

Inspiring action and impact

For this month's Community Heroes feature, Sarah Raine met up with **Jill Ruddock**, Club President of the **Soroptimists International** in Tunbridge Wells to discover more about this inspiring society...



For those who haven't heard of Soroptimists International, can you explain a bit about the organisation?

We often say it's the world's best kept secret! Founded in 1921 in Oakland, California, it's an apolitical, non-religious member-based women's organisation committed to making a difference to women and girls worldwide. The name comes from the latin, 'soror' meaning 'sister', and 'optimum' - 'the best'. Tunbridge Wells Soroptimists formed in 1946 to provide support to refugees after WWII.

How has the group evolved since the early 1920s?

Today, there are 3,000 clubs and 66,000 members worldwide, and we have special consultative status at the United Nations for our work on gender equality and education. Our vision is that all women and girls achieve their individual and collective potential, realise their aspirations and have an equal voice and we do this through education, empowerment and enabling opportunities.

How long have you volunteered and what's your role in the Tunbridge Wells branch?

I joined in 2022, following a vigil held on the steps of the Town Hall in memory of Sarah Everard. The vigil was organised by the Soroptimists. I liked what I saw and went to a meeting and liked what they did, so I joined! I became President Elect in 2024, and became President in April 2025, and will serve for two years. We currently have over 30 members but are always looking to grow that number. We are discussing the option to set up a Soroptimists School Club in the area, for teenage girls to meet and create campaigns to help women and girls.



Jill (fourth from left) was host of a Soroptimist event, pictured with speakers for International Women's Day 2025

From Local to Global: Projects with Real Impact

Discover just some of the work the Soroptimists do in Tunbridge Wells...

- In the early 2000s, we worked with rail networks to influence the design of carriages and stations for lone female travellers to feel safer. We worked with the Police and TWBC to create the Spotlight on Safety Report 2022, moved by the assault of a woman on Major York's Road in 2021, and the murder of Sarah Everard in London in 2021
- We worked alongside Greg Clark in 2022 and 2023 on the 'Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Act 2023' bill, which received Royal Assent and is now an Act of Parliament. We are grateful to Mike Martin MP, who has taken the initiative in 2025 to push the government to issue a statutory instrument, so the Act can hopefully come into effect soon
- We financially support 'Lend with care' projects, globally loaning women entrepreneurs funding to help them establish their business (www.lendwithcare.org)
- We are a female voice on the Town Forum Management Group. We worked alongside Laura Toop's Safe Havens initiative, inviting local businesses to offer a safe space for women in need and are lead organisers for an event on 8 November, focusing on women's safety
- Each year a group of Soroptimists walk to support the Reclaim the Night initiative, to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. It is also the first day of the global '16 days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence', which concludes on Human Rights Day on 10 December. We will have a curated space in The Amelia Scott to mark the campaign. Please do wear or display the colour orange during the campaign, a symbol of hope and a future free from violence
- We are currently running the 'Listening Project', hearing the needs of diverse local groups of women. This will lead to a long-term action plan, as well as implementing quick actions, such as the women-only swimming session at the leisure centre following a request from a Muslim women's group

'Empowering Women, Changing Lives'

The Soroptimists' platform helps to improve the lives of women and girls:

Whilst some feel there is now gender equality, this sadly isn't the case. Women are still being marginalised, disadvantaged, ignored or feel vulnerable. We are committed to lobbying and campaigning to ensure this changes. To put this into context:

- A woman is killed every 3 days by their partner
- The gender pay gap is 7%
- 40,000 women are raped each year in the UK
- The Home Office budget is £20 per domestic violence crime reported, whereas Prevent terrorism reports have a £7,300 budget

GET IN TOUCH:

The Tunbridge Wells Soroptimists meet on the third Monday of every month at 19:30 at Chamberlain Court on Mount Ephraim. Email Lorna at lorna.blackmore@icloud.com in advance if you would like to come along. If you want to find out more information then please follow us on Facebook or Instagram @Soroptimist Tunbridge Wells or email situnbridgewells@yahoo.co.uk.