

The Reading Room

Part of a proposal to modify and extend the Reading Room 1978

The Reading Room was built in 1878, at a time when recent Education Acts providing free schooling for children drew attention to the needs of the many adults whose own childhood education had been at best short and scanty. Its name is significant; books and newspapers were provided for any wishing to consult them, but recreation was not forgotten. It was, in fact, a sort of combined Mechanics Institute and Working Men's Club.

In 1889 a trust deed defined the function of the Reading Room as ...'for the general object of promoting the moral, social and intellectual welfare and rational recreation of the inhabitants of and visitors to Chinnor and their friends'. It is a registered charity and the trustees were to consist of 'The Rector, Churchwardens, Overseers and Guardians of the Poor, for the time being of the Parish of Chinnor'. This constitution has survived to the present day, with modifications brought about by changes in the law of the land; for instance, the Overseers and Guardians of the Poor were swept away in 1929 and their responsibilities taken over by local government. The Parish Council is now represented in their place on the management committee.

Over the past hundred years 'moral, social and intellectual welfare' has been interpreted in various ways: the newspapers and books of the earliest days became the County Library in the 1920s and this of course has its own well-equipped premises. During the Second World War the hall was used as a day-room for evacuees, while on Sundays Chinnor's Roman Catholics gathered there for worship. Perhaps the oldest patrons are the Women's Institute which had met there since its own foundation and continues to do so.

And, of course, the recreational needs and tastes of the village community have been reflected in what the Reading Room has to offer: draughts and dominoes gave way to billiards and darts which were in turn succeeded by bingo and whist. The amplified thumping and swirling coloured lights of the present-day disco replace the flickering silent movies of the First World War; village talent in drama and opera has found premises better suited to its more able and sophisticated performances than those jolly Reading Room representations, on an improvised stage, of the Rebel Maid, Merrie England, and HMS Pinafore during the late twenties and early thirties.

Mean time the building itself has of necessity undergone many modifications. In the early years the rooms behind the main hall were occupied by a succession of resident caretakers, these rooms later became a committee room, a kitchen and storage space. Electricity, main water and drainage were installed as they became available, various heating arrangements succeeded one another. But until the porch

was removed years ago to make room for new lavatories at the front, the building retained its somewhat ecclesiastical appearance, a reflection of perhaps of the association with the church of its social and educational purpose as well as the admiration for the gothic, clearly expressed in many buildings put up in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Among the imaginative and ingenious plans drawn up by the architects Gordon and Marjorie Smith to meet the suggestions and wishes of the committee is one that would include the re-siting of the lavatories and the restoration of the porch, not entirely for aesthetic reasons; but also to make it possible to include a ramp as well as steps in the approach to the entrance, something that would be a different kind of convenience, especially to members of the Darby and Joan Club. It is hoped, too, that the kitchen can be made more efficient and that better arrangements can be made for the storage of some of the rather bulky equipment used by, for instance, the mother and baby club. It may also be possible to contrive a larger committee room or even a small hall which might be a source of additional revenue.

Whatever is finally decided and whatever grants may be available, the cost of such work is bound to be considerable and it is to be hoped that the village will respond generously to the inevitable appeals that will be made for funds to preserve and improve a building that has served Chinnor for just over a hundred years.