



Some of the members of the Rylstone and District Women's Institute, in a rare, clothed moment. Left to right, Miss July, October, January, March, September, August, May and November.

JONATHAN PLAYER/The New York Times

# Bare-naked ladies — Yorkshire style

The members of an English village Women's Institute, aged 45-66, hoped to raise \$2,800 for leukemia research with their own full-monty charity calendar. They raised \$790,000

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would hardly occur to someone looking for exhibitionists to come to the Yorkshire Dales village of Rylstone, a picture-perfect collection of cottages and a duck pond on a road between Skipton and Kettlewell.

Much less would someone seek to peek out among the sisterhood of the Rylstone and District Chapter of the Women's Institute, a wholehearted rural service organization known for "jam and Jerusalem" — home-bottled preserves from the Yorkshire Dales, and the poem enshrining "England's green and pleasant land."

It provoked some wide-eyed stares when word went forth from the pastoral place that 11 members of the Rylstone and District Chapter of the Women's Institute, ages 45 to 66, had decided to substitute the traditional images of watery sunsets and winding paths bursting with buttercups for their annual calendar with images of themselves with no clothes on.

What proved even more surprising than the event was the reaction to it.

The women had come up with a attention-getting notion of raising money for leukemia research, a mission that took on a sense of urgency after the husband of one of their members died of the disease. They hoped that by the end of their campaign, sales of the calendar might reach \$2,800. It reached \$790,000.

Another unexpected reaction, the calendar, a discreet and tastefully done-up of the garage-mechanic style, brought forth thousands of orders from middle-age women who appreciated the serenity and confidence of the village women had re-created their own flagging self-image in our 50s, and it doesn't

bother us, and that seemed to come across," said Tricia Stewart, co-owner with her husband of a medical-software firm. She introduces herself these days as Miss October.

"Just to say, how absolutely bloody marvelous!" wrote a Bristol woman in her mid-40s. "I have no intention of reaching my 50s, 60s, 70s or more and lying down for the rest of my life, and I know that a lot of other women out there need to see that they aren't expected to either."

A letter from Liverpool said, "It makes us oldies feel better about ourselves — quite uplifted, in fact."

A man from the Orkney Islands in northern Scotland said the calendar had enabled him to convince his 47-year-old wife that a recent mastectomy didn't make her "any less desirable." And another man exulted, "How wonderful to see real women instead of stick insects with pouty lips and pipe cleaners for legs."

The women, who call their fundraising effort the Calendar Girl Campaign, have seen their own daily calendars fill up with events ranging from agriculture and amusement fairs to network television interviews to the annual Woman of the Year dinner in London and modeling appearances on the catwalks of fall fashion week. Like all successful enterprises, they started a Web site ([www.dacnet.net/rylstonewi/](http://www.dacnet.net/rylstonewi/)).

Royal courtiers in London, hearing the women were in town, invited them to Buckingham Palace to hand-deliver calendars for the Queen and the Queen Mother to a gold-braided equerry. "A really dishy young chap," confided Angela Baker, 54 (Miss February).

But none of it seems to have gone to their heads. When Matthew Freud, great-grandson of Sigmund Freud, who is the moment's hottest celebrity public-relations man in

London, invited them in to discuss corporate sponsorship, they gleefully told him they had never heard of him. "The whole time," Ms. Baker said, "I thought his name was Floyd."

They also won't be doing another calendar. "We couldn't repeat the success, and we'd lose the novelty," said Moyra Livesey (Miss May), a 51-year-old nursing-home manager.

The women first thought up their daring venture in 1997, a time, they said, before any of them had heard about *The Full Monty*, the hit film about a group of men who bare it all in nearby Sheffield. "We partly did it out of devilment," said Lynda Logan (Miss July), a 56-year-old painter. "But the top and bottom of it was that we were so shocked by John's death that we would have done anything to draw attention to the tragedy of his illness." John Baker, 54, a national park officer in the Yorkshire Dales, died in July 1998, only five months after falling ill.

Their plan was to have Ms. Logan's husband, Terry, a former professional photographer, set up the shot, then duck into a side room while she snapped the shutter. But on the day of the shoot itself, the women overcame their inhibitions with generous amounts of red wine and let Mr. Logan, 61, go ahead and do the whole job himself. "We're all great friends, so there was no embarrassment," Ms. Livesey said. "In fact, watching each other covering ourselves strategically with sieves and plants and apple presses and the like was tremendous fun."

The women maintain their Women's Institute image by wearing pearls in all the shots. The pictures are in black and white, except for the presence of a bright yellow sunflower in every frame, a symbol that commemorates John Baker, who busied himself planting sunflower seeds during his illness but didn't live to see them bloom.

The calendars were a hit from the moment they were published in April, and no objections came even from quarters the women were wary of. Their husbands and children all applauded their initiative, and the chairman of the parish council said only, "Well, I've seen more than that over the garden fence."

Reporters from the London tabloids who showed up with money to pass out for gossip found no one to spend it on. A television interviewer, frustrated that not even the local churchman had a bad word to say about the appearance of strippers in his flock, said, "So will it be Methodist ministers posing this way next?"

"No," the Rev. Keith Hopper responded. "They'll pay us to keep our clothes on."

The urge to bare all has now spread to other organizations around England, many with causes of the same traditional bent as the Women's Institute. Those stripping for charity have included Country-side Alliance chapters, pro-hunting groups, sports clubs, farmers from Devon, chefs in Suffolk, a Royal Air Force pilot team, a fire brigade in suburban Manchester and the Sir Watkins Williams-Wynn's Hunt in Cheshire, which Prince Charles has often ridden with.

With all this shedding of cricket whites and jodhpurs going on across Britain, the only reported moment of embarrassment occurred in the countryside outside Prees Higher Heath in Shropshire.

David Higham, 41, an editor of a hunt-supporters' magazine, was being photographed astride a mountain bike driving feverishly across a stream with his arms bent low against the handle bars and his bottom, clad only in a black bikini brief, held high in the air.

Seeing a passing neighbour, he waved.