

Beaconsfield Hall

FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF Benjamin Disraeli, the Earl of Beaconsfield in 1881, his supporters founded the Primrose League in 1883 in memory of the famous Conservative Prime Minister and his favourite flower. The league's aim was to support the Conservative party and to that end they began building club houses. In that year a meeting was held at the Crown Inn, Shipton, to discuss the possibility of a club house in Shipton. In the following year, 1884, at a meeting held at the Red Horse a limited liability company was formed to arranged for the erection and management of such a building. The funding was to come from donations and the sale of 300 shares in the company at a £1 each.

Land for the building was bought for £15 from A.W.S.Hitchman, director of the Chipping Norton Brewery and owner of the Red Horse site. Plans were drawn up by Mr. J.C.Traynor of Peterborough and the tender for its building by Alfred Groves of Milton was accepted - £300 for the building and £100 for furnishing. Within a year, the hall, built of Milton stone, was almost complete, and on 24 August 1885 the memorial stone, also of Milton stone and donated by Mr Edwin Groves, cousin of the builder, was formerly laid by Mrs Wynne, wife of the prospective Conservative M.P. for North Oxfordshire.

The occasion necessitated the erection of a platform decorated with flags and bunting to accommodate the local dignitaries and party.

The Shipton Brass Band was in attendance and played suitable marches, hymns and songs, and there was a large number of spectators, most of whom were in the Conservative colours of orange and blue. There were many speeches from the platform including the Chairman's which set out the aims of the Beaconsfield Hall Co. for the hall "to be used for political meetings, concerts, balls, entertainments, social gatherings and any like purpose".

Other speeches suggested the hall could be used as a penny kitchen, to house the infants from the nearby school, and as a polling station which then covered the area as far as Fifield and Idbury.

Following the laying of the memorial stone Mrs Wynne was presented with the silver trowel then used. In one of the last speeches it was said that the roof should be on by October and the hall completely furnished. By all accounts it was in use by November 1885 and in subsequent years well used for the purposes intended.

Apart from schools, chapels and inns there were no public buildings or meetings rooms in any of the other local villages, and yet by 1890 the B.H.Co.Ltd. was considering ways to improve its building. The original building comprised an entrance hall (with cloakroom, ticket office and lavatory) leading to the 45 ft by 24 ft main hall which led on to an ante-room 12 ft by 24 ft. The hall was presumably heated by solid fuel fires and lit by gas. The new plans of 1890 proposed building a new kitchen and turning the ante-room into a meeting or reading room.

However, other villages wanted their own parish rooms. By this time Fifield's vicar was using the redundant Primitive Methodist Chapel as a Parish Room and Milton's vicar was keen to use the redundant Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in Milton.

But this needed funding which, in the 1890s came mainly from concerts organised by Mrs Samuda (one time of Shipton Court). These concerts were held in Stow on the Wold and Chipping Norton, but, most frequently, in the largest local building, the Beaconsfield Hall.

Various improvements were made to the hall in the early part of the century as it continued to be used for the purposes it was built, but the Beaconsfield Hall Co. found it difficult to continue. So, on 24 May 1923, the Company asked the Parish Council to take over the hall for the nominal sum of £5. After due discussion this offer was accepted and Deeds of Conveyance were drawn up and signed the following year on 23 April.

Henceforth it became the Parish Hall but most locals still referred to it as the Beaconsfield. But the Parish Hall was now facing more local alternatives, from the Tiddy Hall in Ascott and from the YMCA or Red Triangle Club (opposite the gas works in Ascott Road) which was opened in 1923. By 1925 the Wychwoods British Legion had opened its own hall in Milton.

Nevertheless, for any large function the British Legion and others used the newly named Parish Hall in Shipton, which was still used

for the usual meetings, concerts and dances with the added attraction of cinematographic shows.

Various alterations and improvements continued to be made to the building including the installation of electricity in 1930 and central heating in 1936, the same year as Milton began collecting for its own village hall. However, three years later in October 1939 Shipton Parish Council lost the use of the hall as it was requisitioned by the military for the duration of the war.

Even the Parish Council had to find alternative accommodation for its meetings in the Red Triangle. In 1941 the late Dr Gordon Scott proposed the creation of a Wychwoods Social Centre out of the redundant St Michael's Home. Funds were raised and if the proposal had reached fruition maybe there would have been no need for a new village hall now, but, by November 1946 the scheme had come to nought.

By the late 1950s and into the '60s the hall was used more and more by Shipton C.E.School (later to be called St Mary's). There was also more fund-raising, by the usual means, and from the re-introduction of street fairs.

This resulted in major internal alterations, with the provision of a stage, new kitchen, and the conversion of the gallery into ladies' conveniences. Later, the old gallery became a committee room. Showers were added at the northern end and there were improvements in lighting and heating.