

## History of Sunningdale Village Hall



The Village Hall in Church Road has been an integral part of the Sunningdale village scene for a century. But it nearly wasn't built there at all, and indeed that whole corner of the village could have looked very different if Victorian developers had had their way. For many years before the hall was built St John's College, Cambridge, who owned Broomhall Farm and the allotments (which then spread across the present school playing field) had tried to find backers to enable them to cover all those green acres with houses. And at one stage in the mid-1890s a separate scheme was actually agreed to build a tobacconist's shop next to the school on the hall site.

The shop plan fell through at the last moment. By chance shortly afterwards in 1897, the year of Queen Victoria's 60th anniversary on the throne, the Parish Council decided to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee by building a village hall. When they approached St John's College about a possible site the college thought it would be an ideal way of using the plot originally earmarked for the shop.

Unfortunately the hall plan also bit the dust. The College was unwilling to pay for the construction, and in the absence of a wealthy sponsor the Parish Council didn't have sufficient funds. Ten years later the Parish Council had another go, and in January 1908 local architect T. Leonard Roberts presented detailed plans for a hall with an attached parish room (now the toilets and kitchen). The hall with a wood block floor had a stage right across the southern end, and a main entrance from Church Road.

Later that year a wealthy local stockbroker, Henry Alexander Trotter, offered to fund it as The Trotter Memorial Hall in memory of his late father who had been a benefactor of Holy Trinity Church and one of the original trustees of Sunningdale Golf Club.

In April 1909 the Windsor & Eton Express reported: "On a site near the School ..... a building is about to be erected by Mr H.A. Trotter of King's Beeches, for parish purposes in memory of his father.... It is to contain two rooms, a large one provided with platform for parochial entertainments, and capable of accommodating 250 people, and a smaller one for mothers' meetings, religious classes and objects connected with the Parish Church ..... Tenders for erection have been invited, and the work is expected soon to be put in hand."

Work proceeded apace, and on 4 December 1909 the same paper reported: "The fortnightly meeting of the Debating Society took place on Thursday evening last week (Nov 23), and was held in the new Parish Hall, not yet formally opened."

At the time the country was gripped by a bitter General Election after the House of Lords had controversially rejected the Budget of the then Liberal Government, which sought higher taxes from the wealthy to fund the new idea of state pensions.



1. The Village Hall in 1909

Both main parties held large election meetings in the new hall before Christmas. The Liberals praised the “fine” new hall. A week later the chairman of the Conservative meeting said how grateful they were to Mr Harry Trotter for the gift of the “beautiful hall.”

In January 1910 the newspaper reported the hall’s first acoustic test with a concert by Sunningdale Choral and Orchestral Society, and concluded: “The result proved eminently satisfactory, and the lighting and seating arrangements were everything that could be desired”.

There is no mention of a formal opening ceremony but by the end of January the newspaper was carrying weekly reports of a variety of events in the hall: political debates, religious talks, lantern lectures, concerts including black and white minstrel shows, whist drives, and children’s events.

Trotter gave the hall to the parish, and in assigning the remainder of the 99 year lease for the site and building from St John’s College to the Vicar and other local Trustees, he agreed that the hall should be called ‘The Parish Rooms’ rather than ‘The Trotter Memorial Hall’ as originally suggested.

The hall obviously enjoyed a good first year as the Church Magazine reported a meeting of the trustees in November 1910 which said: “On the secretary devolves the difficult task of finding dates for all the people who wish to use the rooms; especially the smaller room. Also the more troublesome task of meeting all the expenses and at the same time letting the various organisations have the rooms for meetings at a low price ..... the applications for the rooms show that they may meet the needs of the parish.”

In 1934 when the Coronation Memorial Institute, built a couple of years after the Village Hall and by this time known as the Working Men’s Institute, was in financial difficulty there was a plan to close it and merge it with the Village Hall. The vicar sought legal advice and was told that the Parish Council had to keep the CMI as a reading room or club and had no power to dispose of it.

The hall continued to do good business in the inter-war years, and in 1938 the original wood block floor in the main hall was replaced with a “sprung” dance-floor – solid maple boards on battens – which is still going strong today.

After World War II the hall experienced many difficulties, and the committee minutes from 1944-1985 show a constant struggle to maintain and improve the premises, and a poor level of bookings largely due to the decrepit state of the building.

The trustees and management committee were forever drawing up improvement plans only to defer them or go for cheaper options. For instance in 1949 there was a plan to spend some £5,000 on the kitchen and cloakrooms, an extension and a new boiler and heating system. Only £550 of work was completed.

Two block bookings kept the hall going during this time. Holy Trinity School used it for lessons until 1958 and school dinners until 1979, and a commercial entertainment promoter used it for twice weekly dances throughout the 60s and early 70s (although these caused a huge nuisance in the village with noise, parking problems and drunken behaviour). In 1961 the trustees considered various options if they couldn't make the hall pay for itself. They ruled out selling it (as a hall), because it would no longer be a community facility and could attract an even worse clientele than the dances had.

But they did enter into discussions with the Parish Council about the Council running the hall. They also offered it to the school. These plans came to nothing and in 1969, with bookings low and a large programme of work required, the trustees asked the Parish Council to put the future of the hall to the public. The general view was that funds must be raised to keep the hall as an amenity for the village. Some improvements were carried out, but by 1977 the trustees, facing urgent repairs and realising a huge amount needed to be spent to make the hall viable, drew up a £16,000 programme of works and set up a fund raising committee. Again, some of the work was completed, including a new roof. But in April 1983 the financial situation was again very worrying with a drop in bookings, not helped by the state of the hall and unfinished improvements.

The hall was in danger of becoming a liability in the community, and with the electrics and parts of the rear floor in a dangerous state, something had to be done. The then vicar was reluctant to have any further involvement with the hall, and a new "secular" management committee was elected in December 1985.



2. The Village Hall Today

This committee set about an ambitious fund raising programme, including a balloon race, barbeque and barn dance. Over the years they raised some £75,000; built a new rear hall, laid an asphalt car park, replaced the main kitchen and built a second kitchen and toilets, and carried out a running programme of repairs.

This transformed the hall, and the long-serving bookings secretary May Heard found

a huge increase in hirings.

The pre-school permanently booked the new rear hall during the weekday times, and helped with improvements to the premises and grounds. Many local organisations with activities as wide ranging as badminton, healing, keep fit, karate and ballet made block bookings. The Art Society took over the entire premises twice a year for their weekend art exhibitions. National Blood did the same every month for blood donors. There were countless one-off hirings for parties and events. At elections the hall became a polling station.

In 1989 the hall acquired a new landlord. St John's College got planning permission to build three houses on the front acre of the allotments adjoining Church Road. In return for giving up its lease on those allotments the Parish Council was granted the freehold of the rest of the allotment site and the village hall and car park, provided it remained a community village hall. Then in 2008 the 99 year lease expired, leading to lengthy discussions about the future of the hall.

Eventually it was decided that the CMI, which had been restored and re-launched as a community facility by the Church following the demise of the Working Men's Club, would take over the day-to-day running of the hall in conjunction with the hall committee and the Parish Council.

Everyone connected with both buildings, along with the Parish Council and Holy Trinity Church, believe that this is the sensible way forward: one administration, but two different village venues providing affordable facilities for the community. Hopefully the hall will continue to flourish, and provide an important local service, long into its second century.

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