

Soroptimist International Leamington & Warwick

Background notes for an article in The Courier

The Soroptimist movement traces its origins back to the days of the First World War when women gained independence and freedom by using their skills and proficiency in management and the professions. After WW1 there was a growing demand for ladies' clubs where women could meet and continue their worthwhile activities. 'Venture Clubs' were formed in the 1920s in Bristol, Coventry, and elsewhere, and these later amalgamated with the Soroptimist movement (founded in 1921 in Oakland, California -by a man!) which held similar ideals.

In 1935 Coventry Soroptimists formed a 'daughter club' in Leamington and Warwick. 21 women attended the inaugural meeting on 6 May 1936 and the Club's charter was presented on 26 June 1936. Members were mainly drawn from the teaching and medical professions.

Members

Club members included many spirited 'movers and shakers' over the years. To mention a few...

Founder members included **Dorothy Sweet**, Headmistress of Kingsley School; **Gwyneth Smalley** Headmistress of Warwick Preparatory School; **Lily Dodd** who helped to set up the WVS in Warwickshire and ran a shop at Weston -under- Wetherley mental hospital; and a **Miss Wakefield** who was headmistress of Leamington College.

Dorothy Bailey founded Bailey's furniture store with her husband. She was a great globe trotter and at the age of 75 set out alone for a trip on the Tran Siberian Express to China.

Gwendoline Pryse was Superintendent of physiotherapy at Warwick Hospital and journeyed down the Amazon in a small boat in 1987!

Rene England was a Red Cross worker for 30 years and became Warwickshire Branch Director. At the end of WW2, she nursed at the Nazi concentration camp at Belsen. She was awarded an OBE in 1960 and became Mayor of Leamington in 1968. Her last mayoral function was to pilot a Vickers Varsity aircraft over Warwickshire. She was a former Girl Guide Commissioner and played hockey for Warwickshire. **Dr Agnes Young** whilst President during WW2 set up a canteen in the High Street for soldiers waiting for transport in the evening. This proved to be a much-needed service and donations of food parcels and money enabled 42,000 soldiers to be served by 1941. Parcels of tea and packets of seeds came from America. To ensure the continuance of

rations the canteen was affiliated to the WVS (Women's Voluntary Service)and it attained the status of a railway canteen. This meant that cooked meals could be provided-despite rationing- on a soldier's production of a travel warrant.

Mrs. JM Ireson was Red Cross Assistant Welfare Officer for Warwickshire and volunteered for VAD during the Munich crisis. In 1945 her task was to trace missing people, arranging to transport and unite invalids and disabled people with their families anywhere in the world.

Miss J Hobbs was Matron of Warwick Hospital for 9 years.

These are just a few past members who had remarkable careers and interesting lives-later becoming members in order to continue the Soroptimist tradition of service.

Programme Action

- x Helping to keep Leamington station attractive with colourful planters
- x Collecting provisions for the Leamington Women's Refuge and food bank
- x Assisting at the information desk at Warwick Hospital
- x Working with elderly Asian ladies to improve their English
- x Helping school children with their reading
- x Volunteering with Warwickshire Vision Support
- x Introducing the data link 'message in a bottle' in the area
- x Catering at the Leamington Night Shelter
- x Coffee mornings to fundraise for WaterAid and Macmillan Cancer Relief
- x The Club's annual 'Swimathon' at Warwick School which raised £174,000 over 19 years for local causes and charities ranging from the new A&E campaign to a new boat for the Warwickshire sea cadets.
- x Raising awareness of issues affecting women and girls in this country and overseas such as FGM (female genital mutilation) and trafficking

The Club celebrated its 80th anniversary in 2016 when members were joined by Soroptimists from friendship links forged with Apeldoorn, Birkerod, Cologne, and Nantwich as well as members from clubs in the Midland Arden Region in a weekend of activities. June James was President then - a position she held six times during the Club's existence- and last year marked her 50th year as a Soroptimist.

Soroptimist International has over 80,000 members in 132 countries and is the world's largest service organisation for women of today. Members volunteer to work at a local, national, and international level to improve the lives of women and girls through 'educate, empower and enable' programmes and help them achieve their potential and have an equal voice in creating strong and peaceful communities worldwide. Soroptimist International has special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council.