

Norman Pearce received this letter in 2008

R E Lewis' recollections of the building of the present Diddlebury Village Hall

DIDDLEBURY VILLAGE HALL 1949 – 2008

Although it is some sixty years ago, I still remember the building and construction of the village hall. Being 7/8/9 years old at the time, I was attending Diddlebury School five days a week and walked up the drive past the site every day. I was interested in the construction work and have been ever since.

The idea of a village hall came just after the end of the Second World War. At that time, there was only a 'clubroom' by the church that could be used for village functions.

By 1948 the project was well under way and it proved to be a community effort in the real sense. A small piece of land was given by Mr Vincent Shiers Wrigley, of Delbury Hall Estate – Grandfather of the present owner, Patrick Wrigley.

The piece of land selected, was the orchard opposite Church Farm - then farmed by Mr Sidney Corfield and his son, Brian.

During the Second World War, the parkland on either side of the main drive to Delbury Hall was requisitioned for use as an ammunition storage area. (This area was of significance to the village hall project.)

The ammunition was stored in steel 'huts' – rather like modern poly-tunnels. These semi-circular shelters consisted of about 20 sheets of corrugated steel, stacked on 3 courses of common or semi-engineering brick.

For speed of construction, the bricks were left loose and not held together by mortar. The huts were located in groups of 3 or 4, usually around trees. When filled with ammunition boxes, they were covered with camouflage netting and were difficult to see from the air.

Following D-Day in the summer of 1944, all the stored ammunition was taken away to be used in the advance through Europe. Soon after this the steel huts were removed, leaving only the bricks which were stacked in piles for collection. This never happened, and by 1948, my father, and other farmers with transport, combined with village folk to transfer the bricks to the site of the proposed village hall. At that time, it would have been virtually impossible to acquire new materials for such a project.

In the autumn of 1948, Mr Leonard Preece, who was entrusted with the building project, set out the general area of the new building. Again, a working party of village people, gave freely of their time in the evenings to remove the apple trees (for firewood) and then the turf and topsoil was removed from the area.

At this time, Delbury Hall and nearby Milford Lodge and Aston Hall, employed full-time garden staff. This much sought after topsoil was taken to these gardens and recycled into potting compost for future use.

During the early spring of 1949, the working party was again assembled. By this time, Mr Preece had set out the exact foundations of the hall using the well-tryed method of site boards, squares, nails and string lines.

I remember he always wore bib and brace overalls and a trilby hat. He also carried a yard long wooden measuring rule, which folded in three places, so he could carry it in a special pocket on his overalls.

The foundations were all hand dug and the subsoil was used to fill a hole or depression some 200 yards across the field alongside the site. After being excavated, the foundation trenches (footings) were pegged to the correct level. This involved hammering wooden pegs into the trench, leaving them 18 inches (0.5 m) high and levelling each one to the next. When the footing was filled with concrete, it was levelled and tamped to the top of the pegs, thus ensuring the concrete was of the correct depth and most important that the finished footings were level. The concrete was mixed on site, but I remember a large, very rusty concrete mixer being used, driven by a petrol engine and the word, Liner the name of its manufacturer, on the side. It was filled by hand shovel and the mixed concrete tipped into wheelbarrows and taken to the footings.

Soon after this, I remember two young men, came to help Mr Preece by cleaning some of the bricks and mixing mortar. (I think their names were Stan Sheen and Bert Price). They came on odd days, first one, and then the other. I think they had other jobs as well, but of course the work was only done on fine days – which seemed to be every day in those long hot summers.

Mr Preece soon had the foundations to oversight or damp course level and the area was concreted. I don't recall what was used for damp-proofing, but plastic sheeting had not been invented. They probably used a bitumastic felt type of material.

The work progressed with the walls going higher. Mr Preece made a dummy window-frame from wood, which was used to ensure that the holes were left for windows were all of the correct size. The steel framed windows were fitted later.

I remember by the autumn, the roof trusses were in place. I think a specialist roofing firm fixed the metal roof in place. At the time, no apex ventilation was allowed for.

Many times I attended functions on cold nights when the hall was full if people. The walls were running with condensation – has this ever been remedied?

There only remained the fitting out to be done. The hall was plastered using lime and plastering sand mixed onsite. I think it still has rougher textured walls, not the carlite browning and skim-smooth walls of more recent times.

I do not recall who fitted the doors or who built the stage. The kitchen was much smaller than the wooden extension now in place, but it had a serving hatch, fitted cupboards and two Belfast sinks.

I remember Mr Preece writing the small rendered date – 1950 above the entrance. Although it was still 1949, we were told it would not open until 1950, so that was the date decided on.

The finishing or fitting out of the village hall continued during the autumn and winter of 1949/50. I don't know who did this work, but there were local carpenters as well as those employed on Delbury Estate.

The floor is of particular interest. It was said at the time that it was taken from a ship what was being scrapped. I have always believed this was correct. During the 1930's there were many liners taking people around the world to various parts of the empire – it was the only way to get there.

During WW2 many of these liners were used as troop ships and hospital ships. When they were returned to their owners, many were found to be worn out beyond repair and scrapped. These cruise ships would have had floors similar to the village hall in the state rooms and dining areas.

I recently spoke with someone who thought the floor came from a country house which was being demolished. Both options were feasible, because many old houses were too large for their owners to maintain. Delbury Hall was reduced in size and nearby Corfton Hall was demolished in 1955/56 – too late to be of relevance to the village hall.

Whichever of these sources the floor came from, it was certainly reused material, for a floor of that quality could not have been found any other way in those austere days in the late 1940's.

Looking back, I now realise what a lot must have been going on in Diddlebury at that time. It was a time of hope and recovery after the war. As well as the village hall project, the council were building six council houses on land near the top of Mill Lane. Unlike our village hall, which was an in-house project, a firm from Church Stretton (John Bromley) was contracted to build the houses.

Also in the autumn of 1949, electricity came to Diddlebury. First, the high tension line was brought across from Ludlow via Sutton, then the transformers and low-tension lines were connected to various houses including the church and village hall. It was decided to install convector heaters in the village hall and they were fixed one under each window, down each side of the room.

Also by now, the stage had been constructed. This, together with the backstage took up nearly a quarter of the floor space. I remember a basic system of lighting was installed. It consisted of a row of red, green and white bulbs hung in a row above stage – they were controlled from a wall-mounted system of switches and control boxes. The idea was that different lighting effects – from dark graveyard scenes, to bright South Sea island effects – could be created from the entertainments planned. However, I do not know if it was ever fully understood or used.

Although the electric lines were in place by late 1949, I do not think the power was switched on until early 1950. By this time, the council houses were complete and it was decided to open the village hall later in the year.

There may have been some delay at that time because a 'fire curtain' was required to separate the stage from the rest of the hall. This could not be made locally so there may have been a delay in getting permission and having one made to order. However, one duly appeared, in the form of a steel roller shutter which could be wound up and down by turning a handle at the side of the stage. The main stage curtains were also hand operated.

The first event I remember was in 1950 (possibly before it was officially opened).

With the coming of electricity to the village, the MEB (Midlands Electricity board), put on a working display on modern, clean electrical appliances. A lady made cakes with a food mixer, and cooked them in an electric oven. Another demonstrated various vacuum cleaners by continually hoovering a piece of carpet, emptying the bag and repeating the process.

There were electric kettles, water heaters, wash boilers and irons, but no washing machines. There was, however, a refrigerator – but we were told that unlike the other items on show, this was a luxury item and supplies were limited.

The highlight of the evening, when it was getting dark was a 12 inch television which took about ten minutes to warm up. Television transmissions were only about three hours in the evening then, so my first TV viewing was of the transmitter mast and concentric circles of Alexandra Palace so favoured by the BBC as their test card.

However, a programme was transmitted that evening, and I remember it well. It was about the forthcoming Festival of Britain planned for 1951, and in particular the construction of the Dome of Discovery. Yes, they had a dome in those days, and this one was built on time, within budget and used successfully. After the Festival of Britain, it was dismantled and recycled into other products. Perhaps it should have been kept on; it might have inspired later dome construction.

Possibly others may recall the exact date the village hall was officially opened, but I recall a variety show was put on with each person doing their party piece. In particular, I remember Stan Sheen, who had helped to build the hall, did his impression of Stanley Holloway and recited his poem of Mr and Mrs Ramsbottom and the tale of Albert, their son.

I think the Craven Arms Male Voice Choir may have performed, and they did many times later.

For me, one of the great benefits of the village hall was felt in other ways. Each year, the school dentist arrived for two days. He would spend time drilling suspect teeth with his foot-operated treadle drill – without local anaesthetic. All very painful and totally unnecessary since our teeth were replaced by our adult teeth by the age of ten.

However, the joy when he set up shop in 1950. He had a new chair, complete with electric drill – still no local anaesthetic – but it made his attempts to repair the damage he had done previously, much easier and quicker to bear.

These are my recollections of the early days of Diddlebury village hall and the great community spirit that went into its construction. Most of the village men were employed by the Delbury Estate or the tenant farms thereon. They gave of their time freely, after having done their full day's work. Mr Preece, the master mason, who built the hall, was probably close to retirement age when he took on the task. I don't know how much he was paid or those who helped him, but there had been much fund raising in order to start the project in the first place.

Returning to the source of the bricks – there may well have been some ‘Admin’ buildings there such as offices and possibly a cookhouse. They would originally have been built in the conventional manner which would account for the cleaning of bricks that I recall seeing onsite.

The village hall as it was originally constructed did not have a car park as such until the 1960’s. The hall was approached through a gate in the iron fence on the original orchard. A short tarmac path led to the main doors, either side of which was grass with several shrubs planted. All this was kept in good order.

To the left of the hall, and backing onto the drive to the vicarage and school was a purpose built bicycle shed for about 30 cycles. In the early days, the majority of people attending the various functions at the hall, came by bicycle or walked. Few had motorcars – perhaps, six in the whole area.

For large events, such as whist drives and dances, a bus was run – or possibly two, by Fred Freeman or Eddie Austin who both ran local bus services.

These are my recollections of the events of 1948 – 1951. I was an 8-9 year old at the time, but I remember them well.

If I have missed out or unintentionally left out any details I stand corrected. It was a great time for the village; we all had hope for the future and there seemed to be order in our small world.

Mr Wrigley did not survive to see the hall completed, but there were others whom I remember – Rev. N.F.Tripp, and Mr James, the headmaster; people who we looked up to and set us standards by example, which have served us well in life.

For myself, I think the building of village hall started my interest in the construction industry, a career that I have enjoyed up until my retirement two years ago.

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