



Bonchurch Women's Institute



The picture shows the committee members of the Bonchurch WI for the year 1923, just one year after the local branch's formation, in 1922. The village's WI lasted for 70 years, finally winding up its affairs in November 1992, the outcome of rising costs and a falling membership. By that time, it had been reduced to just 19 souls, most of whom were pensioners without much additional income. Vera Locke, their spokesperson, observed that they were just scratching along, barely making enough money to pay for the hall at the schoolroom. Vera added that they were a happy little gang, with the oldest member aged 94. They had tried and sadly failed to find younger women to augment the membership.

The picture forms part of the late Fay Brown's collection at the Heritage Centre and it has a legend of names, but the list is not complete. However, it is possible to put names to some of the faces and what emerges is that many of the committee in 1923 were 'well-to-do' Bonchurch residents with independent means, in several instances occupying some of the village's best properties. The lady standing at the back on the far left is Mrs Louisa Simeon, of *Orchardleigh* in Bonchurch. She was elder daughter of the Rt. Honourable Hugh Childers. Next to her in the back row, second from left, is Miss Alice Venables of *Torwood*, Bonchurch. She was a daughter of the Canon Venables who came to live in Bonchurch in the 1860s. In the back row, second in from right, is Miss Guild, a daughter of Lt. Col Guild of St. Ann's, Bonchurch. Her mother's father, the Hon. Charles Royes, was a member of the Legislative Council of Jamaica. Mrs Seaver, who figures on the back row, third from left, was wife of Rev. Jonathan Seaver, Bonchurch's Rector. Another of these early committee members was Miss Burgess, then matron of the Holiday Home for Nurses at Seaside Cottage. Another was Mrs. Linterne of the fine mansion known as *Pulpit Rock* in Bonchurch.

One of the great highlights of the WI year at Bonchurch was the Flower Show. In 1932, it was held at Cliff Dene in Bonchurch. The Heritage Centre has in its archive a handbill for that Show. This reveals that, despite the high social profile of its governing members, there was a significant attempt to be socially inclusive. Children over 12 years and children under 12 years could compete separately for the best arranged basket or bouquet of wild flowers. Under the Table Decorations section, meanwhile, there was a separate entry section for 'cottagers', meaning for members who employed no outside help. Needless to say, there were prizes for blooms, for fruit and for vegetables. At the bottom of the handbill, finally, there was a 'silver collection at the gate', a reminder of happier times for local WI funding.