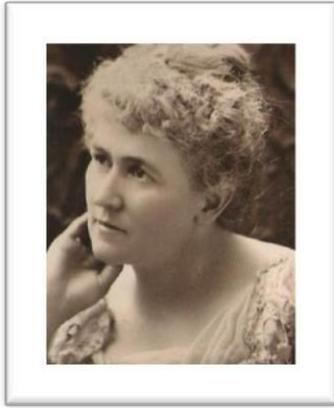


# **For Cottager and Countess: the origins and early years of the Women's Institute**



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**Adelaide Hoodless**  
1858-1910



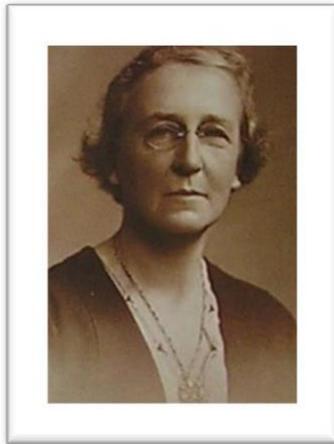
**Janet Lee**  
1862-1940



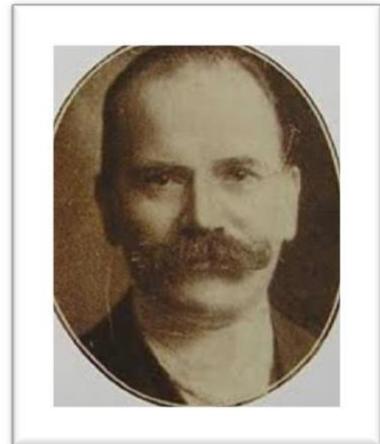
**Madge Watt**  
1868-1948



**Lady Denman**  
1894-1954



**Grace Hadow**  
1875-1940



**John Nugent Harris**  
1862-1953



**Louisa Jebb Wilkins**  
1873-1929



**Meriel Talbot**  
1866-1956



**Alice Williams**  
1863-1957

## ***Other Women's Institutes***

The Women's Institute is one of the most widely known of all women's (indeed any) organisations conjuring up various images to anyone who hears of 'the WI'. There were, however, earlier unrelated organisations which bore the name. A London County Council facility was established in 1913, headed by Lilian Barker, variously correctional and educational with branches in districts such as Hackney, Brixton and Deptford. At the other end of the social scale, a group was established in London in 1897 by Mrs Nora Wynford Philipps. This was a meeting place for women interested in the professions, education, social and philanthropic work. Further confusion arises as the latter group put on an exhibition at Lady Cowdray's house in 1915 of 'what women have done and can do in agriculture'. Lady Cowdray's daughter, Trudie, Lady Denman (of whom more below), went on to become chairman of the NFWI (National Federation of Women's Institutes) for nearly 30 years.

## **Canada**

*The* Women's Institute movement started in Stoney Creek, Ontario following a speech in 1897 made by Adelaide Hoodless (1858-1910), a teacher, author and promoter of domestic science education, and grew with considerable speed. Mrs Hoodless lost her youngest son, John Harold, at the age of 14 months in 1889. It is said that when she learned that the likely cause was contaminated milk, she determined that women should be educated in food preparation, storage and hygiene in dairy and home. This may, however, be folklore as she was already an energetic promoter of a scientific approach to home management. What *is* certain is that Mrs Hoodless spoke to a Farmer's Institute Ladies' Night in February 1897 with the suggestion of forming a group to educate and inform rural women and, no less important in outlying areas, for socialising.

Mrs Hoodless's interests and activities, however, lay in domestic science and small town society rather than agriculture, and although she has become the most recognised founding name, the movement developed through the existing network of farm institutes after farmer's wife, Janet Lee (1862-1940), drafted a constitution (with her home now a museum in Ridge Road, Stoney Creek, Ontario, just west of Toronto - [www.fwio.on.ca/erland](http://www.fwio.on.ca/erland)). Despite the early farming connection and funding from the Board of Agriculture, the organisation in Canada soon became closely linked to small towns, stressing the domestic arts and community public works. Indeed,

there was soon an expressed opposition to women undertaking agricultural work and the WI was felt by many to offer little to farm women.

## **Agricultural Roots**

Before the first UK Women's Institute meeting was held in 1915 on Anglesey there had been moves to provide a voice and opportunities for rural and farm women in England through the formation of women's branches of existing groups, notably the Agricultural Organisation Society (AOS) which had been set up in 1902 largely to support and share knowledge between co-operative societies on Horace Plunkett's Irish model. So how did the largely unsuccessful attempts of the AOS feed into the establishment of the WI in England and Wales?<sup>1</sup>

In England, a number of people were looking to the position, indeed plight, of farm women. Edwin Pratt's 1904 report, *The Organisation of Agriculture*, noted the effects of the drudgery and 'monotony of women's work on the farm.' John Nugent Harris, to play such a significant role in the establishment of the WI (see the room named for him on the ground floor at Denman), 'tried to get the farmer members of the operative agricultural societies I was organising to allow women to become members, but failed ... Several women joined, but we could never get them to say a word .... 'We dare not because our husbands and sons would make fun of us'.

Another report of 1912 by Sir Robert Greig, discussed the benefits of the Women's Institutes in Poland, Belgium and Canada. Greig also arranged for the translation in 1914 of an influential Belgian book, largely on Women's Institutes: *Women's Place in Rural Economy*.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the Scottish organisation began and remains separate, being the Scottish Women's Rural Institute, started in 1917 (organised by Catherine Hogg Blair (1872-1946), an active women's suffrage supporter, at Longniddry, East Lothian, with Madge Watt as inaugural meeting speaker). The Northern Irish Federation, also separate, dates from 1932 (organised by Miss Dorothea Macausland (1888-1970) in Garvagh, Co. Londonderry) under the banner of The Federation of Women's Institutes of Northern Ireland. Eire has the Irish Countrywomen's Association, originally the Society of the United Irishwomen, established in 1910 by Anita Lett (c1871-1940) in Bree, Co. Wexford, drawing on Plunkett's Irish Co-operative movement motto of Better Farming, Better Business, Better Living.

## **The Women Who Led - Madge Robertson Watt (1868-1948)**

Against the pre-war thinking of a voice for rural and farm women, and the wartime focus on food production and women's labour there was a keen sense of what was wanted, without quite finding the route to successful implementation. Enter Mrs Alfred Watt (Margaret Rose, known as Madge). A redoubtable Canadian, involved at a senior level in the movement there, setting up the WI branch in British Columbia in 1909, Madge came to England on the suicide of her husband in 1913, not least for the purpose of educating her sons, Robin and Sholto, but with a zeal to promote the Women's Institute. Born in Collingwood, Ontario, her father was a barrister of Scottish descent. Margaret Robertson, as she then was, read modern languages and history at the University of Toronto gaining a first class BA in 1889 and an MA in 1890. Beyond her work in WWI and the WI, she played a key role in the founding of the Associated Country Women of the World in 1930.

On arrival in England, Madge started to promote the WI through speaking and leafleting. This had little effect until she linked her ideas with the focus on agriculture and food production brought by WWI. In June 1915 Mrs Watt read a paper at the AGM of the AOS: 'The place to be filled by farmers' wives in the Agricultural Co-operative Movement'. John Nugent Harris saw how this echoed his continuing, but hitherto fruitless, efforts. The AGM<sup>2</sup> was held at Bangor University (which then, as now, had a leading Agriculture department). Sir Harry Reichel, Principal of Bangor, considered that in Mrs Watt's speech, 'a new note had been struck in rural economics'.

It is interesting to review John Nugent Harris's commentary (in his later reminiscences) on the class basis of the struggles in getting the movement going in England, with reference to Mrs Watt's initial (some would say enduring) lack of understanding of British village social structure: 'It should be borne in mind that the rural England of those early days ... was an entirely different rural England to what now exists. Then, our villages as a rule were dominated largely by the landlord, the squire or the lady of the manor. When any new suggestions were made to improve local conditions or introduce some new ideas, the villagers were not allowed to think for

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<sup>2</sup> Arranged by Col. the Hon. Richard Stapleton-Cotton, whose wife, Jane, became President of the first WI group at LlanfairPG, Anglesey and a member of the NFWI founding Executive Committee.

themselves whether such should be encouraged. Everything had to be submitted to the squire, the landlord or his agent, or the lady of the manor, and on their decision, action was taken. I question if there was any country in Europe where such conditions obtained.

‘It was this fact, in my view, which was the cause of Mrs Watt’s failure to establish Women’s Institutes in England. She thought she had a rural community to deal with similar to that in Canada, and I had the greatest difficulty in getting her to realise ... that she must disabuse her mind of this and be guided by me in her approach to our villages. On several occasions she omitted to do so with rather unfortunate results.’

### **The Early Days**

From Madge Watt’s speech at Bangor the AOS actively fostered the concept of a rural Women’s Institute with the organising committee, chaired initially by Mrs Roland (Louisa) Wilkins<sup>3</sup> who, in 1917, championed Lady Denman as her successor. The Board of Agriculture provided financial and organisational support through the Women’s Branch, funding a post for Mrs Watt in a national structure.

Having seen the first meeting in Wales, the WI in England started in Singleton, West Sussex in November 1915 with the second Sussex group, at Wivelsfield in March 1916, started by Josephine Tyrell Godman, later on the first NFWI Executive Committee.

Initially run as a branch of the AOS, in 1917 management was transferred to the Board of Agriculture with Lady Denman taking a role as honorary assistant director and a WI National Federation executive being

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<sup>3</sup> Mrs Wilkins, *née* Jebb (1873-1929), was the first women Agriculture graduate from the University of Cambridge, in 1897. She wrote on smallholdings, land tenure and women’s work on the land, was a founder member of the Women’s Farm and Garden Union in 1899, acquiring their community farm at Lingfield in 1922, and in 1915 started the Women’s National Land Service Corps as a wartime offshoot of the WFGU. The Land Service Corps were absorbed into the Women’s Land Army in 1917. Her younger sister, Eglantyne Jebb, founded Save the Children.

established. The Board of Agriculture responsibility for the WI was with Meriel Talbot.<sup>4</sup> In 1919 the WI became self-funding.

The success with which the WI was established required a number of features which came together in 1915. Although the outbreak of war added an incentive to promote agricultural efficiencies and food production, allowing Mrs Watt's proposals to take root, the task of galvanising geographically disparate women who had, for the most part, no experience of organised employment, social association or community engagement beyond church or chapel attendance required both formidable administrative skills and the power to enthuse. These traits were found, along with many other talents, in the persons of Grace Hadow and Lady Denman.

### **The Women Who Led - Lady Denman (1884-1954)**

Lady Gertrude Mary Denman, known as Trudie, had an aristocratic upbringing, educated by governesses and a Dresden finishing school. Her father, Weetman Pearson, Viscount Cowdray, was a Liberal MP with a substantial fortune made in construction and Mexican oil. Her mother, Annie, was active in charitable works and, it may be remembered, lent her London home for an exhibition of agricultural produce and crafts in 1915. When the AOS set up a committee to organise the founding of WIs in 1915, Lady Denman was the committee chairman. When the National Federation structure of the WI was established in October 1917, she was elected as NFWI Chairman and remained in the post until 1946.

Lady Denman had been on the executive of the Women's Liberal Foundation from 1908, her active British political life being curtailed when she set sail for Australia in 1911 on her husband's appointment as Governor General (although she continued her work with women's political and social groups in Australia). She had an enduring passion for improving all aspects of the lives of (particularly) rural women - their living conditions, education, family planning and occupational opportunities. In 1928 she chaired the commission which produced a

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<sup>4</sup> In 1915 Meriel Talbot (1866-1956) had been the first woman at the Board and went on to organise and lead the Women's Land Army in 1917. 'Slasher' (named for her cricketing skills) Talbot was a founder member of the Victoria League (promoting links with the Commonwealth and emigration) in 1901 and became Dame Meriel on the award of DBE in 1920 for services to the Board of Agriculture.

report on *The Practical Education of Women for Rural Life* and in WWII she was honorary director of the Women's Land Army, gaining improvements to working conditions for agricultural workers, women and men. Importantly, she understood from the outset that the WI should be truly rural, that it 'must be agricultural and must be the cottage woman's movement as much or more than the countess's, or it was nothing.' Her interest in agriculture, particularly, smallholdings had led her to the AOS and a connection with Louisa, Mrs Roland Wilkins. The idea of the WI being affordable and embracing all classes is seen in both policy documents and archival anecdotes. The veracity of their perception of just *how* inclusive the movement was, has been contended although Maggie Morgan (now Professor Maggie Andrews), in her doctoral study and later publications, felt that the middle class image where working class women may feel excluded was actually more a feature of later decades and was not part of the ethos of the likes of Lady Denman and Grace Hadow.

### **The Women Who Led - Grace Hadow (1875-1940)**

Grace Eleanor Hadow, a vicar's daughter from just outside Cirencester, was Vice-Chairman of the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) from 1917 to her premature death in 1940 and was largely responsible for drafting the Constitution. She was the sister of Sir Henry Hadow, responsible for the influential Hadow reports on education (1923-33), with whom she compiled the first volume of *The Oxford Treasury of English Literature - Old English to Jacobean* in 1907.

She came to the movement through a public life in education, lecturing at both Bryn Mawr in the USA and the University of Oxford, having gained first class honours in English from Somerville College, Oxford in 1903. Although interested in rural and village life, Miss Hadow's philosophy was centred on education as the necessary foundation to improving living conditions and allowing women to participate fully as citizens. She had been active in the suffrage movement, setting up a National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies branch in Cirencester, and fulfilled a range of public functions and employment before and during her role with the Women's Institute including being appointed to the Gloucestershire Chamber of Agriculture in 1916, championing women's work. Tellingly, her 1946 biographer devoted just 13 pages out of over 200 to the WI, although within the movement her influence was considerable and would, for most, have been a life's work. Miss Hadow came to the WI at local

level, setting up the Cirencester branch. This took her to the meetings in London which, in October 1917, set up the National Federation of which she was made Vice-Chairman to Lady Denman's Chair. Along with the general duties of a vice-chair, Miss Hadow took a particular role in press and literature, writing the first NFWI Handbook in 1921, and her legacy in publications was influential for many years. In 1929 she was appointed as principal of the Society of Oxford Home Students (later St Anne's College), a post which she held until her death in 1940. In 1938 she was the only British woman delegate at the British Commonwealth Relations Conference in Sydney, Australia.

### **Founding Ideals:**

**education - independent income - public voice - living conditions**

The founding constitution set out that the WI aimed to provide '*for the fuller education of countrywomen in citizenship, in public questions both national and international, in music, drama and other cultural subjects and also to secure instruction and training in all branches of agriculture, handicrafts, domestic science, health and social welfare.*' There were expressly no political, religious or class barriers. The movement's aims can be wedded to four interdependent strands, which echo in other movements and spheres - the desire to give women opportunities and the knowledge and strength to access those opportunities: for education, for an independent income, for a public voice, and for reasonable living conditions, without which every aspect of life is compromised.

**Education** was a key feature of the Women's Institute from the start. This focus had come through the thinking of those who had been working towards getting a co-operative association of farm and rural women through the AOS and was also rooted in the ethos of the Canadian WI movement. Space precludes discussion of whether the early ideas were empowering or an upper middle-class led dissemination of their view of what the rural housewife should know. What is not in doubt is that many thousands of women have had their educational horizons broadened, whether in agriculture, horticulture, home-making or other spheres. In the early decades, considerable work was done in music, for example, with engagement with the Federation of British Music Competition Festivals, regional choirs and the like. Denman College was opened in 1948 to provide the WI's own education centre. A key feature of the early Denman courses was the requirement for delegates to pass on what they

had learned, whether to their own Institutes or to more formally disseminate to others, through their own teaching and courses. Although there has always been, and remains, a local programme of talks and Denman courses on cookery, craft, smallholding and 'light' agriculture, horticulture, sewing and needlework, and the like, there has also always been a focus on leadership, preparation for WI and public office along with music, history, geography, literature, politics and more. As well as the talks and day classes there were early attempts at longer agricultural and horticultural courses specifically for WI members and they ran for several years in the 1920s at Seale Hayne Agricultural College in Devon and at Oaklands Farm Institute in Hertfordshire, but were not a great success. Education, of course, links closely with the following paragraphs on income and home economy. It can be seen that there was, in areas such as craft, something of a tension between the two and the Guild of Learners of Handicrafts, established in 1920, stressed the undertaking of craft for personal pleasure, the preservation of traditional skills and the development of high standards, rather than the profit motive. In addition to its own educational function, the WI has also been a powerful pressure group lobbying national and local government on state educational provision, from primary to tertiary level. Anyone interested in the educational activities of the WI should look at the work of Cicely McCall, NFWI Education Adviser from c1942.

In addition to the concomitant results of giving women an increased confidence, the drive to improve women's economic lives led to affording opportunities to access an **independent income**, seen in training and outlets for produce, along with a stress on money saving at home. The WI Market remains to date as stalls at local markets, usually weekly, where market members can sell produce. The first opened in Criccieth in May 1916 under Dorothy Drage<sup>5</sup> and was largely a wholesale market, unlike the later model. After a period of considerable success, closure soon followed, not least due to bad feeling caused by undercutting competitors. WI Markets as we know them today became formalised through the National Federation with the first recognised operation being in Lewes, East Sussex in 1919 (founded by the Misses Brand and Shiffner). Although selling surplus produce and ensuring a distribution system in times of war and depression was a driving feature, there was also a clear sense of allowing women an opportunity to gain an independent income.

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<sup>5</sup> *Née* Greaves, a member of the NFWI Executive from 1917.

This independence was also behind much of the instruction - whether in craftwork and kitchen, farm and garden production for income, or to minimising household expenditure (seen, for example, in shoe mending classes). Some groups also organised sizeable cottage industries supported by the necessary instruction and marketing. A Carnegie Trust grant was obtained in 1918 for this purpose. Various projects were undertaken including soft toy making, basket work and glove making. This particular venture was not successful but thriving cottage industries continued to be organised by individual WIs or regional groups.

The third strand which was strongly apparent in the founders' thinking was enabling women to gain their **public voice** providing both an outlet to enhance confidence and, importantly, training. Talks on current affairs, training and practice in running meetings, speaking, organising at village, county and, for a few, national level, were part of the WI programme. Training for office was marked with the Voluntary County Organiser role, the first three week school for such being held at Burgess Hill, Sussex in 1918. Although many (nearly all) early VCOs were from a background where confidence was rarely an issue, servants took care of the home and transport was available to enable them to carry out their role, Lady Denman stressed the importance of involving all classes of women who could bring their experience of village life. This attitude and opportunity allowed Alice Freeman, a gardener's wife, to become a VCO with no more access to transport than a bicycle which carried her many thousands of miles in her role over more than 30 years from the early 1920s.

Along with monthly meetings and local activities the WI has, from 1918, been active at national and local level in highlighting and discussing wider concerns, putting forward resolutions and lobbying government. The movement recognised that all aspects of the lives of members and future generations were compromised when basic needs are not met and the promotion of acceptable **living conditions** and other campaigns was, and remains, a pillar of the Women's Institute. The first resolution, put forward by Mrs Trenow of Epping WI, was to press for the adequate provision of council housing.

Other matters addressed in the first 20 years or so included :

- The call for running water in all country homes (the push for rural water, plumbing and electricity lasted until well into the 1950s and the WI provided valuable post-war data through members' surveys which fed into government programmes, highlighting 'surprises' such as only 10% of farm workers having electricity long after it was considered the norm in towns).
- Encouragement for women to get onto parish and district councils.
- Support for the unsuccessful Bastardy Bill 1920 enforcing fathers to support their illegitimate children.
- A call for the better awareness and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases.
- Calls for more humane conditions in slaughterhouses and for more humane farming systems included, among other things, support for the Protection of Animals Act 1936.
- A drive for more women police officers.
- Various resolutions seeking investigation into maternal and infant mortality and better health care, including lobbying in support of the Midwives Act 1936 which provided for better training and an increased provision of midwives.
- Campaigns for children's health and free school milk (which impacted the Free School Milk Act 1934 and the Public Health Act 1936).
- Support for the Matrimonial Causes Act 1938, going some way towards giving women an equal voice in divorce.
- And an interesting one, writing in the aftermath of Brexit: a call for the support and development of the work of the League of Nations.

This is all in addition to many successful local campaigns in getting many community improvements which were sometimes, literally life-saving, including health care provision, public phone boxes and playing fields.

## Communication

An important role across the strands of activity, from informing on current affairs and campaigns, exploring often (particularly in the early years) radical issues, to printing useful recipes, was played by the WI's magazine. *Home and Country* was produced monthly from March 1919 to 2006, after which the new *WI Life* was launched (not without considerable displeasure from the ranks). From January 1918 to February 1919 the WI shared *The Landswoman* magazine with the Women's Land Army, worth seeking out online not least for its outstanding cover art.

## More Remarkable Women

This short note has left out many who should be remembered in the early story of the WI. In alphabetical order, a still incomplete consideration would look at:

Helena 'Nellie' Auerbach, on the National Committee from 1919, the second Treasurer, also VP for the Jewish League for Woman's Suffrage and Treasurer for the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies.

Inez Jenkins, *née* Ferguson, an Oxford Classics graduate, General Secretary from 1919 who had worked at the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and as press secretary for the National Union for the Society of Equal Citizenship. She went on to author *The History of the Women's Institute Movement of England and Wales*, pub. 1953.

Lady Isabel Margesson who became, along with Josephine Godman, one of the first two Voluntary County Organisers. She had worked with Emmeline Pankhurst in the Women's Social and Political Union.

Lillian 'Lil' Nugent Harris was the wife of John Nugent Harris. She was appointed secretary when the WI was run by an AOS committee becoming a member of the first NFWI Executive Committee in 1917.

Mary 'Pollie' Hirst Simpson, involved with the WI from the early days, and appointed as the first WI Agricultural Adviser from 1925, remaining in post for over 20 years. An 'invincible' hockey player, golfer and horsewoman of somewhat startling appearance, often sporting a man's tie, Miss Simpson was a master at encouraging the shy, inexperienced villager

to speak at local meetings: 'The old cottage housewife who had a special way of ironing men's starched collars ... the blacksmith's wife giving a talk on the uses of iron ... the shepherd's wife on what could be seen in the fields very early in the morning in the lambing season.'

Alice Williams, the first Secretary, Treasurer and Editor of *Home and Country*. Miss Williams was youngest of 14 children of a Welsh MP and landowner, a talented artist, published playwright and involved with the Gorsedd, promoting Welsh language literature and poetry.

Margaret Winteringham, a National Committee member from 1922 and, as Liberal MP for Louth from 1921-24, only the second woman and first Liberal to sit as an MP.

And there are some women about whom the information is less obviously available but who played a considerable role and deserve further investigation: Mrs Caroline Huddart, Scaynes Hill WI, Sussex, one of the first VCO trainers at the Burgess Hill course in 1918; Mrs Trenow, Epping WI, who put forward the first national resolution in 1918; Miss Preece, who was appointed as technical/crafts organiser in 1918 and who established the Guild of Learners; Mrs Nan Clowes of Sussex, a paid assistant to Madge Watt who set up many early institutes and was heavily involved in the development and training of the Voluntary County Organiser system and many, many more ... through to my granny, Mrs Doris Haynes, an ordinary rural wife and mother for whom Dunchurch and Thurlaston WI (Warwickshire) was a source of information, opportunity, support and fun from the 1930s until her death in 1982.

Carrie de Silva  
July 2016

### **Further reading**

A referenced version of this leaflet is available on request but key sources and further reading are:

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