



Litton & Hinton Blewett Women's Institute

President: Chris Arnold



WI Report for the Parish Council - Hinton Blewett

April 2017

Our thriving WI now has some 50 members. At our AGM, in May 2016, Jenny Speed was voted in as president and Sue Fry as secretary. We now have 11 members from our village, still the most for several years.

June is WI outing time and 41 members and friends boarded the Bagheera in Bristol docks for a trip up the Avon. It was a warm summer evening as we toured around Bristol waterways looking at old buildings and new ones. We traversed Netham lock and out onto the Avon going as far as Hanham, noticing how green and rural the surroundings were. A black cloud suddenly shed its raindrops and the Perspex roofs were quickly slid into position! Our host, and boat captain, was a very knowledgeable young man who made the history of the waterways fascinating. He even spotted a peregrine falcon perched high up on a building. The committee organised a wonderful supper on board.

This was followed, in July, by a garden meeting at a member's house, held in the beautiful garden of Barley Brook house, the home of Georgina. We wandered around admiring the flowers and trees in the evening sunshine, sipping our Pimm's. No one ventured into the pool, although it did look inviting! A splendid supper was served indoors as the evening had cooled down.

In August, more of us gathered for a game of croquet in a member's garden, sitting in the sunshine together to have lunch.

The title of the talk in September was 'My Life at Sea' and so many of us were expecting to hear about the life of a female sailor. No such thing! Jan McNeil was an exuberant character who commenced her talk by bursting into song. It materialised that she was employed in ships' entertainment. Her talk was very lively and very entertaining. A child prodigy, her parents encouraged her singing talents and she sang professionally from the age of 14. With her accompanist, and later husband, they starred at clubs and music halls all over England and later turned to a life of entertaining on cruise ships. This life enabled her to visit many exotic places around the world and rub shoulders with many celebrities. Latterly, she was Entertainments Manager on the prestigious Seabourn liners where the highlight was the weeklong celebrations for Sir Cliff Richard's 60th birthday where many famous names were present.

Our speaker for October, Mike Spencer, gave an interesting talk entitled 'A walk in China', illustrated with beautiful slides. Mike, a supporter of St Margaret's Hospice, undertook a 50 mile hike along the Great Wall of China as a sponsored challenge. The wall dates back to the fourteenth century. The countryside was extremely rugged, the wall following jagged, precipitous hills and the whole walk was composed of steps both up and down. In places, the terrain was so rough it required going on 'all fours'. Health and safety does not appear to have reached China! The wall was frequently narrow, breaking up and having steep drops on either side with no hand rail! Needless to say this is not the part of the wall usually shown to tourists! He also showed us slides of modern China, Beijing and Shanghai, all high tech and new and compared it to peasant subsistence farming only half an hour away. China is a country of great contrasts.

In November, Maggie Campbell told us of her experiences working with the Samaritans. She is now the director of the Bristol branch of Samaritans, the organisation that is always available to listen confidentially to people in distress. Samaritans was started by a minister, Chad Varra after he had conducted the funeral service, following the suicide of a child who had no one with whom to share her anxieties. The organisation is non-religious, non-judgmental and totally confidential and it operates 24/7 in the Bristol branch. The volunteers listen but do not give advice. Bristol has 140 volunteers whose initial training is 30 hours. As

well as manning the phones, they go into schools and prisons to make people aware of the help they can give by just listening. Some of the calls can be very distressing and the volunteers sometimes need counselling to help them cope. A very interesting talk, if sometimes sad.

We finished the year in December when 23 of our members attended the WI Festival of Carols in Wells Cathedral where two of our members sang with the choir. WI ladies enjoyed a great Christmas meal at the Chew Valley kitchen. The combination of 36 ladies and a good supply of wine meant that the decibels crept up pretty high! Good food and good company put everyone into a festive spirit. Our normal meeting followed two days later. Our speaker, Elaine, demonstrated winter flower decorations making three beautiful arrangements, which were later put into a raffle. The lucky winners took home arrangements, which looked like a Christmas cake, a door wreath and a decorated cracker, all with lovely fresh flowers and foliage. Hopefully the rest of us took home inspiration!

2017 dawned and at our January meeting we enjoyed a social evening but we began by remembering our good friend Winifred Spencer who died in December. Winifred was a past president and a lively member of the WI and will be greatly missed.

Our February speaker was Yvette Staelens who spoke about about the 'Lost Singers of Somerset'. The "lost voices" are the old folk songs of Somerset, which were passed from singer to singer, not written down because many rural singers were not literate. The songs were collected by people like Cecil Sharp in the 1800s. Cecil and a friend, Revd Martin, collected the songs, Revd Martin writing down the words and Cecil Sharp setting the music and photographing the singers. Many of the songs were collected very locally and Cecil came to Harptree Court at the invitation of Mrs Kettlewell. The singers also came to the Castle of Comfort to sing the Sheep Shearing song to Cecil Sharp. Gustav Holst set Somerset folk songs to music and many hymns are the tunes of old folk songs. Yvette gave a very interesting talk interspersed with her singing beautiful folk songs.

At our March meeting, our speaker was James Cox and his talk was entitled, "A Head Gardener's Story". Early enthusiasm for horticulture was when his parents allowed him to plant a garden on the banks of the Severn where they had a chalet. The labours of Spring and the display of flowers in the Summer were washed away with the floods of winter. Undeterred, he became an apprentice gardener at Birmingham Botanic Garden, where his first working day involved stepping on cockroaches as they emerged from the roots of plants in the tropical house. This did not dull his enthusiasm! His next post was with Highgrove, followed by Anthony House in Cornwall and lastly Yeo Valley Garden where he was head gardener until 2015. For all these gardens he had colourful slides showing transformations and sometimes disasters. It was fascinating to see the stages of development of Yeo Valley organic garden over the years to its present splendour.

Our Wine Club and Diners' Club, which visits local restaurants on a monthly basis, continue to be well supported. We also have a sewing group making heart shaped cushions for the oncology department at the RUH and to date have made over 250 plus driver bags for portable drains.

In the future, we are looking forward to a visit to the theatre in Wells.

A poster is displayed advertising the WI meetings on the noticeboard outside the pub. Through continued close communication, we hope many more residents of Hinton Blewett will be enticed to join our ranks in the future!

Chris Arnold
Retired President
Litton and Hinton Blewett WI