

EDP WI WEEK 7th December

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Just Names on a Page?

Sitting in Evelyn Suffield House, in Norwich, reading the first Minutes Book from 1st February 1919, the names of our founders rise up from the page: Lady Albinia Donaldson, Mrs E Birkbeck, Mrs Mordaunt Edwards, Mrs Burton-Fanning, Miss Burgess, Miss Duff, Miss Upcher, Miss Wise, Mrs Elwin with Lady Fellowes and Lady Suffield. Who were these ladies? How did they come together on that day? Just names on a page?

At that meeting Lady Fellowes was in the chair and Lady Denman was a guest. Lady Denman had formed the National Federation of Women's Institutes in 1915 as part of her war work and she explained the benefits of becoming a County Federation. There were already 27 Women's Institutes in Norfolk, 11 of which celebrated their own centenary in 2018/19. The meeting was organised by Mrs Christabel Burton-Fanning and Miss Burgess, who became the Secretary of the Norfolk Federation of WIs and who held that post for many years.

It is possible that Lady Suffield and Lady Fellowes only intended to be the representatives of the Women's War Agricultural Committee at that meeting; instead they were co-opted onto the Committee. Lady Evelyn Suffield went on to be President of the WI for 48 years and Chairman for 20 of those years. Like many early WI members, she had strong Women's Suffrage connections. As President of the Voluntary War Work Association, Norfolk and Norwich Branch, she worked alongside Mrs Laura Stuart (Vice President) sister of Ethel and Helen Colman and also Mabel Clarkson. All were members of the National Union of Women's Suffrage, Norfolk Branch, of which Mrs Laura Stuart was President.

Many of these ladies on the committee were also active in the National Council of Women's Workers with Miss Wise as the Chairman. Miss Wise was Gertrude Mary Wise and the new Treasurer the Federation Committee. She was also the Headmistress of Norwich High School for Girls and assisted Mrs Burton-Fanning on the Education Sub-Committee of the new Norfolk WI Federation. There are many graduates of Norwich School for Girls involved in the Suffragette movement; Miriam Pratt was a teacher at the school and was arrested and taken to Holloway Prison whilst working there and Dorothy Jewson and Edith Cavell were all alumni of this school too.

The Committee looked at how they could set up a Federation School, the first of which took place on 12th and 13th November 1919 with a representative attending from each of the WIs that had been formed in Norfolk at that time. It was a great success. The first day was presided over by Miss Colman and Mrs James Stuart who were great ambassadors of 'Education for Women' and the second day welcomed Mrs Nugent-Harris (who became the editor of Home and Country Magazine) and Miss Davison.

Many of these ladies had contributed greatly to the World War I War effort, also experiencing the loss of their children in the Great War. Another member of the newly formed Federation Committee, Mrs Meade, joined the Red Cross as a Volunteer Auxilliary Nurse in 1916 and worked alongside her daughter Theosodia at Hedenham Hall, Bungay. She lost her son Robert Percy Meade in 1916 on the front in France and then sadly her

daughter Theosodia died in 1919. (the very first year of the WI Committee). Mrs Meade was also on the Norfolk Ladies Committee during the war alongside Lady Fellowes.

Mrs Mordaunt Edwards had turned their family home at Hardingham Hall into a Red Cross Hospital and became the Commandant in 1917 until the war ended in 1918. Guests in 1911 were Russell Colman and his wife Edith. He was the brother of Ethel, Helen and Laura Colman who were well-known followers of the cause of Women's Suffrage. Edith Colman also served on the WI Norfolk Federation Committee. She was Vice-President of the Norwich Division of the British Red Cross Society and other Red Cross Services, and was awarded an OBE.

Lady Albinia Donaldson was at the Inaugural Meeting of the Norfolk Federation in 1919 and spoke of the experience of her local WI in Norfolk and the "great value of the Institute in providing a centre for social gathering of all classes and sections". This was reported in 'The Common Cause', the magazine created by Emiline Pankhurst for the Suffragette movement. Lady Albinia Donaldson was also an honorary governor of Addenbrooke's Hospital and lived part of her time in Cambridge and part of her time in North Norfolk where she held one of the first WI meetings.

Mrs E Birkbeck and Mrs Mordaunt Edwards and Miss Duff were all officers in the Norfolk Girl Guides Association and there was an initiative agreed in the first year of the Norfolk Federation of WIs to talk to the Girl Guides Association about "How Girl Guides can help the Women's Institute". Miss Duff was firstly Chairman of the Representative of the Council and later became Assistant County Commissioner of Norfolk for the Girl Guides.

Miss Catherine Basilia Duff, as well as being involved in the Girl Guides, had joined the Committee of the Norfolk and Norwich Branch of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals with Mrs Laura Stuart and Miss Willis who was the secretary of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Society in Norwich. Miss Duff became Lady Mayoress of Norwich in 1920 to her brother Col. Granville John Berney Duff who was Mayor. As he wasn't married at this time, she assisted him and did an admirable job alongside him.

These are just some of the stories of the extraordinary ladies of that first meeting and the network of achievement. This led to the formation of the Federation of Women's Institutes in Norfolk. When you look at those names on the page, think of the incredible people behind them: such strong characters with a strong belief that they could promote this wonderful organisation. Today we enjoy the amazing achievements of these ladies. Today we continue to reap the benefits of the legacy of these amazing women.