

Buckden Parish Council
Annual Meeting, 25 May 2021

Report from Cynthia Alers, Chair of the Board of Trustees
Buckden Village Hall

It has been a mixed year for the Village Hall. Due to Covid restrictions on public meetings, the Hall was closed for much of the year. Efforts to open whenever possible were twice aborted as Government guidelines changed at short notice. The long periods of closure were hard on our regular hirers who depend on the Hall as a venue for their businesses and for those whose social life revolves around the clubs that regularly use the Hall. We are very pleased to be open once again as of 17 May per government guidelines and hope that we will now be able to stay open and welcome back all our hirers and users. We have invested heavily in Covid materials to ensure a Covid-compliant venue and hope that our visitors will feel safe.

We took advantage of the Hall's closure to undertake some long overdue maintenance, including replacing the floor in the main Hall at a cost of £40,000. The floor dated back to the opening of the Hall in 1999 and had worn down to its last layer of laminate, so replacement was much needed. We also floored the stage area and tidied up the steps to the stage.

As a hospitality business, the Hall qualified for a high level of government support funding during the Covid lockdowns, of which we took full advantage. The three Hall staff members were put on furlough, and the Hall applied for each of the available grants. We were thus able to conserve a stable financial position despite the loss of rental income which is our only source of funding during normal times. Although bookings are still at a very low level, we believe it was necessary to return to normal trading routines as soon as we could. We anticipate that bookings will gradually increase and already have enquiries for August and September. Buckfest will be going ahead this July after its cancellation last year, and the Village Fete is once again in planning for early September. The Parish Council has returned to in-person meetings, and various exercise and training classes are starting up again.

In December, the Hall had the opportunity to apply to Huntingdon District Council for CIL monies to fund specific projects. The Valley has been sadly neglected for many years, with the lake slowing dying due to silting up. We applied for funds to undertake a comprehensive refurbishment of the Valley and were informed in March 2021 that our submission for grant funding had been successful. We are still in the planning stages but expect that work will begin in mid-summer and complete around December 2021. We will be posting weekly updates with plans for village residents to view and comment on.

We also applied last summer to the Football Association for a grant to improve the pitches, refurbish the sports pavilion, replace our ancient mower, move the dilapidated storage containers and rebuild a proper storage building (in cooperation with the Parish Council). The FA has promised partial funding for most of these projects, and we continue to develop plans and budgets for their approval. It is unlikely that we will receive full funding for all our projects, so additional fund-raising will need to be undertaken once we have approval from the FA.

Our ties with the Parish Council continue to grow closer, with several joint projects under discussion. Village residents often tell us that our playground is very small compared to Brampton and Little Paxton and that there are few activities for older children and teenagers. We are working with the Parish Council on addressing these issues, although the playground is under the management of the Parish Council, not the Hall. We are looking into the feasibility of building a climbing wall, erecting a zip wire and improving the utility of the MUGA pitch which is currently underutilised.

The trustees have also undertaken a review of its legal structure. Several of our tenant leases are coming up for renewal, and we are endeavouring to standardise all leases on a proper commercial basis per our obligations under the Charity Commission. Regulations and procedures have tightened up considerably since the leases were granted 25 years ago, and much has changed in that time. This has been a frustratingly long process, as dealings with the Charity Commission proceeds at a very stately pace. We are hopeful that two of our long leases will be renewed in the coming months. Once that process is complete, the Trustees are planning on undertaking the conversion of our legal status from an unincorporated charity to a CIO (“charitable incorporated organisation”) which is a path most organisations are now pursuing as protection against personal liability. It is increasingly difficult to obtain insurance for unincorporated organisations, and conversion to a CIO is a structure encouraged by the Charity Commission and ACRE.

Like many volunteer organisations, the Hall struggled with recruitment of trustees despite a full programme of projects. We have now recruited a new Treasurer who will try to fill the shoes of our stalwart Des Foster. Des deservedly won “Community Volunteer of the Year – Silver Award” at the Hunts Forum annual ceremony – it was unclear whether he appreciated the plaque or the Hotel Chocolat box more. We have also had some interest from a resident to take on the role of Chair. However, we still need to recruit trustees to help us manage the Hall which is a small vibrant commercial business in its own right.

The coming year will again be a busy one, with several projects proceeding simultaneously including the Valley, the pavilion, the storage units and legal structures. We thank the Parish Council and Buckden residents, as well HDC and ACRE, for their support over the year.