

## Nostalgia with Mike Dewey

# A tale of two women's clubs, this week the Soroptimists

LAST week we ended the Nostalgia articles for the month of March, which is designated as Women's History Month, with an account of the Townswomen's Guild, a British association which was founded in 1929. This week we look at another organisation which is specifically for women worldwide, Soroptimists International.

### Soroptimist International (SI)

Founded in 1921 in Oakland, California, Soroptimist International is now a global volunteer movement with a network of around 66,000 club members in 121 countries. It was formed initially in response to a query from the wives of men in Rotary Clubs, who questioned why there was not a similar organisation for women.

All the clubs have the same aims, to empower, educate and enable women and girls to attain their full potential. In practical terms that means for example building schools in poorer parts of the world, encouraging vaccinations, helping to stop female genital mutilation, and supporting girls to stay in education.

The Soroptimist movement is truly international, and whether at home or abroad, on business or pleasure, a Soroptimist's card and badge will give her entry to clubs all over the world.

SI's status is such that it has representation with the United Nations and takes an active part in many world-wide issues related to women. All their actions are recorded on a database which is used by the UN to inform policy change and practical responses to issues.

Why are they called Soroptimists? The word is derived from soros – Greek for sisters, and optima – the best – so, the best of sisters.

### Soroptimist International in Britain

The first Soroptimist's club outside



**Soroptimist Sue Granshaw attends the reception at No. 10 which launched the Dame Barbara Windsor Dementia Mission**

the USA was started in London in 1923 and chartered the following year. The first President was Viscountess Kathleen Falmouth and its founding members included George Bernard Shaw's secretary.

The club met weekly at the opulent Criterion restaurant facing Piccadilly Circus, when lunch was followed by a speaker. For example, the speaker at a lunch in September 1924 was Lady Barrett, whose talk was entitled 'Need for Enlightenment of the Public'. She explained that had she not been a member of the club she would not have appreciated that there was such wide diversity of professions in which women were now engaged. She gave two examples, there was now a women stockbroker, and the Royal Society had recently 'chosen a woman for a Fellowship in metallurgy at £500 per year'. In conclusion she suggested that 'members of the club should get in touch with girls and give them advice about the various professions'. The speakers were not confined to women, Edgar Wallace gave a talk in January 1926, and later that year men were invited to attend the lunch, six appearing on the first occasion, but only two the second time. A magazine The London Soroptimist was established in 1926.

Other cities were slow to form soroptimists' clubs. There was talk as early as December 1925 about forming a club in Manchester, but this did not materialise until the middle of 1927. Even so that seems to be the first club to be formed outside London. Clubs in Glasgow followed later that year, Edinburgh early in 1928, followed by Liverpool at the end of the year, and a club was formed in Birmingham early in 1929. At the monthly meeting of that club in May 1929 it was reported that there were seven Soroptimist clubs in Britain, one having been recently established in Inverness. That meeting also discussed plans for the formation of one national magazine, which was considered preferable to each club having its own.

At the international level, Soroptimists' clubs were being established in Europe and in 1928 a Federation was formed for those clubs, with another Federation for clubs in America. By 1934 the number of clubs which had been formed in the UK and Ireland justified the formation of a separate Federation to the rest of Europe.

Soroptimist International of Great Britain and Ireland (SIGBI) now has around 6000 members in 270 Clubs in a total of 18 countries which include countries in Asia, the Caribbean and Malta. These work at a local, national and international level to educate, empower and enable women and girls.

### Local clubs of Soroptimists International

Locally there are two clubs, High Wycombe & District and Thames Valley. As well as undertaking projects on their own initiative, they collaborate on some local projects



**Soroptimists host an Orange Café at the Ark Café in Marlow**

and when the project is a nationwide initiative.

An on-going example of the latter is supporting Wycombe Women's Aid. Thames Valley recently hosted an Orange Café in the Ark Café at the Methodist Church in Marlow, and the High Wycombe club hosted another at The Front Room in Castle Street. The colour orange was used to draw attention to the campaign against Domestic Violence. Members wore orange, had orange balloons and distributed leaflets and postcards, providing information for visitors to the café. They found that the women visiting had no knowledge that there was this support available, offering advice and legal information, and ultimately safety in Refuges if escaping violence and/or intimidation.

Another recent example of this collaboration was a nationwide project to establish why there is such a large backlog of court cases which involve domestic violence and abuse. Each club sent members to the courts in High Wycombe and Reading to carry out a survey of these cases. Soroptimists nationwide have now published a review and pressed their Members of Parliament to investigate.

### SI High Wycombe & District

This club was formed in 1963 with 21 members and received its charter the following year. The membership grew rapidly, reaching 100 within 3 years. These members were drawn from business and professional services, including local government, education, the medical profession, and social services. There were strict rules for membership, including that the applicant must be actively working, and the club sought 'to maintain high ethical standards in business and professional life'.

For the first 30 years or so the club operated along very formal lines, and funding-raising through social activities appeared to be its main

purpose. A major event in the programme was the annual dinner. In 1972 for example this was held at 'The Sculpture Gallery at Woburn Abbey', when the incoming President announced that she had selected The Royal Lifeboat Institution and the Pestolozzi Children's Home in Sussex as her chosen charities for support.

All this changed in the 1990s, when meetings became more informal and relaxed, with less emphasis on the social element. Members became much more involved in the community, recognising all the different roles which women play at all levels of society. Members from different ethnic backgrounds were welcomed and became actively involved. Active collaboration between different clubs greatly increased, with increased participation in nation-wide projects initiated at SIGBI headquarters.

SI High Wycombe & District now meet at the Papermill Pub and Restaurant in Loudwater. Their work focuses on local projects to support women and girls needing help in our community. In addition to their longstanding support of Wycombe Women's Aid, they provide refreshments, and Christmas treats and toiletries for the drop-in centre run by Chosen, a charity that engages with sex workers in the town.

The Club has raised money to help match-fund two Community Board grants to establish and maintain Wycombe District Dementia Action's website. This provides information about dementia and local activities to make High Wycombe a welcoming place for those living with dementia. Club members volunteer for WDDA and Alzheimers Research UK by manning stalls and speaking to local groups about dementia and developments in research. In recognition of this, Club member Sue Granshaw last week attended

the Downing Street reception to launch the Dame Barbara Windsor Dementia Mission.

### SI Thames Valley

The SI Thames Valley club is more recent, having been founded in March 1990. It is a small but active club, whose members meet monthly in the Lantern Room of Bourne End Library.

In addition to their work in the local community, for some fifteen years Thames Valley soroptimists have developed their Kori Development Project in Sierra Leone, led by member Rose Moriba. The initial aim was to stop the practice of FGM (female genital mutilation) which was carried out on girls all over Sierra Leone. Not any more in Kori District where the club is focussed. Girls are offered alternative celebrations but 'no cutting'.

The club has built a big new secondary school where education seeks to dispel ancient myths and offers equal opportunities to girls to develop their education. Bursaries are offered to girls to encourage them to attend school regularly to qualify and go on to college. The school is so popular that an additional three classrooms are having to be built.

A library was built for Kori District and stocked with children's and adults' books, which included dictionaries, atlases and maps. A retired headmaster then stepped in to help sort and shelve the books and oversee the many children who came in class-loads to take lessons there. Electricity was provided by the installation of solar panels so that students could study when it was dark.

Another important activity was to send warm clothing to a Soroptimist club in Krakow, Poland who were hosting many refugee families from the Ukraine war.

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