

Ever increasing circles

In May, Taunton Inner Wheel is celebrating its 95th anniversary.
ANDREA COWAN discovers the secret of its longevity



Inner Wheel is one of the largest women's voluntary service organisations in the world, with representation at the United Nations, so I was embarrassed to admit that I knew very little about it. Thankfully a coffee with the president and secretary of the Taunton club, Angela Snow and Theresa Dowsett respectively, put this right.

It was founded in Manchester in 1924 by Margarette Golding, the wife of Oliver Golding, a Rotary Club member. Margarette, a capable businesswoman in her own right and a great philanthropist, felt that there should be something for the wives of Rotarians as well. She was described as having a heart of gold and one early club secretary noted in a journal: 'Mrs Golding's understanding of human nature and her faith in women urged her to create an organisation where friendship could really grow.'

This seems to be the thread that runs through the association. 'Fundraising is obviously very important but it's not all about raising money,' explains Angela. 'Friendship and helping to improve the lives of others is absolutely key.'

Within 10 years 79 similar clubs sprang up around the country – known affectionately as 'the 79ers' – and in 1934 the decision was made to unite them under one umbrella association, Inner Wheel. The name reflected its close association with the Rotary Club, and its emblem is a small wheel contained within the Rotary wheel.

There are now 500 Inner Wheel clubs in Great Britain and Ireland, divided into 29 districts, with approximately 10,000 members. International Inner Wheel was formed in 1967 and is active in 104 countries with over 108,000 members.

Taunton is one of 16 different clubs in District 20 which covers the whole of Somerset, most of Dorset and a little of West Wiltshire. It is also one of the original 79ers, chartered in 1930 and so is celebrating its 95th anniversary this year. Although this is really thanks to the eagle-eyed Theresa who noticed a discrepancy over dates in some archive material. 'I was going through some files left by the previous secretary,' she explains. 'There was a certificate for our

left: Margarette Golding, a businesswoman and a great philanthropist, felt that there should be something for the wives of Rotarians. Photo: Inner Wheel

right: A Taunton Inner Wheel coffee morning. Photo: Taunton Inner Wheel

below left: The president, Angela Snow, inducting a new member to Taunton Inner Wheel. Photo: Gaynor Underhill

below right: The Rt Hon. Ann Widdecombe is guest speaker at the 95th anniversary lunch. Photo: Rt Hon. Ann Widdecombe

membership dated 1934, and a presentation to the club for its 80th anniversary in 2010. The dates didn't tally, so I contacted the main association and after much research we found that we had indeed been established in 1930, under the name of The Taunton Rotary Club Ladies Auxiliary. Our president at this time was Mrs Goodland, wife of the mayor of Taunton.'

To mark the occasion, there is to be a lunch at Taunton Racecourse in May, to which representatives from clubs in the District, Inner Wheel dignitaries and other local women's club members will be invited. They are particularly delighted that the Rt Hon Ann Widdecombe has agreed to be the guest speaker. She said on being invited, 'Congratulations to the Taunton Inner Wheel on its 95th charter. Inner Wheel does a tremendous amount for charity, and I am very happy to support it in any way I can.'

As the presiding president, Angela will be wearing her chain of office to the lunch, an impressive chain which features metal bars bearing the names of all the presidents since Mrs Maunder in 1934. 'Although sadly we are missing bars from 1979 to 1989,' says Angela. 'A few were removed by an earlier president to make it a little more comfortable to wear – it's very heavy – and sadly they have not been retrieved as yet.'

Angela's name features multiple times on the chain as she is currently on her fourth presidency. 'I first joined Inner Wheel when I retired from teaching,' she explains. 'After such a rewarding career I needed to do something.'

This is where Inner Wheel comes into its own, aimed at women just like Angela who are desiring purpose and to put their skills to worthy causes. 'I've made great friends and met some inspiring women: we even had one member who had worked at Bletchley Park.'

Over its 95 years, the Taunton club has ensured it is placed at the heart of the community. Members help with gardening at Abbeyfield (now called Heron House Residential Home), support the Women's Refuge in Taunton, Priorswood Community Centre and local food banks.

The club also supports a particular charity chosen by the president, currently Breast Cancer Now, and there is an international focus with Médecins Sans Frontières. Money is raised through a events such as coffee mornings, cream teas, bridge days, and general donations.



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'We also like to respond to unforeseen events,' continues Angela. 'Last year we helped raise money towards bleed kits following the visit of the *Knife Angel* sculpture in the town centre.'

Knife Angel was made from 100,000 confiscated, blunted blades and was touring the country as part of a national youth anti-violence tour to raise awareness of knife crime. 'We heard Dr Lynne Baird talk at the annual Inner Wheel conference last year. She founded the Daniel Baird Foundation following the stabbing of her son, Daniel, in Birmingham in 2017. She has gained an OBE for her work in this field and spoke so movingly, so when we heard about the *Knife Angel* sculpture tour, one of our committee members liaised with the local police to enable us to collect money while it was in Taunton. Three bleed kits have now been installed.'

The club meets every month at Taunton Racecourse. There is a round-up of activity from committee members, an evening meal and a talk from a guest speaker. 'So far during my year there has been a Christmas wreath demonstration, an interior designer describing her job and Nichola Penn, founder of the local company Boo Cottage Botanicals, talking about her handmade soaps and cosmetics. It's very varied,' says Angela.

There are currently 42 members of the Taunton group, 'and we're growing all the time,' says Theresa. 'It tends to be friends of current members who attend one of our events and decide that they would like to be involved.' Perhaps this is the secret to its success: anything based on friendship is off to a great start. ●

If you're interested in finding out more, visit: innerwheel.co.uk