

ADDRESS

Margaret Collingwood, Federation Chairman

To Norfolk Federation of WIs at the Centenary Celebration April 12th 2019

In their WIs women have found something for themselves, a way of meeting across boundaries of class and denomination, a way of building a community of women able to explore their own skills and take charge of their own affairs, without the controlling influence of men.

Those were the words of Anne Stamper, the WI archivist, summing up her researches into our movement.

Today I'd like to explore her ideas with you through the lives of three remarkable Norfolk ladies, without whom we would not be where we are today

I'll begin - this won't surprise you - with our first chairman and our only president, Evelyn Suffield.

She was born almost 150 years ago, into a life of aristocracy, old money, extensive lands and plentiful servants. She married Major the Hon. Charles Harbord in one of the society weddings of the year. His family was among the most prominent in Norfolk, with a history going back to the 13th century.

On the death of Charles' father in April 1914, Evelyn became Lady Suffield. Four months later the first world war began. By 1916 Britain was facing a critical food shortage, as farm man-power had disappeared into the army. The answer was - of course - to bring in the women and raise production back up again. The Board of Agriculture set up Women's War Agricultural Committees across all counties. In Norfolk, Evelyn Suffield took the lead in recruiting, training and placing women into the Women's Land Army.

That was the origin of the Women's Institute movement in this county. Lady Suffield with her leadership skills and inspiring personality soon became its driving force. The amazing development of the movement under her guidance confounded the prophets who, at its birth, gave it from three to five years.

What was it about this exceptional woman that so inspired our WI members for thirty years?

Our first County Secretary - more of her later - had this to say. *Lady Suffield possessed the great qualities of a born leader, infinite tact, great wisdom, and a wide vision, crowned with a keen sense of humour. No detail of our work was too small, and nothing too large to command her careful consideration. Never too busy to listen, she would remind us that It is the little things that create differences, in the big things of life we are one.*

Evelyn Suffield saw the WI as a force for good both at village level and nationwide. *I should like something like this*, she said. *A stranger comes into one of our villages and remarks on the happy atmosphere, and, on being told that there is a Women's Institute there, to say, Ah! That accounts for it.*

And looking beyond, she said: *If we can cultivate peace and goodwill in our homes and villages, it will bear fruit in the country and the world.*

In 1938 the Norfolk Federation celebrated its 21st anniversary. After singing "For she's a jolly good fellow", followed by three cheers, the members presented their President with a platinum diamond, emerald and ruby brooch, as a mark of their affection and gratitude. After Lady Suffield's death her daughter donated the brooch to the Federation, for the use of her successors in the years to come. I need hardly tell you how honoured I feel to be wearing that brooch today.

The second remarkable woman I bring you is Mary Burgess.

She was our first County Secretary - a position she held for thirty years. All that time she worked alongside Evelyn Suffield in an effective and harmonious partnership (as far as we know!). And yet the contrast between the two could not be greater.

Mary was the 2nd of 7 children of Edward Burgess, who was one of the colourful characters of nineteenth century Norwich, as well as a fearless champion of the poor and oppressed. He edited and published *Daylight*, a weekly journal intended to expose villainy, humbug and fraud. He was often in court for libel, was publicly horsewhipped by an opponent, and another time spent 3 months in prison. He was hugely popular among the poor in Norwich and detested by his victims. Mary acted as his secretary, clerk and cashier until his death in 1911.

During the Great War, Mary worked as organizer of the Women's Land Army, and in 1917 was asked by her employer, the Board of Agriculture, to inaugurate the WI in Norfolk. She and Madge Watt, over from Canada, formed the first Institute at East Runton in January 1918. Within a year there were 29 WIs and it was time to form a County Federation. Evelyn Suffield was appointed chairman, with Mary Burgess as full-time organiser and secretary.

Mary's efficiency and tireless hard work, combined with Lady Suffield's leadership and vision, were the forces that drove the remarkable expansion of the WI in Norfolk during the 1920s and right up to the second world war. She travelled ceaselessly around the county, usually in a car kindly provided by the vice-chairman's husband, Dr Burton-Fanning. We can perhaps see him

as a forerunner of today's WI husbands; making himself useful, but not getting in the way.

Like Evelyn Suffield, Mary Burgess strongly believed in the comradeship between the labourer's wife and the lady of the manor, working together for the common good. In 1919 the Queen had asked her, at a meeting in Sandringham, about setting up a WI in the village and she herself became a member as soon as it was formed.

In retirement, Mary liked to remember those the early days, the enthusiasm and excitement of *beginning*, when the newly formed WIs were filling a gap in village life, providing a place where everyone could meet on the same level, contributing whatever she could do best. She often quoted the words of Walt Whitman: *I do not call one greater and one smaller; that which fills its period and place is equal to any.*

Cicely McCall came a generation after our first two Norfolk WI pioneers. She was born in 1900, and her life spanned the entire 20th century, as she lived on till 2003. I'd like to think that a few of us here may remember her.

The youngest of eight children of an Irish barrister, she studied at Oxford, but left without a degree. After a succession of jobs, she moved to Cairo for five years, helping women who had been brought into the country for prostitution.

Returning home in the 30s, she became the first woman in Britain to train as a psychiatric social worker and went on to work in women's prisons.

In 1938 Cicely was recruited by Lady Denman as the WI Education Organiser, to reinforce the WI's ideas on adult education for women nationwide. She travelled 3 weeks out of 4 and visited every county in England. The WI set up residential courses, and out of these came the plan for a dedicated WI College. Cicely McCall helped put forward the resolution at the 1945 AGM, and it was carried overwhelmingly. Three years later Denman College opened its doors.

But by then Cicely had been sacked by the WI. She had stood as Labour candidate for Bury St Edmunds in the 1945 election, and that was held incompatible with her staff duties. Unfortunately, she was not elected as an MP, and found herself once again out of a job. So, she went back to being a social worker, finishing up at the old St Andrew's Hospital outside Norwich. She bought a bungalow at East Carleton, joined the village WI, bought three geese and two poodles and settled down to country life.

Meanwhile the first warden of Denman College had died, and the WI needed a replacement. Some might say that Cicely, with her experience as a prison officer at Holloway and as principal of a girls' approved school, was the

obvious choice. Anyhow, she was invited to take on the job, and after some hesitation, she accepted.

She found the college in a mess and launched a series of radical changes. They were certainly successful; she halved the college's deficit and doubled the student intake. However, she ruffled too many feathers and did too much too fast. After a year the WI sacked her again - for being a square peg in a round hole.

If I had defrauded the college, she wrote bitterly, or been found in bed with the gardener, the terms of the dismissal could hardly have been more insulting.

Cicely was now 58 years old, with no home, no job, and precious little pension. She went back to Norfolk, where the Federation had always been supportive of her. The county council recruited her into the child guidance team, and she was secure until her retirement in 1964.

That was another beginning for Cicely McCall. She was invited to set up a Norfolk & Norwich branch of the Association for Mental Health, now known as MIND. She made it her work for the next 19 years, steadily breaking down the prejudice against mental illness. When she retired again, at the age of 83, she was able to say: "I think our greatest contribution has been to help change public opinion. Hardly anyone now fears that mental illness might be catching".

She lived on for another twenty years, in her 16th century house in Dunston that she herself had restored from a derelict ruin. The Board of Trustees minutes of April 1997 record their pleasure in seeing Cicely, then aged 97, at the Federation Annual Meeting. I hope that in her old age she made her peace with the WI. The WI certainly has much to thank her for.

Here we have three Norfolk women, so very different in their backgrounds, their aspirations and their lives, and yet each so important to the success of our WI movement.

Can we see any common threads in them? Yes, I think there are three.

The first is easy - *commitment*. Each maintained her unswerving commitment to the WI, coupled with powerful energy and capacity for hard work. Evelyn Suffield's efforts with the WI alone would have exhausted most people, but the WI was just a fraction of her interests. She was county councillor, magistrate, girl guides commissioner, and held too many other jobs to mention. Mary Burgess was indefatigable in her work as County Organiser and Secretary, speaking, writing and travelling around Norfolk for 30 years.

And as the EDP wrote on her 103rd birthday, Cicely McCall fitted enough into her life to make Methuselah envious.

The second thread can be found in the word *conviction*. Each of our ladies had her own crystal-clear vision of what the WI movement was set up to achieve and how it was going to achieve it. Lady Suffield saw the WI above all as *a living force for good, rich with power for social health and healing*. Mary - or Burgie as she became affectionately known - knew that the WI would lead to women's empowerment, urging members to take an active part in local government and beyond. Cicely during her education visits witnessed the deplorable conditions in so many English villages and realised that, through the power of the WI, women could take charge of their improvement.

The third quality they shared is *comradeship*. I mean the quality of taking people as they are, valuing them as individuals and seeing the good in them whatever the obstacles. Evelyn Suffield spoke of *the labourer's wife and lady of the manor working together in a happy comradeship of service*. Mary Burgess had her favourite quote from Walt Whitman, about *not calling one greater and one smaller*, and Cicely never judged; as she used to say to her volunteers in Norfolk: *People who say, "She's queer" are so often the ones who are queer themselves*.

Truly these were three remarkable pioneers of the WI in Norfolk. Their examples inspire us today. If we dare to change just a couple of words of the Bible, we can proclaim:

Let us now praise famous women, and our mothers in their generations.