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WOMEN of the WORLD

The Women's Institute is a global phenomenon which celebrates its centenary this year. **Sarah Foster** examines its remarkable growth

WOMEN worldwide are celebrating a remarkable anniversary this year - the centenary of the first Women's Institute. The focus of their attention is a little place called Stoney Creek, at the Western point of Lake Ontario in Canada.

At a time when industry and urbanisation were dominant forces, and the women's suffrage movement was growing in towns and cities, rural women faced bleak, narrow lives.

Forty-year-old Adelaide Hunter Hoodless knew their problems. Having grown up fatherless in a farming family and seen one of her children die at 18 months - a casualty of ignorance of food hygiene - she was determined to change things, and became one of the best-known educationalists in North America.

"The education of mothers has been my life's work," she later said, when speaking about domestic science at a meeting in Guelph, Ontario. There a Mr Erland Lee heard her and, as a result, asked her to address his local Farmers' Institute in Stoney Creek. This gave her the idea to form an Institute for women, similar to the Farmers' Institute for men."

On 19 February, 100 women and one man - the helpful Mr Lee, who chaired the meeting - gathered in Squire's Hall at Stoney Creek and the Women's Institute was born.

The movement grew through Canada and into America. Its aims were to improve women's skills as mothers and home-makers but, by so doing, it offered them support, friendship and education in a way no other organisation did. The idea took longer



to reach Britain.

Although Adelaide Hoodless visited England in 1899 as a delegate to the International Congress of the National Council of Women, interest in forming a British WI proved scanty.

In 1913 Madge Watt, a founder member of a Canadian WI, came to live in England with her two sons. She was convinced that the WI was needed here, but it took two years before she persuaded the Agricultural Organisation Society of its benefits.

The first British WI meeting was held on 11 September 1915 in the remarkably named Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch (Llanfair PG), Anglesey, in Wales.

That first meeting was arranged by one Colonel Stapleton-Cotton and his wife, who became the first WI president. He later confessed: "I was one of many who doubted the capacity of women to conduct even their ordinary business with success.

During the last 18 months I have learned more about women than I have learned




in 40 years. I see and believe that women can and will bring all classes, all denominations, all interests, all schools of the best thought together... It will be a reality in the not distant future, and it will be brought about by these Institutes."

It is startling to consider how radical the WI seemed at the time of the First World War. It was viewed by many as dangerously democratic. "Meetings such as you describe," said one well-to-do lady, "would, we feel, give the lower classes a false sense of their own

importance, which would be most undesirable."

At the end of April 1915 the German blockade was taking hold; Britain had food supplies for just six weeks. The proliferating WIs became central to the war effort - and the organisation as a whole was administered by the Government's Board of Agriculture. In 1919 the WI achieved independence, partly through the work of its new chairman, Lady Denman. By then there were more than 1,000 Women's Institutes, link-

ds for women members. The centenary so far included a commemorative medal by the Mint, bell-ringing in churches and a conference at Romsey, in five countries. I, herself a WI member, broadcast the Women's Institute has been undervalued. Men's affairs are trivialised. In the WI will be a force to be with; the largest organisation in the world, working as ever, to improve women's lives. 



TOP: the first members of the WI in Britain at Llanfair PG in Anglesey in 1915
ABOVE: the WI emblem
LEFT: orienteering in the Nineties requires energy and teamwork

contribution to our

information, contact the WI, 104 New King's Road, London SW16 4LW. Check your local directory.

the NFWI takes place in Birmingham, with an exhibition. An exhibition of all aspects of the WI.

holding a day at the bands, and many Rose and Warrior. Presenting a joint art, mark the centenary in Llandudno, County

ibitors at the Royal Glamorgan the centennial theme

Royal National Voluntary Action -

is holding a day of Haddenham, craft demonstrations to advance, £4 on the 01753 713576 for details).

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