Building of the recreation ground and pavilion on the Common

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For some of us, watching a village cricket match to pass the idle hours of a summer afternoon is a pleasure. An opportunity to meet friends and receive instruction on the intricacies of the game from helpful bystanders. Sadly, few spectators now position themselves on the banks of the amphitheatre, which is Ewelme's recreation ground, yet the venue was only obtained after decades of struggle against officialdom, local objection, lack of funds and countless Parish Council meetings. Village cricket was first recorded in in the 1850s but incredibly, the first recorded request for an enclosed space for cricket matches was put to the Parish Council on 18th April 1905! Headmaster Robert Quixley sent a letter on 15th March 1937 suggesting levelling an area for a playing field, but this was dismissed as 'impracticable'. At the April 1945 meeting, Mr Mundy proposed the common be fenced to enable the Common rights holders to graze their allotted number of cattle without a herdsman, plus a space for a recreation ground. These were not trivial requests. Before television and vehicular mobility, the men of rural villages were eager to play organised games. Sports clubs were set up which became pivotal in village life. Inter-village rivalry was established. with weekly reports on the outcome of games appearing in local newspapers. Ewelme was no exception, with its own cricket and football teams. Cricket was mentioned from the 1850s and a football team by 1908!

The late Herbie Winfield (1917-2007) was probably Ewelme's keenest sportsman. He recalled in his memoirs he started sports at the age of 10, played football for Ewelme until he was 50, and cricket to the age 55. Matches were played on five different fields dotted around the village, donated by friendly farmers. A mobile changing room in the form of a wooden shed was towed by tractor to the venue. Often the pitch had to be cleared of livestock and cowpats before play commenced. The most favoured pitches were the flatter fields behind the New Rectory, or at Prospect Farm off The Pightles lane, from where thirsty post-match players could quickly access The Lamb pub, via wooden planks over the brook. The teams would cycle to nearby villages, but for matches further away the church bus was used, as Rector Jenkins [1945-1952] was a keen cricketer; or by coaches chartered from Aldridge's at Benson, and House's at Watlington. Out of respect, matches were never held on Sundays. If there was a rare Sunday match, play finished before 6.0 pm to enable church attendance, as most of the players were in the choir.

Having returned from his Army service, Herbie decided to tackle the lack of proper recreational facilities in Ewelme. On 13th March 1946 he attended a Parish Council meeting with a proposal for a sports field on a portion of Cow Common. (Its historic use had been necessarily changed for the War effort, when local farmer Fred Chamberlain ploughed the land to grow food, however it would eventually be de-requisitioned). Progress was slow, but on 31st August 1947, the Parish Council met representatives from the two sports teams to discuss the levelling of 3 acres of ground for a playing field. In February 1948, a resolution was put to a parish meeting for 5 acres to be drained and levelled. Eventually, in June 1955 the Parish Council agreed to reserve 6 acres as a playing field. All depended on permission for the common being fenced, and on 25th October 1956, shortly after de-requisitioning, the Ministry of Agriculture & Fisheries wrote this could be done. However, the Use of Common Land is enshrined in rigid ancient Law, and changing the use is not straight forward, requiring an Act of Parliament. Fortunately, the Old Rectory was the home Lord Somervell, a former Attorney General, who steered the Parish Council's application to obtain the mandatory permission. There were also complications to solve concerning the Common Rights Holders, whose properties owned the right to graze a specified number of cattle. Some villagers objected to the common being fenced at all, and a few Rights Holders objected to paying for it. Nonetheless, thirty-two eager villagers attended a momentous Parish Council meeting on 22nd April 1959, when it was agreed to go ahead with the project.

There was much work to do in raising funds, grant applications, and gathering estimates. In the summer of 1959, the Council paid Grundons £810 for levelling level the area. For six months afterwards, groups of willing villagers picked up thousands of stones from the area, which eventually filled a pond that is now covered by the children's playground area. With the ground cleared, village thatcher Fred Harwood seeded the whole area by hand! Mrs Nowell-Smith organised the planting of trees along the southern boundary for donations of £1 per tree, with the donors' name plates attached, (which were swiftly removed by village boys). Ancient gang mowers were purchased from RAF Benson, and the portable shed was permanently installed as the 'pavilion'. The Archive does not record when the first match was played in the new decade, but it must have been a joyous occasion.

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A proper sports ground required a suitable pavilion. Objections were inevitable. A Council meeting of 20th September 1966 debated whether interest in the playing field would last long enough to justify the provision of a pavilion! Eventually, plans were drawn up, grants sourced, funds raised, and estimates obtained. A pavilion would be built by Messrs Coggins & Newman of Benson, at a cost of £1,167. 13sh. 3d. Heavy rain in early 1967 delayed work, but by March it was erected and almost immediately vandalised by village children! (Headmaster Mr Sykes was tasked with having 'words' with the known miscreants - and their parents). A special meeting on 9th May 1967 passed the payment of £7. 19sh 3d to repair the damage, which included repairing the cesspit, where the cover had been removed, rubbish thrown in and the air vent pipe blocked!

In Herbie's opinion the two most important events in Ewelme in his lifetime were the making of the recreation ground and the building of the village hall. However, in post-war years, families began to scatter from small communities, and as long ago as 1977 men from Benson were recruited to make up team numbers for the football and cricket clubs. The football team is now defunct, but Ewelme & Benson Cricket Club continues, but with few, or more often no Ewelme players taking the field.

Ewelme Village Archive