

WI movement looks towards the suburbs

by Philippa Danks

A NEWLY-formed branch of the Women's Institute in Chesterton has highlighted the important role the 70-year-old organisation can play in women's lives today.

The branch in East Chesterton — which had its introductory meeting in June — is now fully fledged with 40 members and looks set to grow much bigger during the winter.

According to its new president, Mrs Marjorie Woodford, the branch has come to the rescue of many lonely and isolated house-bound women and offered them fresh interests, companionship and the chance to talk.

Mrs Woodford, who came to Cambridge when her husband changed jobs a year ago, said: "I was astonished by the number of women who came up to me at the last meeting and said how lonely they'd been feeling.

Suburb

"I think the city can be a much lonelier place than the country and there are plenty of women quite new to Cambridge who feel isolated. I've come to the conclusion that there are lots of lonely pockets in the suburbs."

The formation of a branch in a city suburb, rather than the traditional WI ground of villages and rural areas, reflects the

WI's new trend of moving into the town.

Cambridge county federation secretary, Mrs Brenda Cassidy, said: "This is in response to demand rather than policy. We are about to form a branch in Bar Hill because it was obvious from the interest in our promotions bus and stall recently that there are enough women to get one going."

Branches of the WI have even been forming in London after the June WI exhibition at Olympia — and Barnes and Ealing now have a WI.

A Press officer at the London headquarters said: "In a sense the needs of women in the cities don't differ that much from those in the country.

Largest

"There are going to be more WI branches formed in London. We are important in the rural areas for country minded people but there has been much demand in London these days."

The WI is the largest women's voluntary organisation in Britain. A registered charity with more than 362,000 members and 9,300 branches — or institutes — grouped in 70 county federations, it is an organisation any woman of any age may join.

The first British WI opened in Anglesey in North Wales in 1915. However, the movement began in Canada in 1897 when Adelaide Hoodless, a farmer's wife, from



Mrs Marjorie Woodford ... president of the newly-formed East Chesterton WI.

Stoney Creek in Ontario, lost her first baby.

She believed this was the result of her own ignorance of hygiene and child care and started classes for local women on domestic science and homemaking.

Over the years the WI has campaigned both for

national matters and those specifically concerning women. In the 1920s the WI fought to combat VD with better health education, and in the 1930s turned its efforts to giving positive help for the unemployed. The 1940s was the decade for equal pay for equal work and in the 1950s the WI started the



Keep Britain Tidy campaign.

Greater support for disabled housewives was the bulk of the organisation's work in the 60s and in the 70s it supported more research into alternative sources of energy.

Anniversary

The WI celebrates its 70th anniversary next year — and in the 1980s its main campaign is a reflection of the tragic circumstances which began the movement back in Canada nearly 90 years ago. For this decade the WI wants to ensure better maternity and child health care, and improved facilities for single-parent families.

It is also concentrating on fitness and health facilities for adult education and encouraging women to have more involvement in decision-making.

Perhaps the best known of WI activities nowadays are the 470 markets which open once or twice a week in villages, country towns and suburbs. Anyone — member or not — can become a market producer by buying a 5p share in the co-operative.

Any further information on the WI can be obtained from the County Federation Secretary, Brenda Cassidy, on Cambridge 354095 on Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday between 9 am and 3 pm.

*Presented from English Health by
Kathleen Matthews / 84*