

The Reading Room and Rifle Range

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In most English villages the social hub is the Village Hall. The Parish Council has recently asked us to dig out some history of the Reading Room to assist in the applications for grants for its re-thatching. In doing so we came across some delightful essays covering the 100 years history of this Room and the adjacent Rifle Range; as it was this building that evolved into the new Village Hall, opened comparatively recently in 1981.

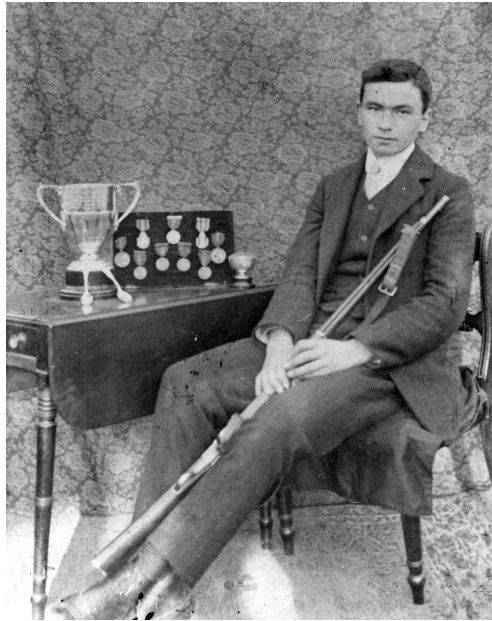
The Reading Room was donated in 1909 by Miss Beatrice Maxwell as a 'men only' sanctum for reading and playing billiards. She had bought the property described as 'two cottages or tenements and gardens near to or adjoining the Ewelme Miniature Rifle Range' (presumably the Reading Room and Kings Pool Cottage) from Mr Frank Lawson of Ewelme Down, for the princely sum of £60.

The Rifle Range had already been donated at some time before 1914 by another local benefactor, Mr Charles Schunck. It had a range of 25 yards, with the butts at the far end from the door with a large mound of sand into which to fire.



**The Rifle Team in 1912. Standing: Fred Wheeler, Albert Cook, G. Justins, W. Wheeler and J. Orpwood.
Seated: H. Smith, Mr Schunck and Walkin.**

We know from previous memoirs that many Ewelme men who went to fight in the Great War had already practised with rifles in that building.



Champion shot F. Wheeler displaying his cups and medals.

However, over time both the Reading Room and the Rifle Range gradually ceased to be used for their original purposes. Whilst the Rifle Range sank into dilapidation after the War, the Reading Room was rescued and kept up by the Women's Institute. It became the main venue for the baby clinic and various social occasions - a Miners 'cosy' family wedding managed to cram in 120 guests!

The late Fred Harwood, the village Thatcher, wrote the following article in 1981 featuring the ingenuity of some Ewelme youths in adapting the building for use as a popular and long-running Young Men's Club.

'The Rifle Range remained virtually derelict until the early 1930's when some of the young men in the village found that an open window allowed them entry – this was very acceptable – because at that time the only meeting place was the Sheep Brook so there was always a congregation of young men around that corner. On the third evening of entry, some of the men were playing billiards on the three quarter-size billiard table - originally stored in the Reading Room - and others were sitting round the stove which they had managed to light, when they had an unexpected visitor in the form of the Trustee of the building, Mr Edwin Hathaway, who was then living in the nearby in Ash's Cottage. [Now Kings Pool Cottage]. Being a very sensible man he suggested to the 'squatters' that they should form a club. This was greeted with enthusiasm and the 'Young Mens' Club' was started there and then. It was open to all males above fourteen years and to any age! It was very jealous of its rules, one being that under no circumstances was the 'fair sex' allowed in and this was very strictly adhered to! It had ever open doors, being open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and 52 weeks in the year. Being open on Sundays was not very popular at first but after a time was accepted completely. As there were quite a few men unemployed at that time due to the 'thirties depression' it gave them somewhere to meet.'

Adjoining the long room was a smaller part forming an L-shaped building. This formed what is known as a valley in the roof which leaked so badly that tin baths; buckets etc were needed to catch the rain water. In the corner of the two rooms was a cupboard in which were locked some .22 rifles left from the days of the Rifle Club. (These rifles were found some time after

the Young Men's' Club was started but more of that later). The main priority was to make the place more comfortable, so with the late Mr Fred Winfield as 'gaffer', a start was made. Firstly, a screen to stop the draught when the door was opened, also a partition across the long room approximately a quarter of the way towards the butts, were erected. Also, a toilet was necessary, but as it was an all male club with plenty of space behind the rooms, all that was needed was a door out and a rough shelter to be erected. The leaking roof was still causing trouble – it was rotting the floor so this had to be repaired. Seating was the next problem and was solved by acquiring some old car seats and then fixing wooden supports to the backs and underneath to make them stand up, and this proved very satisfactory.

During the mid-1930's one incident is worth noting. Some of the club members who had been Army men thought it an idea to shoot some of the young rooks in the Manor trees, so obtaining some ammunition to fit the rifles in the aforesaid cupboards, they started the 'rook shoot'. Now the Manor ladies (Misses Jervis and Quinn) were horrified at this so they telephoned the police who promptly came and confiscated the rifles. There was an attempt to close the Club, but this failed because the village realised its value to the community.

About this time, a village meeting was called to discuss enlarging the Reading Room. At the very well attended meeting the idea was turned down, the strongest objectors being the Young Men's Club who would lose their club rooms, and the W.I. who had taken over the Reading Room when it was being badly neglected. The WI had spent much time and money bringing it back to standard, so was not very keen to give up their tenancy.

During the Second World War period the building was used for other very different functions. The lower or butts end became the A.R.P room for meetings etc. The A.R.P members did a tremendous amount of alteration and restoration to this part to make a very useful room. As there was now a middle section to the long room, this was brought into use. A large cooking stove was installed with other cooking equipment. When this was completed the British Restaurant, as it was called, opened. The club rooms were the dining room. It was quite a successful venture as at that time there were a number of visiting workmen and lorry drivers in the area. It was also used by some Services personnel. The work in the restaurant was done voluntarily by some of the ladies in the village.

With the return of the men after the last War, the Young Men's Club restarted on the same basis as before as it had the building on an indefinite lease with three trustees, namely Sir Donald Somervell, Mr S Winfield and Mr H Poupart. In all the years that the Rifle Range was in the hands of the Club it was completely self-supporting, not at any time receiving any money. Also, another rule was not to let the rooms in competition with the Reading Room. Their duty was to guide if necessary, but through all the years this was never required. The Club carried on for a few years, but finally due to lack of members and not enough care being taken with the equipment - it had to close.

During this time, the A.R.P. room was used as a cinema. This was very popular for some time but eventually the young men running the films could not make it pay, so it had to finish. Next use of the building was an indoor practise wicket by some of the younger members of the Cricket Club. This was self-supporting as all the work and money was supplied by the users. This again was successful for a while. Next came the newly formed Youth Club which finally marked the end of the Young Men's Club tenancy.

That brings the story up to date as the Youth Club were still tenants when the Rifle Range was demolished. In a way, it is rather sad to see the old building go, but time marches on, and one hopes that the new Village Hall building will be as useful.” Fred Harwood



Demolition of the old building.

Mr Brian Young wrote an account of the opening of the new Village Hall on the 26th September 1981. He referred to the many years of debate and discussion, and at times heated argument, as to whether a new village hall should replace the old Rifle Range.

‘In spite of the weather, the Grand Opening was very well attended. One of the oldest inhabitants of Ewelme, Mrs H J [Lizzie] Winfield, performed the Opening Ceremony accompanied by a Guard of Honour formed by the Ewelme Guides and Brownies, who also presented her with a posy [by Rhona Bruce]. The Rev I M Williams thanked Mrs Winfield for cutting the tape and declaring the Hall open, and went on to thank all those who had worked so hard and given so much of their time over the months past to make the building of this fine Hall possible and especially those who had so generously given gifts and loans of money.’

Tea was served by the ladies of the Amenities Committee. In the evening, there was a Supper Dance and Cabaret which was very much enjoyed by over 150 people and thanks must go to those who had worked so hard and provided food, etc. to make this opening evening such an enjoyable one. The Bar was run by Mr and Mrs R L Cox of the Greyhound Inn and their helpers and they were kept very busy throughout the evening to the end.

This was the village’s first night of entertainment in this fine hall and a very successful one it was and the first of many more to come, I hope. In spite of the feelings of many in the past on the subject of building a new hall and where it should be located, now we have got it, I feel it is up to everyone to pull together and forget their differences to make this hall a resounding success in the future, to support the Village Hall Management Committee in their efforts, and let it be our meeting place where we can join as a community and enjoy ourselves together.”

These two buildings have indeed had a chequered history. How glad we are that despite the controversy, the present hall was finally built with the sexist conditions and uncomfortable surroundings consigned to the past - though some villagers can still remember sitting on those old car seats!



Lizzie Winfield opening the Village Hall

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An intriguing opening paragraph in an editorial by the late George Cannon in the 1976 Spring issue of the Ewelme News, listed the importance of ancient communal spaces where people gathered to discuss the matters of the day - from local wells in biblical times, Greek and Roman Baths, Georgian Coffee Houses and Spas, to the ale-houses and taverns of more recent times. Reading on, it became clear that George was referring to the controversial plan to build a new Village Hall on the site of the old Rifle Range. Mentioning the inevitable polarisation of opinions with regard to the proposed building and siting of a meeting place, large enough to suit the needs of all the community, he ended with a question – ‘*What do you think?*’

An acrimonious meeting in a packed Reading Room raised robust objections to the scheme, mainly due to the site’s lack of parking. Some favoured a building in the Green Lane end of the village, some the Common end. A few wanted a thatched roof to match the Reading Room. Others saw no need for a new meeting place at all!

Early village records from the 1870's show the limited public events such as lectures and lantern slide shows were held in the small downstairs classroom at the school. The Reading Room was built in 1909, as an all-male preserve for men to retire to smoke pipes and read newspapers. After many decades it ceased to be used for its original purpose and it eventually housed a temporary wartime classroom, Women's Institute meetings and a baby clinic. (In the 1960's the Miners family somehow managed to cram 120 wedding reception guests into its limited space!)



Miners wedding party outside the Village Hall

The Rifle Range building attached to the Reading Room was also built at that time, and was well-used for shooting practise, but sinking into dilapidation after 1918. In 1926 youths broke in and initially squatted inside, but they were eventually allowed to use it as a rather uncomfortable Youth Club, as sitting on old car seats was preferable to loitering outside around the sheep brook. Also, it gave the unemployed men in the 'thirties depression' years somewhere to meet.

In the 1940-45 War the butts end became the A.R.P meeting room, and a British Restaurant was established, complete with a large cooking stove operated by volunteer village ladies to provide meals for visiting workmen, lorry drivers and Services personnel. For a few years after the War it was used as an occasional cinema, an indoor practise wicket by younger members of the Cricket Club, and once a mini-circus performance complete with a caged lion! The Youth Club continued to meet there, but by the early 1970s it was in a sad state and its demolition would provide a site for a modern, spacious village hall.

The new building was officially opened on the 26th September 1981 - notwithstanding the almost 10 years of planning, fund raising and much disputation, at a cost of £52,600, (of which nearly £40,000 was in grants from central and local government). Attended by representatives of the builders, County Councillors, Parish Councillors and villagers, the

opening ceremony was performed by Mrs Lizzie [Granny] Winfield, (chosen because she was the oldest resident aged 89 years), with a Guard of Honour formed by Ewelme Guides and Brownies. Mrs Winfield wryly remarked '*this is progress!*' for she remembered in her younger days being barred as a woman from the buildings, but allowed in later times for domestic duties - as she added - '*I used to keep the old place clean and do the cricket teas.*'

(In his memoir, her son Herbie felt that the making of the Recreation Ground in 1959 and the building of the Village Hall, were the two most important village events in his lifetime). Rector Williams thanked Mrs Winfield for cutting the tape and young Rhona Bruce presented her with a posy. Afterwards tea was served by the ladies of the Amenities Committee, and an evening Supper Dance and Cabaret was enjoyed by over 150 people. The bar was run by Mr and Mrs Cox of the Greyhound Inn and their helpers, who were kept very busy throughout the evening to the end.

All eleven of the village's organisations planned to use the new hall, and Brian Young summed up the whole affair in the Nov/Dec 1981 issue of the News. '*I feel it is up to everyone to pull together and forget their differences to make this hall a resounding success in the future, to support the Village Hall Management Committee in their efforts, and let it be our meeting place where we can join as a community and enjoy ourselves together for many years to come.*'

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