SWI Heritage Project Evaluation

"…it was the only thing women really had to go to because, you know, men on farms could go to market and had different meetings, but women hadn't. And this was a way of having a social life, really."

Anne Kerr, ex-National President of the SWI,
interviewed by Evelyn Anderson, SWI volunteer, 25th September 2025.

In Brief

SWI's first National Lottery Heritage Fund project has done what it promised. A collection at risk has been catalogued, digitised and set on a path into Scotland's national collections.

Members recorded roughly sixty hours of testimony from women aged sixty to nearly one hundred, trained and supported to a standard rarely seen in volunteer heritage.

When the planned visitor-centre route for the collection fell away, the organisation found an alternative solution.

At a glance:

£127,175 NLHF grant, of a £183,875 project	**88** oral history recordings accessioned	**≈60 hrs** of testimony, interviewees aged 60–100	**57** members trained as interviewers	**3,400+** volunteer hours, (2,400 target)
24 of 28 Federations participating, Shetland to Dumfries	**1924–2015** full run of magazines digitised	**10** podcasts, 28 member voices	**6** intergenerational craft workshops delivered	**2** national institutions in acquisition discussions

1. The project and this evaluation

Scotland's largest historical women's movement used its first heritage grant to rescue its own record. This evaluation finds the grant was used effectively and the project delivered comprehensively against its objectives.

Scottish Women's Institutes was founded in 1917 to connect rural women living in isolation. It is historically Scotland's largest women's movement, with around 9,000 members today in 28 Federations. In 2024 it received its first National Lottery Heritage Fund award: £127,175 towards a two-year project to rescue, catalogue and digitise the collection amassed over a century, to train members to record one another's stories, and to share what it found.

The collection had been recovered at risk after a move out of SWI's old building. Much of the organisation's memory lived in members now in their eighties and nineties. The project began in January 2025 and will conclude in January 2027.

This evaluation has been carried out in August 2026. It draws on the project's quarterly reports, participation records, training materials, the digitised archive, the website and podcasts, alongside conversations with members of the team.

2. What the project delivered

The project delivered its commitments fully, several ahead of schedule.

The application promised	The project delivered	Note
Two posts: Heritage Project Manager (3 days), Volunteer Coordinator (2 days)	Both recruited January 2025. The first Volunteer Coordinator left after six weeks but the role was successfully refilled by late April 2025	Early staff turnover handled without loss of momentum
250-box collection catalogued; c. 10,000 pages a year professionally digitised	Tendered and completed in three batches: the full 1924–2015 run of Home and Country, annotated cookery books, the Needlework Development Scheme holdings, and audio from the SWI's mid-century LPs	The digitising was representative rather than comprehensive, with further digitising awaiting future funding
Member-led oral history programme, estimated at up to 120 volunteers	57 members trained; 88 recordings accessioned; roughly 60 hours of testimony from 170 interviewees aged 60 to nearly 100; every recording appropriately consented, transcribed and corrected with the interviewee	Volunteer targets were revised at midpoint to reflect depth rather than breadth of reach; the 2,400-hour volunteering target exceeded at 3,400+
Ten 30-minute professional podcasts	All ten delivered ahead of schedule, drawing on 28 member contributors	Strong engagement Facebook - 54,564 post views, 112 shares, 430 likes, Instagram 5213 post views, 383 likes
A new website as SWI's in-kind contribution	Providing a public showcase for the project and volunteer hub, delivered by a Scottish developer for about £15,000	Professional presentation of project and associated assets
Six intergenerational skills workshops	Six delivered, with a Glasgow School of Art schools session added beyond plan	Reached younger and more diverse participants than the application envisaged
Events and knowledge sharing	Royal Society of Edinburgh, Creative Crafts Glasgow, national press coverage, a role on the Scottish Community Archives conference committee	Project has instigated multiple collaboration opportunities

Scanning and storage costs forced prioritisation, and the focus was rightly on the records most meaningful to members and the general public. The team acknowledge that completing the collection properly is a multi-year undertaking. The project has established the scale and identified the most important remaining items.

The pace and the quality of delivery are notable, with video podcasts, workshops and digitisation all completed inside the grant period, by a two-person part-time team and a volunteer workforce with an average age above retirement.

3. People: skills, care and reach

Participation ran narrower but far deeper than planned. The achievement here is the way the activity was designed to support women in their seventies and eighties to undertake skilled heritage work.

The project funding application estimated 120 oral history volunteers and 60 archiving volunteers. At the midpoint SWI reported 60 and 30, explained why and proposed revised targets to the project funder. The average member age is 68 and the project identified the challenges of supporting older volunteers through unfamiliar technology. The project rightly chose depth over breadth. Volunteering hours exceeded the original target by a significant degree, with more than 3,400 hours across 1,350 occasions by June 2026. The result was fewer people delivering much more. While 17 of the 57 trained interviewers did not go on to record, several stayed involved in other strands.

What the project volunteers delivered was impressive. Women in their seventies and eighties learned to set up microphones, manage consent, conduct semi-structured interviews, upload audio and correct AI-generated transcripts. The volunteer training was aligned to Oral History Society guidance and compliant with the Data (Use and Access) Act 2025, with safeguarding protocols, dual consent forms and the right to withdraw. Transcription ran on locally installed software chosen to keep members' voices out of insecure cloud services. The volunteer network was supported via monthly drop-ins, refresher sessions, mentored recordings and peer-to-peer WhatsApp groups. This enabling communication infrastructure responded directly to volunteer and member needs.

The project reach was Scotland-wide with 24 of the 28 Federations participating directly, from Shetland and Orkney to the Borders and Dumfries & Galloway. Training travelled to where members were located, including Perth, Muir of Ord, Dumfries, Hawick, Dingwall, and a three-day delegation to Kirkwall, after which Orcadian members bought their own recording kit to carry on locally. Sixteen non-members took part, among them students and researchers.

Remote volunteering was designed into the project from the start so that any member could contribute, regardless of location, mobility, or personal circumstances. Digitised magazines were sent to volunteers who indexed them from home, with members in their nineties from Shetland notable participants. The project anticipated a handful of members would take up remote volunteering, but this became one of the strongest elements of the project.

It is generally understood that women's records have been largely absent from official archives. This collection, focusing on knowledge that was female, domestic, rural, and held in memory and practice, is one of the largest bodies of testimony about twentieth-century rural Scottish women's lives ever assembled, gathered by the women themselves.

Example: Living Heritage & Intergenerational Skills Transfer

"If you know a good thing, pass it on"

Six workshops carried rural and crafts skills out of the SWI's membership and into younger, more diverse hands. These workshops included:



- Pyrography with the Young Women's Movement in Edinburgh,
- Needle-felting with Dundee International Women's Centre and WHALE Arts in Wester Hailes,
- Sanquhar knitting at the Royal Society of Edinburgh,
- Multi-craft sessions at Creative Crafts Glasgow.

"If you know a good thing, pass it on" is the SWI's internal tagline, describing the organisation's core practice across a century, with crafting skills passed between members until mastery becomes common property. Much of this mastery is held by an ageing generation so designing how crafting knowledge can be passed on safeguards traditional skills at risk of being lost.

Interest in crafts is growing in wider society, driven partly by their contribution to wellbeing and mindfulness, aligning with Scotland's growing focus on a wellbeing economy. These skills carry practical value too, with traditional making, mending and preserving being the working knowledge of resilient households and communities, especially in rural locales.

The project has achieved first-round success towards the UNESCO UK Living Heritage list, and these crafts workshops are a good example of what 'living heritage' means, knowledge that survives by being passed on rather than displayed.

"The event was brilliant. I had never heard of pyrography before, but the tutor was great at explaining how to do it and I'm really pleased with what I made. SWI felt like a very welcoming and kind place. More pyrography and events targeted at women under 30 would be amazing."

Participant feedback

Example: SWI History Makers Podcast

The project delivered ten professionally produced video podcasts, presented by broadcaster Jennifer Reoch and released weekly to a completed series by January 2026. The episodes drew directly on members' lived experience: the war years, the pandemic, cooking, shows and the international movement, with members and project volunteers as the storytellers.

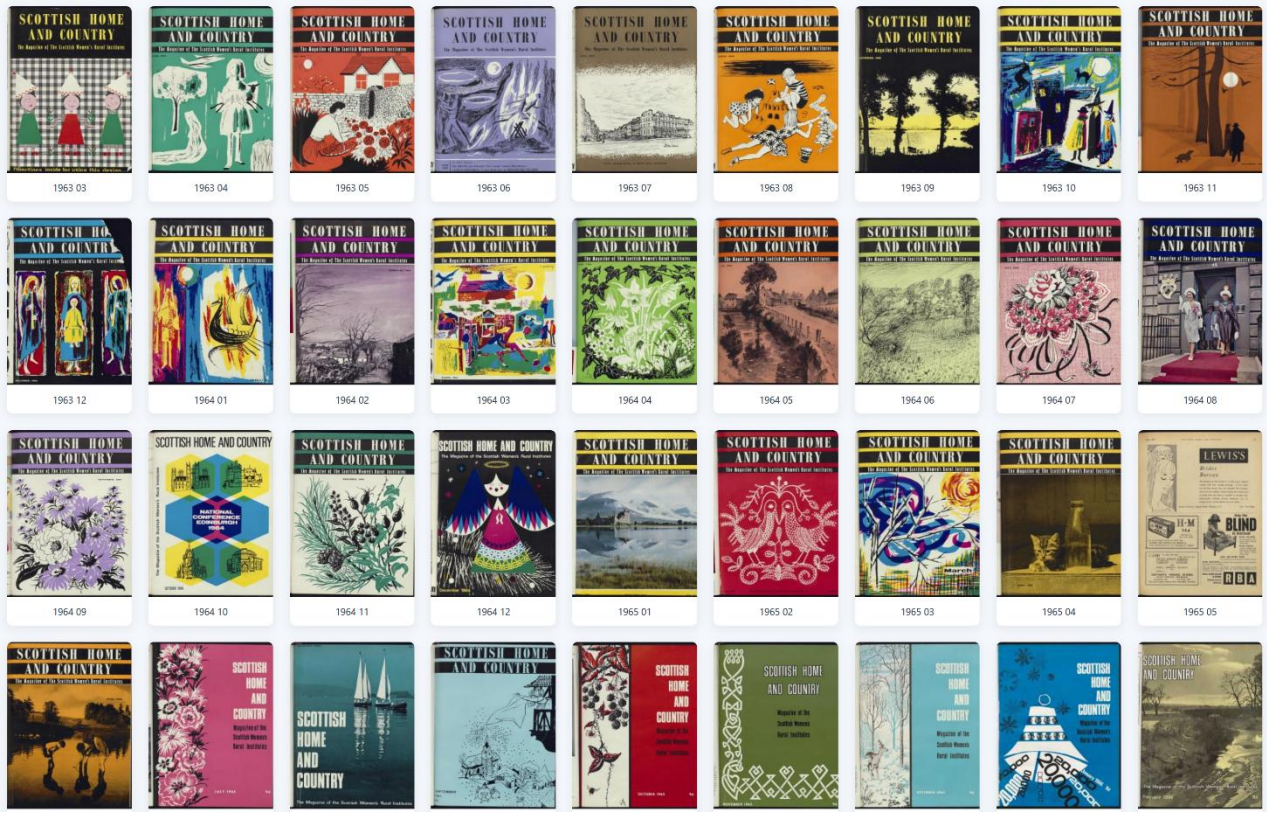
The series was built for distribution that would reach core audiences, as well as new audiences - published on Spotify, embedded on the SWI website, and cut for social media, where reach runs to thousands of views.

The content is also building community online. Episode posts on Facebook draw active comment threads, with members recommending episodes to each other and congratulating guests by name. For a dispersed rural membership, that digital gathering is communication in its own right, and interaction there dwarfs website visits. The website does a different job, acting as the organisation's online front door, independent of any third-party platform. That owned presence protects the organisation's reach and brand identity.





Example: Digitisation







A selection of screen grabs from the digitised collection.

4. Governance, monitoring and adaptation

Governance was robust, disciplined and candid. It was tested by one major setback, and a solutions-focused approach turned the setback into a sustainable opportunity.

Delivery ran on a steady rhythm with weekly Heritage Manager and Volunteer Coordinator meetings, fortnightly round-ups to the Chief Executive, a monthly session with the Archivist, and quarterly reports signed off by the CEO with finance input.

The monthly Heritage Meeting that steered member engagement was chaired by members, not staff, with around thirty members attending across the project's life.

The quarterly reports to the Fund are detailed, quantified and candid. Early cataloguing problems, technology struggles, attrition and digitisation budget pressure all appear alongside the successes.

The application had assumed the collection's long-term home would be an ambitious development project of a Visitor Learning Centre with The Crichton Trust, with the archive gifted to Dumfries and Galloway Council. The partners' Expression of Interest to the Fund for that centre was unsuccessful. SWI rethought the question of permanence and communicated the change to the Fund through its reporting as the new answer took shape.

5. Legacy, learning and recommendations

The outputs satisfy the project objectives, but the method and approach are the more significant achievements.

The most materially consequential outcome of this project is the destination of the archives. In place of a single planned visitor centre, the SWI collection is heading for a distributed home across Scotland's national collections. This outcome was not what the original funding application anticipated, but it is probably a more sustainable solution.

The most important conclusion this evaluation draws from the project relates to how it was delivered, as much as what it delivered. The collection was catalogued, recorded, transcribed and understood by the women whose story it tells, and that choice of method is the project's larger achievement. Three lessons stand out.

1. Volunteer capacity in an older membership is built through support rather than recruitment.
2. Creating digital heritage is easier than finding its audience, so while the collection is online, the discovery journey remains a challenge.
3. Budgets force prioritisation, and the governance records remain unfinished work.

The operational difficulties the project reported are the cost of the method chosen. The hours spent supporting older volunteers through unfamiliar technology were the same hours in which skills, confidence and organisational capacity were built.

This is an organisation that metabolises feedback and acts upon it, and the capacity to adapt is a notable strength. An organisation founded in 1917 to give isolated rural women somewhere to go has, a century on, given them the opportunity to become the researchers of their own history. For £127,175 the Fund secured a preserved collection, alongside the certainty among women in rural Scotland that their heritage matters.

The project evidenced that SWI heritage matters a great deal. The National Library of Scotland does not send its Head of Archives and Manuscripts twice to a store for material of local interest, nor does National Museums Scotland pursue textiles that matter only to their makers. The judgement that this collection matters to Scotland has already been made by the institutions whose job it is to make it. What the project adds is the method. The collection was catalogued by eighty-year-olds learning digital archiving and populating spreadsheets and recorded by members interviewing their peers.

The project is also producing unanticipated outcomes. This summer, ahead of the anniversary of Queen Elizabeth's death, the UK Government’s Cabinet Office approached SWI to feature a member's account of her connection with the royal family. The article appeared in Scottish Home and Country in June 1953, written by an SWI member married to the minister of Crathie Kirk. A member the project trained in oral history will voice it. The project made findable a record of national interest.

Interest in the collection is arriving faster than a small organisation can easily absorb, from universities, councils and cultural partners. However, the audience that matters most is closer to home. This heritage was made by women across Scotland, and it has now been kept by women across Scotland. The circle closes when it is seen by them and the heritage returns to the Institutes it came from.

The project has already demonstrated that when records were sent out to members, they prompted new memories and strengthened connections between women. In a living heritage, archiving is not the end of the process.

Recommendations

What the project learned	Recommendation
The distributed deposit is a strong outcome, but the changed plans need to be communicated	1. Complete the deposit agreements and publish a plain-language account for members of where their heritage now lives
The drop-ins, peer groups and refresher training were what sustained an older volunteer network	2. Agree which volunteer supports continue after the grant ends, so the trained network is not lost before a second phase begins
Digitisation costs forced prioritisation, the governance records remain unfinished work	3. Keep the governance and business records on the funding agenda. Digitising the full collection remains identified, unfinished work
The audience arrives through networks and communities, both in person and online	4. Build audiences through community nurture, including digital content creation
Members as researchers, supported to professional standards was a resource-efficient and meaningful approach	5. Carry the method into the next project, and capture stories of impact as they happen