

DORNEY'S FIRST VILLAGE HALL

The village hall in Dorney Reach will celebrate its fiftieth birthday next year. This was Dorney's second village hall. When it was opened, in October 1970, the ribbon was cut by Miss Bennett, former headmistress of Dorney school. She had been an active member of the committee which had run the first village hall since that opened in 1930. In the parish magazine in the summer of 1960, she recalled the opening ceremony thirty years previously and wondered how many people in Dorney remembered it as vividly as she did. I wonder, now, how many residents remember the old village hall at all?

In common with other villages, in the late 1920s Dorney began to feel the need for a centre where social events could be held. The first steps to providing a hall for Dorney were taken in the spring of 1929. King Edward VII Hospital in Windsor was putting up for sale three huts which had been used as temporary accommodation after a fire. Fund raising started, and in the autumn a bid for £140 for one of the buildings was accepted.

The building was made of corrugated iron, 86 feet long and 20 feet wide. Dorney now had to dismantle it, transport it to the village, re-erect it and fit it out. The site chosen for the hall was next to the school at the very end of Dorney village, the last building before the common as Southfield Close had not then been built. The land, which formed part of Dorney Court Farm, was donated by Colonel Palmer.

The building arrived in January 1930, and T Quarterman from White Heather Garage then began the work to erect it and make it ready for use – drainage, water supply and coal stoves for heating. A strong gale blew the building down while it was being put up, causing some damage, and a shortage of funds delayed completion.



Eventually, the hall had its grand opening on 26 July – not quite finished, but good enough. The event started at 4pm, when Lady Florence Duncombe, from Taplow, performed the opening ceremony. This was followed by a Baby Show (30 entrants!), a garden fete in the grounds of Dorney House, and a boxing display. To finish, villagers enjoyed a whist drive, a concert and dancing.

At this time, there was no electricity supply to Dorney village. So, coal and coke had to be delivered for heating, kindling wood provided, and lamps used for lighting, at least some of which were oil lamps. Another familiar village name, Mr and Mrs Oxlade, were asked to become the first caretakers, their responsibilities including lighting the fires and lamps when required.

At last the hall was ready to host events. A stage was provided; there was a piano and fifty chairs. The first social activity was a whist drive on 18 October 1930. Many events were held to raise money for hall funds, tickets being sold by the village baker and grocer, Mr Barksfield. A rummage sale in November raised over £14. In its first year, the hall hosted plays, concerts, dances, socials and a children's party, as well as the popular whist drives. In the summer months, the cricket team which played on the Common used the hall for its teas.

As funds allowed, small improvements were made. Gramophone records were purchased, though for the dances a live band was hired; a wireless licence was paid for; a clock was installed. Electricity arrived in 1932, and electric lights were fitted. Card tables with felt tops were bought in 1936, and new playing cards and a tea urn in 1939. A flagpole was put up in 1937, perhaps in preparation to celebrate the coronation of King George VI.

The autumn of 1939 found the hall windows papered over for the wartime blackout. The hall continued to see social functions during the war, but it also found itself used for the evacuees, as a temporary schoolroom, and for Home Guard exercises. Some Royal Engineers were billeted there in November 1942, and there were fund raising events in aid of "Salute the Soldier" and "Wings for Victory". The end of the war was celebrated by a Victory Social on 9 May 1945 and a Victory Dance on 1 June. These were followed by meetings of the Labour, Liberal and Conservative parties, as a general election loomed.

Post war years saw wedding receptions, junior Red Cross, film shows, and table tennis in the hall. A boys' club (15-21!) and a WI branch were started. The devastating floods in the winter of 1947 were marked by a flood relief concert. New cups and saucers, a tea urn, glasses and chairs were bought; Woolworths was the go-to store for crockery and glassware. In the 1950s, dressmaking and gloving classes were held. The horticultural show was a July fixture; the young wives had a social, and the old people were given a party.

A stand-alone extension was added at the back of the hall in 1955, put up by the Quarterman family who continued to be responsible for most of the hall maintenance. In 1959 the school moved to new premises in Dorney Reach. The old school building was offered as a community centre, but the suggestion was rejected as too costly to run. Heating in the hall was still provided by coal stove. An oil heater was tried but was not successful. It was not until 1959 that the first electric heaters were installed. The décor of the hall interior at this time was pink and white.

The 1960s saw an increase in private parties at the hall, often hired by non-Dorney residents. It was perhaps this that resulted in a petition from locals in May 1962. Southfield Close had been built between the hall and the common, and people who lived there were annoyed by visitors to the village hall parking on their footpaths and verges and creating disturbance when they left to drive home late at night. Serious consideration was given to converting the old school playground into a car park. This proved unworkable, as access would have been impossible; the schoolhouse was still occupied by Mr Eastgate, headmaster of the new school, and the former school was being used as a library store.

Pressure to replace the hall began to grow through 1962 and 1963. As well as lacking a car park, the hall was "draughty, difficult to heat and inconvenient in many ways". Frequent repairs were needed, among which dealing with two burst water pipes and guttering damaged by heavy snow during the severe winter in early 1963. Initially a plan was mooted to build a new hall on the old school playground and use the existing hall site as a car park. In the end, as we know, the position chosen for the new hall was in Dorney Reach, near the new school. While the new hall was being planned and constructed, the old hall continued to be patched and mended, to fulfil its functions until the new one was ready. Finally, the district council snapped up the old hall site to use for their plans to connect the village to mains drainage, and the old hall was demolished.

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