

A Brief History of Farrington Gurney Memorial Hall

There was a great surge in Village Hall building across the country at the end of the First World War. The rate at which new Village Halls appeared across Great Britain in the 1920's was the highest ever recorded and well over double that achieved in any decade since. The impetus would have been the desire to provide a memorial to honour those who gave their lives in the war together with a national drive to develop social & educational provision in rural areas coupled with the availability of redundant Army and RAF huts at the end of the war.

The original Farrington Gurney Memorial Hall was erected in 1922, the land on which it was erected having been purchased by the Trustees*¹ of The Farrington Gurney War Memorial on the 19th April 1921 for the sum of £12. 10s 0d. The original Hall was demolished in 1997 and the parcel of land on which it stood now forms part of the new Hall overflow car park.

(*¹The 1921 Trustees of The Farrington Gurney War Memorial were Henry Hodges Mogg of The Manor, Farrington Gurney, Harry Thomas Blinman of The Parsonage, Farrington Gurney, Herbert Miles of Home Farm, Farrington Gurney, John Harrington of Ruett Farm, Farrington Gurney, Charles Perry of Sunnyside and William George Hobbs of Farrington Villa.)

The original building was brought from Sutton Veny Army Camp, which was situated on Salisbury Plain between Eastleigh Wood and Sutton Veny village. The timber building originally formed one ward of a large hospital complex which had provided over 930 beds for wounded UK and Commonwealth soldiers injured in the WWI.

During the First World War, the YMCA supported the troops and YMCA huts provided soldiers with food and a place to rest on the frontline or at home in military camps and railway stations. At the same time the YMCA embarked on a massive education program for soldiers, which eventually became the Army Education Corps.

The planning that brought the building to Farrington Gurney would have been a combined undertaking of the new Trustees of the FG War Memorial and members of the local Miners Welfare Institute who would have purchased the building from the YMCA, who in turn, had been appointed by the government to administer and dispose of redundant Army and RAF huts and buildings in the post first world war period. There are many anecdotal stories of the enthusiastic team of Farrington Gurney residents who went to Sutton Veny, dismantled the redundant hospital hut and brought it to Farrington Gurney where it was re-erected as the first Memorial Hall. Even the original cast iron heating stove came with the building and it too was re-installed and stood in the back corner of the Hall for many years. The building was opened in 1923 & dedicated as our village Memorial Hall in a ceremony which took place in 1924.

Regarding the origins of its location in the village, we know that when erected it replaced a public reading room that had stood on the same Back Lane site (now Church Lane) since late Victorian times and it is also interesting to recall that it was initially known as the "Red Triangle hut" due to its YMCA connection and it would originally have had a red triangle YMCA sign over the door. Over the years however that association was lost and it became affectionately known by the village simply as 'The Hut'.

The initial scheme of management by which the Hut was administered in its early years has been lost but at some point the management representatives bought the free hold of the land on which the hut stood thereby securing its future. Later in the 1960's the Hall was formally

registered as a charity and from then on it was administered by 4 trustees and a management committee operating under Charity Commission regulations.

Over the years there has been much evidence to confirm that the hut did fulfil the social and educational objectives that had originally motivated the village in the 1920's:-

The village primary school used the hut facilities extensively with classes taking place and school dinners being served in the old hut from 1953. The excitement of primary school Musical Movement classes in the Hut broadcast by the BBC Home Service on Thursday mornings is remembered by many, who would have listened via the old valve radio that was connected to a primitive public address system on the side of the stage.

The British Legion held Remembrance Sunday memorial services over many years and the hut contained a formal British Legion War Memorial plaque.

The hut was known far and wide for its excellent dance floor which provided just the right amount of flex to ensure that dancers never got tired feet or cramp. George & Eva Dando, who were caretakers from the 1930's until the late 60's, would spend hours polishing the dance floor to a mirror shine on Fridays & Saturdays and administering chalk powder to provide the optimum slippery surface for serious ballroom dancing. The dance floor area of the hut was larger than our current hall and this fact coupled with a large fixed stage facility, capable of accommodating even the biggest of "big bands" from the era, ensured that dance events at the hut were the envy of the district. Consequently these were very regularly organised, some being by invitation only, and over many years regularly attracting attendees from a catchment area well beyond Farrington Gurney.

In the late 50's and 60's the hut didn't miss out on the bingo craze that swept the country. The large size of the building accommodated a big turn out and facilitated equally big prize money such that bingo soon became the main revenue stream allowing the committee to buy an adjacent building plot and extend the parking facilities. This in turn drew even more players until the hut could barely accommodate everyone and some overflow players had to enjoy their bingo evening in the adjacent "Green Room" skittle alley, located out in the playing field, and connected to the hut only by a public address system and microphone so that the bingo caller could be heard and receive live feedback from the Green Room. The bingo atmosphere was electric and eerily silent due the ambience of the bingo callers microphone as, game after game, number by number, the caller brought his audience closer and closer to potentially winning the big "House" jackpot !

The Hut and adjacent Green Room tried to provide for sporting activities in the village and over the years the Hut cloak room and toilet facilities were slowly improved for use by football and cricket teams playing on the immediately adjacent pitches, however, the facilities fell very far short of those we now take for granted in the new building.

Some of the more obscure activities that had been regular events in the old hall over the years included amateur boxing, which required the original ceiling tie beams to be modified and raised to create the extra headroom needed for a boxing ring. The hut also hosted dog training classes and for many years a poultry and rabbit show was a major annual event that attracted exhibitors from all over the country.

From the 1920's up until the early 1970's this ongoing success enabled various improvements to be undertaken to the building. In 1953 the original men's cloak room was converted into a kitchen to facilitate school meals being served in the hut. At the same time an agreement was reached that allowed the school to use the eastern end of the hut as a class room during term time.

A bar was added in the early 1950's. A front porch entry lobby and bingo ticket kiosk was added in the late 1950's and there were further improvements to the lobby, toilets and cloak room & showers in the 1960's. The final notable addition to the hut was the building of a social club extension in the early 1970's, the club quickly became very popular with village residents and provided a lifeline that kept the hut viable for another decade or so but only just. However, the unfortunate fact of the matter was that from the 1980's onward the hut began to fall into decline, the popularity and income from its earlier activities fell away, its facilities began to be overshadowed by newer hall facilities in adjacent villages and slowly the material condition of the hut deteriorated until by the early 1990's it looked as though the building was beyond economical repair and would have to be demolished.

So it was, that in 1993 the Village once again got together in the same spirit that must have prevailed in the 1920's; this time to discuss the imminent closure of a much loved building that had served the village for over 70 years and to speculate if and how we might take on the huge task of replacing it.

A village survey was undertaken and there was clearly much support for an attempt to refurbish or replace the hut and the initial public meetings on the subject held in 1993 led the Trustees and committee to set up a new sub-committee to take forward a "New Hall" project. Although nobody realized it at the outset, all the ingredients for success were potentially in place; most importantly, we had a large and enthusiastic local community dedicated and prepared to embark on fundraising activities which would in turn be key to unlocking grant funding. Also a small nucleus of people, led by John Russell MBE and Clinton Dando were prepared to undertake the nitty gritty financial & project management aspects of the enterprise and crucially we had the support of Wansdyke District Council and the offices of the Duchy of Cornwall both of whom would be key players in ensuring our success. It wasn't long before it was realised that the costs associated with the scheme would be very much greater than we had anticipated and we were very fortunate to have embarked upon the project at about the same time the new National Lottery came into being in November 1994. Much research into a lottery application was undertaken and consequently two applications were made for lottery funding in 1994, one to the Arts Council and one to the Sports council. These applications were successful and provided the key to progressing the project to a successful conclusion. None of these applications would have succeeded without the tireless energy of our village fundraisers who worked for 3 years constantly raising impressive amounts of money in the local community and demonstrating to prospective grant funding bodies that the New Farrington Gurney Hall project was a project worth backing.

Our new Memorial Hall was opened in 1995 having cost approximately £745000,00 to complete.