

## Cardiff Annual Meeting 2018

Nottinghamshire Federation travelled uneventfully to Cardiff, stopping at Webbs of Wyebold, a huge garden centre, for lunch. After a slight diversion to a Premier Inn on the outskirts of the city, we found we were booked into a very pleasant one right in the heart of the city within very easy walking distance of the Arena and, as importantly, large numbers of restaurants. In the evening some of us took the train down to Cardiff Bay where there are even more, as well as the chance to see the yarn bombing carried out by a local WI the weekend before: many hued octopuses!

5000 delegates and observers sang Jerusalem with gusto, accompanied by a member from Glamorgan to start the proceedings. All the officers wore corsages in suffrage colours and the flowers on the stage were likewise in green, white and purple. The Chair's address addressed the recent press coverage and this response was much more positive, giving examples of some of the activities undertaken by WIs throughout the year, including refurbishing and distributing teddies to children affected the terrorist attack on the Manchester Arena last year, a quiz to be broadcast on BBC shortly and a National Ocean Day Twitter question and answer session with a researcher from Plymouth university re plastic soup. She also said that there have been 19 000 new members and 60 new groups formed.

The Treasurer's statement was a model of conciseness. She clearly discussed the three arms of WI finances: membership which aims to break even, Denman which aims for a small profit to maintain the building and Trading which aims to be profitable. The Denman appeal raised more than £600 000 and will continue. Trading has been successful but is looking to continue to update its range as previously good sellers like diaries become less popular.

The discussion of the resolution was very moving, with a number of members giving personal testimony to the importance of both official service provision and less formal help from ordinary people and organisations such as the WI. The doctor who gave the expert input suggested a number of different ways that individuals, groups and the whole organisation could help: by campaigning for a more equitable provision of funding for mental health services, by recognising the link with loneliness, by promoting mindfulness and by undertaking mental health first aid training. Normally there would be a speaker to put the view that the motion should not be carried, but, despite trying no one could be found to oppose it. This was reflected in the outcome: a majority of 98% in support of the motion.

The morning's guest speaker was Dame Stella Rimington, former head of MI5, whose latest novel and autobiography was on sale in the foyer. Her speech showed why it should be a really interesting and worthwhile read. She described how she came to join MI5 and the barriers in her way as a woman, some of which should no longer apply, but others that are a continuing issue for working mothers. She was an excellent speaker and everyone would have liked to have heard more from her, despite the hardness of the chairs after three hours sitting!

We emerged into glorious sunshine, then back in to hear the second guest speaker: Huw Edwards who spoke in English but also in Welsh, showing how alien he must have felt when he went to work for the BBC with mainly Oxbridge educated men.

He cleverly interwove issues from the morning's discussion with his own presentation and also discussed the effects of modern technology on news gathering and reporting. He also spoke about his own concerns about the effects of social media on the trust that people place in news organisations, particularly about the implications for politics in a democracy.

His comments on the risks associated with the speed at which events can be reported, that there is much less time to check what has really happened and to consider the implications echoed what Stella Rimmington said about dealing with terrorism – that you always have to balance acting too soon with insufficient information to stand up in a court of law, against waiting too long and things literally blowing up.

Everyone at the conference was delighted with the first question: the speaker was born in 1946 when the resolution was to campaign for equal pay for women. She asked how far he felt things had come. Neither Huw Edwards or the speaker referred to the latest information about gender pay gaps, but, in a slightly uncomfortable reply, he did set out some of the difficulties in interpreting the information which had not necessarily been available to help make sense of this data. He referred particularly to the problems of putting a value on many aspects of a job and the skills that different people bring to any role, but also to the fact that the figures quoted did not show how many hours someone had worked in the year, only giving annual total salaries.

After that the final business of the day fell rather flat, especially as by now the conference was overrunning – walking netball did not get the hearing it might have felt they deserved, especially as physical exercise and companionship were key components to tackling mental health issues.

The meeting finished with more singing: Jerusalem, Hen wlad fy nhadau (Land of my fathers) and the national anthem. They did provide a phonetic version of the Welsh but it was very hard to read and sing at the same time, though we all had a go.

Notts Fed departed in good order – the real advantage of staying close to the venue became clear at this point as our coach could pull up behind the hotel as soon as we were ready to go, whilst the others had to wait in a very long queue compounded by the increased traffic due to Beyonce deciding to be in the city at the same time as the WI. We were able to stop at the very pleasant Gloucester services, where I at least enjoyed the sun on the terrace, before returning to Nottinghamshire at a reasonable hour.

Although it seems like a cliché, the best part about the trip really was the chance to meet other women from both Nottinghamshire and other parts of the country and so to feel part of a national organisation rather than a little, local one.