

Parish Halls - The steps taken

The Halls were provided for in the Deed set out in 1899 by Arabella Crawford, Harriet Hastie and others, the land was made available and the intention was for a parish room to be built.

Some provisions of the trust deed:

- The trustees have the power to deal with the trust property as beneficial owners including the power to sell, let, mortgage or exchange lands and buildings at their discretion and invest monies coming in to their hands at their absolute discretion
- If the trustees shall at any time determine by a majority of their number that in their opinion the parish room cannot successfully and beneficially be maintained and kept open they may be held by trust to tend to the welfare of the inhabitants of East Grinstead.

The halls were started in 1927 and finally opened fully in 1933, no significant alteration to the outside of the building has occurred since.

The Parish Halls trust named seven trustees, including the churchwardens and incumbent vicar of the parish.

In 1969 the Trustees, struggling to make the halls financially viable were interested in the prospect of selling the halls to finance the construction of a smaller church hall. Valuation was undertaken for marketing. However, possibly due to the discovery that the Church could not use the funds for church use, the trustees approached the Urban District Council to taking over the trust to run the halls. The Council at the time had been discussing the building of an alternative community centre in the Town or taking on a lease of the halls. After the transfer the plans to build a multi recreational facility at East Court were stopped, partly due to concerns that the future of the already struggling halls would be affected.

The trusteeship was transferred in 1971 to the Urban District Council. The Council took on the financial position of the halls and settled several accounts that had been outstanding at the point of the transfer. The UDC made an advance to the trust of £1000 in 1971 to cover all of the associated costs and outstanding liabilities.

In April 1974 the Parish Halls passed to the East Grinstead Town Council as the successor authority to the East Grinstead Urban District Council

Over the next couple of years significant investment to improve the interior of the halls including decorating / carpeting/ replacing lighting / replacing windows and taking fire resistant measures.

In 2007 the condition and use of the halls was identified as a matter needing attention. The intention was that between 2007-9 the halls would be remodelled by the trustees. Cowan architects were charged with writing a report to identify the issues with the fabric, electrics etc,

at the Charities Committee on 14th June 2007. It was identified that the trust would not be able to afford the repairs and refurbishment without significant contribution from the Town Council.

Age Concern were looking to relocate from the Swan Mead address and this was considered as to a possible long term tenancy for the halls, it was even considered handing the halls to Age Concern for them to turn in to a community centre. Reports to the Charities Committee in September and November 2007, gave detailed information. The report included that grants were unlikely to be available due to the business case and that one option would be for the Town Council to take a public loan board loan, for the refurbishment to the level of approximately £750,000. Possibilities of contributions from Mid Sussex District Council and Section 106 planning development funds were also discussed

The business case for the ongoing income generation for age concern caused concern to the council and a "Plan B" on a smaller scale was considered. This would lead to demolition of part of the halls and refurbishment of part.

By November 2009 a decision had been made that the project was not deliverable and the Trustees received a report from an architect and surveyor to advise that sale of the halls in part or full and investment in the Chequer Mead site could be considered. The Charities Committee in June 2010 agreed to the marketing of the rear halls and investment to be made in this way.

December 2010 brought forward an opportunity from Jesus living water worldwide church to take the small halls on a long full repairing lease. Allowing the Town Council to put aside a grant of £92,000 over four years to refurbish the large hall and address the DDA compliance issues. However as they gained estimates for the necessary works to the small halls, this proved to be beyond the means of the church and in June 2011 they withdrew from the negotiations and reverted to simply hiring the small halls on a weekly basis.

The Council had requested estimates for the work to be compiled which showed that the cost to refurbish (but not improve the halls) would be in the region of £200,000. The Monies put aside by the Council and the possibility of grants would not achieve this full cost. Although the Council could have made additional monies available the viability of the halls as a long term facility was considered. The Halls had been declining in use (partly due to the past 5 years of expectation of renovation) but also generally. The number of hirers had reduced to around 40 each month from over 100 in the 1970's. Most years showed the expenditure outweighed the income, only in the last few years, where there was reduced maintenance was this trend reversed.

The Trustees have considered the growth of other halls and facilities in the town, noted that most have underused capacity and reluctantly concluded that even renovation of the halls would not result in anything other than a struggle to keep the income level with expenditure. Far more than £200,000 would have to be spent to make the halls modern and attractive and this would result in higher rental charges. A factor that have historically resulted in the halls losing the regular hirers.

Should the charity have taken loans out to renovate they may be unable to repay these, and should the Town Council have taken the loans and then gifted the money to the charity this could have brought criticism as to the use of public funds if the buildings were subsequently closed.

The conclusion was that the business case would not be proven and the Halls should be sold with proceeds being invested in modernising and improving the community space in the neighbouring site at Chequer Mead.

Clerk to the Parish Halls Trust

September 2012