

# *Account of Purley on Thames*

## Women's Institute

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### *Introduction*

The Womens Institute originated in Stoney Creek, Ontario in 18.. and spread rapidly across Canada and over the Atlantic to Great Britain. It is an organisation for women who live in rural areas and is specifically non-religious and non-party-political. It has built up a reputation for campaigning for rural issues and is caricatured by its 'Jam and Jerusalem' image. This derives from the many WI Markets selling home made jam and the patriotic song Jerusalem which is sung at every meeting.

In England it is organised through County Associations and has a Residential College at Denham. A sister organisation, for town and urban based women was set up as The Townswomens Guild.

### *The Purley WI*

The Womens Institute in Purley was founded in 1936 and held its inaugural meeting on 7th October. It met monthly at the Church of England School and its first outing was to London to see the Coronation celebrations on 28th May 1937.

Meetings at the school had to be suspended in the early part of the war as there were no black-out curtains. However a small group was formed to black out the school before meetings and they were resumed from June 1940. The war effort was assisted by sewing meetings for the Red Cross and the collection of scrap metal. From September 1940 a waste paper scheme was inaugurated with the WI organising the children of the village. The sale of the waste paper had raised £2-9-0 by Feb 1941.

Other endeavours towards the war effort included the knitting of comforts for the troops and a village savings scheme. This lapsed and was replaced in 1956 by a National Savings Group. This lasted until April 1969.

Meetings switched to the Memorial Hall from June 1953 where they have remained.

Blue WI china was ordered as far back as June 1938 for refreshments. Spoons were purchased in January 1959 and in 1961 with the growth in numbers, a set of three dozen cups, saucers and plates were purchased.

As well as the meetings with speakers, whist drives and Beetle drives were organised to raise money. A trading stall was operated from 1963 and in 1974 the Purley WI joined in the opening of the Oxfam shop in Pangbourne which they man on Wednesday afternoons.

### *60th Birthday by Ann Betts*

In the Autumn of 1995, the Committee of Purley Women's Institute started making plans to celebrate the Institute's 60th Birthday in 1996. I was secretary of Purley W.I. at the time and one thing puzzled me; although the members were adamant the Institute was formed in 1936, the date in the W.I. Yearbook was 1937. I thought I had better do some checking, so I telephoned the Berkshire Federation office at Mortimer to clarify the matter. The secretary there was a bit put out, as she thought we really should know the year our Institute was started but, when I explained that the Yearbook date was different from our records, she said she would investigate and ring me back.

When she rang, she was quite excited because she had found the original minutes of the first

meeting of Purley W.I. and, apparently, it is very rare to find such documents. The confusion over the date had arisen because, although the first meeting was held in September 1936, the papers setting out the formation of the Institute and the notification of the Officers were not sent to the National Federation until January 1937. The formation date is always when the N.F.W.I. receive this information.

The Federation Secretary promised to send me copies of the documents and these duly arrived a few days later. I learned that, in March 1936, Lady Rucker saw Miss Palgrave, who was against organising a preliminary meeting as the Rector, Mr. Skuse, felt the formation of a W.I. in the area would kill off the Mother's Union. However, a number of residents who had been W.I. members in other areas were keen that Purley should have its own Institute and, in June 1936, Lady Rucker met Miss Palgrave and Mrs Hodgkin, who agreed to be President if nominated. On July 17th a preliminary meeting was taken by Mrs Trench and Lady Rucker and several Pangbourne members now living in Purley attended. The formation meeting was arranged for September 16th and Mrs Hodgkin was elected President.

In 1940 the Institute's minutes record a number of difficulties:

- 1) No black-out - offers were made of a committee of three to do it
- 2) No money - Balance was £3.11s.0d.
- 3) No transport for speakers.

The President, still Mrs Hodgkin, said it was unfair for members to pay another 2s. but all said they were willing. Various members spoke in favour of carrying on, everyone was nominated for Committee and eleven were elected! Despite the problems at that time, the Institute survives to this day, although on March 15th 1941, a report on that meeting stated "sleepy President, not too helpful but nice members."

Incidentally, Sybil Pryor who was president from March 1995 to March 1998, is the great-niece of the late Miss Palgrave and the niece of the late Miss Lister, who organised the games at the first meeting. Sybil's mother was President in 1962.

The subject of a banner for Purley W.I. first arose in November 1947, but it was not until 10 years later in December 1957 that Mr Eliot Hodgkin donated £10 for a banner as a memorial to his mother, Mrs J Hodgkin, who had served as President of the Institute for sixteen years. The banner was designed by Mr Farrah Bell and a working committee was formed to make it. In June 1958, the completed banner was on show - it had been worked by Mrs Walden, Mrs Annetts, Mrs Harding, Mrs J Winters and Mrs Hem. They received a vote of thanks which also went to Mr Skidmore for the gift of the cord on the banner and to Mr Rawlins for making the pole. In May 1959 thanks were conveyed to Mrs Barnes who had made a holder for the banner.

## *Bibliography*

Jubilee Record of WI events (Margaret Hughes, 1977)