

WI Centenary Annual Meeting Report at the Royal Albert Hall on Thurs 4th June 2015

As this is the first time that I have attended the AGM, I was curious to see how the day would evolve, not just with the business of the day but with the logistics of dealing with the thousands of women attending.

Wednesday morning dawned bright and clear as I collected my room-mate from Yealmpton and made our way to the Ivybridge pick up point at 7.30am. We were lucky enough to travel to Exeter services by taxi, to meet up with the others from all over Devon before travelling by coach to Kensington. It was a long journey, arriving at the Millennium Gloucester Hotel in Kensington at 2.20pm. Unfortunately the report of the state of this hotel's check in system on Trip Advisor was correct, so we were kept waiting on the coach for an hour before we could check in. Once in, the hotel was lovely. Our room was large and airy with good facilities and by this time my roommate Linda and I were firm friends. We had joined up with two others to share a taxi to the theatre, so one hour later after a quick and well deserved cup of tea, the four of us hailed a black cab and had a wonderful tour of London, taking in all the sights as we headed to the theatre area. We dined at La Strasse, an Italian restaurant for a pre theatre supper and were only a few yards away from the Duchess Theatre where we saw "The Play That Goes Wrong". I don't think I have ever laughed so much at a play! Tears were running down our faces and the interval was just as funny when one of the actors finding that we were from the W.I. thought that we were all 100 years old as we told him we were celebrating our Centenary. Given how tired we all were by then we possibly did look that old.

Having slept well we were up bright and early as I had forgotten to turn off my phone and received a message at 5.30am. The plus side to that was that we were able to beat the rush for breakfast and have a leisurely time before checking out and boarding the coach to the Albert Hall. We arrived before the doors opened so had time to admire the lovely building and find our way to the correct door. Devon Delegates were fortunate to have named seats on the arena floor very near the front. I had a splendid view of the stage with the bonus of a large screen above the stage on which to view close ups and the live links. The Meeting started with Jerusalem, which was an amazing sound as the thousands of voices all sang together with great enthusiasm. The board Members looked splendid in all their finery as they waited to be introduced to the Royal Party. The NFWI Chair Janice Langley welcomed us all, especially new Delegates. There then followed the appointment of returning officers and Tellers, which I voted in favour. We then proceeded to the adoption of standing orders for which I also voted in favour.

The Chair's address told us that the Membership subscription in 1915 was 2/- which has remained virtually unchanged in terms of proportion of average income at about 2%. The W.I. maintaining an annual fee this year of £36 is in a secure financial position. There followed a Live Broadcast Link up with Anglesey Federation, the home of the first W.I. Despite a few teething problems with the 5 second time delay, it was lovely to see around the first meeting room and see their proud display of the first kettle used by the W.I. for the tea making. We all felt that continuity with our past members as tea still features in our W.I. meetings today.

Janice Langley

Her Majesty The Queen, HRH The Princess Royal and HRH The Countess of Wessex, proceeded on to the stage for the singing of the National Anthem. The Queen then received the Centenary Link Baton. Her Majesty looked wonderful in a grey silk ensemble with matching grey hat, seeming to be genuinely interested to be there. A spontaneous burst of clapping and cheering made her smile. The Queen made a speech highlighting the changes for women in society since 1915 including gaining the vote, the first woman to climb Everest and the first woman Prime minister going on to say that the W.I. is a constant, encouraging new skill and talents and demonstrating that in 2015 we can still make a difference to all. Her Majesty then declared the meeting open and went off with some of the Board to cut the cake. Before leaving the Royal party were given a centenary cake and the centenary cookbook each, as well as a posy of W.I. centenary roses presented by granddaughters of members of the W.I.

Our first Guest Speaker was Lucy Worsley who spoke on the history of the W.I., research she has done for a new T.V. programme to be screened this month on BBC2. Lucy was a very engaging speaker, despite saying that speaking to so many was daunting. She also told of her working life as Curator of Historic Royal Palaces, showing pictures of Hampton Court, a subject of special interest to me as I had worked there for the Building Conservation Trust. Her new programme about the W.I. sounds very interesting and I look forward to that.

There then followed a constitutional resolution to incorporate unincorporated federations. On the coach on the way up to London we had been informed that the wording of the resolution on Public Affairs Issues- Failing to care, assessment of need in long term care, had been slightly changed by altering two words but not changing the meaning of the resolution. We therefore had to vote on Amendment of the resolution. This now read "This meeting calls on HM government to remove the distinction between health care and social care in the assessment of the needs of individuals, in order to advance health and wellbeing". The word health replaced nursing and the word social replaced the word personal, on medical recommendation so as not to limit the field of change. The voting on this amendment was held and I voted in favour so that I could then vote according to your instructions for the resolution. At this point I was enjoying myself greatly and looking forward to the main vote, which was after all my reason for being there. The next thing that happened threw myself and many others around me into confusion. There came from the floor a vote to move to the next business. People spoke for and against the fact that the resolution was now so altered that it should not go forward. I had received detailed advice on how to vote with all possible situations, so following this advice I voted against the move to the next business, both for Newton and Noss and Elburton, so that if this was over ruled I would be able to follow your wishes and vote in favour of the resolution. I have to tell you that this vote was passed so we moved on to the next business and I did not get the chance to vote on the resolution. There then followed the presentation of prizes before we broke for a very late lunch.

Lunch gave us a rest from all the hard thinking, with a pre-ordered packed lunch being eaten in the sunshine followed by a scramble for the lavatories before convening again. We were then entertained by the winning choir of the singing for joy competition, who really were a joy to listen to so much fortified we proceeded to the next live link up with Great Torrington W.I. They looked a jolly crowd who were all enjoying being part of this momentous occasion. We then moved on to the announcement of the new NFWI board of trustees. Our next Guest Speaker was Baroness Tanni

Grey-Thompson DBE. Tanni was an inspiring speaker, who spoke as if she were just a friend having a chat. She made us laugh and moved us deeply. Tanni had become disabled at the age of 7 following an accident. Her father had always maintained that she had to try hard to be independent as life was going to be hard for her. She took up wheelchair athletics and never looked back, with the support of her husband went on to achieve great things in sport. Now having been elevated to the Lords Tanni is championing disabled people and trying to fight for legislation to improve their situation. Inspiring women takes on a whole new feel when you hear Tanni speaking.

There then followed a live link up to The Social Lites of Cheshire Federation. They had dressed up in costumes of the last 100 years- very colourful. Our last guest Speaker was Helena Morrissey CBE the founder of the 30% Club. I have to confess that I knew very little about this, but Helena explained that she was the first Woman to sit on a FTSE Board and following her success had fought to change opinions and aim to achieve a total of 30% of all FTSE Boards to have 30% Women sitting on them. She has rolled this idea out around the world and is now including Japan and the Emirates which shows how much attitudes are changing. All this she has achieved despite having 7 children and a very supportive Husband.

The final item on the agenda was the Kingston Project Fashion Show. A while ago there had been a call for volunteers to support final year students from Kingston University on a project featuring knitted garments. These included jumpers, trousers, boots and so much more. Anything that could be worn had been knitted. These items of clothing were modelled by professional models and the show was fabulous. Maybe an idea or two for the craft groups to consider.

We finished with Jerusalem and Land of my Fathers sung in Welsh, phonetics provided but not sung with any ease on my part. We all traipsed out of the Albert Hall into the bright sunshine, tired but happy. We had been part of something very special. Once the coach was found and the long journey home began, there was much chatting over the day. As the miles passed by and evening fell some weary heads nodded. We overran our travel time and had to have supply drivers ferried out to an unscheduled service stop which added to our lateness, arriving at Ivybridge at about 11.30pm. As a special centenary gift we all received a gift boxed piece of cake, so I will picture Her Majesty eating hers when I have mine with a cup of tea!