

Ballinger War Memorial Hall – A History

by Anne Martin

This was written by the late Anne Martin in the 1970s and published in parts over three issues of the Ballinger War Memorial Hall newsletter in 1993.

It is a fascinating story and we thought it well worth repeating. We are sure you will enjoy it.

The first meeting to discuss the idea of a village hall in memory of the men who fought in the First World War was held at Ballinger Grove on Saturday, 31st January 1920. Present at the meeting was the vicar of Great Missenden, the Reverend Littlehales and Messrs C Barrett, G Clift, F Hampton, HS Harrington, MN Hart, R Meadows, E Moseley, H Powles, S Rodwell, A Rolfe, and I Bryant-Smith. From the first minutes it seems that Mr Hart of Ballinger Grove was the instigator of the scheme. Mr Harrington of Pednor was voted Chairman, however, and he responded to this honour by immediately donating £100 to the fund. The committee subdivided itself into a General Purposes Committee, a Fund Raising Committee and the Building Committee.

The main aim of the Hall was for the use and enjoyment of the community of Ballinger and district. At the first meeting the vicar proposed that a small enclosure, which could be shut when not in use, should be attached to the Hall so that he could arrange for services to be held there, but the decision was taken that the Hall should be totally non-sectarian and non-political.

The second meeting held at Pednor House decided the no building should commence until £750 was in the kitty. It was decided to approach Lady Liberty through Captain Stewart-Liberty in reference to the site. Collector's books were issued so that subscriptions could be canvassed.

Ballinger Grove, which is now turned into flats, was then a school. A very respectable school for girls by all accounts, where even walks in the woods were conducted in crocodile lines. Miss Gomme's young ladies rallied round to support their headmistress, who was the Chairman of the Fund Collecting Committee and they put on concerts and plays. Mr Albert Drew drove Mr Fred Hampton and his wife round collecting subscriptions which were five shillings for a share.

It is hard to think back to those days and realise what a chore door-to-door collecting must have been. There were no neat bungalows tucked side by side to go from door to door. Ballinger consisted of the few big houses scattered from Pednor to Ballinger ... some substantial family houses on the right hand side of Chiltern Road and, in South Heath- the real heart of the village- the cottages and humbler dwelling places, (Bayleys Hatch was built in 1914 – 18) of the workers that kept the pulse of village life going. The roads were not tarmacadamed until 1921-2. Mr Drew had a governess cart in 1918 for three years, cars were rare possessions. Mr and Mrs Hart of Ballinger Grove were the first to own a car- a Minerva. Mrs Drew's father owned a Model T Ford.

The support from all sides was generous. Mr Bryant-Smith of Pednor, who was the inventor of the moving bendable joint, had a sister Clara Evelyn, known as Miss Evelyn, whose great friend was Clara Butt. Miss Evelyn's cottage at Pednor was always being visited by theatrical friends and they all helped raise funds by giving charity performances. Baroness de Bush lived at

Pednor and she put on charity Shakespearean plays to raise money. Chesham tradespeople gave their support, as did the surrounding villages.

The Big Bazaar of 1920 deserves comment. It was first to be held at Mr Harrington's Pednor house, thereafter at Mr Hart's Ballinger Grove. It was a truly ambitious affair. As well as twelve stalls for produce, the following slide shows were proposed: fortune telling, Aunt Sally, clock golf and pony rides. A maypole dance was to be given by the village children. Pottery was to be bought in bulk from Doultons for resale, as were baskets from Barnstaple. A band was hired and the start of a pernicious custom, Mr. Young of Lee Common Schools was invited to run the games and sports.

Things were not done by half in those days. Today the Hall advertises with posters at the two local shops, one goes outside the Hall, plus a few flapping on local tree outposts. However, in 1920, posters advertising the Bazaar were put up in Chorleywood, Chalfont St. Giles, Amersham, Chesham, Great Missenden and Wendover as well as local villages. Finger posts were to be erected. The venue of the Bazaar had to be changed. Mr Harrington of Pednor House was compelled to leave the country so Ballinger Grove was the new site. The Bazaar was insured against the contingency of rain with Lloyds underwriters. Well did it rain?... but of course! In August the insurance company paid a further "ex gratis" amount of £20, making a profit of £111.2.10d.

In July 1921 Captain Stewart-Liberty reported that he had decided upon the land he was prepared to give. The land he gave was called The Piece, it boasted a stile and was the villagers unofficial meeting place and so was a happy choice. Mr Forbes, the honorary architect, drew up his plans in August 1922, the foundation stone was laid with a copy of The Times and £1 underneath it. The Hall was built within the space of four months. Wrights of Missenden were the builders and Dorothy Evan's grandfather, Mr Joseph Evans, was amongst many local men who helped to build it.

250 invitation cards were issued for the opening ceremony. There was an address in vellum to Mr Forbes, the architect, which stated that "your idea of a Buckinghamshire Barn has been most successful". When the day of unveiling and dedication of the Roll of Honour took place in June 1924 (presumably they had to wait for planning permission) the Hall was being enjoyed to the full. It is hard to imagine how the village had existed without it. All those who were invited to the unveiling ceremony were presented with a photograph of the tablet and a souvenir programme of the order of ceremony.

The next target of the Hall was a kitchen. In 1925 a fete was organised at Jenkins Field at the crossroads, South Heath. Six tents, a marquee and Halton Brass Band was hired. There was a horticultural show that was so successful that a society was decided to be formed at Ballinger. There was a "trial of Ballinger flitch" and old English dress (ie smocks) were worn. Buses were put on to transport the crowds of visitors.

The successor to Ballinger Grange School, the Garden School, run by Mrs Nicholls, did much to help. They put on dances and playlets - they were mainly out of door performances - part of the Isadora Duncan cult. There are people in the village today who remember the fun they had as children acting in the plays organised by Mrs Nicholls and giving dancing displays on Saturday afternoons. Some still remember Red Riding Hood, Beauty and the Beast and Snow White ... and being a bluebell. Miss Gomme's young ladies would not have approved perhaps of their more bohemian successors, but they certainly had fun.

All social events seemed to flourish in the 1920s. The dances at the Hall were so fully packed that half the people had to watch while the others danced - there was not enough room for them all to stand up. In 1926 a "nicely worded" notice displayed at the Hall asked those who left the dance late at night not to speak in too loud a voice.

The records of the early days of the Hall show that it was fully appreciated. They were dances and balls held on the finest floor in Bucks. There was a village orchestra under the leadership of Mr Grover. It was a 20-30 piece orchestra and it put on a fine repertoire of classical and popular music. There was a Men's Club, Whist Drives, a Christmas party for the local children with a tree and presents, plays organised by the Ballinger Grange School. They were practise dances on the first and third Thursday and a big dance on the last Saturday of the month. Penny Readings were given, there were the senior and junior village players, concerts - the list is endless.

To be continued...

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Part II

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Part 1 covered the founding of the Hall and the very earliest years. Good times and the Depression were to follow. Now we continue until the Second World War arrives.

To picture the Hall in those early days, it consisted of the main hall heated by an Army stove and lit by oil lamps. The seating capacity was 200 (that is Church Allowance - they must have packed them in, in those days). Perhaps it is no surprise that in 1923 there were ventilation problems, a ventilator had to be put in the roof and the two end windows were made to open. The stage of the Hall was originally at the opposite end to its present situation.

In 1923 the Women's Institute was formed and activities in the Hall increased. In 1924 the WI organised a gymnastic display given by Mr Clay and his company of Ladies & Gentlemen - the proceeds were to go to provide library cupboards. The WI was active in holding American Tea Parties and organising Caledonian Markets which made a fine yearly profit. Initially there were 59 members and the WI handicrafts met twice a week; there was a fine drama group which competed in the Aylesbury Festivals. There was cooperation with the Lee in organising a barn dance in aid of Lee Common Schools.

The Ballinger Boy Scouts Troop used the Hall extensively. There was a library where over 100 books were lent at 2d a volume. The Children's Christmas Tea became an annual event held on Boxing Day. The fete also became an annual event and a RAF display of 330 men attracted crowds in 1927. The addition to the Hall and the new stage were soon paid for. Also in 1927, four hanging lamps, two wall lamps and a storm proof light were purchased. The hard-worked caretaker was paid an extra 2/6 a week for cleaning and lighting the lamps. The orchestra was sometimes distressed by the lamps' smoke.

Activities increased each year. In 1927 the broadcast of the Albert Hall Armistice performance was relayed to the Hall - a great event in pioneer broadcasting. The sporting life flourished. A Ballinger Cricket Club was formed. Mr Pearce lent his field for the football club. Badminton was played, in spite of the tie bars. The Mission Room affairs were always closely interwoven with the Hall. Mr Kendall's name must bring back many grateful memories. There was a Children's Choir and a Children's Social Club. There are mentions of a concert given by Lee Common School to raise £120 for repairs to the school roof. Another concert was put on to raise money for electricity for Great Missenden Church. In 1929 electricity was installed in the Hall. A great attraction was Miss Newell's folk dancing and later, square dances were the rage. In 1931 The Rover Scouts were asked to wear sand shoes to help preserve the floor. Matting was used to cover the floor for functions that might cause damage. The condition of the Hall floor was often eulogised upon. Devoted service by Mrs Barrett, 25 years by Miss Pearce - stoking the coke boiler three times a day - Mrs Gooderham, Mrs Hearn, Miss Evans are just a few to whom looking after the Hall was not just a job but a service to the community.

Central heating was installed in 1931. To raise funds for this and a storage hut, a dog show was held by Mrs Carlo Clark. This was a day to remember. Tea was to be served in the Hall. The ladies who were to do the teas were so enraptured by the entries for the show that they forgot the time. To their horror, when they came panting over to the Hall to serve the Teas, they could not get in the front entrance as the queues of people were too thick. Instead the helpers had to make an undignified entrance through the back window, to the detriment of their petticoats.

Those were the fat days for the Hall. Unfortunately, lean days were to follow. The general depression of 1931 showed its effect on the fundraising. All shows suffered, the orchestra was not so well attended and dances fell off. Life became more earnest, (even a physical culture class was started in 1932). In May 1932, it was recorded that no activities resulted in profits and overall the Hall now cost £2.2.0d a week to run. It was proposed that the Hall be shut for three months except for use by the Horticultural Society, WI and the Maypole Display. Those concerned in activities must undertake clearing and cleaning. Mrs Barnett took one weeks' notice. The AGM of the Hall that year recorded that the Hall cost £12 a month to run. Therefore, every time it was used expenses must be covered. It was resolved that the Hall must be used only on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Any committee using the Hall should defray the cost. The Men's Club stopped temporarily. There were many misunderstandings over the Hall's problems due to the depression. There were hurt feelings over the idea that the profit motive was having to outweigh the goodwill principle. The WI, under the redoubtable Mrs Hampton, the Scouts and Mr Dwight seem to have kept the Hall's head above water, though the RC Woodland School under Miss Wood's guidance put on a wonderful effort with shows. The Christmas Story was a wonderful success. The British Legion too, remained closely linked with the Hall. Also we hear of Mrs Hampton's plea for certain books lying idle in the Hall to be passed on to the Isolation Hospital. Was the library not well used? Nevertheless, all was not gloom and despondency - 1935 was the date of King George V's Jubilee and there were fancy dress parades with a maypole and decorated wagons. In 1935, Mr Hampton, who emerges from the minute books as a kindly, thoughtful benefactor to the village, retired after 13 years in the chair. The minute book also says that the village orchestra just missed making history by being the first village hall to record over the air - it does not say how or why.

The Coronation was celebrated and a flagstaff presented by Captain Stewart-Liberty- the tallest tree from the fir plantation - was borne up the hill on the backs of local men. It was debarked, erected and was Cyril Dwight the first one to shin up it?

The Scouts built a bonfire opposite the Bull - it was a huge, vast bonfire, so big that the Scouts made tunnels in it, walked into the middle of it and lit the underneath with tapers - very dangerous - and the bonfire burned for two days. The Scouts were often highly praised throughout the years for their selfless help for the Hall. However, the lean years saw the end of their use of the Hall. They were banished to the bird houses next to Mr Haddock's. Later, they used the Scouts Hut on the way to Herbert's Hole. The Ballinger Boys' Club never really seems to have got its foot over the threshold of the Hall. It had to be affiliated to Lee Youth Club. When Miss Abraham of Great Missenden wanted the Hall for the Brownies in 1938, she was offered the billiard room for three shillings a night. This must have been too much, because they ended up meeting over the stables what is now Mr Lawrie's house.

The last AGM before the war broke out was on ways and means of enticing the public to the Hall. The first resolution the Committee made after the outbreak of the war was that meetings were to be held on moonlit nights because of blackout. A message from Captain Stewart-Liberty said that Ballinger Hall was the finest of its kind in the country and he hoped that in the troubled days to come the people of the district would make good use of it to keep up their spirits and morale. Dances were organised by the scouts, there were Red Cross dances, First Aid lectures, Keep Fit classes and it was used as an equipment store and an evacuation centre. Books were disposed of to troops and comforts sent to the BEF from Hall funds. 200 lbs of jam were made in 1940 by the Preservation Centre operated by the WI. Canning and camouflage nets became Ballinger's war effort.

The war years saw a big influx in the population of Ballinger. Pearsons and Newnes, the publishers, operated from Ballinger Grange and Moss Empires were Ballinger Grove. There were troops stationed all around and land girls at Frith Hill. There were dances and socials, local talent shows and land girls' recitations.

But then the war really arrived...

To be continued

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Part III

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This is the final part of the Hall history, as originally written. It takes the story to the end of the sixties.

Ballinger had the first bombs of the war, (Friday before the August Bank Holiday 1940) that were inspected by Sir Winston Churchill and hordes of sightseers. Mr Meadows was Air Raid Warden and Mr Garrett his Deputy and there were four hourly patrols. Blackout was the biggest problem and the Hall got its fair share of warnings before, in 1940, it was permanently blacked out. That meant that whoever used it had to leave it protected. There were no shelters in the village recorded. On 13th of October 1943 a Thanksgiving Service was proposed by Mr Kendall for Ballinger people's safe deliverance from firebombs recently dropped by a British aircraft in distress. The bombs were dropped in the fields behind the pig farm that used to exist. The cottages behind the Hall had to be evacuated for the night and the village people met in the Chapel to hear the apologies of the RAF officer in charge. The bombs were dropped in cases and the bomb disposal unit stayed in the Pheasant for a fortnight. Their job - a rumour has it that the deputy warden unofficially helped - was to collect the bombs, set the fuse ... and run like hell! Flying bombs also seemed to enjoy coasting through the valleys.

During the war it was a common sight to see horses shod outside the Old Forge. Many people still commuted to London by bicycle to the station and paying £6.15.6d a quarter to Marylebone. The WI Caledonian Market produced astounding profits. On 8th September 1943, it was recorded that the Hall benefited by £35 and the Russian Charity Funds by £100. Mrs Hampton received a letter from Lady Churchill thanking the people for this effort. There was a coming of age party, a concert and a WI birthday party. Films were shown every Monday at the Hall, proceeds going to the Merchant Navy. There were whist drives, bingo (we think) and monies paid to the Hall by the Garden Allotments, the YMCA, ATC, concerts, ambulance dances and police dances as well as Forces Dances. Poor Miss Pearce had to stay at the Hall until the end of these dances. Once when she had a bad cold and trusted an officer to lock up, etc, she found all the lights left on and the doors left open - so that after that she waited until the end each time and her faithful dog came every time to call for her and escort her home!

The end of the war heralded the VE celebrations. In May 1945 there was a Children's Victory Party and, on a shockingly wet day, the Peace Day celebrations in June 1946. The Drama Section started again, the Sport Section was formed and a Youth Club started. In 1946 Mr Lloyd, chairman throughout the war, was presented with a beautifully bound volume of the history of Buckinghamshire that had belonged to Mr Hampton. Mrs Hampton made the presentation as a surprise gift and all feelings were deeply touched by the occasion.

The years after the war saw the Hall being used fully again. Square Dancing, Old Time Dancing, Bingo, Whist Drives, Children's plays, the Brownies, all flourished because of the hard work of the younger members. The Hall was asked for its use by the Brownies in December 1947 and they were soon a thriving concern under the leadership of the then Miss Bignell.

It was not easy to finance the Hall even though activities increased. In 1947 the AGM was told that the Hall was only kept going because of the £100 given by the WI. However in 1949, the Hall invested £119 in loudspeaker equipment and £10 in records and needles. They decided to charge £2.2.0d for the use of this and many committee hours were spent debating who should be allowed to operate this precious acquisition. The film shows were still being put on, though an objection was made to the H certificate films being shown. Mr Kendall's Sports Club flourished, there were concerts given by the Brownies and the Guides, with much work on scenery and costumes by willing parents. The Scouts and the Cricket Club vied with each other in their bookings for dances. The British Legion functions were held in the Hall, Chesham Theatre Club put its productions on here. There were regular horticultural shows and supporting fetes. In December 1949 the Guides requested that they be allowed to use the Hall on Wednesdays because the numbers were too much for Miss Pearson's house and it was too dark to go to the Scout Hut.

Feelings were aroused because it seemed to take so long to commemorate the losses in the recent war. Mr Drury designed a memorial that was unveiled in November 1950 by the Chief Constable Colonel Warren. The money had been raised by house to house collection. 1951 saw a rather happy innovation, a Workers Party. The title conjours up pictures of the red flag, but it was really a get together for all the committee members and supporters. Messrs Stevenson, Singleton and Drury put on a picture exhibition and Mr Drury submitted his drawings of the memorial plaque to the 1951 Royal Academy. In 1952 Miss Newell ran a very popular Square Dancing club to add to the fixture list of the Hall. Miss Gray (who ran the village shop) made a suggestion that the library, (boxes with fiction in one and non-fiction in the other), stay open on Thursday evenings from 7-8pm. Miss Halse nobly agreed.

In 1952 an auction sale of parts of the Lee Manor Estate was held in the Hall. The recreation field was sold to the Parish Council for £260. There were Coronation celebrations, with another parade from the South Heath crossroads and a TV set in the Hall for the public viewing of the crowning. Children's parties were held, funded by house to house collection of funds. 120 children attended in 1954. A new interest was proposed - WEA music classes. Whether they took place or not is not known. (The minute books are sometimes like our signposts - they point the direction, but sometimes never reach their destination!) Beetle Drives were the rage. A Book of Remembrance was lovingly designed by Mr Drury but it is now lost. Scottish dancing was tried. Again a dip in fortunes, closure of the Hall was threatened and an appeal for funds started, which again was responded to.

In 1956 a new sports pavilion was proposed, it was suggested that material from the old Scout Hut at Herberts Hole be used. The pavilion was officially opened in July 1956. The Hall was given £100 from the Parish Council in 1958 for a memorial to Miss Wood of Woodlands School, Ballinger Grange. It is believed that it was spent on stage curtains. Certainly drama started up in 1959.

An activity which still flourished was the canning centre, run by the WI, but an activity that temporarily died was the Brownie pack, due to the ill health of Miss Stevens. The craze of Bingo hit Ballinger Hall in the '60s and in 1960 the Ballinger Junior Players put on a wonderful show. The Horticultural Society went into a decline from 1959 to 1962 because of lack of helpers available, but revived when the local interest rallied. The 1960s saw a healthy dramatic club/society, The Ballinger Players established. Also firmly rooted was the play group for pre-

school children, which was later taken under the care of the management committee. It is to be hoped that, as early experience is supposed to form the character, so the happy times that the infant population have had in this Hall will provide incentive for them to grow into good community members of Ballinger Hall in years to come. If the study of the history of the Hall teaches us anything surely it reflects the truth that a committee is as good as its members and that they are a reflection of the community spirit at the time. The Hall has had its ups and downs in the past, but it is always kept on going. Not a bad principle to follow when times are hard.

The main aim of the Hall has always been to create somewhere for local people to meet together to foster common interests and found friendships and community spirit ... long may it go on doing so.