

Village institutions and organisations

Introduction

Local facilities in Chinnor included the Reading Room and the Village Hall. Initially this centred around the Reading Room (established 1878) as a working man's club, providing billiards, school carpentry classes and a venue for sales and concerts as well as the meeting place for the Women's Institute and the infant welfare clinic. It also contained a small library and in 1929 women were allowed to use it as well. For many years it was the only place for people to go in the evenings other than the pubs.¹ The establishment of village reading rooms arose from the desire of the landed gentry and the church to provide an alternative social venue from the public houses and to improve opportunities for self-help and self-improvement. In their endeavour to accomplish this aim, the reading room members had very strict rules of behaviour imposed on them. King cites, no alcohol for example, and attendance at bible classes.² Chinnor Reading Room and Working Men's Club rules included; 'no bad language or oaths and no alcohol to be brought onto the premises', in addition, members were asked 'not to spit'. A measure of the control the Reading Room committee exerted over its members included the rule that 'The committee to decide what shall be sold in the room and to fix the price'. In 1889 a trust deed defined the function of the Reading Room being for the general object of 'promoting the moral, social and intellectual welfare and rational recreation of the inhabitants of, and the visitors to, Chinnor and their friends'. The trustees were to consist of: the 'Rector, Churchwardens, Overseers and Guardians of the Poor for the time being of the Parish of Chinnor'. The original conveyance of 1889 included the following sale of the land by the Duke of Grafton to Rev. Edward Howman, Robert White of Chinnor, farmer, John Folley of Hempton (Henton) and John White of Hempton, farmer, for the sum of £220.

Potential reader interest in Chinnor might be gauged by scanning the 1904 catalogue of books and magazines held in the Reading Room although there are no remaining records of reader usage for any of the titles. Authors listed included Dickens, Bunyan, Verne, Hughes, as well as a number of history, geography and travel books whilst magazines provided included the literary, *Harpers Monthly*, *Cornhill magazine*, *Longmans*, and the papers: *Bucks Herald*, *Thame Gazette* and the *Reading Mercury* all of which would have required a certain reading age.³ In the 1920s Miss Williams started to organise a library in the Reading Room and this library was later developed by Miss Nora Neighbour from 1936-1952. The library was open from 4-6 pm on Thursday evening and contained 100 fiction and 50 nonfiction books, the books being changed every three months from Oxford. Subjects covered included: romance, crime and detection, gardening etc. Carol King's paper included the term 'decline' of village reading rooms which she stated started after the First World War and was due to changes in public attitudes to their 'betters' and the desire to be free of their controlling influences, she suggested that the reading room had passed into history. In Chinnor the Reading Room today has its committee chaired by the Rector and is patronised by many groups in the village.

The Village Hall, in contrast, was part of the creation of village halls during the interwar years and their concept was informed by a number of issues. One was to provide an alternative to the controlled and sponsored social life described in relation to the Reading Room and allotment movement by the local clergy and gentry. This was in keeping with the reforming zeal of the Victorian era and the desire to keep residents out of the local pubs and to provide them with improving occupation and activities. The men and women returning from the First World War were found to be less inclined to return to their old, subservient places in society, resulting in the problem of retaining workers, particularly on the land, as noted in relation to allotments. This resulted in the Oxford Rural Community Council, the rural department of the National Council of Social Service, forging a coherent social policy for rural areas to engender a community spirit by creating village halls, independent of the local clergy and owned and administered by a committee of residents to help to regenerate the lost sense of community which had been disrupted by the First World War. The committee found that there was a lack of a suitable independent venue for meetings. For example, in Chinnor, the school building of the British School was appropriated on a regular basis for the Dorcas Society (a local group of people under the auspices of the Congregational Church whose mission was to provide clothing for the poor) clothing sale and the Widows Tea Meeting. Not only were the school premises unsuitable for adult use, furniture being child sized for example, but day time meetings interfered with the children's education.

Negotiations for the costing of the Village Hall were started in 1935. Initial discussion with NCSS involved the name, with NCSS insisting that the name include the word 'village' and not, as initially suggested, the WI Hall, in keeping with its independent status. Correspondence from the NCSS to Mr. Cuthbert, chairman of the Village Hall Committee and local head teacher, regarding the loan application stated that the requirements for the loan were that:

- The hall was to be held in trust for the whole village.
- Half the total cost of the building and land to be raised locally and they will not forward funding until the money is raised.

Correspondence over the next few years indicated a division within the village which involved a very small section of the residents wanting an extension of the Reading Room instead of a new hall. This request was vetoed by the NCSS. However, the majority of Chinnor residents wanted a new hall although some members of the Parish Council were against the proposal. Other issues addressed in the correspondence included: costs, materials used and the installation of water closets for which the committee was confident that mains water would be available within the next two years.⁴ The plans were drawn up by Dr. Leverkus's a local general practitioner's, sister who was an architect and, according to Mable Howlett, did not charge for her services. However, her fees did appear on the funding application form in accordance with the Royal Institute of British Architect's rules.⁵

To raise money for the hall a model was made of the design by Mr. Arnold, a carpenter, and it was paraded around the village. The model also appeared at concerts and flower shows where money was collected. After the hall was built it needed 'sprucing up' and a jumble sale was held to raise money for this. Men from

the village painted the hall and ladies made curtains.⁶ The foundation stone was laid in July 1939. During the war the hall served as an Air Raid Precaution first aid post and was the local headquarters of the Red Cross. In 1940 it was hired by Oxfordshire Education Committee as an extension to the village school enabling the education of 400 children from London.

The local churches all paid their part in community life. The earliest documented evidence of the parish church, is circa 1160 and dedicated to St. Andrew. In 1875 E. J. Howman became Rector, renovated the church buildings, enlarged the school and opened the Reading Room.⁷ A Congregationalist chapel was built in 1805 and they are still a strong congregation in the village today. In 1854 a Primitive Methodist chapel was built, the trustees consisting of a Chinnor green grocer, three chair turners, three Stokenchurch chair turners, a carpenter and a labourer from Aston Rowant.⁸ Overseeing the temporal well-being of the village was the locally elected Parish Council. A review of Chairmen of the Parish Council from 1900 to the 1940s shows a preponderance of land owners and local businessmen, some of whose decedents have contributed to the thesis, although Doctor Dorothy Leverkus, did serve as vice-chairman.

Social events, along with national festivities such as Christmas, Easter and Whitsun, which brought the residents together as a community, included the local celebrations on May Day when the children went around the village with their garlands.

*'Good morning young ladies and gentlemen, I wish you a happy day
I've come to show you my garland on this first of May
For it is the first of May, the first of May is garland day
So pleased to see my garland, I'll call no more today.'*

The boys carried the maypole up to the home of Walter Benton (who owned Chinnor Cement and Lime Company) where maypole and country dancing was followed by a lavish tea.⁹ In 1926, the Bluebell Express was started and people came from far away to picnic and pick bluebells on Chinnor Hill. Also celebrated were the Thame Fair, Sydenham Chapel anniversary, various church activities such as bazaars and Sunday School treats, the Band of Hope tea (under the auspices of the Congregational church), and the Crystal Palace Temperance Fair. Weddings were also a village affair, the bride walking through the village to the church.
