

WVS welfare work for old people and the origins of Darby & Joan clubs

“W.V.S. members gave every care in their power to the welfare of old people during the war years and many of them made it a regular duty to look after those who were alone during air attack, either taking them to the shelter or staying with them in their own homes. In addition to this form of neighbourly aid, warm blankets and comforting hot water bottles were provided ... for many who were ailing or infirm, shopping was undertaken ... and any who were confused or worried by the intricacies of pension books, form filling and rationing were assured of ready and kindly help and advice at the nearest W.V.S. Centre.”¹

“Released by the end of the war from the constant over-riding importance of its Civil Defence duties W.V.S. gladly turned its attention to the means of increasing its work for the welfare of old people , a cause which it had much at heart.”²

In 1946 WVS enacted two major initiatives to improve welfare for old people.

The first was the creation of residential clubs, which aimed to house the growing number of old people ,who had nowhere else to go after the end of the war, which were funded by the Lord Mayor of London’s Air-Raid Distress Fund.³

The second were Darby & Joan clubs where people could meet in pleasant surroundings for a friendly chat and a cup of tea and perhaps a quiet game of cards or half an hour with the wireless. In some cases, too, a hot midday meal cooked by W.V.S. members was available.⁴

The name Darby & Joan come from a poem by Henry Woodfall in 1735, which describes the lives of happily married couple.⁵

The first of these clubs to open, for which we have a firm date recorded in the WRVS Archive and Heritage Collection, was at Lincoln which opened on 26 July 1946.⁶

The following is extracted from the Lincoln centre organiser Beatrice Slater’s narrative report for June/July 1946.

“The only extra activity has been the starting of our “DARBY & JOAN” Club, which took place on the 26th July. Our rooms are not large enough to hold more than about 20 visitors, so for this occasion we hired a room. 45 old age pensioners attended. After tea they gave a wonderful impromptu concert. The Mayoress (in the absence of the Mayor) spent the afternoon with us.

¹ WVS, 1948, *Report on Ten Years work for the nation 1938-1948*. WVS London, p.27.

² Ibid.

³ Graves, C. 1948. *Women In Green*. William Heinemann Ltd, London. pp.244-245

⁴ WVS, 1948, *Report on Ten Years work for the nation 1938-1948*. WVS London, p.28.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darby_and_Joan, visited 8/12/08

⁶ WRVS/316/CB 1946/Lincoln County Borough narrative report, June-July 1946.

My aim is to have the club open on alternate Monday afternoons from 3 till 6 p.m., there will be books, games, music & tea. Bus fares will be paid and each visitor will be given a small gift of food stuff. I hope to enlarge this idea when it is found out the needs of these old people.”⁷

WVS was administered in 12 Regions which mirrored those of the National Civil Defence organisation. Below is a list of the first recorded mention of Darby & Joan clubs or their equivalent in each region.

- Region 1** (North east) Whitley Bay, 29 November 1946.⁸
- Region 2** (Yorkshire) Sheffield, Attercliffe Wesley Hall and Firth Park Mission Hall, September 1946.⁹
- Region 3** (East Midlands) Lincoln, 26 July 1946. Chesterfield also started a scheme at approximately the same time¹⁰ but no record of an exact start date could be found.
- Region 4** (East Anglia) Kings Lynn, probably in late July or August 1946, but through the National Council of Women.¹¹
- Region 5** (London) Not researched.
- Region 6** (South) By September 1946 *“Darby & Joan Clubs are extremely popular.”*¹²
- Region 7** (South West) By October 1947 there is reported to be *“only one Old People’s Club run entirely by W.V.S.”*¹³
- Region 8** (Wales) By April 1947 *“In one Town 90 old people gathered together in their W.V.S. Club once a week where W.V.S. gave them an excellent meal ...”*¹⁴
- Region 9** (West Midlands) Worcester, Rainbow Hill, November 1946.¹⁵
- Region 10** (North west) No record.
- Region 11** (Scotland) Not researched.
- Region 12** (South east) Burgess Hill, Good Old Timers Club, November 1946.¹⁶

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Author: Matthew McMurray, WRVS Archivist, 10 December 2008

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ WRVS/250/Northumberland 1946/Whitley Bay narrative report, November 1946.

⁹ WRVS/278/CB 1946/Sheffield narrative report, September 1946.

¹⁰ WRVS/657/Region 3 Regional report, June-August 1946.

¹¹ WRVS/660/Region 4 regional report May-July 1946

¹² WRVS/659/Region 6 regional report July-September 1946

¹³ WRVS/658/Region 7 regional report August-October 1947

¹⁴ WRVS/666/Region 8 regional report November 1946 – April 1947

¹⁵ WRVS/825/CB 1946/Worcester narrative report, November 1946.

¹⁶ WRVS/376/East Sussex 1946/Burgess Hill narrative report, November 1946