

by their Women's own magazine, *Home & Country*, launched in March the same year.

The WI may have begun simply as a home-makers' organisation, but it quickly became involved with broader issues. Its staunchly non-partisan stance towards politics and religion did not stop it from campaigning for causes as diverse as female police units (the Government had begun to disband them after the war), adequate school lunches and a 24-hour telephone service in rural areas.

All such campaigns were – and are – chosen democratically by votes within individual WIs, sifted again at regional level and then presented at the national annual meeting for final consideration. It is a measure of the members' open-mindedness that many resolutions seem ahead of their time.

One of the beauties of the WI is that it exists simultaneously as a local, regional and national body.

Perhaps the most talked-about WI lecture of all was in Cliveden in 1938, on *Useful and Acceptable Gifts*. One of the members found the combination of subject and speaker (the one well-intentioned, the other highly-mannered) so irresistibly funny that she recited the speech to some friends. A few weeks

later, at a dinner party, they persuaded her to repeat the performance: afterwards, one of the guests, Herbert Farjeon, approached and asked her to join his West End revue.

Thus it was that on 19 April 1939, Joyce Grenfell stepped on to the professional stage for the first time with the opening lines: "Madam President – fellow Institute members – good evening." Her sure touch and the authenticity of her monologue guaranteed success.

The WI was big enough to laugh at itself, and with the Second World War looming there was no doubt as to its importance. Once more, it dug for victory, working with the Ministry of Food to grow and sell produce. It was a time of growth in other areas, too. In 1946, members voted to develop their own residential college. A site was found, an elegant Georgian building in Oxfordshire, which was named Denman College after the WI's chairman. Opened in 1948, it quickly became a cornerstone of WI life. Today, more than 500 courses cater for some 6,300 students annually, covering subjects such as social studies, personal development and arts and crafts.

In 1952, a WI Handicraft Exhibition took place at the Victoria & Albert Museum.

Among the visitors who were impressed by the "museum-standard" patchwork quilts and other exhibits was Laura Ashley, a WI member then working as a secretary at the Institute's headquarters. Inspired to make a quilt, she found that no shops stocked the dainty printed fabrics she wanted and the rest as they say, is history.

The WI continues to encourage and inspire its members – now well over a quarter of a million of them. Its "Best Foot Forward" project, promoting walking for exercise, won the 1996 Health Alliance Award, and three out of nine of the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council's science

study awards for women went to WI members.

This year's centenary events have so far included the striking of a commemorative medal by the Royal Mint, bell-ringing in village churches and a global video conference at IBM's base in Romsey, linking WIs in five countries. The Queen, herself a WI member, sent greetings which were broadcast.

The Women's Institute has often been undervalued. In a male-dominated world, women's affairs are all too easily trivialised. In fact, it is still a force to be reckoned with; the largest women's organisation in the country, working tirelessly, as ever, to improve women's lives. ☺



Home-bottled fruit was just part of the WI's major contribution to the country's survival during the Second World War

FACT FILE

Annual membership of the WI costs £13. For more information, contact the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI), 104 New King's Road, London SW6 4LY (0171-371 9300).

There are scores of events taking place around the country this year to celebrate the WI's centenary: here are just a few. Check your local press for details, or contact your nearest WI federation.

- 3-4 June The Triennial General Meeting of the NFWI takes place at the National Exhibition Centre, Birmingham, with a Gala Concert on the first evening. An exhibition, entitled *Lifetime '97* and promoting all aspects of the WI, will run concurrently.
- 21 June Hampshire Federation of WIs is holding a day at Portsmouth naval base, with marine bands, and many stands around *HMS Victory*, *Mary Rose* and *Warrior*.
- 23-28 June The northern WI federations are presenting a joint art, Craft and Flower Exhibition to mark the centenary at Auckland Castle in Bishop Auckland, County Durham (entrance £3-50).
- 21-24 July NFWI-Wales will be among the exhibitors at the Royal Welsh Show, Builth Wells, in the South Glamorgan Exhibition Hall – its entries follow the centennial theme of *The Maple Leaf Connection*.
- 3-10 August NFWI-Wales will also exhibit at the Royal National Eisteddfod, Bala, in the Pavilion for Voluntary Action – its subject will be *Inheritance*.
- 8 August Buckinghamshire Federation of WIs is holding a centennial celebration in the village of Haddenham, with an exhibition, cookery and craft demonstrations and presentations (entrance £3 in advance, £4 on the day; contact Mrs Myers on 01494-713576 for details).

Hawkey Studio Associates Ltd



The Queen, herself a WI member, chats to upholstery students in 1984

Phyllis Warden
Hilcot, Chalfont St. Peter
Bucks Federation of Women's Institutes
England