



Honouring SWI National Chairs and Presidents

1917 - 2026

National Chairs and Presidents

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LEADING WITH PURPOSE



The National President (formerly National Chairman) of the Scottish Women's Institutes is the figurehead and public face of one of Scotland's most treasured women's membership organisations. Serving the membership at the highest level, the National President plays a vital role in championing the values that have united women across Scotland for over a century.

At the heart of the role is a deep commitment to the SWI membership. The National President travels the length and breadth of Scotland, visiting towns and villages to meet members, celebrate local achievements, and ensure that member voices are heard at a national level.

The National President also provides strategic leadership at times of both challenge and opportunity. Whether guiding the organisation through periods of change, or representing the SWI on the national stage, the President is a steady and passionate advocate for everything the SWI stands for.

Above all, the National President embodies the spirit of the SWI. It is a role held with great honour, and one that leaves a lasting mark on both the individual who serves and the thousands of members they represent.

HISTORICAL NATIONAL CHAIRS

National Chairs | 1917 - 2008



Mrs C. Anstruther Gray, C.B.E.
— FIFE —
1917 - 1933



Mrs E. Gooch, C.B.E.
INVERNESS-SHIRE
1933 - 1948



Mrs N. Kennedy, C.B.E.,
AYRSHIRE
1948 - 1954



Miss A. McKenzie, M.B.E.
ABERDEENSHIRE
1954 - 1957



Mrs E. Shann, M.B.E.
ARGYLL
1957 - 1963



Mrs T.P.D. Murray, M.B.E.,
ANGUS
1963 - 1969



Mrs D.M. McQueen, M.B.E.
Stewartry of Kirkcudbright
1969 - 1975



Mrs J.A. Lumsden
Dunbartonshire
1975 - 1981



Mrs Isobel MacKenzie, M.B.E.
— West Lothian —
1981 - 1987



Mrs Marie Mackie
— Roxburghshire —
1987 - 1993



Mrs May Kidd
— Angus —
1993 - 1996



Mrs Shirley Wallace
Perth & Kinross
1996 - 1999



Mrs Kay Wragg
Dunbartonshire
1999 - 2002



Mrs Joyce MacRae
Ross-shire
2002 - 2005



Mrs Alison Bayley
Midlothian
2005 - 2008

MARION DAVIDSON

National Chairman | 2008 - 2011



Key Achievements

- Constitution review
- Queen's visit to the Royal Highland Show
- Womens' Suffrage procession
- Walking weekends launched

I've been a member of the Rural for over 50 years, and I felt honoured to be asked to serve as National Chairman when I took over in 2008. I saw it as my duty to give back to this great organisation which had brought me so much joy.

In my first year we began reviewing our constitution, the first time it had been done for quite some time. We also reviewed our website, flyers and other materials, which were still in their infancy then. By 2010 we had everything in place to help take the SWI forward with a more modern constitution for the organisation.

In 2009, while stewarding the Royal Highland Pavilion, the organisation received a surprise three-day notice visit from the Queen, who was lovely and an enthusiastic admirer of the handcraft exhibition.

I was also honoured to lead the SWI during the suffrage procession in Edinburgh to mark the centenary of the women's vote. It was remarkable to see so many women coming together to mark such a historic moment.

I was proud to help drive our walking weekends, including a memorable first event in Arran attended by three Shetland ladies experiencing island life for the first time. I look back on my time as National Chairman with great pride and gratitude for the opportunity to give something back to the SWI.

ISOBEL ROBERTSON

National Chairman | 2011 - 2014



Key Achievements

- Meeting Princess Anne at the Royal Highland Show
- Organising Handcrafts & Homeskills conferences
- Gone above and beyond to welcome and support members

To be voted in as National Chairman during my time in post was such an honour, and I was incredibly proud to have the opportunity to represent the rural. I first began attending SWI meetings with my mother and have always loved the chance to speak with other members. In my first year, I was nervous about taking on the position and everything that came with the role. By my second year, however, I felt much more comfortable, and as that rolled into my third year, I found myself never wanting it to end.

I thoroughly enjoyed meeting members across the country and hearing what it meant to them to have the President attend their events, from birthday celebrations to federation shows and so much more.

I was delighted to have represented the SWI, having the opportunity to meet Princess Anne at the Royal Highland Show was such an honour and a fond memory of mine. I'll never forget our H&H conference during my time; we set a monumental achievement of being the first to sell out the 500-capacity hall in Elgin. The look on the owner's face was incredible seeing all our members turn up to celebrate the SWI.

Serving in this role has been a truly special chapter in my life. I carry with me wonderful memories, lasting friendships, and deep admiration for the spirit of our organisation.

CHRISTINE HUTTON

National Chairman | 2014 - 2017



Key Achievements

- Organising events for SWI centenary
- Taking part in the Great British Menu for the WI Centenary
- Uncovering our archive
- Young Farmers afternoon tea competition

I have been a member of the SWI for nearly 50 years, holding various roles since 2002, including Central Councillor, Junior and Senior Vice Chairman, and National Chairman from 2014 to 2017. Serving as National Chairman during the SWI and WI centenary years gave me, as a lover of history, a privileged front-row seat to our rich heritage from archiving donated books and learning about the history of the SWI to honouring the pioneering Catherine Blair.

I never imagined I would appear on television, but for the WI's centenary in 2015 we took part in The Great British Menu, with three Scottish Institutes involved. I also had the pleasure of attending the centenary event at the Royal Albert Hall, where hearing 4,000 women sing "Jerusalem" is a memory that will stay with me forever.

Another highlight was a spirited afternoon tea competition between the SWI and Young Farmers in 2016, which beautifully showcased both organisations' baking and hospitality skills while celebrating the strong community bonds connecting rural Scotland.

For the SWI Centenary in 2017, we organised a range of events including planting a commemorative tree in Heriot Row Gardens, a walk from Heriot Row to Longniddry celebrating Catherine Blair, and a full SWI exhibition attended by Princess Anne. Serving as President deepened my appreciation for the SWI's heritage, and it was both a challenge and an honour to celebrate the organisation's remarkable past while inspiring its future growth.

LINDA RETSON

National President | 2017 - 2020



Key Achievements

- SWI Centenary events
- Supported the establishment of Junior Dippers Groups
- Representing the SWI at ACWW conferences

I look back very fondly on my time as National President of the SWI. Throughout my tenure, I was determined never to lose sight of my rural roots and to ensure members across Scotland had opportunities to share their stories.

I visited 29 Federations, travelling approximately 25,000 miles. Meeting members was a true privilege, and I greatly valued connecting through our shared love of crafts and the spirit that makes the SWI so special. Serving as President during our centenary created even more opportunities to celebrate the rich history of our Institutes. I was particularly honoured to attend the centenary celebration of our founding Institute in Longniddry, where I learned how it has evolved and grown over the decades.

I am especially proud to have supported the establishment of our Junior Dippers Groups. Providing girls with opportunities to learn crafts that are often no longer taught in schools is vitally important. Furthermore, it is an honour to represent the SWI at ACWW conferences, hearing women's voices from around the world was both inspiring and a reminder of how collaboration strengthens and supports us all.

ANNE KERR

National President | 2020 - 2023



Key Achievements

- Led the SWI through the pandemic
- Secured funding for 500 free ipads/laptops for members
- Introduced online events
- Ukraine Appeal
- Led a new strategy for change

My time as President was, I suppose, like others' in some ways, but also very different, as it presented the unique challenge of leading the SWI through a global pandemic. Thanks to the support of the team around me, I am proud to have secured funding for 500 free iPads and laptops for members, ensuring that no one was left behind as we transitioned to a new digital era. Alongside this, we introduced a programme of online events that members genuinely looked forward to attending, even after likely spending many hours on Zoom during the working day.

I experienced first-hand the power of community within the SWI. Our Ukraine Appeal was a great success, seeing large amounts of clothing and toys delivered to those affected by the ongoing conflict. I was also fortunate to lead the development of a new strategy for the SWI and welcome a new CEO into the SWI, looking honestly at how our organisation needed to evolve and setting a clear direction for the future. Closer to home, I heard how the connections formed online became a lifeline for many members, creating friendships spanning all corners of the country, many of which continue to this day.

I look back on my presidency with deep gratitude, for the resilience, kindness and creativity of our members, and for the friendships formed along the way. It has been a privilege to serve, and I remain confident that the SWI will continue to thrive through the strength of its community and the warmth that brings us together.

MARY BURNEY

National President | 2023 - 2026



Key Achievements

- Streamlined SWI governance and charitable status
- Sold Heriot Row
- Membership growth for the first time since 1950's
- Secured funding for SWI Heritage Project
- Visited the majority of our Federations

I have been attending meetings in my village since I was 14 and have been very fortunate to experience many facets of the SWI. From being part of the initial committee discussions around the Board of Trustees, to serving as Vice President to Anne Kerr and now as National President, I have had many opportunities to learn, meet members and give back to an organisation that I truly love.

During my time as President I am proud to have streamlined SWI governance and secured our charitable status, changes that will strengthen the organisation for years to come. I was also fortunate to secure dedicated funding for the SWI Heritage Project, and it has been a joy to watch it flourish. Selling Heriot Row was a significant moment, but one that allowed us to invest in the future of the SWI in a way that truly matters.

Like Presidents before me, it has been a real pleasure to visit towns and villages across Scotland, and I am proud to have visited the majority of our Federations during my time in office. My geography has certainly improved along the way. Perhaps most heartening of all has been seeing membership grow for the first time since the 1950s, it is a true reflection of how the organisation has grown and evolved with its members over the decades.

It has been an honour to serve as National President, and I leave the role with gratitude, pride and great optimism for the future of the SWI and the community at its heart.

SUSIE FINLAYSON

National President | 2026 - 2029



Key Achievements

- Evelyn Baxter Scholar
- SWI Heritage Group Chair
- Roxburghshire Federation President
- National Vice President

I am delighted to be stepping into my role as National President in May, I initially joined the SWI in 2014 when I moved to Hawick and although I've been here for a while now, I'm still a quine from Cullen at heart. When I moved, I didn't really know anyone down in Hawick, and thought to myself well how do you get to know folk these days, and thought the local Institute in Wilton Dean would be perfect for meeting like-minded ladies who love to craft and chat away.

Since my very first meeting I was welcomed with open arms and got to know everyone, although if I was surprised with an early invitation to join the choir, luckily enough I can hold a tune. As time has gone by, I've been involved with so many facets of SWI life, from being an Evelyn Baxter Scholar, on the old H&H Committee, Roxburghshire Federation President and National Vice President. I have had the opportunity to meet so many members at our Institutes; it has been a delight and I'm only just scratching the surface. As National President I can't wait to visit more and get to chat about the things I love while exploring parts of the country I never thought I'd see.

I hope that when I'm National President, I can take the important parts of our heritage forward while helping the SWI grow and evolve to be the best it can be for our members. It's exciting but also comes a challenge which I can't wait to take on, I've learned so much in my 12 years as a member which I'm sure will play an important part in my new role. No doubt it'll be a busy and rewarding 3 years and I look forward to looking back on it and see what we've achieved together.



Honouring SWI National Chairs and Presidents

Together SWI Chairs and National Presidents reflect the strength, resilience and friendship at the heart of the Scottish Women's Institutes.



Scottish Women's Institutes

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