

Once again we have been celebrating the midwinter with a variety of social gatherings, some of which have made good use of the Village Hall. This year, in particular, memories of past wars have cropped up and it is no surprise that there were war connections even to our first Village Halls. Most of their story has already been discussed by our late editor, Muriel Morris, in these pages over ten years ago, but with so many newcomers to the village it is perhaps worth repeating it now for their sakes.

One 'architectural' contribution made by recent wars was the development of simple temporary huts for troops and POWs at the various camps. With peace, most would have been demolished, but prefabricated wooden structures could be recycled elsewhere. One such might have been that Tea Room erected in the 1920s by the Peoples Refreshment House Association behind the Four Crosses. Besides offering refreshment outside normal licensed hours, this hut became the venue for meetings, such as that of the new WI, and village parties. It therefore started functioning as a sort of 'Village Hall' and demonstrated the need for a 'proper' one for the community. With this in mind, shortly after WWII a committee was formed to promote the idea (after a failed attempt in 1935).

By now the war had produced even more 'huts': steel sheet 'Nissen' which tended to rust, the brick and concrete 'HORSA' (Hutting Operation for the Raising of the School-leaving Age) which only lent themselves to alternative uses on site (e.g. former Grafton School) and that same prefabricated wooden design. Shropshire may have been a safe distance from most action, but for this very reason it was home to several training airfields and POW camps, where such surplus huts were now becoming available.

For two and a half years the committee organised a variety of fundraising events: whist drives, fetes and dances in local fields, school and the old Four Crosses 'hut'. One member, James Paddock senior even gave a plot of land beside Church Lane sufficient for a hall. He later sold the committee the remaining plot as far as the main road, on condition that it would be dedicated to public use. This would prove a valuable safeguard when so many playing fields are under threat.

A suitable building, which even had a stage, had become available at High Ercall, once a busy wartime airfield. Funds, however, were now rather stretched, so it was arranged for the National Council of Social Services to initially buy it and charge the committee a rent. The local farmers, with their trailers and barns, then undertook its removal and also storage of windows, doors and fittings until used.

Problems arose in dealing with architects and officialdom, but Revd. C A Smith, the new vicar of Bicton, who had a knack of dealing with such people, joined the committee and helped secretary Sam Dee keep the project moving forward. In particular, 'temporary planning permission was obtained for twenty years, during which it was expected that funds would be raised for a more permanent structure. The erection was then carried out by George Harben Davies, builder, of Shepherds Lane.

On 8th December 1951 the hall was officially opened by Viscount Bridgeman, Lord Lieutenant of Shropshire, assisted by committee chairman Charles Wingfield of Onslow. The first big event in the hall came in 1952 with the wedding reception of Raymond and Mary Fowles, attended by 124 people (Mary had previously celebrated her 21st birthday in the Four Crosses 'hut').

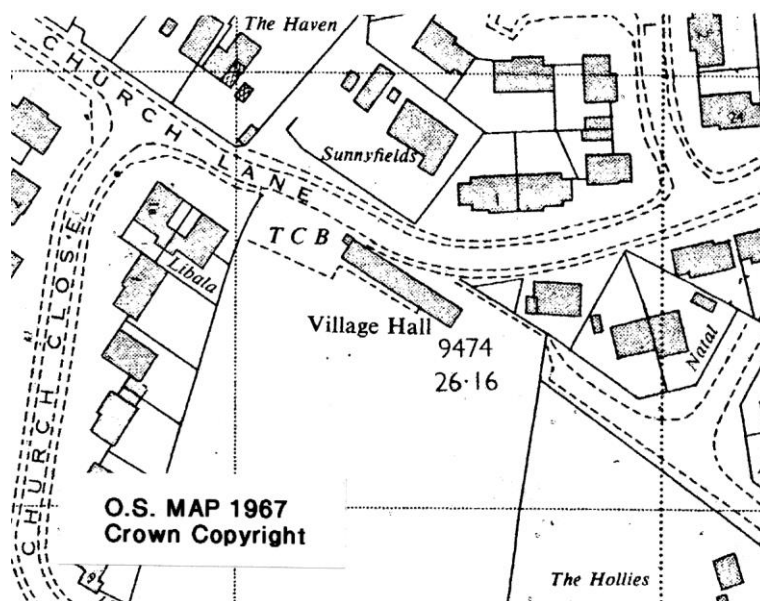
Otherwise, regular meetings of local organisations could also take place, including Parish Council, PCC, School Managers, WI, Scouts, Amateur Dramatic Society and Horticultural Society. The associated field was laid out as sports pitches in 1955.

As years went by it was realised that rental income alone would not be enough to go towards a new hall and therefore other ideas would be needed. With this in mind, one end of the hall was altered to accommodate a social club and bar, which could contribute its profits. (It was mainly a DIY job led by George Davies, also commemorated on today's hall doors).

In 1972, a five year extension to the planning permission was negotiated but with the requirement to find a replacement building before this expired. This really concentrated the mind, leading to the obtaining of local government grants and renewed efforts at fundraising, even including selling waste paper from the village.

By coincidence, it was to be Muriel Morris' daughter, Susan, who held the last wedding reception in the old hall in December 1974, as the new one was being prepared beside it. This then opened for business in May 1976, since when it has seen many alterations, but that is another story.

The old hall was not totally discarded, as it was moved yet again the short distance to Grove Farm where it spent a further twenty years housing chickens. Its story had illustrated a wonderful community spirit in which so many people really worked hard to achieve their goal. As the late President J F Kennedy might have said: "Ask not what Bicton can do for you, rather ask what you can do for Bicton."





**W.I. PARTY IN
OLD VILLAGE HALL**

**Mrs. Galliers, President
Mary Fowles entertains**

Bicton Horticultural Show, 18th April, 1965



Vernon Mann, ? Loder, H R J Ward, C G Edwards, Creswell Butters, Mill Naylor, Mary Fowles

