

# NFWI AGM 2024

What an amazing time I've had this week attending the NFWI Annual Meeting at The Albert Hall as your delegate! From getting on the coach at Lymm on Tuesday morning to arriving back very late on Wednesday night, the friendship and camaraderie I've enjoyed has been most uplifting and the whole experience is one I'll never forget.

Singing Jerusalem in the Royal Albert Hall with thousands of other WI ladies was definitely on my bucket list and we didn't just sing it at the start of the conference but we had an encore again at the close of the day. It really does make the hairs stand up on the back of your neck and Cheshire delegates were lucky enough to be sat 6 rows from the front, down in the actual arena, face on to the stage. From my photos you will see I was right in the centre too so couldn't have wished for a better seat.

The official report of the conference will be available in the coming weeks and a resume will appear in next month's WI Life so I thought I would just share a few of my own thoughts and highlights of the trip.

It can be a little daunting for some ladies joining a group on your own and not knowing who you will sit next to or share a room with but what you have to remember is we all shared our WI Membership and that proved a starting point for many conversations. The Cheshire delegates included members who had been to the conference before and many first timers like myself – one lady I met had only joined her WI last year and is now Secretary and found herself representing her own and three other WI's at the AGM! Another wonderful lady, Heather, from the top end of the Wirral joined us after dinner on Tuesday night. This was her 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> AGM because no-one else from her WI wanted to come. She turns 92 later this month and she put us all to shame with her stories and achievements to do with the WI.

Once the Annual Meeting got underway in the Albert hall there was the inevitable business that needed to be presented to and passed by the delegates. The official report will deal with the numbers and finer details but one thing I did take note of was the membership – currently standing at over 180,000 women, over 80,000 of whom had joined the organisation in the last 3 years. Last year an average of 66 new members joined a WI every single day. Our current Chair, Ann Jones stands down this year after 3 years and she ended her address reiterating that the WI is FOR ALL WOMEN.

The resolution this year on Dental Health Matters was passed with a 95.53% vote in favour. The Trustees had been unable to find someone willing to speak against the resolution but there were some comments from the floor. These focused on how individual members could help and that maybe education about oral health was important as well and that this was an area members could work on at a local level to support the whole area of Dental Health.

Our guest speakers spoke about domestic abuse and violence against women and girls. Our morning speaker was Nazir Afzal OBE who gave a passionate account of his work with abuse victims who needed a voice and someone to believe them. He had been the Chief Crown

Prosecutor for NW England and led many high-profile cases including the Rochdale grooming gang and Stuart Hall. He has spoken about Honour killings and forced marriage and now champions the case for women's rights. Nazir gave us an insight into the scale of abuse and said the long lasting impact on the victims was far greater than the crime itself. He received a spontaneous standing ovation as he finished speaking.

After lunch – sandwiches sitting on the steps of the Albert memorial opposite the venue in the sunshine, of course! our second speaker Melanie Brown and her interviewer Victoria Derbyshire were introduced. The frank questions asked by Victoria were answered in depth by Mel B and gave an insight into examples of coercive behaviour perpetrated by domestic abusers and how difficult it can be for the victims of abuse recognise the abuse and then to escape from their abuser

This was then echoed in the final guests, Timothy Watson who portrayed the abusive Rob Titchner in the BBC Radio drama, The Archers, and Teresa Parker from Women's Aid who helped with the storyline and worked with script writers. NFWI CEO Melissa Green, a life-long Archer's fan talked to them both about the issues raised on the programme. The overwhelming message to come from all the speakers was how important it is to victims for them to be listened to and more importantly believed. For those Archer's listeners amongst you it was said that 'everyone needs their own Kirsty' i.e a friend who listens and picks up the signs of abuse and helps the victim.

The meeting closed with thanks to the retiring chair, Ann Jones followed by our reprise of Jerusalem, HenWlad fy Nhadau (I followed the phonetic version on the big screen!) and then the National Anthem.

What a fantastic day! Thank you for allowing me to be your delegate.

Melanie Barber