

MINUTES OF THE AGM OF THE WEA NORTHAMPTONSHIRE FORUM
HELD ON SATURDAY, 23 NOVEMBER 2013
PARSONS MEMORIAL HALL, GREAT HOUGHTON

Chair: Marguerite Stephenson

Present: 41 members present

REPORT ON WEA IN NORTHAMPTONSHIRE – BRIDGET CHAPMAN, WEA
TUTOR ORGANISER

Bridget Chapman gave an overview of the Northamptonshire WEA provision over the past year.

The Branch Programme for 2012/13 has been successful with few courses cancelled. Some branches have struggled with recruitment whilst others have not. Student numbers for Rothwell and Higham Ferrers continued to recruit well; Long Buckby also benefitted after changing their class times to the afternoon instead of the evening. Nether Heyford is now a student group branch and since the meetings have been moved to the afternoon, enrolment has increased with 8 of 13 students entirely new to WEA courses. As part of a regional target drive, efforts are being made to expand both the branch and community programmes. Courses were offered at Delapre Abbey with mixed success and in Spring 2014 a programme of short courses relating to the Abbey and grounds will be offered.

In September 2013 the method of funding WEA courses from the Skills Funding Agency changed. The WEA now gets the same amount of funding for a 13.5 hours course as for a 20 hour course. As the region needs to look at maximising its funding, branches will be consulted about the length of their course provision as a small reduction in hours (9 weeks or 13.5 hours against 10 weeks or 15 hours) will bring the fee per course to under £50 which may also assist with recruitment.

The WEA has adopted four themes nationally: Cultural Education, Employability, Community Engagement and Health & Wellbeing. The branch programme generally covers the cultural theme and the work with partners at KCU and Wellingborough Homes covers Employability and Community Engagement. However there is little on the Health & Wellbeing theme and proposals in this area from branches would be welcomed.

There is a strong possibility of an OFSTED visit to the county in the current academic year. Should this happen, there will only be 2 days' notice. These inspections are different to the tutor monitoring carried out by the Tutor Organiser.

Bridget thanked the Forum Committee and all branch volunteers for their hard work and support over the year. In addition to managing Northamptonshire, she had spent 5 months covering Lincolnshire and consequently had to rely even more than usual on volunteer support.

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Mary Traxton and Anne Shrive.

2. Minutes of the meeting held on 24 November 2012

The Minutes of the 2012 AGM were accepted as a true record and signed by the Chair. There were no matters arising.

3. Chair's report

Marguerite Stephenson reported that the Summer programme had seen a marked increase in the number of members coming to the visits. At the AGM in November 2012 the committee circulated a survey asking members to suggest what kind of visits they would like. Although only 13 out of 49 members present responded, the survey showed that members would like to visit places that were not usually open to the public. The Forum booked a variety of visits accordingly. Four were full and the fifth (a garden) had unlimited numbers. At Wakefield Lodge, nr Towcester, 40 members toured the 18th hunting lodge built for the Duke of Grafton. 30 members had a walk round Chester Farm, Irchester, a site that has evidence of 10,000 years of history, led by the County Archivist, Sarah Bridges and her colleague. This facility has recently been awarded money from the Heritage Lottery Fund and is being developed by County Council into an educational and recreational centre. The village tour of Earls Barton attracted 16 members who discovered the history of the manor house, the church and the earthworks nearby. Top Lodge, Glendon is a garden built from scratch by Mr and Mrs Burley and 19 members much admired their creation. Finally so many members asked to come to Drayton House, Lowick that 2 groups had to be organized led by Bruce Bailey and committee member Judith Hodgkinson. The house dates from 1300 but is mainly Baroque in design.

Sue Payne's Discovery Walks proved particularly attractive given the summer weather this year and we are grateful to Sue for organising them.

Peta Jellis has resigned from the committee. Peta joined the committee in March 2009 and has ably fulfilled the secretary's role. Her pioneering work of setting up and running the forum website, has been a useful way of keeping members informed of WEA activities. On behalf of everyone I would like to present Peta with a token of our appreciation and to express our thanks.

Thank you also to Bridget Chapman, Sue Payne, Mary Traxton and Judith Hodgkinson for their help throughout this busy year.

4. Treasurer's Report

The Treasurer reported that the Forum funds had maintained a healthy balance due partly to the very successful Summer Programme and the £250 Grant received from Region to offset the cost of the AGM. This Grant enabled the committee to book the hall and provide a guest speaker. Members pay for their lunch at the AGM. The Treasurer will continue to apply to Region for a grant for the AGM as it provides a unique opportunity for members to discuss WEA matters and courses and pleasingly, is well attended.

The income from the Walks programme has to be paid to Region so that appropriate taxes can be deducted to the Walks Leader.

The accounts were accepted as a true record. Proposed by Peter Mackness
Seconded by Eileen Burley.

5. Report on regional activities

Marguerite Stephenson reported the biennial national conference took place at the Guildhall and Corn Exchange Cambridge on 11 and 12 October. After a keynote speech by Joan Bakewell, three workshop sessions were organised. "Integrating Communities" was a presentation by Shirley Howitt and Archie Campbell showing how WEA Glasgow group helped refugees and asylum seekers in deprived communities adapt to their new lives by providing education and support. The second workshop "Does Cultural Education Matter?" used a case study of the Digabilty Project in Humber and Yorkshire to demonstrate how 180 students (many of whom had health problems or low levels of literacy) were encouraged to record their experiences on archaeological digs, fieldwork and guided walks. Finally "Women in Communities" featured the WEA's Women Learning Programme in Nottingham which has been working with women who previously had little opportunity to join an adult education group.

Most of the motions debated by conference on the next day were passed. The longest debate was on the proposal to endorse WEA Council proposals for a replacement membership scheme for England to be implemented from 1 January 2014. Suggested fee to join was £15 a year although committee members and helpers could be exempt from paying a fee if they wished in recognition of their contribution to the work of WEA. Several members spoke for and against the proposals and the votes were 36 in favour, 42 against and 10 abstentions. However clearly there is a requirement to define what membership means and how it should be funded.

At the regional conference held in Nottingham last Saturday John Swinfield-Wells stood down as Chairman of the Regional Committee after serving for five years and Robin Cook was elected in his place. I was re-elected as Vice-Chair. The Forum should have someone else elected to represent Northamptonshire at the monthly meetings but so far no-one has come forward to do this.

Members discussed the proposal to charge a membership fee for joining the WEA. The original intention for students opting to become "Members of the WEA" was to argue for greater resources as being the main provider of adult education. The need for the WEA Central Office to consider how to cut down on costs managing the current membership was welcomed as a first step to reviewing the total operating costs of the WEA.

6. Contribution from Branches

Higham Ferrers and Towcester branches reported on methods used to retain and increase membership of their activities. Both branches undertook extensive publicity in local papers and posters in the vicinity as well as word of mouth. It was felt that good car parking facilities and meeting during the daytime were significant advantages. Towcester undertook some social activities such as Christmas meals. As numbers were limited, many members attended all courses to ensure that they could enrol on the following course rather than miss a course and not able to find a place the next term.

7. Election of Forum Committee

Marguerite Stephenson, Sue Payne, Mary Traxton and Judith Hodgkinson were prepared to offer themselves again for election to the Forum. Bridget Chapman will also be a member of the committee. The role of the Forum is to prepare the summer

programme and attend 3 meetings a year and the more people there are, the work involved can be more easily shared.

David Aaronson from Towcester Branch said he would be willing to serve on the Forum committee.

Peter Mackness proposed and Geoff Starmer seconded the re-election of the Forum members. Brian Shelton proposed and Judith Hodgkinson seconded the election of David Aaronson.

8. Any other business

8.1 Poetry Competition

Bridget Chapman reported that there will be a regional poetry competition. The Northamptonshire Branch and Yelvertoft currently read poetry and it is hoped that members of these groups will take part in the heats to be held in Northamptonshire.

8.2 2014/15 Academic Year

This has been designated by the East Midlands WEA as “The Year of Creativity” and Bridget would welcome suggestions from Branches on suitable courses or activities.

The Chair thanked everyone for attending and closed the formal meeting. Members then enjoyed a talk by Richard Smith WEA Tutor and Chair of Leicestershire Branch of Richard III Society on “*Discovering the real Richard III*”.

Chair _____

Date _____