

While the Dry Drayton Village Hall remains closed due to coronavirus restrictions, we thought it would be fun to revisit how the current hall came to be. The history below was found in the village hall records, written in 1981 by long-time resident John Hacker.

The Village Hall

The old Village Institute, an ex-army hospital hut from the 1914-18 war, was purchased and delivered by a steam-driven lorry from Felixstowe for the sum of £70.

Mr Arthur Frohock, a local farmer (one of the original Trustees) gave the site to the community on a 99-year-lease at a rent of one shilling per year. The sections lay neglected in a heap for some time until a group of willing lads took the job in hand in 1926. Two of Mr Frohock's employees, Ern and Bert Ingle, were possibly the initial inspiration when the work of building the two-foot-high foundation walls commenced. The building stood on these – the floor being supported in places across its width by pillars, some of which later collapsed leaving a nicely sprung floor with a movement of several inches up and down, particularly during the war time when the 'Palais Glide' was a popular dance! Yet despite all their most determined and vigorous efforts, the boisterous youths in their escape from the horrors and privation of the time, failed to open a crack, let alone collapsing the old platform.

The building was a sectional wooden structure with a slightly smaller floor area than the present hall. It stood closer to the road since there was no need of a car park at the time of its construction. Heated by two open fires on the far side, whose straight flues claimed any warmth there may have been, they were just about as effective as our present heating arrangement!

Its lighting system was quite unique – this was a gas making unit installed in a wooden shed behind the hall – a gift from another Trustee, Mr Ben Brooks of Childerley Hall. It used calcium carbide (which gives off acetylene gas when moistened with water) and the inflammable gas was then piped into the building where its illumination worked satisfactorily except in winter when the water froze. The only form of heat available at the time was a naked flame which could not be used near the apparatus for fear of explosion. Working on the principle of the old carbide gas bicycle lamp, one wonders what the fire insurance premiums would be today for using a highly inflammable and explosive gas in a wooden structure!

Behind the building there grew a bed of gigantic stinging nettles obscuring the gas hut and making the old wooden 'loo' inaccessible – which undoubtedly benefitted those vigorous and prolific weeds!

The first Dry Drayton Village Institute was declared open by the Rev Senior of St John's College in 1927. It was to serve the community for a full generation until the old place began to show signs of wear, partly through the ravages of time, partly through neglect, since the initial enthusiasm for its maintenance had faded along with the excitement and jollification that was engendered during wartime revels.

On 26th September 1961 Mr Cyril Phythian made a proposal that a new Village Hall be built to replace the old Institute. A public meeting was called for 16th October 1961, when it was agreed that the old structure was beyond repair. A committee, under the chairmanship of Dr Irwin Peck, was elected to look into the possibilities of building a new hall. Outline planning permission was granted on 23rd October 1962, by which time a sum of £1,300 had been collected, and this was from a

community of less than 500 who, with few exceptions, were wage earners in the lowest income bracket. Other donations were received from the small businessmen who plied their wares in the area and the Parish Council who donated £100, along with the proceeds from the sale of one acre known as "Sparrow Fields" on which Lolworth Service Station now stands which, with interest, amounted to £290.11s.1d. This was held by the R.D.C. We understood that the field was sold to Mr Alf Everson for £200, but the sum was actually £185 and the rest was interest.

All but one of the original Trustees had passed on, leaving legal problems which required the chairman to journey to London to get them resolved. In March 1965 the project was registered as a charity which required the lease to be amended from 99 years to 999 years. (Ed's note: the original lease, written in beautiful script, does state 999 years).

By early September a tender from Wynns of Histon had been accepted and an offer for the purchase and removal of the old building agreed. (The original estimate was £4,668.3s.4d.) Early in 1966 work was started on the new hall, to be completed and equipped ready for the opening ceremony by Alderman Francis Jeeps, chairman of the Cambridge & Isle of Ely County Council, on 24th June 1967, at a cost of:

Final payment hall	£5,030
Additional Architect	£100
Legal Fees	£30
Equipment	£425
Total	£5,585

Of the many involved in its creation, special thanks are due to Mr & Mrs Sid Thompson, the first caretakers, who lavished much care and attention on our newly acquired treasure. Mr Tom Bilton, who gave his time and expertise in installing the electrical fittings. Mr Harry Carter, for his many years an active member of our community who at that time was Foreman Carpenter for Wynns. Harry took upon himself the job of Clerk of the Works, attending to every detail in the construction and, in doing so, devoted many more hours in a labour of love than his union would have approved. He also acquired the first furnishings, tables, chairs, etc. second-hand, which he stripped, repaired and re-varnished in his own time.

It was Dr Irwin Peck who accepted the challenge and responsibility not only for building the new hall but also for raising the necessary funds. Being a good husband, this latter chore he delegated to Mrs Peck, who gave sterling service, soliciting every possible source for funds – from local businesses and organisations, from the village and its people, and anyone who had connections with our community no matter how remote. Everything from donations, Deeds of Covenant, fundraising events, to collecting weekly house contributions. Dr Peck devoted almost six anxious years to the joys and frustrations of meetings, travelling, organising and planning before he savoured the happiness of success. Even then he continued as chairman until the last payment was made, only relinquishing the commitment of office when the hall was completed, fully funded, furnished and operating as a viable enterprise.

If Dr Peck will forgive the lapse of almost 14 years, the village, its people and organisations owe him a debt of gratitude.

“Thank you, sir.”

John Hacker, 1981

Since John Hacker wrote this history of the hall, the building has undergone several alterations, including adding the two back rooms (late 1980s), supporting buttresses at the front (1996), an improved entryway with accessible toilets (2002) and a refurbished kitchen (2014).

The village hall has now operated as a charity (No. 300382) for more than 50 years. The Management Committee’s latest efforts are more electronic than physical – the goal is to make the hall easier to use and manage for years to come. Stay tuned for progress updates!



Photo Caption: Francis Jeeps, chairman of the Cambridgeshire and Isle of Ely County Council, opens the Dry Drayton Village Hall in June 1967. Do you recognise anyone in the photo? If you do, or if you would like to share memories of the village hall through the years, please send your thoughts to Cinnamon Bair at ddvhsecretary@gmail.com.