



MORE THAN JAM AND JERUSALEM

WITH A WAITING LIST THAT STRETCHES INTO 2016, COULD THE EAST DULWICH WI BE SOUTH EAST LONDON'S MOST IN-DEMAND CLUB? **ALEXANDRA JONES** ATTENDS A MEETING TO FIND OUT THEIR SECRET

Photography: **NICKY & KEITH SHERIFF**

The question is, will they sing? The tag line, 'more than jam and Jerusalem', leaves, in the inclusion of that one little word, 'more', a whole lot of room for singing. And, as I sit in the East Dulwich Tavern on a sunny Wednesday evening, nursing a glass of house white ahead of my first East Dulwich WI meeting, I couldn't think of a more mortifying way to meet new people. For the uninitiated, WI meetings traditionally open with a rousing rendition of the hymn *Jerusalem*, which according to the WI's website 'marks its links with the wider women's movement, and its commitment to improving the conditions of rural life.' Problematically, I don't know the words and I can't sing; unless squawking while feeling incredibly

self-conscious counts as singing? Part of the 'new wave' of WIs, which have opened in the last ten years, the East Dulwich branch has proven to be incredibly popular with current membership at 95, a waiting list that stretches into 2016 and the possibility of a Peckham branch on the horizon, to deal with demand. Much as

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THE COMMITTEE L-R: LUCINDA RUTHERFORD, AMIEE LAWSON, DOTTY TODD, ANNA GRyce, RACHEL BUTLER, CIARAN DANCE, MEHREEN UMAR, SARAH ARMSTRONG, KIRSTEN ING

the fourth wave of feminism has galvanized new generations into online action through blogs such as *The F Word*, so these new WIs have attracted members who are keen to support their communities and who have been seduced by the gentle entertainments of shows such as *The Great British Bake Off*. 'We don't do anything by halves,' explains Anna Gryce, who has been President of the East Dulwich WI for the past four years. 'You could just run fairly straightforward meetings and talks, which are quite traditional and which definitely have their place, but we tend to go for big events so that we can involve local businesses.'

The evening that I join them, Anna and the committee have set up a sewing skills event in conjunction with local bespoke-fashion shop, The White Room SE4. 'We're expecting this one to be popular,' explains Ciaran Dance, architect by day, head of membership at the WI by night. 'We have to cap the events at sixty people, or it would just be too much.' And it seems that she's not exaggerating; by 7.15 the room is all but full (they're a punctual lot, these WI-ers) with women who greet each other like old friends.

From the outset there is a buzz of chatter and activity (though before the sewing skills intro gets going this is mainly centred on the buying and consumption of wine) and the group



ranges in age from ladies in their twenties to some in their seventies. Most members that I speak to were drawn to the group for the same reason: to meet new people. And as a group, they do seem particularly sociable. Equally though many members, when they first heard about the WI were put off for the same reasons: they thought it would be too old fashioned, too staid, too much singing...

'I wasn't sure,' member, Tricia Parry tells me. 'I mean, the WI the way I knew it wasn't my thing at all! But as you can see this is just fun, and the events are always interesting and really practical.' Past events have included bread making with Brick House Bakery, wine tasting care of ToastED and a wellbeing taster evening that included advice from Push Studios and products from Dr. Boo. 'We have one talk during the year, we do a history walk, we have an annual picnic at the Dulwich Croquet Club which is always really popular,' explains Anna. And the singing? The bit I was so dreading? 'No singing! God, no!' she laughs. I breathe a sigh of relief.