

.... And What a Year That Was!!

Margaret Collingwood, Federation Chairman

The organisation of a family gathering to mark a significant event can be fraught, stressful and often leads to tears! Imagine the feeling of dread and horror the Board of Trustees of the Norfolk Federation of WIs felt way back in 2015 when finalising plans to celebrate our Centenary with nearly 5000 members. Could we possibly put on events that the whole county would get behind and could we create memories that would send the whole Federation into the next centenary with a smile on its face?

We tried and this is what we came up with ...

In February we held a dinner/dance in the Holiday Inn by the airport for around 300 of our members. They came from far and wide and some even stayed the night. There was a welcome drink, three course delicious meal and dancing till the early hours to the music of the Squeejees. Our Annual Meeting at the end of March took place in the Theatre Royal – a change to our usual venue for this special year – with entertainment provided by the wonderful Pam Ayres and in April we held a special Centenary Service in the Cathedral which opened with a procession of WI representatives and their banners, old and new. The re-formed choir returned and gave a moving performance and, of course, led the singing of Jerusalem.

Once again, the WI had a marquee at the Royal Norfolk Show taking to heart the theme of 'the WI is having a party'. Our visitors were sure of a warm welcome, plenty to look at and discuss and, of course, the best cup of tea at the Showground. Someone must have been very good indeed in July as the sun shone on our Garden Party held at the Old Vicarage, East Ruston. There were definitely as many flowers on the dresses of the WI members attending as there were in the flower beds (though they were in full bloom and showing off delightfully), and it was a treat to see everyone exploring the grounds, having a delicious afternoon tea or a glass of Pimms and plentiful canapés.

Our WIs across the county celebrated Norfolk Day in many varied ways. With over 150 WIs in towns and villages across Norfolk and also in Norwich, hundreds of pieces of cake could be distributed to the general public with messages of goodwill from their local WIs. In the garden of Evelyn Suffield House, our WI Headquarters, we welcomed the BBC Radio programme, The Garden Party, and many of our members with their gardening questions.

The WI has its very own Educational and Training Centre, Denman College, situated near Oxford. We visited in September for a couple of nights to follow courses on craft, Kew Gardens, fitness and cookery. The accommodation, food and teaching are all excellent and this opportunity to socialise for three days with friends is just one of the perks of being a WI member.

The Federation of Norfolk WIs believes strongly in getting to know our members throughout the entire county and our Autumn meetings give us the chance to do just that. We were excited when we knew which speakers were attending to enlighten and entertain: the representatives of the Army, Navy and Airforce giving a modern point of view of being in the services, and the wonderful glass artist, Helen Wright, who gave us a taster of this marvellous craft.

The end of our centenary year will find us celebrating this amazing achievement of our great organisation in St. Nicholas's Chapel in King's Lynn in December. We are holding a candlelit procession 'Light a Candle for your WI' in the presence of the Mayor and the Norfolk High Sheriff.

None of these events would have been nearly as successful without the continued support and efforts of our multitalented office staff. We have seven Sub-Committees which come up with ideas, provide volunteers to man stalls and carry boxes and keep the Federation relevant and informative to our members. However, the glue that binds together these various committees comes from Louise, Helen and Vanessa who manage to overcome all challenges. We now look to the future of the WI in Norfolk and can't help but wonder what the next 100 years will be like. I hope our membership will continue to grow; we have opened two new WIs in this special year, one of which is a workplace WI which is a first for this area. We need to embrace technology and join the digital age, but we must maintain our proud traditions and learn from all those women who have given the WI their talents and time and make them as proud of us as we are of them.