

Pamela Waite's speech for the Steeple Aston WI's 90th birthday

By the late summer of 1917, the village was war-weary. Many of the men were away fighting in the army or navy and food was in short supply.

Miss Vincent called a meeting of village women in her garden at Cedars Lodge. She told them about these "new societies, which were helping women to grow and preserve". The first one had been started two years before in Wales, by a Canadian woman and they were spreading fast. Everyone agreed that she should find out more.

To keep interest alive, the enterprising Miss Vincent persuaded the Ministry of Food to give a box of sugar to the village. A jam-making session was arranged but, by now, the only surplus produce in village gardens were marrows. Several village cooks met at the Technical School, but without any setting agents, the day ended with sticky marrow toffee being scraped out of the pans and distributed to the children.

21 March 1918. An early evening meeting was called at the Technical School. There were three visitors: two came from the Oxfordshire Women's Agricultural Committee, one of whom chaired the meeting, and the third was a lady from the newly formed Ipsden WI, who talked about the aims of the WI and how to organise one. More than fifty people enrolled straightaway and ten offered to be on the committee. A Miss Worrall became President for the first six months and Miss Vincent became Honorary Secretary and Treasurer. The evening ended with the third visitor suggesting that they took on the village allotments and kept a pig in the garden.

The WI proved an enormous success. By 1921 it had sixty-six members with sixteen on the committee. With Headington, it was the third oldest Institute in Oxfordshire and was so strong and active that visitors came to meetings from other villages to find out what a WI was all about.

It developed and changed with the social needs of the community. There was much concern expressed about young girls after they had left school and discussion followed about running an 'associate' group for them. Should they run the village library? They did take over the organisation of the ladies' section of the Flower Show and ran it until the Second World War.

Over the years, they formed a Ladies' Cricket Club – one older lady was an outstanding batsman, but needed a younger 'runner'. There was a Drama Group, a Choir and a Folk Dance Team, with matching apricot dresses.

They also organised outings. In 1920, Tom Franks took some of the ladies to Souldern Fete in his wagonette, pulled by his much-loved brown horse. But, five years later, they were hiring charabancs.

There was one notable post-war outing when they went to Woburn Abbey and then on to the theatre at Northampton. The only problem was that the attraction that week turned out to be a striptease. With some abstentions the ladies went in and formed the whole of the female part of the audience.

The coach driver ribbed them endlessly about, 'What den of iniquity would the WI be

visiting next?’

By the outbreak of war, they were all organised and experienced. Come to the SAVA exhibition in November and you will hear and see all about it.

Ninety years on, we live in an utterly different world, but the fundamentals haven’t changed. We still voice the needs of our rural community, albeit now by e-mails, letters and the occasional demonstration.

We enjoy learning new skills, but they are more likely to be on the use of your digital camera, wine-tasting or wicker structures for your garden, than on shoe repairs or pig-keeping.

We enjoy listening to good speakers, spending days out together walking, painting, and on Federation outings. Above all we talk, laugh a lot and enjoy the support and company of other women.

Our Federation Chairman has toasted us on this, our Ninetieth Birthday, and now I would like to look forward ten years. May we all meet together again then, to celebrate our Centenary!