



Surrey Federation of WIs
6 Paris, Parklands, Railton Road,
Guildford, Surrey, GU2 9JX.
01483 233230 info@surreyfedwi.org.uk
www.surreyfedwi.org.uk



Chairman's Address for ACM 2021

I am greatly humbled to present the Annual Report of the Surrey Federation of WIs for the period 1st November 2019 to the 31st October 2020.

It was a year ago today that I took the incredibly difficult decision to cancel the 2020 Annual Council Meeting. It was clear by the end of that weekend that we were on the brink of an unprecedented health event, unlike anything we had known in our lifetime. But never did we, for one moment, anticipate how the events of 2020 would so tragically unfold. For all of us, joy has been in short supply. It has been a gruelling journey, with no tangible end, and heart-breaking events to come to terms with. It is therefore a delight to see so many members here today and to know that, because of your hard work and commitment, the Federation has a bright future.

It's quite a challenge now isn't it to recall the buoyant start to this financial year with the Christmas Craft Day, Literary Lunch, Speaker Auditions and a Christmas trip to Greenwich? Many of us recall participating enthusiastically in cookery and craft workshops, Surrey Serenaders, Camera Club visits, Science Group talks and Crafty Ladies workshops, with nostalgia.

The Year 2020, similarly, opened with an exciting and full schedule of events. We looked forward to craft and cookery workshops, Blue Badge guided London City Walks, Camera Club visits and to developing our skills through Committee Training and Treasurer workshops. Three large-scale events were also anticipated, the Annual Council and Autumn Federation meetings and the Chairman's event, *Afternoon Tea with Ivor Novello*, which was to be the social highlight of the summer, a chance to dress up, wear makeup and even a hat. When did we last do that? This full and varied programme demonstrated that the federation was very much meeting its objects.

Rumblings of Covid-19 in Wuhan, in late January, did not initially appear to have relevance to Federation plans and so, in early March, an intrepid group of members enjoyed a one-night experience at Denman. This was, not only the last time we would visit, but it would be the final visit of any federation, as Denman was forced to close its doors, initially in late March, and eventually, in Summer 2020, forever. We will remember with great affection the friends we made there and the skills we learned. What a tragic loss for the WI, but Denman has already taken a bold step into the future with Denman at Home, an inclusive initiative that has been welcomed by many.

With the cancellation of the Annual Council Meeting, governance became a critical issue. In the absence of legal guidance, because of the suddenness of the situation, and to meet the requirements of the Charity Commission and our Articles of Association, the business of the meeting was conducted via email. Procedural documents, the Annual Review and Accounts, and the financial appointments were approved by the members, trustees appointed, and the Federation Chairman, Treasurer and officers were elected. It was a huge relief when this was achieved.

In response to the Prime Minister's announcement of a lockdown on 23rd March 2020, federation staff were required to work from home, and subsequently, were furloughed as work dried up. I took on the work of the office staff with significant support from Sheena Landgraf, our Federation Treasurer, this in addition to our elected roles, all voluntarily. From this point on, governance became a constant challenge.

Over the next few weeks all face-to-face events were cancelled and plans laboriously unpicked. This loss of income had a significant impact on the finances of the federation, alongside the potential loss of investment income as the stock market fell. Other reductions in income included a fall in membership subscriptions, due to a 6% fall in membership. Given that no face-to-face meetings could be held from March onwards, the federation is justly proud that membership has remained so high, and this is in no small part due to your efforts as officers and committee members of your own WIs. Thank you.

A further significant loss of income was as a result of the publisher being unable to print Surrey WI News. However, the online version, made freely available, became a lifeline. With no restrictions on size, it documented all aspects of the federation during the pandemic, and helped to bind it together, especially for older members, where digital communications were not readily accessible. As we lived through an historic period it became increasingly important to record the ingenious ways that you coped, and the huge contribution you made during lockdown to supporting your members and communities. I would like to express the federations thanks to June for her remarkable work on SWIN, and to thank you all for your contributions, without which SWIN could not exist. The Federation's Social Media presence has had an equivalent and successful role in communicating to those members who prefer digital modes of communication, thank you Debbie, and to all those who have shared, commented and engaged. The next group of casualties were the Summer Shows. This put the federation at a significant disadvantage as these events provide a fruitful environment for publicity and recruitment.

Despite taking advantage of the Job Retention Scheme, the federation finances have been constantly challenged by the impact of the pandemic, despite prudent financial management. By July it had become evident that face-to-face WI activities were unlikely to resume in 2020. The Board, on the advice of the officers, and based on revised budgets for 2020 and 2021, very reluctantly agreed that a restructuring of the office staffing was necessary. Subsequent staff resignations resulted in a reduction of one third. At this point I would like to thank Diane Sanderson for all of the work she has done for us over the past few years and wish her all the best for the future. The federation continued to take advantage of the flexible furlough and staff were assigned to undertake specific, urgent tasks only, to further protect finances. This did much to offset the significant projected loss due to Covid-19. To support the federation through this difficult time, the services of a company providing Human Resources and Employment Law were acquired. Their advice underpinned, validated, and indemnified the many decisions that were taken.

During the Summer the federation Committees energetically investigated alternative forms of engagement with members, using video conferencing. Together they developed an exciting program of online events and workshops including London City, and Farm to Fork Tours, and Drawing and Willow Workshops. To support WI Presidents and Treasurers a series of 'Annual Meetings Made Easy' and 'Treasurer Workshops' were also presented. The Board would like to thank all those members who have attended such events and who have made the programme such a success.

It was more challenging for the interest groups to adopt video conferencing, as it does not readily lend itself to the types of activity and modes of interaction of these groups, however they have been remarkably ingenious in devising alternatives. Fortunately, the Science Groups were able to successfully deliver their series of talks via video conferencing. These groups will benefit greatly from your support when they are able to run once again.

The Office 365 project, which would have significantly facilitated access to and circulation of information, had unfortunately to be put on hold until such time as the staff could return from furlough and work in the office. The production of the 2021 Yearbook continued unhindered. It will have a small but important new addition to the speaker listing, advising members which speakers use Zoom or other online platforms. Thank you Sally.

The final casualty was the Annual Federation Meeting, one of the key income generators of the year. We fervently hope that the 2021 meeting, which will feature all the speakers from the cancelled 2020 events, in a celebratory jamboree with the theme of Inspiring Women, will go ahead.

Despite all that Covid-19 has thrown at the federation, because of its prudent management, and the efforts of all involved, the federation is in very good, shape and ready and waiting for its return to a non-Covid world, but this could not have been done without your effort. For this I thank you all.

Carol A. Gartrell
Chairman, Surrey Federation of WIs