

CHAPTER TWO

The WI: A legacy of the Great War

The Women's Institute Movement for women, and particularly rural women, was one of the most significant legacies of the First World War. The organisation would not, and could not have been formed so successfully in Britain without the particular social, cultural and economic conditions of wartime. Government bodies during the conflict simultaneously were prepared to take a role in areas of life that would have once been left to individuals and also began to recognise the national contribution that rural women could make to food production, food preservation, and food economy or saving. As the *Coventry Evening Standard* remarked:

Probably there is no woman who leads a more cramped, unattractive life than the countrywoman. In most villages there are no amusements, no interests, nothing outside the little home and the garden. But the countrywoman has become a very valuable asset to the nation. But for her, in many villages throughout the country, there would be no one to care for the gardens and allotments.¹

The Women's Institute Movement, though nowadays seeming to perpetuate notions of 'Englishness', is not in origin a British organisation; rather, it is an import from the colonies founded in Canada in 1897 at Stoney Creek. The aims of this fledgling organisation were soon summed up in a resolution claiming that: 'A Nation cannot rise above the level of its homes; therefore we women must work and study together to raise our homes to the highest possible level'.² The Canadian movement was very closely linked to the government, and, in 1911, this was formalised in an advisory board of

four women appointed to the Department of Agriculture of British Columbia, whose role was to: 'assist the Department in forming and guiding the Institutes'. There was also an executive officer, Mrs Madge Watt.

In 1913, Mrs Watt, following the death of her husband, who committed suicide when inquiries were taking place into his financial affairs, sailed to England with her two sons. Linda Ambrose's fascinating biography explores Madge's life and describes her journey to Sussex to stay with a family friend, Mrs Josephine Goodman, who provided Madge with a much needed retreat.³ Her decision to prolong her stay, for what became six years, was precipitated by the outbreak of war in August 1914. The task that she undertook, promoting the Women's Institute Movement, was supported by Mrs Goodman, and has been presented as their contribution to the war effort. Women were indeed undertaking a number of tasks to support the country during the conflict, including heavy involvement in the approximately 18,000 charities that were set up during the conflict with the aim of assisting those in the armed forces and their families.⁴

However, Mrs Watt, whose widowhood had also left her newly impoverished, was also looking for some form of financial support – and a job. With missionary zeal she attempted to inspire a will amongst government departments, politicians, women's organisations, and even society hostesses such as Lady Louise Loder, to set up WIs in Britain. Mrs Watt's pamphlet on the Women's Institutes and Food Production led to lectures on the subject both to the League of the Empire and to a meeting of university women in London University. But it was not until 1915, when anxiety about the food supply began to surface, that the notion of Women's Institutes took off in England.⁵

At the outbreak of war, Britain was far from self-sufficient in food, there was a heavy reliance on imports; nearly 80 per cent of the grain consumed in Britain, used to make bread the staple of the working class diet, came from the USA, whilst over 60 per cent of sugar came from the Austro-Hungarian empire. At the beginning of the war, there was perhaps an over-confident approach to food supplies, but in 1915 anxieties began to be raised about food production and the shortage of agricultural labour. Mr Allsebrook gave the

Board of Agriculture's perspective at a meeting in Worcestershire, when he explained:

It was a matter of great urgency that we should produce more food in this country, and so retain money to pay for other things we had to import, such as the munitions of war. The chief difficulty that confronted agriculture was the question of labour.

He went on to express his concern that: 'the labourer's wives and daughters had not realised the extreme need of help' and added that on his travels 'about the country ... he could not help seeing the state in which the land had got for want of labour. What would be the position a year hence if we did not grapple with the problem?'⁶

There appears however to have been some hesitancy from farmers with regard to employing women workers, or perhaps more accurately, to employing women who were not family members. There was also resistance from trade unionists who were concerned that the employment of women would further undercut the already low wages of agricultural workers. Furthermore, the management of the horses, ploughing, and scything were considered highly skilled (and male) occupations and therefore it was believed that women would not be able to do them. Migrant labour, young boys, prisoners of war, refugees, students, and some women all made contributions to food production, but as submarine warfare increased in 1916, food became an increasingly significant issue in the conduct of war. By 1917, shortages resulted in lengthy food queues, concern about civil unrest was growing, and food rationing was introduced in 1918. This, then, was the background that nurtured the Women's Institute Movement.

In February 1915, Mrs Watt met Mr Nugent Harris, a Governor of the Agricultural Organisation Society (AOS), and had at last found a sympathetic ear for her ideas. Mr Harris wrote:

For many years when secretary to the AOS I tried to get the farmer members of the co-operative agricultural societies I was organising to allow women to become members, but failed. Then I got two or three to yield. Several women joined, but we could never get them to say a word at the general meeting.

After the meetings were over the women would come to me and criticise the decisions or some of the agenda in which they were interested. I asked them why they did not have their say at the meeting. They replied 'We dare not because our husbands and sons would make fun of us'. I would not rest until I could establish some movement that would give women-folk a chance to express themselves free from the fear of being ridiculed by men. By the merest chance, I met Mrs Watt. I felt I had come in touch with the very movement I wanted.⁷

Mr Harris's altruism may be questioned but his actions cannot. In 1915, as a member of the executive of the Agricultural Organisation Society, he was instrumental in getting Mrs Watt to read a paper at their annual meeting. Mrs Watt's speech was followed by a resolution proposing that the Canadian Women's Co-operative Institutes should be adapted for British rural life and that this should be done by the AOS, with the Governors becoming responsible for the work. It was one of those resolutions which passed at the end of meeting, when the hall was beginning to empty, and there was, according to Robertson Scott's account of events, some doubt about whether those concerned knew what they were voting for.⁸

The AOS, under whose auspices the WI was started in this country, was long outlived by its protégé. By 1915, the AOS had been operational for three years. It was aided by government grants and had the avowed intention of promoting co-operation in agriculture, and these ideas of co-operation became integral to NFWI ideals in the years to come. Indeed, its first intention was to be called the Women's Co-operative Institute, but this was abandoned in deference to the Women's Co-operative Guild,⁹ even though a member's poem in the 1920s was to announce 'we'll raise the standard of the British Nation through our co-operation'.¹⁰

The achievements of the AOS were not always obvious; an ex-convenor later said of it:

It was a period of big conceptions and the AOS somehow failed to rise to them; some of its moderate-sized geese were swans and its stationery bills were awful ... The AOS did not by its general method of work, impress the farmers as much as was necessary. It

did not gain their ear, though I doubt if anybody could have done so, except perhaps the Archangel Gabriel.¹¹

It was suggested that WI would, through its women members, give the AOS a way to get their message to the farmers and smallholders. It is interesting to note that the following year the *Coventry Evening Standard* pointed out, perhaps aware that on a number of smallholdings men were part-time and there was a heavy reliance on women's labour:

It is very probable that far greater success would have attended the Small Holding Movement in England if it had been recognised that its success largely depends on the practical co-operation of the smallholder's womenfolk. When the capacity of women as a worker on the land is recognised her services will be utilised in a less grudging spirit than that which many a farmer now accepts them.¹²

Whether the Agricultural Organisation Society grasped the potential contribution that WIs could make to resolving the food problems is questionable. It is hard not to feel some sympathy for them if they did not. For in looking at reports of the many speeches that Mrs Watt made to local institutes in the years that followed, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that there was quite a lot of fuzziness about exactly what the Institute's role might be. In Spring 1916 for example, Mrs Watt explained them thus: 'Grants from the government enable lecturers and demonstrators to be sent from London and the meetings add social interests to the more solid advantages of addresses and talks on such varied subjects as domestic economy, small holding and the use of artificial manures, cookery etc'.¹³ Later that year she explained Institutes:

provided a centre for the interchange of ideas, instruction in matters affecting rural life, for social gathering, and in fact anything that would tend to uplift the people ... Everywhere the members displayed the greatest interest in the proceeding and that was largely because the subjects the subjects dealt with were those they were interested in.¹⁴

Mrs Watt, accompanied by Mr Nugent Harris or other members of the AOS, started institutes throughout England and Wales. In doing so the idea of a WI was often initially mooted at large market towns or cities, such as Leamington Spa and Worcester, or at an educational institution. The first WIs were formed in Wales after Mrs Watt, for example, spoke at University College in North Wales in June 1915. Initial meetings were then held in individual villages to explain the idea of a WI and with the aim of electing a committee, responsible for the day-to-day running of the institute, by the end of the meeting. The committee organised the programme, outings, speakers, competitions, social, and fundraising events, and so on. The institutes were, as the name implies, for women but not only was Mr Nugent Harris an active promoter of the Institute Movement, but men also seem sometimes to have played a supporting role in the villages. Hurst Women's Institute's officers in April 1916 included a Mr Browning who was the treasurer.¹⁵

Each institute was an independent entity with its own autonomy, not a branch of a central organisation. This enabled them to adapt and suit their activities to the needs of their own rural area, holding meetings once a month in village halls, clubrooms, or side rooms of pubs, either in the afternoon or the evening. Some institutes favoured the afternoon on the basis that women could then be home in time to cook the men's evening meal, while others favoured the evening meeting as it forced men to look after their children at least once a month. A report of one of the first institutes explained:

At Ciccieth, an Institute was started on January 12th 1916. Since then, monthly meetings have been held and special attention has been given to arranging lectures on the cultivation of gardens for better food production. The members of whom there are about eighty are drawn from all classes of the community but the greater number are the wives and daughters of small holders, who owing to home duties are unable to go out to work on other farms.¹⁶

As this suggests, WIs were attended by women of all social classes and concerned themselves with industry, work and all matters centred around the home, the garden, allotment, smallholding or farm.

The Women's Institute's aims were initially very focussed on wartime food and summarised as: (1) the promotion of increased interest among village women in food production and food economy; (2) the improvement of the conditions of village life especially the social side.¹⁷ The first published aims and objectives of the movement were:

1. stimulating interest in the agricultural industry
2. developing co-operative industries
3. encouraging home and local industries
4. studying home economics
5. providing a centre for educational and social intercourse and for all local activities.¹⁸

Individuals joined a local institute and through that the national organisation. Once an institute was established, which required a minimum of twenty-five people, prospective members required a proposer and a seconder, and their application was then voted on either by the local committee or the whole institute. The membership fee was two shillings annually, no more or less. It was considered a significantly democratic move that wealthier women could not pay more than this and consequently acquire an unreasonable level of influence within the institute. (A similar practice had been adopted by some friendly societies in the nineteenth century.) No one was excluded from this membership fee however important their social standing, as rather worried and delicately phrased letter to the Queen's household following the formation of Sandringham Institute made clear.¹⁹

While not wanting to ascribe the growth of an organisation like the WI to mere dependence on personalities, some women did have a very significant effect upon the early years of the movement. Mrs Watt was undoubtedly one of these, although there are indications of some friction between Mrs Watt and the movement she had started, later in the 1920s. She seems to have been an inspirational speaker, who connected with audiences across the country using what Linda Ambrose has described as her 'folksy style'.²⁰ Her perception of rural women owed a great deal to the Canadian Pioneer ideology,²¹ and to the image of frontier women as self-reliant, self-sufficient,

resourceful, distanced from the taint of commercial capitalism and consumerism, and full of idealism. Within Britain, the WI movement was influenced by a radical tradition of self-reliance, which can be traced from Cobbett's *Cottage Economy*,²² and the labour aristocracy of the nineteenth century, although Mrs Watt did not perhaps appreciate this radical edge that developed. The Canadian pioneer woman was visible in WI thinking four years later, when a member wrote: 'We want to encourage all women to be self-contained and to be able to make and mend for their own homes'.²³ This image of womanhood, although still primarily domestic, is a very significant renegotiation of the Victorian ideal of the 'angel in the house'.

Occasionally, there is an indication that Mrs Watt thought that rural women could be educated by the superior urban women. Also, Linda Ambrose describes Mrs Watt's apparent 'strong attachment to Empire',²⁴ which can be seen when she told a meeting at Leamington Spa that 'The world will be in chaos after the war and behoves all of us to see that when the men come back they are coming back to a better England and better Empire'. This received great applause.²⁵ Mrs Watt was engaged by the AOS as a temporary organiser for the proposed WIs and personally set up the first 100 institutes.

The first three institutes were formed in Wales, and the first in England was at Singleton in West Sussex, chosen because Mrs Watt had a friend there. Women's Institutes were frequently instigated by a member of the ruling elite within a village, who had contact with either Mrs Watt or some other members of the AOS. The *Birmingham Daily Post* reported that:

Lady Willoughby de Broke has started a movement at Kineton for the formation of a Women's Institute, the object of the movement being to form a bond of union in rural areas, and to increase the amount of food production, the sale of produce and the economic use of it. A number of institutes have been established in Worcestershire and are doing good work.²⁶

These county elites also worked with War Saving Committees or War Agricultural Executive Committees and particularly with the Women's War Agricultural Committee who, for example, had organised a public meeting at the Shirehall in Worcestershire the

previous year, on 1 March 1916. Chaired by Lord Coventry of Croome Park, the meeting was attended by the great and the good of the county and Mrs Watt was one of the speakers. Within a month, the *Birmingham Daily Post* reported that:

Lady Deerhurst presided at a meeting of ladies and others interested in the work of women on the land, which was held at Worcester yesterday. Mrs Watt of the Agricultural Organisation Society advocated the formation of village institutes for women, engaged on the land, and Miss Day, lady organiser for the Board of Agriculture, described the co-operative system of marketing fruit, etc, now in vogue in Upton-on-Severn.²⁷

By November 1916, a proposal to start a WI was passed unanimously in the nearby small market town of Pershore, and in the months that followed, the WI there provided demonstrations on wartime food, the use of maize and barley meal, and the making of 'really cheap nutritious soup', whilst members also set about knitting comforts for soldiers, organising a communal kitchen, forming pig and rabbit clubs, and growing herbs. (Pig clubs were a form of insurance whereby all members who had a family pig paid an agreed amount into the club and should their pig suffer swine fever or a similar disease they would be compensated.) This WI and the Women's War Agricultural Committee also jointly provided jars for jam, gave out seed potatoes and seeds for vegetables, to encourage domestic food production and preservation by cottage women, smallholders and housewives.

Given that the organisation supporting the formation of the WI was agricultural, it is not surprising that food production and agriculture were significant elements in the formative years of the movement; a positive report of one of the early WIs noted that:

An Institute at Kelmscott has been in existence since June 1916, and nearly every woman in the village has joined it. Practically every member has responded to the appeal for women workers on the land and is doing what she can, either to help the farmers or grow more food in her garden or allotment.²⁸

It was not only agricultural work on farms or smallholdings by women that was encouraged, but more often a sort of cottage farming. The suggested audience for the publicity poster of the inaugural meeting, of what was to be the first WI in England, at Singleton, issued a special invitation to 'holders of cottage gardens and village allotments'.²⁹ Demonstrations and talks were provided within the monthly meetings on subjects such as: rabbit and goat keeping, gardening, cheese making, rabbit skin curing, herb collecting, and poultry-keeping, which had traditionally been significant sources of independent income. In the early days, this was an area in which the membership seemed to have an interest. Within wartime, the organisation emphasised that food production and saving was a patriotic duty; Mrs Watt encouraged all members to ask: 'What is my home, my garden, my farm doing for my Country?'³⁰ Indeed in this quote and her early speeches, there is an indication of Mrs Watt's perception of the wartime Women's Institutes as predominantly concerned with food production; her talks in the West Midlands emphasised: 'the co-operative buying of seeds, owning of garden tools and both the prevention of waste, making every piece of land productive, alongside systems for the marketing of surplus produced from gardens, allotments and smallholdings'.³¹ Concern to prevent waste of food, and particularly of food grown in gardens and allotments, fuelled the organisation of sales tables at WI meetings, and of markets being set up in village institutes. It also encouraged the formation of WIs in cities and towns in rural areas, including Lichfield, Worcester, and Leamington Spa, with the express intention of organising markets for local rural produce. The *Coventry Evening Telegraph* was concerned about 'allotment holders who find themselves possessed of more than can be reasonably consumed of some kind of vegetables, which unless they can be made use of while they are at their best will very soon spoil and thus result in waste'. Instead, it recommended smallholders getting together to bring their food to market and praised the role of WIs which 'arrange for the opening of a market a certain number of hours one day a week'.³²

As the local organisations grew, so did the personnel required to deal with the WI at a central level. By 1916, the AOS had a subcommittee for Women's Institutes, chaired by Mrs Wilkins, whose main concern was really with the Farm and Garden Union. She

was uneasy about the relationship of the WI to the AOS and her role within it; at her suggestion, Lady Denman was also appointed to help with Women's Institutes. Trudie Denman was later elected National Federation Chairman so often, that to those involved with the WI she became a natural and obvious choice. However, in many respects she was indicative of a new more independent and progressive outlook for the movement, which emerged in the 1920s. She was the wife of the ex-Governor General of Australia and the daughter of a wealthy and titled family. Her father was one of the newly created Liberal peers of 1911 and his involvement in politics had included support for women's suffrage. She herself was strongly in favour of agricultural smallholders and was significantly very involved in campaigns for family planning well into the 1940s. Arguably, Lady Denman's perception of rural womanhood and British rural life differed from that of Mrs Watt, as it was based on the positive experience for women of the suffrage campaign and on her and her families' association with the Liberal Party. Furthermore, her personal life appears not to have persuaded her to believe in motherhood or marriage as the be-all and end-all of women's existence.³³ Both Mrs Watt and Lady Denman inspired an enormous amount of loyalty from rank and file WI members, but Lady Denman's title and her Englishness served to legitimate her leadership of the movement for many years to come.

Lady Denman's affinity to rural food production had developed in a scheme she set up with her friend Nellie Grant, to make use of waste scraps and reduce food imports by encouraging householders to keep poultry. She set up a model poultry farm at the family estate in Balcombe, Sussex and apparently spent a great deal of time there, where she was also 'skilled with the axe, and has brought down many a tree, which subsequently has been turned into firewood'.³⁴ Along with many other members of the WI hierarchy, Trudie Denman had therefore a keen interest and been involved with not only poultry keepers but also smallholders, and reputedly 'had begun to form plans for a co-operative poultry colony of smallholders at Balcombe after the war', although this never materialised.³⁵ She was, when she joined the WI staff, already President of the Women's Section of the Poultry Association, and it is not coincidental that the NFWI were quick to become a member of the National Poultry Council, seeing

their role representing the interests of the smallholder as important. The NFWI magazine *Home and Country* maintained features entitled 'Betty in the Hen House' into the 1930s, even though by 1928 they had withdrawn their affiliation to National Poultry Council as they felt that they could not claim it to be an interest of many of the members.

As early as 1917, however, there was a growing discontent amongst members of the AOS that the WI was diverting too much of its energy away from their real aims. Following an unsuccessful attempt to increase the AOS grant from the Treasury, the Board of Agriculture set up a Women's Institute Section which, with Lady Denman as honorary assistant director, undertook to: 'sponsor the Institute organisation, conduct the propaganda, and form Institutes, yet leave them free when formed to manage their own affairs'.³⁶ This move brought with it, in the short term at least, an input of funds, personnel and official channels of publicity, which reaped encouraging results, and there was a significant rise in the number of institutes in 1918. Exactly what the numbers of institutes were at any one time seemed hard to tell during 1918, when the figures reported in local newspapers varied wildly; whether this was a consequence of the limitations of the organisation's administration, or the frantic pace of recruitment in that year, remains unclear.

The Women's Branch of the Board of Agriculture had not been in existence long, and its chief concerns were women's seasonal work and the Women's Land Army. Within England and Wales (Scotland had a separate organisation),³⁷ the clear intention was that the WI become a completely independent, self-financing, and democratically controlled organisation that would continue beyond the war. This plan was also an indication that the dreams and aspirations of the fledgling British movement were outgrowing the model it had inherited from its Canadian forebears, which always retained its affiliation to the government. The changes in the organisation were passed, and the new rules of the Federation adopted by a conference of representatives of the 137 Women's Institutes, at Central Hall, Westminster on the afternoon of 16 October 1917.

The Women's Institute's perception of the 'Jerusalem' that they were building during the war and in the period that followed, relied on a selective and constructed rural past and an almost visionary

perception of the future, which was well suited to wartime. The rhetoric of an improved post-war version of England and of Englishness became second nature to WI speakers. They spoke of a version of village life and rural womanhood's place in it, along with notions of co-operation, service, and class conciliation, rather than speaking of the confrontation or exploitation that may have been a more familiar experience for many of their listeners. Some involved in the movement saw the WI as a significant part of post-war reconstruction and thus developed a perception of post-war ruralism within which 'villagism' was paramount. The WI was to have a crucial role in revitalising the villages, to stem the perceived population flood from the land to the towns. Mrs Huddart, when speaking in 1917, said upon the matter, 'Women's Institutes, by presenting so many and varied things to women in the country, will do more than anything to keep them in these better and healthier surroundings'.³⁸

Early promoters of the Women's Institute Movement could have attributed its rejuvenation of rural areas to the Victorian ideal of women as moral guardians of the nation,³⁹ and the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century resurgence of 'back-to-the-landism' (the idea, historically strong within British culture, that there is something intrinsically and unarguably better about the rural way of life). Following the crisis of the 1880s, with high unemployment, resultant political unrest, and deep concern about the perceived moral and physical degeneration of the urban working class, particularly in the light of *Bitter Cry of Outcast London*,⁴⁰ attention turned to rural England as far preferable to some of the worst excesses of industrial capitalism. A concern over population shifts to the towns was shared by a wide variety of people of all shades of the political spectrum. The writings of Rider Haggard were one example, as were George Lansbury's hopes that labour colonies could provide a potential retraining in agricultural labouring skills for the urban working class of Poplar.

If during the war the Women's Institute Movement perceived themselves as helping to feed the nation through their efforts to improve food production, it also hoped to feed the nation morally through the rejuvenation of the rural areas. Behind the war was a perception, however illusory, of defence of country, home, and family. To many at the front, and importantly on the Home Front,

the perception of the England that they were fighting for was rural. It was an England of Helen Allingham pictures and of postcards of home, depicting villages, farms, and country cottages. It was not necessarily the rural life of pre-war England that was depicted, rather it was an improved and reworked version.

What they were to get in the post-war world was a little more complex as R. J. Moore-Colyer has argued:

By the 1920s the British rural idyll, or more strictly, the *imagined* rural idyll, was coming under threat from a combined onslaught of people, roads, rural electrification, unplanned urban spread and myriad other stresses, all of which led to a quantum increase in the activities of the numerous protectionist bodies whose efforts were eventually to be co-ordinated by the Councils for the Protection of Rural England and Rural Wales founded respectively in 1926 and 1928.⁴¹

Perhaps, given the changing nature of the countryside, it is not surprising that particularly in those rural areas, which were not too distant from the urban conurbations, the importance of food production within the WI beyond the early 1920s was reduced (although the Second World War would later give it a renewed emphasis). In the post-war era, their agricultural concerns had two strands: the training and wages of those women who worked in the industry, and encouragement of members to be productive within their cottage gardens and allotments. Maybe in this second area of cottage and allotment agriculture, they were not taking into consideration the complexity of domestic gender divisions around food production. Allotments and vegetable growing tended to be perceived as male spheres, and they were not necessarily ones women wanted to take on permanently. If divisions of domestic labour are an area of contestation and a site of power struggle, many women may have seen little advantage in attempting to take over one of the few areas of household labour that men did undertake. The superwoman of the 1990s and the twenty-first century, who does all the traditional female roles within the household and many domestic tasks that were once considered a male preserve, is possibly doing little to break down sexism. Arguably she is just proving the dictum that feminism would

liberate men before it liberated women. The women in the first WIs who seemed reluctant to take over traditionally male tasks should be seen in the light of this argument.

Alternatively, others who either did not live with men or whose men were absent or unreliable might perceive cottage farming as a source of independence and power, and in 1930, the NFWI demanded that the Government Land Settlement Schemes should be available to women in their own right. Some women who had trained as gardeners saw the movement as a space in which to use and develop their skills and expertise. Miss Margaret Rotherham, who was involved in the WI leadership at county and national levels in the period before and after the Second World War and in the formation of Denman College, recalls:

I had always been mad on gardening and I wished to go to Horticultural College. So I went to Studley and was there two years and learned an awful lot. I was happy there, and I got the Horticultural Certificate of the RHS. I think that going to Studley has been the background to all I have done. I have always been doing either gardening or fruit preservation or something along those lines.⁴²

County Councils were often eager to provide financial aid towards WI classes orientated towards agriculture and horticulture, and in 1927 the extramural department of Leeds University provided local institutes with classes in dairying. Some of these achieved real success. The same cannot be said for the residential courses planned for WI members in 1924 and 1925. Organised by the Agriculture and Horticulture sub-committee of the NFWI, they were on dairy work, horticulture, and poultry and were held at Seale Hayne Agricultural College in Devon and the Herefordshire Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture. In 1924, attendance was eleven and four respectively, and in 1925 the courses had to be cancelled. Maybe those who would have been interested were unable to attend a residential course.

At least the courses were orientated towards a perception of WI members as agricultural workers and, consistent with this, the WI constantly petitioned for women's interests to be represented on the

Agricultural Wages Board. In 1926, an attempt was made to counteract the male bias of such boards when the NFWI requested of the Board of Agriculture that at least one of the independent members on Wages Boards should be a woman. Nicola Verdon has drawn attention to the NFWI's work in the inter-war years, arguing that, given the national importance of women's contribution to agricultural in paid work and on family farms, they were concerned that there were no regulation of women's wages, holidays, or hours of work by district wage committees.⁴³

Concern over the importance of agriculture to the institutes was clear in an article in *Home and Country* in 1930, which saw agriculture as unable to 'compete with handicrafts, music or drama in providing occupation for the long winter evenings' but which still urged county federations to give it more time and energy than it was getting. There was great stress laid on the role of the smallholder's wife and it was argued that:

Women excel in certain branches of work such as dairying, poultry, and young livestock and, in the Fens and other parts of the country, in much seasonal work. One fifth of the workers in Agriculture and Horticulture are women and there is an increase in the number of dairy herd owners.⁴⁴

There remains some debate over the significance of women's labour in agriculture in the inter-war years, but the leadership of the NFWI through the pages of *Home and Country* still encouraged it. National census data suggested that: 'agricultural employment accounted for only 2 per cent of all occupied women in England and Wales in 1921, falling to just 1 per cent a decade later'.⁴⁵ This however is only part of the narrative, as Alun Howkins has pointed out: 'Few operations of the agriculture cycle functioned without the work of women at any time during the inter-war years'.⁴⁶ Such labour was unlikely to be included in census data although it is a recurring theme of oral histories. Arguably, the picture is complex, framed by geographical region, the farm size, and the type of agriculture. As Verdon argues: 'Work in the dairy and in the farmyard, particularly with poultry, was customarily perceived as part of the women's province of the farm. The scale and structure of these industries was changing

during the inter-war period'.⁴⁷ Furthermore the market gardens of Worcestershire went on employing seasonal women's labour well into the 1950s; a number of these women were, however, not local to the area but arrived for the harvest season.

Nevertheless, there is a general feeling now amongst historians that full-time and paid agricultural work for women was perhaps reducing in a number of areas in this period, although this was not necessarily a view shared by the Women's Institute Movement. Lynne Thompson has argued that the NFWI and affiliated county federations struggled to maintain, if not their influence on the land, then their close association with it, by means of the promotion of agricultural education for adults. She also points out that such a position was exhorted by the NFWI in *Home and Country*:

It is on the progress of agriculture, the greatest industry in the country that the success of any effort of any institute depends ... The institute which is teaching its members to make poultry keeping a paying investment, the institute which is learning through an organised marketing scheme how to make profitable the production of vegetables and fruit is demonstrating to a hitherto unconvinced farming population how co-operative effort may be successful. The county federation which is making use of the facilities for agricultural teaching available in a county is helping to lay the foundations of the permanent agricultural improvement of the future.⁴⁸

This commitment to in the inter-war period may have been swimming against the tide of working-class women's own wishes. Agricultural work was both physically hard and low paid, and many working-class women in the 1920s may have found domesticity, if affordable, much more desirable. Food production, horticulture, agriculture, and WI markets were of significance for the movement for many years to come, but even during the First World War a sense that the WI movement was wider than this, and indeed that this side of the organisation would diminish, was evident when in 1917 the *Coventry Evening Standard* remarked that country women:

should be helped in their endeavour to assist the food production of the nation, women's institutes are being formed in rural districts.

Though at present these institutes have to confine themselves the growing of garden and field crops, it is very much hoped that they will become permanent institutions, and add considerably to the cheer and education of the country woman's life.⁴⁹

Lynne Thompson has drawn upon research in Lancashire and Devon to challenge my argument that the agricultural side of the WI movement diminished in the interwar period and suggested that:

there is evidence to suggest that in some regions at least, WI members maintained more than a passing interest in agriculture *per se*. This was not simply in relation to the production and preservation of food, but rather as a means of maintaining the influence of women in rural policy making.⁵⁰

Thompson's research indeed draws attention to education work in relation to agriculture, lectures, visits to WI gardens to promote vegetable growing, and the continued popularity of market stalls and village markets. Even in the 1950s, *Home and Country* continued to provide occasional guidance on domestic agriculture. Participation in exhibitions related to food production was waning however, possibly because it was prohibitively expensive for some WI members. In Devon also, Thompson points out that the County Federation asked: 'Miss Gunnell to address various meetings of WI delegates or members of the Royal Horticultural Society on the "Agricultural work for Women's Institutes carried out by the Devon County Council"'.⁵¹ In Worcestershire, the WI also struggled to get members to exhibit at agricultural shows. In 1927, the special members' classes for poultry and rabbit keeping at the Three Counties show (which covered Worcestershire, Herefordshire, and Gloucestershire) were disappointing and three were cancelled. In 1938, the Agricultural and Horticultural sub-committee seemed to accept the inevitable and noted that despite cajoling the: 'gardens were shamefully neglected'.⁵²

The Women's Institute Movement's engagement with agriculture in the inter-war period, highlights the movement's federal structure, which led to regional, even institute, variations in focus, interests, and preoccupations. It is to the structure and organisation of the

movement that the next chapter will now turn, in which I will argue that the wartime legacy of the movement went well beyond agriculture and food.

Notes

1. *Coventry Evening Standard*, 11 August 1917.
2. I. Jenkins, *The History of the Women's Institute Movement in England and Wales*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953, p. 77.
3. L. Ambrose, *A Great Rural Sisterhood: Madge Robertson Watt and the ACWW*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015.
4. S. Fowler, 'War Charity Begins at Home', *History Today*, September 1999.
5. J.W. Robertson Scott, *The Story of the Women's Institute Movement*, Idbury: Village Press, 1925.
6. *Worcester Daily Times*, 8 December 1915.
7. J.W. Robertson Scott, *op cit.*, p. 22.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
10. *Home and Country*, October 1925, p. 27.
11. J.W. Robertson Scott, *op cit.*, p. 54.
12. *Coventry Evening Standard*, 23 June 1916.
13. *Reading Mercury*, 29 April 1916.
14. *Dorking and Leatherhead Advertiser*, 14 October 1916.
15. *Reading Mercury*, 29 April 1916.
16. *Whitby Gazette*, 9 March 1917.
17. *Whitby Gazette*, 18 October 1918.
18. J.W. Robertson Scott, *op cit.*, p. 49.
19. File in NFWI archive, accessed at the NFWI headquarters, London.
20. L. Ambrose, *op cit.*
21. Pioneer ideology relating to women is explored in J.R. Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1979.
22. W. Cobbett, *Cottage Economy*, 1822, reprinted Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
23. J.W. Robertson Scott, *op cit.*, p. 151.
24. L. Ambrose, *op cit.*
25. *Leamington Spa Courier*, 2 November 1917.
26. *Birmingham Daily Post*, 24 September 1917.
27. *Birmingham Daily Post*, 21 April 1916.
28. *Whitby Gazette*, 9 March 1917.

29. Singleton WI History, held by Singleton WI.
30. Mrs Alfred Watt and N. Lloyd, *The First Women's Institute School*, London: NFWI publication, 1918.
31. *Lichfield Mercury*, 2 February 1917.
32. *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 11 August 1917.
33. G. Huxley, *Lady Denman*, Oxford: Chatto and Windus, 1961; describes in a fairly reserved way her private life as well as her more public activities.
34. *Sussex Agricultural Express*, 27 April 1917.
35. G. Huxley *op cit.*, p. 64.
36. I. Jenkins, *The History of the Women's Institute Movement in England Wales*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953, p. 18.
37. C. Blair, *Rural Journey*, London: Nelson, 1940; describes the formation of the Scottish equivalent of the NFWI.
38. Mrs Alfred Watt, *op cit.*, p. 43.
39. C. Hall, 'The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology', in S. Burman (ed.), *Fit Work for Women*, London: Croom Helm, 1979.
40. G. Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1971.
41. R. J. Moore-Colyer, 'From Great Wen to Toad Hall: Aspects of the Urban-Rural Divide in Inter-War Britain', *Rural History*, 1999, 10:1, 105-124, p. 112.
42. Miss Walters, oral testimony (7) typed. History file in the NFWI archive, accessed at the NFWI headquarters, London.
43. N. Verdon, 'Agricultural Labour and the contested nature of women's work in inter-war England and Wales', *The Historical Journal*, 2009, 52, pp. 109-130.
44. *Home and Country*, May 1930, p. 197.
45. N. Verdon, *op cit.*, p. 110.
46. A. Howkins, *The death of rural England: A social history of the countryside since 1900*, London: Routledge, 2003, p. 82.
47. N. Verdon, *op cit.*, p. 116-117.
48. *Home and Country*, January 1927, p. 3; quoted in L. Thompson 'The Promotion of Agricultural Education for Adults: The Lancashire Federation of Women's Institutes, 1919-45', *Rural History*, 1999, 10, pp. 217-234.
49. *Coventry Standard*, 9 February 1917.
50. L. Thompson, *op cit.*, p. 217.
51. L. Thompson, *ibid.*, p. 231
52. D. E. Williams, *Madame President: Fellow Members*, Worcester: Worcester Federation of Women's Institutes, 1980.