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‘The *real* women’s party’:
The social, cultural, and educational life of
Labour Women between the wars.

A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE
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Declaration

I declare that this thesis, which I submit for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, is my own work and has not been previously submitted for a degree in Durham University or any other institution.

Statement of Copyright

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AGM	ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
CLP	CONSTITUENCY LABOUR PARTY
CPGB	COMMUNIST PARTY OF GREAT BRITAIN
DRO	COUNTY DURHAM RECORDS OFFICE
ILP	INDEPENDENT LABOUR PARTY
LHASC	LABOUR HISTORY ARCHIVE AND STUDY CENTRE
LMA	LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVES
LP	THE LABOUR PARTY
LW	THE LABOUR WOMAN
MP	MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT
MRC	MODERN RECORD'S CENTRE, WARWICK.
MU	MOTHER'S UNION
NCLC	NATIONAL COUNCIL OF LABOUR COLLEGES
NEC	NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
NFWI	NATIONAL FEDERATION OF WOMEN'S INSTITUTES
NRO	NORTHUMBERLAND RECORDS OFFICE

NUSEC	NATIONAL UNION OF SOCIETIES OF EQUAL CITIZENSHIP
NUTG	NATIONAL UNION OF TOWNSWOMEN'S GUILDS
ODNB	OXFORD DICTIONARY OF NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY
TUC	TRADES UNION COUNCIL
TWASC	TYNE AND WEAR ARCHIVES AND STUDY CENTRE
WCG	WOMEN'S CO-OPERATIVE GUILD
WEA	WORKER'S EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATION
WHR	WOMEN'S HISTORY REVIEW
WI	THE WOMEN'S INSTITUTE
WLL	WOMEN'S LABOUR LEAGUE
WVS	WOMEN'S VOLUNTARY SERVICE
WYL	WEST YORKSHIRE LEEDS ARCHIVE
WSA	WOMEN'S STUDIES ARCHIVE

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ABSTRACT

When they joined Labour's Women's Section in 1918, women found themselves in a patriarchal movement that ignored their needs and their interests. At least, this is one popular interpretation of the interwar section that this research challenges. To understand *why* women participated in an organisation that apparently subjugated them, it explores not what role they played within the party but what role they wanted the party to play in their lives. While drawing upon elite papers and the party's journal *The Labour Woman*, this thesis is intended to move as close as possible to the ambitions of women on the ground, and therefore focuses its analysis upon the local records of sections and Advisory Councils across England. In doing so, it offers the most comprehensive understanding of being a 'Labour Woman' to date.

This thesis adopts a thematic approach, grouped into three benefits women leveraged from their membership. The first two chapters consider education, with a section that aimed to be 'The Working Women's University' and offered residential schools that combined learning with recreation and provided the mental and physical space women needed. While residential schools were only accessible to some women, the following chapter also shows how sections became mini centres of adult education on the ground. The next theme considered is leisure, which is shown not to be a distraction from party business but an important political priority women wanted to achieve. The chapters that explore this demonstrate how women worked to include their families into section life, ensuring domesticity was complemented rather than challenged by activism. As they additionally show, women also asserted their need for independent leisure, and were able to achieve and justify this right through their activism. Finally, the concept of community provides two other ways Labour Women can be understood. First, as a nationwide organisation with shared ambitions, figureheads, and rituals. Second, as a series of sections with different priorities and circumstances, who experienced membership first and foremost as a face-to-face, social, and communal activity.

Of course, this study naturally adds to our understanding of labour history and women's place within it. To this question in particular, it shows why the party was so effective with women as well as offering a first glimpse of who these women were. Far from relying solely on older women with fewer domestic responsibilities, these pages demonstrate a section that was also often frequented by young, married, working-class women who had families at home.

However, the structure and engagement of this study with other, often siloed, historiographies have also furthered a range of other debates. This work adds to histories of adult education, showing the times and spaces women learned and the circumstances necessary to do so. It also emphasises the need for leisure and recreation for interwar women and shows the steps they took to claim such opportunities, both alone and with their families. Perhaps most importantly, this thesis contributes to our understanding of the, broadly conceived, women's movement at this time. Both as an example of why partisan histories should not and cannot be easily separated from other associational movements *and* as a demonstration of the vitality and vibrancy of women's engagement within the public sphere at this time. As will be shown, like their sisters in many other organisations, the women of the Labour Party's energies were far from spent once the franchise had been won. Across these themes and discussions, Labour's women's sections are shown to be the place women could best achieve their political, if not their partisan, priorities. It was, in this respect at least, the first and most authentic *real* women's party, built by and for its members and organisers across the country.

INTRODUCTION

In a pamphlet for the Diamond Jubilee of the County Durham Women's Gala in 1983, Margaret Hunter Gibb, Women's Regional Organiser for the North East of England from 1930 to 1957, wrote of her memories of the early Women's Section of the Labour Party. She recalled the wide and varied activities of an organisation that was keen to appeal to the tastes of a diverse potential membership, and a social, cultural, and educational programme which widened women's horizons, built friendships of real value, imparted great knowledge and fostered mutual understanding.[1] The section, founded in 1918 when the affiliated Women's Labour League (WLL) merged into the party and a new constitution offered individual membership to women and men for the first time, provided these opportunities to hundreds of thousands of members across Great Britain throughout the interwar period. It was a place where women learned and where they enjoyed leisure, as well as a local and national community that was always political but rarely solely, or even primarily, about activism.

This focus on other activities, particularly the apparent frivolity of social events and the drudge work of fundraising, has left the section with a reputation for ignoring women's interests and priorities. It has been said that between the wars the party's reason for being remained not feminism, nor socialism for that matter, but the advancement of the interests of the male manual working-class.[2] Part of the problem with the role women were offered was the gap between the rhetoric of early section leaders and the reality that was observed on the ground. Writing in a pamphlet shortly after the women's section was founded, Labour's first Chief Women's Officer Dr Marion Phillips said the party aimed to serve women as much as men and saw their interests to be 'essentially…one and indivisible'.[3] For her, the party was the vehicle through which all members could achieve freedom and their 'complete political emancipation'.[4] In short, Labour promised to be an organisation within which women could pursue and achieve their own ideological priorities. While it is true that they would continue to organise separately, leaders stressed that this would be within a 'separate-but-equal'

[1] Margaret Hunter Gibb, 'Diamond Jubilee Gala – 1983 – A Memory', – Margaret Hunter Gibb Political Articles and Lectures, Northumberland Records Office (subsequently 'NRO') 2973/4.
[2] Martin Francis, 'Labour and Gender', in Tanner, D., Thane, P. and Tiratsoo, N. (eds), *Labour's first century* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 191.
[3] Marion Phillips, *Women and the Labour Party* (London, 1918), p. 10.
[4] Ibid., p.9.

structure.[5] However, for many more experienced members, particularly those who had cut their teeth in the WLL or early feminist movements, their position rarely met this claim. Instead, the perspective of many of these women was that their separate sections would be left to focus on what activist Winnie Smith termed 'soppy things', such as socials and fundraising events.[6] They were, according to suffrage campaigner and socialist Hannah Mitchell, little better than official 'cake makers' to the party.[7] These interpretations, which are not without cause and have understandably shaped many feminist histories of this period, see the section as a barrier to women's progress throughout the interwar years.

Of course, this perspective also sits within a context in which the wider interwar women's movement has been criticised for its lack of ambition, for embracing domesticity, and for almost giving up once only one key battle for the franchise was won. Aside from those views held of the women's section, even explicitly feminist organisations of this period have been unable to escape similar criticisms. Susan Kingsley Kent went so far as to say that in their acceptance of traditional gender roles, feminist organisations' understandings of masculinity and feminism were virtually indistinguishable from anti-feminists by the end of the 1920s.[8] Alison Light has summarised this perspective within the literature whilst challenging it, stating that many see this period as 'one of feminisms deepest troughs' which was both 'anti-progressive and reactionary' in character.[9] In this context, the section is only one organisation seen to have let women down. However, there has been a particular criticism of an apparently progressive organisation that appeared happy to leave its women members in subordinate roles, insisted upon their sole attention, and offered them only the chance to carry domestic duties into party life, while men focussed on the 'real' business of politics next door.

Such criticisms within the literature led to the question that this thesis was initially conceived to address: why, in these circumstances, did women not only join the Labour Party but make there's the most active section within the organisation? To put it another way, as Christine Collette has, 'the wonder is not that the Labour Party included women, but that women

[5] Pamela Graves, *Labour Women: Women in British Working-Class Politics, 1918-39* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 154.
[6] Matthew Worley, 'The fruits on the tree: Labour's constituency parties between the wars', in Worley, M. (eds), *The Foundations of the British Labour Party*, p. 205.
[7] June Hannam, 'The victory of ideals must be organised: Labour Party women organizers in the inter-war years', *Management and Organizational History*, 5 (2010), p. 334.
[8] S. K. Kent, 'The Politics of Sexual Difference: World War I and the demise of British Feminism', *The Dilemmas of Democratic Politics*, 27 (3) (1988), p.232.
[9] Alison Light, *Forever England: feminity, literature and conservatism between the wars* (London, 1991), p.9.

engaged in the Labour Party struggle' at all.[10] One clear answer that has already been well established is that these criticisms do tend to understate the constitutional position of women within the party. Although structural factors certainly impeded the influence of sections, this was not the only way women could engage with the party. While the majority of women chose to participate through their local women's section, they also had the opportunity to take part as full members of the so-called 'mainstream' Constituency Labour Party (CLP) alongside men and could do both if they wished.[11] Further, even within sections, women were proud of their real constitutional role, which included representation on executive committees as well as the ability to make speeches and carry out political work.[12] Nevertheless, this thesis does occasionally support the view that sections lacked the influence more experienced women desired particularly when it came to questions of party policy. Further, at a national level, it is certainly true that the section had only minority representation with four seats on the National Executive Committee (NEC), as well a far less influential women's conference.[13] The section can therefore undoubtedly be seen as an organisation which prioritised the extra-curricular side of the movement at the expense of its party-political role.

For some of its critics, the organisation's failings in this regard are the result of the decision to merge the WLL into the party in the first place. The historian Cheryl Law draws upon those such as Hannah Mitchell to frame the move into the party as an annexation that aimed to make women 'handmaids to the party' in a shrewd attempt to 'undermine political solidarity' amongst the women's movement.[14] There were certainly some strengths to the WLL and its independent but affiliated position, which left it open, for example, to co-operation with feminist organisations without party approval. Further, Rowan has shown the space the League provided for the education of members, where they could 'formulate their views, gain confidence, and learn to assert themselves'.[15] However, when understanding the role social or other extra-curricular activities played within membership, many comparisons between the WLL and the section overstate the disjuncture with the past that occurred in 1918. In reality, the section's approach represented a continuation of what the WLL had

[10] Christine Collette, 'Questions of Gender: Labour and Women', in Britain, Brian and Heffernan, Richard (eds.) *The Labour Party: A Centenary History* (London, 2000), p. 404.
[11] Pamela Horn, *Women in the 1920s* (Stroud, 1995), p. 141.
[12] June Hannam, 'Women and Labour Politics', in Worley, M. (eds), *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: identities, cultures and perspectives, 1900-39* (London, 2009), p.179.
[13] Pamela Graves, *Labour Women*, pp. 22-26.
[14] Cheryl Law, *Suffrage and Power: The women's movement, 1918-1928* (London, 1997), pp. 47-87.
[15] Caroline Rowan, 'Women in the Labour Party, 1906-1920', *Feminist Review*, 12 (1982), p.90.

adopted. Both organisations mixed business with education meetings, propaganda, tea parties, expeditions, and outings.[16] Further, it was under the same leadership of Chief Women's Officer, Dr Marion Phillips, and her contemporaries that the section set about its expansion from 1918. However, it is certainly true to suggest that the auxiliary position of the WLL offered an independence to the organisation, allowing it to set its own priorities.

Alongside those who mourn the loss of the WLL, others point to the section's failings in achieving positions in office for its members as its greatest shortcoming, and as evidence that activities other than activism were a harmful distraction from the business of politics. For example, Pamela Graves has pointed out that women remained largely out of power when it came to the party's policy making bodies and also correctly observes that only nine women became Labour Members of Parliament throughout the interwar period.[17] While some of this did look different at a local level, it is true that even in some of Labour's greatest strongholds, women were unrepresented in most elected positions. In her study of County Durham at this time, Maureen Callcott notes that even by 1939 and with a membership of four thousand women across the region, only two women were County Councillors, twelve sat on rural councils, sixty-three on parish councils and twelve were magistrates.[18] In much political science literature, the most significant incentives members of parties can expect to receive are often seen to be the ability to influence policy and to gain, or to have those that you support, gain nominations for elected office.[19] As this literature would suggest, measured by these traditional metrics of activism, the section failed to offer the thousands of newly enfranchised women to whom it had appealed much of the political influence that they deserved.

Despite this, the women's section was to prove the most popular and arguably the most active wing of the Labour Party throughout the interwar period. This was partly because the labour movement could reach men through their trade unions and so, especially in the 1920s, made little attempt to appeal to them as party members directly. This focus did change in the 1930s, with the party's 'Million Members Campaign' in 1932, a members drive which was

[16] Christine Collette, *The newer eve: women, feminists and the Labour Party* (Basingstoke, 2009), p. 70.
[17] Pamela Graves, *Labour Women*, pp. 1-2.
[18] Maureen Callcott, 'The Making of a Labour Stronghold: Electoral politics in County Durham between the two World Wars', in Callcott, M. and Challinor, R. (eds.), *Working Class Politics in North East England* (Newcastle, 1983), p. 71.
[19] See discussions in: Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley, *Labour's grassroots: the politics of party membership* (Oxford, 1992), pp.1-4 & Mancur Olson, *The logic of collective action: public goods and the theory of groups* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 160-170.

ultimately aimed at bolstering party funds.[20] However, for the most part, it was the women's section of the party that remained the most substantial force on the ground. As Ross McKibbin has noted, this started early, as reflected by the 1923 Conference Report that listed twelve constituencies who already had women's memberships of over two hundred.[21] At the same time, Martin Pugh has estimated that nationally women's membership rose from a low level in 1920 to nearly one hundred and fifty thousand by 1924, almost certainly a majority of individual Labour Party members at this time.[22] The gender breakdown at a constituency level can be difficult to fully understand. However, Lowri Newman has demonstrated that around seventy five percent of members in Cardiff were women as one example.[23] As well as being large in number, the women of the Labour Party were also some of the most active in the often-thankless business of electioneering. By 1929, it has been said that women canvassers far outnumbered men across most of the country.[24] In the face of limitations to their influence, women usually outnumbered and outperformed the men of their local CLP.

The question posed by Christine Collette, other historians, and contemporaries therefore remains, why did interwar women dedicate the little time they had available to a party that was prepared to offer them all of the responsibilities but few of the benefits of membership? A further way to approach this challenge would be to state that the role of women in the party at this time was largely a reflection of their lack of experience at the point they joined the organisation. Early leaders of the section were clear that one of their primary roles was to attract the uninitiated who they could then train and politicise through their membership. Marion Phillips passionately defended the continued existence of separate sections on this basis, continuously stating that they were a way of appealing to women and offering them a place where they could enjoy activities that appealed to them, including socialising, whilst ensuring they remained within the movement's fold and could be trained in party business.[25] While leaders were keenly aware that more experienced campaigners could be disappointed with the section and its activities, they also knew that these were not the women that a mass

[20] Duncan Tanner, 'The Politics of the Labour Movement, 1900-39', in Wrigley, C. (Eds.), *A Companion to Early Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 49-50.
[21] Ross McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party 1910-1924* (Oxford, 1974), p. 141.
[22] Martin Pugh, *Women and the women's movement in Britain, 1914-1959* (London, 1992), p. 65.
[23] Lowri Newman, 'Providing an opportunity to exercise their energies': the role of the Labour Women's Sections in shaping political identities, South Wales, 1918-1939', in Breitenbach, E. and Thane, P. (eds.) *Women and Citizenship in Britain and Ireland in the 20th Century: What Difference Did the Vote Make?* (London, 2012), pp. 29-44.
[24] Michael Savage, *The dynamics of working-class politics* (Cambridge, 1987), p.179.
[25] Martin Pugh, *Women and the women's movement in Britain*, p.65-6.

organisation seeking to represent all women who worked inside and outside of the home would be built upon. Instead, Elizabeth Andrews, the organiser for Wales, supported Phillips' view when she said the party wanted to attract those women who were not already active and might not be interested enough to join the party if it was, unlike them, 'one hundred percent political'.[26] For some women, the apparently more frivolous aspects of section life were to be a vehicle by which they arrived at membership and could then go on to be politicised.

Although this view amongst organisers is acknowledged within the literature, what has been less well understood to date is how women themselves saw the extra-curricular activities that made up membership. While this thesis frequently considers the objectives of leaders and the benefits that section activities could have for the party, it also consciously avoids adopting a reductive or utilitarian approach to the opportunities for leisure, education, and feelings of community that women experienced. To put it another way, it is explicitly interested not with what role women played within the Labour Party but what role the party played within their lives. In this vein, it considers all of the activities that women enjoyed outside of what would traditionally be seen as party activism or influence as central to the offering of the women's section. Further, it sees leisure, education, and community, as important and valuable, small 'p', political priorities that women were able to utilise their membership to achieve. This approach draws upon a number of notable and significant interventions within the scholarship. These include calls from those such as Thane and Hannam that we refrain from judging the women of the early Labour Party by a set of rigid feminist characteristics and demands that it would be difficult for them to fully achieve.[27] More recently, Stephanie Ward has also demonstrated how by moving away from considerations of party achievements and impact we can better understand the meanings Labour Women invested in their membership. In her study, she demonstrates the importance of friendship, feelings of belonging, and emotional as well as political fulfilment for women within the section.[28] This thesis builds upon this approach and demonstrates the real value of a wide and diverse programme of leisure, education, and community-centred activities that women built to meet their needs.

[26] June Hannam, 'The victory of ideals must be organised', p. 339.
[27] As discussed in: June Hannam, 'Women as Paid Organisers and Propagandists for the British Labour Party between the wars', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 77 (2010), pp. 69-88.
[28] Stephanie Ward, 'Labour activism and the Political Self in inter-war working-class women's politics', *Twentieth Century British History,* 30 (1) (2019), pp. 29-52.

LEISURE, EDUCATION, AND COMMUNITY

As the focus upon these three concepts may suggest, this thesis is structured thematically, considering each of these benefits of membership in turn, as well as how they interacted with one another. There are several advantages to such an approach. First, studies that explore opportunities for leisure and education for women in this period in particular are well-developed and constantly expanding. With political parties often siloed from these discussions, this thesis is able to draw upon these extensive historiographies and contribute towards them. Taking one example, it is able to demonstrate how working-class women could leverage party activism to a greater degree than non-partisan participation in order to obtain and justify rare, ring-fenced opportunities to socialise alone and with their families. As well as offering a clear structure, the themes used here also most appropriately, although imperfectly, capture the anecdotal benefits of membership that many activists cited emphasised from their membership, as well as the ambitions of their leaders. Like any approach, a thematic structure does present some difficulties. The concept of community, for example, is difficult to define clearly. Further, there are themes that are particularly important such as locality that do not fit neatly into one chapter but are spread throughout the work. However, with a focus on education, leisure, and community, this study provides an understanding of some of the strongest benefits of Labour's women's sections.

To take each in turn, the first theme addressed is the role of education in membership of the early women's section. The provision of training and education was of the highest priority to Dr Marion Phillips and her team of nine regional organisers. For her part, Elizabeth Andrews used her speeches, and the pages of her brief autobiography *A Woman's Work is Never Done*, to claim that the section was the 'Working Women's University' where women gained power because they gained knowledge.[29] This ambition works as an organising concept for the first two chapters of this thesis, which recognise the section's unique place in the already extensive historiography of the educational opportunities offered by the early labour movement. As these chapters show, most provisions for interwar working-class education were facilitated by the trade union movement either directly or through funding and, as a result, remained beyond the reach of women who worked in the home. On the other hand, many organisations led by middle-class women did provide opportunities for development.

[29] Elizabeth Andrews, *A Woman's Work is Never Done* (South Glamorgan, 2006), p.7.

Loosely grouped, they focussed upon training in domestic skill provided by organisations such as the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) or the education for citizenship that was often provided by feminist organisations, however most organisations usually offered a combination of the two. Between the working-class education already provided by the movement and the opportunities offered by the wider women's movement, sat the offering of the Labour Party's women's section. The first two chapters of this thesis reflect what made the section's educational offering unique, while demonstrating how the organisation was able to draw upon both of these traditions, with a curriculum that was wide and extensive but was also focussed first upon the needs and interests of Labour Women.

The first chapter is therefore the most in depth study of the residential schools held by the women's section that has taken place to date. Starting in the North East and London, where they remained at their most popular throughout the period, schools were held on a week-long, weekend, or one day basis depending on the circumstances and needs in a particular community. They included learning that was delivered with a range of methods, from lectures, seminars, and presentations, and covered a wide range of topics, often facilitated by leading figures in a region or the wider movement. Subjects included so-called 'women's issues', focussing upon children and the home, that we might see elsewhere. However, they were also far wider and more varied, with records demonstrating huge levels of engagement from those women who were lucky enough to obtain a funded place, particularly at week-long schools. This first chapter, although focussed upon education, reflects an almost symbiotic role with leisure. If women were to fully engage with the programmes that were delivered, they required the time, rest, and space away from their domestic responsibilities to do so. In residential schools, held in remote and beautiful locations, thousands of women enjoyed an education that took them and their interests seriously, a phenomenon that has been commented upon briefly in previous literature but has never been fully explored in depth.

Following this, the second chapter considers the more mundane opportunities for education taking place in local section meetings, where most women engaged in learning on a more regular basis. In her biography of Marion Phillips, Goronwy Roberts said that the party's first Chief Women's Officer 'sought to turn every branch' of the women's section 'into a mini-adult education centre, aiming high, while keeping her feet firmly on the ground'.[30] This

[30] Marian Goronwy-Roberts, *A woman of vision: a life of Marion Phillips, MP* (Wrexham, 2000), p.74.

chapter assesses how successfully Phillips, her team and her successor Mary Sutherland achieved this ambition. It considers in particular the role of *The Labour Woman*, written and edited by Phillips and Sutherland, in shaping the organisation's educational output, through the structures and programmes of learning it recommended. In its analysis, this chapter shows how the party recommended a course of education that spoke to members as both Labour members and as women. It recommended courses focussed upon issues seen to be of interest to women mixed with those issues of importance to the movement, including trade unions and party policy. However, in reality, education that was encouraged nationally, mediated through regional organisations but *shaped* locally is what is demonstrated. It was women's own priorities, decided within their local communities, that had a significant impact upon the programmes of education that they went on to pursue in their sections and receive.

While education was important to many women, just as essential was the ability to enjoy leisure through their activism, a benefit explored in depth across the next two chapters. Although dances, fundraisers, outings, and pie and pea suppers, could be seen as frivolous, they were central to the experience of Labour membership. There was a potential conflict for married women who wished to access this leisure time, particularly if they or their families perceived that recreation took them away from their domestic responsibilities. However, these were questions other organisations such as the NFWI were also working to address. Considering the approach of this organisation and others, Chapter Three shows Labour's distinct approach to the question of married women's leisure time. It demonstrates the particular message its members could use in this conversation, justifying the leisure time they accessed through activism not only for the good of themselves or their families but for their party and country. More importantly, it demonstrates how leisure was rarely set in conflict with domestic responsibilities, with women able to combine their roles of housewife and mother with party recreation. As housewives, they took part in activities that enhanced and demonstrated their domestic skills, just as those women who joined the NFWI were likely to do. As mothers, women could enjoy being part of an organisation where children became a part of the fabric of section life. This was often necessary for women who could not leave children at home, especially during school holidays where special children's events were usually organised. However, on a more routine basis, sections worked to build organisations that sat in co-operation rather than conflict with members' roles of housewife and mother.

Although this was often the case, Chapter Four demonstrates the real need for independent leisure members also pursued. An early focus of the women's section, supported by Phillips and her team of organisers, was that women should use their membership in order to access much needed leisure time independent of their families. Conscious that women would need to learn to prioritise this, Lillian Anderson Fenn writing in 1919 argued that the party must *teach* women of their right to play as much as it did their politics.[31] While advocated nationally, many of the most important opportunities were once again the more mundane and local. These were the, no less important, ways women socialised with one another as part of section life, as simple as a cup of tea with colleagues or the chance to enjoy a sing a long, as well as more organised events such as dances that punctuated a section's social calendar. Far from demonstrating that the conventional wisdom is true, and that men were happy to keep women focussed on these activities, this chapter shows that the opposite could be the case. Some CLPs were unhappy when sections too closely resembled social organisations such as the NFWI, while other CLPs were happy to support them but only to ensure that their local women's section was thriving. It was often the needs and wishes of women themselves that determined these local social calendars, and some of the most popular events could be those that have most frequently been disparaged. Alongside those regional activities that broadened women's experience of leisure and the relationships they built even further, these women-centred events were an important reason why women chose to join and remain with the party.

Following these chapters, the thesis will finally consider the more difficult to quantify concept of 'community'. In a sense, it addresses two distinct communities. The first is that face-to-face community of women that met in a given locality week in, week out. These pages demonstrate the bonds that women built at this level, the importance of *their* individual section to them, and the significant steps they would take to defend the local community that they had formed if it came under threat. The chapter also show how women were there for one another at the most difficult of times, and how they commemorated the loss of key figures and events within their region. Building upon this, this chapter uses a brief profile of Dr Marion Phillips and other leadership figures to represent the second, imagined, community that Labour Women across the country became part of. Writing a fifty-year history of the party in 1950, Francis Williams said that under Phillips 'a women's

[31] As cited in June Hannam, 'The Victory of Ideals must be organised', p.339.

organisation had been created such as no other party possessed'.[32] The imagined community that is shown to have been formed under Phillips and built upon in her name after her death shows two ways that Labour Women thought about their party identity. First, as a shared local experience amongst friends and colleagues, who socialised, learned, and campaigned alongside one another. Second, as a Labour Woman, one of thousands working across the country for the causes that they hoped the next Labour Government would be able to deliver.

As these chapter summaries suggest, there are a number of other recurring themes that receive prominent attention throughout these pages, the first being the difference between national ambitions and local realities. The local nature of section membership is not a new intervention in the scholarship. Even within the areas covered by one organiser, the literature has observed that there could be a huge amount of variety in the ways in which women engaged with the movement. Evans and Jones, for example, have pointed to the different ways that women in Wales engaged with the Labour Party at this time. They have observed that some made the tea or demonstrated domestic skill, all listened to lectures or political speeches and took place in education, while some attended summer schools and speaker's training sessions for more intensive training.[33] As the pages of this thesis show, similar differences can be found across the country, between and within regions, and the reality was that membership was very often a heavily localised experience under national guidance.

The literature already suggests a number of explanations for this phenomenon. Some texts posit that these different approaches to politics, and what women wanted from their membership, reflect the diverse nature of the working- and middle- class women who made the section their home. As Hannam observes, Labour women were not an undifferentiated group. They brought with them a variety of social and political backgrounds and engaged with politics in different ways.[34] An alternative interpretation, one that is challenged throughout this thesis, is that it was not the background of women themselves but their position within local communities that largely shaped their experiences of Labour membership. Neil Riddell, for example, argued that in 'heavily industrial areas with few women workers, they tended to be restricted to supportive, traditionally female roles',

[32] Francis Williams, *Fifty Years March. The Rise of the Labour Party* (Oxford, 1950), p. 286).
[33] Neil Evan's and Dot Jones, 'To Help Forward the great work of humanity', in Tanner, Duncan, Williams, Chris and Hopkin, Dean, *The Labour Party in Wales 1900-2000* (Cardiff, 2000, p. 224.
[34] June Hannam, 'Women and Labour Politics', pp. 172-3.

whereas 'in textile areas, with much higher levels of female employment, the designation of roles tended to be less rigid, and the women's sections were able to enjoy greater input into policy making.'[35] However, to the contrary, this thesis shows women in industrial areas had some of the most thriving sections that were built around extensive programmes of education, countless opportunities for leisure, and strong and well-built communities, that held their own.

One final theme, or perhaps framing, that occurs throughout this study is the context of the associational culture of interwar Britain within which the women's section operated. Accounts that treat Labour Women's activism in isolation, from the perspective of Labour History, Women's History, or Feminist History, have failed to capture the competitive environment that the section faced. As Innes notes, the boundaries between women's voluntary associations and political organisations are not clear cut.[36] Further, as Hunt has observed, the reality is that Liberal, Conservative and Labour women often shared more of a common experience with one another than they ever did the men of their own parties.[37] Interwar Britain had a rich range of bodies available to women; from feminist organisations to mainstream women's groups, from organisations affiliated to political parties to those which were explicitly non-partisan, from religious groups to business organisations, those which covered urban areas and those with a rural focus. As a starting point, we need to consider these range of options available to women and what each organisation offered them.

Situating this thesis within the literature of this competitive associational environment has allowed a fuller understanding of why women chose the section. This includes appreciating where the organisation's offering was in line with that available elsewhere. For example, while these bodies had different focuses, they all offered women space in the public sphere where they could learn to use their newfound rights and responsibilities of citizenship.[38] This context also elucidates some grounds, other than ideology and aims, upon which women may have based their membership decisions. In her study of the NFWI, Maggie Andrews asked that we contemplate the alternative factors that drove participation, including existing

[35] Neil Riddell, *Labour in crisis: the second Labour government, 1929-31* (Oxford, 1991), p. 18.
[36] Sue Innes, *Love and work: feminism, family and ideas of equality, Britain 1900-39*', Unpublished PhD Thesis (The University of Edinburgh, 1998), p. 6.
[37] Karen Hunt, 'Rethinking Activism: Lessons from the history of women's politics', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 62 (2) (2009), p. 225.
[38] Caitriona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: domesticity and the women's movement in England, 1928-64* (Manchester, 2015), p.47.

networks, childcare requirements, and distance, as well as the opportunity for women to access women-centred spaces and enjoy themselves.[39] Centring these ideas within the discussion does not ignore that the women's section was distinctly 'Labour'. Instead, it places the needs and interests of women, rather than the men of their movement, front and centre when we consider the organisation that they built. These pages provide countless examples of how women asserted their wishes. First, in how they struggled for influence internally and worked to assert themselves in the party, as well as often being at the coal face of communist infiltration. However, there are also examples of the threat that the NFWI, the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds (NUTG), and other women's organisations posed to the women's section. It was on this ground, against organisations that prioritised women's leisure, domestic roles, and families, that many of the section's battles for members' attentions and continued loyalty were fought, and this necessarily shaped the section's priorities.

Of course, the section was not alone in this struggle, nor was it women's only opportunity for participation within the Labour movement. The Women's Co-operative Guild (WCG), which often worked in co-ordination with the section and had many members who overlapped between the two, was also hugely popular at this time. For Scott, it was the WCG that was the best placed to generate an autonomous politics of working women and one of the most successful in the project.[40] As these pages show, the WCG was another way the many Labour Women chose to participate and there was much co-operation between the two organisations. However, this thesis also confidently asserts that it was perhaps in the section over any other organisation that working-class women could pursue the wide range of priorities that mattered most to them. For some, this was their first chance at education post-14, for many more it was the chance to enjoy leisure time either alone or alongside their families. For most, it was the ability to be part of a local and national community of like-minded women that provided opportunities to sustain and support one another through all of their highs and lows.

[39] Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute as a Social Movement* (London, 1997), pp. 6-14.
[40] Gillian Scott, *Feminism and the politics of working women: the Women's Co-operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War* (London 2005), pp. 3-4.

METHODOLOGY

The last study of this length that considered the women's section of the Labour Party during the interwar period was Pamela Graves' *Labour Women: Women in British Working-Class Politics*, which was written almost thirty years ago.[41] In the ensuing period, many of the same methodological problems with studying the section at this time remain in place. The first problem is that many records, particularly elite papers, from this time were either never archived or have subsequently been destroyed. As Nan Sloane notes in her study that primarily focusses on the period before 1918, the loss of records was on course before the merger of the WLL with the party and continued thereafter, with no evidence of any intention to create a permanent record or archive in the newly merged organisation.[42] Further, while Dr Marion Phillips' papers exist and remain archived, the vast majority of her successor Mary Sutherland's records were destroyed by her nephew following her death.[43] As a result, when it comes to the most senior figures in the leadership of the women's section, there is a gap in the information that is available for research especially after Phillips' death in early 1932.

However, unlike Graves' first comprehensive and much needed exploration of the section, this study always intended to base its analysis first and foremost upon the experience of local membership for women on the ground. In doing so, it has answered the calls of those such as Hunt and Hannam, who have argued for a new archaeology of women's politics, one which turns towards the locality, the space in which every day politics was experienced by the vast majority of women at this time.[44] This approach has also allowed this study to address Hunt and Hannam's further suggestion that we reinstate the importance of emotion into our analysis, moving away from a view that too often sees humans solely as rational and instrumental actors in how they express their political views and decide upon their actions.[45] Their request here also takes up a challenge posed by political scientists such as Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, who have urged social scientists to consider the pleasures and emotions behind participation as much as the rational and instrumental forces that drive members into

[41] Pamela Graves, *Labour Women.*
[42] Nan Sloane, *The Women in the Room: Labour's Forgotten History* (London, 2018), p. 222.
[43] Pat Thane, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 'Sutherland, Mary Elizabeth', https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/39184 (last accessed 10 April 2023).
[44] Karen Hunt and June Hannam, Towards an Archaeology of Interwar Women's Politics: The Local and the Everyday', in Gottlieb, J. V. and Toye, R. (eds.) *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender and Politics in Britain, 1918-1945* (Basingstoke, 2013), p. 135.
[45] Ibid.

party politics.[46] It is with these aims in sight that this study draws upon those sources that can be best selected to be the closest representation of the daily experience of Labour Women.

The sources that most faithfully meet this need are the minute books of local women's sections that exist across the country, texts that have provided significant opportunities to add to the historical record, as well as some challenges that primarily relate to both their form and locations. The most important opportunity that local section minutes present is that they have largely been an underutilised resource in historical research, despite their clear benefits. As Ball, Thorpe and Worley have noted, local party records prove a fruitful, if widely scattered, resource, offering fresh perspectives on the events of the 1920s and 1930s and a 'glimpse into the everyday lives of party members.'[47] However, they tend to be used rarely, largely because they are dispersed across the country, usually in an incomplete form. As a result, where they have been drawn upon, it has often been in local or regional studies of a specific party or a group of parties in an area.[48] However, this study seeks to utilise local party minute books to address this imbalance. It does so with a primary focus upon England, where records are most substantially held and easiest to obtain in a significant number. Through this work, this thesis has been able to consider the nature of meetings that were taking place across the North East, North West, South East, South West, as well as the Midlands. This approach will move us closer to the shape and texture of activities being held across the country, as well as the similarities and the differences that can be found in weekly meetings right across England.

However, these minutes necessarily tell one story, focussed as they are upon the formal business of politics as well as those events that local sections have arranged themselves. To complement this, this thesis has also drawn upon the minutes of Regional or District Advisory Councils. The first of these are the minutes of organisations where local sections grouped to arrange themselves at a county or regional level, electing members to represent their interests, and this thesis has been able to analyse those found in County Durham, Northumberland, the West Riding of Yorkshire, and Yorkshire. District Advisory councils were often found it metropolitan areas, and the records considered here include those in Manchester, London, Bristol, Warwick, and West Yorkshire. These district and regional

[46] J. Goodwin, H. Jasper, and F. Polletta, 'Introduction – Why Emotions Matter, in Goodwin, J., Jasper, J. M. and Polletta, F. (eds.) *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (London, 2001), pp. 1-18.
[47] Stuart Ball, Andrew Thorpe, and Matthew Worley, 'Researching the grass roots: the records of constituency level political parties in five British countries, 1918-40', *Archives*, 110 (2004, pp. 72-94.
[48] ibid., pp. 75.

records have proved just as fruitful in often very different ways. They first and foremost tell us about those activities that were arranged at council level, such as residential schools, women's days, weeks and months, and a range of other opportunities. However, they also show the relative strength and weakness of sections within areas, as well as the contrasting priorities for membership that could be found within or between local communities.

Every chapter of this thesis relies heavily upon the records of local sections and advisory councils; however, these are also supplemented by some equally insightful records that have survived nationally. First amongst these sources have been the pages of *The Labour Woman*, which as this introduction has already stated was edited by the two Chief Women's Officers who ran the interwar women's section. The publication is useful not only because we can understand the organisation that these women wanted to create, and because of the regular updates and contributions that their team of organisers also provided that we can appreciate in the same light. It also featured updates from individual sections across the period, but particularly early on as the fledgling organisation started to spread. More importantly, it regularly asked for contributions from its readers. These included on its cost, form, what content women desired and what experiences made Labour membership so valuable to them. Its pages have been invaluable in offering official reports as well as anecdotal accounts when it came to the national character of the section, as well as its significant regional variations.

However, as the purpose of *The Labour Woman* was primarily to share best practice and celebrate the greatest achievements of the movement, with content cultivated by the editor, it necessarily tells the best story that the national section or any particular local group wanted to tell their peers. In the remaining space this thesis has been able to draw upon organiser reports, private communications between organisers in the nations and regions and the Chief Women's Officer, which have often proven more fruitful in demonstrating some of the real dynamics at play on the ground. These papers show where tensions were in place in a given community, between individual women or between women and their local party. They also demonstrate the struggles of organisers to maintain sections that could barely survive in some areas, or that were so large they were almost too dominant elsewhere in the country. Unfortunately, like many of these records they offer a limited view and are only archived in any significant number for the period between 1937 and 1938, with a small number from 1935 and 1936 apparently accidentally archived alongside them. However, this work treats

them as a snapshot of a mature organisation that by this time had existed for nearly twenty years and had taken shape in a range of interesting ways right across Great Britain.

The combination of these sources allows this thesis to conduct one of the most thorough studies of the experience of women at a local level in the Labour Party at this time. From rural to urban areas, those where women regularly worked in paid employment to those where they worked in the home, from relatively affluent communities to those at the front of the economic challenges of the period, those who had Labour representation to those who were yet to achieve representatives from the movement, this study engages with them all. Doubtless stronger in its understanding of England owing to local and advisory council records, but confident in the range of representation this offers and the strength of supplementary resources that also cover Scotland and Wales, this methodology has allowed a new perspective on women's section. This is a view of an organisation that was very much organised and encouraged from the top down, from Phillips, Sutherland, and their team. However, it was always, more importantly, an organisation that was shaped in regions and localities, representing the needs of those women who made the Labour Party their own.

THE WORKING WOMEN'S…

Across the chapters of this thesis, the themes that are considered help understand the role that women wanted the section to play within their lives. As has already been stated, for some, the important feature of the organisation was that it was a working women's university, where they enjoyed formal or more mundane opportunities to learn. For others, the section was the 'Working Women's Trade Union', a framing fully explored in chapter three of this thesis. [49] While considering this latter point primarily within the context of leisure, as the section both facilitated and argued for women's right for recreation as their colleagues in the union movement did for men, this point has relevance across the pages of this thesis. After all, when the trade union movement primarily welcomed men, it offered them a range of social, cultural, and educational pursuits. As Howell has said, working-class housewives needed to be offered the same from the movement and attracted as individuals, and it was the women's

[49] E.M.R., 'Who Speaks for Married Women?', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 27, no. 5 (1939), p.72. All references to this publication are from: Women's Studies Archive, https://www.gale.com/academic/womens-studies-archive. Accessed 18 May 2020.

section that came to fulfil this role.[50] However, while each of these benefits of membership were important factors that attracted women to the membership, the final chapter of this thesis demonstrates that, especially by the end of our period, it was perhaps the organisation's role as a community of working women, local and national, that kept them coming back week after week. The section was all of these things, to different extents, to different women, within their areas during the interwar period, an observation that is missed when their activism is measured primarily in terms of how well they exercised internal party influence.

The section was not the only organisation offering these opportunities. Discussing the range of ways interwar women could play a role within public life, Jones said many organisations provided a women friendly space where they could pursue their own interests, mixing social and political functions at the level of local community and nationally.[51] However, she also explicitly excluded political parties from this discussion, an omission that this thesis seeks to address. Contrary to those who see partisan participation as something outside of the associational culture of interwar Britain or as a means of subjugating women, this study and the women cited within it demonstrate that the section was one of the most important vehicles through which women could achieve their personal, but no less political, priorities. This is partly because of the strength of its early leaders and the fact that so many of them understood the communities that they were selected to represented. After all, while the same could not be said for Phillips herself, the vast majority of the party's early paid women's organisers were working class.[52] This was coupled with other prominent figures in the movement at this time, including Margaret Bondfield who is highlighted as an example in the first chapter of the benefits that the movement's education could have. However, while these leading figures provided its foundations, the strength of the women's section was always its diversity and vitality on the ground. Women who campaigned for Labour at a local and national level, fundraised and built the party's profile, focussed upon those issues that mattered to them and worked with their colleagues including in the WCG, but also used their membership to pursue opportunities for education, leisure and feelings of community that were all too often missing from their lives as working housewives and mothers.

[50] D. Howell, *MacDonald's party: Labour identities and crisis, 1922-1931* (Oxford, 2002), p. 338.
[51] Helen Jones, *Women in British Public Life 1914-50: Gender, Power and Social Policy* (London, 2000), p. 131.
[52] Chris Wrigley, 'The Labour Party and the Impact of the 1918 Reform Act', *Parliamentary History*, 37(1), (2018), pp. 64-80.

CHAPTER ONE – 'THE WORKING WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY': WOMEN'S SECTIONS AT SCHOOL

If there is one part of the fabric of life in the women's section that is most often overlooked in the literature, it is the opportunities for learning, development, and education that sat alongside party business. The section's programme of education built upon the legacy it had inherited from the WLL, traditions of adult education in the labour movement, and the often-complementary activities of the affiliated WCG. However, the learning women received from the section could be far more ambitious, expansive, and varied than anything offered by these organisations. Benefiting thousands of women in the period, it included a mix of activities accessed through weekly meetings, considered in the next chapter, as well as specifically arranged section schools where women came together as a local or regional community. Some of the most transformative results came from these events. Usually arranged by regional organisers and councils but occasionally by affiliated organisations or sections, they included week-long Summer Schools, first launched in County Durham in 1924, shorter week-end residential schools which supplemented them, and one day schools which were far more regular. The schools, considered in this chapter, all offered a 'Labour' education, focussed on those issues which mattered to the party and were often framed around policy questions seen to be of particular concern for women. However, aside from their undoubted benefits to the party, they provided women with a wide range of opportunities to access learning that they were then able to shape around their needs and interests, as well as the leisure time and physical space away from their domestic responsibilities to engage with it.

The section's commitment to members' education was clear from the outset and determined by the priorities of some of its early leading figures. These included a mixture of women who had received formal education to the highest level and those who benefited from the already expansive training offered by other wings of the labour movement. First amongst them was Marion Phillips, who had moved from Australia to obtain her doctorate in Economics from the LSE. Phillips, who worked in the WLL prior to leading the merged organisation, wanted educational opportunities to be central to section membership. In particular, she wanted to address the educational inequality faced by working-class women, holding a particular

disdain for what she saw as the wastage of their minds after marriage.[53] As she set out to fulfil this ambition, Phillips built upon the steps taken by the WLL. As Rowan has highlighted, one of the League's most prominent benefits had been the opportunities for development it offered women.[54] This was the result of a culture that was no doubt influenced by those including co-founder Margaret Bondfield, who started her working life in a shop but rose through her union to become the first woman to chair the Trades Union Council (TUC), the first to become a government minister and, as the first woman cabinet minister, the first woman Privy Councillor. In the League, Bondfield worked to build an organisation that would facilitate, as her union had done for her, access to knowledge which 'no University could teach'.[55] Led by these figures amongst others, the early women's section was founded with a commitment that placed working women's education at the core of its activities.

As Phillips worked to expand the section from a small auxiliary into the largest and most active part of the Labour Party, she, her successor Mary Sutherland, and their team of nine regional organisers retained and developed this commitment. As Hannam has shown, whilst organisers built a larger and broader organisation than the League, they retained its focus on women-centred spaces, where members who lacked confidence received the training they needed in a comfortable place.[56] Their ambitions were extensive and perhaps best summarised by Elizabeth Andrews' phrase the 'Working Women's University'.[57] Andrews herself shared the background of many of the women the section looked to support. Leaving school at thirteen due to her family's financial circumstances and despite the offer of a scholarship, she developed her skills in the Independent Labour Party (ILP) branch she founded with her husband and the branch of the Women's Co-operative Guild (WCG) she went on to found herself.[58] Her views were shared by her team of peers including Margaret Hunter Gibb, a former teacher who saw the sections' schools as amongst her most important work as an organiser. For Gibb, they were a place where she repeatedly witnessed women gain 'confidence because they gained knowledge'.[59] The section's organisers saw the

[53] Marian Goronwy-Roberts, *A woman of vision*, p. 126.
[54] Caroline Rowan, 'Women in the Labour Party, 1906-1920', p.90.
[55] Cited in: Paula Bartley, *Labour Women in Power: Cabinet Ministers in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2019), p. 26.
[56] June Hannam, 'The Victory of Ideals must be organised', p.334.
[57] Elizabeth Andrews, *A Woman's Work is Never Done*, p.7.
[58] Ibid., p.8-10.
[59] Margaret H. Gibb, 'Labour Women in the North-East', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1937, p. 3.

section's educational remit, fulfilled through schools, as a task that they must prioritise as they worked to build the organisation across the nations and regions they represented.

There were very practical reasons, relating to the section's commitment to the party and its competition for influence within it, why this was the case. Firstly, the schools mentioned here, as well as the local activities considered in the next chapter, naturally had benefits for the electoral prospects of the Labour Party. They helped train a generation of women who had once been excluded from formal politics, offering them a background in party ideology, policy, and the business of organising. However, as Phillips and others were aware from the start, this training also meant the section would eventually be better able to assert its own authority within the party. This potential for development was one of the Chief Women's Officer's primary justifications for the continued practice of women organising separately within the party. She said that while men and women came to the party on the same terms, they did not bring with them the same experiences.[60] If the party wanted, as it achieved, a mass membership of women and for them to be effective and active, it needed to address their inexperience. This meant that far from offering a second tier of membership as some of those critics considered in the introduction have seen it, Phillips wanted the section to provide space focussed upon women's needs. First amongst them was providing the education and training necessary if inexperienced women were to find their voice and ever to take their full place as equals within the party's ranks.[61] This education was intended to provide significant benefits for the party and the section's place within it, developing active, engaged, and informed women who were ready to fulfil wider roles and responsibilities in the movement.

Alongside these aims, the section's commitment to education was built upon an awareness of the need for adult education, particularly for working-class people, that had long been recognised by trade unions and other affiliated organisations. The women's section was in many ways able to build upon a legacy of adult education in the movement with roots into the nineteenth century. These included the 'Great Tradition' of liberal education of the Workers' Education Association (WEA), the practical education for trade unions of Ruskin College and what has often been seen as the education for class-struggle of the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC). The competition for ideological influence between these

[60] Marion Phillips, 'Introduction', in Phillips, Marion, *Women and The Labour Party* (New York, 1920), pp. 9-17.
[61] Martin Pugh, *Women and the women's movement in Britain*, p.65.

organisations, and their contrasting views of the remit of adult education, do not serve the purposes of this thesis. However, the way they funded and disseminated the learning that they offered in the interwar period demonstrates why industrial utility often sat at the centre of their programmes, excluding all but a small number of women as a result.[62] The WEA, Ruskin and the NCLC each sought trade union support in fulfilling the 1922 TUC ambition to provide workers 'knowledge…for the immediate and practical purposes of the labour movement and also as a means to the enlargement of their mental and social outlook'.[63] This implied wide remit, which as Barker has said included self-improvement, self-advancement, a pursuit of enlightenment, as well as enhancing trade unionist efficiency, does reflect a commitment to education as a need for working people and a good in itself. However, as Barker has said, the focus of many TUC members was on the last of these ambitions and, as a result, the education offered by these organisations often tended to be focussed upon a training centred around the skills and knowledge needed for effective organised labour.[64]

This is not to say courses from these organisations were not open to women, but that even when they were offered spaces the curriculum tended to overlook their needs and interests. For example, in her study of the North West NCLC, Margaret Cohen shows the Council had only a single woman tutor by 1933, no courses specifically aimed at women, and only three schools were held concerned with their position within society.[65] At Ruskin, TUC funded courses included the 1929 'Technical Schools of Trade Unionism', which focussed upon the practicalities of organising. Even the WEA, which rightly prides itself on a majority of its students during the 1920s being women, acknowledges that most of these came from three unionised occupations: teaching, office, and shop work.[66] It should be said that the WEA and to a lesser extent the NCLC did co-operate and advertise their services to the women's section, particularly at a local and regional level, and that this chapter discusses some cases where this occurred.[67] However, for the most part, there was a gap in the education of working-class women in the home for the section to fill, one which was not centred around the needs of those in unionised industry and, as a result, all too often tended to cater to men.

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[62] For a discussion of these organisations and others see: Clive Griggs, *The Trade Union Congress, and the Struggle for Education 1868-1925* (Barcombe, 1983).
[63] Griggs, *The Trade Union Congress*, pp. 177-190.
[64] Rodney Baker, *Education and Politics, 1900-1951: A Study of the Labour Party* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 123-8.
[65] Margaret Cohen, 'The Labour College Movement Between the Wars: National and North-West Developments', in: Simon, Brian (ed.), *The Search for Enlightenment: The Working Class and Adult Education in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1991), p. 128.
[66] Zoe Munby, *Raising our voices: One Hundred Years of Women in the WEA* (Barton-on-Humber, 2003), p. 10.
[67] Further information can also be found in Marion Goronwy-Roberts, *A woman of vision*, p. 73.

In this, the section was fortunate enough to be able to look to the progress the affiliated WCG, itself founded with self-improvement at its core, had already been able to make. As an organisation whose focus was initially domestic in nature, with classes on dressmaking and home nursing, and at risk of being 'dry' with the later narrow economic focus of the some of the education it offered, the Guild nevertheless played an important role in facilitating learning and training for many women in interwar Britain.[68] Jean Gaffin cites Mrs Layton, who worked from ten, faced poverty after her husband fell ill, but went on to become Vice President of the Guild as one such example. She credited Guild training for altering 'the whole course' of her life. The lectures 'gave her so much food for thought' and turned her from 'a shy, nervous woman' into a fighter.[69] Although this remarkable example was not necessarily representative, June Purvis notes how Guildswomen's education contrasted with the rhetorical aims of earlier forms of women's education. While these trained women to be better wives and mothers to benefit their families, the Guild helped women achieve individuality, autonomy, and power.[70] In was in this image, and with the experience of the wider movement in mind, that the women's section set out to educate its membership.

THE HISTORY OF ADULT EDUCATION

The women's section's programme of education adds to a number of historiographical debates. Most obviously, as outlined in the introduction to this thesis, there is a tendency to view the participation of Labour Women primarily through the prism of party influence. As this chapter suggests, the party's residential schools make significant contributions to this debate, showing how organisers observed with pride as women used their newfound skills and confidence to strengthen their role within local organisations, as well as in the home. However, this chapter also has much to add to a number of different historiographies. These include the history of adult education within this period, which has tended to have a siloed focus on specific programmes and institutions including the WEA already mentioned, at the expense of non-traditional settings where those including women were most likely to learn.

[68] Jean Gaffin, 'Women and Co-operation' in Middleton, Lucy (ed.), *Women in the labour movement: the British experience* (London, 1977), p. 117.
[69] Ibid., pp. 140-1.
[70] June Purvis, *A History of Women's Education in England* (Milton Keynes, 1991), pp. 56-61.

Further, while the civic education provided by the women's section is understudied, the same cannot be said for the range of other organisations with which it competed. From avowedly political feminist organisations to ostensibly non-political organisations such as the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI), most interwar women's movements offered some programme of civic education. As this chapter demonstrates, the women's section had many remarkable features in this crowded market. First, their programme was unquestionably 'Labour', allowing women to enhance their contribution to the movement, build a sense of solidarity between them and to their cause, but perhaps more importantly to justify the sacrifices required for them to pursue independent education, particularly at residential schools away from home. Second, the section's programme took women's needs and interests seriously and saw their attendance at schools as a real achievement which must be worked towards. Finally, the schools combined leisure with learning, both because this provided the mental space women needed to engage with a serious curriculum and because this was something married women in particular had little opportunity to otherwise engage within. This study therefore also contributes to the debate on interwar women's leisure time, showing married women who asserted their own need for independent leisure time which was not in service to their family, and which they were able to justify in the name of their party's cause.

The tendency to overlook the women's section's programme of education in some historiographical conversations is partly a result of the siloed nature of some historical debates. While these pages demonstrate that the section's residential schools have much to show us about the educational opportunities interwar women were able to access, historians of adult education, itself a sub-discipline of the history of education, have had little to say on the activities taking place within women's political movements in this period. In his 2020 assessment of the current state of the discipline, Mark Freeman said that this is partly because of the history of educations detachment from the so-called mainstream of history. [71] In his observations, Freeman points to Malcom Chase's 1995 conclusions, which state those writing histories of adult education could feel the need to validate their work in the face of marginalisation, resulting in 'starkly empirical' work which lacked connections to wider historiographical debates.[72] Chase and Freeman also observed that as historians of adult

[71] Mark Freeman, 'Adult education history in Britain: past, present, and future (part I)', *Paedagogica Historica*, 56 (3) (2020), pp. 384-495; Mark Freeman, 'Adult education history in Britain: past, present and future (part II)', *Paedagogica Historica*, 56 (3) (2020), pp. 396-411.
[72] Malcolm Chase, 'Myth-making and Mortmain': The Uses of Adult Education History?', *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 27 (1) (1995), p. 53.

education tended to come from within the movement, namely the so-called 'Great Tradition' of liberal adult education including the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), the historiography focussed too readily on these institutions, prioritising formal educational institutions over other settings, whilst neglecting vocational education and training.[73] Freeman acknowledges progress had been made to address Chase's concerns, in particular his request that more attention should be paid to gender within studies of adult education.[74] However, while works on the Women's Co-operative Guild and the Women's Institute have addressed some of the silences and neglected settings in which adult education occurred, he saw that there was also much to be done.[75] As this chapter demonstrates, the education offered by the section was often far more extensive than these organisations, while building upon their legacies. Understanding this contribution allows us to better understand the premium interwar women placed upon the chance to access an education and some of the most effective ways in which organisations could ensure this was effective and accessible.

Similarly, studies of the interwar women's movement have often overlooked partisan participation, and this includes in studies of the moves towards education taking place at this time. The labour movement was not alone in looking to educate the women of interwar Britain and most women's organisations had some provision of civic or domestic education. Programmes served several different purposes for organisations and the women who attended them. First, for many women, membership of a women's organisations would be their first taste of education after the age of fourteen, if not younger. Only 5.4 per cent of girls born before 1910 received a secondary education, rising to 12 per cent for those born between 1910 and 1929.[76] Perhaps more importantly, in the time of the expanding franchise, both political and non-political organisations wanted to educate women to take advantage of their new or soon-to-be provided citizenship. This was particularly the case in the feminist movement, where inter-war organisations built upon Edwardian experience and utilised non-traditional spaces to arrange lectures, classes and training women were excluded from elsewhere.[77] Wright has shown how feminist organisers in Scotland worked to provide an 'education for citizenship' to their membership, countering the view that there was anything

[73] Mark Freeman, Adult education in history in Britain (part I), p. 385; Malcolm Chase, 'Myth-making and Mortmain', pp. 53-60.
[74] Mark Freeman, Adult education in history in Britain (part I), pp. 387-8.
[75] Mark Freeman, Adult education in history in Britain (part II), p. 400.
[76] Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford, 1998), p. 260.
[77] June Purvis, 'A lost dimension? The political education of women in the suffragette movement in Edwardian Britain', *Gender and Education*, 6 (3) (1994), p. 320.

moribund about this movement between the wars.[78] Finally, there was a sense amongst middle-class leaders in more social organisations that they too had a duty to pass on their knowledge to working-class members. In doing so, they also worked to justify the important role which they were playing in the public sphere, as Andrews has shown when considering the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI).[79] This aim was shared by the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds (NUTG), intended to be a social outgrowth of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, which had a programme including civic education and domestic training, as well as leaders in the Mother's Union, an organ of the Anglican Church.[80] Across the associational culture of inter-war Britain, organisations worked to offer members the educative opportunities they were otherwise excluded from.

That associations and institutes offered women the chance to receive an education tells us about the environment the women's section operated within, but the most insightful part of this historiography, usually separated from considerations of the Labour Party, is the reception these programmes received. While middle-class organisers prioritised education, many working-class women had different ideas of membership. For example, as Andrews notes, most working-class members of the NFWI prioritised the recreational elements of the Institute.[81] Further, there are suggestions that education in the Mothers Union was unpopular, if only because working-class women felt patronised by leaders. Beaumont cites one woman who left the Union to join the WCG, on the basis that 'Mother's Meetings' were led by 'ladies who came and lectured on the affairs in workers' homes that it was impossible for them to understand'.[82] While the reception these programmes received contrast with the experience of Labour's recreational schools considered here, the synthesis of these stories help us to further understand the priorities of working-class women between the wars.

First, over-stretched and short on time, women who participated often prioritised recreation because this was what they needed. This is a view supported by contemporary accounts, including those in Spring-Rice's oral history published in 1939 which cite the needs of young and middle-aged married women for 'opportunities to use the leisure time they might have

[78] Valerie Wright, 'Education for active citizenship: women's organisations in interwar Scotland', *History of Education: Education and Citizenship in Modern Scotland*, 38 (3) (2009), pp. 419-436.
[79] Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism*, p. 60.
[80] Caitriona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, pp. 13-28.
[81] Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism*, p. 60.
[82] Caitriona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, p. 13.

[as well as] to indulge their interests outside of the home'.[83] Second, it was only through this leisure time and in Labour's case being away from their busy lives, that women could fully engage with education. In the words of Mrs Greehaigh of the 1928 Nottinghamshire school, schools needed to combine 'education with pleasure…we women get so little of either'.[84] Finally, the residential schools took women's education and their interests seriously, encouraging them to study issues which were away from their domestic lives but relevant to their experiences, and offering them the opportunity to participate in tasks which developed their skills, knowledge, and confidence. This chapter demonstrates these points with evidence from a series of underutilised sources, including local and district party minutes, the records of regional organisers, and the testimonies of women who attended and made contributions to party publication *The Labour Women*. As will be shown, women attending schools used their party membership to assert their right to enjoy the leisure time. Through this recreation, they went on to claim the space away from their domestic lives needed to devote time to learning.

SUMMER SCHOOLS

The week-long Summer School of women from County Durham, held in the summer of 1924, was said by the council to have been the first residential school of a labour women's organisation anywhere in the world.[85] Offering a week away from the toil of everyday life, the school proved to be revolutionary for this first cohort. Accounts show how from 'oldest to youngest' they played 'as hard as they worked', and one student expressed feeling alive for the first time, when she first 'lived for one week' of her life at Barrow House, Cumbria.[86] As the first region to hold a women's only residential school, County Durham can rightly claim praise for its innovation. However, it should be noted that schools had been discussed from 1919 and mixed-sex experiments had already occurred in the capital. Further, of all the Advisory Councils across Great Britain, three were able to sustain annual week-long summer schools from 1925 through 1939. The distinctive feature in County Durham, and from 1925 nearby Northumberland, was the sustained high attendance of their schools.[87] However,

[83] Margery Spring-Rice, *Working-class wives: their health and conditions* (London, 1981), pp. 200-1.
[84]'Labour Women at School', *The Labour Woman*, 16 (9) (1928), p. 141.
[85] 6th and 7th Annual Conferences, 1924 and 1925. 1924-1925. Women's Labour League: Conference Reports and Journals, 1906-1977: Conference Proceedings of the Labour Party Women's Organisation. Women's Studies Archive, https://www.gale.com/academic/womens-studies-archive. Accessed 18 May 2020.
[86] Lillian Anderson-Fenn, 'County Organisation – Durham', *The Labour Woman*, 12 (8) (1924), 127. References to this publication are from: Women's Studies Archive, https://www.gale.com/academic/womens-studies-archive. Accessed 18 May 2020.
[87] Transcript of tape conservation with Margaret Hunter Gibb, The Riding, Cambo. 'NRO' 2973/22.

whilst North East schools were undoubtedly outliers in their continued success, London also sustained an annual programme which whilst smaller remained popular. These three early successes became a model that would be emulated across the country. As will be shown, the simplest lessons they provided was that women needed to be offered time and space away from home to enjoy recreation while they learned. In this environment, they were lectured on issues of personal and political importance and not simply on the best way to run a home.

The success of North East schools is partly explained by leadership. Lillian Anderson-Fenn (1919-1929) was the first organiser for the women's section, representing the entire country until 1919 when she became one of nine successors who were appointed to new regional roles.[88] After choosing the North East for her own, she worked with her councils in County Durham, Northumberland and to a lesser extent Yorkshire, to plan their schools before moving to the Midlands in 1929. She was succeeded by the equally enthusiastic Harriet Fawcett (1929-1930) and Margaret Hunter Gibb (1930-1957). Gibb was particularly committed to the residential school provision, attributing the North East success to something other than leadership. For Gibb, schools in the North East were continually so well attended throughout the period, unlike the fluctuating attendance in London, because there were 'less distractions' for local women, which meant schools were more important to them personally and reflected a greater commitment to the movement.[89] Whilst the latter is difficult to uphold, as London had some of the most active sections in the country, the former does point to the needs schools fulfilled. For example, Lynn's study shows Labour concern about NFWI popularity in the North East but reflects most attended because of a lack of leisure opportunities locally.[90] This also challenges a view, shared by Graves and others, that women in mining communities carried tended to carry their rigid gender roles with them into party membership and therefore played an auxiliary role.[91] Instead, it supports Callcott's assertion that women in these communities often simply had different priorities for their membership.[92] The schools, as vehicles for leisure and education, became a significant priority for many.

[88] Transcript of Recording with Margaret Hunter Gibb, 'NRO' 2973/22.
[89] Transcript of Recording with Margaret Hunter Gibb, 'NRO' 2973/22.
[90] Pauline Lynn, 'The shaping of political allegiance: class, gender, nation and locality in County Durham 1918-1945', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Teesside, pp. 33-36.
[91] Pamela Graves, *Labour Women*, p. 157.
[92] Maureen Callcott, 'The Making of a Labour Stronghold', p. 70.

As schools proved popular from the outset, organisers worked to make sure that they could offer as many places as possible. When preparation for the first school began in November 1923, Durham wanted to accommodate thirty-six people, including six with full scholarships to cover travel, board and expenses.[93] With sixty-four applicants, the Council soon increased the support they could offer to ten women.[94] To show how excitement in the region built in advance of this first school, a lecture delivered on the subject by Mrs Fields to the Houghton-le-Spring section in January 1924 resulted in ten women expressing their wish to be considered for the upcoming exam.[95] As a result, Mrs Patrick of the section set up a study group in advance of the exam for the women in her home and, it should be said, this group produced excellent results, with two members from this section alone, Mrs Campbell and Mrs Younghusband, being successful in obtaining one of ten scholarships to attend the first school. The popularity of County Durham's residential schools and the resulting competition for funded places continued throughout the period. By 1928, thirty-two funded scholarships were offered, but this was still less than half of the eighty-nine women who were seeking a funded place.[96] The first school with records in the capital was 1927, with twenty-eight students in attendance, twenty from women's sections and the remainder from locally affiliated organisations.[97] Whilst smaller, London attendance did increase, with both 1931 and 1932 requiring two schools.[98] Because of their popularity, councils encouraged sections and affiliated organisations to sponsor students to attend schools wherever it was possible.[99] This meant that even with limited scholarships they tended to be oversubscribed. To maximise the opportunity, Durham, and Northumberland combined efforts by 1928, offering joint schools across a two-week period.[100] By 1936, they joined with the Yorkshire Advisory Council, also in the region, with ninety-one places offered across the wider area.[101]

[93] 'November 1st, 1923', Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council Minute Books - Nov 1923 - Aug 1929, Durham County Records Office (subsequently 'DRO'), D/X 1048/2.
[94] 'The Durham Summer School', *The Labour Woman*, 12 (4), p. 64.
[95] 'January 22nd, 1924, Houghton Women's Section Minutes of Meetings, T&W Archive, PO.LAB.8/1/1.
[96] 'May 8th, 1928', Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council Minute Books – Nov 1923 – Aug 1929, DRO, D/X 1048/2.
[97] 'Summer School Report 1927', London Metropolitan Archives (subsequently 'LMA'), London Women's Advisory Council Minutes June 1927 – October 1932, ACC/2417/H/001.
[98] 'Summer School Reports 1931, 1932', LMA, London Women's Advisory Council Minutes 1927-1932, ACC/2417/H/001.
[99] 'November 6th, 1924', Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council Minute Books – Nov 1923 – Aug 1929, DRO, D/X 1048/2.
[100] 'Labour Women at School', *The Labour Woman*, 16 (9) (1928), p. 141.
[101] 'Women at School', *The Labour Woman*, 24 (8) (1934), 128.

This popularity naturally meant obtaining a scholarship was a competitive endeavour. However, with the aim of widening access to the largest number of women, processes were designed to be rigorous and fair. In the North East, applicants completed timed exams based on policy and party organisation after studying pamphlets, issues of *The Labour Woman* and *The Daily Herald*. In County Durham, topics included the poor law, housing, the economy, industrial relations, local government, foreign affairs, and propaganda.[102] In Northumberland, assessments covered children, education and employment, food, as well as generic topics found in the handbook of party organisation.[103] Whilst initially emulating the North East, from 1928 London adopted an essay competition. This was thought to be 'less irksome' and to attract women who did not trust their powers.[104] Despite these adaptations, and a series of changes across the period including asking applicants to write a letter to a friend recommending a vote for Labour, North East schools continued to receive far more applications. Whilst this suggests the process of obtaining a place was not a key factor in school popularity, all organisers were aware it needed to be accessible. Anderson-Fenn emphasised the importance of 'inessentials like spelling, writing and grammar' being disregarded to ensure 'no handicap' for less experienced and formally educated members.[105] Further, all the topics and materials were intended to be familiar. Each local section was urged to have a literature secretary, whose job it was to encourage the distribution of party pamphlets, *The Labour Woman* and *The Daily Herald*.[106] Whilst competitive, the application for funded places was to be as accessible as possible to interested women across the regions.

As well as being a way that they could allocate funded places, organisers wanted the pre-work for obtaining a place to reflect women's commitment to their education, and the accomplishment of a scholarship to be seen as an achievement of which they and their local section could be proud. Reflecting on her experience in the North East from the Midlands, Anderson-Fenn said the exam was intended first to ensure women could receive financial support, but, second, to ensure they showed their commitment to the movement and obtaining

[102] Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council Minute Books – Nov 1923 – Aug 1929, DRO, D/X 1048/2; DRO, D/X 1048/3, Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council Minute Books –September 1929 – August 1937.
[103] NRO, 4415/1/1; NRO, 4415/1/2 – Northumberland Women's Advisory Council Committee Minute Books 1929-1935.
[104] 'Summer School Report 1928', LMA, London Women's Advisory Council Minutes 1927 - 1932, ACC/2417/H/001.
[105] Organiser Report - Lillian Anderson-Fenn - 'Summer School Penmaenawr', Labour History Archive and Study Centre (subsequently 'LHASC'), LP/WORG/37/657.
[106] 'Hints for Politicians', *The Labour Woman*, 7 (11) (1919), p. 128.

a place.[107] She had made similar remarks in the past, writing that 'participation should be a highly prized privilege, accorded only to Party members who have in some way proved themselves active and knowledgeable'.[108] Local sections also worked to ensure they were represented at schools and to support members. In the Colliery Ward of Sunderland in County Durham up to five members from around thirty who attended their meetings usually expressed a wish to sit the annual test. However, funding could often only be provided from the section for one woman to take the journey to Durham to complete the exam.[109] To ensure this was fair, the section devised rules to ensure a member who had not received a scholarship previously would be selected each year.[110] The potential to attend a school reflected a serious commitment from women and from their section, and those successful in obtaining a place were safe in the knowledge that they had earned their right to be there.

'MUTUAL DISCUSSIONS AND MUTUAL FRIVOLITY'

Once they had earned their place at a week-long residential school, organisers worked to ensure women had the most enjoyable experience possible. In many ways, summer schools were first and foremost holidays, where women enjoyed 'mutual discussions and mutual frivolity' and where, aside from the value of education, getting away from the 'daily round' was a worthwhile endeavour in itself.[111] Councils booked accommodation in remote and beautiful locations which tended to be by the sea or in the countryside. Once there, they arranged outings for women to take in local sights and organised sports and leisure activities. Outings were particularly important, so much so that Gibb expressed significant disappointment when they did not go as planned, as in 1937 when a miscalculation of funds meant women attending the Heather Brae school had an inferior trip to that booked.[112] When women returned from outings, and completed their work, they enjoyed music together by the piano, had readings of Bernard Shaw plays, and took part in other social events.[113] In London, the schedule always included an outing, whether to Cambridge or Welwyn Garden

[107] Ibid.
[108] Lillian Anderson-Fenn, 'Week and Week-End Schools' *The Labour Woman,* 21 (5) (1933), p. 75.
[109] 'May 16th, 1934', Colliery Ward Women's Section Minutes, Tyne & Wear Archives (subsequently TWA), 5083/6.
[110] 'June 28th, 1938', Colliery Ward Women's Section Minutes, TWA, 5083/6.
[111] 'The Educational Activities of Advisory Councils', *The Labour Woman*, 13 (9) (1925), 158.
[112] Organiser Report – Margaret H Gibb - 'North East Area Summer Schools', LHASC, LP/WORG/37/657.
[113] 'Labour Women at School', *The Labour Woman*, 16 (9) (1928), 141.

City near Digswell Park where most of their schools were held.[114] However, one of the most popular events was the annual cricket match on the grounds of the estate, with women from all ages taking part and great pride taken by whoever was the winning team and was presented with the prize vase.[115] The priority organisers placed upon leisure pursuits reflect a real need they observed from their members and the decision to make these arrangements is justified by student testimonies. For Mrs Hodgkins of Silksworth, Sunderland, the most memorable parts of her experience at Borrowdale in 1928 were the 'glorious hills…valleys…trees and ferns' she had the chance to tour. [116] In organised leisure, the schools were a rare opportunity for women to enjoy recreation that was all too often absent from their daily lives at home.

Whilst this organised leisure was important, the relative leisure of being away from domestic responsibilities could be equally significant to women with a family at home. For one student of a 1939 school 'while school may not be everyone's idea of a holiday…anything is a holiday to a busy mother and housewife' even 'if only she can for one week sit down to meals that she hasn't prepared herself'.[117] Another woman reflected on the chance to be 'waited on…not having to be constantly up and down attending to [her] families needs'.[118] Many found the ability to simply eat food which they had not cooked themselves to be a significant liberation, fulfilling a need identified by Spring-Rice, which alongside the relative leisure of being away from domestic duties provided real satisfaction.[119] These comments also give us cause to again consider the role of food in the mix of politics and pleasure in membership, as Ward suggests.[120] For our purposes, it is clear that leisure was an important feature of the schools. While it was a good in itself, testimonies also reflect that it was necessary if the schools were to be effective in their educative role. As Mrs Berringer of Tooting wrote, whilst organisers wanted to educate, they knew that like 'medicine from the doctor' learning must be sandwiched between 'pleasures and country jaunts with ideal companions'.[121] In a place away from the 'turmoil of…everyday life', she learned more 'in

[114] 'Summer School Reports 1935, 1936', London Women's Advisory Council Minutes 1927 –1932, LMA, ACC/2417/H/008.
[115] 'Summer School Report 1937', London Women's Advisory Council Minutes 1927 –1932, LMA ACC/2417/H/008.
[116] 'Labour Women at School', *The Labour Woman*, 16 (9) (1928), p. 141.
[117] 'Willingly to School', *The Labour Woman*, 27 (8) (1939), p. 115.
[118] 'Labour Women at School', *The Labour Woman*, 16 (9) (1928), p. 141.
[119] Margery Spring-Rice, *Working-class wives*, 200-1.
[120] Stephanie Ward, 'Labour activism and the political self', p. 45-6.
[121] 'Labour Women at School', *The Labour Woman*, 16 (9) (1928), p. 140.

one week' than 'anywhere during the last three years'.[122] Schools offered a place to rest and a place to learn; the latter would undoubtedly have been more difficult without the former.

Of course, students and organisers were equally committed to maximising the educational benefit of summer schools. Mrs Hodgkins coupled her reflections of the Derwentwater Hills with information on the lectures and seminars she attended, as well as the reports she produced.[123] One of the youngest members recorded in attendance was Kitty Farrow, sixteen, in 1933. She said she thought she could speak for all of the women who attended when she said they had spent one of the 'most happy' but importantly one of the most 'profitable weeks of our lives', leaving them feeling 'physically' but no doubt 'mentally better'.[124] Alongside recreational pursuits women completed hours of learning daily, typically involving two lectures, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Each was accompanied by a discussion, usually in the form of a seminar or a question-and-answer. The day would be interspersed with lunch, afternoon tea, and might end with drama or music. However, the focus on learning was upheld throughout, with the most important results seen in the small-groups, or commissions, where members were asked to draft reports on their learnings and deliver presentations to the group.[125] Anderson-Fenn found this work was particularly fruitful and very popular with students, who embraced the opportunity to learn from one another. She found newer women seized the chance to develop their confidence and knowledge, while their more experienced counterparts enjoyed learning from their new perspectives.[126] Through their rest and recreation, students then engaged with a wide programme of learning.

Although naturally focussed upon questions of party politics and policy, the curriculum offered at schools was influenced by a range of factors, which included the speakers available in a region as well as the interests of local members. Perhaps inevitably, those closer to the capital often heard from more eminent people within the movement. Students who attended the London Summer School in 1927 were fortunate enough to have a series of lectures on 'How we are Governed', delivered by Ministers from the first Labour Government. Labour's first Chancellor of The Exchequer, Philip Snowden, spoke of his responsibilities and he was

[122] Ibid., p. 140.
[123] Ibid., p. 139.
[124] *The Labour Woman,* 21 (7) (1933), p. 122.
[125] Organiser Report - Lillian Anderson-Fenn - 'Week's Summer School Penmaenawr', LHASC, LP/WORG/37/657.
[126] Organiser Report - Lillian Anderson-Fenn - 'Week's Summer School Penmaenawr'.

joined by Ministers with responsibility for the Post Office, the Home Office, the Ministry of Labour, the Board of Trade, and others from the departments of Education and Health also made contributions.[127] In more provincial locations, it was common to see programmes which focussed on the Labour Party, its policies, and the wider labour movement. However, these would frequently be supplemented with lectures on local industries or those issues, such as health and education, which were seen to be of particular interest to women.[128] For example, also in 1927, the Northumberland School was lectured by the organiser's husband, Mr Fenn, on 'The History of Trade Unionism', with Durham adopting the same teacher and subject in their own school a week later. At the same time, the North West Lancashire women enjoyed a programme including 'Nursery Schools' and 'Women and War'.[129] It also included sections on 'Agriculture and Unemployment' which were relevant and so popular with local members, as were the lectures on 'Mining' in County Durham which accompanied broader discussions on topics such as Education, Finance and Foreign Affairs a year later.[130] These clearly 'Labour' programmes were built around those questions of key importance to the movement but decided based upon the speakers available in a local area and the interests of members.

In areas with fewer speakers, Advisory Councils came to rely on a handful of individuals. In the North East, the task initially fell to the organiser and her husband, with Mr and Mrs Fenn lecturing regularly on questions of organisation within the movement and trade unionism. Those who succeeded Anderson-Fenn continued to contribute, but Grace Colman, later Member of Parliament for Tynemouth from 1945, also featured frequently and deserves a prominent place within the story of the success of interwar party education in the North East and beyond. The lectures which she delivered were wide and varied in content. At summer schools alone, they covered domestic and foreign affairs, including 'Daughter of War', 'Sanctions', 'The League of Nations', 'Colonial Problems', 'Food Supply, Health and the Land', 'Unemployment – what can be done quickly?' and 'The Menace of Fascism'.[131] Colman's contribution to summer schools in the region and the relationships she built with the women of the North East and Yorkshire cannot be understated. When interviewed, Gibb said that the lectures she delivered, and the experience she brought from her time as a WEA

[127] *The Labour Woman*, 15, (9) (1927), p. 140.
[128] Karen Hunt, 'Rethinking activism', pp. 224-5.
[129] *The Labour Woman*, 15, (9) (1927), p. 140.
[130] *The Labour Woman*, 16 (9), (1928), p. 139.
[131] '20 July 1936', TWASC, D/X 1048/3.

lecturer in Nottingham and London, provided 'immeasurable value' to the region.[132] As another example of someone with no formal schooling, Colman was lucky enough to have received the benefit of a tutor in the past herself, and worked to pass on all she had learned to the women who requested her services. Remarking on the sense of loneliness she felt from Colman, Gibb would later say that while 'no one lived in her life' she had 'a great allegiance to the women of Yorkshire and the North East', providing a 'superb service' to them all.[133] Without question, her individual contribution was a significant part of the success of the schools County Durham, Northumberland and to a lesser extent Yorkshire came to hold.

While this is not a history of elite figures within the party, it feels right to acknowledge Colman's unique contribution that was commonly understood within the section. Many pages of *The Labour Woman*, most often those written by Gibb, paid tributes to the lecturer's role. However, Colman's unique contribution was also felt in person across the country. Examples of this can be found in her role lecturing at the capital's residential schools and in the steps she took to speak at individual section meetings wherever she could, which will be touched on briefly in the next chapter of this thesis.[134] For our purposes here, it should be said that the section were fortunate enough to have a number of women committed to the cause of party education on whom organisers could call for their residential schools. It should also be said that whoever they booked, the organisation of summer schools was a significant endeavour and close to year-round job. In the North East, this ended with marking follow-up work in October and started with preparation for the following year as early as December.[135] The size and scale of the North-East schools also allowed for trialling the best approach. For example, while the first school held in 1937 was seen as successful because of its format, with a single lecturer exploring a thematic range of topics, the second would not be repeated as several lecturers on different topics had lacked focus.[136] Advisory Councils worked to provide the most interesting and engaging schools for their members, adapting their offering each year.

Perhaps the best evidence of the success of the effort that organisers and councils placed into the programmes is the level of engagement from students. There are few accounts that do not

[132] 'Side Eight', Transcript of tape conservation with Margaret Hunter Gibb, The Riding, Cambo, NRO 2973/22.
[133] Ibid.
[134] *The Labour Woman*, 25 (1) (1937), p. 3; 'Summer School Reports 1934', LMA, London Women's Advisory Council Minutes 1927 –1932, ACC/2417/H/008.
[135] Margaret Hunter Gibb, 'Labour Women in the North-East', *The Labour Woman*, 25 (1) (1937), p. 3.
[136] Organiser Report - Margaret Hunter Gibb - 'North East Area Summer Schools', LHASC, LP/WORG/37/657.

mention the 'real desire to learn and interest in the lectures' or the 'very great interest in the questions and discussions' that women observed from their peers.[137] Organisers also commented on active and committed cohorts of students in their own reports. Anderson-Fenn initially worried that women in the less politically engaged Midlands would be challenged by the content of Susan Lawrence's lectures in 1937, which had strayed from propaganda into difficult subjects. However, she was pleased to find women just as willing and able to engage as those in the North East.[138] Accounts from Hunter Gibb in the same year, even in the week in which she was concerned about the lack of clarity in the programme, suggest the same high engagement.[139] At the same time, students expressed their gratitude for the chance to hear from 'experts in their area' who had 'left them longing to learn more' after school.[140]

The schools also reinforced a desire for sharing knowledge and provided those women who attended with the confidence to do so. It was common to see students distributing what they had learned in their local section meetings. Mrs Straker of Colliery Ward in Sunderland ran a series of lectures on her return.[141] Elsewhere, Mrs Baldwin of the North West Hornchurch section in London also ran a two-week session on the Chesterford Summer School she had attended.[142] Some students were even able to contribute to the learning of future cohorts of the summer school. For example, Miss Doe who had attended a previous London Summer School attended the 1929 session at Digswell Park where she was able to lecture on the history of trade unionism, alongside notable figures including G.D.H Cole.[143] Even where this did not occur, organisers were always keen to measure women's learning, and to keep the opportunity for their continued education going, usually in the form of post-work assigned once schools were over. Students submitted essays that were marked and returned, and the best of the submissions would be rewarded with a free scholarship for the next year's school. Despite the incentive, there are suggestions post-work was not students' fondest experiences. One who wrote glowingly about the East Anglian school noted that new ideas and

[137] *The Labour Woman,* 16 (9) (1928), p. 140; *The Labour Woman*, 22 (8) (1934), p. 120.
[138] Organiser Report – Lillian Anderson-Fenn – 'Week's Summer School Penmaenawr', LHASC, LP/WORG/37/657.
[139] Organiser Report - Margaret Hunter Gibb - 'North East Area Summer Schools, LHASC, LP/WORG/37/657.
[140] *The Labour Woman*, 15 (9) (1927), p. 140; *The Labour Woman,* 16 (9), (1928), p. 140.
[141] 'June 30th, 1931', Colliery Ward Women's Section – Minutes of Meetings, TWA, 5083/5.
[142] 'September 13th, 1938', LMA, North West Hornchurch Women's Section Ordinary & Special Committee Minutes 1937-1941, A/HHL/026.
[143] 'Summer School Report – 1929', London Women's Advisory Council Minutes June 1927 – October 1932, ACC/2417/H/001.

associations were worth struggling 'even if you had to write an essay afterwards'.[144] However, evidence shows that women who attended were grateful for the opportunities to study difficult but accessible programmes which expanded their knowledge and their need for learning, and encouraged them to take an active, educative, role in the section in return.

As well as sharing what they had learned with their local communities, students in London were also offered the opportunity to develop lasting relationships with the women who had shared the experience of a residential school. From 1930, the London Advisory Council formalised the process of keeping these bonds going, hosting reunions for those women who had attended any school from their first in 1926. The signs that a community was forming between the women are present in accounts of their very first meeting, where 'there was no need to supply any entertainment' as 'the greatest possible pleasure was shown in the meeting of old friends and the revival of memories, some after an interval of years'.[145] Council reports in succeeding years demonstrate that this community of London Summer School alumni only continued to build. Nearly fifty women attended the 1931 reunion, apparently despite a dense fog, where the 'excitement of meeting old comrades' had led to what organisers termed a 'corporate feeling' amongst the group.[146] The continued commitment of women to these events was demonstrated by the attendance of two members who had not been members of any other school in the five years since their own, yet were still attending reunion sessions annually to be amongst their comrades.[147] Summer schools, particularly in the capital, provided a sense of shared community which continued long after women had attended.

Just as importantly, these reunion sessions offered women a formal role in shaping the success of future summer schools. They were a way in which councils could receive feedback from those who had received the benefit of a residential experience in the past and a way women could use all they had learned to feed this into future programmes. The 1930 reunion played a significant role in the formulation of the school in the year to come, making the decision that two schools should be held and that they should focus on the themes of 'London Government' and 'The Administration of Justice' respectively, with students choosing the

[144] *The Labour Woman*, 26 (9) (1938), p. 130.
[145] 'November 10th, 1930', London Women's Advisory Council Minutes, June 1927 – October 1932, ACC/2417/H/001.
[146] 'November 29th, 1931 – Summer School Reunion', London Women's Advisory Council Minutes, June 1927 – October 1932, ACC/2417/H/001.
[147] '29th November, 1931', London Women's Advisory Council Minutes, June 1927 – October 1932, ACC/2417/H/001.

programme that most appealed to them.[148] It also made the decision about Mrs Harrison Bell being asked to continue as Director, appointed a sub-committee from those across the sections locally, and made recommendations about how individual sections could ensure funding for those members who wished to attend in future. This system continued and the following year, former students met again to decide the format, speakers and subjects which would take place at the summer school of 1932.[149] By the end of the period, the reunion had become almost as much of a tradition as summer schools themselves. Once the reunion had been held the secretary of the Advisory Council produced a report, and the council used this to define the programme, location and speakers who would be taking the week-long and by this point supplementary week-end schools in the year to come.[150] This offered significant influence to the cohort of school alumni who had taken part previously, allowing them a continued role in the continued success of schools which had proven so formative to them.

WEEKEND SCHOOLS

Women who could not attend a week-long school, because they could not receive one of the limited number of scholarships, could not justify the time away from home, or because their area was unable to sustain one, often had the option of weekend schools. These were more frequent than week-long schools and covered more regions across the country. Whilst organisers like Anderson-Fenn found week-long schools preferable, with their 'more serious effort', 'greater elasticity' and them allowing students to spend 'extra time together', many areas found weekend schools better suited them.[151] In smaller districts or those where the party was less popular, a well-attended week-long school was out of reach, and even weekend schools could be difficult to sustain. When this happened, sections often worked with the wider labour movement, as in Beaconsfield in 1925, when a joint school was held with the Fabian Society, the ILP, the WCG, and women's trade unions. As a result, thirty-one women attended a school on 'Pure Milk Supply' and 'Municipal Finance' in Jordans Village.[152] In more dispersed areas, weekend schools simply made more logistical sense, allowing organisers to broaden attendance, as they did in Scotland and Wales. Scotland ran a

[148] '10th November, 1930', London Women's Advisory Council Minutes, June 1927 – October 1932, ACC/2417/H/001.
[149] '29th November, 1931', London Women's Advisory Council Minutes, June 1927 – October 1932, ACC/2417/H/001.
[150] 'January 4th, 1938', London Women's Advisory Council Minutes 1932 - 1940, ACC/2417/H/002.
[151] Lillian Anderson-Fenn, 'Week and week-end Schools', *Labour Women*, 21 (5) (1933), p. 75.
[152] *The Labour Woman*, 12 (8) (1924), p. 135.

successful programme of weekend schools, such as that held at Dollarbeg Castle in Glasgow in 1938. The school included sessions on the 'Maternity Services (Scotland) Act', and 'An Architect's View of Housing' and was attended by sixty women from as far away as Aberdeen.[153] Wales took a similar approach, with Elizabeth Andrews reflecting on the excellent contributions from forty-one women from across the country taught by Mrs Rackham in 1937.[154] Weekend schools were an essential addition to the residential programme, widening education to areas where schools could be unsustainable.

Weekend schools were also popular in areas that ran week-long schools previously and as supplementary sessions to those with week-long schools in the same year. Where they occurred, the number of women attending weekend schools often exceeded their longer counterparts, reflecting that in their shorter form they better met women's needs. Areas that ran weekend schools in place of week-long sessions included the North West of England whose organisers were 'embarrassed' by the popularity of two schools held in 1938 at Cleveleys and Arnside. Both were over-subscribed, Arnside so much so that it left organisers with insufficient room to sleep students and additional accommodation was booked on the day.[155] The school concentrated on international affairs, with eighty students in attendance.[156] Perhaps unsurprisingly, County Durham and Northumberland also utilised weekend schools to supplement their popular summer school programme.[157] Weekend schools proved popular with women across the country, requiring a lower time commitment to attend and often held closer to home, they were often the more accessible, if not the most beneficial, option.

Shorter schools also offered the opportunity to the broadest possible attendance through their affordability, and organisers worked to ensure this was the case. If a school was too costly, it would be re-arranged, as we can see by an attempt to organise a school at Hatfield College of Durham University which was abandoned when the fee was deemed to be too substantial. [158] The result was that individual sections could often be proud to support their members in attending weekend schools where they could not have sustained a summer school scholarship. The Colliery and Houghton sections often did so in County Durham and, if they

[153] *The Labour Woman*, 26 (6) (1938), p. 93.
[154] Organiser Report - Elizabeth Andrews - 'Weekend School 25th May', LHASC, LP/WORG/37/730.
[155] *The Labour Woman*, 26, (11) (1938), p. 171.
[156] *The Labour Woman*, 26 (11) (1938), p. 171.
[157] 'December 4th, 1928', Durham Advisory Council Minutes 8 May 1920 – 27 August 1923, DRO, D/X 1048/2.
[158] 'December 4th, 1928', Durham Advisory Council Minutes 1 Nov 1923 – 21 August 1929, DRO, D/X 1048/2.

did not have the funds, they organised parties, raffles, and lotteries to ensure that they were represented.[159] Here, leisure events and the so-called 'soppy' activities which are an often-criticised part of membership were instead a means by which women were able to fund and fulfil their own priorities. Because weekend schools were accessible in this way, attendance often spanned the regions in which they were held. Sixteen different sections from across the region were represented amongst thirty-eight visitors to the 1933 County Durham school in Roker, Sunderland, with lectures on Education, Agriculture, Banking and Finance. The event was so successful it was repeated a year later, and due to more than fifty applicants two separate weekend schools were arranged across September and October.[160] Where students did need to be funded by their Council, the cost of the programme meant this could easily be resolved too. Northumberland's 1930 weekend school was over-subscribed by two students, with fifty-four applicants for funded places and fifty-two available. This was attended to by Miss McGreevy of the Council making and raffling a leather purse to cover the deficit.[161] Weekend schools were sparing of the precious resources of women's time and section money, and they opened a shorter taste of education to many more women as a result.

These schools were abbreviated summer schools in content and form. The topics discussed were similar, including the labour movement, party organisation, 'women's issues', and domestic and foreign policy. Lectures were spread across three days instead of five, as in the Blackburn Advisory Council school held in Blackpool in May 1937. Here, the first half of Saturday and the last half of Monday were spent travelling, with the remainder of the time split into morning and afternoon lectures followed by discussions or group activities.[162] Weekend schools also offered a similar mix of leisure and education, often held in seaside destinations like Sunderland, Blackpool and, in Northumberland, Whitley Bay.[163] Elsewhere, they were held in country retreats and hotels with grounds where women could roam. As well as Dollarbeg, these included Heathmouth Hall in Ilkley, where South Yorkshire Advisory Council held their 1928 school.[164] These destinations were more accessible but offered a flavour of the same benefits, receiving similar feedback. Derbyshire women commented on

[159] Colliery Ward Women's Section Minutes, TWA, 5083/5; Houghton Women's Section Minutes, TWA, PO/LAB/78/1/2.
[160] 'December 15th, 1933', 'March 9th, 1934' Durham Advisory Council Minutes 16 September 1929 – 25, DRO, D/X 1048/3.
[161] 'August 28th, 1930, NRO, 4415/1/2.
[162] Organiser Report, 'Week-end school at Blackpool 1937', LHASC, LP/WORG/37/634.
[163] 'July 15th, 1931', Northumberland Labour Women's Advisory Council Committee Minute Books, 19219-2935, NRO 4415/1/2.
[164] *The Labour Woman*, 16 (9) (1928), p. 141.

the 'peaceful atmosphere' 'beautifully cooked food' and 'lessons…which will not be forgotten' in their 1928 school.[165] Mrs Greenhaigh of Nottinghamshire enjoyed the 'tea which had been prepared for us' and arrived home 'sunburnt, happy, and much wiser' from her experience of the weekend school in Crick the same year.[166] In an abbreviated form, weekend schools also offered women the chance to pursue leisure, education and recreation.

STUDENTS OF RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

As well as offering the opportunity to expand our understanding of how women engaged with leisure and learning at residential schools, the sources also allow us to better recognise who these women were. Studies of partisan and non-partisan organisations tend to identify some common characteristics of the most active interwar women. While Conservative Party auxiliaries developed a large cross-class membership, regular activity was usually limited to those middle-class women who had the time to spare.[167] Studies have shown how this also overlapped with the most active women in the NFWI, the NUTG and Housewives Associations across the country.[168] Working-class women's limited time restricted their ability to participate, and organisers also sensed a hesitance about their right to do so. Elizabeth Andrews saw that party education must address this issue as much as any gaps in women's knowledge. She saw her role as being to teach women not to be afraid of their freedom.[169] Despite this ambition, the demographics of the women who reached prominence in the Labour Party mirror other organisations. Most women who reached leadership fell into one of the following categories: they remained unmarried or were widowed, they were middle-class and had the resources to manage a home without their presence, or they married a man committed to the movement and willing to support their endeavours. Most early section leaders shared these characteristics, from the two thirds of the regional organisers with no children, to Marion Phillips and Margaret Bondfield who remained unmarried.[170] Perhaps the most significant features amongst them, which it would be reasonable to assume was carried into those women able to attend schools which were a significant commitment, was that that they were not young, married, working-class women with families at home.

[165] Ibid.
[166] Ibid.
[167] Stuart Ball, *Portrait of a party: The Conservative Party in Britain 1918-1945* (Oxford, 2013), 163.
[168] Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 31.
[169] Andrews, *A Woman's Work*, 29.
[170] Brian Harrison, 'Women's in a Men's House: the women MPs 1919-45', *The Historical Journal*, 29 (1986), 626; June Hannam, 'Women as Paid Organisers and Propagandists', pp. 74-5.

However, evidence suggests these women were just as likely to attend a residential school, making significant sacrifices to support themselves and others in doing so. County Durham records reveal that women who had been married dominated summer schools. Between 1931 and 1936, between thirty and forty women applied to take the scholarship exam each year. Of those, never more than one woman was unmarried.[171] Further, accounts suggest these were not just married women, but young married women with families at home. According to a report from one attendee, the 1936 North East school attracted 'fairly young women', thirty of whom were miners' wives, six railway workers' wives, three trade union organisers wives, thirty-three the wives of men in other occupations and sixteen the wives of the unemployed.[172] Only seven women were widowed, although ten young single women were also applying for a scholarship by this point. In the London Summer School of 1927, the attendance was said to be representative of society, with students between twenty and sixty. However, the remarkable feature was the very many young married women able to attend.[173] This seems to have continued and three years after the 1930 summer school was said to have been attended by those aged between twenty to seventy with the vast majority of them being housewives.[174] There are fewer accounts in *The Labour Woman* to establish the women attending weekend schools. However, the accounts we have reflect young women also predominated at least in some areas. Mrs Kirk of Derby described the group of twenty who attended her 1928 school as working mothers who had apprehensively left their families so that they could 'educate themselves' in order 'to take their own place in the world'.[175] While we might expect young working-class women with families at home to be unlikely to make the significant commitment to take the chance of a weekend, let alone a week, away from their domestic responsibilities, the accounts of those who attended give us cause to do so.

It should be said that there was significant regional variation in the popularity of schools across the country and the composition of those who attended them. While well-established schools in the North East, and to some extent those in London, tended to be oversubscribed, the same was not true elsewhere, and this seems to have been a particular problem in the

[171] Durham Advisory Council Minutes 16 Sep 1929 – 25 August 1937, DRO, D/X 1048/3.
[172] *The Labour Woman*, 24 (8) (1936), p. 128.
[173] *The Labour Woman*, 15 (9) (1927), p. 141.
[174] 'Summer School Report – 1930', London Women's Advisory Council Minutes June 1927 – October 1932, ACC/2417/H/001.
[175] *The Labour Woman*, 15 (9) (1927), p. 141.

Midlands. When becoming organiser for the region, Anderson-Fenn found her ambitions to teach women of their right to play and to learn remained a significant challenge. In her report, she observed the difficulties still present in 1937 in attracting women to summer schools, with several Advisory Councils pooling their efforts and still only managing to fill one session. She sensed a hesitance amongst local women and attributed this to the local culture, where she found women were treated less equally to men in comparison to the North East, with them altogether less able to leave their homes freely.[176] However, she also observed that such a culture could be challenged once women were persuaded to attend one school. She said this was due to the 'social education' schools provided, which she saw to be one of their most valuable aspects. In practice, this meant not only reassuring women they had a right to take part but also providing them with the tools to re-assert this right in their party and their community.[177] There were certainly challenges for some women in stepping away from their domestic duties, however this was a factor the section was always aware it must consider.

Despite this, the presence of young married women at residential schools became both increasingly common and continually curious for older students attending alongside them. For many older women, the fact so many of their younger peers could attend was a testament to how far their position in society and the family had changed and how the support networks they had built facilitated their independence. Older members of the London school were fascinated and inspired by younger students. One was struck by the changes in women's status during her lifetime, remarking her husband would have 'consulted doctors with the view of having her certified' if she suggested leaving her home and young family for a week of schooling.[178] Another reflected the importance women placed on the summer schools, and the feat their networks accomplished in ensuring attendance, recounting stories of neighbours who took in children while their mothers were away or those who helped them to raise funds for their place.[179] This is not to suggest that attending a residential school was usually easy. For many women, even those with husbands devoted to the movement, the big challenge was justifying to themselves and to their families that this time was valuable. This was not always a matter of a concern over a neglect of domestic duties. For example, Gibb recounted the case

[176] Organiser Report - Lillian Anderson-Fenn - 'Week's Summer School Penmaenawr', LHASC, LP/WORG/37/657.
[177] Organiser Report - Lillian Anderson-Fenn - 'Week's Summer School Penmaenawr', LHASC, LP/WORG/37/657.
[178] *The Labour Woman*, 15 (9) (1927), p. 141.
[179] Ibid.

of Mrs Parr from Ashington who could hardly relax at a thirties summer school, because of her anxiety get back to her husband to check he had not put them into debt in her absence.[180] However, there are many cases of women worrying how their husbands might take it, or how they would be perceived, for taking this time away from home. Here, it was helpful that women could claim they were not only developing themselves, but that in doing so they could be better advocates for their cause. Accounts from East Anglia in 1938 show how newcomers were concerned whether they should have left 'dad and children' at home, especially when they worried they were attending a school which could have been of little value if it was 'a bit above them'.[181] However, by the end of the week, all of the women who attended agreed never mind 'dad and the boys, the washing, the drudgery' one week in the village of Great Chesterford had considerable benefits and had been worth struggling for.[182]

The women in these accounts, and the many others who submitted testimonies, justified the sacrifices they and their families made based on the ideas, experiences, and associations they gained at school. In turn, they said these made them better servants to the party and its cause. They left more 'qualified to advocate for the cause of Socialism', 'ready to work harder for the Cause' and 'equipped as a group to bring Socialism within their time'.[183] These accounts have notable echoes of the justifications women in associational movements made about their activities. The value of civic and home-craft training was seen to make women better citizens, wives, and mothers and, when considering these organisations, Beaumont has shown that by embracing domesticity they could advocate for a greater public role for their membership. They successfully argued women's domestic expertise gave them the right to contribute in local and national affairs, and while they accepted domesticity, they rejected the idea this should be women's exclusive focus.[184] McCarthy makes similar observations about middle-class Service Clubs in the period, reflecting how their members associations to invest new meanings in the roles of full-time mother and housewife, which in turn allowed them to lay claim to the public sphere by reinventing male ideals of service and contribution.[185] While party political participation has traditionally been excluded from some of these discussions,

[180] Transcript of tape conservation with Margaret Hunter Gibb, The Riding, Cambo., NRO 2973/22.
[181] *The Labour Woman*, 26 (9) (1938), p. 130.
[182] *The Labour Woman*, 26 (9) (1938), p. 130.
[183] *The Labour Woman*, 22 (8) (1934), p. 120, *The Labour Woman*, 24 (8) (1936), p. 128, *The Labour Woman*, 26 (9) (1938), p. 131.
[184] Caitriona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, pp. 7-10.
[185] Helen McCarthy, 'Service Clubs, citizenship, and equality: gender relations and middle-class associations in Britain between the wars', *Historical Research*, 81 (213) (2008), p. 551.

the point seems more relevant with activism, especially with women whose husband and families supported the Labour Party's cause. Women could, and did, justify their access to dedicated time for leisure and learning away from home, supported by their peers and families, because it made them better advocates for their party and campaigners for socialism.

ONE-DAY SCHOOLS

Alongside offering women the chance to enjoy an education in the recreational surroundings of a residential school, regional organisations and local sections worked to supplement their programmes of education with one day schools held closer to home. While they also allowed a limited degree of socialising, with studying interspersed with tea and some entertainment, these schools were often more business-focussed events. Held locally and with less of a time commitment, one day schools were far more accessible to the so-called ordinary Labour member. They also offered women a taste of an education which focussed on policies, organising, matters of local, national, and international interest. However, they would occasionally be specialist in nature, training the generation of Secretary's, Chairwomen and other officials who were building the organisation on the ground. Like their weekend and week-long counterparts, one-day schools demonstrate the section's commitment to the education of its members. Perhaps more importantly, they show that particularly in some regions, women grasped the chance for education wherever it was made available to them.

In terms of popularity, it was once again in County Durham that one day schools seemed to have been the most successful from the start. While the Regional Advisory Council was organising them from its inception, the first recorded attendance in their minutes can be found in 1925. The school, held by regional organiser Anderson-Fenn, was planned to be an organisation class for Chairwomen, Secretaries, and Treasurers primarily. However, as the invitation was made available to all of those interested in the organisation of the section, the school was more successful than those who planned it expected, with an estimated attendance of two hundred and seventy-five women from across the region.[186] This success meant that in future years, Durham's approach retained the same model, using one day schools to supplement weekend and week-long schools but focussing them on the business of party

[186] 'January 8th, 1925', Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council Minute Books – Nov 1923 – Aug 1929, DRO D/X 1048/2.

organisation. For example, the 1927 school was also held by Anderson-Fenn and dealt with section work and conduct.[187] By 1930, when Anderson-Fenn had moved on, the council organised a one-day school under the stewardship of Scottish Organiser Miss Rutherford. While it was once again primarily for the benefit of Chairwomen, Secretaries, and Treasurers, the invitation remained open to all, and organisers were very happy to see one-hundred and fifty-eight women in attendance across the region to be lectured on 'The Duties of Section Officials and the Responsibilities of Section Members'.[188] Whilst business focussed, the one day schools in Durham demonstrate the premium that local members placed upon their education and their commitment to playing an active role within the organisation locally.

The popularity of one day schools in Durham seem to have been largely maintained and this was, of course, in part due to their accessibility. By 1937, one hundred and sixty-six women were still attending a school held by the council.[189] These were numbers that far outstripped the weekend school held in the same year, where thirty-eight students were present to enjoy a residential programme away from their home. A review of local minute books demonstrates why this was practically the case. The Houghton-le-Spring section, which was represented by the County Durham Regional Advisory Council, had an average attendance of thirty-five women at its meetings throughout much of the interwar period. In 1933, it was successfully able to finance the full expenses to send twelve of these members to the one day school which was being held in nearby Roker, Sunderland.[190] County Durham therefore demonstrates women's commitment to their education in the party at this time, and shows how a range of different measures which combined residential schools with one day sessions, and which focussed both of questions of interest and the practical business of organising, opened up the opportunity of development to the widest number of women in the region.

One day schools opened up education as they allowed flexibility and because they naturally represented a reduced commitment in both time and cost for councils and their members. As it financially struggled to arrange a weekend school in 1933, the West Yorkshire Advisory Council invited Grace Colman, mentioned earlier in this chapter, to speak. Unfortunately,

[187] 'September 15th, 1927', Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council Minute Books – Nov 1923 – Aug 1929, DRO D/X 1048/2.
[188] 'March 25th, 1930', Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council Minute Books – Sep 1929 – Aug 1937, DRO D/X 1048/3.
[189] 'May 24th, 1937', Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council Minute Books – Sep 1929 – Aug 1937, DRO D/X 1048/3.
[190] 'July 31st, 1933', Houghton-le-Spring Women's Section Minutes, TWA PO.LAB/8/1/2.

even with the reduced length, Miss Colman's travelling expenses were deemed too high to make the school affordable and so the council agreed to look elsewhere for their planned August session.[191] Their effort to keep an eye on costs seem to have been effective, with the Bramley section able to send all of their members to the school of 1927, with the cost covered from section funds.[192] Elsewhere in the country, the need to keep costs down meant that the members of Advisory Councils were creative in their approach. In Manchester, Mrs Stocks offered not only her services as lecturer but her home as a lecture hall for a one day school in 1932 which was held on 'What do we mean by Socialism?'.[193] The school was to have only a minimal fee, which itself was only intended to ensure that each woman had a cup of tea and cake during the break, and the council gladly agreed to Mrs Stocks offer. One day schools were therefore designed to be as accessible as possible, held close to home and with a minimal contribution required by women or their sections, they opened up some of the benefits of the residential school programmes to women nearby their local communities.

While one day schools were often a popular educational feature of councils across the country, there are no records of others reaching County Durham levels of attendance. More typical was the school held in nearby Northumberland in 1936, which had an attendance of thirty-eight women who between them represented a total of eleven sections in the region.[194] Such attendances were despite steps the council took to ensure schools were as accessible as possible, including from 1933 making the school completely free of charge, with tea being arranged by women from the central Newcastle women's section and members being asked to bring their own food.[195] However, there is little sense from the minutes that Northumberland women were disappointed with this turnout. Like Durham, they had aimed the material of their schools primarily at the officials within local sections, and these numbers would ensure that these were represented. However, we do once again see that County Durham in particular was a stronghold when it came to the popularity of section education.

[191] 'May 10th, 1933', West Yorkshire Women's Advisory Council Minute Book, Jan 1932 – Jul 1944, WYL853/89.
[192] 'May 3rd, 1927', Bramley Women's Guild Minute Book, May 1926 – Nov 1929, WYL853/85.
[193] 'July 2nd, 1932', Manchester Advisory Council Minute Books 1928-1935, M449/1.
[194] '28th April 1936', Northumberland Labour Women's Advisory Council Minute Books, 1935 – 1940, NRO 4415/1/3.
[195] 'March 10th, 1933', Northumberland Labour Women's Advisory Council Minute Books, 1929 – 1935, NRO 4415/1/2.

While some areas were happy for one day schools to concentrate on those with positions of responsibility within the section and therefore accept lower attendances, this could prove a cause for concern elsewhere. The records for York, which shared an organiser with Durham and Northumberland, do not offer confirmed attendances for schools earlier in the period. However, the one-day school of 1931 provided by Hunter Gibb had such a small attendance that the organisation marked their disappointment in the records.[196] It should be said that this school was held at a section and not a council level, and that attendance would naturally be lower, but even by its organisers' expectations it proved disappointing. However, to combat this, the section started to move away from schools that concentrated specifically on the roles and expectations of section leaders and prominent figures, whilst still remaining relevant to both party policy and ideology. The school of 1937 focussed on Labour's Immediate Programme for Government, in 1938 upon 'The International Situation' as well as 'Socialism and Conditions in Britain', and in 1939 on 'Labour and the War'.[197] Each of these sessions seemed far more well attended, with around forty students, in part because of the curriculum in the face of upcoming elections and the war, as well as the fact that the section began to invite nearby sections including Scarborough to join. Just as week-long and weekend schools took different shapes across the country to cater to the needs and interests of their memberships, one day schools were held which took account of local circumstances.

Even when they strayed from organising, schools retained the flavour of programmes of education that otherwise seem to have proved popular with Labour Women and that many in the party saw to be their sphere of influence. A review of the schools held across Wales in 1937 show a mixture of focus on questions of health, welfare, children, and food supplies. These included schools on 'The Children's Charter' with discussions on post-natal clinics, toddlers clinics and child guidance clinics, held in Llanelli, Tonypandy and Treorchy.[198] Pontypridd also had a school spent partly on the charter, supplemented with the other half of the day being focussed on pensions.[199] Elsewhere, there were schools on subjects including 'Nutrition and Food Supplies' and 'The Science of Nutrition' in Colwyn Bay, Rhyl, Abertillery and Bedwellty.[200] The subjects of these schools was partly as a reflection of the speakers available in an area, with one individual able to cover several sections and regional

[196] 'September 8th, 1931', York Women's Section Minute Book, 1927 – 1933, LAB/1/5/2.
[197] York Women's Section Minute Book 1933 – 1940, LAB/1/5/3.
[198] Organiser Report – Elizabeth Andrews - 'Rhondda East & West – October 18', LHASC LP/WORG/37/324.
[199] Organiser Report – Elizabeth Andrews – 'Pontypridd – October 28th', LHASC LP/WORG/37/411.
[200] Organiser Report – Elizabeth Andrews – 'Abertillery – January 20th', LHASC LP/WORG/37/454.

organisations. They also reflect the much-criticised tendency of the section to focus on so-called women's issues when it came to policy at the expense of other matters. For example, a 1935 school of the Northumberland Labour Women's Federation which had been cancelled because the federation was more concerned with inactivity in the area was hastily re-arranged on the subject of Maternal Mortality after it was urged by the Chief Women's Officer to give careful consideration to a report which had been produced.[201] However, as Thane, Hunt, and others have observed, it was this focus on questions such as welfare which made the women's section so appealing to voters and members in the period.[202] Similarly, the schools in Wales seem to have been popular sites for discussion and debate that were well attended. While none reached the levels of County Durham, areas with small memberships regularly achieved thirty-five students, and Tonypandy had sixty-five women present from across five sections at its session.[203] One day schools therefore show us women's continued commitment to section education, in particular in areas of interest to them, through to the end of our period.

While one day schools were often more business focussed, owing to the limited time available, organisers also found room for a mixture of leisure in these sessions wherever it was possible. As it sought to appeal to as many women as possible, the school in York had events which included songs from the Co-operative Choir and dances from Mrs Holt's nearby school in 1931.[204] Demonstrating the popularity of local subjects in the area that will be considered in the next chapter, it also followed this in 1932 with two interesting readings on Yorkshire during the interval.[205] Whilst many other areas do not mention formal leisure activities outside of socialising over tea, there is also evidence that the approach of adopting a recreational setting where it was affordable was implemented at one-day schools. In West Yorkshire, the Hunslet Carr section was pleased to sponsor Mrs Holmes and Mrs Tallent as delegates of the school that was held in Roundhay Park in Leeds in 1931. This approach continued and in 1937 school, when the council could not move forward with the school it had planned at the Clarion Camp in Ilkey, it arranged a one day school where women could

[201] 'May 20th, 1935', Northumberland Labour Women's Federation, 1932 – 1936, NRO 04415/2/1.
[202] Pat Thane, 'What difference did the vote make?', in Vickery, A., *Women Privilege and Power* (London, 2001), pp. 253-88; Karen Hunt, 'Making Politics in Local Communities: Labour women in interwar Manchester' in Worley, M., *Labour's Grass Roots: Essays on the Activities of Local Labour Parties and Members, 1918-1945* (London, 2005), pp. 79-101.
[203] Organiser Report – Elizabeth Andrews - 'Rhondda East & West – October 18', LHASC LP/WORG/37/324.
[204] 'September 8th, 1931', York Women's Section Minute Book, 1927 – 1933, LAB 1/5/2.
[205] 'September 13th, 1932', York Women's Section Minute Book, 1927 – 1933, LAB 1/5/2.

enjoy all that Horsforth Hall Park offered instead.[206] To a lesser extent, but still in the model of residential schools, one day schools also offered students the chance for leisure, recreation and above all else socialising as they came together as a wider group of members to learn.

While week-long and even weekend schools were a significant financial commitment often held once or twice a year, one day schools were an accessible and affordable way for women to access educational programmes much more frequently and closer to home. A large proportion of women, or even an entire section, could attend a school that offered them the chance to study the business of organising or questions of party policy that were of interest to them. To a lesser extent, these schools could offer recreation, leisure, and socialising. However, for the most part, they remained settings where women took time out of their daily lives to develop their own knowledge and understanding. Importantly for organiser Annie Townley, in towns and industrial centres where women 'were not able to get to weekend or Summer Schools' they provided students the ability to 'get used to sound of her own voice in public'.[207] In doing so, they increased the number of active members 'able to take office, act as delegates and preside at meetings across the country'.[208] In County Durham in particular, the schools trained hundreds of women each year, whose commitment to attendance demonstrate that even sessions concentrated on section business had a wide ranging appeal in this mining community. Across the country, they demonstrate another way in which women leveraged their labour membership to achieve the development which they were seeking and which the section, as a vehicle for party activism, was often best placed to fulfil for them.

CONCLUSION

The structured opportunities for education that women accessed as members of the Labour Party challenge our understanding of what membership meant to them. It is true that the women's section was not the only, nor close to being the largest, organisation that had some provision for the education and training of its membership. From the NFWI and the NUTG, to Housewives' Associations and feminist organisations, there was a widespread commitment to the civic education of this generation of newly or soon-to-be enfranchised women. Further,

[206] 'July 13th, 1937', West Yorkshire Women's Advisory Council Minute Book, Jan 1932 – Jul 1944, WYL853/89.
[207] 'Willingly to School', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1933), p. 43.
[208] Ibid.

in the Labour movement, trade unions and those organisations such as the WEA, the NCLC and Ruskin College who sought their funding, had long been developing programmes of education that were focussed upon working-class people. Where this omitted the needs of women, the affiliated WCG also stepped in and many of its thousands of members benefitted from the learning that it supplied throughout the interwar period. However, none of these organisations had a programme which was as extensive, diverse in the range of options it provided or as targeted to the needs and interests of working-class housewives and mothers in particular as that which was provided by Labour's women's section between the wars.

This curriculum of education, largely developed at a regional level under national guidance, can be drawn upon to help us address a number of key questions within the historiography. Most prominently, as the introduction to this thesis suggests, historians have asked why women joined a male-dominated party and in so doing chose their class over their sex.[209] As this chapter demonstrates, with limited public opportunities for impact, Labour Women, like their peers in other organisations, decided to participate in the best way to meet their needs. They used the vehicle that best represented them to access the opportunities for growth that they wanted to enjoy, whilst also allowing them to achieve at least some of their political goals within a limited sphere of influence. As Chapter 3 and 4 will illustrate, some saw the section as 'The Housewife's Trade Union', where they worked together to assert their rights, including those for independent leisure, as trade unions fought to do for their own members in industry.[210] However, for others, such as Andrews, it was a 'Working Women's University', where women could grasp the opportunity for learning and development, learning to use their voice and to an make impact in their homes, sections, and communities.

Residential schools provide a case study of the section's awareness of the circumstances that were necessary for learning to be effective, as well as the significant steps even young women with families at home would take to attend schools that spoke to their needs. These schools mixed leisure with learning as this was what so many members desperately needed, both as a matter of course and as the means through which they could fully engage with scholarship. They focussed upon issues of interest to women and made their programmes, as

[209] Harold L. Smith, 'Sex vs Class: British feminists and the labour movement, 1919-1929', *Historian* 47 (1984), pp. 37-6.
[210] A common image which is outlined here: 'Who speaks for married women?', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 27, no. 8 (1939), p. 155.

well as the pre-work that was required to obtain a scholarship to attend a place at them, as accessible as possible. Further, those who organised schools adapted their programmes for the local audience in order to ensure success. In London, those women who had attended at least one school became a community, who worked together over subsequent years to plan the best and most engaging programme for those students who would come after them.

The stories considered earlier in this chapter, and the many more like them, demonstrate some of the greatest successes of residential schools. For Anderson-Fenn, they offered women 'a background for their work, fostering comradeship' providing 'a common understanding and sense of commitment to each other and the movement'. This was intended to provide a sense of 'the bigness of adventure and a social education which breaks down inhibitions'.[211] As schools up and down the country adopted this approach, we can see that far from women being content to see their needs for independent leisure or learning being subsumed within the family upon marriage, Labour Women took the chance and supported one another in fulfilling these important needs. With some notable differences across regions, which organisers attempted to address where possible, women became increasingly confident of asserting their needs for independent leisure and learning and taking steps to fill them.

Without question, this was made easier because the party's programme of education made women better fighters for their party and the cause of socialism. Women could, and did, justify the sacrifices that they and their families made on the basis that attendance at residential schools offered benefits to the movement, particularly within Labour households and families. This had similarities of the justifications that women also made for their participation in other organisations, based on the demonstration and enhancement of domestic skills, and the necessity of civic education and participation as newly enfranchised citizens. However, as we see with one day schools, members' commitment to those subjects deemed to be so-called women's issues or topics which could also be seen as dry and functional and primarily of benefit to the party also reflected women's own needs and interests. In County Durham in particular, classes on party business remained hugely popular throughout the period, reflecting local women's continued commitment to the cause, and refuting any sense that their role in the party was primarily about deference to the mainstream of the party.

[211] Organiser Report - Lillian Anderson-Fenn - 'Week's Summer School Penmaenawr', LHASC, LP/WORG/37/657.

The next chapter demonstrates how the residential and one day schools here were only the start of the section's educative ambitions. As it will show, women took the opportunities for education further within the confines of their local section meeting. Here, there was a year-round programme of speakers who crossed regions and the country. The nature of the speeches they delivered, and their reception amongst local women are considered. The libraries, speaking classes, and training in a range of political and domestic tasks which was part of the weekly fabric of section life also receive more attention. In all of this, the educational value of *The Labour Woman* itself, which permeated meetings and was used by speakers, local women, and organisers as a syllabus for all they needed to learn will emphasise the important role national leadership had to play once again. Further, we see more evidence of how the section co-operated with organisations like the WEA, NCLC and WCG.

However, residential schools arguably offered even greater benefits for the movement and particularly for those women able to attend them than any of these endeavours. This is not something we can necessarily quantify numerically or in terms of substantive party political outcomes. The records available do not allow us to fully address some of the challenges about internal party influence raised by the historiography and state confidently, for example, how those women who attended school across the country leveraged newfound skills and confidence in how they dealt with the local party. As well as this, there is also the significant regional variety already demonstrated within this chapter that makes any universal statement about impact impossible. Those women from County Durham, Northumberland and London who attended were far more accustomed to residential schools by the end of our period and we also see significant variety with one day schools, with no area coming close to County Durham in its provision. Definitive and conclusive statements about the value of residential schools, even with the wealth of evidence available here, are therefore still unavailable.

However, the sources do allow us to demonstrate that there were some examples of enhanced influence that could be ascribed to residential schools and to say that these did reach across different areas within the country. Organisers claimed they saw 'miracles wrought as the result of these schools', not only in the knowledge imbibed but in 'the courage and self-reliance they helped to unveil'.[212] One example from Elizabeth Andrews reflects why

[212] *The Labour Woman*, 15 (5) (1933), p. 75.

residential schools were her most significant source of pride. She gave an account from the Cardiff Central Committee, where the section was concerned about communist infiltration. Andrews attended a meeting to defend the women's position but found herself superfluous, with Mrs Kerrigan and Mrs Wellington, both of whom attended a school at Barry, leading the charge. She saw with pride as they took courage in both hands, not only challenging local councillor Mr Robson but doing so on 'such equal' terms.[213] Many women felt similarly confident of their role following their attendance at a residential school in particular.

However, to some extent, enhanced internal influence was a helpful addition to a system of week-long, weekend and one day schools that addressed more intrinsic personal and political needs for the students who attended them. Women who were over-stretched and had little time to devote to learning, did leave citing knowledge, confidence, and the sense of belonging to a much wider movement. Just as importantly, they had received a flavour of the liberation they could achieve through their participation in a political party. To quote Mrs Hodgkins of Silksworth once again, within the confines of school women 'tasted for a short time what we would like all workers to have all the time, when Labour comes into its own and we have all things for all men'.[214] As men used trade union membership to develop themselves, their peers in the section built an organisation which was catered to their own needs. It was, at least in part, a 'Working Women's University', where women claimed the fulfilment of education and the liberation of leisure, if only for a time. These were opportunities which they were then able to seize upon, as they continued to develop ways to teach and learn from each other within the confines of their local party section meetings.

[213] Organiser Report - Elizabeth Andrews - 'Cardiff Central Committee - July 2nd, 1936', LHASC, LP/WORG/37/258.
[214] 'Labour Women at School', *The Labour Woman*, 16 (9) (1928), p. 141.

CHAPTER TWO: 'THE WORKING WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY': LOCAL SCHOLARLY COMMUNITIES

While section schools benefited huge numbers throughout the interwar period, the learning opportunities most Labour Women enjoyed came closer to home. From the founding of the section, meetings were intended to be productive, accessible, and informative, with an early pamphlet describing the ideal schedule as being a mix of business, propaganda, leisure, and education.[215] Education at a local level came in many forms, from arranged lectures and demonstrations by members and invited guests, to reading groups and debates, study circles, and the dissemination and discussion of *The Labour Woman* and other party circulars. This chapter reviews the educational opportunities women enjoyed within their section and demonstrate how members used this time to develop themselves. It demonstrates a wide and diverse curriculum that local sections were able to access, one that organisers frequently sought to cultivate to ensure its maximum possible compatibility with the aims and ideas of the Labour Party. However, while efforts to structure the programme came from the top and much useful guidance was well received, and this chapter draws upon the journal *The Labour Woman* as a result, there is no question that it was women at a local level who often shaped the education they received. Occasional tensions notwithstanding, it is also clear that section meetings became an outlet for learning, a local marketplace of ideas where women could access those speakers, literature, and take part in the discussions, which most enriched them.

While some of the educational activities that took place at a local level are difficult to capture from records, two of the most important roles the section played were the encouragement of reading amongst their membership and the training and distribution of speakers who hosted regular lectures and talks at section meetings. In terms of reading, the section looked to harness the significant opportunities which a growing reading public represented. Its activities at a local level included study circles and, even more extensively, lending libraries which sprung up across the country and offered affordable access to a range of texts. In this endeavour, the section continued work which some in the Co-operative movement had already begun, with Jackson for example noting the significant progress which the nineteenth

[215] Marion Phillips, *Organisation of Women within the Labour Party,* Labour Party Pamphlet (London, 1918), Hathi Trust, http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31175035645426. Accessed 10 May 2020, p.3

century society in Lincoln had made.[216] These activities have also often been overlooked in the scholarship, and as Woodin notes in his consideration of the education offered by the movement, this is partly because of a narrow conception of education, often recognised primarily as 'structured and directed learning'.[217] Women's experiences of learning within the section have been similarly overlooked, including in their structured forms considered so far, but perhaps even more so in those activities such as reading and the discussion of texts.

In considering the texts women were encouraged to engage with, we can see the section had a very clear view of what suitable reading should be, however we also see an organisation which needed accommodate women's interests, bending to trends including in popular fiction. When considering how Labour Women read, there is perhaps no better placed to start than *The Labour Woman*. It may seem unusual to draw heavily upon a national publication in what is a study of education at a local level. However, the journal was used not only to recommend those texts which women might enjoy but it was also the sole text, perhaps with the exception of *The Daily Herald*, which most members across the country read in common. The publication was recommended and sold week in, week out, by a team of literature secretaries, one per section. It was present in most sections, most of the time, and it also frequently entered into a two-way dialogue with its readers, seeking contributions of what should be included and trying to establish what the balance between education and entertainment should be. As will be shown, in order for this to be successful, the journal was never simply an informative resource. Editors and contributors ensured it was accessible and attractive to the widest readership, battling rising costs and taking reader feedback into account. In considering this, the first half of this chapter demonstrates that like many of the section's educational activities, its interest in facilitating women's reading and shaping its contents had much success. Libraries sprung up and sections and regional organisations financed and furnished them, *The Labour Woman* and other texts recommended by the party were purchased and read frequently. However, women also demonstrated their own interests, in both education and entertainment, making these heard by editors and their peers, while grasping all of the opportunities to engage with literature that their membership had to offer.

[216] Andrew Jackson, 'The Cooperative Movement and the Education of Working Men and Women: Provision by a local society in Lincoln, England, 1861-1914', *International Labour and Working-Class History*, 90 (2016), pp. 28-51.
[217] Tom Woodin, 'Co-operative Education in Britain during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Context, identities and learning', in Anthony Webster; Linda Shaw; David Stewart; John K. Walton and Alyson Brown (eds), *The Hidden Alternative* (New York, 2013), pp. 79-85.

While it can be difficult to establish what women read from the party records that are available, we can establish a clearer view of the speeches and lectures they enjoyed through local section minutes. As they did with residential and one day schools, regional and district organisations had a significant role in providing each section with the opportunity to arrange an informative and interesting programme of speakers throughout the year. They made provisions to train speakers from within their ranks, in the way that was recommended by party leaders and communicated through *The Labour Woman*. Once they were trained, and with the additional support of others from within the movement and other organisations, they collated and distributed lists of those who were available to offer lectures, as well as funding some programmes and co-ordinating between sections to ensure that best practice was shared. In each of these ways, the national leadership's influence, mediated and moulded by their regional organisations, was able to ensure that speakers were available across the country.

However, neither national leadership nor regional organisations came to play as important a role as local sections, who truly defined what 'The Working Women's University' meant closer to home. Programmes recommended at a national level, and built and financed regionally, were shaped by women in their communities. To varying extents and with different aims, sections confidently expressed their own priorities, building curricula that met their needs. In some areas, these focussed on policy and organising, in what appears to have been a nod to the desires of section leaders as well as a real representation of the interests of women in the area. Elsewhere, they focussed upon issues that were interesting to women outside of party politics, either because they spoke to their lives, were relevant locally, or simply provided them with the opportunity to escape these realities and have a taste of a new topic, and some awareness of new cultures and geographies. Here, as in the literature they consumed, we see the desire for escapism influencing the programmes which women wanted to receive and often most enjoyed. Outside of residential or one-day schools, women grasped opportunities to learn close to home. They worked to build sections which facilitated learning, enjoying the content they wished to read alongside peers and organising their own speakers. In all of this, they were offered one of the widest and most extensive opportunities to pursue an adult education of interest to them from any organisation in the interwar period.

THE LABOUR WOMAN AND THE SECTION'S READING PUBLIC

While the educational activities considered elsewhere in this thesis were often successful because of their collaborative nature, it could be said that early section leaders paid as much attention to the solitary opportunities for learning which came with a wide reading public. The task of cultivating texts Labour Women could read, ensuring these were ideologically aligned, and facilitating access as widely as possible, had a high priority. At its simplest, it involved *The Labour Woman*'s publication. Often light in tone but always explicitly political, the journal provided factual pieces from women around the country and the world, shared the thoughts and ideas of leading figures in the movement, and made recommendations of what should be being done locally and which other publications should be read. As well as all of this, it included competitions, housewives' pages, recipes and, to compete with growing trends in women's magazines, its own fictional serialisations. The commitment of the publication and its two Chief Women's Officer editors to women's reading was matched by their team of regional organisers who contributed to its pages as well as to local section libraries. However, all of this was built upon by hundreds of Literature Secretaries across the country. The early section took women's reading seriously and the pages that follow demonstrate that this served a purpose for the organisation and addressed its own concerns about the influence certain texts could have. However, it was women themselves who took the chance for education that the literature recommended by the section provided. They contributed to *The Labour Woman* to shape its content, fought to make it affordable, built libraries so that they could read more widely and then went on to use all that they had learned to inform the activities and discussions which took place in section meetings and activities.

As the educative value of publications was a central concern in section life, the role of Literature Secretary was one of the most important duties a woman could fulfil in her area. Alongside the Chairman and Secretary, she would be elected by her section annually, with women often rotating the role year-on-year. As well as distributing pamphlets, publications such as *The Daily Herald*, and other texts, the primary responsibility of the literature secretary was the promotion, distribution, and sale of *The Labour Woman*. They attended weekly or fortnightly section meetings, providing regular updates, as well party rallies and events that were open to non-members where they could also sell the publication.[218] Their

[218] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 7, no. 11, p. 119.

propagandist role was also expanded to other non-party events, and included spreading the message locally wherever it was possible, for example by asking local libraries and other organisations to sell the journal on their behalf. The extensive remit placed upon Literature Secretaries included that *all* members should purchase a copy of *The Labour Woman* monthly, as well as that a wider readership of women and even men from the area should also be obtained.[219] The literature secretary was therefore expected to turn up to meetings having read the literature she intended to sell, picked out interesting articles for discussion, and be prepared to make an announcement on what was available to buy.[220] Their success was important not only because it could be used as an indicator of how effective a section might be but also it also had a direct impact on how profitable it may be, as *The Labour Woman* was intended to realise a profit to be re-invested into local activities. As a propagandist, fundraiser, and educator, the Literature Secretary played a central role within section life.

While accounts across the interwar period reflect that Literature Secretaries were often successful in this role, as the national circulation of *The Labour Woman* was constantly said to be increasing, the role faced many local challenges. Across the area covered by the West Yorkshire Women's Advisory Council, circulation remained a challenge up until the mid-1930s.[221] Even reports from areas that had more active memberships, including the Northumberland Women's Advisory Council, suggest that they faced similar challenges.[222] There is evidence that at least some of these problems were due to the cost of the publication. While both editors emphasised that the cost had been kept as low as possible, it was seen to be too expensive in poorer areas, especially when combined with other publications such as *The Daily Herald* and *New Clarion* that women were keen and often expected to purchase. Despite efforts to keep costs low, the price had changed across the period, starting at 1d, before rising to 1½d and again to 2d by 1932. Through their secretaries and regional organisations, women consistently raised their concerns that the cost of the journal had become too high, and attempts were made to address their concerns. Less than six months into her tenure Sutherland reduced the cost back to 1½d in 1932, albeit with some concessions. In the issue she announced the changes, Sutherland acknowledged the 'poverty of members in many areas [had] made it very difficult for them to find the coppers' and said

[219] 'Duties of the Literature Secretary', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 20, no. 7, p. 127.
[220] Ibid.
[221] 'Women's Advisory Council – A Successful Year', West Yorkshire Women's Advisory Council Minute Book January 1932-July 1944, WYL853/89.
[222] '30 June 1938', Northumberland Labour Women's Advisory Committee Minute Book, NRO4415/1/3.

while she was glad to reduce the cost, this would result still in a sixteen-page journal, but one which would have rather smaller pages than women had enjoyed previously.[223] For Literature Secretaries, especially in poorer areas, there is evidence that affordability proved a challenge.

Even at its new lower price, the cost of *The Labour Woman* continued to prove prohibitive for many members. The Gorton Women's Section in Manchester discussed this concern in 1933, expressing their wish to continue to support the journal as well as other publications where possible, but how this was proving challenging locally.[224] This difficulty was continuously brought to the attention of the section leadership and the editor in the years which followed. The Literature Secretary of South Ward women's section in Wales wrote to Sutherland stating that the section would have to cancel their subscription to the publication if this price could not be lowered to a penny, as women could not afford to purchase the books which then became loss making to the section when they remained unsold on the table.[225] Sutherland's reply, which was dismissive given her awareness of the challenges, suggested that price was not the principal problem and that the secretary should instead do something to address the 'indifference' and 'unwillingness to read' in her area.[226] However, feedback from the South West to Sutherland that same year suggested the cost was equally prohibitive for their members in the same year.[227] While literature secretaries aimed at the widest distribution of *The Labour Woman* to broaden its reach, delivered updates on circulation in almost every section meeting, and were encouraged to do so from by their organisers, this often came with significant challenges and the cost could be first amongst them.

Despite these challenges, most sections purchased several copies of the publication monthly and local minutes reflect that the journal was used in educational activities locally. Practical purposes of the journal included the information it provided on opportunities which were open to sections to broaden their learning opportunities. For example, the journal carried regular guides provided by local advisory councils on the speakers which they had available, and which could be booked by other sections regionally or nationally.[228] However, the publication and its articles were also used to structure and provide content for lectures and

[223] 'All about Ourselves', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 20, no. 12 (1932), p. 12.
[224] 'June 13th, 1933', Gorton Labour Party Women's Section Minutes 5 November 1929 – 5 June 1934, M450/1.
[225] Letter to M Sutherland from Mrs Hatto – 11 February 1937, WORG/37/280.
[226] Letter to Mrs Hatto from M Sutherland – 16 February 1937, LP/WORG/37/279.
[227] Officers' Business Conference – 7 April 1937, Annie Somers Organiser Reports, LP/WORG/37/672.
[228] For example: 'Women Speakers – January List', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 10, no.1 (1922), p. 5. Further details of this are also included later on in this chapter.

discussions locally. For example, the small Hamilton section in Scotland designated one night per month where they would get together and read and discuss the articles of that month's edition of the publication.[229] In York, a speaker failed to arrive in 1932 and Mrs Lamb was able to step up to deliver a pre-planned lecture from *The Labour Woman*, resulting in much discussion amongst the members present.[230] As noted in the previous chapter of this thesis, the publication was also used as the basis for exams that students completed in order to gain a funded place at residential schools. *The Labour Woman* was therefore an important, if expensive, part of how the women's section facilitated its local programmes of education.

However, *The Labour Woman* was never simply an educational publication. It also provided lighter content, both from its perspective as a party publication and as a result of much of its readership occupying roles inside the home. In the first category, the publication provided updates on party business, including the growth of the women's organisation as well as the wider labour movement. In the second, it included articles, features, stories, and competitions that focussed upon the home and women's role in it. Like other elements of section life, this domestic focus could be seen to reflect the limited ambitions the organisation and its journal had for the position of women in society. However, like these activities, the domestic focus of the publication was intended to reflect where it found women and not where it thought they ought to be. Women organisers saw that the men of their movement were politicised through their unions and thought that women similarly would engage with political issues through the lens of their own workplace: the home.[231] Similarly, there was a concern, particularly early in the period, that women would identify with one another across classes on domestic issues that mattered to them, and might therefore be attracted to women-only organisations or even political parties.[232] When reviewing the lighter side of the journal's content, we must reflect where it found its readers, as well as where it thought many of its readers' priorities to be.

This assumption was not without foundation, and the growth of women's magazines demonstrate what much of the reading public of interwar women were seeking. As Giles has shown, throughout interwar period, the combination of middle-class women losing their role as head of a large household and some working-class women having greater disposable

[229] Hamilton – 14 October 1937', Agnes Lauder Organiser Reports, LP/WORG/37/573.
[230] 'October 11th, 1932', York Women's Section Minute Book, 1927-1933, LAB/1/5/2.
[231] June Hannam, 'The Victory of Ideals Must Be Organised', pp. 331-348.
[232] Karen Hunt, 'Making Politics in Local Communities: Labour Women in interwar Manchester', p. 97.

income, meant women's magazines including those which worked as 'advice manuals' for the professionalised housewife proliferated.[233] Much of *The Labour Woman's* content can be seen within this context. However, in the 1920s at least, the publication was also keen to provide a distinctively 'Labour' perspective on such features. For example, 'The Housewife' and 'Home Notes' would not be out of place in many women's magazines, discussing cooking, maintaining a home and the improvements domestic technology could bring. However, each coupled these discussions with information about the changes Labour policy and a Labour Government would bring.[234] Whether it was due to the change in leadership upon Phillips' death, or the continued popular trends of other magazines and feedback from readers, some of this was lost by the late 1930s. At this point, the features were even more akin to service or advice manuals, forfeiting political discussion on these specific pages and instead considering fashion with dress patterns alongside household hints for cooking and cleaning, including those submitted by users as part of a competition.[235] Of course, alongside all of this, the publication continued to fulfil its second remit of informing women on Labour politics and organisation. However, in response to both where it found its readers and the other publications which were proving popular, it maintained a heavily domestic focus.

As well as incorporating features of housewife 'advice manuals', other trends popularised by women's magazines and newspapers also found their way into *The Labour Woman*'s pages. Once again, we can see in how the publication handled these trends that the section looked to fulfil women's wishes while it firmly maintained its own ideological perspective. One of the most popular features of magazines in this period was the inclusion of serialised stories aimed at women, which as Melman has observed offered readers narratives of escapism primarily through romantic fiction.[236] Magazines such as *Woman*, which had a combined focus on fiction, marriage and house craft, had significant and increased popularity throughout the period.[237] *The Labour Woman* took to adopting this too, running serials and short stories with young women protagonists which were often romantic in nature. Reflecting the distinctive 'Labour' focus that the publication would bring, these narratives coupled what women would expect with a focus on class and politics, with characters for example who were married to a

[233] Judy Giles, 'Good Housekeeping: Professionalising the Housewife, 1920-50', in Louise Jackson (eds), *Women and work culture: Britain c.1850* (Aldershot, 2005), p. 73.
[234] *The Labour* Woman, vol. 8, no. 4 (1920), p. 53; The *Labour Woman*, vol. 11, no. 11 (1923), p. 175.
[235] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 26, no. 4 (1938), p. 60.
[236] Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (London, 1988), p. 8.
[237] Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain*, p. 210.

Trade Unionist and who were members of the Labour Party.[238] In adopting this popularised trend, the publication sought to offer its readers what they were looking for whilst also ensuring that its remit of informing and educating them about the movement was being met.

As well as the trend towards fiction, contributors and editors of *The Labour Woman* saw the increased appetite for reading as an opportunity to engage women with more serious political texts. From early in its run, the journal carried pieces with reading recommendations and book reviews. By the 1930s, these had grown to a full-page monthly feature, with Evelyn Sharp, the suffragist turned journalist and Labour member, writing 'Books to Read', later 'Our Book Page'. Sharp's recommendations primarily considered books with some political or ideological value, whether fiction or non-fiction, and often concentrated on texts from figures across the movement. Non-fiction books dealt with the topics of war, women's health, history, autobiography, and politics. They included Vera Brittain's *The Testament of Youth*, Hamilton Fyfe's *The Revolt of Women*, G.D.H. Cole, *The Intelligent Man's Guide through World Chaos*, and Jack Lawson's *A Man's Life*.[239] Women's appetite for texts provided the section with the chance to encourage their engagement with educational and ideologically aligned works and the books page remained a popular feature throughout the period.

While fiction reviews were less common, they also played a role, with Sharp herself being an 'avid fiction reader'. She recommended 'ninepenny novels' printed by Ernest Benn, which she said addressed a gap in affordable but quality fiction, including J.D. Beresford's *The Next Generation* and Storm Jameson's *The Single Heart*. She also shared novels she thought offered an interesting perspective and insight. For example, recommending Mary Agnes Hamilton's, Labour M.P between 1929 and 1931, text *Murder in the House of Commons*. While the crime detective narrative of the story was interesting, for Sharp the book could have held its own without it, owing to its insight into the workings of the House of Commons, and the description of all-night sittings where conflicts took place.[240] While it is difficult to establish how this content shaped reading choices amongst Labour Women, we can see some engagement with the page from *The Labour Woman's* readership. Mrs Fenney wrote how she enjoyed the recommendations and reviews shared by Miss Sharp monthly. In

[238] 'A Girl's Progress', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 9, no. 6 (1921), p. 84.
[239] 'Our Book Page', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 21, no.9 (1933), p. 134; 'Our Book Page', vol. 21, no. 7 (1933), p. 102; 'Books to Read', vol. 20, no. 11 (1932), p. 164; 'Books to Read', vol. 20, no. 10 (1932), p. 148.
[240] 'Books to Read', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1932), p. 7.

this particular instance, she had enjoyed reading Laski's *Democracy in Crisis*.[241] The increased popularity of reading as a pastime presented *The Labour Woman* with the opportunity to attract, educate and inform women, with articles, stories and recommendations which added to its content and were also an opportunity for party education and propaganda.

Beyond *The Labour Woman* being used in local sections, and without firm local circulation numbers, it can be difficult to establish the value women placed on its informative content relative to its entertainment appeal. However, the evidence we do have suggests women wanted a range of different things from the publication and Phillips, Sutherland, and their contributors could not possibly have met all of their needs. In a 1930 readers survey intended to support a move towards a lighter magazine focusing upon the home and family, some respondents supported the idea. For example, Mrs Murphy wrote how she enjoyed the cooking pages, dressmaking, and the stories in the publication.[242] In fact, justifying the publications decision to adopt the approach and style of women's magazines, almost all surveyed wished to maintain fiction, either in a short story or in a more serialised form.[243] However, Mrs Read said that the review of books, the editor's letter, and other informative articles were instead indispensable.[244] Another reader reflected that more articles, rather than fewer, were required on both socialist thought and the wider ideas of the Labour Party.[245] Throughout this survey, we see a publication that could not possibly meet all of the needs of the readership, but something that was offering at least something of relevance to many.

Similar contradictions can be found in the records of local communities. For example, members of the Coventry's Central Committee expressed that local sections felt *The Labour Woman* did not sell enough because it was too boring.[246] However, in the South West, organiser Annie Summers found during a Business Conference of Officers across the region that women's ideas cancelled one another out. Mrs Anstey wanted more general interest, Miss MacKay deplored the magazine being used for journalistic stunts, Mrs Barnes wanted international affairs while Mrs New wanted to cut out the Housewife's Page, and many

[241] Mrs E. Fenney, 'Our Book Page', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 21, no.9, p. 144.
[242] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 18, no. 9 (1930), p. 133.
[243] Ibid.
[244] Ibid.
[245] Ibid.
[246] 'January 7th, 1936', Coventry Central Committee Women's Section Minutes February 1935 – November 1937, MSS.11/1/2.

women in the room disagreed with each proposition.[247] As a publication aimed at a wide readership of Labour Women and their wider communities, it would have been impossible to please everyone across the pages of the short monthly journal. However, the paper aimed to be as interesting and accommodating as possible, offering something for everyone and coupling educative content with features that mirrored some of the most popular women's publications of the day with a distinctly 'Labour' feel. These conflicts were carried into the other reading taking place locally, an equally contested ground where the one unifying fact was that women had a desire to read more and worked through their section to facilitate this.

THE READING BATTLEGROUND

As well as using *The Labour Woman* to accommodate women's appetite for reading, and to make recommendations on appropriate content, the organisation facilitated reading through local sections and regional organisations. At the most basic level, leaders in local sections were given the responsibility to ensure texts which supported the party's ideology and causes were recommended to members wherever possible. In addition to distributing the party's journal and *The Daily Herald*, it was once again the Literature Secretary who was tasked with the sourcing and selling of the most appropriate works.[248] While this was one important way women engaged with reading that was endorsed by the party, the cost of many texts and extensive recommended reading lists proved prohibitive for many. As a result, sections and regional organisations worked on alternative ways to support learning, usually through the provision of lending libraries and forums for the discussion of literature including book clubs and study circles. In all of this, the section provided a further opportunity for learning, whilst working to ensure that the ideological influence of organisations like the Women's Institute, publications such as women's magazines and popular literature, and even the Left Book Club was minimised, providing a distinctively 'Labour' approach to literature in their place.

By the end of our period, it was commonplace for sections to have lending libraries for members. Contributions to the journal in 1935 demonstrate many sections across the country offered women the chance to access texts by this point.[249] The benefit these libraries were having were also being cited by local organisers. They reflected that local women were not

[247] Officers' Business Conference – 7 April 1937, Annie Somers Organiser Reports, LP/WORG/37/672.
[248] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 7, no. 11, p. 129.
[249] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 23, no. 3, p. 41.

only accessing texts but setting up book club style discussions, where they debated one another and often 'unsuspecting talents' from amongst the women who had been meeting one another weekly.[250] As so many areas already provided lending libraries, the only mention we often see in local minutes is when members are asked to approve the funds to buy a new text. When they do, those texts that are purchased seem to focus on either local issues or questions of ideology and party policy. This approach had been consistent from the start, with one of the first libraries set up that is cited in local minutes being that in the Houghton-le-Spring section of County Durham. The section started out by focussing on issues of local interest and the labour movement by purchasing a copy of *The Story of the Durham Miners* by Sidney Webb in 1923.[251] As a demonstration of how sections continued to build their libraries, we see scattered references to new texts. For example, in 1936 the women of Ilford South were asked to approve the costs of purchasing a copy of *Practical Socialism* for their library.[252] Lending libraries built slowly locally but were commonplace by the end of our period. Limited sources reflect that they offered women an opportunity to access texts, albeit primarily those that were factual and with a focus upon their locality or their movement.

However, there are some cases where we get more details about the scale of a library that was available in a given area. While it was a regional organisation and not a local section, this is particularly the case for the Morpeth Federation of Labour Women's Sections, later the Northumberland Labour Women's Federation, which due to fortuitous circumstances was able to get a head start on its own collection. The library in question was set up in 1929 and followed Anderson-Fenn passing on the gift of a library of around two hundred books that she herself had received from Beatrice and Sidney Webb.[253] To ensure that the titles could be enjoyed across the area, the federation went on to produce a catalogue of texts, which was circulated to local sections, who could through their representatives loan books monthly when the federation next met. The scheme was successful, and the library seems to have grown, with books still circulating amongst the sections when the federation met in 1936.[254] Elsewhere, sections took to building significant libraries of their own. In Halifax, the section

[250] Ibid.
[251] 'January 22nd, 1923', Houghton Women's Section Minutes of Meetings, TWASC, PO.LAB.8/1/1
[252] 'January 27th, 1936', Ilford South Labour Party Central Women's Section Minute Book, March 1935 – June 1938, LMA, ACC/2527/003.
[253] 'Meeting held February 14th, 1929', Morpeth Federation of Labour Women's Sections, Minute Book, 1923-1932, NRO 4415/3/1.
[254] 'Minutes of 13th Annual Meeting April 27th, 1936', Northumberland Labour Women's Federation – 1932 – 1936, NRO 4415/2/1.

had its own private library and even a librarian, with books available to access for its women for 1d which was in turn re-invested into the purchasing of new books.[255] Reading, and the increased appetite for texts women could enjoy, became an increasing feature of sections across the country, and a further opportunity for women to learn and debate with one another.

As suggested, while local and national section leaders were keen to encourage reading, they equally wanted to ensure the party had influence on *which* texts women were reading and *where* they were reading them. The trend for romantic or escapist fiction continued to grow throughout the period, as women consumed books and serialisations from a wide range of authors. [256] While *The Labour Woman* attempted to play its own part in the phenomenon, many within the movement were concerned about the impact popular fiction could have. The primary worry was that this literature could divert women from the fight, filling their heads with impossible narratives that undermined class solidarity, while ensuring that they lacked the focus or interest to engage with more serious texts. In a 1923 article entitled 'What the Factory Girls Read', Councillor Jessie Stephens lamented the popularity of 'trashy literature' provided for the 'edification of the working-class girl'. She said that while 'superior people…cannot understand this preference where some impossible Duke marries a more or less impossible scullery maid' what they fail to grasp is that 'serious literature is an acquired taste' which 'demands some concentration of mind'.[257] Her solution, that cheap literature should be made available as girls would read it if they could, was based upon her experience of a lending library that had been trialled in the Domestic Worker's Union. With the aim to ensure that when women were reading they were exposed to the reality of working-class life, as well as strikes and trade unions, there is potential that this perspective was battling against some of the trends in popular fiction led by women wishing to escape from this reality.[258] However, Stephens' view was held by many within the section and does seem to have informed the approach which the national leadership wanted local organisations to take. The pages of *The Labour Woman* and the minutes of individual sections also suggest that the perspective of those such as Stephens and national leaders was influential at a local level, with no records of popular fiction being purchased for local lending libraries as an example.

[255] 'Women's Section Programmes', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 25.
[256] Claire Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England 1920-60* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 85-6.
[257] Jessie Stephens, 'What the Factory Girls Read', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1923), p.20.
[258] Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties*, pp. 150-1.

This was not just a conflict between 'serious' and 'unserious' texts, or a worry that popular fiction reinforced the status quo, but a commitment to the Labour Party and its ideology in particular. As well as competing with magazines and books which fulfilled women's need for popular fiction, the section was equally concerned to ensure that reading was not a way in which women could be attracted to organisations which would ideologically influence them further to the left. The most concerning of these challenges came from the Left Book Club, which was growing in popularity throughout the 1930s. The Left Book Club frequently approached local sections, offering its services to come and speak in section meetings and make recommendations to members, and there is certainly evidence throughout party minutes that many Labour Women were actively engaged with the organisation.[259] While its stated aims were to provide 'knowledge' and 'truth' to the British public, and some studies have cited the Left Book Club's influence as being a key part of the success of ideas which supported the Labour Party's growth, there was a concern amongst women's sections that the club was a competing organisation which could result in Communist infiltration and local defections.[260] The issue proved a constant tension for the section nationally and locally, with an official position which supported many of the club's texts, and a policy which at least on paper allowed sections to engage with the club locally if they wished to do so whilst also discouraging it, unlike other organisations which were formally prohibited by the party.

Organiser reports show how this manifested in local communities. One particularly heated dispute occurred in the Mexborough section of South Yorkshire, where Mrs Johnson who had recently joined the section wrote to Sutherland to complain that the local Secretary had refused to allow the Left Book Club to come and speak in a meeting.[261] Sutherland replied to Mrs Johnson refuting her comments, which had also said that Mexborough section were not interested in education and preferred discussing 'trips and cups of coffee', stating the section had always been very politically active. In line with section policy, Sutherland confirmed the Left Book Club was not banned.[262] However, she also wanted to ensure this was not the impression which had been given, writing to the Secretary in question to clarify the

[259] For example: October 5th, 1937, All Saints Women's Section Minute Book, MSS.11/1/1 May 1932- June 1939.
[260] Gary McCulloch, 'Educating the Public: Tawney etc', in Richard Aldrich and Peter Gordon (eds), *In History and Education* (London, 1996), p.120; Laura Beers, "Labour's Britain, fight for it now!', *The Historical Journal*, 52 (3) (2009), p.670.
[261] Letter to Mary Sutherland from Mrs Johnson – 8th July 1937, Regional Organiser Reports, LP/WORG/37/171.
[262] Letter to Mrs Johnson from Mary Sutherland – 23 July 1937, Regional Organiser Reports, LP/WORG/37/163.

discussions. She received a reply which confirmed Mrs Gibb had not suggested the club was banned but had, in line with Sutherland's own view, recommended Labour Party literature instead, to avoid the dissipation of women's energies.[263] This example may have indeed been an attempt by Mrs Johnson to infiltrate the section with Communist aims. Correspondence with the section in question seems to suggest she came alone, knew none of the members locally, and left after having her request to have speaker's from both the Left Book Club and materials from the CPGB form part of section proceedings denied.[264] However, this was far from an isolated incident and represented a constant tension seen across the country.

There is significant evidence that other organisers worried about the influence of the Left Book Club and some the texts it was distributing. For example, Annie Townley worried about the meetings of the club which were being held in Bristol and Bath and being attended by a number of section members. She commented to Sutherland on the challenge of explaining to members that they were not against the organisation and all of its publications, but that they did not think they should be diverting their attention and attending meetings which were, after all, held with CPGB leader Henry Pollitt amongst others present within the area.[265] The tension between supporting publications which often shared their aims and keeping women inside Labour is a similar tightrope to that walked by organisers when it came to tensions between those members who supported united front activities, usually in coalition with local trade councils, and those concerned about communist infiltration, both considered later in this thesis. They also echo the concerns of those who had popular Women's Institutes locally or who worried about women active in the feminist movement. While organisers were keen to ensure women were active, engaged and educated, they always wanted to ensure it was their own version of activities within the public sphere which attracted focus. Evidence suggests that while this was often successful, women were just as likely to make their own commitments a priority, shaping their own sections around their needs and interests locally.

TRAINING LABOUR WOMEN THROUGH *THE LABOUR WOMAN*

As well as facilitating opportunities for reading, local organisations made provisions for more

[263] Letter to Mary Sutherland from Mrs Singleton– 20 July 1937, Regional Organiser Reports, LP/WORG/37/165.
[264] Letter to Mary Sutherland from Ms Whipp – 8 August 1937, Regional Organiser Reports, LP/WORG/37/160.
[265] 'Westbury Women's Central Committee – October 23rd, 1937', Annie Townley Regional Organiser Reports, LP/WORG/37/29.

structured education closer to home. These combined practical training needed for women to play roles within the party with the chance to benefit from talks on a range of issues of interest. Like its ideas for literature, the section's ambitions for this programme were outlined through *The Labour Woman*. As many of the women the organisation represented would join the party as housewives and mothers, the journal urged sections to tailor their programmes in this direction. This meant catering to inexperience, speaking to women in terms of their daily lives, and providing the training necessary so that some amongst them could take positions of local leadership or become speakers to deliver learning to their peers. It also meant providing women with resources which trained them on matters of party policy, questions of domestic and foreign affairs, and a wide range of other issues which they could then share with others. *The Labour Woman* provided regions and sections with guidance on how to train their local leaders and speakers and offered those who had been trained access to suitable information which they could use on the ground. In this role, it once again sat at the centre of the leaderships ambitions for section meetings which were filled with potential for development.

As the final half of this chapter will demonstrate, this nationally recommended programme showed significant results on the ground. However, it was only in regional communities and local sections that something close to 'The Working Women's University' started to take shape. While some women trained themselves in the skills necessary to run their organisation, others turned their attention to the skills necessary to deliver speeches and developed their knowledge on a range of subjects which they could share with others in their own or other section meetings. Armed with teams of speakers, regional organisations then collected speakers lists. Using these, the experience within their own ranks and their connections to elected officials or those from affiliated organisations, it was then the responsibility of each individual section to design a speaking programme for the upcoming year which met members' needs. From those who took the chance to be trained in the business of organising, to the women who learned how and what they could teach, to the women who simply enjoyed the lectures they regularly received and played a part in shaping the programme, this was a truly collective endeavour. One that resulted in thousands of women across the country being exposed to a range of ideas and experiences from within their weekly section meeting.

The first task for local sections was to train groups of relatively inexperienced housewives and mothers into teams of effective political organisations across the country. With this in mind, less than six months after the section was founded, Phillips wrote and shared a series of

six lectures designed to address the question 'How are we to start our work?'. The lectures, entitled the 'Classes of Citizenship', were concerned with women's role within society but approached the issue with a consistent view to their domestic life in mind. The suggested series of classes therefore discussed 'Citizenship and Home Life', 'Housing', 'Food Problems', 'Maternity and Infancy', 'Education and Child Welfare', as well as 'Pensions and Allowances'.[266] In common with Labour's approach elsewhere, each lecture focussed on educating women for a citizenship based upon equal political rights but maintained distinct gender roles. The lectures spoke to the needs of the housewife and mother, highlighting for example the challenges which poor housing stock caused the working woman at home and the impact that problems with post-war food supply could have on growing infants.[267] In terms of the solutions to these challenges where women could have the most influence, they focussed on municipal roles and involvement within the co-operative movement, arenas where members of the section were already, and increasingly, influential.[268] As it set out upon its first task of training this generation of women activists who would already or soon-to-be citizens, the section focussed its programme on those issues which it saw to be of most relevance and interest and to those arenas where it saw members able to have most influence.

In this approach, it also mirrored other popular women's organisations of the day. Non-partisan and non-feminist organisations including the NFWI, the NUTG and the Mother's Union, all worked to educate the new woman citizen. As McCarthy has shown, even the apparently small 'c' conservative NFWI had extensive ambitions for the potential of newly educated and active women citizens. The organisation frequently campaigned on issues of special interest to women, whilst also deepening their understanding of the local agricultural economies within which they belonged, encouraging every member 'to feel her sense of obligation to the country in which she was a citizen, to help develop her mental powers, to make her realise the importance of the intelligent use of the vote'.[269] However, like the women's section, this was very much a citizenship which was founded within the home. As Beaumont has shown, while each of these groups offered education, training, and recreation, these were often focussed on women embracing their rights and improving their position

[266] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 6, no. 2, p. 14.
[267] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 6, no. 3, p.8.
[268] Ibid.
[269] Helen McCarthy, 'Parties, Voluntary Associations and Democratic Politics in interwar Britain', *The Historical Journal*, 50 (4) (2007), p. 894.

whilst remaining within their domestic roles.[270] In the policy areas covered, the arenas for influence recommended and its view of womanhood, the section's early plan for local education was often largely in line with those organisations competing for their attention.

Like these other organisations, the section's approach was not surprising. It reflected a desire to shape the training of its members around their own experiences, with programmes of education which would be both appealing and effective. However, this should not be read as a limit to ambition and through this introduction the section also began a process of politicisation, aimed towards a cohort of women who were trained, engaged, and ready to take on a range of other causes from both inside and outside of the party or the section. As Thane has said in another context, the party's position on women's roles should be read as an expectation that they *would* marry and serve in the home rather than as an endorsement that this should be their role or certainly the *only* role which was available to them.[271] The evidence also suggests that this was an effective approach, and there remained a focus on domestic and family concerns with the section's programme of education as the organisation grew, precisely because it was what members continued to show they were looking for. Lectures, classes, and speeches given on these so-called 'women's issues' remained some of the most popular events hosted by both regional and local organisations. Recognising this from outset, leaders were able to engage women with classes which trained them for party work, embedding an educational culture in sections but one which, like those organisations who also sought women's attention, first spoke to its members where it found them.

If a culture of education and the politicisation of women was ever to be effective, the section first needed to ensure that it had those local leaders who were able to embed it on the ground. It therefore looked to train women who were competent in running local meetings, confident in using their voice and skilled enough politically to engage with the wider movement, as well as local and national government where it was necessary. Alongside citizenship lectures which were built around the home, the curriculum within *The Labour Woman* therefore also included programmes which were intended to train women in the business of politics and the skills they would need to run their section. These included 'Points for Politicians' a series which ran from 1919 and educated women on how to be an effective Chairman, Secretary or

[270] Caitriona Beaumont, 'Citizens not feminists: The boundary negotiated between citizenship and feminism by mainstream women's organisations in England, 1928-39', *Women's History Review*, 9 (2) (2000), p.415.
[271] Pat Thane, 'What difference did the vote make?, p. 284.

Literature Secretary, and included practical tips including taking minutes and organising a local programme.[272] As one of the few studies of the local minutes of women's sections and their minute books across the country, this thesis can speak to the success of the early organisation in training a range of effective leaders in all of these roles across the country. The strength of documentary evidence available to view in a wide and diverse range of areas is testament to the strength of administrative skill in particular demonstrated on the ground.

However, perhaps the most important skill that organisers thought was essential, but lacking amongst their women, was the ability to find their voice and have the confidence to use it. As such, one early recommended series of twelve lectures aimed to teach women how to hold Speakers Classes, where their members could learn both 'How to Speak and What to Say'.[273] Early recommendations also advocated for study circles locally, on the basis that they enhanced women's confidence and would, as a result, increase the number of speakers available to give lectures in sections locally.[274] The push for activities which encouraged women to use their voice, in conjunction with more formal activities like residential schools which were seen to be the most fruitful in this area, continued throughout the period. Study circles were seen to be particularly necessary and Grace Colman, whose remarkable contribution is noted in the previous chapter, was one significant advocate. Writing in 1933, Colman said that by having study circles women, who were 'unfortunately unable to attend Summer or even week-end schools', could learn in small groups of eight or nine how to use their voices through both their own activity and from listening to others.[275] Through contributions and a range of special features, *The Labour Woman* built upon its domestic curriculum with advice on how sections could be formed which did not only educate but also trained the next generation of women politicians who were ready to build active sections.

Alongside lectures that aimed to attract women in terms of their domestic experience, and training which facilitated their political effectiveness, contributors to *The Labour Woman* also encouraged a far wider programme of learning. Even early in the period, all of the features considered so far were supplemented with programmes that could educate women who were new to politics on all they needed to know about the Labour Party. Particularly prominent

[272] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 7, no. 9 (1919), p. 111; *The Labour Woman*, vol. 7, no. 11 (1919), pp.123-4.
[273] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 9, no. 7 (1921), p.140.
[274] 'Eight Million Members Wanted', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 8, no. 9, p.137.
[275] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 21, no. 9 (1933), p.139.

sections included 'The Alphabet of Labour Party Policies', a series of articles which ran through 1919 and the early twenties. It should be said that in some of its focus, the policies in question were those domestic issues which we might expect, such as housing and children's welfare. Further, the spheres of influence that were primarily shown to be available for women to address these issues included the co-operative movement or local government where the party was always most comfortable with them contributing their input.[276] However, the feature was an early demonstration that the section always saw these as only one part of women's involvement within the movement and was ambitious to educate them further. The alphabet also included information on core socialist ideas including the 'Distribution of Work and Goods under Capitalism' and the role of 'Nationalisation'.[277] It built upon this with articles on Labour's approach to 'The War Debt', 'Capital Levies', 'Taxation', 'Public Ownership of Land' and inflation'.[278] From this early example, we can see that once initiated, the section was always ambitious for women's potential for learning a wide range of subjects.

As has been demonstrated, we can certainly say that *The Labour Woman* usually met one of the core remits which its founder set for the publication in 1918. That is to say, it gave special attention to party policy on questions of 'vital importance' to women including 'Maternity, Education of Children, Rents and Housing, Pension and Homes for Disabled Soldiers, the Aged'.[279] However, we can also see that these entry points into the discussion were never the limits of the publications ambitions for the education which should be taking place locally. The early aims were widened in a 1920 article, 'Ourselves', intended to demonstrate that the publication had learned never to 'write down' to women. While keeping articles simple, and using straightforward language, it would bring women's attention to a wide range of issues and policy questions including those they were familiar with and those they were not. From 'home to foreign affairs' the journal aimed to better connect 'the big movements in the financial and political world with the housewife's everyday needs'.[280] In line with this aim, it increasingly included contributions on a range of important topics including the economy, history, science, psychology, banking, foreign affairs, as well as those which focussed on the

[276] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 7, no. 11 (1919), p.128.
[277] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 7, no. 12 (1919), p.140; *The Labour Woman*, vol. 7, no. 9 (1919), p105.
[278] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1920), p.19; *The Labour Woman*, vol. 8, no. 3 (1920), p.35; *The Labour Woman*, vol. 8, no. 5 (1920), p. 68; *The Labour Woman*, vol. 8, no. 10 (1920), p.152; *The Labour Woman*, vol. 8, no.11 (1920), p.168.
[279] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 6, no. 1, p. 6.
[280] 'Ourselves', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1920), p.8.

concerns of women who worked in the home.[281] The result was a publication which aimed to encourage learning which approached women in a comfortable environment, trained them on the skills needed and taught them a far wider curriculum than they were aware they wanted.

SPEAKERS' CLASSES

Although contributors used *The Labour Woman* to distribute recommendations for education and training, much of the practical work was completed regionally. A central aim of Regional or District Advisory Councils was the provision of speakers who could educate women within their section meetings. One of the easiest ways to facilitate this, while providing opportunities for women to develop, was to train talented speakers inside local communities. Early councils were founded with the remit to train speakers who they could then utilise across their areas.[282] Trained speakers were then invited not only to lecture in their own meetings or those of neighbouring sections but were also called upon to attract women to the movement at rallies and public events. Mrs Woodward, speaking at the Coventry Central Committee, outlined why effective and engaging local speakers were essential. She said that Speakers Classes trained people who could continue inspiring 'women into our movement' and keep them there. She recognised that this needed to be maintained, and that those women who first attended a section meeting because they felt the 'wave of enthusiasm' at a public meeting, would not retain their membership for long if regular section business was instead 'very dry and humdrum in contrast'.[283] As is outlined here, the organisation of this regional training took some time to perfect in certain areas and we have varying evidence of the number of speakers' classes taking place. However, they did become an important feature in the calendars of many councils, enhancing the skills, confidence, and knowledge of those women who took part, and providing teams of local experts who could facilitate a much wider programme of education based on party priorities and the interests of members.

Like most of the educational work of the section, the role and form the leadership wanted Speaker's Classes to take was outlined in early editions of *The Labour Woman*. From 1920, the publication discussed how important these classes would be locally, with their core aim

[281] *The Labour Woman*, vol.15, no.9, p.184.
[282] An example of this can be seen in the founding constitution of the West Yorkshire Regional Advisory Council here: Labour's Advisory Council of the West Riding of Yorkshire Records, WYL853/83.
[283] 'Rally held May 25th'. Coventry Central Committee Women's Section Minutes, January 1939 – January 1942, MSS.11/1/3/1-4.

being the training of 'a larger number of members' who would be able to confidently deliver lectures to their peers in the future.[284] However, classes were also intended to ensure an enhanced awareness of both party policy and organisation for those women who attended. The 'How to Speak and What to Say' series of twelve lectures mentioned earlier was a model for how the practical training of speakers could be coupled with the education of women in party business. While it focussed on women's training in speaking and building confidence amongst attendees in groups of around twenty, the topics to be taught and discussed included 'How Government affects the mother and the home', 'How to take Minutes', 'The Duties of the Secretary' and so on.[285] The leadership wanted councils to prioritise speaking classes, and to arrange sessions which would provide confident speakers who were knowledgeable enough in policy and organisation and skilled enough to be future leaders of the movement.

Where records are available, they show speakers' classes could often prove to be an important feature of section life within many regions. Unfortunately, it is difficult to establish where they were occurring outside of the North East and Yorkshire before the late 1920s due to record availability. However, in these areas, classes seem to have been taking place from the start. For example, minutes show that County Durham was organising classes which were held each Monday evening from October 1921.[286] In York, sections had also begun hosting their own speakers' classes, ran in this case every Thursday evening from January 1923.[287] It seems likely that Northumberland was also arranging the same provision, especially given their wide range of local speakers they publicised in *The Labour Woman* from 1922.[288] However, the first documented sessions are evidenced in 1924, with classes which by this point were specifically aimed at improving the effectiveness of women already in positions of local leadership, such as Chairwomen or Secretaries.[289] We also see evidence of Speaker's Classes being held in the West Riding of Yorkshire from early in the period, with discussions of their content taking place from 1920.[290] From early in the period the provision of regional training, and especially speakers' classes, was seen as a way to educate the membership on

[284] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 8, no. 9, (1920) p.137.
[285] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 9, no. 7 (1921), p.140.
[286] 'October 17th, 1921', Advisory Council Minute Books, 8 May 1920 – 27 August 1923, DX 1048/1.
[287] York Women's Section Minute Book, 1920-1925, LAB/1/5/1.
[288] 'Women Speakers – January List', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1922), p.5.
[289] 'October 1st, 1924', Northumberland Labour Women's Advisory Council Minute Books, 1924 to 1928, NRO 4415/1/1.
[290] 'Report of Speakers' Class', Labour's Advisory Council of the West Riding of Yorkshire Records, WYL853/83.

policy and section responsibilities, while equipping a cohort of women with the skills they needed to become not only section leaders but the future educators within their districts.

This element of party education was not without its challenges. While Regional Advisory Councils increasingly organised speakers' classes wherever they could, the records suggest that it took time and work to ensure that they were successful. One issue was the additional commitment required from women and the steps needed to ensure their continued attendance. The first classes held in the West Riding of Yorkshire, for example, ran over a twelve-week period, with thirty-six students, and were beset with problems in attendance. In a report to the council, the organiser had calculated that there was a total of 396 possible spaces for individuals to attend. Of those, only just over half of the places had been filled. On an individual basis, most students attended at least half of the classes and so had the benefit of at least six weeks training. However, only one woman from the group attended all twelve sessions and only two had attended eleven.[291] As they prioritised the training of local speakers, one of the most fundamental challenges for organisers was the continued engagement and attendance of women from local sections at the regionally organised events.

However, for the organiser, a far larger problem than attendance was the content of the programme and its delivery from Mr Houlton who had been booked. The organiser found the tutor too 'lacking in criticism of student efforts', 'too nervous to criticise', and said that as a result his method of delivering the sessions and their results were far too elementary.[292] She observed that while there was discussion amongst students, little of this was of very good quality, and that there was a distinct lack in the frank feedback necessary if the sessions were to be effective. The organiser also criticised the contributions of the majority of the women. With the exception of two or three younger students and a small minority of older ones, she said that their contributions to the classes had often lacked originality. However, she attributed this to the tutor and his methodology, and despite the criticisms she also said that speakers' classes should certainly be repeated. With a leader 'more used to the work' who could facilitate the freedom and frankness amongst women required, the organiser predicted that the experiment could have produced far more fruitful results.[293] Indeed, she observed that

[291] 'Report of Speakers' Class', Labour's Advisory Council of the West Riding of Yorkshire Records, WYL853/83.
[292] Ibid.
[293] Ibid.

some of those women who did participate thought they could have arranged a more suitable class, and that one or two intended to do so in future. The lesson the organiser took from the experience was that not just training but rigorous and challenging training would be needed if women were ever to be able to 'fulfil many of the positions in public life which are now open to them'.[294] Whilst this early example of a speakers class demonstrates the importance of a rigorous and challenging programme, it also shows the importance with which they were seen by women on the ground. The central role which effective and engaging speakers would play within the movement meant that areas worked to ensure that they could be provided.

With the guidance of *The Labour Woman* in mind, a cohort of trained speakers, and the offer of contributions from others within the movement, regional organisations set about facilitating programmes of lectures which sections could plan for themselves. One way councils did this was in the collation and distribution of a speakers list that took all potential regional contributors into account. These comprised those who could be booked to speak on their own specialist topics, as well as those who could be invited to offer talks that were more general in nature, and most speakers offered to do so on a voluntary basis in return for their expenses being covered. While the collation and distribution of these lists took place at a regional or district level, some sections were always more effective than others in the preparation of their programmes. As a result, it was common for councils to ask those with the most successful programmes to share the names and addresses of those who had delivered lectures at their meetings so they could be added to the list, as West Middlesex did in 1935.[295] As well as regionally produced lists, organisations collated and shared information that had been distributed nationally, including information about members of the party leadership, trade unions and affiliated organisations who were also willing to contribute.[296] All of this meant a list which offered sections a diverse range of contributors on issues of interest to a section or more general party business and policy, which usually grew stronger over time.

Owing to travel costs, it could be easier to produce these lists in larger urban centres, but to ensure sections had the maximum possible choice councils also worked together to share the lists of speakers they had available. This was particularly the case in the North East, where

[294] Ibid.
[295] 'September 20th, 1935', West Middlesex Women's Advisory Council Minutes 1932-1940, ACC/2417/H/030/1.
[296] NRO 4415/3/1 Morpeth Federation of Labour Women's Sections, Minute Book, 1923-1932.

the Durham and Northumberland Councils co-ordinated their efforts early and frequently. From October 1922, the councils provided a combined list of speakers who sections could book from across the wider region.[297] While sections were usually responsible for selecting the speakers of most interest to members and covering their costs, some district organisations also worked to support them in accessing local education. For example, women within the area covered by the Morpeth Federation were supported by a fund where sections could contribute monthly in return for their costs being covered when they did book speakers.[298] Some areas could not take advantage of external speakers, for example where attendances at meetings were too small to justify the cost. One example was found in the Partick area of Glasgow, where Agnes Lauder's reports commented with disappointment when the women locally could not benefit from the opportunity.[299] However, for the most part, the speakers list was an important part in the formation of the educative calendars of sections. When they were not disseminated efficiently, sections raised their concerns with their organiser. For example, the Abertillery section in Wales expressed their discontent that they had received no speakers list in 1936.[300] While the issue was in fact caused by their own failure to inform organisers of a change in secretary, their concern shows how important the programme of speakers came to be across the period. Speakers' classes, and the resulting lists which were produced, became an important part of regional organisation. The result was a range of resources and individuals which could be used to provide party education on the ground.

LOCAL PROGRAMMES OF EDUCATION

With speakers trained and lists of those available collated, it was the task of local sections to design the programme of local education that was right for them. One key benefit of locally organised education was that it allowed women to access a range of knowledge from within their section meeting, requiring no additional commitment in time and very little in terms of resources to arrange. Another was that, while they drew upon national and regional resources, it was sections themselves who played the largest role in shaping the education they received. This usually resulted in a programme which provided a combination of what the party wanted, what their members needed, and what they as a community were interested in.

[297] DX 1048/1 Advisory Council Minutes 8 May 1920 - 27 August 1923.
[298] 'June 23rd, 1927', Morpeth Federation of Labour Women's Section, Minute Book 1923-1932, NRO 4415/3/1.
[299] Partick Glasgow – 17 March 1937, Agnes Lauder Organiser Reports, LP/WORG/37/555.
[300] Abertillery – 27 May 1937, Elizabeth Andrews Organiser Reports, LP/WORG/37/448.

Perhaps predictably, this did often mean that issues including health, education and the home were prioritised. However, it also meant that there could be significant diversity in topics from one section to another and more variety than residential and one-day schools. Sections could choose lectures focussed on 'women's' policy areas or the structure and history of the labour movement, but they could also take the opportunity to hear from interesting and even controversial speakers on a range of topics. These included politics and the economy, but strayed into areas of local importance, history, literature, architecture, and travel. Whilst this department of the Working Women's University was encouraged from the top down, it was run and shaped by the interests of local women and the communities they were within.

Just as Northumberland and County Durham had expansive programmes of residential schools, their Advisory Councils also provided extensive opportunities for women to engage with local speakers. Reflecting the councils' views of those issues which would interest women, and the expertise of those women who were initially available to speak, the programme in this region initially focussed on a combination of so-called women's issues and questions concerning organisation and the labour movement. In Northumberland, subjects included 'Maternity and Child Welfare', 'Why women should join a Trade Union', 'Women Magistrates' and 'The Women's Position'.[301] In County Durham, the Colliery Ward of Sunderland enjoyed speakers on health, housing, and education. [302] Similarly, talks at nearby Houghton-le-Spring women's section included 'Health', 'Socialist Sunday Schools', 'Physically and Mentally Defectives' and the 'Workhouse'.[303] Organisers from the region focussed their attention on these topics as they thought they would interest women most, and by 1930 this was not only born out of expectation but experience. When reviewing her time as Regional Organiser for the North East from 1930 to 1957 in a 1983 oral history, Margaret Hunter Gibb reflected that while subjects like India were interesting and engaged a few women, Health, Housing and Education, would all bring women out of their shells, eliciting spontaneous discussion from those in attendance.[304] For Gibb 'women's issues', even a decade or more into the founding of regional councils, remained those issues which interested women in the North East and encouraged their participation. They were topics likely to

[301] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 10, no. 1, p.5.
[302] T&W Archive, 5083/6 Colliery Ward Women's Section – Minutes of Meetings.
[303] T&W Archive, PO.LAB.8/1/1 – Houghton Women's Section Minutes of Meetings.
[304] Transcript of tape conversation with Margaret Hunter Gibb at The Riding, Cambo, NRO 2973/22.

engage women, facilitate them taking part in group discussions within their section which could, eventually, provide them with the confidence to take part in discussions outside of it.

However, while the provisions of these councils and the interests of the women in their area began with women's or party issues, they certainly did not end there. In the Colliery Ward of County Durham, these talks were supplemented by a range lectures on other subjects that local women found interesting, including 'The Isle of Man', 'Alfred the Great', and the 'League of Nations'.[305] In Northumberland, those subjects considered earlier were supplemented by historical topics which included the 'Evolution of the English Constitution'.[306] Further, in common with records that are seen elsewhere in the country and the experience of residential schools, women are seen to have taken a keen interest in those lectures which had some local focus. Lectures were therefore delivered on issues including the Coal Bill and the Sunderland Co-operative Movement, which at the time was one of the most successful in the country.[307] In County Durham and Northumberland, the speakers programme offered and engaged with by sections was a mix of those issues deemed to be of interest to women, those which mattered most locally, with occasional special interest topics.

However, in the wider North Eastern Region that was covered by Gibb and her predecessors, the York section best demonstrates how much flexibility a group had to shape a programme which met their interests. While the section had more limited involvement in the residential schools discussed earlier, they poured a huge amount of effort into the lectures that they received locally, expanding the range of topics and speakers they invited from inside and outside of the movement. Some subjects reflect those in Durham and Northumberland, including 'The Evolution of Women', 'Housing' and 'The Household Budget versus the Board of Trade'.[308] However, the section also arranged addresses on literature including *The Salvaging of Civilisation* by H.G. Wells, talks on the Soviet Union, The History of the Post Office, addresses from medical professionals on common diseases, and talks on the work of the Public Library.[309] Later in the period, the section supplemented these lectures with talks and tours of interest to women, all of which were well-attended and well-enjoyed according

[305] T&W Archive, 5083/6 Colliery Ward Women's Section – Minutes of Meetings.
[306] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 10, no. 1, p.5.
[307] T&W Archive, 5083/5 Colliery Ward Women's Section – Minutes of Meetings.
[308] York LAB 1/5/1- Women's Section Minute Book 1920-1925.
[309] York LAB 1/5/1- Women's Section Minute Book 1920-1925; York LAB 1/5/2- Women's Section Minute Book 1927-1933.

to records. They included guided tours of the streets, talks on the history of the City of York, the building of York Minster and Gothic Architecture in general, as well as demonstrations of electricity by Miss Stockhill who had recently had it installed within her home.[310] The section also worked with other local and national organisations where their work was of interest to the membership. These included a speaker from the Anti-Vivisection Society who delivered a controversial lecture to the section, a Sister from the local Catholic Sheltering Home for Girls, representatives from the Women's Co-operative Guild and a range of local councillors, as well as the local Alderman who spoke of education and Women in Local Government.[311] The programme in York demonstrates how a section which played a limited role in regional schools nevertheless ensured there was no lack of interesting and engaging learning locally.

This particular section's educational efforts also went far further than organised speakers. Most sections coupled lectures with training and other classes, which could reflect those offered to members in other's interwar women's organisations. However, York again seemed particularly active in this area. As well as party-organised lectures, the section would also run surprise debates which encouraged participation from across the membership. A particularly popular example of this came in the 1937 debate on whether 'the Cinema has been the means of educating towards social development and added to the sum of human happiness?'.[312] Across the period, the section also held a number of additional sessions teaching women who were interested in additional skills and training. These included Esperanto early in the period, housewife classes throughout the twenties and thirties, as well as First Aid Classes towards the beginning of the war.[313] The section took so much pride in its activities that once war was declared it rejected a request to co-operate with the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) 'housewives' classes', on the basis that this was not necessary as they were already running a significant provision of their own.[314] This partly reflected a hesitance to engage with the WVS and its middle-class leadership, points considered later in this thesis and explored elsewhere in the literature. [315] However, it also showed a confidence in a programme of

[310] York LAB 1/5/2- Women's Section Minute Book 1927-1933; York LAB 1/5/3 – Women's Section Minute Book 1933-1940.
[311] Ibid.
[312] York LAB 1/5/3 – Women's Section Minute Book 1933-1940.
[313] York LAB 1/5/1- Women's Section Minute Book 1920-1925; York LAB 1/5/2- Women's Section Minute Book 1927-1933; York LAB 1/5/3 – Women's Section Minute Book 1933-1940; York LAB/1/5/4 Women's Section Minute Book 1940-1949.
[314] For more on the relationship between women of the movement and the W.V.S see: James Hinton, *Women, social leadership and the Second World War: continuities of class*, (Oxford, 2002), pp. 2-13.
[315] Ibid.

education and training which was well established for the women of York. As the section shows, within a national organisation which prioritised education, local sections had huge scope to provide a varied, interesting, and relevant curriculum which was particular to their local membership. While a case study, the section was not alone in this, and evidence from across the country shows sections who provided a diverse and interesting curriculum.

STEPPING OUTSIDE THE LOCAL

Another section which also seems to have had a particularly wide range of speakers and subjects present at its meetings was found in Hunslet Carr, Leeds. Here, we can see speakers on familiar subjects, including the National Health, Nursery Schools, and State Maternity provision.[316] All of this was supplemented with talks on Finance, Socialist policy, and the Abolition of Money, which stepped outside of so-called women's issues but provided a continued focus on the political economy that is often seen in other areas. However, the section also devoted much of it's time to cultural lectures, for example on poetry and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.[317] Particularly popular within this section, and in common with what is also seen in other sections in the region and beyond, were talks which focussed on travel and other parts of the world. In contrast to Gibb's observations in the North East, where she mentions that it was women's issues which most engaged her members, many sections across the country seem to have organised speakers from inside or outside of their section to speak about travel wherever they could. These often came in the form of local women providing their own updates from their holidays, but they also included other speakers being invited along to discuss their own trips or even to give women an insight into the place that they were from. These talks provided a huge amount of variety and provoked interest amongst the Hunslet Carr women, who between 1929 and 1936 heard from Mrs Maddison giving an account of her trip to Russia, Mr Bell talking of his homeland of New Zealand, Mrs McIver's discussing her trip to Northern Africa and on a more local level Miss Brooke speaking of her trip 'down South'.[318] Through all of these classes, there was an opportunity for knowledge alongside escapism that no lecture on policy or women's issues, whilst directly relevant to many of the women in attendance, could ever have provided.

[316] Hunslet Carr Women's Section Meeting Minute Books, 1929-36, WYL853/87.
[317] Ibid.
[318] Ibid.

Indeed, it does seem that many women used their section's speaking programme to enjoy the type of escapism which a talk on foreign travel or international circumstances could bring. The minute book of Bramley near Hunslet Carr shows that the section held similar lectures regularly. A prominent figure in the section, Mrs Spence, shared accounts of her trips to Belgium in 1926 and delivered a lecture on her visit to the Channel Islands a year later.[319] Elsewhere in the country, at their conference in Lewis Hall, Isleworth, members from across West Middlesex enjoyed what was said to be a very interesting address from Mrs Greenhead of the council on her trip to Norway.[320] If these talks had been only delivered by members, the pool of potential speakers would naturally be limited, as the option of international travel was clearly a luxury which few women could afford. However, sections also booked speakers from outside their group to fulfil this need. A particularly popular talk in Ilford South was delivered by Mr Ellison, who had been booked by the section to share his experiences of his recent trips to both Belgium and Germany.[321] The same speaker was also engaged on more than one occasion to give his popular 'Scottish Tour' talk, which provided women with an insight into all that they could see over the border.[322] Shortly into the war, the York section was very pleased to have a visit from Mrs Nixon, a labour woman who had been fortunate enough to gain a scholarship to attend Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania and attended to offer the women her thoughts on America.[323] Across the country, we can see sections who actively pursued talks on travel, even within the United Kingdom, as well as those on foreign destinations more broadly. Within these talks, women had a taste of geographies and cultures which were often quite far removed from anything else they experienced in section life.

Whilst these talks could naturally be of much educational value, they perhaps can also be seen alongside the cultural trends towards escapism seen within the interwar period. As historians have noted, this was evident not just in the increased popularity of cinema and the films which were being consumed but in a trend within literature which focussed upon the imaginary or even utopian over the mundane or the familiar.[324] As this chapter has already considered, this preference for escapist literature was clearly present amongst some of the

[319] 'September 12th, 1937', Bramley Women's Guild, May 1926 – Nov 1929, WYL853/85.
[320] 'November 16th, 1937', West Middlesex Women's Advisory Council Minutes 1932 – 1940, ACC/2417/H/030/1.
[321] 'September 22nd, 1937', Ilford South Labour Party Central Women's Section Minute Book, March 1935 – June 1938, ACC/2527/003.
[322] 'October 6th, 1932', Ilford South Labour Party Central Women's Section Minute Book, June 1932 – February 1935, ACC/2527/002.
[323] ''October 29th, 1940', York Women's Section Minute Book, 1940 – 1949, LAB/1/5/4.
[324] Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties*, pp. 150-1.

women attending section meetings, so much so that it became a concern for those in the party who believed that reading should be a vehicle for ideological education most of all. However, within their weekly meetings, many sections chose to devote some of their programmes to opportunities where women could not only expand their knowledge but broaden their geographic horizons and, by all accounts, these were some of the most popular lectures held.

Of course, as well as providing an opportunity for escapism, talks on international matters offered women the chance to enhance their knowledge on questions of foreign policy which were of particular concern in a period between two world wars. As was the case at the section's residential and one day schools, the international situation more broadly was a popular topic in section meetings, particularly towards the end of the thirties. As two examples from many, lectures delivered in the Feltham Ward in July 1939 included 'Socialism at Home and Peace Abroad' and 'Russia and the rest of Europe'.[325] However, even before any sign of the second war, records across the country show that when women were offered the chance to choose, they would often prioritise learning about international matters as much as they did questions about domestic issues or party policy. Far from ever being parochial in their concerns, sections show time and again that they were interested to engage with the cultures, histories, and present-day situations of countries across the world. To take one section as an example, All Saints Women's Section in Coventry enjoyed several sessions delivered by Councillor Briggs on the political and economic changes occurring in different countries. These included China, Japan, Russia as well as those found much closer to home in what he termed 'Britain's European neighbourhood'.[326] While the reception of each of these lectures, and most others, is difficult to establish from minutes, it is certainly clear that sections continued to provide diverse programmes of education which strayed away from party organisation or women's issues and were shaped by the interests of members. The sources therefore reveal women who had a commitment to those issues which were of most relevance to them but who wanted to expand their knowledge, escape from their locality, or learn more about the place they found themselves within, all to different extents and in different places. Women's section's programmes of local education were encouraged from the top, but they were also heavily shaped by the needs and interests of those on the ground.

[325] 'July 5th and July 19th, 1939', Feltham Ward Labour Party Women's Section Minutes, June 1939 – July 1942, ACC/2417/H/019.
[326] All Saints Women's Section Signed Minutes, May 1932 – June 1939, MSS.11/1/1.

While these needs and interests were wide and diverse subjects, most sections were also firmly grounded in their local communities, and time was always set aside for updates of activity at a municipal level. As local representation of the Labour Party grew, councillors and elected officials were regularly asked to provide updates for women at party meetings. The Ilford South section frequently dedicated one of its four speakers per month to those including Councillor Biscov, Councillor Bisson, Councillor Meade, and Councillor Holmes to provide updates from nearby local authorities to their members.[327] When they attended, councillors would provide general updates or be asked to offer women information on specific programmes or policy changes taking part in a local area. For example, Councillor Jenkinson was invited to the 1934 open day for Hunslet Carr, where they were asked to speak about the scheme of slum clearance, in a talk which was said to have been 'wonderful' and ensured that there was a satisfied audience at what became a well-attended meeting.[328] Rooted in their local communities, sections used their speakers programmes to enhance their understanding of events in their area and to maintain links with municipal representatives.

These talks were important not only because of the information women could receive about their area, but because they became an important way for sections to demonstrate and encourage women's own representation in office. In an organisation which increasingly wanted women to take a fuller role in public life, particularly popular local talks were those which gave updates from women who were members of the section and playing a role in local administration. There are a number of examples of this across the country and they included the speech which 'Councillor Mrs Williams' gave about her work on the Public Accounts Committee and the terrible cases of hardship that came under her care to the North West Hornchurch section.[329] Another example was the talk from 'Councillor Mrs Charlton' to the Gorton section in Manchester, where she spoke of her work on the Public Health Authority in the local area and in particular about questions of birth control.[330] As a vehicle for women's representation in public life, sections also used their speaking programmes to have members who had already achieved political office share their experiences with peers.

[327] 'Programme 1934, Programme 1935', Ilford South Labour Party Central Women's Section Minute Book June 1932 – February 1935, ACC/2527/002.
[328] 'February 6th, 1934', Huntley Carr Women's Meeting Minute Book, 1929 – 1936, WYL853/87.
[329] 'July 12th, 1938', North West (Ward) Hornchurch Labour Party Women's Section Ordinary and Special Committee Minutes, December 1937-September 1941, A/HHL/026.
[330] 'July 22nd, 1929', Gorton Labour Party Women's Section – Minutes 5 November 1929 – 5 June 1934, M450/1.

This was also the case when it came to other appointed positions in which organisers were keen to see their members play an active role. In particular, there was a continued drive to see women take up the role of magistrate within their local community, with Hunter Gibb lamenting to the York section that they had not done so by 1936 when a new panel of magistrates had been appointed 'which did not include one working woman' amongst them.[331] Where women had been appointed, their peers were interested to hear of their experiences. For example, Mrs Givens gave a lengthy and detailed discussion of her work on the Juvenile Court to the women of All Saints section in Coventry. Urging them to take part, as in her view they 'understood children better than men' and there were 'sometimes five men to one woman' on the court, Mrs Givens' spoke for some time on the matter.[332] Her contribution was so popular amongst the women present that she was invited back only a month later to continue her address. Alongside offering women knowledge on party policy, questions of national importance and an insight into international circumstances and affairs, section education therefore offered them a chance to hear first-hand from those already doing so about the roles they could fulfil in public life. It was this diverse curriculum of knowledge that women accessed week in week out through their section meetings that made the speakers programme one of the most fruitful opportunities for learning Labour women could enjoy.

The pages of *The Labour Woman* show that these programmes of education were often formed in a two-way dialogue with the section's leadership, with those areas which had the most successful schemes rewarded for providing accounts that could be shared with others. In a 1934 competition, sections were asked to submit essays on the lecture programmes taking place locally. Two of the sections whose minute books remain intact, and have been examined here, Hunslet Carr in West Yorkshire and Colliery Ward in Sunderland, made such effective submissions that they were recognised in the journal, with the Colliery Ward winning a prize.[333] However, it was the Halifax Women's Section and the Ashington Section in Northumberland, who were the standout winners, and their contributions tell us how the leadership thought an ideal programme should look. In Halifax, the lectures were a mix of so-called women's issues, including Health and Education, party business, including organisation and policy, and other subjects of wider interest to the membership. They included a lecture by Miss Doris Eccles of Halifax on 'Platonic Ideas on Education and

[331] 'November 24th, 1936', York Women's Section Minute Book, 1933 – 1940, LAB/1/5/3.
[332] 'March 7th, 1935', All Saints Women's Section signed minutes, May 1932 – June 1932, MSS 11/1/1.
[333] 'Women's Section Programmes', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 24-5.

Family Life', Mrs Holroyd on 'Memories of the Early Days of the Labour Movement', as well as Miss Montgomery on 'A Cruise in the Mediterranean' and Mrs Lewcock of York on 'The Tolpuddle Martyrs'.[334] In Ashington, the programme reflected a continued trend in Northumberland, focussing on the business of Labour politics and its policy, as well as matters of local interest. Lectures included 'Outline of Socialism' by Mrs Horn, 'Labour's Foreign Policy' by Mrs Colvin and 'Why the Miner Should Have a Fortnight's Holiday with Pay' by Mrs Davison and Mrs Neale.[335] Held up as ideal examples for others to emulate, these sections demonstrate both the diverse curriculums that were being delivered across the country and the national leadership's view of what the ideal programme should be.

While Sutherland was happy for sections to have programmes which incorporated the interests of local members, we can also see that she was keen to ensure that the education taking place had a significant focus on campaigning and party policy. For example, when assessing the competition entries in question, she expressed her disappointment that many made little mention of the fact 1935 was an election year, and fewer still contained any serious study of party policy.[336] Part of this was the tendency to rely on the same speakers, to have lectures by the same people year after year, who would lecture of their own subjects and therefore 'may not cover important Party policy', a practice Sutherland thought should be discouraged.[337] She recognised the difficulty in this, particularly in smaller areas unlike Halifax or Ashington, which were not in industrial centres and which therefore attracted smaller attendances.[338] However, she also thought there was a tendency amongst sections to settle into a routine and 'stand still' after making progress. For Sutherland, even with an attendance of eighty weekly or fortnightly, no section should be content with the same programme or a static membership and should always be looking to grow its members and content.[339] One way in which they could do so was by training up members in speakers' classes and residential schools and, here too, Ashington had lessons to offer smaller counterparts. When these sections did not have the funds for a programme with had a diverse range of speakers, they could train their own. Ashington was proud to announce that all of its lectures were delivered not by paid speakers but by members of its own section. In fact, not

[334] Ibid.
[335] Ibid.
[336] Mary Sutherland, 'Your Section and its Work – I', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 23, no. 2, p. 23.
[337] Ibid.
[338] Ibid.
[339] Ibid.

only were all names mentioned section members, a total of six in nine of the women in question had attended the Northumberland Summer School which had been held at Cober Hill in the previous year of 1934, reflecting the value of residential schools to the movement.[340] Working together, the educational resources provided by the national organisation and mediated through regional councils offered women the chance to shape their local programmes of education, albeit one that the leadership always had a clear view upon.

Whatever Sutherland or her predecessors view, it seems clear that the process of training and encouraging local education which they initiated in 1918 and continued throughout the period had produced significant results by 1939. Regions had trained a set of local officials who managed their sections effectively, complemented by a range of speakers in most areas who could continue the work of educating the next generation of labour women. Through speakers lists, their links in local communities and the talent within their own ranks, local sections were able to design programmes of education which worked for them. This gave all women on the ground the opportunity to engage with learning and training without the need for any additional commitment in time of resources, accessing education from much closer to home.

CONCLUSION

The introduction to this thesis cites Marion Phillips' early ambition to turn every branch of the women's section into a mini-adult education centre. However, despite many historical accounts of the women's section, few have considered how successful the organisation was in achieving this aim. The extensive programme of local party education examined in this chapter benefited thousands of working-class housewives and mothers throughout the interwar period. Women at a local level pursued an education built around their needs and interests, and which took their potential as citizens, future politicians, members of society, and housewives and mothers, seriously. The fullest expression of the benefits of the Working Women's University can perhaps be seen within its other branch, those residential and one-day schools where the respite of an environment away from home and the opportunity for leisure freed women from their domestic responsibilities and allowed prolonged and serious focus on learning. However, in section meetings, women received a taste of the same advantages, reading widely and hearing from speakers from their section, region, and their

[340] Ibid.

wider movement. Building upon the success of the WLL and the affiliated WCG, of which many were also members, and recognising the legacy of trade union education for those in industry, the section played its own role in a much wider programme of learning than was otherwise available to its women members. At a local level, this was delivered in a way that appealed to those who built Phillips' vision of mini-adult education centres on the ground.

There are certainly some ways that we can see a lack of ambition in the women's sections' programme of education. When we consider *The Labour Woman*, it did tend to bend to the popular trends of the day and much of its content would be familiar to readers of so-called 'housewives manuals' or those who read popular women's fiction in the period. The focus on domesticity, as in so much else of Labour's approach, spoke to the publication's readers first and foremost as housewives and mothers. However, from party publications to the libraries which were set up across the country, it would be wrong to suggest that the section sought to restrict women's opportunities for wider learning, or at least to restrict these to matters surrounding the home. There were certainly challenges, but these tended to surround concern that women would divert their attention to other organisations which were not fully aligned with Labour's own aims for education, with a predominant concern being organisations further to the left. Even with this in mind, it was often local women who led the conversation about what they should be reading. In a dialogue with the editor, they made their views heard about the content they most enjoyed in *The Labour Woman*. At a local section, they voted on the texts which they decided to purchase. It was inevitably impossible to have a single programme of reading, and a compatible party publication, which met the needs and interests of members from a diverse range of communities with different experiences and background. However, it was this very diversity that meant that sections could shape their own reading interests, and that *The Labour Woman* often had a little something for everyone on its pages.

Similarly, when it came to training their next generation of leaders, thinkers, and speakers for local meetings, it was often those issues which focussed upon the home which were used to initiate women into party business. As editor and Chief Women's Officer, Phillips thought this would prove those topics which related to the home and children would be the most appealing entry into politics, and feedback from those including Hunter Gibb in the North East demonstrated that this was often the case. However, as sections trained their local officers, went on to train a generation of knowledgeable skilled and confident speakers, and put their heads together to arrange annual speaking programmes, it is the degree of variety

which can be seen that was a real triumph. The national organisation had a clear view of how local education should look and used their journal once again to commend those who most closely met their expectations. However, for the most part, it was women themselves who decided what they wanted to learn in their section meeting. This went from the traditional, with all sections having something on so-called women's issues, to the political, with talks about the party, their place in it and the wider labour movement. It also included talks at a municipal level, which demonstrated the work taking place locally of concern to working-class women and showed through representation the contribution they could make. However, it also included escapist talks on culture, literature and, more frequently, on travel, which could be a welcome and interesting respite. Through all of this, a nationally recommended programme was again delivered in a range of different local flavours in communities.

The success of local educational work, as in the case of regional schools, is best measured in those terms women set for themselves. In a feature in *The Labour Woman* in 1932, the editor urged women to submit correspondence detailing what their section meant to them. When they did, the organisation's role in their education, training and development shone through above any other benefit. For E. Blackmore, her local section was the place where women learned 'of affairs which so vitally affect our humble lives', awakening her to the importance of issues relating to 'our towns, the nation and the world generally'.[341] The 'fuller, happier and more complete life' which had followed came from a programme which helped her 'understand myself in trying to understand others', an activity which brought out the good and ensured 'development would follow'.[342] For fellow contributor Margaret Davis, particularly important was the opportunity to hear speakers on industrial matters, situating the section's own contribution within the wider labour movement's fight and demonstrating that the sacrifices of participation were worth it for the benefits constructive work could bring. [343] For her, section life was an escape from the 'hurly-burly' as cinema, the theatre or tennis might be for others. However, it was one that through her own development had provided her 'with the fullest measure of self-expression'.[344]All of this was possible in a section which represented a group of like-minded, independent, communities, built with a top-down remit for education, mediated through regional organisations but shaped by women on the ground.

[341] E Blackmore, 'A Wider Outlook', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 20, no. 10, p.155.
[342] Ibid.
[343] Margaret Davis, 'Helping with Constructive Work', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 20, no. 10, p.155.
[344] Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE – FOR LABOUR AND FOR LEISURE: RECREATION, THE LABOUR HOUSEWIFE AND MOTHER

While many of the successes of the early section can be attributed to its focus upon the education of women, just as important for many members was its place at the centre of their social world outside of the home. The conference that founded the London Labour Women's Advisory Council said that its remit included providing 'opportunities for social intercourse amongst Labour women', and this remained their focus throughout the period.[345] Councils, and the sections they represented across the country, all adopted a similar mandate and, as a result, women came to build lifelong friendships through their membership. As advocates for their cause, they also brought with them neighbours, friends, and family members so that sections represented an expansion of their often-restricted existing milieux. While the next chapter considers those much-needed opportunities for leisure that members were able to enjoy away from their families, this first consideration of recreation demonstrates how the ability for women to incorporate their existing relationships, and importantly their roles of housewife and mother, served to facilitate their access to much needed leisure time.

Much of this would not have been possible in a mixed-sex organisation. This was partly because, as Martin Francis has observed, the so-called mainstream of the party continued to be dominated by the trade union movement, the vast bulk of their membership being men.[346] In this environment, the room for Labour women's needs to be put first was often inevitably lacking in the local CLP meeting, which women were able to attend from 1918.[347] However, perhaps more importantly, the women's section wished to appeal to the inexperienced local member and, more specifically, the much coveted and difficult to obtain demographic: the young working housewife with a family at home. In 1922, Helen Beckett wrote in *The Labour Woman* that everyone in politics, irrespective of party, saw this as the most difficult group to tackle, and the so-called 'average woman' would need to be encouraged out of her 'tiny house' or even 'couple of rooms', the very small space that often represented 'her whole world'.[348] As the extensive literature on leisure that this section will consider demonstrates,

[345] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 6, no. 7 (1918), p.71.
[346] Martin Francis, 'Labour and Gender', p. 191.
[347] Pamela Horn, *Women in the 1920s*, p. 141.
[348] Helen Beckett, 'Some Hints for Sections', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 10, no.5, 1922, p.75.

this perspective is a sharp generalisation that hardly reflects the reality of many women's lives. Nevertheless, part of the way the section addressed the challenge they observed was ensuring party work was a valuable use of women's time, where they could build themselves and the organisation they supported, working towards policy aims and electoral successes, fundraising, canvassing, and learning their political craft. However, at a far more basic but perhaps even more fundamental level, the section needed to offer women something as well as party-political purpose. This meant providing them with the mental space and mutual support that came from both the enjoyment of leisure and the resulting friendships they built.

It should be said that this is not the traditional view of the role of leisure in the historiography of the women's section. As the introduction to this thesis suggests, a more common interpretation has been that the organisation's focus on recreation was a convenient way for the party to offer women the illusion of full party membership. Inside an apparently separate-but-equal structure which kept them side-lined, they were tasked with a mix of frivolity and drudge work, raising funds for the party at bazaars and fetes, completing the bulk of election work, but had limited possibilities for real political power.[349] In this interpretation, leisure is not just a distraction but a harmful one, keeping women away from the 'business' of politics being completed elsewhere.[350] Similar observations have been made about Labour's sister parties overseas, as well as their Conservative opponents' auxiliaries at home.[351] Much of this criticism is not without foundation. It is true that much of the daily experience of women involved fundraising activities, such as bazaars and jumble sales and that this usually served to bolster party funds as Duncan Tanner amongst others have reflected.[352] The many benefits which social activities played for the section itself and the wider party, in recruitment, fundraising and propagandising are demonstrated throughout the next two chapters of this thesis. Additionally, the view of a party which was happy to keep women in a supplementary role and which encouraged their focus on leisure over the serious business of politics is occasionally supported in these pages. The traditional view of an organisation which focussed on frivolity at the expense of real internal influence is therefore not without evidence.

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[349] Pamela Graves, *Labour Women: Women in British Working-Class Politics, 1918-39* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 154-8.
[350] Matthew Worley, 'The Fruits on the Tree', p. 205.
[351] Kate White, 'Women and Party Politics in Australia', *The Australian Quarterly*, 53 (1) (1981), p. 30; Stuart Ball, *Portrait of a Party*, p.154.
[352] Duncan Tanner, 'Labour and its membership', in Tanner, D., Thane, P. and Tiratsoo, N. (eds), *Labour's First Century*, (London, 2000), p.251.

However, as this thesis has argued in relation to education and will go on to consider in the community women built in their sections, the provision of leisure was far more important to women, more varied in popularity and purpose, and more necessary for any organisation competing in interwar Britain than a focus on fundraising, recruitment or propagandising would reflect. The next two chapters demonstrate the real needs that leisure, particularly that which did not sit in conflict with women's domestic roles, had for section members. They demonstrate that while the roles of housewife and mother were central to the section's approach, it usually had women's own interests at their heart. Further, they situate Labour Women's experiences within a context where many membership organisations looked to appeal to the middle- and working-classes by offering them an opportunity for leisure time. This applied to women's organisations which the section was in most direct competition with. However, it also applied to the wider labour movement within which the section drew upon a shared legacy. As Duncan Hall demonstrated in his consideration of the role of music in the labour movement, recreational activities all provided a mix of 'pleasure, pennies and propaganda'.[353] This chapter therefore redefines the leisure Labour women enjoyed as more than a secondary concern, and it challenges the view that recreation was prioritised primarily because it was convenient and profitable. In this, it builds upon some interventions into the debate which have helped to reflect the social value of membership. Most significantly, Stephanie Ward has demonstrated how moving away from considerations of party achievements and impact moves us closer to the meanings invested in their membership, showing the importance of friendships, feelings of belonging and emotional as well as political fulfilment women found in their membership.[354] This chapter will argue that each of these benefits were largely derived from the opportunities for leisure provided by the section. In shared recreation, women built local communities which helped to sustain them, and experienced opportunities for much needed enjoyment which were otherwise unavailable.

While the important role of leisure in the women's section is under-explored in the literature, there is already a well-developed understanding of the nature of many of the organisations the party competed with. Some of the most popular organisations in this period, including the NFWI, the NUTG, Housewives' Associations and the Conservative Party's women's

[353] Duncan Hall, ''A pleasant change from politics': the musical culture of the British Labour Movement, 1918-1939', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Warwick, 2000, p. 41.
[354] Stephanie Ward, 'Labour activism and the political self in inter-war working-class women's politics', *Twentieth Century British History*, 30 (1) (2019), pp. 50-1.

auxiliaries, also prioritised their social offering. Each of these organisations fulfilled similar recreational roles in their members lives and, unsurprisingly, this often meant that those middle-class women who had the time to spare were members of a number of them.[355] Like Labour, each of these organisations could and have been criticised for their limited ambitions for the role of women outside of their home. Reinforcing domesticity and keeping women away from many so-called real political issues of the day, they too offered a limited public space where women could escape the home for a taste of recreation but often achieved little in the way of challenging their position. These observations, amongst many others, have led to the criticism that far from the decades immediately post-franchise representing a triumph, the interwar period was instead one of 'feminism's deepest troughs' which was 'anti-progressive and reactionary' in character.[356] However, the reality the women's section faced was not only the range of attractive, if unambitious, opportunities women had available to them, but that the most popular of those were from the organisations which prioritised leisure.

The literature on these organisations is also more developed in its understanding of the benefits leisure could have for women who took part. For example, the NFWI would perhaps be one of the easiest organisations to criticise on the grounds mentioned. However, as Maggie Andrews has shown, the traditional image of this organisation, and its perception of offering women mere 'Jam and Jerusalem' has clouded the real benefits it had for many members' lives.[357] Andrews has asked that we reconsider the NFWI and recognise the significant claim in even asserting a right to leisure. By considering the combination of education and opportunities for women to demonstrate their domestic skills, she has been able to show how the NFWI asserted that it represented skilled workers, who were eligible for the same benefits as those working outside of the home, including leisure time.[358] McCarthy makes similar observations about the benefits of middle-class Service Clubs, which helped women invest new meanings in their roles of full-time mother and housewife, allowing them to reinvent male ideals of service and contribution.[359] Others have shown how the NUTG had a similar approach. Founded as an outgrowth of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, it eschewed more active campaigning, in favour of a social approach resembling the NFWI.

[355] Stuart Ball, *Portrait of a party,* p. 163; Caitriona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, p. 31.
[356] Alison Light, *Forever England*, p. 9.
[357] Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute as a Social Movement* (London, 1997), p. xii.
[358] ibid, p.78.
[359] Helen McCarthy, 'Service Clubs, citizenship and equality', p. 551.

In urban areas the Institute did not reach, it was often the NUTG that provided a common meeting ground where women came together 'for their wider education' including 'in social activities'.[360] Beaumont has similarly shown how the Mother's Union, the Catholic Women's League, the National Council of Women as well as the NFWI, were all able to successfully argue that women's domestic expertise gave them the right to a public life.[361] As this should show, leisure was not simply a frivolous distraction for all of these organisations, but a part of their programme which women needed, and which they needed to work towards justifying.

In the same way as other organisations, when making claims for their right to leisure, section women needed to provide justification to themselves and their families and to ensure that their recreation sat as comfortably as possible within family life. One way to do so was to incorporate their families and existing social circles in section activities. As a result, some of the most successful events the party held were those arranged for women to bring along friends and family members. More fundamentally, party activities which incorporated women's roles as housewives and mothers meant there would be no tension between their domestic roles and party activism. Sections arranged events where women brought along children, especially during the holidays. This allowed the opportunity not only to initiate the young into party life, but to ensure that women's childcare needs were met and that they could provide their families with experiences which were otherwise out of reach. Further, activities were arranged where like the women of other organisations they could demonstrate and enhance their domestic skills. After a brief outline of the literature that explores women's access and approaches to leisure at this time, particularly once they married, this chapter will then consider each of these benefits and demonstrate in turn the array of leisure activities within the section which placed women's roles as mother and housewife at their heart.

WOMEN'S LEISURE IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

While this chapter demonstrates some of the ways women who worked in the home accessed leisure through their membership, many young women in this period were already able to seize the opportunity to enjoy recreation elsewhere. Those in industry were increasingly able

[360] Mary Stott, *Organization Woman: The Story of the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds* (London, 1978), pp. 15-19.
[361] Caitriona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, pp. 7-10.

to leverage their position to access leisure on their own terms. Selina Todd's work has demonstrated the priorities of young women in paid work by the opportunities they accessed, and the ways in which they used their financial independence and wage-earning status.[362] She sees these women, rather than the young men of their generation, as the founders of modern working-class youth culture.[363] Describing the relative freedom this young cohort of women were provided, Claire Langhamer has shown how they used the opportunity of paid leisure to get away from the realities of their daily circumstances, with visits to the cinema or opportunities to go dancing providing a world of escapism, comfort, and glamour away from the home.[364] While these could be seen as secondary concerns, especially given the campaigns for legal and political equality taking place at the time, the fact that young women prioritised leisure demonstrates the needs they wanted to fulfil while it was possible. As Katharine Milcoy has said, they asserted themselves, showed who they wanted to be and used their access to leisure to shape the modern culture which they wanted to take part in.[365] However, they also reflected a wish to, for this time of their lives, escape the domestic drudgery which many of them had seen their mother's generation endure.[366] While many mothers did not have the opportunity themselves, and usually relied on their daughter's support in the home, the evidence suggests that they also did all they could to support their children in enjoying recreation while they had the chance. Linda McCullough-Thew saw women in Northumberland who 'indulged their daughters' between school and marriage, 'urging them to have a good time before they settled down'.[367] Young women were making claims on the public sphere and prioritised paid leisure while they could, activities borne out of their observations of their mother's lives and what they also had to expect once married.

When the transient stage of their lives in paid work came to an end, the reality most women faced was a future working within the home, with limited access to the time and resources needed to enjoy independent leisure time.[368] While arguably more necessary in the face of domestic drudgery, the pressures of being a housewife and mother meant recreation was

[362] Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family in England 1918-1950* (Oxford, 2005), p. 5.
[363] Ibid., pp. 196-223.
[364] Claire Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England 1920-60*, p. 65.
[365] Katherine Milcoy, *When the Girls Come Out to Play: Teenage working-class girls' leisure between the wars* (London, 2017), pp. 122-128.
[366] Fiona Hackney, 'Quiet Activism and the New Amateur: The power of home and hobby crafts', *Design and Culture*, 5 (2013), p.182.
[367] Linda McCullough-Thew, *The pit village and the store* (London, 1985), p. 146.
[368] Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's place: An oral history of working-class women 1890-1940* (Second Edition) (Oxford, 1985), p.125.

much harder to pursue. As Langhamer observes, once they were married most women's need for independent leisure was superseded by the needs of her wider family. Where married women could enjoy leisure time at all, this meant it would usually be at home, and often only enjoyed when in service to their husband or children.[369] This partly reflected an association between paid recreation and youth, and the resulting impression of leisure in adulthood as being rooted in the home.[370] However, it was also due to the constraints on women's time and resources, leaving a gap in their lives which needed to be filled.

Of course, it was not that married women did not have leisure time, and interventions including Langhamer's have worked to correct a record that overlooked the times, places, and forms this took for far too long. For many women, much of their leisure tended to be experienced in more relative terms. Rather than activities enjoyed in formal settings alongside others, it could be seen as anything less arduous than their eight-hour day and often mean sitting down to sew or knit after a full day of completing domestic duties on their feet.[371] Langhamer's contribution challenges the gendered concept of leisure adopted in much historical literature, sat in contrast with paid work and often focussed upon those 'unambiguously structured' times and spaces where it occurred. [372] Her work has reconceptualised leisure as women experienced it, often without such a sharp distinction being drawn with their work.[373] Nevertheless, those cited by Langhamer demonstrate that, where it was available to them, more structured opportunities for leisure including that provided in service to their families or organisations of which they were a part, were important to married women in this period. This was also demonstrated in Margery Spring Rice's *Working-Class Wives*, which was written in 1939 using information collected during her time on the Women's Health Enquiry Committee. The women Spring-Rice quotes highlight the gaps in their lives, which include the ability to indulge their interests, to form new social ties, to talk and laugh with others in a similar position.[374] Spring Rice notes the important role which the WCG and the Church had come to play by 1939 in facilitating these needs.[375] Importantly for this chapter, but frequently overlooked in histories of the Labour

[369] Claire Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England, 1920-60*, p.190.
[370] Ibid., p. 190.
[371] Katherine Milcoy, *When the girls come out to play*, p. 27.
[372] Claire Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England 1920-60,* p. 2.
[373] Ibid., p. 16.
[374] Margery Spring Rice, *Working-Class Wives*, p. 201.
[375] Margery Spring Rice, *Working-Class Wives*, p. 201.

Party as well as those of leisure, the women cited by Spring Rice also saw the women's sections of political parties as a central place where their needs for recreation were met.

While working-class women faced some of the most significant challenges in accessing leisure, they were far from alone. The extent to which *most* women, including their middle-class counterparts, could access the public sphere continued to be limited by their domestic roles in this period. In fact, for some women, the changes in society from modernity actually signified a step back in their ability to participate. In the culture of associationism pre-1914, many middle-class women could sustain an active public life, in part due to the domestic servants who were an essential part of running of the family home.[376] However, between the wars, fewer households could sustain a range of servants and the number of women who could be close to the stereotype of the pre-war 'lady of leisure' reduced.[377] In line with the working-class, middle-class women's needs were increasingly linked to the interests of the family and the constraints this brought. Even those women whose households benefited from much of what modernity had to offer, those living in suburbia with smaller homes and family sizes as well as time-saving appliances, were often unable to gain the fulfilment they needed. This was evidenced by the phenomenon of the so-called 'under-occupied' suburban women who became a source of concern in newspaper reports and scientific journals during the period. An article by a junior medical officer in the *Lancet* in 1938 described a nervous condition he termed 'suburban neurosis'. His explanation, that suburban housewives were 'under-occupied', had few family members and friends around them and 'little to look forward to' pointed to a real problem.[378] As Helen McCarthy shows, while Taylor's diagnosis was questioned by his medical peers it also had significant cultural influence. As a result, press coverage often framed in terms of popular psychology frequently concerned itself with amongst other factors communal spaces, road and housing layouts which stood in the way of neighbourliness and could lead to loneliness.[379] With the role of housewife still predominant throughout the period, and the possibility of married women's potential for part time eschewed as a result, Taylor did prescribe amongst other suggestions that women engage with voluntary associations. For our purposes, this reflects a time in which *most* housewives, from the already active, to the over-burdened, to the apparently under-occupied, needed

[376] Megan Smitley, *The feminine public sphere 1870-1914: Middle-class women and civic life in Scotland c. 1870-1914* (Manchester, 2009), p. 61.
[377] Judy Giles, 'Good Housekeeping: professionalising the housewife, 1920-50', pp. 73-4.
[378] Cited in: Helen McCarthy, *Double Lives: A history of working motherhood* (London, 2021), p. 161.
[379] Ibid., p. 161.

access to times and spaces outside of the home. As this chapter demonstrates, the women's section was one venue in which this need could be easily filled within the period.

MOTHERS IN LABOUR

While the next chapter evaluates those steps women took to access independent leisure through their membership, the ability of many housewives and mothers to do so was necessarily limited. The responsibilities of the home, and particularly childcare, meant many would not have been able to enjoy these events as often as they would like. However, to ensure women did not face a choice between their role in the section and their domestic duties, many sections placed family life at the centre of their leisure activities. As is demonstrated here, across the country, sections and regional organisations developed their own ways of accommodating women's families. Most offered some events specifically arranged to incorporate children interspersed throughout the year, while many allowed children to come along on organised trips and outings, and some sections invited children along on a far more regular basis. Here, women built sections around their families and, in doing so, ensured they, their children and their peers were able to take the fullest possible advantage of the recreation membership had to offer. The women's section, in this sense, could represent an extension of family life rather than sitting in conflict with it, and this is reflected in accounts from the time. Some of this has already been documented in the literature. For example, in Weinbren's oral history of Labour's grass roots, he cites Patricia Meitlis who spoke of Labour as a very caring party when she was growing up poor. She speaks of some of her fondest childhood experiences being socials where 'the whole family went along and we had a lot of fun and the evening always concluded with a song of the Labour Party, a building-together-in-a-group sort of song'.[380] If, as Langhamer confirms, married women's leisure time was spent in service to their families, then the endeavours of sections allowed them to fulfil this duty whilst also enjoying this much needed recreation.

As school holidays were a particular challenge for members, one of the most common ways sections incorporated children into their activities was the organisation of parties or days for children during summer or winter breaks. These offered the chance for women to enjoy the social side of the movement, while they and their peers shared childcare, and their children

[380] Dan Weinbrein, 'Labour's Roots and Branches', *Oral History Journal*, 24, 1 (1996), p. 33.

took part in games and activities. In content, most socials had some mix of entertainment, competitions, food, and drink. For example, the winter party of 1929 in York started with tea before children enjoyed games, recitations, dancing, refreshments, after which all children were offered an apple, orange, and a toy for their efforts before they were sent on their way.[381] While most leisure activities hosted by the section or the wider party were intended to make a profit, or breakeven at least, the primary function of family events was rarely to fundraise. Sections ensured they took place whether or not they were profitable, as Gorton section in Manchester committed to do in 1928 by hosting a fundraiser in advance of their Children's Day so it could go ahead whether or not it proved a financial success. [382] A similar example can be found in Bristol a decade later, where an expansive children's sports day was held which included food, drinks, dances, as well as activities including a Spinning Jinnah, Skittle Alley, Football, and Darts. While successful in terms of facilitating space for children and an enjoyable day, the event had a deficit of almost £8 which sections across the Bristol East area were tasked with recovering in the months to come.[383] Section women organised days where they and their children had the opportunity to enjoy recreation, and they often did so without consideration to those events which proved most profitable for the party's funds.

For the most part, it is also true that sections did not need to worry about the financial success of these events. As they filled a real need for members, children's socials were some of the most profitable throughout the year. This is evidenced by the significant financial success of events such as that held in York in 1928, which was said to have raised much needed funds as well as enthusiasm for the section in the local community, particularly when it included a dance. [384] Supporting this single case, minute books across the country show that children's events were usually the most popular in terms of the numbers who attended them. To give just a brief idea, the York winter party of 1929 mentioned above was attended by forty-nine children and their mothers and this was typical of the forty to fifty children who attended their children's functions year after year.[385] This far outstripped the attendance of other events held by the relatively poorly attended section, as considered in the next chapter. Similarly, the North West Hornchurch section in London had between sixty and seventy at

[381] 'January 8th, 1929', York Women's Section Minute Book 1927-1933, LAB/1/5/2.
[382] 'Social held November 19th, 1928', Gorton Labour Party Women's Section Minutes 5 November 1929 – 5 June 1934, M450/1.
[383] 'Bristol East Divisional Labour Party Women's Central Committee, 20th October 1938', Minutes of St George West Ward Women's Section, 1931-1933, Bristol Archives 39035/51.
[384] 'May 1st, 1928', York Women's Section Minute Book 1927-1933, LAB/1/5/2.
[385] 'January 8th, 1929', York Women's Section Minute Book 1927-1933, LAB/1/5/2.

their party for members children in 1932, despite struggling to reach fifteen members at their regular meetings as demonstrated their minutes weekly.[386] Events designed for children and arranged in school holidays were therefore a necessary and popular feature in many local sections. They brought women's domestic life into their party, providing space for them and their children to enjoy the social side of the movement while building community.

Of course, this community often went far wider than a woman's individual section, and district and regional organisations also sought to incorporate children into events. Alongside their duties considered elsewhere, Women's Advisory Councils were concerned with facilitating socials across a larger area which allowed women of the party and their families the chance to socialise together. The Leeds council had a sub-committee specifically created to manage its own children's days, which often represented more of a sports day than a tea and dance. In 1932, children were issued tickets stamped with their mother's name and ward.[387] Girls took part in egg and spoon and skipping races, while boys competed in sack and potato races. Their mothers took part in a tug of war and the men of the local party were also invited along for a thread of the needle race.[388] While minute books can only reflect that those recording the events deemed them a success, and consistently state days were enjoyed by all, the continued focus on children's parties and days at section, district and regional level do suggest events which brought women and their children together had enduring popularity.

The involvement of children in events intended for them was important, but the commitment of many local sections to making their social activities family friendly also went far wider. As considered in the next chapter, another important recreational opportunity women were able to access through membership was the ability to take an outing away from their local area, taking in new sights and enjoying leisure often while campaigning. However, for many women, this opportunity would not have been possible if children were left at home. In 1921, the Leeds section took an outing to Adel and many of the approximately one hundred women in attendance brought their children along.[389] On a far larger scale, the Chilton section in County Durham took a char-a-banc trip to Whitley Bay on the August Bank Holiday of 1922.

[386] 'Annual Report of 1932', North West (Ward) Hornchurch Labour Party Women's Section Ordinary and Special Committee Minutes, November 1932 – January 1936, LMA, A/HHL/025.
[387] 'August 13th, 1932', Leeds Women's Advisory Council Minute Book, January 1932 – July 1944, WYL853/89.
[388] Ibid.
[389] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1921, p. 29.

Two hundred and fifty-eight adults attended the event, and fifty-four children came along, with the section's only regret being it had insufficient space as far more would have liked to attend.[390] Outings were so popular that it could be impossible to arrange them at a regional level in an area where the section had many members, and this problem was demonstrated in County Durham in particular. Discussions early in 1934 about a county level outing in the region were halted after much discussion, as the women present thought such a large event would prove unwieldy.[391] Their concerns about the huge popularity of such an event proved to be founded, and when they did eventually organise a county wide outing in 1936 six hundred and thirty women and children attended.[392] The affair was a huge success for the County, raising over four hundred pounds, and proving the popularity of outings which allowed women the chance for recreation which also accommodated their family life.

It should be said that while many sections and regions invited children along to their outings, there was still a wish from many for women-only recreation and some areas focussed upon this approach. Some that did so successfully will be considered in the next chapter. However, where areas did focus on outings which excluded children, the trips seemed to have proved far more difficult and perhaps even less attractive for women to attend. In York, the section began considering a programme of outings after receiving encouragement from the local CLP agent in 1928.[393] First year plans faltered, and as no definite plans could be agreed upon amongst the women it was instead agreed that the section would accompany the local CLP on their trip to Scarborough.[394] In the years which followed, York struggled to develop a programme of annual outings focussed on women members. Initially, these often took the form of trips along the river followed by picnic teas and entertainment. The trip of 1933 was seen to be a huge success and was therefore repeated in 1934. However, despite fine weather attendance was poor and the trip was seen to have been far from a success.[395] York did experiment with other social activities, including a social outing to Castle Howard in 1937 and the trip to Ripon in 1938, however these too were only attended by twenty and nineteen members respectively.[396] While section reports indicate that members were happy with these

[390] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 10, no. 8, 1922, p. 126.
[391] 'January 30th, 1934', County Durham Women's Advisory Council Minutes 16 September 1929 – 26 August 1937', DCRO, D/X 1048/3.
[392] 'July 20th, 1936', County Durham Women's Advisory Council Minutes 16 September 1929 – 26 August 1937', DCRO, D/X 1048/3.
[393] 'March 20th, 1928', York Women's Section Minute Book 1927-1933, LAB/1/5/2.
[394] 'August 14th, 1928, York Women's Section Minute Book 1927-1933, LAB/1/5/2.
[395] 'August 9th, 1934', York Women's Section Minute Book 1933-1940, LAB/1/5/3.
[396] 'Section Outing 1937', York Women's Section Minute Book 1933-1940, LAB/1/5/3.

attendances, those events which incorporated women and their children in outings were more successful, even accounting for the differences in size between York and other areas.

Outside of outings or those events which were specifically arranged for their benefit, the attendance of children was often an assumed and enjoyed feature of many other section events which had a leisure element. Children usually had a prominent place in the Women's Day's celebration held across the country for example. According to *The Labour Woman,* one of the most remarkable features of the Women's Day in County Durham from its first year was the central role in the celebrations which was played by the children of women in the movement. Making and carrying their own banners and marching, the children made the day 'as it should be, a day for the children as well as the mothers'.[397] Elsewhere, the Women's Day at Wrexham in 1936 was centred around a 'Go as you please' competition, with those children who entered winning prizes for their efforts.[398] That the section thought the some one hundred and fifty women who attended this event to see the children's efforts was disappointing shows how popular these events could be and how women and their children often experienced the recreational side of membership alongside one another.

More regularly, the social activities held throughout the year in sections also allowed women to bring their children along and often made special efforts to accommodate them. For example, children would be included in the arts and crafts exhibitions which regularly took place. These included the event held in York in 1932 where there were classes for women, which included cake making, bread making and knitted garments, alongside separate lessons for their children, who had the opportunity to learn how to produce knitted garments, sew or attend a class on other miscellaneous tasks with prizes allocated accordingly.[399] Other activities where children were noted as being present included more regular social and fundraising functions which took place, including Pie and Pea Suppers held in Hunslet Carr, or simply the regular monthly socials held in York in 1923.[400] It is unfortunately difficult to establish from minutes the attendance of children at many other socials that occurred, which tended not to be ticketed and so did not have a separate children's ticket price or attendance

[397] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 11, no. 7, 1923, p. 112.
[398] 'Women's Month – June', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/712.
[399] 'York Labour Party – Women's Section Arts & Crafts Exhibition', York Women's Section Minute Book 1927-1933, LAB/1/5/2.
[400] 'March 20th, 1934', Hunslet Carr Women's Meeting Minute Book 1929-36, WYL853/87; 'September 4th, 1923', York Labour Women's Section Minute Book, LAB/1/5/1.

listed in the minutes. However, it seems likely from records that children were present at a far wider number of the socials held by sections than these. For example, it was common for members' children who attended alongside their mothers to play a role in the entertainment of a social evening. One example from Hartlepool saw the children form a Pierrot Troupe and perform a variety show for their mothers and the wider women's section at a monthly concert.[401] In Gorton in 1929, members' children were tasked with performing a dance routine, a dramatic performance, or a recital for those attending a social evening.[402] Children were therefore part of the social fabric of section life and, as a result, their mothers were able to enjoy all of the opportunities for leisure and recreation the section offered alongside them.

This also took more organised forms in many areas and, as women's sections grew, they also played a huge role in the foundation and promotion of youth or junior sections of the party. This work was ongoing as early as 1920 in some areas, with an already established Wood Green junior section supported by the women's organisation by this point, as well as a Bedford Young Labour League which, while still only with girl members at this point, was growing with its focus on sewing, singing and acting.[403] *The Labour Woman* proudly boasted in 1929 as the youth movement continued to develop that it was the Women's Conference that had been largely responsible for bringing the organisation of young people into question within the party for the first time.[404] In line with the view of the women's leadership within the party, leading men within the movement also thought that women and particularly mothers were best placed to play a leading role in the organisation of young people. In a 1933 leaflet entitled 'Labour's Call to Youth', Arthur Henderson urged sections to 'take the initiative to recruit young members into the party', asking women to influence the young folk in their homes, as well as the friends of their sons and daughters, and to take a full role in helping their CLP plan a special meeting to campaign.[405] The women's section and the wider party saw huge potential in the role that sections could play in the organisation of the young.

This does also appear to have been the feeling of local sections and parties, as well as regional organisations, who often built their efforts to organise children around the role that

[401] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 10, no. 9, 1922, p. 142.
[402] 'Meeting of Executive Committee – May 1st, 1929', Gorton Labour Party Women's Section Minutes – 5 November 1929 – 5 June 1934, M450/1.
[403] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1920, p. 28.
[404] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 17, no. 9, 1929, p. 141.
[405] Arthur Henderson, 'Labour's Call to Youth', York Women's Section Committee Minute Book, LAB/1/5/6.

mothers in particular could play. In a reflection that male dominated CLPs saw the organisation of young people to primarily be women's responsibility, CLPs frequently deferred this duty to their local section. For example, whilst the York Central CLP saw the benefits of an organisation of young people, they did not take steps to arrange this directly but made a pitch to the women's section. An address in 1928 from the local party agent suggested to the section that there should be a Guild of Youth locally, which could provide study circles, classes, as well as leisure activities including dancing for the young ones.[406] The agent thought such an organisation would move young people in the right direction, educating them so that they could fulfil party work in future, but he left it to the section to debate how best this could be arranged. Even in areas where the CLP managed the process of setting up a local Guild, it was thought that women would be best placed for recruitment. For example, the local party wrote to the All Saints section of Coventry in 1935 asking women with children who were likely to become members of the Guild to put down their names.[407] Elsewhere, section organisers took the initiative to demonstrate their commitment to the organisation of junior sections. Some councils, most notably including Northumberland, even set up a special sub-committee of their members who were tasked with supporting the organisation of young people locally.[408] The result was that women's sections across the country took a leading role as junior members entered into party life for the first time.

The efforts that Labour women poured into the organisation of young people resulted in junior sections which emulated their own in both set up and popularity and which quickly spread across the country. Usually organised on a similar basis to the women's organisation, junior sections also coupled educational opportunities with campaigning, as well as the provision of recreation and leisure pursuits. Occasionally supervised on an alternating basis by Labour Women but usually managed by young members themselves, anecdotal evidence does suggest that junior sections were popular where they existed. Wood Green was not only early but particularly active, with an average attendance at its meetings of around seventy children as early as 1922, with those young members who attended being said to be between four and thirteen in age.[409] The section had proved an inspiration to villages in Wales, with Elizabeth Andrews the organiser for the nation writing of their own efforts to build a youth

[406] 'March 20th, 1928', York Women's Section Minute Book 1927-1933, LAB/1/5/2.
[407] 'January 31st, 1935', All Saints Women's Section Minute Book, May 1932 – June 1939, MSS.11/1/1.
[408] 'November 26th, 1924', Morpeth Federation of Labour Women's Sections Minute Book 1923-1932, NRO, 4415/3/1.
[409] 'Some Hints to Sections', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 10, no. 5, 1922, p. 75.

section in the region within which they hoped to couple 'picnics and rambles' with singing, 'especially Labour songs', as well as education in matters including 'Industrial History' and particularly the employment of child labour which would impress upon their young minds.[410]

Across the country, *The Labour Woman* reported that there were up to 250 branches of the League of Youth by 1929, with the number said to be increasing every day.[411] As in the women's section, there does seem to have been significant variety in the strength of the movement across the country. For example, Mr Brown of the Leeds League of Youth spoke to Hunslet Carr of the speed with which the movement was growing in the area, where the number of youth organisations already outstripped other parts of the country, even including London.[412] Further, for those areas with a large organisation, it seems clear that there were significant benefits for those young people who joined the party at this time. The activities they were able to enjoy and how this built a worldview are themselves subjects which could support a full thesis length study, and this gap in the literature has recently been addressed by Seddon's work which considers the Labour Party's League of Youth, as well as their Liberal, Conservative and Communist peers at this time. [413] However, for our purposes here, it is important to reflect the key role which women's sections played in the formation of junior or youth sections, and the resulting links which the organisations retained with one another.

Of course, women's role in the organisation of youth had huge benefits to junior members themselves and to the party, but it is also clear that junior sections had benefit for women's sections and particularly the mothers amongst them. For example, while their children participated in a junior section, women were freed to spend additional time in their own section or on their duties at home. This combination of offering children an opportunity to enjoy leisure and learning whilst freeing up their mothers during busy times was also expanded in some areas. For example, the London Advisory Council worked with local Guilds of Youth in August 1929 to arrange a Summer Camp which adopted a similar structure and form to the section's residential school, if more leisure focussed. The camp offered sixty young people the opportunity to travel away from home to Buckhurst Hall, where they enjoyed rambles and walks in the countryside as well as discussions around the

[410] Elizabeth Andrews, 'Letter to the Editor', *The Labour Woman*, 7, 5 (1919), p .53.
[411] 'The Labour Party League of Youth', *The Labour Woman*, 17, 9 (1929), p. 141.
[412] 'March 20th, 1934', Hunslet Carr Women's Section Minute Book 1929-36, WYKL853/87.
[413] Matthew David Seddon, 'Partly made politicians: the youth wings of British Political Parties', Lancaster University, PhD Thesis, 2020.

camp fire.[414] Coming once again in the summer holidays, it provided them with much needed opportunities for leisure while they built their own community, whilst also providing support for the members of the local section who found the holidays a difficult time for childcare.

Further, the opportunity for shared leisure activities and education between women in their local section and their children were also enhanced by the close links between the two organisations on the ground. Many women's sections and the junior sections frequently mixed their socials and enjoyed leisure alongside one another. The Ilford South section frequently took an active role in supporting its local Guild of Youth with their social events, not only attending but providing them with organisational assistance.[415] This relationship was often also reciprocal. For example, Agnes Lauder observed how the Renfrewshire women's section were supported by their local League in the organisation of their social which was said to have been a huge success as a result.[416] In terms of education, the two organisations also frequently mixed their provision, providing the chance for both of these wings of the movement to learn from one another. It was common for young members from the League to visit and lecture for the women of Hunslet Carr not only on the need for organisation locally but on special subject matters. This included a 1934 lecture from Mr Heald on the 'Abolition of Money', which he also concluded with a further request that women canvas their children to increase League membership in the local area.[417] In York, the women's sections opened up one-day schools, which included leisure as well as afternoon and evening lectures, to the local League of Youth as well as their sister sections locally.[418] There were therefore many opportunities for shared leisure between the women's section and the league of youth, and between mothers and their children who shared Labour membership, during this period.

As a reflection of how successful the inclusion of young people could be, and the strong and shared bonds which the experience of membership had been for many families, the records also show that many mothers and daughters attended the women's section together once they were old enough. Lowri Newman's study of sections in South Wales in this period highlights the benefits of this inter-generational involvement for both the women concerned and the

[414] 'The Labour Party League of Youth', *The Labour Woman*, 17, 9 (1929), p. 141.
[415] 'November 5th, 1930', Ilford South Central Women's Section Minute Book April 1930 – May 1932, LMA, ACC/2527/001.
[416] 'Renfrewshire – 19th January 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Agnes Lauder, LP/WORG/37/603.
[417] 'March 20th, 1934', Hunslet Carr Women's Meeting Minute Book 1929-36, WYL853/87.
[418] 'Committee Meeting – June 29th, 1937', York Women's Section Committee Minute Book, LAB/1/5/6.

party. She reflects for example the tableaux held by the Penderry section in 1935, which stated their tableaux 'should be reserved for the daughters of members only' and 'maintained that this rule be strictly kept'.[419] There are a number of other examples of mothers and daughters similarly working alongside one another throughout the movement and this proved to be a significant benefit to the maintenance of the organisation. For example, Mrs Taverner briefed the West Middlesex Advisory Council about the work of local sections in 1937. Amongst the most significant works she observed on the ground, she was proud to express her own significant encouragement to see daughters taking on the mantle of their mothers across many sections, continuing the work their parents had been doing alongside them.[420] As mothers had done with their young children, they enjoyed the opportunity to share their section life with their daughters once they had reached the age where they could attend.

While it was far more common to see women incorporating their children into section life, there is also evidence that in some areas they would invite their husbands along too. Alongside its children's party in December 1922, the Barking section organised an evening at the Municipal Restaurant where they entertained their husbands a few days later.[421] In some areas, these events could also reflect the strength of the women's movement in comparison to the so-called 'mainstream' of the party in a community. For example, the 'Husband's Party' held by North Tottenham in 1926 was intended to address the fact that the ward had far more women members than men, a phenomenon that was common across the country and often related to men being affiliate members through their unions. The party proved a success, resulting in the recruitment of 23 new men members for the local CLP.[422] It should be said that this process was also tried and proved successful in reverse. For example, Agnes Lauder recounted how the eight women had gathered in Ayr Burghs in the interests of founding a section in 1937. As the low numbers would make this difficult, each woman was tasked to bring another woman along with them who could be a friend or family member, To aid this, the secretary was also tasked with distributing membership forms to the wives of the sixty men, mostly railway workers, who attended the CLP regularly.[423] The shared experience of

[419] Lowri Newman, ''Providing an opportunity to exercise their energies', p. 38.
[420] 'AGM April 16th, 1937', West Middlesex Women's Advisory Council Minutes, 1932-1940, ACC/2417/H/030/1.
[421] 'Barking', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1922), p. 12.
[422] 'A Husband's Party', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 14, no. 6, p. 88.
[423] 'Ayr Burghs – 14 April 1937' Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Agnes Lauder, LP/WORG/37/497.

membership therefore extended beyond women's role as mother to her role as wife on occasion, with those women whose husbands were also part of the movement playing a role.

One potential challenge for those housewives and mothers who wanted to participate in the section and enjoy the recreational opportunities it had to offer; was often how it could conflict with their responsibilities at home. However, as has been demonstrated, one of the section's greatest successes was ensuring they did not face this dilemma in many areas. The organisation frequently placed women's families at the centre of its activities, and in many ways, it could represent an extension of family life. From those activities aimed at children and organised in the most difficult times of year for childcare, to the incorporation of young people into the fabric of more regular events, the section was often a place which the whole family could enjoy. Further, its central role in the Guilds or Leagues of Youth which were set up across the country offered young people the chance to form their own organisation, whilst providing space for their mothers to enjoy their activism. Even with older daughters and husbands, women involved families in sections which represented an extension to the home.

THE SKILLED LABOUR HOUSEWIFE

As well as allowing women the opportunity to incorporate motherhood into section life, leisure activities provided them with the chance to enhance and demonstrate the skills central to the other role those outside of paid work came to fulfil in the period, that of the housewife. Women frequently had the chance to enhance and display their skills in homecraft or cookery, and there were a wide range of activities specifically arranged for this purpose. The use of these skills doubtless provided benefits for the section itself, and as with many leisure activities they could prove to be central in the party's fundraising activities as well as being an opportunity to attract new women to the cause. The latter point was particularly important given the competition from non-partisan organisations who had long provided space for women to train and show their domestic skills. However, those activities which concentrated on domestic activities were also an opportunity for women to widen once solitary activities into opportunities to socialise and, as studies of other organisations have also shown, to assert their right to participate in the organisation and to enjoy even wider leisure pursuits on the basis of the skilled work they completed in the home. The incorporation of the image of housewife into party life, as with the role of mother, doubtless provided limitations upon women's internal party influence. However, it also allowed them to enjoy a range of activities

with their friends and comrades, to build upon their existing skills and to show with pride the work they had produced as a result. This was leisure time which once again sat alongside, rather than in conflict, with the domestic responsibilities which could be mundane at home.

Of course, for the reasons considered earlier in this thesis, there were those at the time and remain those in the historiography who do not see the focus on housewives and mothers in party life and discourse in these terms. However, as mentioned in the introduction, both Ward and Thane have worked to challenge the sense of disappointment in the organisation on these grounds.[424] Building on this point, Thane has also noted the similarities between Labour's women's sections and the NFWI, and the emphasis they both placed on the value of women's domestic skills and the contribution they made to society.[425] As will be demonstrated here, this was more than a rhetorical position, as the sewing clubs, exhibitions, and opportunities to produce and share food represent. When we set these activities alongside those arranged by the NFWI or the NUTG, we see apparently frivolous distractions in a different way. Women-centred spaces, focussed on women's own priorities, were places where the skills of the domestic worker could be recognised and enhanced.[426] In itself, this was a political achievement women leveraged from membership, whether or not it was within a partisan organisation which should, and did, have wider ambitions for its members as its remit.

Like the associational bodies of interwar Britain, the role of leisure in the Labour Party therefore fulfilled a number of different purposes. As the historiography demonstrates, most popular leisure activities that took place within these organisations were also arranged with recreation rather than domestic utility in mind. However, domesticity was also an important way the skilled housewife could justify her access to the leisure time she went on to enjoy. There were a small number of organisations who did not need to use domesticity in this way. Take, for example, the Women's League of Health and Beauty, an unashamed in its wish to offer a space for autonomous pleasure to women, with pianists, teachers and babysitting on hand and a heavy social calendar.[427] However, this organisation had young people with resources as its target audience, and its membership did not need to justify their access to

[424] Pat Thane, 'What difference did the vote make?', p. 284; Stephanie Ward, 'Labour Activism and the Political Self'.
[425] Pat Thane, *Divided Kingdom: a history of Britain 1900 to the present* (Cambridge, 2018), p. 81.
[426] Stephanie Ward, 'Labour Activism and the Political Self', p. 44.
[427] J. J. Matthews, 'They had such a lot of fun: The Women's League of Health and Beauty between the wars', *History Workshop*, 30 (1990), p. 49.

recreation away from family life in the same way. As a result, it was far more common for organisations to recognise women's domestic roles as a means of providing them access to wider opportunities outside of the home. The professionalisation of the housewife mentioned earlier was an important way in which they achieved this. As Andrews reflects, one of the key claims of the NFWI was that its skilled workers were entitled to the same benefits as others, including the right to leisure time.[428] Given its origins in questions surrounding the paid workforce, and concerns about how they may best use their 'free time', this redefinition of women's domestic work as skilled labour like any other also justified their access to leisure time.[429] In validating their work, women were also able to claim access to the leisure time alongside which it was often accompanied. The utility of activities within the NFWI and other organisations, meant women could combine the music and drama they enjoyed with those activities which had a domestic purpose such as the handicrafts and agricultural pursuits already considered.[430] Women in non-partisan organisations could not only re-affirm the importance of their domestic roles, they could also leverage this to access wider opportunities, including to fulfil their need for all-important leisure time outside of the home.

The women's section's focus on leisure activities which was built around the skills and interests of the housewife should be seen in a similar light. Of all the activities which were easy to arrange as a group and which took place in local sections across the country, sewing clubs, parties and meetings are some of the most common in minute books across the country. The Houghton-le-Spring section was early and focussed on its approach to offering women access to sewing socials. In April 1923 they agreed to start a sewing party, with one pound in funding raised from members for Ms Flynn and Ms Richardson to purchase sewing materials in advance. In Houghton-le-Spring these would be more intimate affairs that typical section meeting, with Mrs Jeffrey's welcoming women into her home for the party over the coming weeks.[431] When the question of a new set of sewing meetings came up again a year later, the same approach of hosting the event in women's homes was adopted. This time it was suggested that the meetings rotate, with each comrade providing one session in their home and providing the tea while the women who attended brought along the cake.[432] While the cost of meeting halls for socials and meetings was doubtless a factor in the decision to

[428] Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptance Face of Feminism*, p.78.
[429] Terry Irving, *Challenges to Labour History* (Sydney, 1994), p.3.
[430] Caitriona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, p.25.
[431] 'April 5th, 1923', Houghton-le-Spring Women's Section Minutes, TWA PO/LAB/8/1/1.
[432] 'July 7th, 1924', Houghton-le-Spring Women's Section Minutes, TWA PO/LAB/8/1/1.

host these sessions at home, the sewing socials which took place as a result were intimate occasions where women opened their homes to one another, enjoying a once solitary activity together, having a chat and something to eat while sharing their skills with their peers.

As with all of the leisure activities considered here, sewing parties and meetings had much utility for the party as well as for the women involved. The second of the Houghton sessions above was arranged to raise funds for a stall at a bazaar and this was typical across the country, with sewing being one of the most lucrative activities which took place. Reflecting that the mix of leisure and utility would offer both women and the party something, *The Labour Woman* recommended as part of its Eight Million Members campaign that one business meeting a month should be combined with a sewing meeting which is working to 'a sale of work or similar object'.[433] Writing earlier, in a pamphlet upon the founding of the section, Marion Phillips had said sewing parties were helpful as 'beside raising funds' they drew members together offering a chance for women who liked to come along to meet and chat about the party'.[434] Evidence suggests that this approach was already being successfully adopted in some sections across the country. Following the West Bromwich Section's sewing meetings during the Spring of 1919, they managed to raise a significant £104 in profit from their sale of garments at a bazaar, funds which were then used for the section and the wider party.[435] Across the country, minute books discuss sewing parties and meetings which were held with the same purpose in mind. In York, attendance at the sewing meetings held in 1936 usually had between eight and twelve members present. Between them and using the two sewing machines they had to hand, the women were able to complete 'a good deal of bazaar work' across their weekly meetings.[436] Sewing was an opportunity for women across the country to put their skills to use for the good of the party, representing some of the best fundraising opportunities for the cause through the sale of their work which then took place.

While this fits a narrative that sees the section as a supportive organisation for the benefit of party funds and propaganda, sewing was also a useful and interesting activity for those women who took part. While most would have had experience already, from within their families and the school system, many looked to the section to enhance their skills so that they

[433] 'Eight Million Members Wanted. How to Organise and Find Them', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 8, no. 9 (1920), p. 137.
[434] Marion Phillips, *Organisation of Women within the Labour Party*, p. 3.
[435] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 7, no. 8 (1919), p. 96.
[436] 'May 26th, 1936,' 'June 16th, 1936'. York Women's Section Minute Book, 1933-1940, LAB/1/5/3.

could sew garments for them and their families. When York started their activities in 1920, it was not with a sewing club but with a sewing class, with Mrs Taylor providing a machine and Mrs MacKeith providing her expertise so that women could learn to make and mend clothing for themselves and their families.[437] This remained necessary for many throughout the period and, in a reflection that men of the party were not always happy to keep women focussed on such activities, it could also be a source of contention with the so-called mainstream organisation. In 1937, Mr Rosser-Thomas the Penydarren Ward Secretary wrote to Chief Women's Officer Mary Sutherland asking for the rules of the women's section, stating that his local section was in serious danger of emulating social service clubs like the NFWI.[438] Sutherland wrote to organiser Elizabeth Andrews asking her to address the issue locally but was clearly unhappy with the 'man complaining that the section is too focussed on sewing parties'. Sutherland saw that the risk of ceasing or limiting such activities is that women would simply leave and choose to visit voluntary and charitable organisations, as they needed to gain these skills to repair old garments for both themselves and their families to use.[439] While sewing had much utility for the party, it therefore also had significant benefits for members themselves, allowing them to develop skills which were important in domestic life. If the section did not provide them with this opportunity, leaders within the organisation were aware that their needs meant they would find what they were looking for elsewhere.

As well as local opportunities to enjoy sewing together, the section provided women with the chance to contribute to Homecraft Exhibitions where they could demonstrate the wide range of domestic skills, they had amongst them. Often arranged again with fundraising at their core, exhibitions were more varied than a single bazaar stall, and mixed the production and sale of works with competitions which recognised the particular contributions of members and occasionally their children. In 1934, as well as demonstrating fine needle work, the women of Northumberland were offered the opportunity to demonstrate their skills in the garden with a best pot of pulls competition and were asked to place on sale the homemade sweets and toffees that they had made.[440] In nearby York, the activities were even more extensive. A leaflet advertising their exhibition, held in the Railwayman's Club on Blossom

[437] '5 October 1920', York Women's Section Minute Book, 1920-1925, LAB/1/5/1.
[438] 'Letter from Rosser Thomas (Pennydarren Ward Sec) to Mary Sutherland', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/312.
[439] 'Letter to Elizabeth Andrews from Mary Sutherland, Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/311.
[440] '10th December 1934', Northumberland Labour Women's Advisory Council Committee Minute Books, 1929-1925, NRO 4415/1/2.

Street, shows sessions on cake making, bread making, preserves, homemade sweets, knitted garments, crochet garments, thrift garments, sewn garments, a miscellaneous class for any useful clothing article, as well as a session for home hints, in which women could take part.[441] For the children they brought along, it also had sessions on the knitted garment, sewn garment and a miscellaneous class. Across each of these events, which offered a mixture of instruction from a leader and the assessment of contributions by a judge, women were offered the chance to be recognised for their skill while contributing something to the party funds.

Of the organised leisure activities that took place in York in particular, the Homecraft Exhibition is a case study in how seriously section women took these occasions and how popular the opportunity to demonstrate one's domestic skills proved to be. Far from having the competition assessed solely by a woman from the section, a booklet which was printed to share the success of the occasion shows how the judges who had been appointed also obtained the service of a Domestic Service Inspector from the Local Authority to take part in judging the competition.[442] Each of the goods produced were to be sold at a Whist Drive at a charge of 6d, and the funds which were raised were split between the party and one competition winner in each class, who won 2d per adult and 1d per child. In a reflection that these competitions were particularly popular, in a York section which struggled to hit double figures for many of its events, dozens of women asked for forms to take part in 1932 from their section alone. So much so that the section needed to order more forms from the Regional Advisory Council so that all of their women could contribute.[443] In terms of the contribution of women, the judges which included the local authority inspector commented on the excellent work that had been produced and submitted for all of the prizes.[444] In York, as elsewhere across the country, Homecraft Exhibitions proved to be hugely popular events for the party and highly enjoyable leisure activity for members. They offered the chance to demonstrate women's skills and to have this recognised across their peers in the movement.

While there are sadly limited accounts from women about the experience of entering a Homecraft Exhibition, the papers of Margaret Hunter Gibb do reflect some of her views and

[441] 'York Labour Party Women's Section Arts & Crafts Exhibition', York Women's Section Minute Book 1927-1933, LAB/1/5/2.
[442] 'Booklet on the York Arts and Crafts Exhibition', York Women's Section Minute Book 1927-1933, LAB/1/5/2.
[443] 'February 16th, 1932, York Women's Section Minute book, 1927-1933, LAB/1/5/2.
[444] 'Booklet on the York Arts and Crafts Exhibition', York Women's Section Minute Book 1927-1933, LAB/1/5/2.

those of her local members on the importance of these events. In correspondence with a relative of Gibb, Martin Bulmer, upon her death, Elizabeth Blackburn of the East Boldon section in County Durham wrote of how important the demonstration of domestic skills was for many members of the women's section. She recounted hearing Gibb speak at Conference, where she said that while some women made good Chairmen or Secretaries, all women had something to give to society, and an important way the women of County Durham reflected this was with the time they spent exhibiting handwork, knitting, crocheting and embroidery at their events, allowing all to 'respect each other's abilities in whatever form'.[445] Gibb expressed similar sentiments in pamphlets she had written, including the 1974 reflection *Labour in the North East Between the Wars*. As well as all of the benefits mentioned so far, Gibb commented on how social events that included these competitions and exhibitions, as well as speaking contests, ensured the significant variety within the interwar movement were represented.[446] Exhibitions were therefore an opportunity for all women to contribute to section life, in a way that they enjoyed, and which was focussed on their own particular skills and interests. The result was social activities which could serve to fundraise, but which importantly provided the colour, variety, and vitality of the interwar women's section.

While it is far more difficult to quantify than arts and crafts, given that the assumption of its presence at meetings meant it was rarely remarked upon, the role of food which women produced and shared with one another was an equally important part of section life. This partly represented a chance for women to share the burdensome responsibility of domestic life. Alongside being offered the chance to socialise with others, Spring-Rice noted the need amongst women she surveyed to simply eat food they had not cooked themselves.[447] As previous chapters of this thesis have shared, despite the many benefits of the education provided by the section's residential schools, this was one of the most enjoyable elements for many women who attended them. However, it was also about the experience of eating alongside one another and sharing the food which members had made with their peers. As Stephanie Ward has indicated, while the mixing of 'politics of pleasure' has been long noted in studies of women's experience of the party, the wider implications of involving food has

[445] 'Letter from Elizabeth Blackburn', Recollections of Margaret Gibb by Friends, NRO 2973/2.
[446] Margaret H. Gibb, *Labour in the North East between the Wars*, June, 1974, Margaret Hunter Gibb Political Articles and Lectures, NRO 2973/4.
[447] Margery Spring Rice, *Working-Class Wives*, p. 201.

not been fully considered.[448] While there is no room for a full consideration of its role here, it is clear that food played an important part in membership which needs at least to be noted.

Once again, the food women produced for party events provided an opportunity to raise money. Pie and pea suppers were particularly successful in this regard, with members sharing the cost of ingredients and some baking the pies or providing the peas which would then be used to raise money. In the North East, there are records of the Colliery Ward of Sunderland holding a number of such events throughout the period, typically raising a profit of over £1.[449] Nearby Houghton-le-Spring took a similar approach, and their fundraisers were also an opportunity to recruit new members, with members encouraged to invite along their friends and neighbours in 1927 for a fee of 6d per head.[450] Elsewhere, once they had finished a particularly prolific few weeks of sewing classes in 1927 which resulted in the surplus of goods for an upcoming bazaar, the women of Bramley turned their attention to organising their own pie and pea supper to aid in fundraising.[451] In some areas, the potential of such events was even higher, with Gorton in Manchester frequently arranging suppers which as well as potato pie included performances from singers or fancy dress competitions and could achieve a profit of around £3 for section funds.[452] In each case, events where members produced and shared foods with other members and the wider communities were significant successes, representing their popular place within the calendar of section activities annually.

However, as well as being opportunities to fundraise, these activities were just as often opportunities for women to enjoy one another's company and having food cooked for them. This ranged from the grand to the more mundane opportunities which took part within the organisation. In the former case, the Hunslet Carr section in Leeds made a particular occasion of their women's supper, which was held annually and included the roasting of a joint of meat. In January 1936 the supper was said to have been well enjoyed by the forty-four women who attended, who as well as their share of a 14lbs leg of pork at the 'grand affair' enjoyed a pianist for the evening.[453] At a more mundane level, women shared tea and cakes regularly as they took the chance to catch up during section meetings and events. The mixture

[448] Stephanie Ward, 'Labour Activism and the Political Self, pp. 45-6.
[449] 'September 23rd, 1930', Colliery Ward Women's Section Minutes, TWASC 5083/5.
[450] 'November 21st, 1927', Houghton-le-Spring Women's Section, TWASC PO.LAB/8/1/1.
[451] 'February 28th, 1927', Bramley Women's Guild Minute Book, May 1926 – Nov 1929, WYL 853/85.
[452] 'February 12th, 1929', February 22nd, 1932', Gorton Labour Party Women's Section Minutes 5 November 1929 – 5 June 1934, M450/1.
[453] 'January 28th, 1936', Hunslet Carr Women's Section Minute Book, 1929-1936, WYL853/87.

of tea and cake was often used as an opportunity to fundraise too. For example in the Colliery Ward, tea and conversation followed every meeting, usually realising a small profit for the section.[454] The same was true in Houghton-le-Spring, where tea was often accompanied by games and competitions which also did much to add to party funds.[455] However, representing the primarily social function of these events the York women noted how even in quiet weeks when it came to party business they still met for their tea. Not because it necessarily had any financial or party purpose but simply because it was nice to get together and enjoy 'a nice talk amongst us as friends'.[456] The sharing of food and drinks amongst them represented a chance for women to get together, sharing what they had made for the benefit of their section and party but more importantly in service to the relationships they had built amongst them.

In terms of opportunities to enhance their cooking and baking skills, there are not as many mentions of the classes that were taking place locally within minute books. However, we know from *The Labour Woman* that recipe nights, for example, would take place. In 1935 the journal urged sections to arrange such meetings, which had proved a way of attracting some women who were not yet interested in the political side of the movement.[457] Throughout the period, the publication also carried its own recipe pages, welcoming contributions from women on the subject. It is possible that this omission reflects the fact that women rarely shared cooking tips and arranged these recipe meetings. However, just as likely is that these events were not minuted as they did not represent an opportunity for either fundraising or recruitment activities for the party which would usually be documented. Either way, the making of food, one of the housewife's great skills, and sharing it with friends and colleagues was an important part of membership. As with homecraft, it provided women with the opportunity to enjoy leisure with their friends whilst putting their domestic skills to use and the chance to demonstrate these skills to their peers and the movement. As with the involvement of children, it meant that section life was an expansion of domesticity and did not necessarily sit in conflict with the responsibilities of housewife and mother at home.

[454] 'July 15th, 1932, Colliery Ward Women's Section Minute Book, TWASC 5083/5.
[455] 'June 23rd, 1931', Houghton-le-Spring Women's Section Minute Book, TWASC PO.LAB 8/1/2.
[456] 'January 18th, 1928', York Women's Section Minute Book 1927-1933, York LAB/1/5/2.
[457] *The Labour Woman,* vol. 23, no. 5, 1935, p. 41.

CONCLUSION

In some ways, it was an obvious and natural step to allow women access to leisure time where they could claim that their recreation was in service to their families and their party. However, the independent opportunities for leisure discussed in the next chapter were in many ways facilitated by those considered here. Labour women were Labour housewives and mothers first, because this is the space the section offered them, this is the space it found them within, and this was the reality which needed to be acknowledged before any other opportunities could be enjoyed. By incorporating their families into section life, women did not need to face a stark choice between spending time with their children and broadening their own access to leisure outside of the home. In enhancing and demonstrating their domestic skill, they could rightly claim that the activities which took part within the confines of sections, which offered them so much more, also had significant household utility. Importantly, like their peers in other associational movements in this period, they could demonstrate that the role of housewife was a skilled one, which like any other deserved its own recognition and its own rights, particularly to enjoy those opportunities for leisure which their peers in the industrial wings of the labour movement were working so hard to achieve.

Whilst the last chapters considered the section as the 'Working Women's University', this chapter therefore also understands it as other women saw it, the 'Working Women's Trade Union'. In an article at the very end of our period, E.M.R. from Glasgow wrote to *The Labour Woman* describing the section in these terms. Reflecting over the twenty years of the organisation, she said that it had become 'not just a sort of kindergarten for experienced electors' but a 'Trade Union for working-class housewives' in particular, who, after all, continued to 'form the majority' of members of the section by this point.[458] Like any good interwar trade union, the section was a place which recognised the work of its members, worked to help them enhance their skills and improve their conditions, whilst fighting for their rights to time away from work which could be based around their needs and interests.

Of course, the activities discussed across these pages also had much more than this utility in mind, and the relationships women built through their sections or the experiences they enjoyed with their families should not be understated on their own terms. These had real

[458] E.M.R., 'Who Speaks for Married Women?', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 27, no. 5 (1939), p. 72.

value to women and those around them, sat in service not to the party but to those who made the party what it was, from those who enjoyed section life as part of their childhood, to those mothers who found a place of mutual support, friendship, and fun. These are more difficult to quantify from the records available, but the examples cited here reflect enjoyable and popular events where Labour housewives and mothers enjoyed a section which was an expansion of their home and their often-limited social circles. Either way, it was the mix of the social with the educational and political, which made the women's section such an enjoyable experience for women *as well as* an effective vehicle for their cause. As Hilary Armstrong wrote in a pamphlet of the North East organisation at this time, the activities women relished were seen as 'legitimate' because they were independent of men and because, as their limited time was too precious, their activity 'complement[ed] the rest of their life' rather than challenging it'.[459] The working housewife and mother was able to leverage her trade union to enjoy opportunities for leisure alongside her family, to enhance and display her domestic skill, and build and sustain relationships. The sections they built buzzed with the voices of their children, families, and the new friends they had made. The social activities they arranged socialised once solitary activities which could otherwise confine them to the home.

[459] Hilary Armstrong, *Women: New and Old Structures within the Labour Party* (1983), Margaret Hunter Gibb Political Articles and Lectures, NRO 2973/4.

CHAPTER FOUR – FOR LABOUR AND FOR LEISURE: INDEPENDENT LEISURE TIME FOR LABOUR WOMEN

While activities that incorporated women's families and domestic roles were important, the aim of leisure for many within the section, including its early leaders, was that women should be able to enjoy independent access to rest and fun away from their arduous daily lives. This took more every day forms, including section meetings intended in the words of Elizabeth Andrews to 'vibrate with life'.[460] It also included those organised events considered here, all of which mixed party business with leisure to some extent, including women's days, weeks and months, outings, and conferences. Through these activities, facilitated by a women's organisation which accommodated domesticity, members experienced local camaraderie and regional and national solidarity as part of a large and growing movement. Just as importantly, they asserted and defended their right to independent leisure time away from their domestic responsibilities. In doing so, they fulfilled a real political priority which was as important to their daily lives as many of the policy aims of their party could equally have proved to be.

This chapter assembles significant evidence that independent leisure was amongst the most important parts of membership for many, and that the role recreation came to play in section life was decided by women themselves. First, when it looked to build, the section's most successful methods of recruitment and fundraising were its social activities. Second, the fact that leisure was part of the fabric of weekly meetings ensured that Labour politics were not only appealing to the uninitiated but ensured those women who joined kept coming back. Further, while studies have frequently separated the time women spent in apparently non-political organisations from party politics, this chapter demonstrates that sections felt real competition from these organisations on the ground. One of the key arenas in which the battle for women's limited time were fought was in their leisure provision and those organisations which offered these opportunities to working-class women in particular were often the most successful. Finally, this chapter demonstrates that, contrary to many traditional accounts, these decisions were driven by the needs of women and not the preferences of the so-called mainstream of their party locally. Far from being happy to keep women side-lined, many men within CLPs were actually frustrated when they saw sections which focussed too readily on

[460] As quoted in June Hannam, 'The Victory of Ideals must be organised', p. 339.

leisure at the expense of party work. Leisure was not only a priority for Labour women, but one that they fought to contain within section life and to justify to their movement.

Of course, this was not true of all women in the Labour Party, just as it was not in other organisations. For some women, the focus on leisure could be seen as frivolous and as standing in the way of the real benefits which participation could bring. The historiography has already observed this perspective within other organisations, non-partisan and partisan alike. For example, while many working-class members of the NFWI saw their time in the organisation as a much-needed leisure pursuit, there could be frustrations from their middle-class peers, who wanted to prioritise education and could see their role as something more akin to social work. [461] Further, Fleming's work on Lancashire Conservatism, has shown how many women in the area prioritised more active contribution in the party rather than enjoying the simple social pursuits that came from affiliated organisations.[462] As is shown, similar concerns were often raised by more experienced members within the section's ranks. However, as organisers realised and as this chapter demonstrates, it was leisure that built and sustained sections, supporting women in the arduous business of party politics and in their already over-stretched lives, by placing the section at the centre of their social worlds.

LEISURE'S ROLE IN THE SECTION'S GROWTH

The role local sections would need to play in women's social lives if they were to be successful was well understood by the early leaders of the section. With an aim to attract women who were not already political, Marion Phillips wanted to create an organisation which filled the remits of being interesting, fulfilling, as well as enjoyable.[463] As editor of *The Labour Woman*, she wrote an article in 1920 that aimed to assist sections in playing their role in achieving Labour's rather ambitious target of eight million members across the country. She said that the key to appealing to women in particular was to provide a mix of 'social gatherings' for some as well as 'business meetings and educational lectures' for those who were already more politically experienced.[464] Social gatherings were naturally to include some updates on Labour Party business but were also intended to focus on music and other

[461] Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism*, p. 60.
[462] N. C. Fleming, 'Women and Lancashire conservatism between the wars', pp. 329-349.
[463] Marian Goronwy-Roberts, *A woman of vision*, p. 70.
[464] 'Eight Million Women Wanted. How to Organise and Find Them', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 8, no.9, 1920, p. 137.

leisure activities. Even regular party meetings should be accompanied by refreshments and where possible the playing of a piano and the singing of a song.[465] In line with some of the successful examples seen in the previous chapter, she also said that sections should look to build up an organisation of young people locally, which was not only a pipeline for future members, but could focus on creating dramatic societies which then could be drawn upon to provide entertainment for future junior and women's section socials.[466] The aim was to create a space that, initially, appealed to women as a place their recreational needs could be filled.

This focus on leisure was supported by regional organisers and represented perhaps the most difficult task they confronted, a mission not only to provide women with the confidence to leave the home to enjoy leisure time, but with the ability to assert this right with the men in their lives. Speaking in a later oral history interview about her experiences within the North East, Margaret Hunter Gibb remarked on the traditional roles fulfilled by women in colliery districts in particular, with no time for external activities and miner husbands whose views on women's place inside the home were slow to change.[467] Gibb reflected on the initial struggle of women within colliery villages, as well as the eventual significant success of areas such as Ryhope and Silksworth, both now part of the City of Sunderland, in building organisations that had very regular meetings, socials, conferences, and schools which entirely changed the outlook of many women's lives in the area.[468] She remarked on how socials and competitions particularly appealed to inexperienced women who had initially struggled to speak at meetings, and how this entrance into the party led to the broadening of their horizons, a reorganisation of their lifestyles to incorporate party work, and eventual pride from the miners of the contribution they could see their wives making.[469] This entire process started, in Gibbs view, with meetings which provided women with a welcoming and 'positive feeling'.[470] Gibb's comments speak to particular challenges and successes in one part of the country, but reflect the central role social events played in building sections nationwide.

While the position of leaders on the question of leisure is already better understood in the literature, the role and form of recreational activities locally, how they supported the section

[465] Ibid.
[466] Ibid.
[467] Transcript of tape conservation with Margaret Hunter Gibb at The Riding, Cambo. NRO/2973/22.
[468] Ibid.
[469] Ibid.
[470] Ibid.

and sustained members, and how this differed across the country has not been fully considered. Fortunately for our purposes, the pages of *The Labour Women* provided ring-fenced space where reports of these activities were shared early in the period, offering an insight into the central role leisure played from the outset. From 1923, the publication rarely carried such updates, apologising to readers that it would no longer have space to print a record of local events as the organisation grew unless something 'special' or 'unusual' had occurred.[471] However, using a combination of accounts in the journal where they exist, the extensive records of local activities in section and Advisory Council minutes, and organiser reports, a clearer view of the central role which leisure played and the importance which women placed on opportunities for recreation can be recovered. Leisure played a role for the section, in building a membership and financially sustaining the organisation. It played a role for the party, supporting the activities of the local CLP and providing the foot-soldiers who completed party business. However, it also offered women a space outside of the home where they had ring-fenced time for recreation which could be enjoyed independently or alongside their families. Before and after the members campaign, it was key to attracting thousands, if sadly never eight million, women to a section which became the centre of their social world.

LEISURE IN RECRUITING FOR LOCAL SECTIONS

Many early sections worked to build a model akin to what Phillips had suggested from the year the organisation was founded, providing leisure opportunities as a means of introducing the uninitiated into party life. In Luton, one of the first sections in the country, members were arranging successful monthly social evenings as early as 1918.[472] In the same year, Swindon was also arranging a series of gatherings but had seen particular success with its Summer Fete, which had raised £18 to help the section get through an expectedly quiet winter season.[473] As the early Lancaster section worked to build its membership in 1919 it adopted a similar model to others, designating one meeting each month to holding a social, which included educational party content followed by leisure and refreshments along the lines Phillips had suggested.[474] In York, as the founding vote of the women's section concluded on 9 March 1920, the members confirmed the minutes and then immediately moved on to

[471] 'Apology to Women's Sections', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1923, p. 59.
[472] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 6, no. 6, p. 61.
[473] Ibid.
[474] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 7, no. 12, 1919, p. 145.

making plans for their first Whist Drive and Dance, followed by the discussion of setting up a holiday club.[475] In subsequent months, much of the activity of this section came to be dominated by their social calendar, and the women started planning a Garden Party to be held during the period summer from May. From the outset, social events would therefore be central as fledgling organisations across the country looked for ways in which to grow.

Anecdotal accounts also reflect that this model was proving successful in some parts of the country, although this remained an ongoing pursuit. For example, Ipswich women thought that their socials were having an early impact in 'arousing interest and gaining new members' for the section.[476] Their social of January 1919 included games, singing, dancing and, with the help of men of the local party, an enactment of the playlet 'The V.C.' by Lady Margaret Sackville.[477] Mrs Alexander of the section urged others to 'take the hint' and focus their recruitment efforts on this direction, and sections up and down the country took this direction. While some areas were quicker to progress than others, social events remained a popular way in which they continued to grow throughout the interwar period. For example, the organiser for Scotland Agnes Lauder gives an account of the West Stirlingshire section in 1937. Already a fairly young section in terms of its membership of around forty women, they allowed a further twenty young married women to come along to their social that took place at 8.30pm once the business of their regular meeting had concluded.[478] Dancing went on from 9.30pm until 11pm, followed by an address by Lauder, and the result was that a significant number of those who attended expressed a wish to join the party and discussed the process with the organiser. Leisure-centred social activities were a key way in which the section worked to build its membership from the outset, and indeed throughout, the interwar period.

However, as women organised their social activities, there remained a problem in getting attention for events which had the potential to recruit members to the cause. One of the most popular ways local sections worked to combat this was by arranging events where women could bring their friends, neighbours, and family members along. This allowed women to grow their organisation whilst also building a section which better represented an extension of their existing social world. The Rugby section was early in asking members to bring their

[475] 'March 9th, 1920', York Women's Section Minute Book 1920-1925, York LAB/1/5/1.
[476] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 7, no.2, 1919, p. 16.
[477] Ibid.
[478] 'West Stirlingshire – 21 April 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Agnes Lauder, LP/WORG/37/618.

friends along to party meetings. From 1920, it was asking members to bring their friends and neighbours along to open-air meetings to enjoy a taste of membership.[479] There were significant risks as well as benefits in opening up section activities to those from outside of the organisation. One of the most significant, in the view of Helen Beckett who wrote in *The Labour Woman* to encourage all women to persuade friends to come along to a meeting, was that women were unlikely to return if the meeting was dull, abstruse and without musical items.[480] To combat this, it was far more common for sections to ask members to invite friends along only to explicitly social functions. This was often to an event that would be hosted once or twice a year, as in the case of the All Saints Women's Section in Coventry which held a picnic for women to bring their friends and families along.[481] However, in smaller sections, the involvement of friends, neighbours, and family members was far more regular and helped sustain events throughout the year. In York, even regular party socials involved the friends of members, as in March 1935, where they enjoyed singing, guessing competitions and dancing, followed by a brief outline of the work of the party and renditions of 'Auld Lang Syne' and the 'Red Flag'.[482] The section also opened up larger events to those from outside the party in the hope that they might join. In 1938, women were asked to invite their friends along on the annual outing by bus to Boroughbridge, Ripon, Middleham and Aysgarth Falls.[483] Socials which offered a way for the party to grow and an opportunity for women to bring their existing networks into section life were a feature across the country.

Unfortunately, a lack of collected membership data across sections make it difficult to establish how successful these attempts to expand local memberships proved to be, and whether women were able to encourage their friends and neighbours to stay once leisure activities had ended. In York, the section did not reach a point where it no longer required these activities and where it was able to sustain its events with its own significant membership. However, there is evidence that socials could often prove too popular, and that there was a sense from some within other sections that this meant this benefit of membership should be restricted to those who took an active role in party life. While York had around fourteen women attending the 1935 social, the Hunslet Carr section of Leeds had forty-four women at its women's supper only a year later. As a result, the section moved and passed a

[479] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 8, no. 7, 1920, p. 11.
[480] Helen Beckett, 'Some Hints for Sections', p. 75.
[481] 'July 5th, 1934', All Saints Women's Section Signed Minutes May 1932 – Jun 1939. MSS.11/1/1.
[482] 'March 12th, 1935 – Social Evening', York Women's Section Minute Book 1933-1940, York LAB/1/5/3.
[483] 'May 10th, 1938', York Women's Section Minute Book 1933-1940, York LAB/1/5/3.

resolution which stated that moving forward they would not invite those outside of active workers of the party in the future.[484] Men active in the CLP could be invited where appropriate, but women would no longer be asked to bring their friends and neighbours along. However, these events were popular in Hunslet Carr until this point, and so it seems that they were often necessary until they were no longer needed for a section to sustain itself.

While it might not have been a problem for Hunslet Carr by 1936, the task of sustaining the membership often proved as difficult for sections as building a membership initially. The challenge was certainly more complex, as there was a tension between activities that attracted women to the section and those more serious tasks which many wished to focus upon once they were experienced. Many women who were attracted to the party by social activities went on to be more interested in partisan politics and the business of campaigning and organising, and they wanted section programmes which facilitated this. For example, members in the Chippenham were agitating in 1937, seeking the advice of organiser Annie Townley on how they could move their section away from its focus on the social element of the movement.[485] Reflecting that similar concerns had been raised elsewhere and that there was unhappiness from more experienced women in the movement, *The Labour Woman* urged them not to grow impatient with socials which opened up the movement to those not already engaged in political work. While some frustration was 'inevitable', all women should remember that most came 'into the movement very raw and inexperienced' and that many of those working actively in their local sections, on Advisory Councils and in Public Authorities first came to meetings for the 'monthly social' which 'offered a pleasant break from domestic duties.[486] To complicate matters further, many women continued to see leisure as a significant part of their membership which needed to be maintained and there is evidence that this occasionally came at the expense of party business. While organisers were keen to have a mixture of leisure, education, and party business, they would also challenge sections which focussed too readily on recreation. Elizabeth Andrews visited Dinnas, a small village in Wales, as late as 1937 to advise the sixty women present at what they termed a 'Labour Guild' of the work they were expected to complete as well as the 'cup of tea' and 'jolly evenings' they were having at

[484] 'January 28th, 1936', Hunslet Carr Women's Meeting Minute Book 1929-36, WYL853/87; 'December 1st, 1936, Hunslet Carr Women's Meeting Minute Book 1929-36, WYKL853/87.
[485] 'Women's Central Committee at Chippenham – November 9th, 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Annie Townley, LP/WORG/37/2.
[486] *The Labour Woman*, vol.22, no. 11, 1934, p. 164.

present.[487] Leisure could therefore be a contested ground in local sections, and members and their organisers needed to ensure a suitable balance between recreational activities which attracted and sustained a membership, and opportunities for more 'serious' participation.

For the most part, it does seem that sections were able to achieve the balance that was right for them, and most local women and their organisers were happy with an approach which concentrated on the needs and wishes of those within particular communities. In smaller sections such as Cardiff South, Elizabeth Andrews was happy for the focus on whist drives and dances to be maintained, in the hope that the section could both raise funds and boost its membership through social activities.[488] Organisers were also called upon to defend this approach, and when they did, they pointed to the fierce competition that the section faced from other organisations when it was bidding for women's time. Far from being universally happy keeping women focussed on frivolous activities, the focus on leisure in some sections could even lead to unhappiness from male-dominated CLPs. The example mentioned in the last chapter, where Rosser-Thomas of the CLP clashed with Andrews, Sutherland, as well as the local women over what he saw as them focussing too readily on activities which were best accommodated by the NFWI is one such case.[489] Indeed, it was precisely because these activities were being offered by organisations like the Women's Institute that was one reason that organisers worked to accommodate women's need for leisure time on the ground.

This approach was born out of experiences in local communities where, especially in Wales, the threat of organisations like the NFWI and NUTG were clear by 1937. For example, the Abergwynfi section, according to Andrews once one of the best in West Wales, was struggling by this point due to women's attention being diverted to other voluntary organisations in the area.[490] It should be said that there were other dynamics at play in the constituency. As Andrews acknowledged, the heyday of the section also happened to coincide with Ramsay MacDonald's tenure as its Member of Parliament. However, the pattern could also be seen elsewhere. The problem was even more profound in the Caerphilly section, which had all but ceased to function by 1937, with most of the women locally

[487] 'Rhondda – Dinnas a tiny village', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/331.
[488] 'Cardiff South', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/276.
[489] 'Merthyr', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/331.
[490] 'Aberavon – Abergwynfi Section', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/357.

diverting their attention to the NUTG.[491] The same was also seen in Carmarthen, where only fifteen women attended a meeting which Andrews held, even this representing a larger attendance than those who usually gathered at section meetings, as they too had dwindled in number with women focussing their attention on other local organisations.[492] Outside of Wales, there is less mention of the competition with other organisations in organiser reports from this period. However, Lynn has noted that North East Labour parties also had significant concern about the popularity of the NFWI in particular, and that the women attending the Institute ascribed this to the opportunities for leisure that it was offering them rather than any specific ideological affinity or appeal.[493] Organisers across the country continued to struggle to build up and maintain their organisations and, for Andrews but likely most of Sutherland's team, a key part of this process was acknowledging the competition they faced from the alternative local uses for women's limited and precious leisure time.

It should be said that far from Rosser Thomas' view being held across the country, there was also an understanding in CLPs of the need to attract and retain women through the social side of the movement. Some of these examples simply re-enforce the existing view of local parties that were happy to keep women focussed on leisure at the expense of other activities, although these seem rarer than traditional accounts suggest. One CLP that does seem to have often been happy with a subordinate local women's section was in York. When the section was founded in March 1920 it was visited in May by local CLP representative Mr Anderson who took the opportunity to ask women for their support with future party-wide social functions. Reflecting the criticism that women carried their domestic roles into membership, their primary responsibilities were to be the management of refreshments at these socials moving forward.[494] Later in the period, the local agent visiting the section spoke not of party business but encouraged the women to have outings in the coming summer, 'as they could not make enough of the social side of the movement'.[495] At a regional level, similar patterns could also be observed. When the Women's Quarterly Conference of Bristol was founded in 1925, which represented sections across the wider city, they received an early visit from the General Secretary of the Party. His opening request was not for campaigning support from

[491] 'Caerphilly – May 8th, 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/369.
[492] 'Carmarthen – February 18th, 1937, Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/222.
[493] Pauline Lynn, 'The shaping of political allegiance: class', pp. 33-36.
[494] 'May 4th, 1920', York Women's Section Minute Book 1920-1925, York LAB/1/5/1.
[495] 'March 20th, 1928', York Women's Section Minute Book, 1927-1933, York LAB 1/5/2.

the women, or to deliver an address on party work as was often seen elsewhere, but to request that the organisation take up the arrangements for the Christmas Party moving forward to make it 'a real party affair', the profits of which would be centralised.[496] In some areas at least, socials seem to have been a remit for the section with which the party was comfortable.

Although this was the case, it is just as common from local records to see CLPs who wanted women involved with the business of party work and saw leisure only as the means to engage them. One example can be found in the case of the defunct Westbury Melksham Women's Section, which had ceased all activity by 1937. Organiser Annie Townley was pleasantly surprised by the efforts of the new local party secretary who set out on an ambition to restore the section with the help of the men of his CLP. To do so, he organised a tea that attracted a small number of women, thirteen in total, who enjoyed being waited on by the men. Over sandwiches the women agreed to reform a section locally, drawing up a new schedule for meetings which better suited their needs as young mothers, and inviting men to the first social they would hold in return in future.[497] The role of leisure was a source of disagreement amongst CLPs; doubtless some were happy to keep women's sections busy, others saw it as an unnecessary and harmful distraction, while many saw it as a necessary way in which local sections could be built and maintained. However, one point which each of these perspectives agreed upon, was that leisure was popular with section members, future and past.

Whatever the view of their CLPs locally, the work of building and sustaining organisations also left women with few doubts about the need for programmes of leisure. As memberships faltered in some areas across the 1930s, a key way that sections worked to encourage those who had left the organisation to return was in the provision of special events targeted at them. Local or county reunions in particular were a popular mechanism, where sections, divisional or regional organisations would invite old members for a social which included refreshments and entertainment. One such event was held by the Manchester Women's Advisory Council in 1931.[498] The struggling York section was particularly prolific in hosting similar events, if not formally entitled reunions. As it worked to maintain and build its membership throughout the decade, some examples include the Pie Suppers it held in 1934 and the 'At Home'

[496] 'September 15th, 1925', Minutes of Women's Quarterly Conference, Bristol Archives 39035/43.
[497] 'Westbury Melksham Women's Section – July 7th', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Annie Townley, LP/WORG/37/371.
[498] 'January 5th, 1931', Manchester Labour Women's Advisory Council Minute Books 1928-1935, M449/1.

meeting which it hosted in 1938 where old members were repeatedly encouraged to return and catch up with their former peers. Ambitions were limited and were not necessarily aimed at encouraging full-throated support for the cause moving forward. Instead, the section merely wanted women to come along to meetings which they would 'make as enjoyable as possible', as often as they possibly could.[499] As sections worked to sustain and rebuild themselves throughout the 1930s, they saw that leisure had always been a significant attraction to membership which must remain a priority. Like their leaders in the women's organisation, and the men of many local CLPs, they understood that women had limited time available to them and they were seeking opportunities that were both fulfilling and enjoyable.

LEISURE'S FUNDRAISING POTENTIAL

As well as being a way to build and sustain a membership, the role which social activities played in financially supporting the women's organisation was significant. While all sections contributed to wider party finances locally, the most significant proportion of the funds they raised from social activities were ring-fenced to support sections themselves, members interests, and work that women wanted to take on in the community. The challenge of sustaining local organisations naturally varied across the country, but many sections found it difficult to keep their work ongoing, especially as some dwindled in size across the 1930s. The All Saints section was unable to have representatives at a number of party events, including conferences and weekend schools held in Crick, because of a shortage of funds by 1936.[500] Later the same year, the section was closed down altogether as it could no longer sustain itself, not meeting again until March 1938. This was not just an issue for individual sections. The Manchester Labour Women's Advisory Council, responsible for the organisation of women across the division, repeatedly refused invitations from other organisations for affiliation or attendance at their events on the grounds that the council had a lack of funds.[501] The fundraising potential of social activities therefore became increasingly important in the ability to sustain local and regional organisations in several different areas.

[499] 'September 25th, 1934', York Women's Section Minute Book 1933-1940, York LAB/1/5/3; 'March 1st, 1938', York Women's Section Minute Book 1933-1940, York LAB/1/5/3.
[500] 'August 13th, 1936', All Saints Women's section signed minutes May 1929 – June 1939, MSS.11/1/1.
[501] 'June 4th, 1924', Manchester Labour Women's Advisory Council Minute Books 1928-1935, M449/1.

At the most practical level, fundraising could therefore simply be about keeping a section afloat. Take, for example, the case of the Rhondda West section which by 1937 had dwindled to only about fifteen members attending its regular meetings. Far from being about apathy locally, Elizabeth Andrews found that women had been turned away from the section because of the location in which meetings were being held, the Pentre Labour Club.[502] The problem was not the venue itself but the fact that women needed to pass through a corridor near a bar where men were drinking, which had prevented many women from returning, and funds were so short that no alternative venue was available. There were other examples of a venue being a hindrance to organisation across the country. For example, the previously mentioned All Saints section decided to change its meeting place upon reforming in 1938 as the rooms they were meeting in was also thought to be a drawback to new members.[503] This section was fortunate enough to have a member, Mrs Chetwynd, who had a house large enough to have the section meet there. However, this was not an option for the Rhondda West women. As a result, Andrews worked with the section on fundraising efforts including a social and jumble sale which would facilitate the section renting a room at a café.[504] Even in areas that were not struggling financially, socials remained central to the continuation of section work and annual financial accounts also reflect this. For example, in line with the charge often made about the women's sections role in sustaining the local mainstream of the party locally it was true that the Hunslet Carr section used £3 of its £8 of expenses in 1930 to provide a grant to the local CLP. However, it is also the case that the remaining majority of their funds were spent on conference expenses for delegates, postage, the expenses of speakers who they had invited to attending meetings, as well as stationery, laundry and so on.[505] In the same year, one social tea and concert alone held in April had raised almost £2 of these section funds, representing nearly a fifth or total income and a quarter of total expenditure. Socials were therefore an essential way in which all sections could maintain their daily business and activities.

The fundraising potential of socials also meant that events were held in order to support causes that were close to members hearts, putting their section at the centre of local communities across the country. At a city or regional level these events could be quite significant in the number of individuals that they could benefit. For example, the Women's

[502] 'Rhondda West – July 27th, 1937, Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/222.
[503] 'April 21st, 1938', All Saints Women's section signed minutes May 1929 – June 1939, MSS.11/1/1.
[504] Ibid.
[505] 'Balance Sheet for Year 1930', Hunslet Carr Women's Meeting Minute Book 1929-36, WYL853/87

Quarterly Conference of Bristol used the funds raised from its socials to host 'treats' on an annual basis. These included seven social events in the Christmas of 1925 for over 1,300 children from the local community, including those of the unemployed.[506] The scheme was so successful that it was repeated the following year, instead focussing on providing treats for those who had reached old age within the area.[507] On a smaller level, individual sections also used their funds to open up their social events to wider communities and to raise funds for others who were in need. The North West Hornchurch section was one such case. In 1932, their funds supported the provision of boots to the unemployed, as well as a separate children's party to the one usually organised for their own families intended to benefit the children of those out of work.[508] These events could be hugely popular and while they tended to reoccur at times of need, they were especially popular amongst sections early in the period. Demonstrating the need they fulfilled, the Chester section ran two parties in 1921 for the children of the unemployed in their area, with a total of 220 attending the first and 280 the second.[509] A year later, Lowestoft also held two parties and was able to successfully entertain 750 children of the unemployed across the events.[510] Socials allowed women to finance opportunities for their peers and their families, as well as for their wider community.

LEISURE IN SECTION LIFE

However, as this thesis consistently suggests, leisure represented something far more fundamental than the maintenance of the section, the wider party, or the activities that either of these wings wanted to support. Chapter One argues for the important space that leisure created for the provision of education, particularly at the party's residential schools. However, leisure for its own sake, and as a respite from the realities of family life, was just as important. *The Labour Woman* carried several examples of working-class housewives and mothers who came to the section to meet their need for independent leisure. One example was provided by Minnie Pallister who, writing advice to women of practical steps they could take at home to reduce their burdens, spoke of a woman whose sad face still haunted her. The woman in question rose at a meeting and shared how she came to the section after being

[506] 'January 26th, 1926', Minutes of Women's Quarterly Conference, 1925 – 1928, Bristol Archives, 39035/43
[507] 'October 18th, 1926', Minutes of Women's Quarterly Conference, 1925 – 1928, Bristol Archives, 39035/43.
[508] 'Annual Report of 1932', North West (Ward) Hornchurch Labour Party Women's Section Ordinary and Special Committee Minutes November 1932 – January 1936, A/HHL/025.
[509] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1921), p. 27.
[510] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1922), p. 44.

married eight years and never experiencing 'a real night's rest' nor 'a day's holiday' since.[511] Mrs Blackmore of Newton Abbot wrote in 1932 of how her own problems at home had seemed 'overwhelming', her life 'narrow in outlook', before she came to the section which went on to provide her 'a fuller, more complete and happier life', allowing her to escape the 'hurly-burly of everyday life'.[512] While some women used the cinema, theatre, or sport to plug this gap, Mrs Blackmore found space and 'the fullest measure of self-expression' through section life.[513] At a local section level, women accessed independent leisure through their weekly meeting and regular socials. They took the chance to organise trips alongside one another which, while occasionally campaigning events, provided opportunities to take in sights and spend time with one another free of domestic distractions. Regionally and nationally, they attended conferences, galas, and even larger scale outings, building even larger communities. For a lucky few, the party even looked to provide the opportunity for a funded holiday. In all of this, women were able to leverage their membership to achieve a real political priority which is far more difficult to quantify than policy achievements or positions in elected office. They found ring-fenced space in their lives for the leisure which so few of them otherwise enjoyed, and which their membership also helped them to justify.

Despite being a significant feature of section life, one of the most difficult to quantify elements of women's experience was the regular socialising which took place at weekly meetings. More often than not, every section meeting provided a combination of party business with a chance for members to get together and socialise. At the most basic level, most party meetings were followed by a cup of tea, food, and other refreshments while members discussed their week. In the Colliery Ward of Sunderland, tea and conversation followed every meeting, usually realising a small profit for the section.[514] The same was true in nearby Houghton-le-Spring, where tea was often accompanied by games and competitions which also did much to add to party funds.[515] This chance to socialise with neighbours and friends may not reflect sections which vibrated with life, but they did provide chances for women to get together regularly with those who were like minded outside of the home.

Aside from tea and socialising, another popular feature of local meetings was the provision of

[511] Minnie Pallister, 'Where do mothers come in?', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 25, no. 6 (1937), p. 90.
[512] 'What my section means to me', vol. 20, no. 10 (1930), p. 155.
[513] Ibid., p. 155.
[514] 'July 15th, 1932, Colliery Ward Women's Section Minute Book, TWASC 5083/5.
[515] 'June 23rd, 1931', Houghton-le-Spring Women's Section Minute Book, TWASC PO.LAB 8/1/2.

music and the act of communal singing. Here, Labour women drew upon the legacies of their movement, as well as the opportunities available to women in other organisations. Whilst bands or booked professional pianists were reserved in most areas for formal socials, some sections across the country had a piano and a member or two on hand who could lead the musical element of section meetings weekly. For example, larger sections like that in Hunslet Carr had a pianist who performed at weekly meetings, and members would regularly join in with a song.[516] However, even in those areas where a pianist or a piano was unavailable, communal singing was a popular feature of meetings. There are examples of this in minutes across the country and, while limited in detail, secretaries often note how well received communal singing tended to be. For example, the St George West Ward section frequently noted that 'community singing, and refreshments' had made for a very enjoyable evening at their weekly meetings.[517] For most of the sections reviewed here, singing became just as much a part of the sound of meetings as any discussion on party business or policies.

In terms of the songs which were enjoyed the start or end of a meeting, popular choices tended to include labour songs such as 'The Red Flag' and 'England Arise'.[518] However, equally common was the singing of patriotic songs, with 'Jerusalem' and the national anthem both proving popular.[519] In their presence and content, the songs Labour women sung week in week out drew upon wider traditions in the Labour movement, including Labour churches, which Duncan Hall described as fulfilling a mix of 'pleasure, pennies and propaganda' throughout this period.[520] However, there are also remarkable similarities with the NFWI and the NUTG, which equally drew upon legacies which included feminist movements such as the Women's Social and Political Union from 1906. As Jenkins observes in her study of the Canning Town Branch, a key feature of life within the organisation locally was regular singing, with members like their successors in the women's section enjoying songs including 'The Red Flag' and 'Auld Lang Syne'.[521] As well as the opportunity to catch up with friends, colleagues and neighbours, meetings offered this further small opportunity for entertainment

[516] 'January 13th, 1931', Hunslet Carr Women's Meeting Minute Book 1929-36, WYL853/87.
[517] 'January 22nd, 1929', Minutes of St George West Ward Women's Section, 1928 – 1931, Bristol Archives 39035/50.
[518] 'February 8th, 1933', Ilford South Labour Party Women's Section Minute Book, June 1932 – February 1935,
[519] 'March 15th, 1937', West Middlesex Women's Advisory Council Minutes, 1932-1940, LMA ACC/2417/030/1.
[520] Duncan Hall, 'A pleasant change from politics', p.41.
[521] Lyndsey Jenkins, 'Singing the Red Flag for Suffrage. Class, feminism, and local politics in the Canning Town Branch 1906-7', in Jenkins, Lyndsey, Hughes-Johnson, Alexandra (eds), *The politics of women's suffrage* (London, 2021), p. 77.

on a weekly basis. In their form, these meetings also again reflected other organisations, representing what made the most enjoyable use of a spare evening by their members.

As well as the small time set aside at each business or work meeting for recreation, sections balanced their monthly calendars so that more structured and ring-fenced time for leisure could also be provided. Whilst important ways in which sections grew, as outlined earlier, these regular activities also became a ritual that were central to section life, and it was typical for at least one week of a section's calendar each month to be focussed purely upon social endeavours. For example, the monthly programmes outlined by the Ilford South women's section usually started the month with a social and ended with a Whist Drive.[522] If normal meetings did not always vibrate with life, these designated sessions were much more likely to fulfil the ambition. Socials in the Feltham Ward of London included performances from their members, whether it was in the form of a song from Mrs Pettit or a play that was delivered by the entire section to an invited local audience.[523] It was common for Ilford South to book a band for their monthly social, as did Gorton women's section in Manchester, whose band, pianist and songs proved hugely popular to the women who attended to enjoy an evening dance with one another.[524] Of course, these socials like those already considered all played a significant role in sustaining the section locally. As well as attracting those who were not already members, the fundraising capacity of socials often outstripped Whist Drives or Sale of Works, reflecting the popularity of the social element of the movement to both members and others. However, socials were also a central and regular way that section life offered women an outlet for independent leisure while they also built a community of local women.

Organised socials also allowed Labour women to feel part of even wider regional communities, and it was common for sections that found themselves nearby one another to invite their comrades along to their engagements. Examples of this can be seen across the country in local party records. For example, the Levenshulme women's section attended a social held by Gorton in 1929, with a very enjoyable evening being held where songs were played by the band and dancing took place.[525] Similarly, the Sowerby Bridge section invited

[522] Ilford South Labour Party Central Women's Section Minute Book, April 1930 – May 1932, LMA ACC/2527/001.
[523] Feltham Ward Labour Party Women's Section June 1939 - July 1949, LMA ACC/2417/H/009.
[524] 'Social held November 19th, 1928', Gorton Labour Party Women's Section Minutes – 5 November 1929 – 5 June 1934, M450/1.
[525] 'Social held April 15th, 1929', Gorton Labour Party Women's Section 1929-1934, M450/1.

their peers from Ripponden in Halifax along to one of their business meetings in July 1924. The occasion proved such a success that the two sections went on to organise a joint ramble around the district in September of the same year, with eighty women taking part in the full day's activities and over one-hundred meeting later for tea.[526] As well as the practical benefits of sharing best practice on how to run a meeting which the women cited, they wrote to urge this level of co-operation between other sections on the basis of the friendships this helped to foster.[527] Sections therefore used the chance to socialise to extend their local communities, forming ties that proved both productive and enjoyable for those who attended.

This same widening of section life occurred within the annual outings that sections arranged. For example, the Bath section invited Swindon women to visit them on their outing of 1920, hosting them for a day which included a tour of the city and the baths and the Abbott, followed by tea in the Labour Rooms.[528] Later, the Ilford South section invited the nearby Eastern section along with them on their 1935 trip to Huddleston.[529] Elsewhere, organisers were keen to encourage this practice wherever possible, particularly so that smaller sections could combine their efforts, enjoy a social activity, and build a wider community. Agnes Lauder, organiser for Scotland, spoke to the women of South Ayrshire and encouraged them to work with other sections in the area to visit the town of Old Cumnock, and was successful in combining their efforts with nearby Auchinleck section.[530] As well as local sections grouping together to arrange these efforts, local advisory councils also had a hand in sending women on these combined trips. The Central Committee of Coventry's 1935 outing had twenty-nine members from across four local sections, twelve from what was termed 'W1' section, three from 'W3', four from 'W4' and ten from 'W10'.[531] By working with nearby sections, women were able to feel part of an even wider community, enjoying recreation alongside those they knew as well as a wider group of people from across the other sections.

[526] 'Sowerby Bridge', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 12, no. 12 (1924), p. 194.
[527] Ibid.
[528] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 8, no. 10, 1920, p. 160.
[529] 'March 6th, 1925', Ilford South Labour Party Central Women's Section Minute Book 1935-1938, ACC/2527/003.
[530] 'South Ayrshire – 24 February 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Agnes Lauder, LP/WORG/37/509.
[531] 'June 4th, 1935', Coventry Central Committee Women's Section 1935 – 1938, MSS.11/1/2.

WOMEN'S DAYS AND CONFERENCES

Just as smaller events gave women the opportunity to take their place in a wider community, the phenomenon of Women's Day, later Women's Week, and the galas held across the country, could leave them in no doubt they were part of a huge and vibrant movement. As in with the party's residential schools, it seems that much of the countrywide success of these events started with the actions of the County Durham Advisory Council. Inspired by the Durham Miners Gala, the council arranged its first Miner's Wives Gala in 1923.[532] The sixth annual conference of the women's section in 1924 spoke of the enthusiasm and spirit of the estimated 5,000 women who marched at the event, of the worldwide attention which had come to be placed upon the miners' wives of the Durham coalfields, and the response this received from miners' wives in other far off countries.[533] The Gala only continued to grow from this point, and became a huge affair for the Advisory Council. As early as 1925, it was purchasing 20,000 tickets for those women from across the county who wished to attend.[534] As a demonstration of how one small section responded to Women's Gala's over other activities, the Colliery Ward of Sunderland sent fifty members in 1934, despite rarely having more than thirty women at its meetings.[535] County Durham's Women's Gala therefore was a first taste of how popular a mass-event for women from across a wider community could be.

As the first event took place in County Durham, there was already a movement elsewhere to ensure that similar events would also be arranged across the country. In the same year, *The Labour Woman* wrote of the national planning that was taking place, with trade unions and women's sections working alongside one another to host a full 'National Women's Day'.[536] Whether the decision to adopt this approach was made in Durham's honour or they simply had a head start in already planning their gala is unclear. However, it does seem to be the case that from the first year Durham's efforts outstripped those of any other region and became an inspiration to many others. *The Labour Woman* paid tribute to 'the northern county which so early in the day decided upon a Miners Wives Gala' of its own.[537] On a visit to the Gala a

[532] Margaret Hunter Gibb, 'Diamond Jubilee Gala – 1983 – A Memory', – Margaret Hunter Gibb Political Articles and Lectures, NRO 2973/4.
[533] 6th & 7th Annual Conference, 1924 and 1925, *Women's Labour League: Conference Reports and Journals 1906-1977*
[534] 'December 19, 1925', County Durham Regional Advisory Council Minutes 1 November 1923 – 21 August 1929, DRO, D/X 1048/2.
[535] 'April 16th, 1934', Colliery Ward Women's Section, Tyne & Wear Archives 5083/6.
[536] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 11, no. 7 (1923), p. 112.
[537] Ibid.

year later, George Lansbury wrote that he came close to tears for only the second time since leaving school as he watched 'ten thousand mothers and wives and daughters' stream past him as a 'mere man' in the audience.[538] County Durham's Gala also played a role in the formation and growth of those which were held in other areas. Margaret Hunter Gibb recounted a story she had heard of a group of well-off women in a Cornish village who, having seen pictures of the Durham Women's Gala, were inspired to hold their own small equivalent nearby.[539] The Women's Gala of Durham was therefore central in the early development of a National Women's Day, offering a vision of how successful it could be.

However, it is also true that local communities adopted the Durham model and adapted it to their needs, and that the occasion became one of the most important in the calendars of Advisory Councils. From 1925, plans were made not for a Women's Day but a Women's Week, and local communities used the opportunity for a mixture of leisure, education, fundraising, and campaigning. In Leeds in 1925, Women's Week included hundreds of members alongside their children coming in specially conveyed cars and charabancs to Temple Newsam where they held political meetings, enjoyed sports, and worked to distribute party literature.[540] By 1928, the London Women's Advisory Council was planning events that were spread across an entire Women's Month. These included a visit to the House of Commons, picnics, outings, as well as canvassing.[541] Whilst most of these events were therefore a mixture of business with pleasure, it is without doubt that these celebrations of women and their role in the party and society offered them the chance to enjoy themselves and feel part of a much wider community. By 1927, it was an established fact for Marion Phillips that the Durham's Women's Gala was, as in previous years 'the great triumph' seen across the country. Like Lansbury, she felt close to tears as she observed and spoke at the Gala held this year. However, she did not comment on what it meant for the movement or the section, but of the 'deep joy and fellowship' she observed between the women who met at Roker Park football ground in Sunderland.[542] She said that, for that day at least, it 'made all the things of everyday life, the hard and sordid struggle for existence, seem a very long way

[538] 'Women's Day in Durham: How it impressed a mere man', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 12, no. 7 (1924), p.112.
[539] Transcript of tape conservation with Margaret Hunter Gibb at The Riding, Cambo. NRO/2973/22.
[540] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 13., no. 8, 1925, p. 138.
[541] 'April 23rd, 1928', London Women's Advisory Council Minutes June 1927 – October 1932, ACC/2417/H/001.
[542] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 15, no. 7 1927, p. 104.

off'.[543] Women across the country had similar opportunities to enjoy such respite, in events which were designed to celebrate their place in the movement and their local communities.

It should be said that Women's Day, Week or Month events were not always as well attended, and most areas naturally struggled to sustain celebrations that were as large as Durham or as broad as areas like Leeds and the capital. In this vein, organisers provided the Chief Women's Officer with accounts of their disappointment when celebrations in their region did not go as planned or when they did not mirror what was happening elsewhere. For example, in 1937 the women of the Cumberland Federation of the Labour Party were said to be disappointed when their very ambitious rally did not go as planned. Clashing with a popular County football match, the dancing troupes, procession, and public demonstration held in Maryport which were coupled with speeches from Arthur Greenwood and dancing competitions were said to be poorly attended.[544] Elsewhere in the same year, Elizabeth Andrews was disappointed with the Women's Day in Wrexham, which only attracted 150 women from across the local area.[545] It should be said that as far as section activities go, 150 still far outnumbers those attending most party events and functions. It must also be reflected that such issues, while more common later in the period, were often specific to certain areas. Many others, even nearby, were still able to sustain significant events by this point. Andrews also reports on the work of the East Glamorgan Advisory Council who arranged twenty-three buses and two cars to carry over seven hundred to their Women's Day event. The women, who travelled in groups from Cardiff, Bridgend and Pontypridd spent their time on the way distributing literature to women in small villages, before they met for lunch.[546] To varying degrees, the days, weeks, and months, organised to celebrate women in the movement offered likeminded members from different sections a chance to come together to work and socialise.

Similar opportunities could also be found for the limited number of Labour women who were able to attend the section's nationwide conferences. Unlike women's days, these affairs were naturally more business orientated throughout. However, they also offered the chance for women from across the country to come together, where they could play their constitutional

[543] Ibid.
[544] 'Cumberland Federation of Labour Parties – September 18, 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports, LP/WORG/37/642.
[545] 'Women's Month – June' Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/712.
[546] 'Women's Month – June' Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/711.

role as well as making new friends and meeting their peers. Held throughout our period, with the notable exception of 1926, which was cancelled in solidarity with the miners' lockout, the conference offered women the chance to hear from leading figures in the movement and debate policy and motions.[547] For Annie Stewart of the Aberdeen section, the most significant benefit of attending the 1926 conference was the broadening of women's horizons which could take place at these events. Stewart thought that if an insular approach to section life was adopted, focussing too readily on local business, women could become disheartened with their work.[548] However, after experiencing 'the comradeship of conference', delegates were said to be inspired by one another, and they could return home and also act as a stimulant to those within their local section. Just as it is considered 'good for people to travel, as they get their minds broadened in the process', Stewart states, 'it is good for us to meet at each other at conference' where it was possible to 'shed out insular ideas and realise we are just units in a great movement'.[549] In their social role, conferences offered women perhaps even greater opportunities for learning and leisure than any study of the official records of the debates that took place or the motions which were passed would ever allow us to fully understand.

As well as accounts from the section's publication, local party records also give us a flavour of the benefits that women ascribed to their attendance at conference upon their return. The primary benefits which the women of the St George West Section of Bristol took from their visit were the chance to experience a new place and the ability to socialise and form ties with local women. The two delegates sent to the 1930 conference in London regaled their peers with stories upon their return. While these included the strenuous travel between their lodgings and the conference hall, which were over an hour away whilst walking in thundery heat, they also included their visit to the Labour Borough of Stepney, where they were 'entertained in royal style' by local members.[550] On a different note, Mrs Hennessy of the same section recounted her visit to conference in Hartlepool two years later, where she also noted that she had received a very warm welcome but observed significant poverty amongst the women owing to unemployment in the area.[551] While offering women a chance to see

[547] 8th Annual Conference, 1927. Women's Labour League: Conference Reports and Journals, 1906-1977. WSA.
[548] Annie Stewart, 'The value of conferences', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 14, no. 5 (1926), p. 75.
[549] Ibid.
[550] 'June 24th, 1930', Minutes of St George West Ward Women's Section 1928 – 1931, Bristol Archives 39035/50.
[551] 'July 25th, 1933', Minutes of St George West Ward Women's Section 1931 – 1933, Bristol Archives, 39035/51.

their place in a wider movement, conferences also allowed delegates and their section peers upon their return to understand the varied experiences of their comrades across the country.

While these benefits of conference are of course difficult to quantify, local records certainly suggest that like the party's summer schools, women's experiences became the subject for much local discussion with their peers upon a delegate's return. As well as those examples cited, we can see that Mrs Dinham on the Leeds Women's Advisory Council visited local sections including Bramley to give what was said to be a very interesting account of the event and proceedings at a conference she had attended.[552] In Ilford, it was common for two weeks of each year's calendar to be dedicated to updates from the conference, delivered by a member of the section or a representative from their Advisory Council who had attended, as it was by Mrs Holmes in 1932.[553] Of course, many of the discussions would be about the resolutions debated and passed at conference, as well as the speeches which were given, rather than a discussion of the social activities which took place. As such, even in those areas which did not have a delegate attending, conference updates were given and discussed, with the Colliery Ward dispensing with their speaker in 1933 in favour of a section discussion of the national conference report they had received, and all sections were encouraged to adopt this approach.[554] However, the dissemination of women's experiences to their communities also facilitated an even greater reach for the feelings of belonging to an even wider movement that the events created. Conference reports and stories therefore became an event for most members, whether or not they had been fortunate enough to be selected as delegates.

National conferences also provided women with the chance to meet leaders who they could only otherwise hear or read about in party communications or editions of *The Labour Woman*. Across this period, the women attending section conferences were able to share the floor and hear from Ellen Wilkinson, Susan Lawrence, Marion Phillips, as well as their own and other regional organisers from across the country.[555] This could be an exciting, if nerve wracking, opportunity. Margaret Hunter Gibb recounted the story of a young delegate who was secretary for the Halifax section and was terrified at the idea of Marion Phillips being at

[552] 'May 3rd, 1927', Bramley Women's Guild Minute Book, May 1926 – November 1929, WYL853/85.
[553] 'Programme 1932-33', Ilford South Labour Party Central Women's Section Minute Book, June 1932 – February 1935, ACC/2527/002.
[554] 'June 27th, 1933', Colliery Ward Women's Section, TWA 5083/5.
[555] Annual Conference Reports. Women's Labour League: Conference Reports and Journals, 1906-1977. Women's Studies Archive.

conference, only to be delighted when they did speak face to face, and Marion complemented her on her blouse to break the tension.[556] This does seem to have been consistent with Phillips' wider approach with members and in a 1969 article published in *The Labour Woman* in tribute to Phillips, Lucy Middleton commented on how she would also consistently work to encourage the less experienced delegates who she found at conference.[557] Alongside the chance to meet their peers and others in their position from other regions, conferences therefore allowed women to meet key figures in the movement and leaders in the section.

However, as space would necessarily be limited at national conference and the cost would be prohibitive for many members of individual sections, it was more common for women who had already achieved a leadership position to be attending. There do seem to have been some limited exceptions to this across the country, with some local sections making a special effort so that they could facilitate of a local member attending conference. The Leicester section did so in 1919, using the profits from its socials and dances in order to finance the trip.[558] Similarly, in London, the Hornchurch and North West Hornchurch sections were not able to fund a delegate to attend conference on their own. However, by pooling their financial resources the two sections were able to successfully sponsor one delegate between them to attend.[559] However, for the most part, it was common for women who were on an area's district or regional advisory committee to be nominated to receive the limited funding to attend conference, rather than those women who attended only weekly section meetings. As such, the chance to get the benefits of attending the national event were necessarily limited.

This was a gap which could however be partly addressed at a regional level, and regional or district conferences also ran across the country which opened up the opportunity for many more women to attend. As an additional commitment for women away from family life, attending conferences could be difficult for women to organise. For example, Mrs Purves of Blyth recounted in *The Labour Woman* how she had to reorientate her domestic schedule, completing her washing on a Sunday night so that she was ready to attend conference on Monday morning.[560] However, the benefits could also be significant, and women made

[556] Transcript of tape conservation with Margaret Hunter Gibb at The Riding, Cambo. NRO/2973/22.
[557] Cited in: June Hannam, 'Women and Labour Politics, p. 179.
[558] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 7, no. 8 (1919), p. 96.
[559] 'Annual Report of 1933', North West (Ward) Hornchurch Labour Party Women's Ordinary and Special Committee Minutes, November 1932 – January 1936, A/HHL/025.
[560] Mrs M Purves, 'Why I joined the Labour Party', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 24, no.8 (1936), p. 120.

similar efforts to ensure their attendance across the country. As a result, some regional conferences appear to be as well attended as some of the structured leisure activities that took place across this period. For example, the London Women's Advisory Council conference of 1931 was attended by 160 women from across the section as well as affiliated organisations, with 65 separate groups represented.[561] The Leeds Women's Advisory Council's conferences were also said to be well-attended and growing annually, with 1935 representing their largest to date, providing an opportunity for women to show what they wanted through debate and the regional organiser remarking on the lucid nature of the arguments they made when doing so.[562] Similar accounts are shown across the country and, while not all of them recount the social nature of the meetings which took place, many do reflect that these were also opportunities for women to get together. These include the tea which was served at the end of each conference of the West Middlesex Advisory Council, as well as the songs which included 'England Arise' enjoyed by all of the women who were present.[563] Sections also ran their own smaller local conferences, where they invited other local sections and affiliated organisations along, including those in Ilford which, as well as a speaker, included music by Mrs Sparrow on piano, and singalongs of the 'Red Flag'.[564] While important vehicles for party business, conferences at a national, regional, and local level therefore provided further opportunities for women to come together, socialise and enjoy feeling part of a movement.

Like the experiences of women in their weekly section meeting, their monthly social, or in the outings they arranged with their section, the extent to which each community engaged with each activity naturally varied locally. As has already been observed, there was no single experience of Labour Party membership for women at this time, and this includes the huge variety in social events across the country.[565] However, what is clear is that the opportunity to socialise and to enjoy leisure opportunities which were focussed on women's individual needs were central to the experience of party membership. As organisers constantly emphasised, there was a need to make even business meetings of the party as enjoyable as possible if women were to be attracted and retained, as section life needed to represent a

[561] 'Women's Advisory Council Annual Spring Conference, May 1931', London Women's Advisory Council Minutes, June 1927 – October 1932, ACC/2417/H/001.
[562] 'Women's Advisory Council – A Successful Year', Leeds Women's Advisory Council Minute Book, January 1932 – July 1944, WYL853/89.
[563] 'October 21st, 1936', West Middlesex Advisory Council Minutes 1932-1940, ACC/2417/H/030/1.
[564] 'October 3rd, 1930', Ilford South Labour Party Central Women's Section Minute Book April 1930 – May 1932, ACC/2527/001.
[565] Karen Hunt, 'Making Politics in Local Communities: Labour Women in interwar Manchester', p.98.

break from the everyday as much as it did a serious political commitment. Outside of party work, sections across the country also ensured that ring-fenced time for socials with singing, dancing and dramatic performances were a monthly occurrence. When women from across sections came together, they often did so for practical reasons. These included the need to recruit, to conduct party business or, in the case of Women's Day, Week or Month, the wish to show a collective strength and to campaign for their movement. However, they also used this time to feel part of a collective, claim their place in a significant, growing, community, and to enjoy much-needed leisure with women from across their region and the country.

LABOUR WOMEN TAKE A HOLIDAY

While local meetings, socials, and activities which brought a number of sections together provided access to leisure time, many women still faced the need for more ring-fenced time away from the home. The section's approach to residential schools is demonstrative of the need for rest and relaxation in particular. However, schools were still serious educational endeavours, and did not represent a place for simple respite and recreation. The need to take a trip or holiday, and the fact that this was deserved, was a repeated and increasing theme which can be found in *The Labour Woman*. From 1923, the magazine started to carry a section 'Where to go for the holidays' with suggestions submitted from local sections.[566] Later contributions on holidays included a 1934 article which discouraged the use of holidays for self-improvement over rest when it came to the reading which women planned to take with them on trips.[567] At a section level, there is also evidence that holidays were a popular topic and that those who had been fortunate enough to take some time away from home were urged to share their experiences with their peers. As outlined in Chapter Two of this thesis, any talk that provided escapism with a glimpse of travel usually proved popular with members. Many examples have already been cited, but others include Miss Brooke of Hunslet Carr who received a great reception of her account of her holidays 'down south', while Mrs Spence of Bramley gave her section an update of her holiday to Belgium in 1926 and a year later her sea voyage to the Channel Islands.[568] The need for ring-fenced leisure time in the form of a trip was increasingly recognised as a requirement for section women.

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[566] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 11, no. 6, 1923, p.104.
[567] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 22, no, 7, 1934, p. 106.
[568] 'August 28th, 1934', Hunslet Carr Women's Meeting Minute Book 1929-1936, WYL853/87; '23 August 1926' and 'September 12th, 1927', Bramley Women's Guild Minute Book, May 1926 – November 1929, WYL853/85.

There is already a well-developed understanding of the increasing role of the wider labour movement in the facilitation of trips and holidays. However, these organised opportunities were usually arranged by employers or trade unions and intended to address the contentious question of how paid workers should best spend their free time. As such, housewives and mothers were usually missing from these programmes and are absent from subsequent historiographical discussions. In his exploration of the wider options for leisure that were available between 1880 and 1939, Snape shows that leisure being framed in contrast to paid work led to a competition between capital and organised labour. He shows how an increased awareness of the economic benefits of leisure such as sport, which included increased productivity and reduced absence, led to hundreds of employers joining the Industrial Welfare Society by 1926, covering millions of engineering, shipbuilding, iron, steel, and food manufacturing employees.[569] At the same time, since trade unions feared leisure may re-enforce relationships between firms and their workers, they built alternative models founded in ideas of co-operation and mutuality.[570] As the labour movement also looked to facilitate recreation in the forms of holidays, it did so in this contested environment, and as a result it aimed much of its focus on working-class men. Prynn has shown how the Clarion Clubs and the Workers' Travel Association both aimed to offer access to leisure which provided colour to the lives of working-class people from industrial centres who had difficult and drab daily lives.[571] However, Clarion Clubs and Holiday Associations were founded to provide more fruitful use of leisure primarily for industrial workers, and the Workers' Travel Association under the stewardship of Cecil Rogerson wanted parties from 'the works, the mines, the garage' to travel with leaders who acted as 'guides, philosophers and friends'.[572] In conversations about holidays and trips, as with those about other leisure activities, and the subsequently arranged provisions, women, particularly those at home, were often excluded.

While they often found themselves outside of those opportunities for leisure that were targeted towards the needs of industrial labour, section women made their own arrangements for organised recreation. It is true that, as Langhamer has observed, a focus solely on structured leisure can lead to the ambiguous times and places where women spent most of

[569] Robert Snape, *Leisure, Voluntary Action and Social Change in Britain*, *1880-1939* (London, 2018), p. 138.
[570] Ibid., pp. 140-144.
[571] David Prynn, 'Clarion Clubs, Rambling and the Holiday Association in Britain', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 11 (2) (1976), pp. 65-77.
[572] Ibid., pp. 65-75.

their 'free' time being overlooked.[573] However, while this thesis also contributes to an understanding of the more routine opportunities for leisure and recreation available with section membership, women also claimed their right to structured leisure time through their organisations. This has already been observed in non-partisan organisations such as the NFWI, where Andrews has shown how outings and trips were a common and extremely popular feature of membership for women.[574] It is also true in the Labour Party's women's sections, where alongside section outings and organised residential schools, there was also a move to provide access to holidays for those who most needed it, albeit on a limited basis.

One way the party, unions, and other affiliated organisations looked to facilitate holidays for women came with the foundation of the Mary Macarthur Holiday Home Trust. The trust was set up in commemoration of Mary Macarthur, who had been a leading trade unionist and a figure in both the Women's Labour League and the women's section before her early death in 1921. It was chaired by the Marchioness of Crewe, who became friends with Macarthur during their time working together on the Central Committee of Women's Employment, and had trustees including Labour figures Marion Phillips and Margaret Bondfield who also worked on the Committee as well as with Macarthur in the movement.[575] It sought to address concerns Macarthur expressed before her death; notably, the lack of opportunities for respite or a holiday for working women, and it was therefore decided the trust should use its limited resources to purchase a holiday home for women working inside and outside of industry.[576] The first home was opened in Autumn 1922 at the Gables, High Ongar, Essex. It was subsidised by contributions from across the labour movement, but the women's section of the General Workers Union for whom Macarthur had worked was amongst its most significant early donors, who supported four beds especially for its members.[577] The cost of staying at the home, at a subsidised rate, could be covered by those in a position to do so. However, the understanding was that it was more likely that the trust itself or sections, unions, regional and affiliated organisations would also work to fund stays on behalf of their members. Instructions in *The Labour Woman* in 1928 urged women to write to the Secretary Miss Ward

[573] Claire Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England 1920-60*, p. 2.
[574] Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism*, p. 76.
[575] 'A Holiday Home for Working Women', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 11, no. 11 (1923), p. 173.
[576] 'History', Mary Macarthur Holiday Trust, http://mmht.org.uk/History.html?LMCL=SMcp9j. Accessed on 16 June 2020.
[577] 'A Holiday Home for Working Women', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 11, no. 11 (1923), p. 173.

to apply for a place, to say whether they were able to afford the 20s per week fee for a visit or whether they would need partial or full reimbursement and their case would be considered.[578]

The intention was to provide a space which could be used for respite and recovery, rather than medical treatment that would be better catered to elsewhere. Women could stay alone or, if necessary, they could also bring along their children, usually for a period of a week or two. Less than a year into its foundation, the scheme was already having benefits. Contributors to *The Labour Woman* thanked the home's matron for providing 'the best holiday I have spent in my life' especially when their children could come along and they themselves had never had a holiday since 'their young days'. Others commented on 'the most delightful of days' they had ever spent, and the feeling of family at 'the lovely house and grounds'.[579] Less than two years after Macarthur's death, the home set up in her memory was providing much needed space for leisure, and the demand for this only increased across the period. While the home catered to 144 women in 1924, this had risen to 525 by 1932, with visitors coming from across women's sections, Women's Co-operative Guilds, and those trade unions which accepted women.[580] By 1939, 550 women were visiting annually with many more being turned away, and the trust estimated that it had supported 6,500 women since its foundation.[581] Reflecting their continued value, a woman who signed her letter 'Mrs B' wrote of her 1934 visit to the section's journal. She said that she had 'the best holiday I have ever experienced since I was married about eleven years', as well as highlighting the crucial need that the home fulfilled in providing 'a real rest and change for mothers'. At the home, 'she seemed to forget' all of her troubles and she 'had to make such an effort to come home'.[582]

One home was limited in who it could reach, owing to finances and geographical challenges. As a result, the trust repeatedly asked sections for more support and completed regular fundraisers, including in 1939 when demand remained so high that it needed to expand and open a second accommodation.[583] The second property, opened in Stanstead and so it should be said not expanding the geographical reach of the scheme far, reflected the continued demand coming from those areas that were being catered towards. This demand, and the

[578] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1928), p. 39.
[579] Ibid.
[580] 'Update on the Mary Macarthur holiday home', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 22, no. 6 (1934), p. 83.
[581] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 27, no. 2 (1939), p. 20.
[582] 'Update on the Mary Macarthur holiday home', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 22, no. 6 (1934), p.83.
[583] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1939, p. 20.

positive response from those who attended, is also reflected in the local records of those areas in the South East best placed to support their members in attending. The West Middlesex Advisory Council were particularly active in sponsoring their members. In 1933, they were thanked by Mrs Braithwaite for their support which enabled her to spend a happy time and 'derive much mental benefit' from her stay at the holiday home.[584] Over the years that followed, they were also thanked by Mrs Belcher directly, and by sections from Brentford and Chiswick, North Greenwood, Crawford, and Harrow amongst others for their support in offering women the chance to attend the home.[585] In a sign of the reception which the home received from those who had attended, the Brentford and Chiswick sent a letter to the council in 1936 asking if another member could attend, but acknowledging that this would be the third month in a row that one of their women had attended.[586] Given that they did not have another request from elsewhere that month, the council agreed to their request. The home was therefore popular with those women who were able to attend it throughout this period, and demand increased so much that two, later three, properties would need to be provided.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given how beneficial it was proving to members, the West Middlesex, and nearby London Advisory Councils also both played active roles in the organisation of the home and its various fundraising activities. The former sent representatives to garden parties with the queen, AGMs, and annual galas, while section members from the latter also attended annual meetings and arranged outings at a council and section level to see what the home was all about.[587] There were also additional fundraising efforts by the West Middlesex Advisory Council in particular, if only because they were prompted by the trust when a member from Hounslow returned home happy but embarrassed that the matron had relayed that the council did not contribute as much as organisations of a similar size.[588] The Mary Macarthur Holiday Home Trust, although limited by resources and location, was therefore providing a much needed opportunity for the rest and relaxation for thousands of women many of whom were from the South East who could access all the home had to offer through their membership.

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[584] 'November 17th, 1933', West Middlesex Women's Advisory Council Minutes, 1932-1940, LMA, ACC/2417/H/030/1.
[585] West Middlesex Women's Advisory Council Minutes, 1932-1940, ACC/2417/H/030/1.
[586] 'March 20th, 1936', West Middlesex Women's Advisory Council Minutes, 1932-1940, LMA, ACC/2417/H/030/1.
[587] West Middlesex Women's Advisory Council Minutes, 1932-1940, LMA, ACC/2417/H/030/1; London Women's Advisory Council Minutes June 1927 – October 1932, LMA, ACC/2417/H/001.
[588] 'September 10th, 1937', West Middlesex Women's Advisory Council Minutes, 1932-1940, LMA, ACC/2417/H/030/1.

While this did not expand to the size where the majority of labour women could benefit, it does reflect the growing awareness of the need for leisure time and comes alongside a number of other developments within the British movement. It should be said that this was also within an international context where women's socialist organisations saw the facilitation of leisure as one of the key roles they could fulfil in members' lives. Reflecting their own aim to provide holidays for working women, Hulda Flood of the Swedish Socialist Party wrote in *The Labour Woman* how their endeavour had expanded throughout the period from arranging nearby domestic trips to holiday homes to include international travel to the United Kingdom and Russia by 1934.[589] There was a similar focus in Amsterdam with Dr Elisabeth Pelletier writing of the enjoyment their members gained from using the 'De Born' holiday home which they had set up.[590] While each of these partner organisations differ from the British labour movement in the scope of the arrangements they made for women, all reflect the recognition that leisure was a need women's organisations could help to address.

CONCLUSION

Our understanding of leisure within the Labour Party's women's section has all too often considered it as a hindrance to women's liberation in the interwar period. Inside their party, it has been said that women were offered an illusion of influence and very little potential for impact, instead left focussing on 'soppy things', which did much to bolster party funds and morale but had little impact on the *real* business of politics.[591] However, this chapter has challenged the assumptions behind this interpretation on a number of grounds. Firstly, it shows that leisure was not a nice addition to activism but a fundamental political priority many women wanted to fulfil. Secondly, reinforcing the point, it has shown that the popularity of social activities in particular far outstripped many of the more 'serious' opportunities which women were able to access through their membership. As cited earlier, Ward has already demonstrated the benefits for women of friendships and feelings of belonging within their local section. [592] This chapter also asks that we take this further and acknowledge the significant benefits for regional and national involvement and consider how

[589] *The Labour Woman,* vol. 22, no. 5, 1934, p. 73.
[590] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1936, p. 19.
[591] Matthew Worley, 'The Fruits on the Tree', p. 205.
[592] Stephanie Ward, 'Labour activism and the political self', pp. 50-1.

it must have felt to be part of a large and growing community of like-minded women, enjoying the opportunity to come together to work and socialise alongside one another.

Of course, there is evidence throughout these pages that many traditional assumptions are not without justification. Some sections were happier than others to perform apparently supplementary roles locally. However, this chapter argues that the reasons behind this have also been misunderstood. Far from women in mining communities focussing on so-called frivolous activities because they carried their rigid gender roles into membership, it was instead that they focussed on leisure and opportunities to socialise because this was exactly what they needed from membership. This was something acknowledged by the leadership of the organisation, from the two Chief Women's Officers in this period, to their team of nine regional organisers and was based on more than just assumptions. As evidence here demonstrates, and as is almost entirely absent from considerations of the section, opportunities for leisure were the competitive ground on which the battle for women's limited time against organisations like the NFWI and the NUTG were fought. Those who did not cater to women's need for recreation tended to lose members, and as Sutherland and her regional organiser Andrews demonstrated in the case of the Pennydarren section, the real threat to the organisation came from other women's organisations and not their local CLP.

This chapter also supports some of what we know about the role of local CLPs, and specifically the men within them, but primarily challenges our assumptions in this arena too. The truth was that there was a huge amount of variety in the nature and quality of the relationship between a CLP and their local section. Some were happy to keep women focussed on socialising and fundraising, however the motives here were also not as straightforward as one might think. While leisure activities did arguably keep women away from the business of politics, many men also understood that they were necessary to build and maintain thriving sections, with some even chipping in and offering support where this was needed. For the most part, and in many of the sections whose minute books have been considered in this chapter, the role of the local CLP was limited within section life. It was women who decided what their programmes would be, the shape of their leisure calendars, how the majority of the funds that they raised from social activities could be spent. In many areas, it was the section which was more well-attended and better financed than their local party, and so their role was far from supplementary but critical in sustaining the organisation.

This chapter has first and foremost tried to capture the wide and varied nature of section life for those women who took part, demonstrating how it took its place at the centre of women's social worlds. These included the mundane opportunities for a chat, a singalong or a raffle at their weekly business meetings which might not have always vibrated with life but did provide regular respite. It also included organised socials, whist drives, games, dances, and outings which all took place at a local level. Regionally, women had the opportunity to expand this and enjoy the activities which surrounded Women's Days, Weeks, and Months and which all mixed leisure with party work to some extent. Of course, there was a benefit to the section of these events, which did much to sustain it financially and in terms of membership. However, this only serves to reinforce how women wanted and needed access to these opportunities, a fact which is reflected in these events being so well-attended, usually so financially profitable, and their regular reoccurrence month on month. While the financial ability of these events allowed women to make their contribution to party reserves, the majority was spent on women's own needs and interests. This included the day-to-day business of running a section, finding suitable accommodation, and facilitating the programmes of speakers which are considered elsewhere in this thesis. It also included women doing their bit for local communities, especially the unemployed, where they could. One further way some sections and regional organisations spent their funds was in providing more ring-fenced opportunities for leisure for those members most in need. The innovation of the Mary Macarthur holiday home has been considered at greater detail than in previous studies of the section, because of the close links between the organisations and because it offered, albeit a limited number, of women chances to access a holiday which would otherwise have been impossible to enjoy. In all of these varied forms, the section therefore offered different opportunities for women to access the opportunity for independent leisure.

As the last chapter confirms, one way in which the section made much of this possible was by placing many of its activities within, rather than in contest with, family life. However, even those activities which embraced women's roles as housewives and mothers always had their right and need for leisure time at their core. The earlier account from 1937 of a woman who rose at a meeting to tell her story of being married eight years without 'a real night's rest' or 'a day's holiday' demonstrates the significant challenge sections wanted to address on the ground.[593] Minnie Pallister, who shared the story in *The Labour Woman*, thought it

[593] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 25, no. 7, 1937, p. 90.

represented the thousands of mothers who had every ounce of 'beauty and leisure' crushed out of their lives. In the longer term, her aim was to achieve a Labour government which could make real change to women's lives outside of the party.[594] However, while this work was ongoing, the section worked to offer women both rest and enjoyment inside of its walls.

Of course, the extent to which this was realised depended on the nature of the local area, the local membership, and the challenges they faced. However, with varying degrees of success, women worked in sections to provide social activities which attracted new members, their families, and friends into the fold. Once inside the party, they worked with one another to provide new leisure opportunities in the space available. Perhaps the last words on the value of the section and its leisure pursuits should once again go to a member. Mrs M. Purves, chairman of the Blyth section cited earlier, described how the party turned her from a bit of driftwood into someone who not only had 'something to work for' but perhaps more importantly 'something to live for'.[595] Leisure was more than a secondary concern for women such as her. It was the reason many joined, and usually a significant reason why they stayed in the party. Studies of activism which miss this do not fully acknowledge the significant benefits women leveraged from their membership. At the same time, studies of leisure or other voluntary organisations which do not address the time women spent in party politics overlook a time and place where many made the most of the limited time, they had available. The section was a vehicle for women's activism, but it could also be the medium by which they achieved access to leisure, sitting at the centre of their social world outside of the home.

[594] Ibid., p. 90.
[595] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 24, no. 6, 1936, p. 120.

CHAPTER FIVE:
THE LOCAL AND NATIONAL COMMUNITIES OF LABOUR WOMEN

Writing for an essay competition about what her section meant to her, Mrs E. Blackmore of Newton Abbot shared her fondness for the particular group of women of which she was a part. Her peers were those 'whose lives were similar to my own, who had the same cares and responsibilities' and were also who she had 'came to admire, making many loyal and firm friendships' along the way.[596] Mrs Blackmore's account reflects something consistently seen in party minute books, read in accounts of the section's journal, and noted from comments made in organiser reports. When women joined the section, they did join a national organisation which offered a place within an even wider labour movement. However, they also built local communities that helped to sustain them through some of the happiest and most difficult times of their day-to-day lives. Previous chapters of this thesis have shown how women used these communities to access some of the most beneficial opportunities of membership, including the chance to pursue their educational interests or to enjoy opportunities for leisure. However, this chapter is concerned with the more everyday importance of individual sections, and how the communities that were built became a vehicle through which women could feel part of a nationwide network of likeminded friends and activists. Belonging to *their* section in particular rather than *the* section in general was an important part of women's experience of party membership and it was through individual sections and shared experiences that they claimed autonomy within the labour movement.

Although the thematic structure of this thesis has so far engaged with the more straightforward, albeit by no means uncontested, concepts of education and leisure, a chapter framed around 'community' poses far greater challenges. This is partly because, as has been demonstrated so far, there was no one single community of Labour Women. Members came from across the country and found themselves in localities with different challenges and opportunities. They could be old or young, middle- or working-class, and while some of them worked outside of the home, many did not. From these circumstances and experiences, women naturally wanted different opportunities from membership and while this varied at the level of an individual section, it was here that the closest to a community of like-minded

[596] E. Blackmore, 'What my section means to me: A Wider Outlook', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 20, no. 10 (1932), p. 155.

women could really be found. Having said this, these pages show why the section was more than a collection of independent groups, tied together by support of their party and electoral ambition. The section had its own figureheads, celebrities even, who could draw collective excitement during their lives and a sense of shared loss upon their death. The organisation had its own publication, its own rituals, a sense of its identity, not only in relation to the labour movement, which was fiercely protected, but in the way it faced society. The working women's university, or indeed trade union, considered in previous chapters, are two of the more common ways this identity was framed. Members therefore found themselves in local communities first and foremost, and it was through these that they built and enjoyed lifelong friendships which they could draw strength from at their most difficult times. However, through this local experience they collectively became 'Labour Women', with all the opportunities, responsibilities, and feelings of belonging that they could then embrace.

This study is fortunately not the first to engage with the challenge of 'community', and to consider the relationship between local and national ideas of the concept. From a historical perspective, one the most valuable is Hester Barron's study of the meanings of community during the 1926 miner's lockout in County Durham. Barron's work demonstrates the complex relationship between an imagined national community of miners and the local building blocks necessary if these wider loyalties were to be built.[597] Drawing upon the powerful nationwide image of mining communities, which held strong in the consciousness of those inside and outside of the group, it refutes any necessary conflict between feelings of individual community and wider class allegiances. In Barron's words, it shows how in Durham, 'it was precisely through an experience of the local that the conceptualisation of wider class or occupational identity was made possible' for the miners.[598] Although it focuses upon one county in particular, and to some extent the wider North East of England of which it was a part, Barron's work offers a useful template to help us understand the relationship between the wide range of local communities considered here and their national organisation.

In the literature review for the work, *The 1926 miner's lockout* draws upon the various understandings of community, and views of its usefulness, from a range of sociologists, anthropologists, and historians that have also proved illuminating here. These include

[597] Hester Barron, *The 1926 miners' lockout: meanings of community in the Durham Coalfields* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 268-270.
[598] Ibid., p. 268.

Ferdinand Tönnies definition of over a century ago of *Gemeinschaft* as those 'interactive, culturally based, and face-to-face relationships' linked by kinship and a similar occupational culture, which certainly could be seen to represent many women's sections across the country.[599] They also include Benedict Anderson's concept of an imagined community, an intellectual construct originally intended to relate to a nation, that is also illustrative in the contest of the nationwide section and has already been used as a framing to describe British mining communities.[600] There are flaws in each definition of community that can be adopted, and while one can be seen as backward-looking and insular, another can be detached from the circumstances of a given locality and the relationships which often made any particular section what it was. In its definition of community, this chapter draws primarily upon those local experiences of membership women shared with familiar faces. However, it also reflects upon some of those ideas, rituals, and figureheads which provided a wider national identity.

While this identity was often particular to members as 'Labour Women', local sections were also firmly of the movement, although this usually meant their party and the affiliated WCG in particular. Raphael Samuel's view of the complete social identity of British Communists, with 'intense neighbourhood networks' who lived in 'a little private world' of their own, socialising, holidaying and, working together, shared many characteristics with women's experience of section membership.[601] However, the section perhaps reflected a shallower commitment, which as this thesis demonstrates sat alongside women's existing responsibilities rather than in conflict with them. Nevertheless, those including Marriot have described 'a culture of labourism' within the party at this time and Lowrie Newman has shown it was often Labour Women, particularly through the social side of the movement, who played a key role in forming these local socialist communities.[602] The communities we speak of here are therefore first and foremost those women in local sections, who felt part of a wider whole. A group which through a combination of its strength relative to the mainstream of the party in many areas and its presence across the country played a formative role in the culture of the party and could stand confidently against other associational bodies.

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[599] Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*, cited in Hester Barron, *The 1926 miners' lockout,* p. 4.
[600] For the original work see: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 2016). For discussions on those who have adopted this framing see Hester Barron, *The 1926 miners' lockout*, pp. 5-6.
[601] Raphael Samuel, *The lost world of British Communism* (London, 2006), pp. 13 – 14.
[602] John Marriott, *The culture of Labourism: The East End between the wars* (Edinburgh, 1991); Lowrie Newman, ''Providing an opportunity to exercise their energies', p. 37.

In line with this understanding of community, this chapter will first concentrate on the question of locality and show how the strength of the organisation varied across the country. In some areas, the strength of sections, measured in terms of the sheer number of active women taking part and their confidence in making their own views and preferences known, could prove a threat to the so-called mainstream of the party that was so often dominated by men. This was evidenced in disputes by the end of this period, particularly when it came to communist infiltration. In other areas, the challenge for organisers remained the building or sustaining of any significant women's section at all. However, even in these areas, the commitment of often a small number of women can be seen in the fortitude they displayed when defending their group. This same attachment to individual sections is shown elsewhere in the country, especially in the creative steps organisers needed to take to allow women the opportunity to maintain at least symbolic links to their original section when it was threatened with a split or merger. This mixed picture does not speak to one women's section but a series of them. However, it does highlight the importance which many women placed on their section and the steps that they took to assert its right to influence within the movement.

This chapter will then move on to consider how women used their membership to complete philanthropic or voluntary activities within their areas, where section life represented an expansion of existing communities which recognised local challenges. In doing so, it considers how, as in the case of the leisure pursuits of the NFWI or the NUTG, the section faced competition from those charitable organisations which were popular in interwar Britain and allowed women to give something back. This section also notes the tension between offering women an outlet to do something for their community and how charity, and especially charitable organisations, were viewed with suspicion within the labour movement both in the UK and abroad. In reviewing this, it once again shows that it was local sections who determined those activities which they wanted to prioritise, those they saw of benefit to their local community, and the party and organisers needed to co-operate with their decision.

Finally, this chapter will consider another way that the nationwide section could represent an imagined community. Beginning with the impact of grief and ill health at a local level, it builds to a picture of how shared acts of commemoration demonstrated a wider bond. It does so by first considering how Labour women supported one another through the all-too-common threat of long-term sickness and grief. Aside from being there for one another, keeping in touch and offering their support and condolences, sections also provided practical

assistance when a member needed it. They had provision for sick visitors, sick funds, and offered support with obtaining care. When the worst happened, they corresponded with the bereaved and stood in silence to mark their sympathy. Alongside these localised experiences, this section also considers how individuals across the country were joined by a mutual bond, perhaps best represented when their founder and early leader Dr Marion Phillips passed away. Through their web of interconnected communities, section women provided one another with a network of mutual support and understanding. In all of this, this chapter shows the heavily localised experience of membership whilst also drawing upon the common benefits women enjoyed. These included the feeling of belonging to a group of like-minded women who were joined in a common endeavour which was always about much more than party politics.

LOCAL COMMUNITIES OF LABOUR WOMEN

One challenge when trying to construct an understanding of how sections across the country operated differently as individual communities is the question of source material. As the introduction to this thesis has discussed, minute books, *The Labour* Woman, and the records of regional organisers and organisations can all fulfil a different and useful purpose. However, the snapshot provided by the papers of regional organisers have proved particularly useful for this chapter. While they only cover 1937 and 1938 in any great detail, they provide a view of what was by this time a mature organisation of women working inside and out of the home that these records provide is a valuable portrait of the communities which had been built up across the country. These were communities which varied in numbers and vitality, were shaped by the concerns and the abilities of local members, that were influenced by the dynamics of internal party conflicts and external challenges to their popularity. However, to differing degrees and with the support of now strong regional organisations and often stronger-willed regional organisers, they asserted their right to exist as independent communities which were shaped around the needs and interests of members.

One of the most significant insights these records show is how a small number of local activists, with support from their regional organisations, worked to sustain a separate women's section. For some areas, the threat to local organisation came from either apathy or the difficulty in recruiting members, and the latter was particularly a challenge in rural communities where it was often challenging if not impossible to overcome. Take, for example, the Box section, which had a 1937 visit from Chippenham Women's Central

Committee as well as the organiser Annie Townley in April to try and revive the section. A disappointing meeting, with only three women attending from the Box area, left the Secretary and three members in question very disheartened as they tried to rebuild their organisation.[603] The challenges in this one community reflected wider problems in Chippenham and the wider South West, which as organiser for the region made Townley's job an unenviable task. Later the same year, she wrote to Sutherland again to confirm that despite work that had taken place over that summer, the Box section continued not to meet, stating that along with the Purton section that was in the same position it could soon be crossed off the list of sections nationally.[604] The challenges Townley and the handful of local members in some of her ward's had reflects the challenge the party had in engaging with rural women in particular.

However, the efforts they took to overcome these challenges also show their continued commitment to the section. Activities that did prove popular included rallies, doubtless in part due to the addition of star speakers including Townley herself and those such as Susan Lawrence, by then former MP for East Ham North. These notable, even celebrity, figures within the movement were an important attraction to members both old and new. One such rally drew in 200 women in June 1937, at the time one of the largest events the county organisation had ever held.[605] Less successful, but perhaps more illustrative of the challenges the regional organisation faced, activities included the visit the Central Committee made to Castle Coombe in July of the same year. Even as an organised event across the Chippenham area, the campaigning trip was only able to attract six members, who canvassed door to door in what Townley describes as 'one of the loveliest villages in England'. Unfortunately, the trip proved unsuccessful, in part because the village itself would soon be derelict, with local men being sent to work in rubber factories where they were busy making gas masks. However, a far larger problem was that as the women canvassed and stood and made speeches to try and attract attention, they were observed by women who were 'peering from their windows and doors' but would not dare 'come near' them.[606] Townley attempted to cheer the women, disheartened with the lack of doorstep support and the meagre show of

[603] 'Chippenham Women's Central Committee – April 22', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/6.
[604] 'Chippenham Women's Central Committee – September 14', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Annie Townley, LP/WORG/37/3.
[605] 'Chippenham Women's Central Committee – June 17', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Annie Townley, LP/WORG/37/5.
[606] 'Women's Central Committee at Castle Coombe – July 1st', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Annie Townley, LP/WORG/37/4.

strength from existing members, with a picnic where she insisted on the valuable work which leaflet distribution had at least done. However, the day demonstrated that even by 1937, some areas of the country had significant challenges in building even a small local organisation.

This was not only a challenge in rural England, and by 1936 organisers in Wales and Scotland were also still working to build up several of their local sections from scratch. With no organisation to speak of in Carmarthen, Elizabeth Andrews wrote to the Executive Committee of the local Labour Party in November asking for the name of an active woman in the area from each of the delegates.[607] The challenge was taken up and fifteen women attended a meeting with Andrews the following February, but as many were focussing on other organisations locally refused to form a section, so Andrews' work continued heading into further meetings in June of 1937.[608] She confronted a similar challenge in Bethesda, Carnarvon, where only twelve women attended her meeting in March 1937, most of them elderly, who would agree to join the party and even attend any section meetings which were held but all stated they would not themselves agree to form a section.[609] In Scotland, Agnes Lauder faced similar challenges in many of her communities. She too was hosting meetings in an attempt to have communities found a section, with the eight women she could attract each promising to find other members who could join alongside them but none of them willing to take on the official roles themselves.[610] Elsewhere, Townley was creative in her efforts, attempting to convert women from the Govan Housing Association and the Govan Socialist Women's Guild, the latter of which had once been part of the ILP, into a pre-prepared women's section of active members.[611] In Scotland and Wales, as in parts of rural England, the building of sections from the ground up remained a challenge for organisers and the small number of active women in some communities locally even by the end of 1937.

In other parts of the country, the greater challenge once an organisation had been founded was ensuring its ongoing success. Local minute books show that there were several examples

[607] 'Carmarthen Divisional Labour Party – November 27th, 1936', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/219.
[608] 'Carmarthen – Address to the Local Party – June 1st, 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/219.
[609] 'Bethesda Carnarvon – March 17th, 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/227.
[610] 'Ayr Burghs – 14th April, 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Agnes Lauder, LP/WORG/37/497.
[611] 'Govan (Glasgow) – 22nd November 1936', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Agnes Lauder, LP/WORG/37/547.

of areas which could not maintain their ongoing participation within the party and as a result had to cease their section activities. The North West Hornchurch ward had once been a particularly well organised albeit small section. Once again situated in a rural community and reflecting the section's challenges there, it struggled throughout the 1930s to maintain an attendance high enough to sustain itself. While numbers fluctuated, they were consistently much lower than we see elsewhere. The Annual Report of 1932 estimated that the average attendances were eight faithful members who kept the section together as 'a real live section'.[612] A year later, despite making new members there was still a lack of interest from them and twelve women were reported to be attending weekly meetings.[613] By January 1937, the problem was so great that it was agreed to disband the section and a vote was passed to inform the regional organisation of the outcome. In 1937, the All-Saints women section near Coventry made a similar decision, effectively ceasing operations and weekly meetings following the lack of support for the organisation locally and attendances at the meetings which were traditionally under ten members.[614] While this may seem like a phenomenon of later in the period, there is some evidence that there were some areas struggling to maintain a membership even in the heyday of growth elsewhere in the country. In 1927, as sections continued to swell and the Labour Party grew nationwide, the Bramley section in Leeds was also closed with only seven women meeting at one of its last engagements.[615] In each case, we can see struggling sections where little more than a handful of members felt unable to continue their activities despite having worked for several years in attempt to do so.

However, each of these examples also demonstrate that when a small number of women had an attachment to a particular section, they continued to work in whichever way they could to preserve their place within the party. Each of these sections had a hiatus of around a year before many of the same women who had signed the final minutes of the previous organisation were present at its restoration shortly after. In All-Saints, the reforming meeting was held in March 1938, and involved an afternoon tea where women discussed how they could ensure they would all attend the section this time around.[616] This meeting was similar to that held in December 1937 in North West Hornchurch, where fourteen of the members of

[612] 'Annual Report of 1932', North West (Ward) Hornchurch Labour Party Women's Section & Special Committee Minutes November 1932-January 1936, A/HHL/025.
[613] 'Annual Report of 1933', North West (Ward) Hornchurch Labour Party Women's Section & Special Committee Minutes November 1932-January 1936, A/HHL/025.
[614] All Saint's Women's Section signed minutes, May 1932 – June 1939, MSS/11/1/1.
[615] 'August 16th, 1927', Bramley Women's Guild Minutes May 1926 – November 1929, WYL853/85.
[616] 'March 24th, 1938', All Saint's Women's Section signed minutes, May 1932 – June 1939, MSS/11/1/1.

the previous section grouped together to take their role once again in party business.[617] In Bramley, the meeting to reform the section was held in November 1928 and the women agreed that they would try to carry on.[618] Whilst this particular section's records do not exist past 1929, they continued to meet until the end of that year where despite small attendances they were satisfied to have attendance at meetings of usually around nine members. Elsewhere, we can confirm from records that the other two sections mentioned both continued into the war, and that the women who had reformed them worked to create programmes that were as entertaining, informative, and appealing as possible to the women in their local areas. The women of Hornchurch organised events, group outings, and speeches from women who had been police officers in the last war or who had grown up in mining communities in subsequent months.[619] In All-Saints, the women also arranged outings, had fortune telling afternoons, and arranged a series of socials and bazaars.[620] In each case, the determination of just over a handful of women to have their place sustained within the labour movement is a testament to how important their small communities had become.

Fortunately for most regional organisers, each area was a mix of these challenging sections and others that had built-up larger organisations which worked as communities and continued to thrive. So much so that many outstripped their local CLP and were often able to confidently hold their own, even when they were challenged from apparently more powerful parts of the movement. In Annie Townley's region, Chippenham was only one section across the wider South West, and other more established sections included that in Wootton Bassett. One example which demonstrates the strength of this section, and its leadership, came in March 1937 when the divorce of the section's secretary was announced. While chatter amongst women inevitably occurred because of a divorce, it was the fact that Mrs Chilcot was married to the potential candidate for the area which had caused so much concern. Given that this would prove concerning for some within the section and was causing tension with the local party, the secretary offered to resign.[621] However, demonstrating her strength as an organiser and the autonomy which the local section had built, Townley visited the section to

[617] 'December 7th, 1937', North West (Ward) Hornchurch Labour Party Women's Section & Special Committee Minutes November 1932-January 1936, A/HHL/025.
[618] 'November 11th, 1928', Bramley Women's Guild Minutes May 1926 – November 1929, WYL853/85.
[619] North West (Ward) Hornchurch Labour Party Women's Section & Special Committee Minutes November 1932-January 1936, A/HHL/025.
[620] All Saint's Women's Section signed minutes, May 1932 – June 1939, MSS/11/1/1.
[621] 'Wootton Bassett Women's Section – March 2nd', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Annie Townley, LP/WORG/37/13.

assert that the private lives of members should remain their own. Following a discussion, all agreed that Mrs Chilcot was an excellent secretary, and she was re-elected unanimously. Townley wrote to Sutherland to state that the division was instead considering whether it was Mr Chilcot who ought to resign as a candidate, given the unpopularity of divorce in such rural areas.[622] While an isolated incident, the experience of Mrs Chilcot and Wootton Basset demonstrates how individual sections had become communities, built around their own needs and able to support members in the face of apparently more powerful parts of the movement.

While records do not show any other example of a divorce being the cause, by this time, it was more common to see a women's section behaving in this autonomous way and defending themselves in the face of the male-dominated central party. This thesis elsewhere analyses the tension in Penydarren, where the focus on leisure amongst some women had proved a concern for men from the local ward and defences were required from both Elizabeth Andrews and Mary Sutherland who emphasised how the section competed for women's attention with organisations such as the NFWI. However, conflicts in this area and surrounding wards were wider than this exchange and women often held their own. The Merthyr Tydfil Executive Committee met in November 1937, with representatives of the four of nine wards which were functioning. The area only had one functioning women's section, that in Penydarren, with 86 paid members which far surpassed the very small number of men who attended the mainstream of the party locally. Andrews observed that the men were 'terrified of the success of the section' particularly when 'they claimed their part in ward work' and that comments from men around the table included that it was unfortunate there was such a large section in Penydarren.[623] At the same time, the Dowlais ward secretary rejected a section for their community, as they had a WCG locally which should be sufficient. Elsewhere, the Town Ward Secretary said that their women did not want a section and another member said that the party should not allow women to form a section at all, and instead they should work through the section. While it was only Andrews' interpretation, she thought that the response she received was owing to Penydarren's success, and the threat successful women's organisations posed to local organisation was condemned by the men present.[624] Far from men in this area being happy to keep women in a supplementary

[622] Ibid.
[623] 'Merthyr Tydfil – November 29th, 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/290.
[624] Ibid.

organisation, evidence from Wales suggests many found the success of an independent women's section a threat to their position and, in their view, the success of the party.

However, far more importantly for our purposes, this evidence suggests that women continued to defend their place within the party and within independent sections. These examples went far wider than in Wales, and women in Margaret Hunter Gibb's area were also fighting attempts by the men in the party to suppress the separate organisation of women. In Bradford, Gibb met with Mrs Shaw and Mrs Tennant to discuss the needs of local sections and was informed of the influence which men who had a strong opinion that there was no case for women's section were having on the organisation locally. Gibb acted on the advice, insisting that the local agent Mr Ashworth organise a meeting for women to meet alone in March so that they themselves could decide whether or not to organise separately.[625] In other parts of Hunter Gibb's regions, there is evidence that women could be successful in their fight, if only through attrition. For example, the Cleveland section had long been battling against two previous agents who also rejected the idea of a separate women's section. According to Gibb, the first of which was specifically against women's organisation, the second was against any organisation which did not involve him public speaking, but both had worked to quash the section locally.[626] The section's persistence had finally produced results by 1937, when a new agent was appointed who was the first to believe in the women's section, and even discussed with Gibb how they could work together to squeeze the former agent, now the Chairman of the Redcar and Cleveland Party, out of the organisation in the longer term. Like the women of Wales, those in the North of England defended their place within the party which was both influential and built around an autonomous community.

Whilst limited, there are also other examples of this relative strength of the women's section within local Labour Party's from the minute books of sections and Regional Advisory Councils. Where they occur, they demonstrate that where strong organisations existed, they could ensure that they made their demand for a say in party business clear. One example of this can be seen in Northumberland in 1935, where Mrs Legg tended her resignation as the President of the Morpeth Labour Women on the back of a candidate adoption meeting that

[625] 'Bradford - 9 February 1935', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Margaret Hunter Gibb, LP/WORG/37/54.
[626] 'Cleveland Division – 29 January 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Report – Margaret Hunter Gibb, LP/WORG/37/150.

had taken place within her constituency. The meeting left not only Mrs Legg, but all the other women present apparently feeling a sense of 'great indignation'. The selected candidate did not enjoy the section's support and the general feeling amongst the women was that 'our efforts in the way of education by sending our women to Summer Schools and Weekend Schools had proved futile', as the CLP refused to take account of the talent amongst the women's section itself.[627] In response to the complaint from these women, the Secretary of the Northumberland Federation wrote to the Divisional Executive asking for them to receive a deputation. In January 1936, Mrs Legg withdrew her resignation, following a statement from Mr Garrow who was responsible for the decision which, while not altering the outcome, demonstrated that the women's voice had been heard.[628] In another part of Hunter Gibb's area, York felt that their women were not getting the prominence they deserved by 1933 when it came to party appointed positions decided in the area. As such, they made a commitment to forward their own nominations when posts were being considered. Aware of the fact that this also might not change the outcome, they decided to do so 'if only to let the party know that we are a lively section.[629] Whilst the records do not demonstrate that in either case the council or section were successful in changing selection and appointment decisions, the women of both Northumberland and York, like their colleagues elsewhere, confidently asserted their right to an important and influential role within the labour movement.

By this time, the section was equally comfortable coming into conflict with threats from the industrial as well as the political wings of their movement, particularly when it came to communism. From 1933, a heated and contentious debate across the labour movement was the call of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), joined by the recently disaffiliated ILP, to create a united front against fascism with the Labour Party, the TUC, and the Co-operative Party.[630] Calls to affiliate to the Labour Party had come on several occasions from the formation of the CPGB in 1920. Similarly, especially in the early 1920s, there was not always a clear a line drawn between organisations, with many members who overlapped the parties and took part in joint locally organised activities.[631] In line with its own consistent

[627] 'Meeting held November 20th, 1935', Northumberland Labour Women's Federation Minute Book – 1932-1936, NRO 04415/2/1.
[628] 'January 10th, 1936', Northumberland Labour Women's Federation Minute Book – 1932-1936, NRO 04415/2/1.
[629] 'March 14th, 1933', York Labour Women's Section Minute Books 1927-1933, LAB/1/5/2.
[630] Lewis H. Mates, *The United Front and the Popular Front in the North East of England, 1936-1939*, PhD Thesis, University of Newcastle (2002), p. 5.
[631] Norman LaPorte and Matthew Worley, 'Towards a comparative history of communism: The British and German Communist Parties to 1933', *Contemporary British History,* 22 (2), 2008, p.232.

approach from the early 1920s, Labour's official position continued to eschew any attempts at co-operation. Along with the TUC, the party issued the statement 'Democracy and Dictatorship' on 24 March 1933, rejecting the united front approach.[632] The 1933 Labour Conference endorsed the NEC's approach, and the party again replied to a CPGB letter in 1934 condemning Communist misrepresentation in attacks against them and refusing to make common cause with those who accepted dictatorship.[633] There was no alliance ahead of the General Election of 1935. However, undeterred, the left continued to agitate and a CPGB campaign to affiliate to Labour in 1935, whilst unsuccessful, managed to secure a third of votes at Labour conference, the highest the CPGB had ever successfully received. It was in this context, with a significant minority considering the united front or even affiliation, that relatively strong women's sections in some areas of the country operated in 1936 and 1937.

One challenge for those women who wished to support Labour policy, was some communist ideas, and particularly the potential of a united front against fascism, did prove popular with some members of the section. Within section meetings, much of this tension came from members who organisers thought had been influenced by the men in their lives and it was common for organisers and local members to note a woman who may be agitating on these points also had a husband who was involved in Communist, United Front, or simply Trades Council activity. This was the case in Tonypandy, where some members were said to be using their weekly meetings for communist propaganda and this was attributed to their husbands being members of their unity campaign.[634] There were similar cases in Sheffield, where Hunter Gibb reported that 'communistically-minded' women, one of whom was married to the Chairman of the local Trades Council, were also influencing regular weekly business.[635] A challenge for women, even within section meetings, was that at least some amongst them were minded to accept the ideas behind the unity campaign and even broader communist policies, although this was ascribed often ascribed to their husband's influence.

While there was doubtless something in this, the strength of many women's own feelings on the matter are repeatedly demonstrated. As a result, organisers reported frequently as

[632] Lewis H Mates, *The United Front and the Popular Front*, p. 6.
[633] Ibid.
[634] 'Rhondda West – May 31st, 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Report – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/340.
[635] 'Sheffield Park Divisional Party Management Committee', Labour Party Women's Organiser Report – Margaret Hunter Gibb, LP/WORG/37/140.

tensions flared up at events organised by the section across the country. This included the debates in South Yorkshire about the Left Book Club and whether their representatives should be allowed to speak at section meetings considered in the education section of this thesis.[636] Elsewhere, the One Day School at Denbigh was dominated by discussions of a communist speaker who had been booked to lecture at a future meeting due to several young members who were said to be 'rallying around this Communist leader'.[637] Organisers repeatedly demonstrated their frustration that when women got together for official section activities, there was always the risk that a small number of those who supported the CPGB or the united front could disrupt the occasion. In another week-end long school in Blackpool, apparently excellent discussions after each lecture were disrupted by two 'communistic' students who made it hard to keep the group on the topics which were in hand.[638] While most members supported official policy, there were those amongst them who adopted a different approach to those ideas and organisations outside the so-called mainstream of movement.

These women did, however, remain a minority and a far more common problem rather than internal disputes on these issues, where most sections supported party policy, was the support for the CPGB or the united front in the wider party and affiliated industrial organisations. However, here too, as a mature organisation by this period the section was often successful in defending its own and the official party position, frequently more successfully than the so-called mainstream of the party locally. In some senses, their successes here emulated others in homosocial organisations whose involvement within interwar public discourse, in the words of McCarthy, served as a marker of national identity as well as a bulwark of democratic values, successfully ensuring that for the most part fascists and communists could not penetrate these settings.[639] However, with the particular challenge their place within the labour movement represented, women were also called upon to directly defend their party and sections as independent organisations which could not be co-opted into front activities.

One significant case of this can be seen in areas across Wales, particularly Cardiff, where

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[636] 'Letter from Mary Sutherland to Mrs Singleton (Secretary of South Yorkshire Advisory Council', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports, LP/WORG/37/169.
[637] 'Denbigh – March 15th, 1937' Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/229.
[638] 'Weekend school at Blackpool, May 9th 10th, 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports, LP/WORG/37/634.
[639] Helen McCarthy, 'Associational voluntarism in interwar Britain', in Matthew Hilton (ed), *The Ages of Voluntarism: How we got to the Big Society* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 56-7.

women were concerned and campaigned against communist infiltration and influence within their local parties, Trades Councils and Spanish Aid Committees. Cardiff women raised their concerns with Andrews in 1936 and some amongst them, along with their organiser, attended a meeting of the Trades Council in July to defend the Labour Party's official national position.[640] The Chairman of the Council, Mr Pope, gave a long speech where he spoke in favour of the United Front and stated that there was no rule of the TUC which formally debarred communists from the organisation. He was supported by local Councillor Alan Robson, who according to Andrews gave a 'long tirade' about the Cardiff Constitution of the Trades Council, that had been endorsed by the Labour Party, supported action such as the United Front and insinuated Andrews was the reason behind the disquiet and had led women 'up the garden'. It was then that women themselves spoke up, defending the organiser and clearly stating most women's positions within the area. As the first chapter of this thesis explains, Andrews attributed this in part to the confidence they had gained at the section's weekend school. After following on from the women, she was left in no doubt that Mr Robson was clear of their position and surprised, especially since the majority of individual members in Cardiff were women.[641] This was only the first of such conflicts on the question of the unity campaign and communist activity, and women continued to push on the matter.

Less than a year later, Cardiff women remained concerned about communist activity on the Trades Council and continued to defend the party and the section. They had good reason for their view, as men from the Unity Campaign had continued to push the issue in ward meetings locally.[642] When a member of the Unity Campaign wrote to the women asking for use of their hall, the Chairman refused to have the letter read. Instead, they raised the matter with Andrews, also informing her that the same member had asked many of them to sign Unity forms, which some had done, although apparently not in support of the campaign but only out of innocence. Andrews instructed the women to cancel and return the forms, advising they could not be part of the campaign and loyal to the section or party. Following this, they all had sharp discussions with one of the men locally pushing the matter. However, the question remained unresolved. So much so that less than two months later, the women took further action. They decided to formally separate the political and industrial sections of

[640] 'Cardiff Central Committee – July 2nd, 1936', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/258.
[641] Ibid.
[642] 'Cardiff Central Committee – March 12th, 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/268.

the movement locally and moved a resolution to the Trades Council to that effect.[643] This story of Cardiff is of a particular area where the wider labour movement had a particular ideological persuasion, but women stood their ground. However, this could also be seen elsewhere in Wales. For example, it was only the strength of the Neath Chairman and the 'very lively' question time she held that prevented locals from arranging for communist speakers to attend a future the ward meeting.[644] In both of these cases, by 1937, some of the strongest women's sections dealt with the particular challenges of their area. They were robust enough by this time to rigorously defend their position as a section, in this case also the official policy of the party, against other influential wings of their movement.

It should be said that while the experiences in these areas are demonstrative of the strength of sections, they are not entirely representative of the often-fruitful relationships that ran from the beginning of the interwar period between sections and wider labour movement. Trades Councils in particular had played significant roles in supporting the women's section. It was, after all, the local council which worked with women to start the very first section in Wales in Ton Pentre, Rhonda, in 1918.[645] As time progressed, they continued to play a significant role in the foundation and support of many sections. It was the Trades Council Secretary who called a special meeting in April 1937 to deal with the fact that with the exception of Penydarren the rest of the area covered by the Merthyr Central Committee were struggling to maintain women's section.[646] Elsewhere, when there was a difficulty in a section sustaining themselves, it was their relationship with other parts of the labour movement which meant women could continue to contribute, form communities and propagandise for the party. In Worcester, Hunter Gibb observed the success of the Women's Co-operative Guild locally, with sixty members attending a meeting she visited. This meant that the nine women of the section locally were no longer meeting separately but carried out their duties as part of this larger organisation.[647] While this was not an ideal solution for Gibb, who advocated for a separate section, she saw the value in having a place where those supporting the movement could continue to meet in relative strength and she understood that the varied and useful

[643] 'Cardiff Central Committee – May 7th, 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/260.
[644] 'Neath – November 18th, 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews', LP/WORG/37/394.
[645] Elizabeth Andrews, *A Woman's Work*, p. 26.
[646] 'Merthyr Central Committee – April 19th, 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/303.
[647] 'Worcester Report – November 30th, 1927, Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Margaret H Gibb, LP/WORG/37/41.

programme of the Guild, as well as the 'delightful premises' held by the Co-operative movement locally were appealing to many women . Many sections therefore sat alongside other wings of the labour movement, supporting one another from the outset in building the strongest organisations they could whilst also taking specific local factors into account.

If these examples show how women fought for their movement or the women's section in general, others show how committed many were to their section in particular. Across the interwar period, many stronger sections had developed into their own self-sustaining communities which, while part of a wider whole, felt proud of their particular contribution to the movement. This pride was often best demonstrated when there was a threat to the section women had come to know and love. On some occasions, this happened when heavy-handed local ward officials decided that a section was too unruly or too dominant within a given area. Returning to Cardiff again, the South of the city women's section was in a bitter dispute with the local party Executive Committee over plans to split it up in 1937. They called upon Andrews' assistance, who supported them in their fight. As a result, they were able to successfully have the Ward Chairman agree that the actions of the mainstream of the party had been too severe, that they had acted without agreement of the section, and committing to spend time with Andrews and the section working out the grievances.[648] Women would therefore battle not just for a place, but their place, within their local party and community.

While the example of a section which was seen to be too powerful occurred in this community, local records also demonstrate how communities facing the opposite problem were also committed to their community. The nuances and complexities which this could present are perhaps best demonstrated within the area represented by the Coventry Central Committee, where dwindling attendances in some wards near the end of our period meant women needed to be creative if they were to sustain an organisation. Some districts, such as All Saints and Longford, were able to keep going on a year-by-year basis, but they often needed the encouragement of visitors from the council including Mrs Gardner and Mrs Clarke at their annual meetings to ensure that women accepted organising roles.[649] However, by 1938, the council faced a number of areas which did not have an active section, and

[648] 'Cardiff South – February 24th, 1937' Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/278.
[649] 'March 2nd, 1937', Coventry Central Committee Women's section: signed minutes, February 1935 – November 1938', MSS/11/1/2.

discussions were constantly ongoing about the best approach to take. One suggestion was the merging of smaller sections, including section four, which hardly met, with section nine which whilst more regular in its meetings was also small in number. The suggestion was immediately rebuffed by Mrs Ewart from the latter organisation. In an effort to quell any concerns, the committee had to agree to discuss in great detail and for some length how officials, representation on committees would be apportioned and this even led to the unusual agreement of keeping two-minute books moving forward for each constituent part of the newly combined section.[650] Even for those sections which were too small, there was a clear attachment to individual sections and their own contribution as a group to the movement.

This attachment was perhaps even greater in some larger sections, where it was unfortunately not always possible for women to avoid the need for their section to be split and equally creative solutions needed to be found. By 1937, the Pontypridd section in Wales had become one of the largest and most successful across the nation. With over 300 members, it was responsible for almost the entire work of several central wards of the party across the town, which included not only section business, but the upkeep of the local party rooms and the organisation of almost all local party activities.[651] Following the death of Miss O'Brien, the Secretary, the section was no longer able to use the rooms which they had maintained and been responsible for. At the same time, and as was commonly expected across the country, the section was asked to split and reflect the greater number of wards which were now being contested by the party in the area, so that in could mirror the mainstream party organisation. According to Andrews, the decision caused much consternation locally, with members who had 'much sentiment attached to this section' because of the 'splendid work they had done during Miss O'Brien's time'.[652] The solution did include the formal separation of section into a number of smaller organisations. However, in another creative attempt to allow women to retain a sense of community, members who were no longer assigned to the central section would be allowed to attend its meeting as 'visitors'. In Andrews view, this was the best that the party could do to handle the situation which took 'some tact so as not to lose some of [their] best members' within all of Wales.[653] The significant steps Pontypridd women took to

[650] 'February 1st, 1938', Coventry Central Committee Women's section: signed minutes, February 1935 – November 1938', MSS/11/1/2.
[651] 'Pontypridd – May 27th, 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/423.
[652] Ibid.
[653] Ibid.

defend the central section which they grew under Miss O'Brien, and its legacy, show how important these individual communities had become to those who were regularly taking part.

Further, the fact that Miss O'Brien had been able to hold off calls to split the section before this point shows how powerful and important a section's Secretary and wider leadership could be. The essential role which secretaries could play in the success or failure of particular sections was felt by the women concerned and their organisers alike. It meant that when a secretary moved on to another area, as was the case with Mrs Ball in Westbury Trowbridge, they were concerned that the section would continue to function to the same level in their absence. Mrs Ball was so concerned that she asked Annie Townley to promise to conduct visits to the section once she had moved on, where she fortunately found that there was no reason to be 'afraid they might get a bit slack' as she found the very effective new secretary getting on well with the women and her work.[654] Elsewhere in the country, Margaret Hunter Gibb was concerned when an ineffective secretary proved a risk to the success of a section which could otherwise have made a significant contribution to the movement. On a visit to the area, she found that the secretary at Golcar in Colne Valley talked far too much for her liking. Gibb was 'afraid that some of the very nice helpful women' would get tired of the secretary's incessant conversation and leave, stating that the meeting was not at all business like and the secretary had a thousand reasons for all the things she had not done.[655] Secretaries therefore came to play an important role in leading the organisation locally and were often seen as a central reason why a section may be successful or fail within their area.

However, it was often a combination of the work of the entire section within a community, the bonds that they had built, and their relative strength in the area which determined the fate of the women's organisation. As organiser reports demonstrate, by 1938 the picture across the country was a complex mixture of those women who continued to strive towards a local organisation, some who were ambivalent to the idea, and those who fought hard to sustain the individual section that they had already built. This reinforces the point Karen Hunt has made, in stating that despite the growing nationalisation of politics locality remained an important determinate of grass roots experience in this period. As this thesis frequently demonstrates,

[654] 'Westbury Trowbridge Women's Section – January 19th', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Annie Townley, LP/WORG/37/35.
[655] 'Golcar Women's Section, Colne Valley – 26 May 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Margaret Hunter Gibb, LP/WORG/37/152.

the category of 'Labour Women' is 'not a shorthand for a single experience or response to the possibilities and limitations that party membership presented' at this time.[656] In areas with fewer members, organisers needed to be dogged in their persistence to build local sections from the ground, and creative in how they allowed and facilitated women working with other parts of the labour movement where this was not possible. In areas with a well-established membership, sections and their organisers were often strong enough by this point to defend their right to a separate women's organisation in general and their individual section in particular. They were also some of the most vociferous and successful defenders of the official party position, particularly when it came to communist infiltration or the desire from some for united front co-operation. In these examples, we see a wide and varied organisation which struggled for relevance in some areas but once established, could lead to strong and autonomous communities, ready to defend themselves and their place within the movement.

SITUATING SECTIONS *WITHIN* LOCAL COMMUNITIES

While the examples considered so far demonstrate the importance of sections as autonomous communities, this should not imply any detachment from the wider local civil society of which they were apart. On the contrary, sections could be some of the most active and engaged parts of their broader community, and there are several examples throughout the archives and the literature where they played an important civic role. When they undertook these roles, they preferred to see their activities as the hands-on representation of their values and aims. As Sinnett's study of the development of the Labour Party in Bristol demonstrates, the support which Labour women provided for the unemployed or the elderly were not acts of charity but seen as the 'practical' application of 'politics on the ground'.[657] Sinnett demonstrates not only how section women excelled in these duties, but how they saw this contribution as just as important as any debate or resolution on a policy question. Of course, they also saw the opportunity of helping those in their community as an excellent propaganda effort, which could help attract those men and women outside of the movement to their cause by demonstrating the good Labour could do.[658] These hands-on steps were some of the ways

[656] Karen Hunt, 'Making Politics in Local Communities: Labour Women in interwar Manchester', p. 98.
[657] T. Sinnett, 'The development of the Labour Party in Bristol, 1918-1931', PhD Thesis, University of the West of England, 2006, pp. 33-36.
[658] Ibid, p.165.

in which women could contribute to their local community, gain value from their role and feel that they were able to use their membership to put their politics into practice.

Many local sections across the country completed activities to support the unemployed within their communities like the women of Bristol in Sinnett's study. This should not be surprising, as unemployment was not only a real local issue for many members and their neighbours, but it was also a significant policy and campaigning matter for the party across the country. As well as articles of *The Labour Woman* dedicated to the matter across the period, the plight of the unemployed and the steps which Labour would take to address the challenge was a frequent feature of the speeches delivered in weekly meetings, and the training which women received at the section's one day, weekend, and week-long residential schools. The priority which the section would place upon this issue was made clear from the early 1920s, where a number of sections used the section's journal to emphasise how they were supporting those out of work locally. As this thesis demonstrates elsewhere, it was common to see the party's leisure activities used as fundraising events for the support of the unemployed. In Crayford, the very first activity of the section in 1921 was to host a social and dance for the unemployed. The event was so successful that it was able to hand over nearly £15 in profit to the Unemployed Committee of the party to support those out of work in the local community.[659] Elsewhere, despite its small size, the North West Hornchurch ward focussed its efforts on supporting the unemployed whenever it could. This included the hosting of regular Whist Drives for funds that would help them provide boots for those who needed them.[660] From early in the period, the section was demonstrating the practical steps which they could take to support their local communities, taking their place in civil society.

While some of these events were straightforward fundraisers, others provided the opportunity to propagandise for the party and to attract potential members, whilst also offering a service to the local community. These usually included those events for children where they and their unemployed parents would be invited along, which have been briefly touched upon earlier in this thesis. For example, in 1920 both Chester and Lowestoft sections held events which adopted this formula in the Christmas parties they arranged.[661] In Chester, some 220 children

[659] 'Crayford', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 9, no. 7 (1921), p. 115.
[660] 'Annual Report of 1932', North West (Ward) Hornchurch Labour Party Women's Section and Special Committee minutes, November 1932 – January 1936, ACC/2527/004.
[661] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1921), pp. 27-9.

of the unemployed received gifts from the women's section at a party with a Christmas tree. In Lowestoft, the section had two teas for the children of the unemployed in the district. The first entertained 140 children and the second 350, and after tea the children enjoyed a magic lantern show, conjuring tricks, and a concert, as well as visit from Father Christmas with a present for each child.[662] The Lowestoft event was so successful that it would be repeated, and a year later a further two parties catered for 750 children in total, using £84 worth of funds which were collected from section and Trade Union activity within the local area.[663] Through these events, women fulfilled the need of doing something for their community, but were also able to demonstrate to those in their area the value which the party could have.

Such events not only promoted the party within a local community but demanded members' time rather than allowing them to focus their attention elsewhere. As has been demonstrated, Labour frequently competed for women's attention against the NFWI or the NUTG on the basis of leisure. Another contested ground between these organisations was the role membership allowed women to play within their local community. Reflecting this was a concern from the outset, the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Committee (SJC), a group representing women in the Labour Party, trade unions and the co-operative movement and chaired by Labour's Chief Women's Officer, published an article in *The Labour Woman* as early as March 1920. The article, entitled 'Keep to your own party', urged women to avoid organisations including the Women's Citizens Association (WCA), NUSEC, the Women's Local Government Society, the Mothers' Union, and the Charitable Organisations Society.[664] It asked women to eschew these groups not only as they are 'middle class associations for political, social and philanthropic purposes' but because the committee would like to point out 'that our organisations already do the necessary work' which these organisations also wished to fulfil. Importantly, it emphasises the benefits of the labour movement being as an organisation which can field local and parliamentary candidates and win and contrasts this with the WCA who will fail 'to do anything but merely talk' or 'run special Women Citizen Candidates' for local authorities or parliament as they have already done who would inevitably fail.[665] Reflecting both the concern they felt from the outset about the philanthropic wishes and efforts of their members being directed elsewhere, and how they

[662] Ibid.
[663] *The Labour Woman*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1922), p.44.
[664] 'Keep to your own party', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 8, no. 3 (1920), p.37.
[665] Ibid.

saw the political nature of the labour movement as in contrast with charitable organisations, the SJC acknowledged some of the tensions which would face them in the coming years.

The movement therefore wanted women to channel their philanthropic efforts through the party for a number of reasons. First, there was the simple question of time and resources. While studies elsewhere have shown how middle-class women, particularly from the Conservative Party, could comfortably spread their altruism across a range of causes, the limited time available to many working-class Labour women restricted their ability to give something back to their communities.[666] As a result, organisers wanted women to be focussed on their organisation through which they could also commit most of their time to causes which served the party. However, another problem was that the perceived class interests which many labour figures saw to be at play within the philanthropic movement. Many Labour figures had fundamental issues with charitable organisations and the women who ran and contributed to them, avoiding what they saw to be middle-class priorities.

The extent to which there was a real difference in ideology or practice between leaders in the section and voluntary organisations should not be over-stated. Many saw the same activities and even policies to be necessary. However, as James Hinton points out, it was a commitment to class, not ideology, which the SJC wanted to see as its most important point of difference. It wanted to separate itself as the self-described representative of 'working women' from the stereotype of the typical member of a middle-class organisation who was 'idle…freed by affluence and the labours of her domestic servants to interfere in lives which her very comfort prevented her from comprehending'.[667] This approach is similar to that seen in the labour movement internationally at this time. For example, Oliver's work on the Australian Labor Party demonstrates how damaging the stereotype of the 'lady bountiful' could be. The image, seen in both British and Australian politics, of a middle-class woman with too much time and money on her hands, was one which a number of political leaders within Australia worked to both malign and reject. Like their counterparts in Britain, this left them focussing on many of the same activities as voluntary organisations when it came to philanthropy or so-called practical politics, but with an important rhetorical difference which instead of charity

[666] Helen McCarthy, 'Parties, Voluntary Associations and Democratic Politics in Interwar Britain', *The Historical Journal*, 50 (4) (2007), pp. 891-912.
[667] James Hinton, *Women, social leadership and the Second World War* (Oxford, 2002), p. 79.

focussed on ideas of mutual aid which came from both solidarity and the state.[668] Charitable activities therefore posed a threat to the women's section, both in using the limited time of working-class women within a local community and in the ideological implications of accepting the role of the burgeoning middle-class philanthropic sector at this time.

However, organisers were also aware that they needed to make room for charitable pursuits if women were not to divert all of their attention elsewhere in this way. If they suspected this at the start of the interwar period, then by the end their experience had proved that it would the case. Once again, many of the tensions could be seen across Wales where Elizabeth Andrews constantly battled to keep women's attention on the section or, at the very least, on the wider labour movement. By 1937, one of the organiser's biggest difficulties was in the Aberavon section, which was declining in both its size and participation levels. Andrews attributed this to women's focus being split away from the section, and when visiting she found many women were instead engaged with philanthropic work for the Pilgrim Charitable Organisations that was popular locally.[669] Elsewhere, she faced similar challenges in Caerphilly, where whilst visiting a section, she noted that women's energies had dissipated into a range of other organisations. Alongside those previous chapters would lead us to expect women to be participating in, including the NUTG, Andrews found that women were spending much of their time at the Royal British Legion over and above section business.[670] The threat for the section was that if it did not provide women with the chance to situate themselves within their local community, and offer them with the space to spend their limited free time contributing to it, then other organisations would come along and offer them the opportunity to do so.

More often than not, this meant that other than through requests in *The Labour Woman* or speeches which were given by organisers in local meetings, it was left to sections themselves to determine the activities they wanted to take part in locally. As war approached, one test of how this would be shaped and seen differently across the country was the foundation of the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) in 1938. Set up to recruit women for civil defence,

[668] Bobbie Oliver, 'In the Thick of Every Battle for the Cause of Labor: The Voluntary Work of the Labor Women's Organisations in Western Australia, 1900-70', *Labour History,* 81 (2001), p. 93.
[669] 'Aberavon – October 31st, 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/357.
[670] 'Caerphilly – May 8th, 1937', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/369.

specifically air raid precautions, the WVS was a voluntary body set up in a way which reflected many of its interwar associational predecessors. As Hinton's study observes, it allowed middle-class women to retain the social leadership many had enjoyed throughout the period, where they 'simultaneously served their community and helped to uphold the authority of their class'.[671] Despite this, there were many leading women within the Labour movement who supported the WVS from the outset, including Mary Agnes Hamilton and Barbara Ayton Gould. However, in a sign that the section's suspicion of voluntary organisations and their middle-class leaders were firmly embedded in some communities by this period, both were keenly aware that the WVS would be handled with suspicion. As Hilton recounts, they warned the WVS founder Lady Reading that 'the chief obstacle was the strong feeling among Labour women in northern industrial towns that local authorities, not voluntary organisations, were the proper agencies' to deal with the precautions.[672] As one activist looking back on the matter in 1948 also cited by Hinton recounted, Labour women had become 'rightly suspicious of voluntary work which was almost entirely carried on by those politically hostile to the Party and was largely exploited for their political ends'.[673] The WVS, like those associational interwar bodies which proceeded it, was seen by many Labour women as a threat to their individual section, as well as to the wider aims of the party.

However, despite this, records demonstrate that the reception which the WVS received was heavily determined by the women in a particular locality. For example, Hinton shows how women in County Durham used the organisation as an arena in which they could participate and have an 'open class struggle', using the structure to challenge the paternalistic hold 'traditionally exercised by middle-class social leaders over the associational life of the miners' wives.[674] Elsewhere, sections saw the WVS as something which should be avoided and defended their own roles within their communities. When the WVS approached the York section in 1940, asking them to conduct joint housewives' classes for the community, they section rejected the suggestion outright. Replying to inform the WVS that co-operation would not be necessary as they were 'already running various classes including First Aid on our own' York sought to maintain its independence.[675] Other sections were far more comfortable co-operating with the organisation wherever it was necessary. For example, the

[671] James Hinton, *Women, social leadership and the Second World War*, pp.4-5.
[672] Ibid., p. 67.
[673] Ibid., p.68.
[674] Ibid., p. 14.
[675] 'Meeting October 1st, 1940', Women's Section Minute Book, 1940-1949, LAB/1/5/4.

Ilford South section does appear to have been working with the WVS on local activities by 1938. They received a letter of thanks addressed to the sections Chairman, Officers, and all of their members for not only their ongoing support but their actions during a recent emergency which had occurred in the area.[676] Involvement, or lack thereof, with the WVS was therefore heavily determined by the section in question. Reflecting their views as an internal community and the place they wanted to take within their wider locality but reflecting the suspicion of voluntary organisations which still existed at least in some parts of the country.

Of course, charitable, and voluntary work were only some of the ways Labour Women could take an active role within their local community. The leisure activities discussed elsewhere in this thesis provided perhaps greater opportunities for women to open their life in the party to their friends, families, neighbours, and wide communities. Further, the records considered here are only those of the section itself, and there are doubtless many more examples of the co-operation which women undertook with other local organisations as well as a number of women who like their Conservative counterparts were able to split their attention across a number of causes and voluntary pursuits. All of this is to say that while they operated as internal communities, sections across the country formed part of their localities and were shaped by its dynamics. As much as they were influenced by the wishes of the national leadership or their regional organisers, women formed their own local bonds which were built upon shared local experiences, interests, and wishes. This influenced the degree to which, or at all, they wished to engage with voluntary organisations and also the extent to which they saw that the needs of their communities were better addressed in this forum or another.

SECTIONS AS LOCAL AND NATIONAL COMMUNITIES

As well as being a means by which women could support others in their area, local sections were also a source of mutual support and comfort that they could draw upon themselves. Aside from their role in facilitating women spending time with their families, celebrating holidays and women's events, many sections also played important roles when one of their own was facing a more difficult time and many came to rely on their comrades. As will be demonstrated here, some sections became the outlet for the emotional, practical, and even

[676] 'October 19th, 1938', Ilford South Labour Party Central Women's Section Minute Book, June 1938 – March 1942, ACC/2527/004.

financial support of their members. This was the case when a member became unwell, where sections often took the responsibility for keeping in touch with women unable to attend meetings, providing them with advice where they could and even, in some cases, limited financial support. However, the deaths of family members were also a far more common occurrence for interwar women and here, too, sections came into their own. Through all these examples, we see local sections which were their own internal communities, supporting and sustaining women at some of their most difficult times. We also see how the shared experience of ill health, grief, and loss, usually localised but even when relating to a national and prominent figure within the movement, cemented lifelong bonds amongst members.

The threat of ill health was a fundamental risk to many of the working-class wives and mothers which the women's section looked to represent. However, as Thane's work demonstrates, the role the section could play in supporting women who fell ill or had a member of their family in that position was significant, in part because of the unique coalition of members within their ranks. The women's section included women from a cross section of occupations and backgrounds, amongst them those employed in professional or voluntary services including social services and health care as well as those who were most likely to be in receipt of welfare support.[677] This provided a unique opportunity to support those who faced times which were not only emotionally difficult but could prove financially ruinous and have a significant impact on a family's reputation. As Giles has demonstrated, the interwar difference between a so-called 'respectable' family and one which was struggling was dynamic and often paper thin, and amongst the key dangers to family life was ill health.[678] This was doubtless part of the reason why the section focussed so much of its attention on health policy over other issues. It is also why Thane has rejected the calls from those historians and contemporary commentators who wished the section had pursued a more avowedly feminist agenda over welfare reform, reflecting that such an interpretation marks a failure to recognise the 'wretchedness of poverty, dismal housing and lack of health care' that many women faced.[679] The wider section, as well as the women within any given community,

[677] Pat Thane, 'Women in the British Labour Party and the construction of the welfare state', in Koven, S. and Michel, S. (eds), *Mothers of a new world: maternalist politics and the origins of welfare states* (London, 1993), pp. 345-6.
[678] Judy Giles, 'Playing Hard to Get: working-class women, sexuality and respectability in Britain, 1918-40', *Women's History Review*, vol. 1 (2), (1992), pp. 242-3.
[679] Pat Thane, 'The women of the British Labour Party and feminism, 1906-1945', in Smith, H. (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Amherst, 1990), p. 135.

were all too aware of the dangers ill health posed, and the range of experience within their ranks meant they were well placed to support one another when such difficulties were faced.

The illness of a member was therefore a frequent cause for concern for sections and this is demonstrated in local minute books, particularly when it came to long-term or more serious health problems. At the simplest level, the efforts sections took to support women could be seen when passing on well wishes and making sure they kept engaged with the section while they were out of active participation. Sections drafted written notes and letters which they agreed at their meeting and would be sent to the member in question. In Hunslet Carr, Mrs Rowe's hospital visit for an operation in March 1930 became an item on the agenda, and a letter was drafted by those present to express their hopes for her recovery.[680] The approach adopted by local sections was similar for those who were also elected to attend District or Regional Advisory Councils and the support offered by both organisations was very well received. Mrs Carlton of the West Yorkshire Advisory Council wrote thanking her peers for their kind thoughts and enquiries during her illness of 1938, and the message was read aloud to the committee who passed a resolution of thanks in return.[681] Where they could afford it, sections frequently sent gifts to their missing friend, as they did in Ilford South when Mrs Sparrow reported that Mrs Priestley of the section was seriously ill in hospital in 1931.[682] At a council level, the West Middlesex Women's Advisory Council wanted to do something alongside writing to Miss Cross, who was lying unwell in as isolation hospital in Cardiff, to wish her well and to recognise all she had done for the movement. They purchased a copy of Vera Brattain's *The Testament of Youth,* and all the members of the Council signed it with a message before forwarding it on to her.[683] Actions such as these demonstrated that they kept an ill comrade in their thoughts and so extended the bonds of community in her absence.

However, sections also ensured that members' contact with meetings was much deeper than simple correspondence offering good wishes. They also commonly appointed so-called 'sick visitors' who would visit members at home when they were unable to attend a meeting and

[680] 'March 25th, 1930', Hunslet Carr Women's Meeting Minute Book, 1929-26, West Yorkshire Archives, WYL853/87.
[681] 'August 10th, 1938', West Yorkshire Women's Advisory Council Minute Book, January 1932 – July 1944, West Yorkshire Archives, WYL853/89.
[682] 'May 13th, 1931', Ilford South Labour Party Central Women's Section Minute Book, April 1930 – May 1932, London Metropolitan Archives, ACC/2527/001.
[683] 'March 8th, 1935', West Middlesex Women's Advisory Council Minutes 1932-1940, LMA, ACC/2417/H030/1.

were tasked both with keeping them in touch with party business and affairs and ensuring that their link to the section was maintained. In Gorton, sick visitors were appointed for each of the party wards found within the constituency, namely Mrs Evans for North Ward, Mrs Speake for Openshaw Ward and Miss Clayton for South Ward.[684] The visitors were busy from the start, with their first visit instructed to be conducted by the section as early as May.[685] These could be extensive commitments to those women who developed long-term illnesses. For example, when Mrs Gannon of Hunslet Carr fell ill in 1934, sick visitors were instructed to visitor her once a month until she was feeling well again.[686] While sadly section records do not record the activities of visitors and their contact with local women outside the initial visit, the link they offered between women who were unwell and the section which was their social and political home was just one way in which support could be offered.

Of course, the matter of sickness could be a serious issue for the functioning of the section, and so there was a business case for keeping in touch with members who were unwell. In the longer term, prolonged periods of illness could mean that women lost touch with the section, and that once they were well, they may no longer participate to the same degree. However, even in the shorter term, the small number of women who were regular attendees of meetings in many areas meant that a particular increase in sickness at a difficult time took even the most important proceeding to a halt. For example, during one particularly significant period of sickness over the winter of 1933, the Annual Meeting of the York women's section was delayed as so few members had attended.[687] The decision to suspend the meeting is unsurprising, as the important role Annual Meetings played included electing the officials to conduct section business over the coming year. However, on a smaller scale, illness also meant more routine party opportunities which were nevertheless expensive could be impacted. For example, the significant financial burden of the scholarship for residential schools meant that when Mrs Lovelle of Bedlington could not attend the 1927 Summer School in Northumberland urgent action was taken to try and re-allocate the funds which had been assigned to her place.[688] Sickness proved a challenge to the section in itself, and so there was a case for keeping in touch with members on these grounds until they were well.

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[684] 'April 4th, 1933', Gorton Labour Party Women's Section, Manchester Central Archives, M450/1.
[685] 'May 30th, 1933', Gorton Labour Party Women's Section, Manchester Central Archives, M450/1.
[686] 'August 28th, 1934', Hunslet Carr Women's Meeting Minute Book, 1929-36, West Yorkshire Archives, WYL853/87.
[687] 'January 31st, 1933', York Central Women's Section Minute Book, 1923-1933, York Archives, LAB/1/5/2.
[688] 'Meeting held June 23rd, 1927', Morpeth Federation of Labour Women's Sections Minute Book, 1923-1932, NRO 4415/3/1.

However, most records indicate that the processes that sections put in place were primarily intended to support women through these difficult times in whichever way that they could. These took on even more practical purposes in some areas across the country where resources allowed. For example, the Hunslet Carr section held fundraisers across the period which were specifically aimed at raising sick funds which could be used to support those members and their families that required financial support.[689] Elsewhere, even women who were able to cover the financial burdens of illness came to rely upon their section for support in managing their affairs. Writing to the Ilford South women's section in 1936, Mrs Boswell thanked her peers for the letter of sympathy they had sent upon her illness. However, she went on to request their help in finding someone appropriate who could care for her at home during her illness. Two of the members experienced in social services, Mrs Macleod, and Mrs Fallaize, agreed to approach two women that they knew who they thought would be suitable for the role.[690] Members came to rely on their sections for practical support, as well as a continued bond and sense of community, during some of the times in their lives they needed it most.

While this was the case when a member became unwell, an even greater challenge for women and their families came when someone close to them had passed away. Sections worked to mark their sympathy with the bereaved, communicating with them, offering them tokens of condolence, and marking their loss within their meetings. There are examples of these activities taking place on a regular basis in sections right across the country. For example, the Hunslet Carr section would stand for a minute's silence when one of their members had lost a family member, as they did in August 1929 when Mrs White was bereaved of a young son.[691] As well as similar activities, the North West Hornchurch Ward in London made sure to reflect and offer condolences to members who had lost someone within the past year in the pages of their Annual Report. In 1935, the report offered the section's sympathy both to Mrs Swain who had lost her husband and Mrs Irwin who had lost a little girl.[692] Whilst these offerings of support between women who spent frequent time together and had suffered such tragic losses are not unexpected, they also reflect the real friendships and communities built

[689] 'January 22nd, 1935', Hunslet Carr Women's Meeting Minute Book, 1929-36, West Yorkshire Archives, WYL853/87.
[690] 'September 28th, 1936', Ilford South Labour Party Central Women's Section Minute Book, March 1935 – June 1938', ACC/2527/003.
[691] 'August 13th, 1929', Hunslet Carr Women's Meeting Minute Book, 1929-26, WYL853/87.
[692] 'Annual Report of 1935', North West (Ward) Hornchurch Labour Party Women's Section Ordinary and Special Committee Minutes, November 1932 – January 1936, LMA, A/HHL/025.

locally. As evidence that these bonds existed both within and outside party business, women continued to support one another even when they were no longer part of a given section. This can be seen in Ilford in 1931 where the section wrote to Mrs Sparrow's, the former member and one time section secretary, to offer their condolences when her husband passed away.[693] This mutual support offered by sections came to be a central element of party membership.

However, these acts of commemoration were also part of a wider move to ensure that significant events to each section as a community were marked where appropriate. This also meant that when a current or former member of the section passed away even more significant commemorations were held. At a regional or district level, this often took the form of special tributes being held at the AGM for members who had been lost in the past year. For example, the West Yorkshire Advisory Council commemorated Mrs Dighton and Mrs Lake, both of whom were members of the council as well as their local section and had passed away during 1932. At the Annual Meeting held early in 1933, time was spent discussing the members and their contribution to the movement and correspondence was sent to their families, including Mr Dighton and his daughter Mary, who herself was a member of the section.[694] Elsewhere, the West Middlesex Advisory Council paid their own tributes to Ms Bowman, who had been a delegate to the council on behalf of her local section, in their AGM of 1936.[695] In these cases, the women who had been paid a tribute were active members of both their sections and their regional organisations. However, outside of annual meetings, regular tributes proved common when any local member had passed away. For example, in June 1937, the deaths of local members Mrs McEwen and Mrs Crowley led the whole council of West Yorkshire to stand for a minute's silence.[696] Regions and districts took the chance to commemorate members' deaths and in doing so they both recognised the individual contributions of women and the communities to which they collectively belonged.

At a section level, women adopted their own approach to marking the loss of prominent members, who could become representatives of the community they helped to build and the

[693] 'May 13th, 1931', Ilford South Labour Party Central Women's Section Minute Book, March 1935 – June 1938', ACC/2527/001.
[694] 'Annual Meeting January 11th, 1933', West Yorkshire Women's Advisory Council Minute Book, January 1932 - July 1944, WYL853/89.
[695] 'AGM April 16th, 1937', West Middlesex Women's Advisory Council Minutes 1932-1940, ACC/2417/H/030/1.
[696] 'June 9th, 1937', West Yorkshire Women's Advisory Council Minute Book, January 1932 – July 1944, WYL853/89.

shared memories and experiences it was based upon. The case study of Mrs Webb, who had been the President of the St George West Ward Women's Section in Bristol, is one example. Both Mrs Webb and her husband first fell ill in 1932 and her attendance at meetings dwindled over the next couple of years. The section sent their best wishes, had sick visitors attending, and frequently discussed the state of her health at their regular meetings.[697] When she passed away in July 1935, members expressed their sense of loss for Mrs Webb and the role she had played, where as Chairman of the section since its foundation twelve years prior she had led them to their current position. Mrs Price urged members to let Mrs Webb's 'life and work be an example and inspiration to them, to carry on the work to which she had devoted her life' and in the weeks that followed her death the section sent a wreath, as well as framed and hung a portrait of her which would later be officially unveiled at a ceremony attended by the Regional Organiser Annie Townley.[698] Aside from being an example of what seems a significant initial reaction to Mrs Webb's death, this case also demonstrates how the collective memory of an individual continued to be important part of this community's identity. On an annual basis for at least the next three years, members were still discussing their late Chairman's death, placing notices marking the event in the *Labour Weekly* and the local *Evening Post* and meeting by her graveside at 3pm on 5 July to lay flowers to mark their fallen comrade.[699] For the women of St George West, Mrs Webb had played a central foundational role at the heart of their section. This was particular to their area, although it again reflects the importance of a range of individuals, not only in what they did for the movement but in the resulting shared relationships and experiences they came to represent.

While these face-to-face experiences were essential in creating local communities, similar sentiments could also be seen when it came to those national figureheads who had almost become synonymous with the movement of which women felt part. Many prominent women within the section had their deaths commemorated, including Mary Macarthur. The Holiday Trust set up in her name, the benefits of which are considered fully in the fourth chapter of this thesis, remains in place until today. However, one of the most significant contemporary nationwide events for the section came when Dr Marion Phillips, passed away. When Phillips

[697] 'January 10th, 1933', Minutes of St George West Ward Women's Section, 1931 – 1933, Bristol Archives 39035/51.
[698] 'July 9th, 1935', 'July 23rd, 1935', Minutes of St George West Ward Women's Section 1933 – 1938, Bristol Archives, 39035/52.
[699] 'June 28th, 1938', Minutes of St George West Ward Women's Section 1933 – 1938, Bristol Archives, 39035/52.

died in 1932, a year after losing her seat in Sunderland in the General Election, she remained at the top of the organisation which she had fought to build and to sustain from 1918. By this time, Arthur Henderson said that Phillips had constructed 'the most formidable organisation of politically conscious women in Britain – probably the world'.[700] While there were a number of contemporary individuals and organisations who could no doubt compete for this honour, this thesis demonstrates that Phillips' work had certainly provided a space for thousands of women where they had their first taste at politics, adult education, a chance to feel part of a community and to enjoy much needed leisure time away from the home.

Of course, Phillips did not do this alone, and the help of the organisers mentioned here, her predecessors and successor cannot be understated. However, her unique ability to stand her ground, her clarify of vision for the organisation and her commitment to the women she wanted the Labour Party to represent were remarkable. Among her many qualities one of those who knew her best, Margaret Hunter Gibb, said that Phillips had 'the ability to hold her own, was very able' and was 'a bundle of humanity and had great perspective'.[701] However, even those women within the section who had never met Phillips would usually have had a good understanding of how she looked, what she thought and how she worked for their position in the party. The image and words of Phillips, through regular communications from her office or the pages of *The Labour Woman,* permeated local sections. As a result, by the time of her death Phillips was one of a small number of figures that members right across the country shared, iconic because of her founding role and her reputed strong-willed nature.

For some outside of the women's section, the role of Chief Women's Officer was a waste of Marion's abilities. Newspaper obituaries lamented the fact that despite her Doctorate in Economics, Phillips had no formal role in the Labour Government, seeing her acumen going to waste when the catastrophe of 1931 occurred.[702] This perception was partly due to a lack of understanding about the real influence Phillips had in her role. In the party hierarchy, she sat third on the letterhead, after only the President and the Secretary. She had the ear of every Labour leader through her tenure and became so powerful that her role fell in prominence after her death, when resolutions were made that the post 'would never again rise to the level

[700] Cited in: Lucy Middleton, 'Women in Labour Politics', in Lucy Middleton (ed), *Women in the Labour movement: The British experience* (London, 1977)., p. 35.
[701] Transcript of taped conversation with Margaret Hunter Gibb at The Riding, Cambo. NRO 2973/22.
[702] Beverley Kingston, 'Yours very truly, Marion Phillips', *Labour History*, 29 (1975), p. 124.

of power of 'Dr Marion' once again'.[703] Further, as Editor of *The Labour Woman* she spoke directly to sections monthly and received their contributions, a level of direct communication with members few others could imagine. None of this had come easy, Phillips had faced battles with the so-called 'mainstream' of the party as well as with many of the women she looked to represent. The first group continually challenged Phillips on policy and the second either did not want the separate organisation of women or preferred the autonomy of the more independent, but less influential and popular, WLL. When she died on the 23rd January 1932 she asked her friend and colleague Barbara Ayton Gould to pass on one final message to the members who read *The Labour Woman*: 'Tell them to carry on and consolidate the movement; the future of Socialism depends on the next few years'.[704] The response from one woman accepted the call, saying Marion had built a hundreds of thousand strong membership 'because her life touched theirs' and that 'a hundred thousand women will take up the task she began.[705] Phillips had created an organisation which had been committed to following her lead, and which was strong enough by the 1930s that it could continue to hold its own.

For this reason, and others, while some lamented the waste of Phillips' talents upon her death, women's sections instead marked her significant contribution to the movement. Her loss was perhaps inevitably commemorated most prominently in the North East, where accounts show she was popular with both members and constituents. D. N. Pritt, candidate in the two member ward alongside Marion, said the people of Sunderland 'idolised her…and that she was certainly regarded in this way by the rank-and-file of Labour women'.[706] She was known as the 'motherly' Dr Phillips and after one member of the women's section in Ryhope spoke of becoming a grandmother for the first time she gifted them a gown, bonnet and shall. In a sign of their affection for Phillips who was their 'angel of mercy' the family decided that the baby would be named Marion Phillips Barnes in her honour.[707] A lack of financial support meant that Phillips rarely visited Sunderland as often as she liked during her short tenure. However, the preceding examples explain why several members from the area used the memorial edition of *The Labour Woman* to pay tribute to her. E. Stewart paid tribute to the woman who would go down in history as her party's first woman Member of Parliament,

[703] Ibid., p. 124.
[704] Barbara Ayton Gould, 'Marion's Last Message', *The Labour Woman*, vol. 20, no. 3, p. 34.
[705] Cited in: Marian Goronwy-Roberts, *A Woman of vision*, p. 214.
[706] Cited in: Marian Goronwy-Roberts, *A Woman of vision*, p.155.
[707] Ibid, p.156.

whose ‘marked ability, high character and kindly disposition endeared her to all’.[708] Nellie Suddick, a member of the Advisory Council for Sunderland women’s section, attributed the raising of the Labour vote in the area by ten thousand to Phillips and said ‘no words can express the feelings of the women of Sunderland for the loss’ of someone who was ‘the Friend and Servant of all’.[709] Phillips’ death was felt particularly keenly in the area she had come to represent, where communities had felt her presence whether they had met her or not.

However, sections across the country also shared in grief and commemoration, reflecting the sense of an imagined national community between Labour Women which was present by 1932 and Phillips’ own role as an icon who had worked so hard to build it. The memorial edition of *The Labour Woman* is filled with accounts, with one page concentrating on the messages that had been received by the nine regional organisers across the country. All the organisers spoke of Phillips’ unique contribution to their region whilst many also reflected on how her work in the publication and parliament had touched women. Her work in leading the section during the miners’ lockout was praised by Elizabeth Andrews in Wales. Meanwhile, her commitment to making meetings as enjoyable as possible is reflected in Annie Townley’s anecdote of their last encounter where Phillips asserted ‘we must not let the women’s section get too dull’. Her successor, Mary Sutherland, wrote from Scotland to dissuade the members who every day told her this was ‘a tragedy for the movement’, stating there was no sense of waste or tragedy when one thought of Phillips’ legacy.[710] Through their regional organisers and organisations, women from across the country expressed their shared sense of loss.

At a local level, minute books do not provide much information about the content of the conversations that took place following Phillips’ death. However, most reflect that the occasion was formally marked with activities and discussions in each section. For example, the Ilford South section stood for two minutes silence when the letter announcing Phillips’ death was read to the section and nominated two members to attend the memorial service with a wreath which the section raised funds to provide.[711] As in the case of important local members such as Mrs Webb, there were also events and activities which continued to commemorate Phillips’ contribution long after her death. For example, five years later, the

[708] E Stewart, ‘Other Tributes’, *The Labour Woman*, vol. 20, no. 3 (1932), p. 39.
[709] Nellie Suddick, ‘Other Tributes’, *The Labour Woman*, vol. 20, no. 3 (1932), p. 39.
[710] ‘Message from Women District Organisers’, *The Labour Woman*, vol. 20, no. 3 (1932), p. 42.
[711] ‘February 3rd, 1932’, Ilford South Women’s Section Minute Book April 1930 – May 1932, ACC/2527/001.

prize at the Women's Day at Wrexham was the Dr Marion Phillips cup.[712] In Bristol, the women continued to meet in June in 1936 to host the Dr Marion Phillips memorial tea.[713] In their experience and demonstration of feelings of loss for an important figure, women showed the nationwide, if imagined, community of which many of them now felt part. This national community, which sat alongside the relationships and networks of mutual support built locally, was one important meaning invested in their identity, both individually and as a section, as labour women. As the first amongst them, at least officially, Phillips' death and contribution in life highlighted what unified women of different backgrounds, interests, and priorities, as well as the diverse range of communities that women had built on the ground.

CONCLUSION

The women's section between the war had much that united them in a common experience. Under the stewardship of Dr Marion Phillips and Mary Sutherland, they were trained in the business of organising and tasked with the duties of political fundraising and campaigning. Through their regional organisations and organisers, they experienced a range of opportunities which would otherwise be unavailable to them. These included a wide range of leisure activities and opportunities for party education, which the pages of this thesis have explored elsewhere. They also shared some common days in the calendar and women's days, weeks, and months were important to many amongst them. Others looked forward to conference and even if they were not attending received updates from delegates and through the pages of *The Labour Woman*. During national holidays, they enjoyed the celebrations of Easter and Christmas which could often be shared across several sections within a constituency. Each of these nationwide events left individual women within their local areas, and the sections that they represented, feel proudly part of a wider community.

However, for all the importance of national activities, the local experience of membership was extremely important to the majority of active women. Through their section, members made lifelong friends who would be there to enjoy the good times and support them through the bad. They leaned on each other for practical support and provided their condolence at

[712] 'Women's Month – June', Labour Party Women's Organiser Reports – Elizabeth Andrews, LP/WORG/37/712.
[713] 'June 30th, 1936', Minutes of St George West Ward Women's Section, 1933 – 1938, Bristol Archives, 39035/32.

times of great sadness. In areas where they were weak in size, a small number of women worked together week-in, week-out, doing all they could to sustain a local organisation. In others, they fought for their identity as a collective, proud of the achievements which as a group they could call their own. Women felt an affinity with *their* section, a phenomenon seen both when the smaller amongst them were asked to merge or the larger asked to split. As communities, they also drove their own priorities. They not only defended their place within the party but were often the most effective advocates for its cause, shaping their own brand of practical politics and fighting against those inside or outside of the movement who threatened official party policy. Further, through these practical politics they were not a siloed organisation but played a real and active role in supporting others within their areas.

There was therefore no simple definition of Labour Women across the country, no cohesive single community which we can point towards to fully understand the nationwide experience. However, in a sense, this reflects the strength of an organisation which was confident enough to allow such variety. While there was no one experience of membership, there was a common belief in a practice of politics which was grounded in local communities, and which was founded with the needs and interests of members at the heart. Alongside moments where the shared imagined community of Labour Women shared events, including the outpouring of sentiment which took place upon the premature death of Dr Phillips, it was this commitment to an organisation built around members which was often the commonality between them. For some the section had become their university, for others their trade union, and to a varying extent it was for all a vehicle for party activism in the traditional sense. However, it was also a place where they met their friends and neighbours, supported one another, and took pride in building and defending an organisation which really was their own.

CONCLUSION

The Labour Women of interwar Britain wanted a range of different things from their party membership. Some wanted to enhance and exercise their internal party influence, gaining positions in elected office, or achieving policy outcomes, and their successes and failures in doing so are already well represented within the literature. However, this thesis set out to understand why, when failure against these measures was so often the case, women bothered to join and remain the most active members of the Labour Party at all. The chapters answering this initial question have uncovered a wide and varied range of experiences of membership across the country; these could offer the opportunity to fulfil priorities that were equally political, if not necessarily partisan. The role that the section had come to play in the lives of its women by 1939 may have failed to meet the high expectations of many of its socialist and feminist critics at the time. Inevitably, this has also led to a number of criticisms within the historiography. However, it was a role that was explicitly shaped by the interests of women themselves, born within a particular context in the nationwide associational culture of interwar Britain, and flexible enough to bend to the needs of particular communities.

Most of the interwar organisations that have provided a comparative framework to this thesis offered women opportunities from which they were excluded within the home. A range of groups offered the opportunity for training or education, extended restricted social milieus, permitted demonstration of existing skills, and provided access to more structured leisure and recreation time than married women, in particular, could usually access. By situating the section within this context, this study has challenged a tendency to silo partisan participation, expanding our understanding of the range of options available to those seeking these benefits, and helping us understand how and why they chose the organisation for them. More importantly, it has demonstrated that when the women's section was at its best, it was in a unique position to offer all of these benefits to members, justifying their right to the leisure, education, and extended community they deserved. The section's place within the labour movement made it best placed to act as the Working Women's Trade Union, fighting for their right to leisure like any other. Its understanding of its members' lives, developed from a combination of working-class representation amongst leaders and an approach that prioritised the lived realities, interests, and priorities of women themselves, allowed it to develop a curriculum of ring-fenced and regular education. The Working Women's University had a

programme that was more well received, varied, and adaptable to local circumstances than those found elsewhere. The shared experience of women's experiences in the section also led them to build lifelong friendships and communities, feelings of solidarity and comradery, resources they drew upon at the happiest and most difficult times of their lives. Pamela Graves' important study shaped our understanding of the role Labour Women played in their party, while this thesis helps us to understand the role the party came to play in their lives.[714]

While this work provides important contribution to labour history, many important interventions are in other areas of research. Education was selected as a theme not only as an organising premise for this research, but because of the notable and significant omission of women's experiences of adult education in the historiography of this time. Stepping outside of the handful of institutions usually considered within this literature, this study has illuminated some of times and places interwar women were able to benefit from an education. These included residential schools, where women enjoyed lectures, seminars, study circles and recitals on a range of subjects. At school, they heard from speakers from across the labour movement, as well as elected representatives and experts in their fields. Much of this did focus upon so-called women's issues, including domestic concerns, welfare, health, and the family. There was also a natural tendency to favour sessions on organising, either in the party or the trade union movement, as well as party policy and socialist ideology. This was natural, given that these were subjects that the party wanted to speak to women about *and* organisers were aware women wanted to hear. However, women were also offered and pursued an education that was far wider and varied across the country. Alongside the activities at some residential schools, this can be seen in those local opportunities for education in section meetings. On the ground, Phillips' so-called 'mini adult education centres' naturally had a 'Labour' flavour and form. However, they also developed programmes of learning that were broader than expected, either from the perspective of what was offered elsewhere in the labour movement or to women in other associational bodies.

This was partly because of the astuteness and effectiveness of organisers, but mainly due to local women across the country who took control of their sections and regional organisations to pursue what was fulfilling and interesting to them. Many women had a role in shaping the residential schools that they and future cohorts would attend, but this process was at its most

[714] Pamela Graves, *Labour Women*.

formal and its most effective for the women of the London Advisory Council. Summer school alumni from across cohorts became a community who were called upon to improve the residential programme each year. At a section level, women's influence in the learning they received was often even greater. Many women's sections developed their own reading interests from texts that could be fact or fiction, in line with party priorities or not, and built libraries around them. They selected those speakers who they wished to hear from and decided which subjects were of most interest to them. They also trained their own women to take on this invaluable role within the movement. This thesis therefore demonstrates that the women's section's regular meetings and residential schools were important locations and times where women learned, adding to the history of adult education. It also shows this was more effective than comparable organisations because women had the opportunity to exercise control, shaping the programme of education and training that was best suited to them.

Just as these pages have shown us how Labour Women pursued their need for personal development, they have illustrated how party membership proved to be a vehicle for respite, escapism, and, occasionally, rest. It seems unquestionable that the section's residential schools, set it remote and beautiful locations, would not have been as effective or popular if they did not combine learning with leisure in the way that they did. Indeed, for the small number of women who were able to benefit, we see that the Mary Macarthur Holiday Home provided a similarly much-needed respite without the need to learn. However, even when they could not use their membership to achieve physical escapism, Labour Women used their time to pursue a taste of the same benefits. This was true of the literature that many consumed and the hugely popular talks and discussions on themes such as travel that are found throughout these pages. More regularly, escapism could simply be found within the leisure activities of local sections. Bazaars, fetes, dinners, suppers, trips, and outings were significant parts of section membership, and it is certainly true that they provided a fundraising and campaigning role for the party. However, they also offered women the opportunity to enjoy themselves and each other's company. This reframing of so-called frivolous leisure activities is an important intervention in the historiography in its own right, challenging the view that the recreational nature of membership was predominantly, or even significantly, the result of the wishes of the male-dominated party locally or nationally. It is true that some CLPs were happy to have a women's section that was primarily social in nature, but it was more common to see local leaders unhappy when they did not see a focus upon serious enough activity from women in their area. However, more importantly, it demonstrates that in the

limited time women were able to dedicate to section life, often justified by both the ideological and partisan nature of their cause, they prioritised the important political ambition of achieving opportunities for escapism from their domestic roles and responsibilities.

Naturally, however important the cause, women's time was limited by these same domestic circumstances, but Labour Women were never required to eschew the roles of Housewife and Mother. While the older women of residential schools found it remarkable that young, married, women with children at home could attend, this was at least in part explained to be the result of the significant steps their local community of women took to support them. More regularly, the section ensured it represented an extension of existing social and family life, one that complemented rather than sit in conflict with domestic responsibilities. From activities that made children part of the fabric of section life, to those that allowed women to enhance and demonstrate domestic skill, they embraced the home and the family. Of course, this would be grounds to criticise an organisation that apparently had women's best interests at heart, a progressive political party that at least rhetorically was aiming for full social and political equality, and this has been commented upon within the literature. However, as has been shown, this approach to women's free time sat in line with the party's wider ideological and rhetorical positions to women and their social and political emancipation, as well as representing an understanding of where the majority of its members found themselves to be.

Of course, while we can offer some generalisations about this majority of women, their geographies, backgrounds, experiences, and stages of life mean there is no single 'Labour Woman' that is truly representative. This thesis has shown some of the many shapes this identity could take. For some, it was a vehicle for personal development and perhaps even the means to achieving a political career, while for others it was the chance to enjoy themselves, either independently or alongside their friends and families. The localised approach to this study has allowed it to show how many of these inter- and intra- section differences were reflected on the ground. Just as individual women prioritised leisure and education to different extents, the sections they built all had their own set of ambitions and they arranged annual programmes that reflected this. However, this work also shows many of the common experiences that Labour Women shared across the country. There has been little difference found in the form of meetings taking place across the country and the roles women were elected to fulfil in their communities provided a relatively uniform structure to proceedings. As a number of chapters have demonstrated, much of the credit for this can be laid at the door

of *The Labour Woman* and its two Chief Women Officer editors. However, regional organisations and their organisers also worked to mould sections in a particular image. Nevertheless, there was a huge amount of variety and vitality in the section's activities. The importance women placed upon belonging to *their* section in particular cannot be understated, as the countless examples of them holding their own against over-assertive CLPs, their regional organisations, and other wings of the labour movement demonstrate.

While this thesis draws out this primary identification women had with their local, face to face, community of women, it also repeatedly shows there was something more than the practicality of activism that united Labour Women in a common identity. While women naturally relied on their local communities at some of the happiest and most difficult times of their lives, they shared an affinity with those from other sections and regional organisations and took the opportunity to demonstrate this wherever they could. When women from different sections came together at residential schools, they formed friendships that long outlasted their attendance. When sections were given the opportunity to welcome their comrades from other areas who were visiting or when they met others during Women's Days, Weeks, and Months, the reception was never anything other than supportive, warm, and welcoming. Outside of shared local rituals, shared publications such as *The Labour Woman*, and those infrequent but important shared experiences such as Women's Conference, there was therefore something else to being a Labour Woman. An identity that was perhaps imagined, but no less significant, bonding women in their shared cause, through their shared experiences, and represented by those key figureheads that characterised their movement.

By rejecting a view that sees the section as a small- 'c' conservative organisation happy with the status quo, this thesis adds to a growing body of work that challenges an interpretation which sees the, broadly conceived, women's movement as a failure at this time. Women in the labour movement, whether in the forerunning WLL, the handful of trade unions available, the WCG, or the women's section, had real and significant political ambitions. Contrary to those who criticise these organisations, alongside their peers in apparently even more conservative associations and even feminist movements, the interwar women's movement did not simply retreat into the home and embrace domesticity. Between the wars, women continued to pour a huge amount of effort into fights for rights and opportunities, *some* of which can be measured in successful campaigns, elected positions achieved, and policy outcomes put into place. However, outside of these activities, the women of these movements

also engaged in the practical and daily struggle of achieving time and space for enjoyment, growth, and feelings of contribution and community. The experience of Labour Women, like their male comrades in the movement or their female colleagues in other organisations, shows us the wide range of small 'p' political priorities that women were working to achieve across the country. These were filled with variety, dependent heavily upon local and personal circumstances, and as a result are more difficult to measure than the battle for the franchise or any policy outcome. However, such apparently small victories proved no less significant.

While the diversity of aims and experiences naturally means a single, complete history of the women's section is not possible, the use of local sources that are neglected has provided a different picture of the organisation that at its peak represented hundreds of thousands of women across Great Britain. The women's section was a loyal and effective campaigning force, with significant vitality and vigour, who provided much colour to the Labour Party and who, sadly, often received very little in the way of policy concessions or positions in office in return. However, they were first and foremost an organisation of women who were united by a common cause but recognised an opportunity to use their membership to pursue many of the opportunities that they were precluded from by their domestic roles and responsibilities. They had fun, learned, offered, and received support, shared their membership with their family when they wanted, and enjoyed independent opportunities where they could. Their membership achieved thousands of different political priorities across the country, although we naturally cannot measure these successes using the traditional metrics of party activism.

Bringing together easily siloed historiographies has offered opportunities to reconsider how women thought about and used their activism. As well as labour history and texts on party activism, this thesis draws upon literature that considers women's and feminist movements, opportunities for leisure and education at this time, themes of community, and texts that explore women's position within society in an era of franchise expansion that was coupled with both an explosion of youth culture fuelled by young women *and* an apparent reinforcement of women's domestic roles once married. This context elucidates how necessary the combination of leisure, education, and community within a single organisation proved to be, and demonstrates that the history of the women's section has much to teach us about the priorities of thousands of working- and middle- class women in this period. The symbiotic relationship between leisure, education, community, and the better explored experience of section women's activism is repeatedly demonstrated through this work.

This exploration of Labour Women therefore draws upon and adds much to our understanding of a range of historiographies, but it is perhaps the use of localised primary sources that offers the most potential for further development. Any study is necessarily confined by time and resources, while some also deal with the closure of archives during a global pandemic. However, where those sources closest to the women who experienced membership have been considered, they have proved invaluable resources. Structured with a focus on the business of meetings, party minutes have nevertheless shone a reflection on the relationships at play in a given community, the activities that groups of women prioritised, and how they as a team looked to achieve their aims. They show how women raised their voices at meetings, what caused them to do so, and how sections only miles from one another shared much in common but had their own distinctive shape. Further study of the remaining resources that could not be reached during this period of study, including those in Wales and Scotland in particular, would no doubt enhance our understanding of the experience of Labour membership for women even further. While the social element of Conservative auxiliaries is already better explored, there is also much to be said for considering the local minutes of these organisations where they exist, as well as huge potential for studies considering the Liberal Party's women's organisations at this time. As Hunt's earlier cited study reflects, the reality is that women activists at this time often shared as much with one another across movements than they did with the men of their party.[715] However, the differences in their offers in education and leisure in particular, and how their members prioritised each opportunity, would enhance our understanding not only of party activism in general but what made each of their offerings unique. As this thesis shows, we can already be comfortable that Labour competed effectively with non-partisan organisations in its leisure offering, and the reception of its working-class members to the section's programme of education has been shown to be far more positive than women from competing organisations.

This study is important not only because it contributes to our understand of what women prioritised, but because it gives us an insight into who some of the most active Labour Women were. A combination of reports and anecdotes from within *The Labour Woman*, the observations of regional and national organisers, and the registers that formed part of local minute books, has provided at least a glimpse of the composition of local meetings. These

[715] Karen Hunt, 'Rethinking Activism', p. 225.

note, as may be suspected and as is occasionally observed upon elsewhere, that familial links between members was important and it was not uncommon to see daughters follow their mothers into membership. More importantly, they demonstrate that as well as those older and more experienced women who had been members of the WLL, who may have been wealthy or whose children were older and so had fewer domestic responsibilities at home, sections also represented a cross section of women from local communities. As stated, young, working-class, women with children at home were not only attending meetings but would occasionally take the opportunity to travel away from their responsibilities to enjoy leisure and education. The use of underutilised membership books, alongside recently released census information, is another fruitful area of pursuit that could build upon this development and help us understand how representative communities of Labour Women tended to be.

The research for this thesis began around the time that the Labour Party celebrated its centenary of women achieving full party membership for the first time. The party's initial ambitious plan, as outlined to electors in its manifesto of 1918 was that the it would be 'The *real* Women's Party'.[716] It did so with full knowledge of the potential for success from feminist movements, aware that an all-women's party may be appealing, and concerned that the forces of conservatism, and organisations like the NFWI whose activities supported domesticity, would challenge it for the newly and soon-to be enfranchised woman's attention. Many of these organisations also proliferated across the interwar period and their success is already well observed. However, in many ways, although not those traditionally measured, it is true that it was Labour or at least its women's section that came closest to being the first real women's party for its members. This was not the result of the actions of the so-called mainstream of the party, nor was it as a result of women members being happy to simply fulfil their CLP's priorities. Instead, it was the product of thousands of women, working under local leaders, regional organisers, and two formidable Chief Women's Officers, who built the Labour Party, or Labour Parties, that worked for them. These often began with a partisan purpose but became so much more than that. By the end of the interwar period, hundreds of sections sat at the centre of women's social, educational, and cultural lives. They were places women laughed, learned, and where they laboured towards a position in their party and society that would provide them with space to fulfil their wishes and their potential.

[716] 'Labour Manifesto 1918: Labour's Call to the People' F.W.S Craig, *British General Election Manifestos, 1900-1974,* pp. 31-3.

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