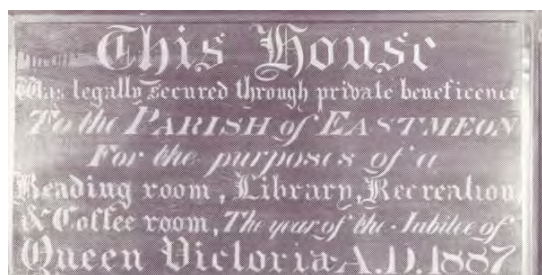


Before the Village Hall ...

Michael Blakstad, East Meon History Group

Today's Village Hall is a comparatively recent building, opened in 1975; it plays a vital part in the community life of East Meon, providing a venue for meetings and indoor sports, organised by village societies, and for private social events such as weddings and funeral receptions. The Village Hall Committee works hard to maintain the building and schedule bookings, and to organise the Country Fair each May. But its predecessor was a more vibrant social centre, and demanded more its unpaid Committee.

With Tony Norman's invaluable help, I have been digging deep into the history of The Institute, the ramshackle but vibrant building which was located opposite where East Meon Stores now stands.



You may have seen the plaque in the foyer of the Hall which commemorates the building of the 'Reading room, Library, Recreation and Coffee room ... legally secured through private beneficence ... in 1887, the year of the Jubilee of Queen Victoria'.

Note that it was donated by its benefactors to 'the Parish of East Meon', the church not the Parish Council.

The buildings were very basic – corrugated and galvanised iron sheeting. In 1885 it was listed as the Working Men's Reading Room and Library, and its Librarian was William S Tregear, master of the National School. In 1915 it was listed as the East Meon Church Institute, and 'Institute' became the name by which it was known.





Institute Management Committee, late 1940s Committee, chaired by Reverend Watkins. Back row, left to right, W (Weary) Blackman, Herbert Goddard, Jack Porter, Frank Collyer, Reece Porter. Sitting, Doc. Clifford, Lady Margaret Nicholson, the Vicar, Harry Wynn, George Wilson Atkinson.

As part of his parish responsibilities, the Vicar of All Saints always chaired the Management Committee, until as recently as May 1968, when the legendary Herbie Goddard was elected to be the first regular lay chairman.

In the days before radio, and long before television, the Institute was a vital source of entertainment and social life in East Meon. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, there was a plethora of village music groups including a fife and drum band, a glee club, jazz and swing bands and a folk group. They all performed at the Institute.

Sports facilities included a billiards table, a boxing ring, and even a rifle range (where Park Vista is now located) all organised by the Committee, who also laid on regular dances. Village societies such as the British Legion also held events (the WI held cookery demonstrations). The National School, located on the West Meon road, used the Library and held overspill classes there. Vicars gave magic lantern shows. In the minutes of January 1931, it is recorded that 'Mr Talbot Ponsonby was to give a play in aid of Institute funds'.



Next to the Institute was the caretaker's house, and the incumbent was responsible not only for maintenance of the facilities, but for taking bookings, collecting the money and supervising behaviour. Several of the entries in the minutes record damage done 'by younger members' at dances and unruly sports events.

The rifle range is the long, light roof at the top left.

The most depressing theme pervading the minutes was the need to refurbish and repair the buildings, reflecting the fact that they were erected using skimpy materials. Of which, more in an article later this year ...



Village children at tea outside the Institute. Note the adult helpers dressed as 'country yokels'



Blackman family photograph of a dinner in the Institute, post WWII.

To read the minutes, or summaries, click on

http://www.eastmeonhistory.org.uk/content/catalogue_item/institute-library)