

East Meon Village Hall

History by F.G.Standfield

This appears to be the text of a speech given in February 1995 at celebrations of the twentieth anniversary of the opening of the Village Hall.

The original East Meon Village Hall was built in 1881, sited opposite what is now the Spar Shop. It was constructed of timber and corrugated iron, was at first named 'East Meon Reading Room, Library and Coffee Room' and later known as 'The Village Institute', or just 'The Institute'. Space for car parking was non-existent, for cars had not been invented; and so called 'toilet facilities' were outside and non-existent.

Yet the Institute was well loved. When I joined the Management Committee, the then Vicar, Rodney Smith, was Chairman, and John and Pam Sparrow, living in the adjacent 'Caretaker's Cottage' were the caretaker. Committee meetings were held in their cottage.

Then, in 1968, the late Herbie Goddard, already Parish Council Chairman, succeeded the Vicar as Village Hall Chairman. Herbie was a wonderful man – 'Mr East Meon', and referred to, behind his back, as 'The Mayor'. I believe his election as chairman was the best thing that ever happened to the old Hall.

However, in 1968 I was horrified at the great cost of maintaining the building. The corrugated iron was rusty and the timber constantly needed repairs or replacement – I suspect it suffered from dry rot, deathwatch beetle, and every other disease. As fast as funds were raised for improvements, money disappeared into a bottomless pit for repairs.

Then, in the early 1970s, I had what proved to be an unusual stroke of luck, in the shape of a dose of influenza, which prevented my attending a Committee Meeting. By the day of the meeting, though unfit to venture out, my brain felt clear, and I saw, as from a distance, that the only sensible future option was to have a new hall, largely financed by demolition of the old hall and cottage, and sale of the site for housing development.

So, with a shaky hand, I wrote to Herbie on these lines, suggesting that he should read my letter at the meeting. He did, and – surprise, surprise – the reaction was favourable.

Thereafter, every possible new hall site was considered, including the site where we are tonight. Outline planning consent was obtained, and a purchase price negotiated with the landowners. But we faced two major problems: first, Workhouse Lane residents were understandably apprehensive of noise and disturbance late at night. And secondly, rampaging inflation then running at the rate of something like 20% per annum.

Public meetings were held in the hope of reassuring Workhouse Lane and other nearby residents, designing the new hall without windows to the east and southern sides, and by setting it well back from the road.

As for the size and design of a new hall, we obtained details of the other halls recently built in Hampshire, and Committee Members drove round inspecting them. A new hall at Bramley, near Basingstoke, seemed ideal and an architect was engaged to design our new hall, incorporating the main Bramley features. Then, as we were new to inviting tenders from builders, there came an unfortunate diversion in the shape of an alternative proposal for the hall to be sited in the Recreation Ground.

This was an unsound idea for a number of reasons, but it found much support, and, though causing six months' delay, increased the estimated cost of building by something like £2,000. And, if that were not bad enough, the cost of the land here was also increased!

We have forgotten what hyper inflation was like. At 20% per annum, the cost of a new building would increase from, say, £40,000 to £48,000 in a year. So, when the Village was feverishly engaged in every form of fund-raising, we were not merely running to remain stationary, but even going into reverse!

Though we had an idea of the sum likely to come from the sale of the old hall site and had been promised grants by various bodies, including our Parish Council, we felt we dare not sign a building contract until we were certain the cost would be available.

The situation was desperate. So I suggested to Herbie that I should approach Sir Lynton White (then Mr Lynton White), always a generous village benefactor, so see if he would be prepared to guarantee a personal loan of £20,000 free of any interest if and when needed, without any security but merely upon my personal assurance that it would be repaid within two years. He asked no questions, and immediately agreed. At that time, £20,000 was the equivalent of at least £50,000 today – perhaps more – and his reaction was typical of his great generosity and trust. The vital part he played was unknown to most people at the time, and may be largely unknown today.

We were able to sign a contract at once, the sale of the old hall and cottage was put in hand, Messrs Moulds were awarded the building contract, and work commenced, in a sea of mud! Fittingly, Sir Lynton laid the foundation stone.

The village was inevitably without a hall for quite a while - it may have been for at least a year, and our Committee Meetings were held in the comfort of Herbie's house.

I have almost completed this reminiscence, but must refer to two important matters.

First, all members of the Hall Committee pulled together in whipping up support. It would be invidious to name any one as being particularly praiseworthy, though I know Mrs Lettice Ross, the Secretary, worked herself to the point of exhaustion. Others included three stalwart ladies who are still around, and seem ageless, namely Ivy Cook, Iris Porter and Cath Barrow. And these names these names are not by any means exhaustive. And that wonderful lady, Mrs Dorcas Simpson, was the queen of all fund raisers.

My final revelation is that, shortly after Lynton White had made it possible to start building, it was decided, with Herbie's agreement, to try to spread the risk of the final £20,000 guarantee, by replacing it with a total of ten separate £2,000 guarantees by ten individuals. So I approached local residents with that object in mind, and all agreed without hesitation, leaving Lynton to carry a risk of £2,000 instead of £20,000. I was not surprised, but, looking back, it was rather remarkable. The end of that part of the story was that no guarantor lost any money.

Finally, I have not intended to exaggerate the importance of my part in events that are now local history. Herbie Goddard was the dynamic leader, co-ordinator and inspiration and, at the time, I told him that the new hall would be his memorial. It was, and is.