

BRANSTON WI 1917 – 1987

Branston WI, the oldest institute in Lincs. North, was formed on November 28th 1917 at a time when it was considered very daring to be a member of a Women's group and many ladies had to ask their husbands for permission to attend future meetings.

Miss Watkins governess to the Abel-Smith family of Longhills Hall had attended WI meetings in Canada and returned with the idea of starting similar institute in Branston. Miss Emmeline Abel-Smith was the first President and also the first delegate to represent Branston WI at the AGM in London on October 24th 1918. She obviously did a splendid job as after only four months a letter was received from Mrs Watt the founder of WI's in England asking for 20 copies of Branston's programme "to show other WI's what excellent work you are doing".

A coal club and fish club were formed at the latter end of World War I to enable these commodities to be sold to members at advantageous prices. In the first six months the fish club sold 1,525lb of fish and the coal club distributed three trucks of coal amongst twenty three members. Going from house to house WI members collected 951 eggs for the national egg collection for wounded soldiers between June and December 1918, and also collected fruit stones and nut shells to be used in the preparation of gas masks.

Demonstrations on cookery, bottling and drying fruit, dressmaking, refooting machine made stockings, paperhanging and "how to put away a pig" were very popular in the early days. Branston ladies obviously took more than a passive interest for the fish club was suspended during December 1918 when members were killing their own pigs and not requiring as much fish.

Bootmending classes were so successful at this time that a sub-committee was formed to deal with the hiring out of bootmending tools and the sale of leather and balata. 2p was charged for the use of tools for 24hrs – with any lost or damaged to be replaced by the member using them.

Debates were popular in the early days on subjects such as "The influence of home and school on childrens characters" and "How to make a man happy at home". Talks included "Wealth and the high prices of living", "The education act" and "The responsibility of the vote", members being asked to make the latter widely known and to invite potential voters who were not members to the meeting.

The formation of a library in Branston by the WI was approved in 1918 and the end of the World War I heralded concerts for returning soldiers, dances, whist drives, surprise suppers, summer picnics and entertaining the old folk – some of these activities not so very different from those today.

In subsequent years the World War II WVS activities in the village were organised through WI contacts and Branston's Meals on Wheels service had WI origins – indeed many of the helpers today are WI ladies.

On the occasion of the opening of the new Church Hall in November 1976 the WI organised a craft exhibition drawing on the talents of the individual villages, local groups and schools to display their paintings, photographs and numerous crafts in the new hall. The Branston Pickles concert party was formed in 1979 when a pantomime using characters based on soap powders entertained fellow members and local groups. This group ran for many years and is perhaps one activity which could be revived.

An oak tree and two decorative trees were planted in Branston by WI members to commemorate the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1978 and much hard work was put into weeding and tidying the War Memorial gardens for these celebrations. WI ladies have been responsible for recording all the gravestones in the old cemetery so that these stones could be rearranged round the edge and the cemetery transformed into a garden of rest.

A Christingle service is organised by the WI in early December each year with the proceeds going to the Church of England Childrens Society and the Methodist Childrens Homes.

Other projects have included the provision of hooks for dogs outside the local co-operative store and the most recent project the designing and purchase of a village sign to celebrate the 70th birthday of Branston WI. Fundraising started in early 1987 when members were asked to take £1 and use it to make money in any way possible apart from

gambling. A Band Concert, a Barn Dance and Cheese Wine Party also raised valuable funds and a grand total of £700 was the result. A sub-committee researched the history of Branston with invaluable help from Mr. Bill Stead the headmaster of the Junior School. Two scenes depicting Branston at the turn of the century were chose to be worked onto a fibre glass plaque and local craftsmen Mr. Carrell and Mr. Caudwell were commissioned to create the plaque and wrought iron stand. Many visits were made by the sub-committee to see each new stage of development and the sign was completed in September 1988.

Parish councillors, school children and teachers, WI members and villages were invited to the ceremony on September 26th when the sign was unveiled by Mrs. Joyce Herriman and Mrs. Frances Ward past and current Presidents and handed over to Mr. Michael Wood, Chairman to the Parish Council for the village of Branston. When videos were made, and photographs taken, a tea party was held in the Church Hall. Branston's school children and future generation provided invaluable assistance in eating huge quantities of sausage rolls.

Over the years more parties have been held and members continue to enjoy a variety of activities – talented ladies have entertained us with Victorian and Scottish Christmas'; Old Time Music Hall and innovative pantomimes.

We have walked together around Branston and in the Wolds and have been escorted on guided walks through Lincoln.

Our leisure activities have included scrabble and darts with competitions fiercely contested by the Witham Group Institute. Yoga classes have helped us relax and unwind; and for the creative the annual Group produce show is an opportunity to cook, grow and sew or display flower arrangements and photographs. Many of us learnt patchwork and quilting and worked together to produce a Patchwork Quilt in celebration of Branston WI's 80th birthday.

Theatre outings have been popular – to Tolthorpe Hall for Shakespeare in the open air and to Lincoln Theatre to watch many well-known musicals. For the quick-witted and fleet of foot quizzes and barn dances maintain their popular appeal.

In February 1999 we were privileged to hold our monthly meeting in the Council Chambers at the Guildhall in Lincoln followed by a tour of the Guildhall and Insignia. We are now looking forward with anticipation to the New Millennium.