

THE RISE OF THE MODERN WI

Alongside craft's recent revival, another tradition has been rejuvenated. Meet the members of today's Women's Institute

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With an image that used to be as dusty as the church halls they met in, the Women's Institute (WI) is an oft-mocked British tradition. An organisation steeped in history, it was formed in 1915 to revitalise rural communities and encourage women to produce food during the First World War. Now, almost 100 years on, it's the largest voluntary women's organisation in the UK (with over 212,000 members) and has a new lease of life.

Say 'WI' to a group of young crafters and you'll be met with smiles of recognition, but it's only in the past seven years that younger members have been doing it for themselves. Take the Shoreditch Sisters (www.shoreditchsisters.blogspot.co.uk). One of the first of the new wave of WI branches, it was formed in 2007 by Jazz Domino Holly whose aim was to socialise with friends and reconnect with traditional crafts, all with a modern, London twist. Known for their campaigning, which mixes crafting with hard-hitting issues such as female genital mutilation, Shoreditch Sisters are using their making powers for good. Member Martha Wass explains: "Traditional group focus crafts like knitting circles are great for providing a space to discuss campaigns while working on them. It's an easy way in: knitting first, learning about the issue second."

Dig a little deeper and you'll discover that the WI's jam and Jerusalem façade fronts a radical political force to be reckoned with. Campaigning has always been at the heart of the organisation, with work on subjects as diverse as school dinners (1926), equal pay (1943) and breast cancer screening (leading to a change in government screening policy in the 1970s). And who could forget the slow handclapping of Tony Blair at the WI conference back in 2000? Powerful stuff.

GENERATION GAP?

But what happens when old meets new? All Angels WI (www.allangelswi.org) in Kington St Michael, Wiltshire, works alongside the existing village branch, joining up to plant spring bulbs, litter pick and collaborate on the Flower and Produce Show. "We're encouraging our members to enter as

much as possible for this year's show. We hope to ruffle a few feathers; we have a little bit of friendly competition going on," explains president Liz Allen.

So, with a respectful nod to the original branches, the new ones are enjoying the heritage and traditions of the organisation while embracing change. Women such as Gothic Valley WI (www.gothicvalleywi.org.uk), a North London group whose programme includes bat walks and corset making.

And don't forget the crafting. The ladies of Little Bowden WI (www.littlebowdenwi.co.uk) have made (deep breath) fascinators, dry felt corsages, paper sculpture jewellery, shoe charms, hand tied bouquets and dry point print Christmas cards, while the Dalston Darlings (www.dalstondarlings.net) have enjoyed Peter Pan collar workshops – all projects that would be at home on the pages of *Mollie Makes*.

DIGITAL DIVAS

Digital has revolutionised the way WI branches operate, too. "I don't think we could run the Southampton Sotonettes WI without it," says Alice, who manages the 450-strong Facebook page (www.sotonettes.co.uk). "Facebook is a great forum for our members to contact each other. Recently, a member wanted advice on a new sewing machine. A few hours later, she was raring to go." But, just as in every aspect of society, there are downsides. The Shoreditch Sisters have experienced online trolling when talking about street harassment or sexism. "It hurt us when it first started," says Martha. "But it proved these topics need to be discussed even more as it's obviously still a problem."

And with the weight of a mighty organisation behind them, the new WIs have an infectious confidence and palpable strength. Behind them is a genuine love of the three important Cs – crafting, campaigning and community – as well as a nostalgia for the traditions of the past and fond homage paid to a national institution.

So, what are you waiting for? Take your crochet, grab a cuppa and squeeze in next to 212,000 amazing women. There's always room for one more. Visit www.nfwi.org to find your nearest branch. ●