I arrived at Towcester Cemetery gates in plenty of time to catch the Federation coach to London, for my first trip to a National AGM. I did chuckle when getting into our car as my husband reminded me that the bus route featured in ‘On the Buses’ terminated at the cemetery gates! Thankfully Reg Varney was not driving our coach! We had a charmed journey down to London to our hotel, which meant we had the afternoon free. Many of us chose to walk the short distance to the British Museum. I tagged along with Sue Kendall and Sandra from Cranford WI; we saw the Elgin Marbles and the Saxon treasures from Sutton Hoo, which were just amazing. After a cup of tea, and a diversion to the gift shop, where I purchased a much-needed fridge magnet and yet another Christmas tree decoration we returned to our hotel. We all enjoyed a convivial evening discussing our WIs and anticipating the following day.

After breakfast we gathered in the foyer to wait for our coach, sadly it had got caught in traffic, which meant we had a shorter time, than we would have liked, to travel across London to the Albert Hall. We reached our seats with minutes to spare before the start of the meeting, which is traditionally the singing of ‘Jerusalem’. I have since discovered that it was the centenary of the WI first singing Jerusalem in The Albert Hall, in 1924. This was such an occasion, but for reasons best known to our National Board of Trustees it was not mentioned. Ann Jones the Chair of the Board of Trustees introduced the theme for the event – Stop violence against women and girls and for future women to live without fear. Ann warned the meeting that at times it may be uncomfortable and unpalatable listening to our speakers but referred members to information on support available listed in the AGM agenda. She then introduced the other trustees seated on stage and took the meeting through the resolution to enable three federations to become charitable trusts.

Ann Jones then addressed the meeting on the federations progress since the last AGM. She informed the meeting she was standing down after three years as Chair and was very proud that the organisation was now in the last phase of the strategic plan implemented at the start of her tenure. We had 24,272 new members join WI since the last AGM, which equates to 66 members joining a WI every day. We now have 17 virtual WIs with 500 members, we have 7 WIs run in women’s prisons, an initiative which has had more resources put into it over the past year. The first WI podcast was launched in April 2024, there has been a review of the handbook and a recruitment video produced all to try and remove barriers to anyone joining a WI.

The WI Education Trust had been launched in January with the start of the Learning Hub for unlimited virtual learning for all our members. We were informed that 3884 members are attending courses every month. In October the education grants process will be launched. Annually £150,000 will be available for Federations to bid for, to support education projects for their members, with grants up to a maximum of £10,000 available. A WI lottery, is in the final stages of development and will be launched on WI day on 16th September. This lottery will benefit all levels of the WIs National, County Federations and individual WIs. Ann was sure that the WI is now in a better position to continue to develop and grow.

Our National Treasurer Jeryl Stone gave her financial report and reviewed the accounts to 30th September 2023. As there were no submitted questions, we moved on to hear our first guest speaker. Nazir Afzal was Chief Crown Prosecutor for NW England. Most recently, he was Chief Executive of the Association for Police & Crime Commissioners and is currently the Chancellor of Manchester University. During a 24-year career, he has prosecuted some of the most high-profile cases in the country and advised on many others and led nationally on several legal topics including Violence against Women & Girls, child sexual abuse, and honour-based violence. Nazir was an inspirational speaker, and the crux of his talk was that the victims of such heinous crimes should be listened too and that someone in authority should believe them and then act! He received a standing ovation from the WI members present.

The meeting then went on to discuss the resolution on Dental Health Matters, after hearing from the Chairman of the Association of British Dentists, Eddie Crouch, and being informed that the WI could not find a professional to speak against the resolution, several members spoke from the floor. The only concerns raised surrounding how WI was to support and carry this resolution forward if it was approved. I was feeling very well informed at this point, as Northamptonshire delegates had been briefed by Eddie Crouch at our very own resolutions briefing back in March at WI House. The resolution was passed by 4578 votes for to 214 against.

After lunch and an opportunity to sit in the sunshine by the Albert memorial and chat to other delegates and observers we resumed the afternoon session with a Q & A session with Victoria Derbyshire and Melanie Brown MBE (Scary Spice), now a patron of Women’s Aid. Mel talked with Victoria candidly about her 10-year abusive marriage and her work with Women’s Aid. Especially, her petition to educate family court judges on the effects of domestic violence on victims and their children. If you wish to support Mel’s petition the link is here:

<https://takeaction.womensaid.org.uk/melaniebrownpetition>

It was then time for the awards ceremony, the Lady Denman Cup was awarded to Susan Keefe from Wilshire Federation for writing a 500-word letter to inspire someone to join a WI through highlighting her own experiences with the WI.

The second recruitment awards were presented to a representative from each WI. These awards are given to each WI who had increased their memberships by the highest percentage in their category. Each winning WI receives £200.

For a WI with less than 24 members - Hayling Honeys from Hampshire Federation were winners this year.

For WIs with more than 24 members but less than 50 – the winners were Codicote WI from the Hertfordshire Federation who went from 39 members to 115.

For WIs with more than 50 members- and they were last year’s winners of the 24 – 50 section, was Frinton on Sea from the Essex Federation who grew from 147 to 198 members. At this point we all looked on in awe and wonder!

Our last speaker of the day was the actor Timothy Watson who played Rob Titchener in ‘The Archers’. The focus was on the story line of Rob’s abusive and coercive behaviour towards his partner Helen Archer. Timothy was joined on stage by Teresa Parker Head of Media, Brand & Relationships for Women’s Aid, who spoke about the legacy of the Archer’s story line and Women’s Aid becoming 50 this year.

The meeting was then drawn to a close by Ann Jones but not before we sang Jerusalem again followed by the Welsh national anthem in honour of Ann, and finally a resounding rendition of God Save the King.

After an incredibly thought-provoking day we were glad of the walk in the sunshine down Exhibition Road to meet our coach outside the Victoria and Albert Museum. The coach made good progress through the London rush hour traffic, and we were soon on the M1 heading for Northamptonshire. Sadly, the road works and the fifty mile an hour speed limits took it toll and we had to take a short break at Toddington Services, but we were back in Towcester at 7.40pm.

On reflection I feel very privileged to attend, what could be the last ever NFWI AGM at the Albert Hall. Due to rising costs the Board of Trustees has made the decision that the national AGM will be held virtually for the next two years, and the NFWI AGM will only meet again in person in 2027. No dates, or details have been given for next year’s AGM yet, but we are all being encouraged to meet up as WIs or in our federations for AGM parties/teas etc, so members can view the proceedings and hear the speakers together.

Jane Ward

Hackleton & District WI