

*Department of Humanities, Northumbria University*

**Honours Dissertation**

**'For Home and Country':**

**The Role of the Women's Institute in the Northumberland  
and Durham Counties during the Second World War**

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# List of Abbreviations

**BWICMB** - Blanchland WI Committee Minute Book

**CWIRB** - Chopwell WI Record Book

**EBWIAR** - East Boldon WI Annual Reports

**FWICFSRB** - Felton WI Cooperative Fruit Scheme Record Book

**FWIRB** - Felton WI Record Book

**FWIWCCB** - Felton WI War Comforts Committee Book

**HLHWICM** - Hetton le Hole WI Committee Meeting Minutes

**HWICM** - Hylton WI Committee Meeting Minutes

**LWIGMB** - Lesbury WI General Meeting Book

**NA** - Northumberland Archives

**NFWI** - National Federation of Women's Institutes

**NHWIRB** - New Herrington WI Report Book

**NSWIFS** - New Silksworth WI Financial Statements

**NWIRB** - Newbottle WI Record Book

**POW** - Prisoner of War

**TWA** - Tyne and Wear Archives

**WI** - Women's Institute

**WLA** - Women's Land Army

**WVS** - Women's Voluntary Service

**WWIMM** - Widdrington WI Monthly Meeting Minutes

# Introduction

The slogan 'for home and country' encapsulates the ambitions of the Women's Institute (WI) – a rural, patriotic organisation with a female membership that wanted to improve lives across the rural landscape of England and Wales.<sup>1</sup> Founded in 1915, the WI crossed class divisions in the rural community and gave rural women a voice.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the formation of the Northumberland and Durham county federations gave women of the rural North East an opportunity to be part of this organisation, which provided women with time away from their busy lives and enabled them to join a supportive network of women. The organisation's patriotism became apparent during the Second World War, with the WI making a number of contributions to aid those on the home front and overseas. WI members in the counties of Northumberland and Durham formed part of this endeavour.

This dissertation will argue that the WI had a more significant role during the Second World War than has previously been acknowledged, both in terms of the historiography as well as people's common perception of the WI. The common image of the WI during the war is a group of older ladies making jam and singing 'Jerusalem'.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the jam-making itself should not be dismissed, as tons of preserves were made to meet the nation's demand throughout the war.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as this dissertation will show, these women made an important contribution to the war effort through various projects.

The focus on the Women's Institute in the North East also addresses a broader issue: when studying the home front during the Second World War, historians have largely neglected the rural

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Carey, *Bows of Burning Gold: Celebrating 90 Years of the Women's Institute* (Skipton: Alfresco Books, 2005), pp. 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid; Jane Robinson, *A Force to be Reckoned With: A History of the Women's Institute* (London: Virago Press, 2011), p. 173.

<sup>3</sup> Julie Summers, *Jambusters: The Story of the Women's Institute in the Second World War* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013), p. 162. Jam-making is often linked with the singing of Jerusalem as every WI meeting begins with this song.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 162-163; Susan Cohen, *The Women's Institute* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2011), p. 38.

North East, instead largely focusing on the urban sphere.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, when the rural experience of women has been explored, there has been an emphasis on the Women's Land Army (WLA), which has meant that the focus was placed on younger women in war service and not the older civilian generation left behind.<sup>6</sup>

Julie Summers' *Jambusters* is the only book that solely focuses on the role of the WI during the war and provides a great overview of national WI wartime activities.<sup>7</sup> Summers also highlights the limited recognition the WI has previously received in the historiography.<sup>8</sup> Other secondary works such as Jane Robinson's *A Force to be Reckoned With* and Simon Goodenough's *Jam and Jerusalem* only provide a chapter on wartime activities as they cover the history of the WI from 1915 to the present day.<sup>9</sup> These chapters briefly cover the main activities of the WI during the war but lack the detail and range of examples provided by *Jambusters*. Maggie Andrews' *The Acceptable Face of Feminism* examines the WI through a feminist perspective.<sup>10</sup> Her ideas are touched upon throughout this dissertation, for instance in terms of how the WI helped boost morale, provided confidence and gave women greater independence within rural communities during wartime.<sup>11</sup> Yet, secondary material offers limited examples of the WIs in Northumberland and Durham. Therefore, with the use of primary sources, this dissertation will demonstrate the extent to which institutes in the North East fit into the national pattern of WI activities during the war as well as providing a new light on the experiences of rural women in the North East.

The use of WI meeting minutes has provided a real insight into the activities and experiences women had during the war as well as the local circumstances that are reflected in the projects WIs

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<sup>5</sup> Craig Armstrong, *Tyneside in the Second World War* (Chichester: Phillimore & Co. Ltd., 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey G. Field, *Blood, Sweat, and Toil: Remaking the British Working Class, 1939-1945* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 169-171.

<sup>7</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. x.

<sup>9</sup> Robinson, *A Force to be Reckoned With*; Simon Goodenough, *Jam and Jerusalem: A Pictorial History of Britain's Greatest Women's Movement* (London: William Collins Sons and Company Limited, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute as a Social Movement* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

undertook. However, with the substantial number of WIs across these two large counties, not every WI's archive could be studied. There are evidently further local examples available for research. Nonetheless, this dissertation covers a good geographical spread of WIs and demonstrates the typical activities undertaken in these counties. Evacuation and post-war planning were other contributions made by WIs in the North East. Yet, the WI minutes do not provide a real insight into these projects, which is why they have not been examined in this dissertation.

Similar to the North East, other regions of England and Wales have been neglected by historians when studying the WI as the examples provided are often located in the south of England, for instance Gloucestershire.<sup>12</sup> Summers' *Jambusters* includes many southern examples, although it also contains accounts from Cheshire due to the interviews she has obtained that provide a real personal insight into these women's experiences.<sup>13</sup> Apart from local histories of individual institutes, there has been no sole focus on county federations and the specific role those WIs played. Therefore, this dissertation provides recognition to the work of the WI in Northumberland and Durham that often showed differences to the general national experience of WI members in the Second World War.

The first chapter of this dissertation focuses on the 'Make Do and Mend' campaign that officially began in 1941 but was apparent from the start of the war, as demonstrated through the activities of the WI. The chapter first examines the national efforts of the WI in regards to 'Make Do and Mend', which is necessary to understand the contributions made by WIs in the North East, covered in the second section of the chapter. This includes exploring the different causes the WI aided by making knitted garments as well as the thrift demonstrations they provided at monthly meetings. This chapter will highlight how every WI studied in the Northumberland and Durham counties contributed to the 'Make Do and Mend' campaign. Therefore, it was the greatest

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<sup>12</sup> For example, in Cohen, *The Women's Institute*, pp. 33-43, one or two examples are provided from more northern areas such as Derbyshire and the Tyne Valley but the majority of examples are from Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and Essex.

<sup>13</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, p. xxiii.

contribution made by WIs in the North East, compared to the perceived greater national contribution of fruit preservation.<sup>14</sup>

Chapter Two explores how the WI promoted the 'Dig for Victory' campaign and aided food production across the nation. The national food production activities demonstrate the rural, agricultural nature of the WI, including their links with the WLA. Moreover, apart from producing a surplus of fruit and vegetables, this chapter also considers different activities such as egg and herb collections. Again, by using the WI minutes from institutes across Northumberland and Durham it sheds new light on the rural experience of women in the North East. Food production by the North East counties broadly fitted into the national pattern of WI wartime activities as WIs across the nation were aided by rural women with agricultural experience.

Chapter Three analyses the wartime activity most associated with the WI, jam-making.<sup>15</sup> With the use of secondary material, this chapter examines how successful fruit preservation was nationally, including the formation of the Cooperative Fruit Preservation Scheme in 1940. Although this chapter demonstrates that WIs in the North East fit into the national pattern of preservation activities, it was not the greatest contribution made. Some WIs openly objected to making jam. Therefore, a degree of local autonomy was demonstrated by WIs locally. This indicates again how 'Make Do and Mend' was more prominent across the North East and the importance of offering a fresh perspective on the rural experience of women across Northumberland and Durham.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

# Chapter 1: 'Make Do and Mend'

The rationing arrangements that consumed the lives of the British people during the Second World War not only restricted their diets but also, from 1941, their clothing. 'Make Do and Mend' became one of the most famous catchphrases during the war with housewives everywhere salvaging every bit of material to make new clothes or to mend others.<sup>1</sup> This chapter will first explore the role of the WI in the national 'Make Do and Mend' campaign, discussing how the WI exercised its influence in making the campaign a success. Additionally, in examining the national campaign, it will highlight how branches of the WI, in Northumberland and Durham, contributed to their local communities and to the forces, through the number of garments made. This chapter will provide examples, previously overlooked by historians, of WIs in the North East and how the 'Make Do and Mend' initiative was the greatest contribution made in the local counties. Overall, this chapter will conclude that the 'Make Do and Mend' campaign was vital to the nation during a time of rationing and the WI was able to pursue this campaign effectively to provide essentials to those at home and abroad.

## **National 'Make Do and Mend' Campaign**

The WI is well known for its knitting and sewing skills and the WI members' expertise became invaluable to the war effort. Before the official 'Make Do and Mend' campaign was introduced in 1941, due to the rationing of clothes in that year, WIs across the nation set up their own knitting and sewing groups to produce garments. Julie Summers highlights this as the WI received a number of emergency requests from different organisations and workforces.<sup>2</sup> Miss Farrer, the National Federation of Women's Institutes' (NFWI) general secretary, discouraged knitting and sewing to be part of monthly meetings but to set up separate groups so WI members could spend more time on these activities.<sup>3</sup> Unlike fruit preservation, the NFWI did not provide WIs with supplies such as wool

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<sup>1</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, p. 206.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*



at the start of the war. Therefore, institutes had to raise money to buy supplies or rely on donations, demonstrating their commitment to the project.

However, there were opportunities for WIs to apply for free wool as long as the finished garments were sent to specific causes and organisations. Susan Cohen notes how institutes could apply for twenty-four ounces of free wool, coupon free, from the NFWI to knit for comforts for the forces.<sup>4</sup> This free wool was only supplied by the government after the rationing of clothing in 1941. Yet, this was not a significant amount of wool; thus wool donations were not as readily received as sugar donations for fruit preservation. Nevertheless, awareness of national schemes allowed the WI to produce more garments than they would have produced if they had relied on monies raised on their own. This suggests that the government saw this activity as less essential than other WI projects, such as fruit preservation, because in September 1939 wool was already controlled, but not rationed.<sup>5</sup> Supplies of wool were prioritised by the government for the factories to produce uniforms and necessities for the services. Thus, the government can be seen to support activities that prevented waste more than the production of new items.

Due to the lack of donations, the WI is noteworthy for the ways it was able to adapt. Mavis Curtis highlights how the institutes would unravel the wool from old jumpers and then straighten the wool so it could be re-knitted.<sup>6</sup> This demonstrates the creativity of the rural women; even before the war and rationing, rural women had to be inventive to make sure their families had enough clothes as material was not as readily available as it was in towns. Cicely McCall notes the range of skills rural women had and that this became more apparent when evacuated mothers from towns

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<sup>4</sup> Cohen, *The Women's Institute*, p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> Board of Trade: Wool Control Department: Papers, BT 204, National Archives, <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C3242>, date accessed 18 February 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Mavis Curtis, *The WI: A Centenary History* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2015), p. 129.

were unable to repair their children's clothes.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the WI provided an educational role as well as providing wool and patterns to their communities.<sup>8</sup>

In 1943, the Ministry of Information published the book *Make Do and Mend* to aid women across the nation.<sup>9</sup> The book suggests that if help was needed or if people wanted to join a sewing class then joining 'your local Institute' was the best option.<sup>10</sup> This demonstrates clear evidence of how the state relied on the WI. Therefore, rural women, especially those in the WI, were the best candidates for mending and producing garments. This was due to one of the early aims of the WI, to revive traditional skills such as knitting.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the WI was the most significant organisation to produce home-made woollen garments due to the skills rural women already had. Furthermore, the production of a book like this clearly shows how the government recognised the importance of 'Make Do and Mend' despite the minimal donations of wool they made to the WI.

Even with limited donations, as early as November 1939, the Red Cross had already received a number of supplies sent from WIs to hospitals and convalescent camps.<sup>12</sup> The WI was just one of the many organisations that assisted the Red Cross throughout the war. For example, towards the start of the war, the WI was one organisation that supplied over thirty thousand hospital garments and comforts for the Red Cross in Dieppe.<sup>13</sup> Yet, these supplies were less significant after the fall of France, thus the efforts of the Red Cross and the WI were redirected to supply packages to the many British prisoners of war.<sup>14</sup> Midge Gillies states, 'during the six years of the war the Red Cross sent

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<sup>7</sup> Cicely McCall, *Women's Institutes* (London: Collins, 1943), p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Mike Brown and Carol Harris, *The Wartime House: Home Life in Wartime Britain 1939-1945* (Stroud: The History Press, 2013), p. 251.

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Information, *Make Do and Mend: Prepared for the Board of Trade* (London: HMSO, 1943), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, p. 198.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 195-196.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

over twenty million food parcels to POWs'.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the Red Cross and its contributors were significant in helping prisoners of war and other servicemen throughout the war in various ways.

Similar to its focus on making garments for the Red Cross, the introduction of the official 'Make Do and Mend' campaign in 1941 allowed the WI to contribute more to those on the home front. Propaganda about mending and reusing clothes stressed that wasting material and clothing items was just as bad as food waste.<sup>16</sup> Oliver Lyttelton, president of the Board of Trade, made a radio broadcast about the campaign that was very irregular for the time.<sup>17</sup> 'When you feel tired of your clothes remember that by making them do you are contributing some part of an aeroplane, a gun or a tank'.<sup>18</sup> Thus, spending money on new clothes was not the priority, as the space needed to produce more armaments could replace material factories.

1941 also saw the creation of Mrs Churchill's Aid to Russia campaign, which produced and sent woollen and fur-lined garments to Russia.<sup>19</sup> The Red Cross aided the project and was supplied regularly by WIs across the nation.<sup>20</sup> The national success of the WI's contribution to the 'Make Do and Mend' campaign is hard to truly calculate due to the various causes and number of WIs. Yet, *Home and Country* estimated in July 1945 that approximately 160,000 garments were made nationally.<sup>21</sup> This figure could be a lot more as Summers notes that by making rough estimates through the 5,585 institutes with 288,000 members about twenty million garments could have been made.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, the WI played a significant role in the 'Make Do and Mend' campaign as well as going above and beyond by producing a number of items for important causes such as the Red Cross.

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<sup>15</sup> Midge Gillies, *The Barbed Wire University: The Real Lives of Allied Prisoners of War in the Second World War* (London: Aurum Press Ltd., 2011), p. 32, cited in Summers, *Jambusters*, p. 196.

<sup>16</sup> Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 235.

<sup>17</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, p. 201.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157, 216, 217.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 216-217; Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism*, p. 101.

<sup>21</sup> *Home and Country*, July 1945, cited in Caitríona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women's Movement in England, 1928-64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 142.

<sup>22</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, p. 193.

## **'Make Do and Mend' in the Northumberland and Durham Counties**

By examining the different ways in which WIs contributed to the 'Make Do and Mend' campaign across the nation, it is possible to define the specific role played by WIs in the North East. Specific examples and causes WIs supported in Northumberland and Durham typically mirror those supported by other WIs but local, more personal examples are evident in primary material. Therefore, this section will demonstrate that WIs in the North East contributed to the 'Make Do and Mend' campaign as well as producing various items for a number of causes that have previously been overlooked by historians.

Before the official 'Make Do and Mend' campaign commenced in 1941, WIs in Northumberland and Durham had already mended and produced a number of items. Chopwell WI started preparing and making comforts for the forces in October 1939 by holding a public meeting, including other village organisations.<sup>23</sup> By organising public meetings like this, the WIs were able to mobilise wider community support. This was important as the WIs needed donations of wool and supplies so comforts could be made for the forces and other victims of war. Chopwell WI also responded to the request to make minesweeper gloves in January 1940.<sup>24</sup> Minesweepers were important during the war as they removed naval mines and protected important cargo ships. Felton WI also made minesweeper gloves and by May 1940 twenty-two pairs had already been made, fifteen were made by Mrs Wood alone.<sup>25</sup> This indicates the willingness of WIs to respond to urgent requests at a time when garments were most needed.

As early as September 1939, Hylton WI decided to knit blankets for the local hospitals; the minutes highlight how they believed that pursuing this was crucial for the area and for the war

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<sup>23</sup> Chopwell WI Record Book (hereafter cited CWIRB), October 1939, S.WI25/1/1, Tyne and Wear Archives (hereafter cited TWA).

<sup>24</sup> CWIRB, January 1940. S.WI25/1/1, TWA.

<sup>25</sup> Felton WI Record Book (hereafter cited FWIRB), May 1940, NRO.4327/20/10, Northumberland Archives (hereafter cited NA).

effort.<sup>26</sup> Hylton's blankets started to be made in November 1939 for the WI's own casualty packs and for the Royal Infirmary.<sup>27</sup> Along with the start of its fruit preservation in 1940, Hylton WI held knitting meetings that were scheduled so blanket making could be done efficiently.<sup>28</sup> Balancing fruit preservation and garment making would have been achieved by different committees within the institutes. Likewise, Hylton members also listed goods needed for the forces so they could work from it accordingly.<sup>29</sup> This was followed by an emergency meeting in June 1940 that discussed a letter sent by the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) to help provide comforts for the wounded and Hylton WI agreed to help.<sup>30</sup> Working with the WVS demonstrated the importance of this comforts campaign as it followed the Dunkirk evacuation, a time when many wounded soldiers returned to British shores. However, like other WIs across the nation, Hylton WI experienced difficulties in gaining enough wool or having the funds to buy it.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, throughout 1939 and 1940, a number of whist drives were held to fundraise for the Hylton WI wool fund as well as holding a garden party in June 1940 that would have specifically helped fund the wool needed for the WVS campaign.<sup>32</sup> The success demonstrated by Hylton WI was expressed in their Annual Report of 1940 as the knitting party produced 390 items.<sup>33</sup> This would not have been possible without the funds raised for wool and supplies. The 1940 Annual Report also indicates that £42.10.9 was raised over twelve months for the wool fund, thus the whist drives and the garden party were successful.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the Hylton WI dedicated greater effort to the production of knitted items than fruit preservation, thus demonstrating how WIs prioritised certain activities.<sup>35</sup>

Additionally, wool funds were common due to the lack of donations from the NFWI and the government. New Silksworth WI's financial statements highlight the money raised for the wool fund

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<sup>26</sup> Hylton WI Committee Meeting Minutes (hereafter cited HWICM), September 1939, S.WI7/2/3, TWA.

<sup>27</sup> HWICM, November 1939, S.WI7/2/3, TWA.

<sup>28</sup> HWICM, January 1940, S.WI7/2/3, TWA.

<sup>29</sup> HWICM, November 1939, S.WI7/2/3, TWA.

<sup>30</sup> HWICM, June 1940, S.WI7/2/3, TWA.

<sup>31</sup> HWICM, June 1940, S.WI7/2/3, TWA.

<sup>32</sup> HWICM, November 1939, June and November 1940, S.WI7/2/3, TWA.

<sup>33</sup> HWICM, Annual Report 1940, S.WI7/2/3, TWA.

<sup>34</sup> HWICM, Annual Report 1940, S.WI7/2/3, TWA.

<sup>35</sup> HWICM, 1939-1945, S.WI7/2/3, TWA.

throughout the war.<sup>36</sup> November 1940's statement shows how New Silksworth held concerts to raise money for wool as well as a party for wounded soldiers.<sup>37</sup> This was very similar to the actions of Hylton WI and how WIs responded to certain events such as servicemen returning from Dunkirk. Shotley WI's great interest in knitting for the war effort also required a ready supply of wool.<sup>38</sup> Mrs Gump of Shotley Hall was keen to support the WI and parties were held at her residence throughout the war and the money donated was used to purchase the wool.<sup>39</sup> This demonstrates the need for all members of the community to aid the WI's campaigns, especially the wealthier members, who could provide their grounds, money and influence to achieve greater success.

Producing items for the Red Cross and POWs was also important to WIs in Northumberland and Durham. Yet, without individual wool funds and donations, the practice would not have been possible. The rationing of wool and material in 1941 made it difficult for WIs in the North East region to produce as many items for the forces and local causes. Felton WI demonstrated this clearly in its own 'War Comforts Committee Minute Book' as there was a significant difference between the numbers of items made in 1940 compared to 1941.<sup>40</sup> In 1940, 836 comforts were made and in 1941 only 392 were made.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the coupon free wool, introduced in late 1941, aided the production slightly and the Felton WI was able to continue their good work by producing 1,659 items up to the end of 1944.<sup>42</sup> The coupon free wool was closely monitored by the WIs; for example, Bolam WI members were only allowed one and a half pounds of wool per year.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, Helen Carey indicates the success of WIs in Durham as 2,223 knitted garments were made for the National Service Association by the end of 1942.<sup>44</sup> This highlights the level of success in the making

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<sup>36</sup> New Silksworth WI Financial Statements (hereafter cited NSWIFS), 1939-1944, S.WI8/3, TWA.

<sup>37</sup> NSWIFS, November 1940, S.WI8/3, TWA.

<sup>38</sup> Shotley Women's Institute, *Golden Jubilee Book: 1927-1977, 'The Snods Story'* (Consett: Ramsden Williams Publications, 1977), p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Felton WI War Comforts Committee Book (hereafter cited FWIWCCB), October 1941, NRO.4327/20/27, NA.

<sup>41</sup> FWIWCCB, October 1941, NRO.4327/20/27, NA.

<sup>42</sup> FWIWCCB, December 1944, NRO.4327/20/27, NA.

<sup>43</sup> Bolam WI Monthly and Committee Meeting Minutes, October 1941, NRO.4327/6/1, NA.

<sup>44</sup> Carey, *Bows of Burning Gold*, p. 42.

of garments in the North East as well as the thousands more that would have been made for other causes such as the local infirmaries.

The WI comforts sent from the North East aided many local men and services. Blanchland WI received letters of thanks from the Hexham Supply Depot, the distribution centre for the counties, and from the Red Cross for the many knitted items made.<sup>45</sup> Felton WI regularly sent comforts and parcels to local men and women and kept a track of where they were located.<sup>46</sup> Reservations were made to make sure local service personnel had garments for Christmas and the winter months as well as using donations from the British Legion to further their efforts.<sup>47</sup> This provided a real morale boost for prisoners of war and WI members alike; thus Felton WI felt they had made a real contribution by making sure local individuals were well equipped. Likewise, North East WIs supported Mrs Churchill's Aid to Russia campaign, for example, East Boldon WI made and sent fur-lined garments.<sup>48</sup> WIs who did not produce items for the campaign forwarded donations instead such as Newbottle and Chopwell WIs.<sup>49</sup>

The introduction of the official 'Make Do and Mend' campaign gave further inspiration to the WIs in the North East. With the campaign in full swing, more 'Make Do and Mend' classes and demonstrations appeared in monthly meetings. At the February 1941 meeting, Felton WI had a demonstration on 'thrift' using old clothes to make a rug.<sup>50</sup> Felton WI found this most useful as they knew tips like these would be vital for when household commodities would become harder to obtain.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Blanchland WI had a class on how to make slippers from old felt hats in April 1942.<sup>52</sup> This type of recycling and resourcefulness demonstrated by WIs in the North East allowed members to gain more knowledge to aid their situation at home and help others in the community.

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<sup>45</sup> Blanchland WI Committee Minute Book (hereafter cited BWICMB), Annual Report 1941, NRO.4327/5/1, NA.

<sup>46</sup> FWIWCCB, 1940-1944, NRO.4327/20/27, NA.

<sup>47</sup> FWIWCCB, Annual Report 1941 and October 1941, NRO.4327/20/27, NA.

<sup>48</sup> East Boldon WI Annual Report (hereafter cited EBWIAR), 1945, S.WI27/3/2/2, TWA.

<sup>49</sup> CWIRB, December 1941, S.WI25/1/1, TWA; Newbottle WI Record Book (hereafter cited NWIRB), November 1941, S.WI12/1/1, TWA.

<sup>50</sup> FWIRB, February 1941, NRO.4327/20/10, NA.

<sup>51</sup> FWIRB, February 1941, NRO.4327/20/10, NA.

<sup>52</sup> BWICMB, Annual Report 1942, NRO.4327/5/1, NA.

Furthermore, Newbottle WI, like others in the North East region, began making garments as soon as war was declared.<sup>53</sup> Yet, what was special about the Newbottle WI monthly meetings was how they read out the letters of thanks they received from local men serving in the forces who had received the handmade items they had made.<sup>54</sup> For example, a letter from Private W. Fawcett was read out on the 15<sup>th</sup> September 1941 that included a note of thanks for the socks he had received.<sup>55</sup> This further demonstrates how receiving letters like this would have empowered the WI members knowing that they were really helping local servicemen and the war effort.

Finally, the production of items continued after the war due to the refugee crisis in Europe. Many WIs in the North East began knitting in 1944 for the Clothing Relief of Europe; for example, Dalton WI appealed for more knitters to help the cause as well as setting up knitting afternoons to make the items.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Linton WI sent for six pounds of wool to prepare to knit for the cause.<sup>57</sup> This again highlights the WI's response to urgent requests and how they prioritised their knitting for certain causes. The production and knitting of items for a number of causes throughout the war was done in some way by every WI studied in the Northumberland and Durham counties. This highlights how garment making was more accessible compared to the other projects the WI undertook such as fruit preservation. Therefore, not only did the local counties fit into the national pattern but knitting, sewing and making do and mending became a focus for many WIs in this region.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated that the WI were significant in the 'Make Do and Mend' campaign by not only mending their own items but producing a number of garments together to aid others on the home front and abroad. This was also highlighted across Northumberland and Durham, indicating how the WIs in the North East fitted into the national pattern of 'Make Do and Mend'

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<sup>53</sup> NWIRB, September and October 1939, S.WI12/1/1, TWA.

<sup>54</sup> NWIRB March 1940, September 1940 and September 1941, S.WI12/1/1, TWA.

<sup>55</sup> NWIRB, September 1941, S.WI12/1/1, TWA.

<sup>56</sup> Dalton WI Committee Minute Book, August 1944, NRO.4327/13/1, NA.

<sup>57</sup> Linton WI Committee Minute Book, August 1944, NRO.4327/29/1, NA.



activities. However, primary material indicates the individual experiences that occurred such as the personal letters of thanks received at Newbottle WI.<sup>58</sup> This is significant as local examples shed new light on the situation in the rural North East during the war. Similarly, knitting and sewing appears to have been more common in the North East counties compared to fruit preservation, thus was the greatest contribution made locally. Yet, supplies were dependent on donations and money raising efforts. The effect of material rations were most evident in the numbers of garments produced after rationing was introduced, highlighted by Felton WI.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, the raising of morale amongst prisoners of war and the WI members themselves, due to these activities, were not only an important contribution to the war effort but provided relief and encouragement to these women to carry on. Overall, this indicates that the WI provided their skills to mend and make vital garments needed during a time of rationing, thus aiding those at the greatest level of need.

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<sup>58</sup> NWIRB, September 1941, S.WI12/1/1, TWA.

<sup>59</sup> FWIWCCB, October 1941, NRO.4327/20/27, NA.

## Chapter 2: Food Production

The government's 'Dig for Victory' campaign encouraged the nation to grow its own food during a time of rationing and shortages. This campaign was also promoted by the Women's Institute across England and Wales. Being a rural organisation, the WI had a number of members that would have had the experience of being self-sufficient. This chapter will examine the role of the WI in food production and consider how it promoted the initiative to grow a surplus of food in addition to what was being produced on the nearby farms. Examining the national food production activities the WI carried out, as well as the egg and herb collections, will demonstrate the national pattern of activities which the WIs in Northumberland and Durham matched. Thus, this chapter will provide examples that have previously been overlooked by historians as many historical accounts focus on the land girls in regards to food production and not the WI and their aim to provide more food for their communities.

### National Food Production

The success of 'Dig for Victory' relied on a number of organisations that were set up at the start of the war such as the Women's Land Army (WLA). Yet, existing rural organisations such as the WI used their influence to create a further surplus of food by promoting the initiatives to their communities. Lady Denman, the NFWI president, was also the honorary director of the WLA from 1939 to 1945, which was a similar role to the one she carried out in the First World War.<sup>1</sup> This higher level of responsibility highlights the government's faith in the NFWI president and her experience in agriculture. However, with this added responsibility Lady Denman had to share her duties within the NFWI. Miss Farrer became general secretary and had a vital role in communicating with the government and ensuring the WI continued successfully.<sup>2</sup> Lady Denman expressed the importance of

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<sup>1</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, p. 23, 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

both organisations in 1940 by appealing to farmers' wives to help the WLA in their communities.<sup>3</sup> This indicates the importance of solidarity amongst women in the rural communities during the war and the change in gender roles that was occurring across the nation.<sup>4</sup> WI members aided the WLA in various ways such as hosting the land girls in their homes or mending their clothes.<sup>5</sup> The increased amount of independence women were experiencing and the new job opportunities available to them was frowned upon by the remaining men in society, demonstrating a degree of continuity in regards to the perception of women during the war.<sup>6</sup> Yet, the production of food by both organisations aided communities across the nation, despite the lack of recognition they received.<sup>7</sup>

However, with an increased focus on the WLA by the government and the NFWI president, the WI was seen as less important in regards to food production. In part, this was the case as the WLA were a service organisation so strong, young women were needed to continue the man's role on the farm and to meet the demands and deadlines of the government.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, with older, civilian members, the WI could not be given the sole responsibility of food production. Maggie Andrews agrees that this likely 'estranged young single women' from the WI, preferring to join organisations with a sole focus on war work such as the WLA.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, this did not deter the WI; they produced a surplus of food for their communities in a more flexible manner than the WLA but still with a great commitment to the cause, thus promoting 'Dig for Victory'.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the WI pursued other projects such as making knitted garments and helping the evacuees so their time could not solely be spent on food production. This demonstrates how time was split amongst important wartime activities and the various committees that were set up to ensure these activities were successful. Therefore, to achieve a surplus of food for the community, the WI encouraged

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 49-50.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 249; Mark Donnelly, *Britain in the Second World War* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, p. 194.

<sup>6</sup> Donnelly, *Britain in the Second World War*, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, p. 130-131; Braybon and Summerfield, *Out of the Cage*, pp. 187-188.

<sup>8</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, p. 118; Field, *Blood, Sweat, and Toil*, pp. 169-171.

<sup>9</sup> Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism*, p. 102.

<sup>10</sup> Cohn, *The Women's Institute*, pp. 36-38.

regular demonstrations as well as continuing pre-war activities such as egg collections.<sup>11</sup> This indicates that existing WI activities were extended and were aided greatly by the connection with the WLA and the NFWI's experience in agriculture.<sup>12</sup>

After the Munich Crisis in 1938, the WI started to plan for the worst. Like the creation of the WLA, the Produce Guild also reformed and was open to any WI member willing to join for one shilling a year.<sup>13</sup> The formation of the Produce Guild came with a grant from the government and encouraged WI members to continue their wartime role like they had in the First World War.<sup>14</sup> The Produce Guild had its own chief organiser and Voluntary County Organisers that decided on the level of qualifications needed for the Guild's demonstrators as well as where and how the produce would be used.<sup>15</sup> The Produce Guild linked directly to the national campaign of 'Dig for Victory', thus encouraging local country people to grow fruit and vegetables on whatever green space they had available.<sup>16</sup> The Produce Guild had monthly meetings within the individual counties and institute members, who were part of the Produce Guild, would regularly report back to their WI.

However, Susan Cohen highlights how the WI were already acquiring allotments and communal garden areas before the 'Dig for Victory' campaign, demonstrating the preparation and knowledge of what needed to be done rurally in wartime.<sup>17</sup> Thus, for many country people being self-sufficient or working on the farm, in the rural districts, came very naturally to them. Mavis Curtis indicates that the aim was to plough two million acres of grassland before the 1940 harvest, demonstrating the importance of improving food production in rural communities.<sup>18</sup> The WI encouraged members to grow anything they could in their gardens, and many were supplied seeds

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<sup>11</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, p. 135; Curtis, *The WI*, pp. 206-207.

<sup>12</sup> Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism*, pp. 101-102.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>14</sup> Robinson, *A Force to be Reckoned With*, p. 154.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Cohen, *The Women's Institute*, p. 36.

<sup>18</sup> Curtis, *The WI*, p. 115.

from the NFWI, the Produce Guild and the United States.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, this again highlights the importance of donations to aid WI activities. Unlike wool donations, seeds were distributed relatively easily due to the agricultural and rural connections the WI had, including the Produce Guild and the company Suttons.<sup>20</sup> The seeds were distributed efficiently amongst the WI members and committees that carried out food production activities to ensure that the project was well organised to gain a successful surplus of food.

In addition to the support and advice gained from the Produce Guild and the NFWI, the WI magazine *Home and Country* also provided plenty of tips and inspiration to aid food production as well as letters from fellow members.<sup>21</sup> Providing advice helped WI members daily and was a great source to refer to in between WI or Produce Guild meetings. For example, in the September 1940 edition, Mrs Wilkinson noted how her WI's early potatoes were 'amazingly good' and how they were able to make a profit on them.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, reading about different people's experiences and the WI's achievements not only gave WI members a morale boost but gave them the belief that they were part of a larger movement with common goals.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, cooking demonstrations were also a big part of WI meetings, thus allowing members to learn and recreate meals in their own homes.<sup>24</sup> This gave WI members inspiration to create meals that were different and within the limits of their weekly ration, which would have been made more exciting by the produce they had grown in their local community.

Even with an increased focus on the production of fruit and vegetables, the WI was still able to continue traditional activities such as egg collections.<sup>25</sup> The eggs were distributed by the WI to local services such as hospitals. As the number of civilian casualties increased there was an increased demand for food. Yet, egg collections were also negatively impacted by the war because of rationing

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<sup>19</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, p. 130; Cohen, *The Women's Institute*, p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism*, p. 106; Summers, *Jambusters*, p. 113.

<sup>21</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, pp. 131-134, p. 143.

<sup>22</sup> *Home and Country*, September 1940, cited in Summers, *Jambusters*, pp. 133-134.

<sup>23</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, pp. 131-134, p. 152.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>25</sup> Carey, *Bows of Burning Gold*, p. 30

and the restrictions on the sale of eggs.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, other collections were made that had plentiful resources across the nation's hedgerows and woodlands. Simon Goodenough highlights the vast collection of herbs by the WI, which was not only done to improve wartime meals but more importantly for medicines.<sup>27</sup> This included the collection of rosehips that were a significant source of vitamin C as one pound of rosehips provided as much vitamin C as twelve large oranges.<sup>28</sup> This was important during wartime as there were a lack of oranges available, thus rosehip syrup could be provided to ensure the nation was receiving enough vitamin C, especially children.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the WI carried out a number of different activities to aid food production across the nation as well as aiding medical shortages.

### **Food Production in the Northumberland and Durham Counties**

The various activities the WI took part in to aid the nation's food supply were also reflected in Northumberland and Durham. With agricultural experience present amongst WI members, the WIs in the North East produced food that aided local communities. Like 'Make Do and Mend' and fruit preservation, discussed in the next chapter, WIs in the North East focused their efforts on certain causes that best suited their institute. Thus, the following examples demonstrate the different ways WIs in the Northumberland and Durham counties followed the campaign of 'Dig for Victory'.

With many WI members in Northumberland and Durham also part of the Produce Guild, institutes were able to run food production projects or aid members to produce a surplus of food in their own gardens. Food production by WIs would not have been possible without the donation of seeds. As East Boldon WI stated in their May 1940 group meeting, with the formation of the Produce Guild and the seed donations they received 'now everybody is quite happy "Digging for Victory"'.<sup>30</sup> The seeds available varied from the time of year to what WI members wanted to grow. Members of

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<sup>26</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, pp. 127-128.

<sup>27</sup> Goodenough, *Jam and Jerusalem*, p. 60.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*; Curtis, *The WI*, p. 127.

<sup>29</sup> Curtis, *The WI*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>30</sup> East Boldon Group Meeting May 1940, S.WI27/3/3, TWA.

Usworth WI regularly received seeds for their own personal use including seed potatoes, in May 1940 they were worried that their seed potatoes were not going to arrive in time, but they did and were planted at the correct time for efficient production.<sup>31</sup> To ensure WI members could effectively 'Dig for Victory', institutes had a number of guest speakers and demonstrations. Lesbury WI had a talk from a local man, Mr Keighley, about how to control pests in the garden in June 1940 as well as a 'How We Get Our Own Food' talk from the Ministry of Information in March 1943.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Mitford WI had a guest speaker, Mrs Hall, from the Food and Agriculture Organisation that encouraged the WI members to be advocates for food improvements in the community.<sup>33</sup> This highlights the role of the WI in the community to not only aid their members in pursuing 'Dig for Victory' during a time of rationing but also in regards to the quality of food produced.

As well as producing food for consumption, WIs in the North East took part in produce shows to demonstrate their food production activities. Chopwell WI was one institute that had produce shows and during their October 1941 meeting they discussed their recent show and how it was a great success; the best one they have ever had.<sup>34</sup> Having been founded as an institute in 1932 to say their produce show was the best they ever had, in wartime conditions, suggests the success Chopwell WI had in producing food and organising community events during the war. Likewise, their president agreed, 'the produce show definitely shows that we really have been "Digging for Victory"'.<sup>35</sup>

The success highlighted by Chopwell WI would have been aided by the seed collections and distributions made by the WI members who were part of the Produce Guild.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, the Produce Guild was very important for the success of initiatives carried out by rural people and the WI. In February 1942 there were over 3,000 members of the Produce Guild in Durham that met

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<sup>31</sup> Usworth WI Monthly Minute Book, March, May and June 1940, S.WI33/1/1, TWA.

<sup>32</sup> Lesbury WI General Meeting Book (hereafter cited LWIGMB), June 1940 and November 1942, NRO.10817/3/1, NA.

<sup>33</sup> Mitford WI Monthly Minute Book, May 1944, NRO.4327/79/2, NA.

<sup>34</sup> CWIRB, October 1941, S.WI25/1/1, TWA.

<sup>35</sup> CWIRB, October 1941, S.WI25/1/1, TWA.

<sup>36</sup> CWIRB, February 1944, S.WI25/1/2, TWA.

monthly at Houghall.<sup>37</sup> Having so many members from across the county, many of them WI members, allowed food production to be done efficiently by the education and instructions received. As well as Produce Guild seed distribution, WIs also bought their own seeds and paid for classes on seed and bulb plantation as demonstrated by the financial statements of New Silksworth WI.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, seeds sent from the USA were also significant to WI food production. Newbottle WI received free packets of seeds from the USA in March 1941 and East Boldon WI reported on the good results demonstrated by the seeds obtained from the USA in 1942.<sup>39</sup> Thus, free seed packets would have increased production further in villages. Following production, WI members wanted inspiration to create dishes with their produce; for example, Newbottle WI's president, Mrs Jobson, gave a cookery demonstration in January 1941 called 'Plot to Pot'.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the importance of growing your own produce and cooking it was shared and encouraged by the WI, which definitely followed the spirit of 'Dig for Victory'.

A continuation of WI practice was also evident in Northumberland and Durham during the war. Egg collections became even more important as WIs distributed them to hospitals in the North East that held victims of the bombing raids. Julie Summers agrees as the WIs in Northumberland knew that due to the large mining villages in the south of the county, aerial attacks would be likely.<sup>41</sup> Thus, WIs wanted to help the counties' hospitals in any way they could. For example, Shincliffe WI sent 1,600 eggs to Durham County Hospital in 1940.<sup>42</sup> In Northumberland, Lesbury WI sent twenty-seven and a half dozen eggs to the Alnwick Infirmary in April 1940, a practice they continued throughout the war.<sup>43</sup> However, difficulties were experienced due to wartime conditions. East Boldon WI demonstrated a smaller quantity of eggs collected in 1941 and 1942 due to the shortage

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<sup>37</sup> CWIRB, February 1942, S.WI25/1/1, TWA.

<sup>38</sup> NSWIFS, November 1940, November 1942, November 1943 and November 1944, S.WI8/3, TWA.

<sup>39</sup> NWIRB, March 1941, S.WI12/1/1, TWA; EBWIAR, 1942, S.WI27/3/3, TWA.

<sup>40</sup> NWIRB, January 1941, S.WI12/1/1, TWA.

<sup>41</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, p. 50.

<sup>42</sup> Shincliffe WI, 1940 Annual Report, D/WI3/110/21, Durham Record Office.

<sup>43</sup> LWIGMB, April 1940, NRO.10817/3/1, NA.



of supplies.<sup>44</sup> This reflects the difficulties of obtaining eggs during the war as many would be kept by rural families during rationing.

Finally, WIs in Northumberland and Durham also collected and dried herbs. This not only made rationed meals more satisfying but the collection of rosehips and nettles helped the production of much needed medication. Rosehips were significant as they could be produced into rosehip syrup that provided vitamin C, which would help prevent illness and keep civilians away from hospitals as space was needed for bomb victims. The nation previously relied on the importation of oranges as a source of vitamin C. Joan Stokoe, a child living in Northumberland during the war, remembers how children were the only ones allowed to eat oranges during the war and even then they could only have them two or three times a year.<sup>45</sup> This indicates the importance of rosehips during the war to fill the gap in the nation's vitamin C provisions. WIs in the Northumberland and Durham counties contributed towards this cause. Hetton le Hole WI demonstrated throughout 1942 the collection of sage, mint, parsley, nettles and rosehips.<sup>46</sup> The Hetton le Hole Committee also had an evening walk following their meeting in August 1942 to try and collect as many rosehips as they could.<sup>47</sup> The rosehips would be sent to distribution centres to be made into rosehip syrup; therefore WIs from the North East not only helped those in the local community but nationally. This highlights the importance of the WIs in the Northumberland and Durham counties in not only producing a surplus of food but collecting herbs that saved lives during a time of medical shortages.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated that WIs in Northumberland and Durham contributed to a number of activities to aid food production in their local communities that reflected the 'Dig for Victory' campaign. Likewise, the collection of eggs for local hospitals was important as there was a surge of

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<sup>44</sup> EBWIAR, 1941 and 1942, S.WI27/3/3, TWA.

<sup>45</sup> Joan Stokoe, 'Banana Sandwiches', BBC WW2 People's War Archive, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/03/a2734003.shtml>, date accessed 1 March 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Hetton le Hole WI Committee Meeting (hereafter cited HLHWICM), April, June and August 1942, S.WI19/2, TWA.

<sup>47</sup> HLHWICM, August 1942, S.WI19/2, TWA.

victims due to the bombing raids. Moreover, the collection of herbs, most significantly the collection of rosehips, gave the people of the North East and across the nation, a ready supply of vitamin C. This was important, especially for children who needed to be provided with the right amount of nutrients and vitamins during a time of rationing. Therefore, food production was a lot more than just growing fruit and vegetables; it aided the medical shortages and boosted morale during events such as the produce shows.

## Chapter 3: Fruit Preservation

Ration-stricken Britain not only relied on organisations to produce food but the WI also produced tons of preserves to stop surplus fruit going to waste. The Second World War is what gave the WI the reputation as jam makers and Jerusalem singers and this perception often reduces the actual significance of fruit preservation.<sup>1</sup> Fruit preservation is the most recognised, national contribution made by the WI during the war. This chapter will explore the role of the WI in fruit preservation across Northumberland and Durham and show how WIs in the North East fit into a broader national pattern. It will take into consideration rationing and the creation of the Cooperative Fruit Preservation Scheme. However, this chapter will also argue that although WI fruit preservation was carried out across the North East, it was not the counties' most noteworthy contribution compared to 'Make Do and Mend'. Nevertheless, the chapter will provide evidence that has previously been overlooked by historians as secondary texts do not include examples of fruit preservation in the North East. Overall, this chapter will demonstrate how North East WIs were able to produce tons of jam during a time of rationing that not only aided their own local villages but also the national home front.

### National Fruit Preservation

'They want more jam, you women of the country districts can give it to them'.<sup>2</sup> Lord Woolton, the wartime Minister of Food, delivered this speech to the nation through a BBC broadcast in 1941.<sup>3</sup> Woolton's reliance on the women of the country highlights the wartime struggles of food and rationing, a major concern of the British government throughout the war. The WI did not take over the full responsibility of manufacturing jam, and fruit preserves continued to be made in factories.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, p. 162.

<sup>2</sup> BBC Broadcast given on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1941, in Neil Dudgeon, *Village Voices: A Portrait of Change in England's Green and Pleasant Land* (London: WI Books, 1989), p. 93, cited in Robinson, *A Force to be Reckoned With*, p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, pp. 162-163.

Yet, the significance of the fruit preservation conducted by the WI should not be underestimated. WIs were able to use the surplus fruit that otherwise would have rotted and put it to good use. This demonstrates the importance of WI jam-making as the amount of jam made provided 'a significant contribution to the food supply', which was aided by the experience country women had in making preserves.<sup>5</sup>

Adding a teaspoon of jam to a boring, simple, rationed meal could warm the hearts of the nation and various WI members understood the importance of making jam to boost morale. Likewise, Lady Denman told the nation's WIs that contributing to the war effort through fruit preservation would win them the war.<sup>6</sup> This continued inspiration from the president and Lord Woolton's visits to various preservation centres proved to individual WI members that their work was vital to the war effort.<sup>7</sup> As Julie Summers states 'it was a wonderful example of how the WI network functioned to the benefit of the country as a whole', highlighting the importance of an existing organisational system.<sup>8</sup>

The Produce Guild was also significant for the success of fruit preservation. Jane Robinson states that 'the summer of 1939 was marked by a glut of plums and blackberries' and this provided a perfect opportunity for WI members to start preserving fruit.<sup>9</sup> Produce Guild members aided this preservation through the methods they had learnt at their meetings.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the summer and autumn of 1939 demonstrated village to village preservation. Similarly, the limited support from the government was demonstrated as 430 tons of sugar was not enough for the majority of WIs across the nation.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 180

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 152, 187.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>9</sup> Robinson, *A Force to be Reckoned With*, p. 155.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, p. 165.

The spontaneous success of fruit preservation in 1939 prevented approximately 450 tons of fruit going to waste.<sup>12</sup> This proved to the NFWI and the government that with further support, fruit preservation could be extended. Consequently, 1940 saw the creation of a fully functioning Cooperative Fruit Preservation Scheme. This extension meant the Ministry of Food could supply the NFWI with more sugar to promote more WIs to take up preservation. Therefore, success was evident in the 2650 preservation centres that were established across the nation by the end of 1940.<sup>13</sup> Preservation centres were designated spaces that could be anything from a WI member's kitchen to a kitchen in a village hall. The government grant enabled £1400 worth of sugar to be distributed to the county federations and on to the individual WIs.<sup>14</sup> The scheme and the government grant allowed 1,631 tons of jam to be made in 1940, a great improvement from 1939.<sup>15</sup> This demonstrates that to contribute significantly to the war effort the individual WIs needed the support from the government because of the rationing of sugar. Additionally, the jam produced to be sold had to be examined by NFWI judges and was standardised to the correct proportions and recipes set out by the Ministry of Agriculture.<sup>16</sup> This was important as a lot of the jam went to hospitals or canteens.<sup>17</sup> Any jam that was 'substandard' was sent to schools and any that was not sold was bought by the Ministry of Food.<sup>18</sup>

The rationing of sugar not only meant that the WI had to rely on government supplies but stricter controls were also introduced.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, WI logbooks kept accurate figures on the amount of jam made to avoid jam or sugar being sold on the black market.<sup>20</sup> Jam-making also depended on the availability of fruit. WIs grew some of their own fruit and the centres also relied upon donations

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>14</sup> Duff Hart-Davis, *Our Land at War: A Portrait of Rural Britain 1939-45* (London: William Collins, 2015), p. 146.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism*, p. 107.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Robinson, *A Force to be Reckoned With*, p. 158.

<sup>19</sup> 'Sugar for Home-Grown Fruit', *The Times*, 23 March 1940, Issue 48571.

<sup>20</sup> Robinson, *A Force to be Reckoned With*, p. 157.

and members of the community selling their surplus fruit to the centres.<sup>21</sup> The poor fruit harvest in 1941 caused a major problem for the WI. There was less fruit available and some preservation centres had to shut down.<sup>22</sup> In an effort to improve the harvest, more fruit bushes were purchased and with endless hard work, 1941 turned out to be one of the best years for jam production during the war.<sup>23</sup> This was made possible by opening the preservation centres to the public in 1941, creating a more cooperative system. The WI members continued to take the lead and all the centres relied on the sugar distributed by the NFWI.<sup>24</sup>

Despite continued jam-making efforts, the Cooperative Fruit Preservation Scheme hit a setback in 1943. There were approximately 800 less preservation centres affiliated to the NFWI, due to the lack of volunteers.<sup>25</sup> This occurred as 1943 highlighted an increase in female conscription into different branches of the forces and organisations such as the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF).<sup>26</sup> This made the Ministry of Food anxious as WI preservation contributions had become vital for the nation's food supply. Therefore, the hard work to ensure efficient production of preserves was continued by older women, not eligible for service, impacting the productiveness of preservation. Nevertheless, fruit preservation continued throughout the country; it may not have been as successful as before 1943 but the contribution made was still important in supplying preserves to the nation. Simon Goodenough highlights the overall success of the national scheme between 1940 and 1945 as over 5,300 tons of fruit was used for jam-making instead of going to waste.<sup>27</sup> Thus, at a time when wasting food was not an option, the WI was able to produce preserves that would last in the nation's store cupboards as well as supplying vital nutrients through the fruit-filled jam.

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<sup>21</sup> Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism*, p. 107.

<sup>22</sup> McCall, *Women's Institutes*, p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid; Summers, *Jambusters*, p. 188.

<sup>24</sup> McCall, *Women's Institutes*, p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, p. 189.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 189-190.

<sup>27</sup> Goodenough, *Jam and Jerusalem*, p. 57.

## **Fruit Preservation in the Northumberland and Durham Counties**

Examining the Cooperative Fruit Preservation Scheme and its development is important to understand how the Northumberland and Durham counties fitted into the broader WI network during the war. Therefore, to explore the North East's specific successes and differences to the general perception, gained from secondary literature, primary sources need to be consulted. Minutes from individual WI meetings highlight clearly the work and organisation that went into fruit preservation throughout the war. Unlike the majority of WIs, some in the North East counties openly rejected jam-making or prioritised other projects, thus fruit preservation was not the greatest contribution made in Northumberland and Durham.

1940 was the year that many Northumberland and Durham WIs started their preservation activities, for example, Hylton WI.<sup>28</sup> One of their members, Mrs Browell, attended the fruit preservation school and passed on what she learnt to her fellow members during their October meeting in 1940, including how to make jam and store it.<sup>29</sup> Hylton WI also organised a public meeting on the Cooperative Fruit Preservation Scheme in 1941, which included other organisations such as the Mother's Union.<sup>30</sup> This demonstrated the need for the WI to be active in their community by providing an educational role and an introduction to the scheme. Still, Hylton WI prioritised the making of comforts over fruit preservation as a greater focus on the activity is demonstrated in their minutes.<sup>31</sup> Thus, indicating a degree of local autonomy. Nevertheless, institutes such as Felton WI had prominent knitting and preservation schemes. In 1941, forty stone and five and three-quarter pounds of jam were made and in 1942, 583 pounds were produced, highlighting the productiveness of Felton's preservation centre.<sup>32</sup> Yet, approximately 209 pounds

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<sup>28</sup> HWICM, July 1940, S.WI7/2/3, TWA.

<sup>29</sup> HWICM, July 1940, S.WI7/2/3, TWA; HWICM Annual Report, 1940, S.WI7/2/3, TWA.

<sup>30</sup> HWICM, March 1941, S.WI7/2/3, TWA.

<sup>31</sup> HWICM, 1939-1945, S.WI7/2/3, TWA.

<sup>32</sup> Felton WI Cooperative Fruit Scheme Record Book (hereafter cited FWICFSRB), December 1941 and November 1942, NR0.4327/20/17, NA.

were made in 1943 that also decreased in 1944 and 1945 due to the lack of fruit available.<sup>33</sup> Thus, in comparison, Felton WI had more success with 'Make Do and Mend' as they continued to obtain wool towards the end of the war.<sup>34</sup> East Boldon WI also expressed difficulties and was unable to start a preservation centre because of fruit shortages.<sup>35</sup> However, East Boldon WI bought preserving bottles and sugar with their rations so jam-making could be done on a small scale, which they then sold on their trading stall.<sup>36</sup> Thus, preserves were still being made and sold even when difficulties were experienced. Shotley WI also made and sold their jam and donated their profits to the Hexham Hospital Depot.<sup>37</sup> Producing 168 lbs just between April and September in 1941 was a great achievement, demonstrating the village's resilience during the year of a bad fruit harvest.<sup>38</sup>

The advantage of looking through the minutes of WI meetings from 1939 to 1945 clearly highlights the development of the Cooperative Fruit Preservation Scheme in particular villages. This is demonstrated by Newbottle WI that formed in 1935. Newbottle WI decided to join the Produce Guild in late 1939 and reported about its work regularly.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the correspondence from the NFWI was the best way to instruct and notify WIs about information from the Ministry of Food. For example, Newbottle WI received a notice about the availability of sugar in April 1940 and how the NFWI were unable to obtain gooseberry bushes in 1943.<sup>40</sup> Thus, having a network in place enabled information to be sent relatively quickly considering the wartime conditions. Moreover, Newbottle WI worked with their community in regards to fruit preservation. This was demonstrated by the husbands of WI members such as Mr Laffey and Mr Baggott who attended the two day preservation school in July 1940.<sup>41</sup> As fruit preservation was a cooperative scheme, it needed support from across the community, thus having experienced men and women on board aided preservation. Newbottle

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<sup>33</sup> FWICFSRB, December 1943, May 1944 and April 1945, NRO.4327/20/17, NA.

<sup>34</sup> FWICFSRB, 1941-1945, NRO.4327/20/17, NA; FWIWCCB, 1940-1945, NRO.4327/20/27, NA.

<sup>35</sup> EBWIAR, 1941, S.WI27/3/3, TWA.

<sup>36</sup> East Boldon WI Financial Statement and Sugar Rations 1940, S.WI27/3/2, TWA; EBWIAR, 1944, S.WI27/3/4, TWA; East Boldon WI Licence to Trade in Foodstuffs by Retail, December 1939, S.WI27/3/2, TWA.

<sup>37</sup> Shotley Women's Institute, *Golden Jubilee Book*, p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> NWIRB, November 1939, S.WI12/1/1, TWA.

<sup>40</sup> NWIRB, April 1940 and January 1943, S.WI12/1/1 and S.WI12/1/2, TWA.

<sup>41</sup> NWIRB, May 1940, S.WI12/1/1, TWA.



WI also had regular preservation demonstrations to help improve techniques such as the one in July 1940 by a representative from the Durham County School of Agriculture and from the president herself, Mrs Jobson, on bottling tomatoes in September 1942.<sup>42</sup> Most significantly, March and April 1941 highlighted the plans of setting up a preservation centre.<sup>43</sup>

Due to the scarcity of fruit in 1941, Newbottle WI had to join forces with the Shirey Row WI.<sup>44</sup> The preservation centre allowed WIs to have a structure and volunteers in place to guarantee a successful production rate. The Newbottle WI annual meeting in 1941 congratulated all the women involved in the centre on their hard work and success.<sup>45</sup> This was seconded by a letter from Lady Denman in March 1942 with a copy of a letter from Lord Woolton thanking the Newbottle and Shirey Row WIs for their good work in the preservation centre.<sup>46</sup> Letters of congratulations were also received in 1943.<sup>47</sup> This indicates the support received from the NFWI and the government and the importance of their inspiration to carry on the hard work in the preservation centres. As well as the continuation of the preservation centre, Newbottle WI also had a gooseberry jam competition for the Durham Produce Guild Meeting in 1944.<sup>48</sup> Competitions were an important part of WI activities and as Maggie Andrews argues they 'left some record of a domestic women's productiveness', thus giving women across the nation, including Northumberland and Durham, confidence, pride and a morale boost during a difficult period.<sup>49</sup>

Yet, some institutes in the North East favoured other projects such as food production, indicating that fruit preservation was not the greatest contribution made locally. This was demonstrated in the county of Durham by Chopwell WI. Chopwell's monthly meeting in April 1942 highlights how the members openly rejected making jam, thus members did not want to take part in

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<sup>42</sup> NWIRB, July 1940 and September 1942, S.WI12/1/1 and S.WI12/1/2, TWA.

<sup>43</sup> NWIRB, March and April 1941, S.WI12/1/1 TWA.

<sup>44</sup> NWIRB, April 1941, S.WI12/1/1 TWA.

<sup>45</sup> NWIRB Annual Report, November 1941, S.WI12/1/1 TWA.

<sup>46</sup> NWIRB, March 1942, S.WI12/1/1 TWA.

<sup>47</sup> NWIRB, March 1943, S.WI12/1/2 TWA.

<sup>48</sup> NWIRB, September 1944, S.WI12/1/2, TWA.

<sup>49</sup> Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism*, pp. 110-111.

the national scheme.<sup>50</sup> This does not mean that Chopwell WI did not want to aid the war effort but that they preferred to make comforts for the forces and produce food.<sup>51</sup> Thus, individual WIs focused on the activities that best suited them and did not always follow everything set out by the NFWI, indicating a degree of local autonomy. Chopwell WI did not disregard fruit preservation as they had a best bottle of fruit competition in 1943.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, WI members made jam for themselves on a small scale but did not take part in the national scheme.

Chopwell was not the only WI in the North East that did not prioritise fruit preservation. Lesbury WI discussed the preservation scheme and made jam but no specific preservation centre was formed.<sup>53</sup> Widdrington WI discussed the uncertainty surrounding the scheme as no one had sufficient time and the village could not be considered as a fruit growing area.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, small scale, designated centres were set up in members' homes in 1941.<sup>55</sup> Yet, only one centre actually operated in 1942 and the decision was made to 'shelve' the scheme in 1943.<sup>56</sup> Even within WIs that regularly made jam, some members could not contribute. For example, Nancy Clark discusses her experiences as a Carham WI member during the war and how she had to prioritise looking after her two evacuee boys over fruit preservation.<sup>57</sup> However, she was able to make knitted garments for the forces as it was something she could do quite casually on an evening or when she had time.<sup>58</sup> This demonstrates the ease of contributing to the 'Make Do and Mend' campaign, unlike preservation.

Jam-making was a long, tiresome and often expensive activity and required enough resources for it to be viable, including equipment, sugar and plenty of fruit.<sup>59</sup> This indicates that for some institutes, especially those with a small membership, that fruit preservation was not as

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<sup>50</sup> CWIRB, April 1942, S.WI25/1/1, TWA.

<sup>51</sup> CWIRB, October 1939, January 1940 and October 1941, S.WI25/1/1, TWA.

<sup>52</sup> CWIRB, November 1943, S.WI25/1/2, TWA.

<sup>53</sup> LWIGMB, October 1939, March 1941 and June 1942, NRO.10817/3/1, NA.

<sup>54</sup> Widdrington WI Monthly Meeting Minutes (hereafter cited WWIMM), March 1941, NRO.10661/1/1/4, NA.

<sup>55</sup> WWIMM, July 1941, NRO.10661/1/1/4, NA.

<sup>56</sup> WWIMM, June 1943, NRO.10661/1/1/4, NA.

<sup>57</sup> Nancy Clark, 'Interview with Nancy Clark', *Oral Histories of the Women's Institute*, <http://winortheast.omeka.net/items/show/12>, date accessed 22 March 2017.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism*, p. 107; Summers, *Jambusters*, pp. 182-183.

accessible as knitting garments. Knitting is a low cost activity and many institutes and WI members during the war would already have the right resources. Therefore, even though fruit preservation was a significant national WI contribution, 'Make Do and Mend' was more evident and successful throughout the Northumberland and Durham counties.

Nevertheless, fruit preservation continued, demonstrating the commitment to the scheme by WI members in the North East. One of the first activities members of the newly formed New Herrington WI took part in, in 1944, were demonstrations on how to bottle fruit.<sup>60</sup> This included how to make wartime jellies, which was appreciated by the 109 members the WI had by the end of 1944.<sup>61</sup> Demonstrations on wartime jellies continued into 1945 as well as their membership in the Produce Guild.<sup>62</sup> This indicates that WIs across Northumberland and Durham were active in fruit preservation throughout the war. Even though there were some differences to the national pattern, their role generally fitted into the wider network of WIs.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated how the WIs in the counties of Northumberland and Durham, to a large extent, fitted into the national network of WIs during the war by successfully producing tons of jam. Likewise, examples from a variety of WIs across the North East provide a new outlook when studying the WI. However, the evidence does show how some WIs such as Chopwell did not always want to follow the instructions given by the NFWI.<sup>63</sup> Thus, by not agreeing to produce jam highlights how fruit preservation was not the most significant contribution made by WIs in the North East. This does not reduce the importance of the Cooperative Fruit Preservation Scheme in the North East but there was a greater focus on other projects such as 'Make Do and Mend' which is present in all WIs studied in the Northumberland and Durham counties.

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<sup>60</sup> New Herrington WI Report Book (hereafter cited NHWIRB), June 1944, S.WI9/1, TWA.

<sup>61</sup> NHWIRB Annual Report 1944, SWI9/1, TWA.

<sup>62</sup> NHWIRB, June 1945, S.WI9/1, TWA.

<sup>63</sup> CWIRB, April 1942, S.WI25/1/1, TWA.

## Conclusion

This dissertation has countered the traditional view of the WI as an organisation of older women of jam makers and Jerusalem singers, instead demonstrating its greater significance in rural areas during the Second World War. Recent cultural representations have also tried to offer a more nuanced view of the WI. The ITV series, *Home Fires*, based on Julie Summers' *Jambusters*, provided the nation with a visual insight into the role of the WI during the war. Although the programme had a purpose to entertain, *Home Fires* is focused around the WI and regularly shows different activities they took part in, including those explored in this dissertation. However, in May 2016, after two series, *Home Fires* was cancelled.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the greater recognition deserved by the WI in regard to its wartime activities will not continue to receive the same level of appreciation and it is therefore likely that the traditional view of the WI will prevail. ITV received many complaints, most significantly by the WI. WI members 'bombed' ITV with hundreds of jam jars full of preserves as well as 20,000 members signing a petition against the cancellation.<sup>2</sup> This was significant as it demonstrated that WI members, many with connections to members during the war, wanted the programme to continue to give more appreciation to their wartime activities.

*Home Fires* inspired this dissertation. At the same time, by focusing on Northumberland and Durham, this dissertation has been able to gain a clearer understanding of the nature and meaning of local WI activities. The examples discussed in this dissertation have shown that the WI's contribution to the war effort was not restricted to jam-making. Moreover, the jam made was of greater importance as it provided nutrients and was easy to store. Yet, *Home Fires* and the diaries used by Julie Summers provide a more personal insight into the experiences of WI members,

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<sup>1</sup> 'Women's Institute bombards ITV with jars of jam in protest over Home Fires axing', *The Telegraph*, 22 May 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/22/jam-sent-to-itv-in-wi-protest-over-home-fires-axing/>, date accessed 22 March 2017.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

something this dissertation was unable to truly obtain, apart from Nancy Clarke's interview.<sup>3</sup> The interviews available through *Women's Work: Oral Histories of the Women's Institute* only provide oral histories of the post-war period in the North East.<sup>4</sup> This indicates how experiences have not been recorded in a way that provides a more personal appreciation of the efforts the WI made in Northumberland and Durham during the war. The hopes of further research through personal interviews grows more unlikely each year.

Although this dissertation has offered a fresh perspective on the home front in the rural North East during the war – using primary material that has barely been considered before – there are opportunities for further research. The Women's Library at the London School of Economics holds documents from the NFWI and the WI magazine *Home and Country*.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, WIs that are still existent today may hold a number of documents for their own use rather than donating them to the local archives. Yet, the primary material used throughout this dissertation has provided a real insight into the projects examined. Therefore, the analysis of other projects such as the WI's role in evacuation can also be considered in the future.

The projects of 'Make Do and Mend', food production and fruit preservation have demonstrated that jam-making was not the sole contribution made by the WI but this dissertation has also shown the differences between the national and the local experiences of women in Northumberland and Durham. Reflecting the traditional perception of the WI, fruit preservation has been portrayed as the greatest national WI contribution to the war effort. However, this dissertation has shown that 'Make Do and Mend' was a greater contribution made by WIs in the Northumberland and Durham counties as every WI studied pursued the campaign in some way. This does not take away the importance of fruit preservation locally, yet, it does indicate a degree of local

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<sup>3</sup> Summers, *Jambusters*, p. xxiii; Nancy Clark, 'Interview with Nancy Clark', *Oral Histories of the Women's Institute*, <http://winortheast.omeka.net/items/show/12>, date accessed 22 March 2017.

<sup>4</sup> *Women's Work: Oral Histories of the Women's Institute*, <http://winortheast.omeka.net/>, date accessed 22 March 2017.

<sup>5</sup> The Women's Library at LSE, <https://twl-calm.library.lse.ac.uk/CalmView/Overview.aspx?s=NFWI>, date accessed 22 March 2017.

autonomy away from the instructions of the NFWI. 'Make Do and Mend' was more accessible than preserving due to the time and money needed to meet the demands of set standard preserves. Nevertheless, WIs in the North East did generally fit into the national pattern of WI activities but by examining individual counties, local differences and priorities become apparent. The various contributions boosted morale for the women themselves and those they were helping at home and overseas. Therefore, this dissertation has provided greater recognition to the rural women of the WI in the Northumberland and Durham counties that worked to serve their 'home and country' throughout the uncertain times of war.

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