



CONFESSIONS OF A WI SPEAKER BY MARTIN GURDON



Hitting the big time

I'M WRITING THIS ON A DANK

Tuesday night at a Premier Inn.

I've never stayed in a Premier Inn before but it's very much as you might expect. The room is clean but austere, in one of those flimsy, nondescript brick buildings that lurk near motorways and airports. I'm able to contemplate a wall-mounted radiator and sparse, sub-MFI furnishings without the distraction of another living soul, because my wife is at home.

This could easily be a depressing, Alan Partridge moment but I've actually had a thoroughly nice day and am feeling a bit demob-happy after speaking to around 900 WI members at this year's Derbyshire Federation Annual Meeting. Mostly, I speak in village halls to 15-30 members. Would a truncated version of a talk given to small audiences work with a big one in a theatre, I'd wondered.

The other slightly nerve-racking aspect was that I was doing this solo. Usually I bring along a real chicken but travelling 50 miles or so in a cat box and being fed bread and raisins for a brief village hall appearance isn't the same as going 400 miles and facing theatre lights and a sea of humanity. So I left her at home, which seemed to disappoint some people.

Despite this, I was made to feel very welcome – but there were a couple of surprises. The first was that they'd reserved a place for me on the Assembly Rooms stage, behind the row of trestle tables dividing

the organisation's great and good from their admittedly cheerful and unthreatening audience. This meant that short of staring at the floor all morning I'd be looking into the whites of my audience's eyes.

Along with Derby's Mayor and Mayoress, I made a sort of low-key triumphal entrance, weaving my way from the back of the hall to the stage, then mounting the steps, on which I managed not to trip. Later, I poured a glass of water without spilling it over my neighbours. I'd never felt more exposed and it's funny how in such circumstances you worry about the most unlikely possibilities.

The other element which brought me up short, partly because it might quite literally do so, was the running order. Peeping at Treasurer Barbara Barlow's agenda, I could see it had an almost military precision, with timings finishing ominously at 17 minutes past and 22 minutes to the hour. I had a 20-minute slot and thought a brief intro and talking about three things would fill it – although this was an approximation. What would happen if I was still talking after 21 minutes? Would I be politely gonged off?

During lunch I was assured that over-running slightly wouldn't be a problem. But I continued to twitch inwardly, and this wasn't quelled on discovering that the keynote speaker was cricketer and expert at public speaking Rachael Heyhoe-Flint.

Before we trooped back, one of our

party, who'd clearly picked up on my nervousness, suggested a loo visit. 'I'll wait for you,' she said, gently but in a tone brooking no argument.

After another 15 minutes of stage-bound internal twittering I was on. The talk itself passed in a bit of a blur. I do remember starting to enjoy it after about five minutes but the physical reaction to pre-event nerves manifested itself in a sort of St Vitus' dance juddering halfway down my left side, hidden by the lectern from an audience largely hidden from me by the glaring stage lights. However, I knew things would be all right because they were laughing when they were supposed to rather than when they weren't.

I'd be lying if I said this wasn't both good for the ego and rather intoxicating but it was still a relief to finish, apparently on time. Nobody seemed to miss the chicken and, during her thank-you address, Barbara Barlow suggested that if I attended another WI conference at the Albert Hall and needed the facilities (you might remember my reference to this in an earlier column), I'd find those at the top of the building queue-free.

All this makes the prospect of a night in a Premier Inn entirely palatable and I expect to sleep well – especially now the juddering's stopped. **WI**

● *Martin's talk was videoed and has been posted on YouTube. To view it, visit www.youtube.com and search for 'Chickens Derby WI'*

ILLUSTRATION: MARY KILVERT. PHOTO: STEVE TANNER