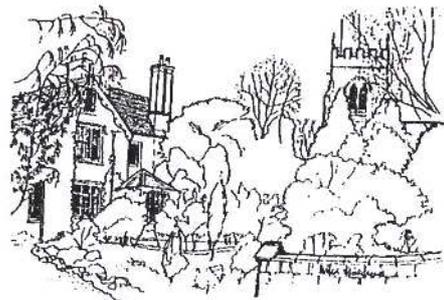


A History of Codsall Village Hall



**CODSALL & BILBROOK
HISTORY SOCIETY**



A HISTORY OF CODSALL VILLAGE HALL

The origins of the Village Hall in Codsall go way back before the Second World War when Codsall was a much smaller village than it is today. Try to imagine the centre of the village. There was the Crown Public House, the Bull surrounded by a sandstone wall; in front of the old half-timbered house, used as a restaurant in recent years, there was another small wall. In the Square next to the land owned by the Bull was a cycle shop and running down and round the corner into Wilkes Road were small, very old, cottages. On the other side of the Square, in the area occupied by the car park now, was the thriving concern of the Codsall Supply Company If you stood outside the Crown Inn at that time it was possible to look straight up Church Road to St Nicholas's Church at the top of the hill, as the by-pass had not arrived to cut off the Church's direct access to its village.

In your mind take away the whole of the Wheel Estate, replace the Chillington Estate with a farm, put an orchard where Gorsty Lea Garage used to stand, a quarry in place of the Council Offices, allotments where the High School, the Middle School and St Christopher's now stand and instead of the modern expanse of Brincars Garage was a sweet shop, which sold a few groceries, with a couple of petrol pumps outside.

This will give you some idea of how small the village was between the wars. However, there was an active village life so where did the people meet?

In September 1995 Mr. Pat Hughes, the person behind the successful completion of the Village Hall recorded his account of how it all came about.

Before the Second World War began a village hall had been talked about but there was little money in the kitty. There was £90 given by Captain Warner [a Captain in the First World War], £100 from the Women's Institute and a few other bits and pieces but that was all.

After the war Arthur Parkes called the first meeting on the 13th February 1946. In the Chair was Arthur Parkes, Secretary was Arthur Johnson, Vice-chairman was Major Peter Horrell, the Treasurer was going to be either Mr. Copeland or Mr. Fred Cox.

On April 9th. 1946 Charles Horrell, because his sons had returned safely from the war, donated an acre of land and an adjacent cottage in Wood Road as a site for a Village Hall. He lived at Wheatstone Park and was involved with the Triplex Foundry, responsible for making the Triplex Grates which most people had in those days.

By May 10th, the committee had £1,600 promised. Their share of the building costs for the hall was estimated at £2,000. There seems to have been two schemes put forward. One in about 1947 and another one in 1952. It appears there was a lot of talk but very little action at this point in time. It was also a very difficult time financially. It took so long to make decisions and get plans drawn up that support from the Ministry often dried up because there was no more money available. In despair this committee lapsed in July 22nd 1952.

An entry in the Minute Book records a new initiative on Tuesday 9th December 1958 when a new committee was elected with myself as Chairman, Mr. E.H.Ablitt as Vice-chairman, with Miss Betty Kuphal as Secretary and Mr. Jack Taylor as Treasurer. One of the first actions by the new officers was to contact all the organisations asking them to send a representative in order to bring the Committee up to date.

As the new Chairman, I was very keen to have all the churches and the political parties involved with the project. The Conservative Party were already a presence in the village, but there were no official representatives of the Labour or the Liberal parties. My decision to ask them to play a part in the planning did not go down too well with some of the village people.

The next thing to be considered was the site. We still had the land in Wood Road, donated by Charles Horrell, but this was felt to be inadequate because of the growth in the size of the village and the need to provide a large enough car-park. This is now the site of the British Legion Club. Messrs. Ablitt, Hughes and Woodward arranged to meet the Seisdon Rural District Surveyor to talk over the possibility of an alternative location.

At this time the Chief Executive of Seisdon Rural Council was Mr. Baskett. He advised me to have the Hall built as a voluntary undertaking. In this way it would be possible to apply for all sorts of grants and the final cost would work out much cheaper than if the Hall was built by the local authority. He showed his support for the scheme by offering a seven acre site for a peppercorn rental which would allow for not only a Village Hall but a sports field as well.

The Committee gratefully accepted this new site. I then went to see Charles Mason, an architect in Wolverhampton. He was a friend of Mr. Ablitt. Mr. Mason produced a sketch plan and it was decided that, because of some disquiet by certain parties in the village, a Parish Meeting would be held, under the Chairmanship of the Chairman of the Parish Council (Geoff Woodward), to give everyone the opportunity to learn all the facts and have their say. We said, these are the sketch plans for the new seven acre site. If you accept them we will be able to sell the other site which will help us to find the deposit for what was going to be a much more expensive building than had first been envisaged.

We had the Public Meeting and although there was a certain amount of opposition there wasn't very much. I told everyone present that if they would pass the sketch plans we would call a second meeting in six months time when a detailed costing would be available and the people could then decide if they wished to proceed. I told them that there would not only be a Village Hall but a Sports Pavilion as well. Originally it was hoped to incorporate a Swimming Pool into the plan.

Mr Billingsley, of the Charles Mason's practice was appointed as architect. We had some costings from the Quantity Surveyor and we finally came up with a building which, we reckoned, was going to cost us about £12,000. The Sports Field was going to cost another £5,000.

We understood we could get grants from the County Council, the District Council, the Parish Council and the Department of Education and Science.

But, by the time we came to have the second meeting a number of people had passed resolutions. The P.C.C. for example, which was dominated by some of the older residents of the village, said that they didn't think anything should be done in a hurry and they passed a very "wet" resolution not really supporting the idea at all. During the discussion I decided to walk out and leave them to discuss it without me as I thought they would be able to do that much better if I was not in the room. There was a considerable amount of opposition. They also objected to my idea of bringing in the political parties, because they thought that they might try to control the project. I said that it was a community venture and we must involve everybody in the village.

Once, I was summoned to a house in Codsall where I was told in no uncertain terms that a Village Hall was not required and should not be built. I replied that, with all due respect the village had told me to build it and the only people who could tell me not to build it, would again be the people of the village. The opportunity for that would come when I presented my costings and if the

meeting disagreed, then fair enough, that was their privilege and that was the democratic way it was going to be done.

At this time there were three places which were used as meeting places by the village. There were the Parish Rooms, run by the Church. There was a Conservative Hut which was by the Station and there was Blanton's Tea Rooms which by this time belonged to the Old People's Welfare. So there were three different groups of people who realised that if a Village Hall came into being they were going to lose their lettings. These were quite important people in the community and they certainly tried to persuade me that the Hall was not wanted. One or two councillors were opposed to the idea, but the more opposition I encountered the more determined I was that the plans should go ahead.

To cut a long story short, six months later we had a tremendous meeting in the Parish Room. About a hundred and twenty people attended, which meant that it was completely full and it was very hot. The atmosphere got a bit warm as well.

I have never had such a gruelling as I had that night. Geoff Woodward was in the chair and he was very fair. I think he had some sympathy with the objectors, but he played his part as Chairman of the Parish Council very well indeed. He said that he was there not to take sides, but to see fair play.

In the end Queenie Stubbs said, in her thin wavery voice, "Well I think Mr. Hughes's plans are excellent and I move that they be accepted." Somebody else seconded it and although there had been a lot of questions we got approval by 100 votes to 8.

Jack Taylor interrupted here to say that Mr. Hughes had put his resignation on the table if the proposal did not go through.

Having obtained the village's approval we then set about having the plans drawn up. One of the things that we had in mind was the idea of concerts. We hoped too that we could put the Dramatic Society productions on in the hall, so we would need lighting etc. We had the idea of a swimming pool as well. But, when we came to work it out we realised that we would get for the Wood Road site would not finance everything that we wished to do, so we had to reduce our plans. Early on in the planning one of the things we thought of as essential was a bar, because if we wanted to have dances then a bar was almost a necessity. But then we ran into a snag with the County Council. At that time the Methodists were an important presence on Staffordshire County Council. The Chairman was A.G..B. Owen, who was a very religious man. The rule was in those days that no place which had a bar in it could receive a County Council grant. Since this was, I think, 20% of the total cost we were a bit perturbed about this.

In the end the architect came up with a brilliant idea suggesting we replaced the bar with a ticket office. The ticket office had a shelf behind it and could easily be adapted to become a bar. We specifically didn't licence the premises, people had to get a special licence. We made it plain from the beginning that it wasn't going to be a licensed premises because this would have upset several other people.

On the committee was the minister of the Chapel and when the question of a Christmas Raffle came up he said that he was very sorry but the Chapel would not support it in any way and he would have to leave the meeting.

After negotiation with the District Council, who were very happy with the plans, and having solved the problem with the County Council we had, of course, to submit the application to the Ministry. Before we did this we wanted to make certain that we were going to be able to get the other grants. We were working on a figure of about £17,000, having cut out the swimming pool and one or two minor details. We still included the pavilion at the back for the use of the cricketers and footballers. We thought this could also be used as a small room if people wanted to hire something smaller than the hall.

I was rung up by Mr. Gibb from Stafford, Secretary to the Rural Community Council. He told me not to fill in the form until I had seen him. So, I went up to Stafford and he explained that the forms were vetted by a Ministry official looking for specific answers to specific questions. Although you might give the right answer but use slightly different words you will only score two points instead of five. These are the answers you are to give and he sat there, in his office and dictated the wording that was required.

The forms were then sent off in October 1962.

We sold the Wood Road site for £2,200 and we sold the turf from off the field at 5d a yard run. It had to be taken off so the field could be levelled. It was bought by Bakers Nurseries, who were still in the village at that time.

In March 1963 we received a letter from the Ministry saying they wouldn't give a final decision until April 1963. We had already gone out to tender. 1963 was the year of the very bad winter. We had gone for a fixed price tender which normally had to be approved within eight weeks. If it wasn't approved within the eight weeks then it lapsed and the builder could resubmit. The tender we wanted to accept was £1,200 less than any others and although the architect was a little dubious about one or two small points he couldn't justify us going to the next tender. I went to see the builder and asked him if he could give us 16 weeks instead of 8, as he couldn't do much work because of the bad weather, this took us up to the third week in March.

When the Ministry wrote back and said we couldn't have an answer until April I couldn't confirm the tender until I knew whether or not we were going to get the Ministry grant. I wrote to the Ministry and, in no uncertain terms, pointed this out. The letter was posted off on a Saturday morning. The following Wednesday I was sitting in my office at work when the phone went. When I answered it I found that it was the Department of Education and Science. The caller was the Civil Servant I had met in London on one of my preliminary visits and with whom I had corresponded over the grant. He said, "We have received your letter, we understand what you are saying and you will be pleased to know we have agreed that you should have your grant, but, all letters at this department in London are typed in Newcastle and it will be ten days before you have written confirmation."

At this time we were very close to the sixteen week deadline with the builder. So I asked the official if he was absolutely sure that we were going to be given the grant or could he be overruled by somebody else. He confirmed that our grant would be safe. He had, of course, realised that they wouldn't be paying out the money until the next financial year.

We had already had a meeting on March 4th. At that meeting we had agreed to accept the tender, subject to the Ministry approval. We couldn't move without this because their grant was about £4,000. We had already done some work on the Sports Field which was a separate issue. The estimated cost of the Village Hall was £15,377. We had raised £18,398, but we also had all the costs of people like the surveyors to pay and the interior furnishing.

Perks and McRobie were given the order and they started work on about April 1st 1963. The contract was that they would be finished by 31st December. Somebody suggested that in that case it would be a good idea to have the official opening on New Year's Day. I said, "Not likely. We shall need a period in between to furnish it and of course people can overrun the time they think they need to finish a job."

In the end we had the opening on Saturday 1st February 1964. We invited Major Peter Horrell, the son of Charles Horrell who had given us the original piece of land in Wood Road, to come and open it.

Some of the local Conservatives had continued to chunter saying that the Village Hall was unnecessary. Very much to my surprise about three weeks before the opening I received a phone call from Wombourne from Mr Talbot's office, saying that he would like to attend the opening. He was the sitting Conservative M.P. We had had very little contact with the Conservatives officially, but I said that he would be welcome to come, but I pointed out that it was a community occasion and hoped he would not make a political speech. This was quite understood so he came. The two gentlemen who had tried hard to dissuade me from the idea in the beginning were also present.

Gilbert Smith (Vicar of St. Nicholas) and I discussed what we were going to do with all the clergy. I suggested that Gilbert should bless the building, and that George Waddington (Minister of Trinity Methodist Church) should say some prayers. I asked Walter Joret (Roman Catholic priest) what he could do. He replied that the rules of his Church permitted him to do very little indeed. "The best I can do is to come and sit on the platform. I can literally only say "The Our Father" with you." He was a delightful person and a great friend of Gilbert Smith and my wife and myself and we were very happy to settle for that.

We had a very successful opening, in spite of the fact that we opened at 2.30pm and the builder only left the site at 10.30am ! He was a month behind schedule. Of course the ladies were wanting to get in to start preparing the food.

The first two organisations that started in the new building were the Civic Society and the Flower Club. The Civic Society particularly was very popular. It had about three hundred members after about two meetings. The Management Committee realised that they had to try to provide what the village wanted. The Flower Club was started by Doris Porteous, Bill Williams was the first chairman of the Literary Society, another organisation which was soon extremely popular. People hired the building for dances and other things. Mr Bill Newman was the caretaker. The sports activities never really got going very well.

One of the mistakes we made was to put a flat roof on the building, but of course we couldn't afford to do anything else at the time. The building has since been enlarged, a lounge has been put on the side. A proper bar has been built and today this is franchised. The kitchens are new and a committee room has been put on the front. It has always had a very good car park which has been one of its attractions.

In the early days we tried putting on dances for the youth of the village, but we had to have stewards and eventually we stopped the dances because some of the bike-riding fraternity from Bushbury and other areas came and stirred up trouble. We tried all sorts of things, not all were successful, many were and are still going strong today.

Seisdon Council, under Arnold Baskett were very helpful. He was very keen to have a similar scheme in Seisdon, but he couldn't raise sufficient interest in Wombourne. He was behind us all the way. He and John Blamire Brown prepared the Trust documents.

The ownership of the Hall was in the hands of four Trustees. These were appointed over and above the Management Committee. They are the legal owners of the Hall. There was John Blamire Brown, Geoff Woodward, Fred Cox and Arthur Johnson. The only active one today of the original trustees is John Blamire Brown.

The Hall has always been self-financing but has never made any money. The responsibility for the Hall falls on the Parish Councillors who are the elected representatives of the village people. The Village Hall Management Committee are a group of people who manage the Hall for the Parish Council, who elect six members to serve on it. It also includes representatives of the various bodies and the political parties, because it was meant to cover all aspects of village life. Because the Hall belongs to the community the only way that money can be raised for extensions or repairs is through the rates which the Parish Council can raise.

I continued on the Management Committee for a few years and was still Chairman until 1966 when I accepted a job with the diocese of Lichfield. My office was then in Staffordshire and I had to cover the whole of Staffordshire and North Shropshire. I was also involved with things like Boys' Clubs in Wolverhampton, so I had to give up my chairmanship of the Village Hall in order to carry out my other activities. Since then I have had no committee involvement with the Hall. I think it is generally acknowledged that the people responsible for the building of the Hall were myself, Jack Taylor, Betty Kuphal and Mr. Ablitt backed up by the rest of the Committee.

I have lived in Codsall since 1953 and I think we have been lucky in that it has maintained many of the characteristics of a village. There are lots of people in the village who have made a tremendous contribution to the life of the village and now it is impossible to think of the village without the Village Hall.

Mr Pat. Hughes 1995