

VILLAGE HALL AND VILLAGE HALL TRUST-A SHORT HISTORIC BACKGROUND

Amended 29th January 2025

In May 1967 a Public meeting agreed that a new village hall should be built to replace the Rifle Range Hall in Church Street. On 11th August 1969 the Scheme for the amalgamation of two charities, The War Memorial Playing Fields and the Rifle Range and Recreation Rooms was signed and the Scheme of Governance for the Buckden Recreation Ground and Village Hall Trust was also signed. The scheme lay down that the Parish Council would be the Custodian Trustee. The Trust would be overseen by Trustees who also constituted the Committee of Management responsible for running the Trust. The Committee when complete should consist of a maximum of thirty members: six members appointed at the AGM, twenty members representing village organisations and no more than four co-opted members to be appointed by the committee. The twenty member village organisations were listed and many of these no longer exist. Over the years it has been accepted that any bone fide village organisation could nominate a member of the Committee. The Scheme gave authority for the construction of a Village Hall and if the Committee thinks fit, a rifle range.

As Custodian Trustee the Parish Council was a nominal owner of the land. That meant it had no beneficial interest in it, nor any rights to dictate what the VHT could do with the property. However, over the years the Parish Council has generously assisted the VHT financially with capital grants, a substantial loan and income grants. The legal ownership of the land has now been handed over to the new CIO charity, which with the approval of the Charity Commission, has taken the place of the old Trust. (This paragraph has been added at the request of Cllr John Thelwall)

In 1971 a Parish Assembly, attended by over 200 residents, agreed that the Parish Council should grant £10,000 towards the construction of the new Hall. The hall was completed by the end of 1974 and officially opened in January 1975. It comprised a hall and stage (the same inside dimension as now) with a small kitchen, a storeroom, two changing rooms, toilet facilities and rooms for a village club. The main hall was clad in corrugated iron sheets. The new hall

was under the management of the Village Hall Trust. A club was also opened for the benefit of all residents for an annual subscription of 50p. The original idea of forming a club was that the income derived from it would help to defray the costs of running the hall. The Committee also had, as the name makes clear, the responsibility of managing and maintaining the playing fields and the Valley area. Over the next few years the Buckden Bowls Club moved to its present site and the Tennis Club constructed their new courts. The hall was used for a variety of users including a very active Theatre Club and a Badminton Club. The changing rooms were used by the village football and cricket clubs. The Parish Council and the VHT agreed to work closely together. The Council also instigated work on the clearance of the Valley area and made grants to the Tennis and Bowls clubs to enable them to build their own facilities.

In the late 1980s the Hall was beginning to show its age and the Parish Council agreed to provide the VHT with further funds to enable repairs and refurbishment to be done on the Hall.

By 1992 the Trust was running into financial and organisational difficulties. The Committee was unable to recruit members and more importantly was unable to find a chairman, treasurer and a member willing to take responsibility for the management of the use of the facilities. The Committee consisted of just four members and no chairman. In spite of distributing a thousand leaflets to villagers they had received only 36 responses and no firm offers of help. In September 1992 the then Chairman of the Parish Council called an emergency meeting in the hall. On 11th September over 100 residents attended and the Chairman explained that unless a new Chairman of the Trust and representative committee could be found the hall and the playing fields would have to close. The effect of this 'threat' was immediate and from those present a chairman, secretary and volunteer booking clerk were all recruited.

It was agreed that it was important to maintain close links between the Parish Council and the Trust and a small liaison group was set up comprising the two chairmen and two others, one from each organisation. The newly elected chairman and committee were energetic and forward looking and the all-weather surface was constructed, work was done to improve the valley area, the drainage for the sports fields was improved and a pipe was laid between

the stream to the south of the lake and the lake. Perhaps more importantly the rents paid by the Tennis and Bowls clubs, the sports field users and Village Club were rationalised. Unfortunately, after only two years this very energetic and resourceful Chairman moved away from the village and as there was no willing volunteer and the Chairman of the Parish Council stepped into the breach thus creating an unfortunate situation where there was the same Chairman for the Parish Council, the Trust and the liaison group.

Fortunately this situation did not last for very long and a new Chairman was persuaded to take the reins of the Trust and the Parish Council's treasurer became chairman of the liaison group. It was agreed that the hall was showing its age and urgent repairs were needed and new facilities provided to meet the needs of the village. A joint committee was set up and ambitious plans were developed for a rebuild of the hall.

Inevitably the problem was how to raise sufficient funds to meet the cost. The Lottery Millennium Grant Fund had just been announced and the Chairman of the Trust suggested that the village should apply for funding. He and the Council Chairman attended an informal interrogation with the Fund committee and successfully sold the idea provided that the village could submit a written application which would meet the requirements of the Fund. The Parish Council agreed to make the application and it was agreed that the application and thereafter the management of the project would be undertaken by a small Committee of four. The Committee comprised the Chairman of the Parish Council, the Chairman of the Trust, the Council Treasurer and an independent village resident who was responsible for the management of all financial matters and the special dedicated bank account that would eventually be set up if the application was successful.

Estimates were received for the project and the overall cost estimated to be around £700,000. The Parish Council Chairman was tasked to negotiate with the Fund and after a false start and initial rejection the final application was successful and the team negotiated a grant of £350,000. This left a gap of £350,000 to be raised

Perhaps fortuitously the CCC announced that they intended to close the village library in order to develop the land at the end of Manor Gardens. At a meeting

chaired by the BPC Treasurer attended by CCC representatives and over one hundred residents the village made it very clear that it was vehemently against the proposal and the CCC representatives agreed to look at alternatives. Subsequently the Parish Council negotiated an arrangement whereby the money obtained for the plot on which the library stood would be given to the fund for the new hall in return for the new building including facilities for a library and a long term agreement for the library to remain in that facility in return for an annual rent to be paid to the Trust.

The BPC Chairman then negotiated grants from the District Council, The Countryside Agency, The Thomas Charitable Trust and from WREN. Whilst these negotiations proceeded every house in the village was visited by a member of the Council or Trust and asked how they believed the rest of the required £350,000 should be found. The result was overwhelmingly in favour of public donations with any shortfall being met by the Parish Council and thus the Precept. In spite of donations from 174 families and four very generous large donations from individual residents there was still a shortfall of around £110,000 and the Parish Council agreed to take out a loan which would be repaid from the parish precept over a period of ten years. A list of the donors is shown on a board in the Hall.

The small managing committee was very aware that what they were going to build would have to benefit all of the village residents and clubs for a very long time and were therefore determined that the needs of both current and future users would be met. To ensure that they produced a building to meet this aim they talked to all the clubs and societies in the village to determine the design to meet perceived needs. The resultant plan included the following:

- a designated area for a pre-school with associated toilet facilities for small children, with a separate entrance,
- a meeting room that would be used on a regular basis by a dancing school. (now the Lincoln Room) with a serving hatch to the new bar at the end of the hall,
- an entrance hall leading to a storage room and large enough to accommodate some storage shelves,

- room for a youth club with a hatch entrance to the kitchens and easy access to a separate entrance and to toilets (now called the Aragon Room),
- a large meeting room with hatch access to the kitchen area and access to the toilets (Now The Millard Suite),
- a Council meeting room (now the VHT manager's and Parish Clerk's office),
- a new access lobby with improvements to the existing toilets (unfortunately the new toilets were never provided because the Trust decided that they wanted a sprung floor in the Lincoln room and a lighting room for theatrical performances. These were not in the original costings and the trust decided that new toilets could be provided at a later date.)
- a small office for the VHT manager (In 2019 used by a Beauty firm now by the Council),
- a Library with a small office and toilet facilities, with a main entrance to the exterior but also another into the entrance lobby,
- an entrance to allow access to boiler and meters and to hall,
- a small storage room,
- a small meeting room with access to both the main hall and the village club (now apparently part of the club),
- dressing rooms for actors taking part in on stage activities, these rooms having been taken over by the club and the pre-school group,
- a large backstage area for storage of theatre flats, props etc, (part of this area has been taken over by the club),
- an extension to the Village club including new toilet facilities and a new room with access to a balcony and to the bar (the original plan was that this new area would become a place for the older residents to meet to enjoy a coffee, companionship and perhaps the odd tipple).
- this left the main hall. The old small kitchen was closed and a new one with serving areas provided (this gave access to not only the main hall but also the Millard Suite and the Aragon room and separate access from the main hall), a new bar serving area for the

hall and the Lincoln Room was provided at the end of the hall facing the stage, a lighting room was provided with access via the new enclosed stairway provided to give access to all roof areas. The stage was later raised by volunteers from the then very active theatre club. The upper side walls and the roof had to be given new cladding,

- All of these rooms and the entrances to them were designed so that up to nine events or meetings could take place without interfering with others.
- The car park was improved with new tarmac and markings.

There remained the question of the provision of changing facilities for the football and cricket teams. It was agreed that the VHT should apply independently to the Foundation for Sport and The Arts, this was successful and it was built under a separate contract to the main building

At the same time it was agreed that the long term problem of wet sports pitches should be addressed and a French Drain was constructed at the base of the slope overlooking the pitches which discharged into the small ditch on the eastern end of the VHT grounds. It was also agreed that something should be done about the valley area, in particular the level of water in the lake. It was decided that all water from the roofs of the new building would be channelled into the lake and a new adjustable sluice gate was constructed to control the level of the lake. The pipe previously laid to bring water from the small stream was left.

Inevitably all this took a deal of time and effort but when the final design was agreed fixed price contracts were agreed with the architect and the Quantity Surveyor. Three competitive quotes were received and after advice from the Architect and Quantity Survey one selected. The Council Chairman was asked, because of his previous experience, to negotiate a fixed price, fixed time contract, this he did with the aim of completing the building in the Millennium year. He also negotiated a ten (this may have been seven) year maintenance agreement with the contractors. Unfortunately the Trust never took advantage of this and also failed to set up a long term maintenance plan. The Council Chairman was also asked to be the Project Manager, which he was for the duration of the project during which time he negotiated with Redlands, the

then owner of the local gravel pits, to lay the new car parks at a very competitive price (they gave us the tarmac). They also provided the tarmac for the paths around the Valley area. During the construction the time that the hall was not available for use was minimised so that the Trust and club could operate as smoothly as possible.

Inevitably the construction was beset by bad weather but the project was completed in time for it to be opened by our local MP, John Major on 10th July 1999.

On completion of the project the building was handed over to the VHT Charity to be managed by them. It was agreed that the Parish Council would have exclusive use of its designated room and the use of other facilities when required. The relationship between the Trust and the Council was good and the liaison committee continued to operate. It was discovered that the Council room was too small for its designated purpose and the VHT hall manager moved into it later to be joined by the Parish Clerk. It was agreed that the Council would use the Millard Suite for its meetings.

When the Church Commissioners decided to close the Silver Street public allotments and build Beaufort Drive, the Council Chairman had a strenuous discussion with representatives of the Church Commissioners and persuaded them to provide the children's play area at the recreation ground

Unfortunately, after a serious illness the Chairman of the Trust died in 2003. Thereafter the relationship between the Trust and the Council deteriorated. There was an aggressive attempt by the Village Club to change its designation from a Private Members Club and to run it as a business. It also made attempts to take over the Village Hall. When this was rebuffed further attempts were made by the Trust to change the way that it was run. There was considerable contact with the Charity Commission and both the Parish Council and the Trust sought legal advice.

To put it mildly throughout the period 2003-2010 was not a time of an easy relationship between the Trust and the Council. That said the Council still did its best to support the Trust and in 2007, after heated debate between the two treasurers the Council recognising that the Trust financial position was not good agreed to pay an annual rent of £600 would be paid in respect of the

Clerk's shared use of the office. At a later date, again recognising that the Trust was under considerable financial pressures, it agreed to grant a sum to be applied for each year to help with the maintenance of the sports pitches, this has been paid to the trust since then. The Council has for some years also allocated some of the handyman's time to litter pick around the hall and playing fields and to keeping the footpath in the valley area clear. (This was originally 148 hours and is currently 96 hours annually.

In about 2014 the Parish Council made a loan on advantageous terms to the Trust to install solar panels on the roof of the Hall. This loan has been duly repaid

In 2019 the then Chairman of VHT reported that the 'Hall' was a successful 'business' with a turnover of £120,000 a year. It was also understood that it now has substantial reserves. Nevertheless, in an attempt to ease the strain on the Trust's resources the Council agreed to take over the running and costs of the children's play area. This and previous actions do not suggest that the Council is trying to take advantage of the Trust's facilities.

The original report was written in 2019 at the request of the full Council after a period of both verbal and written differences between the Council and VHT. At its meeting in April 2019 the Council agreed that "Following the recent criticism about the Council by the Chairman of the VHT. That a meeting be arranged between representatives of the Council and the Trust to ensure an amiable future relationship between the two bodies.

This account has been written because many of the present Parish Councillors and VHT Trustees may not be familiar with the efforts that went into providing the excellent facilities that we enjoy today. It is hoped that both Councillors and Trustees will find this brief useful. There may be small areas of poor recollection, but the Council minutes have been checked for some facts. All of the original papers relating to the funding, design and building were handed to the Trust for safe keeping and are believed to be somewhere in the roof.

Terry Hayward

30th January 2025

NOTE: I have not attempted to report on the relationship between the Council and the VHT since 2019 because I resigned from the Council in that year. That said there are at least three current members who can provide details because of their involvement with the Trust over the years. Cllr John Thelwall was chairman of the Trust for 3 years and a number of councillors have been members of the liaison group which was formed in 2019 to facilitate joint working. Currently Cllrs Peter Clark and Caroline Underwood are the council representatives on the group.