



Dormansland and Lingfield Women's Institutes The Early Years

During the First World War Women's Institutes, an idea that was founded in Canada, were set up throughout the country to give help and support to women left at home while the men were fighting at the Front. The WI played an important role in breaking down social barriers. Even by the time of the 1918 General Election many women still did not have the right to vote. By the end of the war women were yearning to be involved in a more active role in the community.

After the War the WI were instrumental nationwide in getting village halls built. Up until that time most halls were only for men.

Dormansland was the first village in our area to form a Women's Institute and a preliminary meeting was held on 12th December 1919. The Dormansland WI was formed, carried by 32 votes and Miss Griffiths was elected as President with Mrs Kellie as Hon. Secretary.

The first actual meeting was held on 2nd January 1920. On that day 54 members were enrolled. The first proposal was to hold a "social" the following Wednesday in the Parish Room to encourage new members. There would be a talk on Women's Institutes and their work, followed by a tea and an entertainment.

On that first day 54 members were enrolled and by August numbers had reached 128. It was arranged to meet monthly with an annual membership of two shillings. It would have been out of the reach of many of the women to pay this outright and so there was a book whereby women could pay in instalments, probably a penny a time.

The meetings always finished on time as the women had to get home to get their husband's evening meal ready for when he came home from work. Many of the women brought their babies along as there was no external childcare. Dormansland was very rural in those days and many of the women would have lived in quite isolated locations and so it was an opportunity for women to come together in the afternoon for companionship, education and fun.

In July 1920 the Dormansland branch became affiliated to the Surrey County Federation.

A banner was produced, designed and embroidered by Miss Chettle, although every member was asked to put in at least one stitch. The Dormansland WI minutes stated that it was "a magnificent piece of needle and tapestry work for which originality of design and perfection of workmanship can be equalled in very few Institutes." Later that year it was exhibited at NFWI exhibition at Draper's Hall in London. The image of the woman depicts skills in handicraft and the cherries and blossom indicate the famous Dormansland cherries.

By 1921 membership had risen to 160. In that year various demonstrations and lectures were held on such varied subjects as boot and shoe repairing; slipper making; the training of children; the Home Medicine Chest, jams and bottled fruits; homemade bread; utilising waste and "leftovers made palatable".

One week the women were taught how to skin a rabbit and then cure the skin. The next month they were taught how to make gloves from the skin.

There were lectures on Local History, Palestine, and Duties and Responsibilities of Jury Women; there were demonstrations on re-bristling brushes and simple bandaging. Competitions were held on Hat Trimming; fruit cake and bread making. Dressmaking and glove making classes were held and a Tennis Club started.

There was also a serious side and then, as now, the WI campaigned on many social issues. In their first year Dormansland passed a resolution to urge the Prime Minister to give "facilities for legislation to enforce responsibilities on fathers of illegitimate children."

In 1921 the WI wrote to the Parish Council asking for the reinstatement of the Saturday afternoon postal delivery. Something we can only dream about these days! The following year a petition was sent to London Brighton and South Coast Railway asking for cheap tickets to London. The Railway replied saying that they would issue cheap tickets on Wednesdays.

It was also proposed that the WI should make garments every year for St Mary's Hospital in Paddington.

In 1922 the Committee decided that as there was only one representative for Dormansland on the Lingfield Parish Council it was proposed to put pressure on to have one more man to represent Dormansland. Miss Griffiths then suggested that a woman should stand and it was agreed to approach a suitable woman to run. Unfortunately there is no record if a suitable woman was found.

Many local self-help schemes were established.

In 1921 a Savings Bank was proposed to be run for members for Christmas or summer Charabanc outings, members paying monthly instalments towards the trip.

The following year a Coal Club was proposed for poorer members, with 32 members signing up. There were also house to house collections for the district nurse and a National Savings Scheme was started.

The monthly meeting always included tea given by twelve different members each time, plus some form of entertainment with music or plays, games and dancing. During the summer months meetings were held in members' gardens. A singing class and dramatic club were started.

At Christmas a children's party was held for members' children and their mothers.

On June 23rd 1921 an 'American' Tennis Tournament was held at Wayside in Hollow Lane. The winners were presented with WI aprons.

A weekly produce stall, held outside the Royal Oak, was held between May and September, making £49.15s.11½d in the first year. In the summer three hundredweight (152kg) of sugar was bought to make jam for the benefit of the Institute and 61lbs (28kg) of jam was made.

In October 1921 a charabanc was hired which took 25 members and friends plus 8 from Lingfield WI, which had started by then, to see the Surrey County Exhibition at Guildford. Dormansland had sent various exhibits and won three prizes. Miss Hadden won first prize for her fur gloves with fingers; Lily Robbins won third prize for basket work.

In April 1921 the Lingfield WI was formed, starting with 88 members enrolled. Members had to be proposed and seconded before they could join and so enrolment must have taken quite a time!

Early members were Miss Moberly, who was instrumental in forming the Lingfield branch; May Love; Hilda Dunstan; Charlotte Hayward; Margaret Hazell; Edith Nelson; Greta Hazell; Mrs Griffiths; Mrs Bell, and Mrs De Claremont.

By June the membership had reached 100 with 24 signed up for glove making classes.

From the beginning the Lingfield members were interested in drama; folk dancing was also popular. Later a choir was formed with Ivy Lee as the pianist and choir master.

Like Dormansland, a banner was made and designed with many of the early members being involved.

In 1922 a presentation was made to the first babies of the members. Each was presented with a silver rattle and a pair of silk gloves.

In the May meeting of 1922 there was a demonstration and exhibition from the East Grinstead Disabled Soldiers Industry, showing how to make fancy goods from cardboard boxes.

Lingfield WI often joined with Dormansland and Crowhurst on outings and in June 1922 40 members went on an outing to the 'Orchard Tea Rooms' for a picnic, afternoon tea and games.

One meeting in September 1922 included a competition for 'four boiled potatoes'; the lucky winner was Mrs Morris. The meeting ended with the singing of the National Anthem. (The singing of 'Jerusalem' was not adopted by the Women's Institute until the AGM of 1924.)

Lingfield and Dormansland Women's Institutes

Both Dormansland and Lingfield afternoon Women's Institutes carried on until the beginning of the 21st century but their tradition has carried on with the Evening Women's Institutes in both villages.

Sue Quelch 2018

Sources:

Dormansland WI Minute books

Lingfield WI Minute books

Enid Isworth