

DORNOCH SWRI - THROUGH THE AGES

Until the year of twenty-six, the Girl's Club used to meet,
In the reading room. Territorial Hall, just off Castle Street.
But in April 1926 plans were set in motion –
A Dornoch branch of the WRI was indeed their notion.

A committee then they had to form, from folks who'd do their share
To get the whole thing going, and Mrs Robichaud took the chair.
The ball soon started rolling with a picnic on the shore.
Plenty food, then races, shared with Birichen and Clashmore.

Next came the serious business – a syllabus to form –
Speakers, classes, concerts, dances – the list goes on and on.
"We'll start with a real attraction" the committee then decides.
'Big game hunting in Africa' – illustrated with lantern slides.

Miss Mould of Dornoch Castle, then invited all those present
To view her trophies, all on show, from her travels to that continent.
A rhino and a buffalo head, large tusks and a zebra skin.
Imagine the outcry today - if we were to do such a thing!

From early accounts we learn that the women were fully aware
Of how to make slippers, loose covers or rugs, or economical household repairs.
One meeting they made up a tub frock, that was won later that on in the night,
By the member whose guess, of the number of peas in a bottle, turned out to be right.

Each year they had an assortment of social events on their card,
Dances and concerts, a bulb show, and a night to remember our Bard.
Some wonderful outfits were worn at their '27 Fancy Dress Ball.
Two hundred people attended the event in the Territorial Hall

By the 30s they'd entered an era where folks wanted to learn something new,
Classes like millinery, upholstery, and even folk dancing, to name but a few.
Singers once paid them a visit, with sewing machines, by the way.
Then Cadbury's gave them a demo – wonder if they left any Milk Tray!

Some members, real keen on Drama, had their talent put to the test,
When the Anstruther Gray Scottish final saw them on stage with the best.
Mrs. Sykes once treated the Institute to tea in the Tain Royal Hotel.
£10 paid their fare and also their tea – and into the pictures as well!

Tongue twisters, and quizzes, fast knitting as well, were some of their competitions.
Could you draw a pig, blindfolded of course, or sing, say or pay up a threepence?
The winner of one competition had one shilling at most to produce
An item in craft or in cookery – 1st - a dinner for two and a little boy's suit!

The onset of war made full use of the talents and time of each lady,
There was fund-raising, jam making, knitting, of course, for those in the army, airforce or navy.
Socks by the hundred were sent away, with mittens and helmets and mufflers.
While servicemen here were invited to tea, served by the Institute's spinsters!

In '43, to their Burns Night, they invited some foreign male guests,
They'd come from Canada, to Clashmore working their way through the forests.
The ladies were good organisers, a 'Welcome Home Fund' they had started,
By the end of the war their kitty had soared – a thousand pounds they'd collected.

Membership numbers in those days were large, as many as seventy attended.
One night they'd to fork out sixpence each, for Princess Elizabeth and her intended.
Another outing had been planned, this time a day to Elgin.
The total cost of their day out was one pound and one shilling.

Burns Night in '49, must have been a sight to see,
Two hundred folk sat down to dine on haggis and baking and tea.
Spare a thought for the hostesses there, what a nightmare it must have been
Tatties to peel, turnips to mash and hundreds of dishes to clean!

Brora members entertained one night – their theme 'The Gay Nineties'.
A forward looking Institute – no just one with good long memories.
A lady came to make do, or mend, - nothing was wasted she felt,
And from oddments of parachute silk, made a nightie, a handbag and suspender belt.

By '51 suggestions were made to buy a fancy new urn,
Electric they said would be a fine choice, if the council would put the power in.
The lack of power in the Chambers, was the cause too, we hear tell,
Of the non-appearance of Hoover, to show off their latest model!

The Institute also ran film shows to give the kids a treat,
Members' children got in free; the rest paid sixpence for a seat.
A summer outing in the fifties was a gastronomic tour it would seem,
With coffee in Dingwall, at Cromarty lunch, high tea in Rosemarkie and a cuppa at Altnamain!

Their competitions were varied, with oft an unusual one.
Like the night they'd all to whistle a tune – just imagine the laughter and fun!
One night the Committee decided it needed some funds, and hence
A pair of nylons was raffled, raising twenty-three shillings and sixpence.

In '53 their role numbered an amazing eighty-six names.
But reports show December's small turnout, for only forty-seven folk came.
By now they had purchased a cooker, not electric, but powered by gas,
So Calor paid them a visit, making dishes to delight every lass.

In '56 the Hydro Board put temporary power in the Chambers,
And new equipment went on show with helpful hints for members.
By '57, a new problem arose, for petrol was then on ration.
"We'll have to cancel the Bulb Show", was the cry of the Federation.

For our ninetieth, though, our plans turned out well
A nice drive to Contin and the Coull House Hotel.
We had afternoon tea and a short history talk
Then through their Fairy Garden – what a magical walk.

Then out of the blue, our lives came to a stop
When a pandemic in '20, caught us all on the hop.
The virus moved fast causing much devastation
Everything cancelled throughout the whole Nation.

We couldn't meet family, neighbour or friend
All social activity had come to an end.
T'was just for three weeks, we were led to believe
What the future would hold, was hard to perceive.

A sign of the times - sadly over the years,
Numbers have dropped, raising all kind of fears.
With no meetings allowed in a hall or a room
Federation resorted to their AGM on Zoom.

Twenty –twenty one: we were still kept indoors
And sadly found out that Federation's no more
Vaccines were given, but life kept on hold
Though time didn't stop – and we're all getting old.

Time has come round, good things come to an end
We've all learnt how to make do and mend.
But time has moved on – things aren't the same
We hoped ever for youngsters, but they never came.

It's a very sad ending to a great organisation
Ninety-five years since its formation.
But for hundreds of women, through happiness or strife
Dornoch Institute's been very much part of their life

We have much to be thankful, looking back o'er the years
We've shared so much happiness but also some tears.
Let's toast then the women who started it all
And committees thereafter who answered the call.

There were those good with letters or handling money
And those in the chair with outlook so sunny.
And last but not least, I'm sure you'll agree
The girls in the corner making the tea.
They all made up the Dornoch Institute! Cheers!