



# Jules Hudson

## COUNTRY ESCAPE

Ninety nine years on, Jules discovers how a handful of women on Anglesey formed what is now the largest voluntary women's organisation in the UK: the WI

**O**ne of the things I relish in life are those days when you make the sort of chance discovery that reveals something new and exciting about a thing you thought you knew, but didn't.

Take the WI for example. Over the last few years, I've spoken at many WI gatherings across the Welsh Borders and they're always great fun. Don't think for one minute that it's all jam and Jerusalem, stern faces and tweed. Ever since the film *Calendar Girls* hit our screens and, led by Helen Mirren, a handful of women revealed virtually everything for charity, a good many have thought again about how we view Britain's largest women's organisation, including me.

Only last week, I had the chance to address my biggest meeting yet: the Wales WI AGM. At a University hall in Wrexham, some 750 had come together from groups right across Wales for a day of information sharing, a catch up, and to hear my tales of life. As I rose to my feet, the warmth of their welcome filled the air, and, amidst the cheers and whoops and claps, there were even a few wolf whistles. Needless to say, they were a terrific audience and extremely kind in their appreciation of my efforts, but it was over lunch prior to my talk that I made my discovery.

I'd always taken the WI for granted, as part of the fabric of our society that's always just been there. But if it hadn't been for the First World War, a tin shed in Anglesey, and a handful of inspiring women, we might never have heard of it.

In 1915, Britain was embroiled in the unfolding tragedy of what was then known as the Great War. The nation had mobilised itself to wage a new kind of war, a total war in which every area of the country, and every part of society, was involved. It required the complete reorganisation of industry and trade, and the mobilisation of every man, woman and child in the country.

Just off the main road running through Wales most famous town, Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch, or Llanfair PG for short, is a small tin hut that looks much the same as it did 100 years ago. Yet it was here, on the 16th of September 1915, that a handful of women started the very first WI in the UK. Inspired by the efforts of a sister organisation in Canada, their aim was to galvanise rural women to help with supporting the war effort.

Since then, their legacy is a national institution with more than 200,000 members in almost 7,000 institutes, and that next year will celebrate its centenary. I was moved to think that from such humble beginnings had sprung one of those things I'd always taken for granted. And, more to the point, that it hadn't begun in a wealthy drawing room on a grand estate. It had begun in an iron shed that most people would barely notice, yet somehow this to me is how it should have been.

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Indeed, in many ways it reflects those many generations of women who have built the organisation to make it what it is today. Throughout our rural communities, the WI members I meet aren't interested in frills and fame for their efforts. They're determined in their pursuit of the causes they support, simply getting on with it regardless of the cost to themselves. Alongside supporting their communities, over the last 99 years they've campaigned and achieved things that governments alone could never have done. On the list of issues they've fought for are: equal pay for women, breast screening across the UK and the Keep Britain Tidy campaign. This year, they're working to reform legal aid to help the victims of domestic violence, and, lest we forget their rural roots, they're highlighting the plight of the honey bee.

So next time you're asked about getting involved with the WI, remember their motto: Inspiring Women. From all that I've seen it sums them up beautifully, because they are, and they do. Who knows you might even get into this year's WI Calendar. I've already ordered mine.

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the Countryfile team, but is best-known as the leading face of Escape To The Country. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

You can follow Jules on Twitter @thejuleshudson, or visit his website at [www.juleshudson.com](http://www.juleshudson.com)

