

THE NEWTON FERRERS AND NOSS MAYO WOMEN'S INSTITUTE HALL - 1925-1990 - A POTTED HISTORY

There are many new residents in our villages who make use of the W.I. Hall, but who are under the impression that it is a public hall funded by public money. It seems appropriate to set the record straight - particularly as 1991 is the 70th birthday of the WI

The hall is owned and run by the W.I. It receives no grants for maintenance and improvements from either public sources or from the N.F.W.I. It was built for the W.I. in 1925 with a £500 bank loan, and was opened on 14th April 1926 by Lady Mildmay. The President at that time, Mrs V.V. Yonge, stood as guarantor for the loan.

There was no running water or electricity. It was lit by two "double petrol lamps" (which sounds rather alarming!) and heated by two Perfection Oil Heaters, which cost 27/6d each, later replaced by a coke stove.

It was let out to local organisations, and a fortnightly dance proved very popular - almost too popular as the police had to be called on one occasion to restore order. In 1927 poles were fixed across the doors to keep the cattle out, and in 1933 the gents lavatory, which apparently had a separate entrance, was fitted with bars on the window and a gate, to prevent it being used as a public convenience!

There was always a great demand for the use of the Hall, and in 1931 the rent was about 12/6d per evening session. In 1932 the Wesleyans held their Sunday evening services every week in the Hall, and this was free of charge.

In 1933 electricity was installed, and by 1934 running water must have been laid on, as it was noted that the wages of the caretaker should be reduced to 2/- per evening, as there were no lamps to light, water to carry or Elsan buckets to empty! These wages were paid by the hirers of the hall. Cleaning was done voluntarily by members on a rota system. A paid caretaker-cum-cleaner did not materialize until 1985.

The minutes show an ongoing saga of improvements and renovations, all paid for by hall hiring charges, interest-free loans from members, donations and fund-raising efforts. The original bank loan was repaid by this means, and this method of funding remains the same today. In 1955 a new floor was laid in the main hall.

In 1971 Mrs Monica Edwards (now living in Chumleigh) and Mrs Pat McDonald (now a V.C.O. and living in Thurstlestone) "erupted" on the W.I. scene. Their enthusiasm and hard work secured a real modernisation programme, the most notable part being the installation of oil-fired central heating, which made the hall a much more comfortable place to be in, and encouraged additions such as new curtains and new floor coverings in the side rooms, not to mention new bookings! Indeed, they generated such enthusiasm that in 1975 the entire hall, apart from the ceiling, was redecorated by members.

By 1984 trade was so brisk that running the Hall became too much for the W.I. committee, and the Hall Management Committee was formed, for an initial three years. This consisted of four W.I. Members and four non-members who were recruited to help make the Hall a more profitable concern. Mr Wilf Fearn became Chairman, Mr Ron Adamson, the Treasurer, and Mr Paul Terry was affectionately known as the Handyman, which indeed he was. Miss Eileen Hewitt took over as Hall Booking Secretary.

By 1987 the Hall had been renovated both inside and out, and was financially firmly on its feet. During the three years major work included: Installation of main drainage; Purchase of new cooker and piano; Updating of the electrical system; Painting of the ceiling; Complete exterior redecoration: Roof cleared of moss and waterproof sealant applied; New roof in gents cloakroom.

In March 1987 the three gentlemen retired amid thanks and congratulations, and the Hall was again run by W.I. members, who continued as the Hall Management Committee, separate from the W.I. Committee.

Recent major improvements and maintenance work include: Installation of radiator in gents cloakroom; Panelling to walls of gents cloakroom; New floor covering in kitchen and ante-room; Repair of watermain. In August 1990 complete interior redecoration was undertaken, though unfortunately not by voluntary labour!

Realistic hall-hiring charges, set in consultation with the Newton & Noss Village Hall Committee, provide most of the money needed for maintenance, though fund-raising efforts and loans are needed for major improvements, and donations are more than welcome. It is important that both halls charge roughly the same, as there is no point in cutting each others throats, though a little competition is healthy. The W.I. are proud that their efforts to raise the standard of their Hall should be commended.