

Village Hall 25th Anniversary Coffee Morning 23rd September 2017 by Martin Horler

As many of you know I am a storyteller so, as all storytellers do, I'll begin at the beginning.

In the late 1980's there was in Kilmersdon an enthusiastic thespian group called Kilmersdon Arts Academy headed up by Sue Georgiou. We performed plays/pantomimes, not quite sure what you would call it, in the hut which was, at that time, the Village Youth Club now Richard's hut. We did two performances each time and the hut was packed. We often said that if it caught fire during a performance half of this village would be cremated in one go. We had no stage, we fixed a scaffold pole across one end of the hut, cut up a plastic downpipe as curtain rings which were sewn onto two dust sheets as curtains. There was no room to change backstage so we had a horsebox parked alongside the hut with a lightweight staging (a scaffold platform 4m long by 500m wide) spanning from the side door of the hut to the personnel door of the lorry.

We would come off the stage, run across the staging to the lorry to change costume, men and women all in the back of the lorry.

I was, at the time, chairman of the Village Day Association and at one AGM made the suggestion that we should have a focus for the fundraising of Village Day and thought a good idea would be to build a village hall – to be honest my ulterior motive was so that Kilmersdon Arts Academy would have a proper hall to perform in and a proper stage to perform on. I am pleased to say that the idea was received with amazing enthusiasm by everyone. A committee was formed chaired by Ted Hallam, secretary was, I think, Yvonne Kirby and the treasurer was Archie Gleave. Archie had an architect friend Bill (I think) Hind who would produce the drawings for the building. I remember the first meeting with the architect, we all sat round Archie's dining table and I said I would like the exterior of the hall to look like an old Victorian school and that we must have a stage. Well, I think he achieved that very well.

Where was the hall to be built? The obvious place seemed to be in the playing field next to the ready-made car park – although at that time it was just scalplings. Permission was sought from Lord Hylton who, very generously, released the plot of land for a peppercorn rent and I am ashamed to say that I don't think the rent has ever been paid. So – with profound apologies for the late payment I would like to pay the last 25 year's rent in one go. (*hand over pot of 25 peppercorns*). Planning permission was obtained and Archie set about seeking out grants. It was amazing how he would discover the most obscure trusts to put in an application to. So, with Village Day funds amassed over the years, donations from numerous private individuals, the grants that Archie acquired, grants from Somerset County Council, Mendip District Council and the generosity of Lord and Lady Hylton the funds were there to appoint a builder. Halsalls of Radstock were chosen.

In the autumn of 1991 I thought it would be rather nice to have a 'First Turf Cutting Ceremony' so one Sunday afternoon Lord and Lady Hylton ceremoniously cut the first turf to commence the building. I managed to purchase some very cheap bubbly for

everyone that attended. If I remember correctly about 30 people turned up. A short time later Halsalls moved onto the site and building commenced. They worked through the winter of 1991/92 and completed the building by April 1992. There is a photograph in the Green Room of the official handover of the key which took place early evening on 13th April 1992. The building cost, if I remember correctly, £132,000 and the day the key was handed over the building was paid for.

Once the Hall was up and running it was handed to the Official Custodian and registered with the Charity Commission. The fund-raising committee stood down and a village hall management committee had to be formed. Colin Gibbs was the Youth Club leader and he took on the role of chairman, Jenny Jones became treasurer.

From day one Cherry Gilham became caretaker of the hall and I must say assisted by her husband, Ted, who did a tremendous amount for the hall without anyone knowing. The committee, and indeed all of us, would like to show our appreciation for her years of dedication to the Hall.

Whilst the building had been paid for we had no tables, chairs, crockery or cutlery so the management committee took up a £5,000 loan from the bank and purchased all that was needed to get going. It was decided to have an official opening and chose 6.30pm on Wednesday 8th July. The hall was packed to capacity and we ran out of chairs so late-comers had to stand. It was a wonderful start to the Hall with Lord and Lady Hylton performing the ceremony. Bookings started coming in from individuals and more regular organisations. Three or four years into the life of the Hall I became chairman of the management committee.

They say hind-sight is a wonderful thing and, whilst we loved the design of the building, it was becoming obvious that there were some things that could be better. The first was that the heaters which had been installed were very red which made it almost impossible to have a slide-show, they would burn your head and freeze your feet so we needed to think of alternative heating. I spent ages looking at numerous alternatives, most of which would cost a fortune. Then a parishioner said I should seek the advice of a consultant in heating and ventilation and he would pay the fee. The report was produced and the Scanlock system came out top. I had never come across it before but we went ahead and had it installed. We soon realised that the kitchen and store-rooms were too small but we could do nothing about that. Another improvement was the upgrade of the toilets which I calculated would cost about £9,000. I applied for numerous grants and was pleasantly surprised how the money came in, over a few months we received £10,500. We had a leak in the porch roof and when it was repaired the roofing contractor said the felt for the whole roof required replacing so I set about obtaining quotations, the cheapest being £10,000. Undeterred and encouraged by the success of raising funds for the loos I embarked on applying for grants for the roof and again was surprised how quickly we received £11,000 and was able to secure a water-tight roof. Other additions included a sound-system, cupboards in the store-room, storage under the stage and, for a period when Penny Hutton was chair, she organised a complete refurbishment of the kitchen. All this besides the numerous times the Hall has been redecorated to keep it looking good.

Sometime after I became chairman I managed to persuade Frances to join the committee as secretary and one of the first things she suggested was a survey of the village asking what people wanted from their village hall. Several of the committee went around knocking on doors to pick up the survey forms and there was a very good response. Analysing the results, the overwhelming request was for films to be shown. Frances tracked down Paul Shilling who was the chairman of the South West Film Club Society who agreed to come and show a film and, if he could choose the film and the date, it would be free. The date he chose was a Saturday night, the Hall was already booked so we arranged for the film to be shown in the Court Room at the pub. The film was 'Shine', the room was full and, at the end, I said "If you want films you will have to form a committee to organise it. If you are willing to be part of that committee put your name and contact number on the list by the door". Reel People was born and the rest is history!

This Hall has been host to some fantastic events over the years but, sadly, the very purpose I hoped for never materialised – Kilmersdon Arts Academy performing on the stage because Sue sadly died. However, remember the St Nicks Old Timers Music Halls? This Hall was packed every year for four nights, remember the auctions, silent auction, quiz nights, beetle drive, the WI Flower and Produce Show?

Remember the Parish Council Millennium Show – River Dancing in Wellies? Remember the Medieval Murder Mystery when I think about 80 people came to sit down at long tables covered in course twill cloth to eat a medieval meal and solve a murder mystery. We lit the Hall entirely with 120 candles. Of the 80 people 78 came in costume to add to the atmosphere.

Star costume had to be that of Penny's son-in-law, Stuart, who dressed as a monk and even shaved the top of his head.

As a member of the Village Halls Association we came across Take Art, an organisation, based in Taunton, that built up a fund from all the Somerset District Councils as well as banks, insurance companies and businesses to book professional acts to perform in village halls at a heavily subsidised rate. We had some fantastic performers – remember the Old Rope String Band, Sid Kipper, John Kirkpatrick, Loyko, the Russian Gypsy Band who performed at this Hall for something like £5 a ticket, they stayed with us overnight, rehearsed in our sitting room on the Sunday morning then left for London to perform that evening at the Royal Festival Hall with tickets of something like £40 a seat.

Remember Sergeant Pepper's Only Dartboard Band? We had an events committee that organised all these fantastic events and nothing thrilled me more than to see this Hall full of people enjoying themselves.

An initiative the Village Halls Association brought in was the Hallmark scheme, Hallmarks 1, 2 and 3 which were to reward excellence in Village Hall Management. We thought it worthwhile attempting Hallmark 1 and 2 and, I must say, Frances was the driving force behind the application and, as the certificates on the wall indicate, we achieved it in 2012. Two years later we decided to attempt

Hallmark 3 and, again, Frances was the one who did the most work but it paid off because, as the other certificate shows, this was achieved and I believe we were only the fifth hall in Somerset to achieve Hallmark 3.

So, in the last 25 years this fantastic village hall has achieved a great deal thanks to everyone who has contributed to its success be it by serving on the committee, organising an event, hiring it for a private function or simply by attending an event. May it continue to flourish over the next 25 years.