

The Definitive History of Coombe Bissett & Homington Village Hall

By Rollo Batten

The background history leading up to the construction of the present hall, which was completed in 1972, is an interesting one. Luckily records of meetings going back to 1945 have survived.

The original hall (referred to as the Old Hut) was a 1914/18 corrugated iron ex army building which was acquired as a meeting place by the Old Comrades Association (Members of the Armed Forces who had served in the First World War). Eventually it also became used as the village hall. It was sited on a very restricted triangular piece of ground on the North side of the main Blandford Road opposite Coombe Bissett Church adjoining the public footpath to Stratford Tony. There was no space for car parking but just after the First World War there would have been no need.

The first record referring to building a village hall is in minutes dated 22nd February 1945 of the Coombe Bissett Home Guard (Dad's Army) Association which was formed on the 18th January 1945. They record "It was decided to proceed getting funds to build a Village Hall——". Subsequent minutes show that money was raised, including profits from a fete, which was paid into a Village Hall Building Fund. Later on the 24th May 1945 a meeting took place with the Parish Council and the minutes record "Report of Joint Meeting with Parish Council. All the members of the Home Guard Committee were present with all members of the Parish Council——". A representative from Wiltshire County Council explained the aims and objectives of the recently formed Parish Councils Advisory Service and of its interest in promoting and assisting local bodies in the provision of village halls. It was agreed: -

- (1) That a scheme for providing a suitable public hall for the village should be proceeded with forthwith.
- (2) That the proposed hall should be for the free and unrestricted use of the public generally and should not be available for use as a School Kitchen simply for the purpose of securing a grant from the General Education Committee towards the cost of erecting the
- (3) That a Hall Building Committee be appointed to carry out the proposed scheme, such Committee to consist of seven members representatives of all sections of the village, with power to co-opt not more than two additional members if so desired.
- (4) That such Committee proceed as soon as possible to formulate a scheme and arrange for a canvass of the whole village with an appeal for gifts and promises for the Building Fund.

A public meeting was called for 30th May 1945. At the opening the Chairman reported "the Parish Council had met the Home Guard Association for the purpose of discussing the question of a Village Hall which it was decided should be built as a memorial and thanks offering to the young men and women of the village who had helped in defeating Nazi-ism——" (The old photographs and rolls of honour and other similar items in connection with those who fought in me two World Wars and the Home Guard were removed from the Old Hut and hung in the Social Service was present and gave much advice on how to proceed which included :-

- (a) the necessity of having a Trust Deed accepted by the Charity Commissioners clearly

defining the hall management

(b) the importance of having women on the Committee

(c) the building cost would equate to about £10 or £11 per seating in 4 - 5 years

(d) that in planning the Hall to "get it right first time" as they would be building for 100 years

(e) on the various conditions required to qualify for grants and loans e.g. that there were no restrictions.

The Chairman expressed the view that it would probably be 3 - 5 years before building commenced!! Finally it was resolved to form a New Village Hall Building Fund Committee with seven members and three Trustees. It held its first meeting on 5th June 1945 when Mr Victor Duffett was elected Chairman. Three hall designs were considered and four possible building sites identified. The fourth site was favoured and was on part of a field owned by a local farmer Mr Ernest J Thorne, a member of the committee and Chairman of the Parish Council. He offered to give a piece of this field large enough for the requirements of the new hall but on the condition that a clause be inserted in the Deeds prohibiting the sale of any form of alcoholic drinks. This offer was nevertheless accepted and the Committee expressed its gratitude for his generous gift. However, for reasons not recorded the land was never conveyed. Such a condition would of course have been contrary to advice that among other things a grant and interest free loan would be available provided "that there were no restrictions". The field was on the South side of Homington Road opposite the matched chalk boundary wall to the Old House and now has a house and bungalow built on it.

In July 1945 it was agreed that a circular letter be distributed (250 copies to be printed) and in it the sum of £3000 to be quoted as a probable cost of erecting a new hall!! In 1957 a building site had still not been acquired. The Old Chalk Pit West of the Church was considered. Later in 1958 rebuilding on the site of the Old Hut was also considered and the purchase of land East of the village Stores and Post Office but the owner was not prepared to sell. In 1964 the purchase of the old village school (now a house named the Old Rectory House - the school bell still exists on the rooftop) was considered because a new school was shortly to be built on the land off Shutts Lane. Fortunately as events turned out the Planning Authority refused consent for the change of use in October 1966. Their refusal was the trigger for the Chairman to call an emergency sub committee at which it was agreed to make a planning application for site approval to build a new hall on land adjoining and South of the new school. Consent was subsequently received and the owners of the land Donald and Reginald Thorne (now deceased — sons of Ernest J Thorne) were approached and agreed to sell the land for £1000, which was considered a very fair offer. At that time the fund held £2095 in Defence Bonds and £15.0.10d in cash at the Bank.

In November 1966, after 21 years of continuous service as Chairman Victor Duffett expressed his wish to resign. He had endured all the frustrations of locating land for the new hall. At long last this quest had been achieved. It was a fitting moment to end his Chairmanship.

Robert Bramwell, who was a member of the Committee and also Chairman of the Old Hut Committee was elected his successor. Authority to effect the purchase of the land and the Trust Deed (as per the National Model) was agreed on the 2nd January 1967. It was also agreed that of the various types of hall considered Reema Construction Ltd would be the most suitable. The major problem of finding a suitable site had at long last been solved. The next major task was raising enough money, with the aid of grants, to build the new hall. Robert spearheaded the efforts of the Committee with enthusiasm and drive. He and his wife Margaret gave permission to use their premises. The Old House, for two fund raising Fetes in 1967 and 1968. Other ways of raising substantial money was by way of interest free loans and

gifts from the inhabitants of the village.

A Newsletter was produced on a regular basis and distributed to all householders. In this way everyone was kept up to date with events and progress in raising the money, hall designs (where they could be inspected) and costs, etc.

Considerable thought was given to getting the design and the size of the hall right. To this end a visit was made to Laverstock Hall. Very helpful advice was given about siting e.g. not to build too close to the boundaries. This was invaluable as in later years it became necessary to provide extra storage at the West end of the hall and a room to the South named the Homington Room. Reema's original plans were increased in size to accommodate a badminton court and the kitchen was enlarged but later it was enlarged again.

The plans received planning consent in 1968, the work commenced in 1970 and was completed at the end of 1971. In order to gain adequate access to the site it was necessary to widen the upper part of Shutts Lane. Also as the land was on a considerable slope substantial levelling was required together with drainage work before the hall construction could begin. The final overall cost for the work and equipment was approx £17,000. Somewhat different to the estimates given in 1945!! The scheme was supported with grants from the Department of Science and Education and Wiltshire County Council.

There was concern regarding letting charges and whether income would meet running costs. These doubts were quickly dispelled when hall bookings were made for seven days per week. It was a great success and continues to be so.

The first Annual General Meeting of the hall was held on 28th June 1972 when members of the New Hall Management Committee were elected in accordance with the Trust Deed. As a consequence the New Village Hall Building Fund Committee and its three Trustees became obsolete.

An official opening ceremony took place in 1972 when the Countess of Radnor formally declared the hall open. This was followed by afternoon tea and a grand celebration dinner in the evening.

Rollo Batten

Secretary to Coombe Bissett New Village Hall Building Fund Committee
(1959-1972)

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