

The Village Hall - the building project that sparked a 'civil war'

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The May 13th, 2026, Annual Parish Meeting focused on keeping the Village Hall Charity in existence, and the urgent need for volunteers to join the present long serving but diminishing Village Hall Management Trustees! This discussion prompted an investigation into archive documents, revealing the astonishing 'birth' of the present village hall.

Previous Ewelme News have covered the 1909 provision by local benefactors of two amenities, being the Reading Room and the Rifle Range next door - separated by *'some rather unsavoury public toilets.'* (The Rifle Range gradually lost popularity for shooting practise after World War I, becoming increasingly dilapidated. In 1926 village boys - seeking a meeting space more comfortable than the bus shelter - broke in and squatted. A Youth Club evolved which continued into the 1980's). Indoor village events had historically been staged in the church, the relatively small Reading Room, or in the two school classrooms - causing disruption and involving labour in the clearing and replacing of desks.



The Old Rifle Range before reconstruction began.

A central venue for community use was required. A newspaper cutting dated February 8th, 1938, reported on a meeting in the school room to discuss two suggestions - to build a new hall, or, as a cheaper alternative, the Reading Room doubling in size by being joined to the Rifle Range - costing approximately £500. Two groups objected to the latter proposal. The Women's Institute used and financed the upkeep of the Reading Room, and the Boys' Club would lose a free venue. The outbreak of World War II disrupted the plans, and the two buildings were utilised for various essential purposes during hostilities.

In the 1976 June issue of the Ewelme News the editor, George Cannon, asked for opinions on the need for a Village Hall "...as a common meeting place to suit the needs of all the community. Some

favour a meeting place at the Benson end of the village. There are those who favour the other end, on the Common. Some there are who see no need for a meeting place at all, and some favour a place in the centre, near the water. What do you think? ”

In 1980 positive movements began to build a new hall to replace the Rifle Range (now known as The Social Club). A Village Hall Management Committee was formed, acting in conjunction with the Parish Council, with the first meeting held on June 6th, 1980. Fund-raising events were organised, and personal loans and gifts poured in. On January 9th, 1981, the Management Committee signed a contract agreement for £50,154 with Chiltern Development Company Ltd of Princes Risborough, to build the new hall, to commence on February 2nd, 1981, and be completed by August 22nd, 1981. The overall estimated cost was £52,000. (As motor car ownership had increased, the lack of parking became apparent, and the first outline plans show five parking spaces - in the present Playschool garden!)

As noted in 1976, the divergence of opinions continued, and the advancing scheme attracted vigorous opposition. A document written by Mrs Joy Best (of the Old Coach House) illustrated the surprising toxicity evolving between two factions. One group, with full Parish Council support, preferred to replace the Rifle Range. The other, to build a new hall on the playing fields, possibly situated near the present cricket nets against the bank, with parking provision beyond the Sports Pavilion.

However, on November 6th, 1980, the Parish Council agreed to replace the Rifle Range with an overall estimated cost of £52,000. Three main factors influenced the decision. No serious planning problems were likely, plus a substantial grant of £27,200 was available (but only for that project), from the District Council and the Department of Education & Science - a grant withdrawn the following year! Other grants raised the sum to around £40,000. A further bonus was the Parish Council could combine its previously separate Rifle Range and Reading Room charities into one, becoming Custodian Trustee of both venues.



The Old Rifle Range before reconstruction began.

Mrs Best wrote that the project was initially received enthusiastically, but - *“The site, the size, the cost, could not please everyone, it would have been hard to have done so. Still they worked together, raising money for this and that, but below the surface a rumble could be felt. Then as the new hall began to appear the community cracked, split, and divided. Resentment grew on both sides. The project dismissed and the whole thing became nothing but a battle of principles. Those for it rushed things along regardless of anyone. Those against it did all they could to stop any sort of community*

in the village. The resentment became like a cancer; it festered and grew angry.” (One villager recently revealed participating in a door-to-door campaign to canvass support for the sports field site!)



The building of the new Village Hall commences.

Although the generous 50% grants were not applicable to an alternative site, the rift widened. A bad-tempered meeting on November 27th, 1980, expressed the ‘...*opposition of a great many villagers in favour of the sports field!*’ Opposition even continued through the building phase in 1981. Mrs Best recorded some clandestine activity - “*On the very last meeting in the school to discuss the arrangements of the grand opening of the hall... The other group heard of the meeting, and the cancer burst. They rushed to the meeting and angry spiteful words hung in the air, like raw icicles!*”

How long it took for the ‘raw icicles’ to melt is best not remembered now, but the present village hall was finally opened on September 26th, 1981 by Mrs Lizzie Winfield, Ewelme’s oldest resident. All eleven of the village’s organisations planned to use it - some of whose members must have included the dissenters!

Carol Sawbridge, Ewelme Village Archive