

As the whole nation commemorates the hundredth anniversary of the start of the First World War, here in Bicton our local Women's Institute celebrates its own ninetieth anniversary. The two events are not altogether unrelated...

The WI movement really started in Canada during the last years of the nineteenth century, but attempts to introduce the idea to the traditional male dominated world of Britain in the following century proved rather slow. However, with some support from enlightened branches of the 'Agricultural Organisation Society' in September 1915, an institute was set up at LlanfairPG in Anglesey (better known for its long name) which could provide a model for others to follow.

By then the war was changing the world for women anyway, giving them greater opportunities beyond domestic roles and breaking down the barriers of male prejudice. In particular, the role of rural women in coping with food shortages, through co-operation, mutual support and education, was at least appreciated by the 'men from the Ministry'. The WI association with jam and food preservation was thus established!

After the war, the desire to forge a new world after so much suffering could be summed up by those poetic images in Blake's 'Jerusalem'. Women in particular benefitted from the changes, gaining more political freedom and confidence in organising institutions (as well as freeing themselves from large hats, long heavy skirts and tight Edwardian corsets).

As more local institutes were established, the national and regional administrative structures of the movement were set up, breaking free from wartime ministry support.

After that serious business of the war, and while there remained continuing social issues, the national leaders nevertheless stressed the need to have more fun with music, drama and outings. For some isolated rural women in those days a 'charabanc' ride gave them a rare opportunity to see a wider world. The movement therefore grew from strength to strength, establishing new groups including that covering 'Bicton and District' in 1924.

The first president for several years was Mrs Amy Sandford of Udlington (now Isle Court) helped by Kathleen Edwards, Miss Lee and Mrs Olive Paddock. Monthly meetings were then held in rotation at the Four Crosses tea rooms, the Grapes at Bicton Heath and the Wingfield Arms at Montford Bridge.

Since those days the same formula of varied local activities and involvement with other groups at county level has continued. The Second World War also made it necessary to return to those skills developed in the First – jamming and canning and dealing with welfare issues, including refugees.

In peacetime the scope for activities has become even wider, too numerous to list, but can be illustrated by the following examples from the 1980s. There was more going on than just those monthly meetings in the new Village Hall. Such outside events also tended to produce more photographic records, particularly those competitions staged at the West Mid show ground.

Finally we must not forget the 'behind the scenes' help from many husbands over the years (perhaps new 'equality' legislation means they could join too!). At least they were invited to join a weekend in Paris 30 years ago this month - another anniversary!

WI County Competitions



A serious display of handicrafts



A not so serious display of fancy dress



