



## A history of Purley Memorial Hall

### A story of a remarkable community

To set the scene: In 1946, the country was still in economic crisis following the war, - austerity as we know it in 2013 is nothing to the hardships of that time - money was in very short supply; rationing still controlled. Almost all you could buy, which, at that time, was mainly food – a piece of meat the size of a mobile phone was one person’s meat ration for a week - and clothing; the shelves in the shops were mostly bare. The main diet of the time was bread and potatoes!

There were endless government regulations and orders over all aspects of living. The military historian, Correlli Barnett, had summarised the situation with brutal clarity: “the post war British people had “the psychology of the victor although their material circumstances approximated more to those of a loser”.

It was a desolate time. But in desolate times communities do bond and pull together and this is the story of Purley.

It was at a Parish meeting that the villagers of Purley decided they wanted to create a war memorial to remember those soldiers of Purley who did not come back from both the Great War and the Second World War, but also to build an amenity for those that did, to enjoy.

The driving force for this memorial was a wee Scots lady, Mrs Florence Goodwin, a lady with drive and determination, immense energy and vision for what could be done. It was at her house, Wakering Cottage in Westbury Lane, that the idea of the village hall was first discussed. She was untiring in her efforts and dedication towards the building of the hall. Bert Nicholls remembers her saying in her broad Scottish accent, “We’ve got no money, don’t know where it’s going to be”, “But she got a committee together; she was the driving force to getting the hall started”.

I have in front of me a small A5 minute book; I opened the red cover with “July 1946” handwritten on the front. The heading on the inside cover in Florence Goodwin’s handwriting was “Purley War Memorial”; the words were underlined.



Mrs Florence Goodwin

The first page started.....

After a Parish meeting was held in the schoolroom on Monday July 15<sup>th</sup> at 7.30 p.m. to discuss ways and means of obtaining site or buildings for hall or playing fields, the Committee elected was as follows:

Miss Scott Stokes (Chairman)  
Mrs Goodwin (Secretary)  
Mr J Melville  
Mr H Tidbury  
Mr J Warwick  
Mr Fothergill  
Mr Halsey

It was agreed that suitable premises or land be sought for a village hall and this was left in the hands of the Committee to report at the next meeting to be held on Monday July 22<sup>nd</sup> at Mrs Goodwin's house.

So started a story of this remarkable community, and the village hall they built; the hall which spanned seven years from conception to its grand opening.



Miss Scott-Stokes

Miss Scott-Stokes, also of Westbury Lane, a highly educated lady with a beautiful trained barrister's mind, was elected the Hall Committee's first Chairman. She was also the Vice-Chairman of the Parish Council. She did much work in London for the underprivileged for which she received the OBE. It was Miss Scott Stokes who steered and focused the Hall's Committee impeccably throughout the build.

The village needed a hall badly, the servicemen certainly deserved all the amenities that could be given to them and it was decided that somehow or other they would raise the money from within the village. The idea was received enthusiastically by the nine hundred or so villagers of Purley and everyone became very busy raising funds by organising events such as fetes, whist and beetle drives and dances: concerts were given by the then Purley WI choir, anything else the villagers could think to do, they would.

A house-to-house collection – the “Penny a Week Fund” – was started and this brought in from thirty shillings to two pounds every week.

The Committee decided very early on that a “playing field” would not serve the needs of ex-servicemen, so a hall it had to be. The Committee looked at a number of sites around Purley but very soon they set their eyes on a plot of land attached to the north east corner of the new Glebe Road.

A special Committee meeting was called to consider the purchase of the land. The Committee were unanimous in their vote that “the land was admirable for the village hall, with lovely views of the Chiltern Hills.” Mrs Goodwin was tasked to approach the owner, to ascertain if the land could be purchased. The answer was in the affirmative and a price was agreed at £120; the Committee had their land.

Miss Scott-Stokes guided the Committee through the purchase. At that time, a charitable trust was to be formed called "Purley Memorial Hall". On the 15<sup>th</sup> October 1947 the conveyance of the land was completed and the Trust set up. The first Trustees were Miss Scott-Stokes, Mrs Goodwin and Mr Melville.

Also in these very early months the Committee were deliberating on the type of building for the hall; they considered buying an ex-army hut from Aldermaston as a temporary hall but very quickly decided a new build hall was the best option.

The village was fortunate in having among its residents the architect, Mr Lewis Trevers, and he offered to design the hall. To build a new hall at this time, a building licence was required and the plans had to be approved. Mr. Trevers undertook all this work for the Committee. The first plans were rejected but revised plans were re-submitted and approved. All through the build Mr Trevers visited the site weekly to give advice and, if anyone wished to consult him during the week, he never failed them – a fine voluntary effort for a busy man.

The Committee had the job of finding someone who would be willing to take charge of the actual building operations – for even building of the hall was to be done by voluntary labour. They approached Mr. Bert Nicholls who lived in Glebe Road. He was a bricklayer and a foreman in the building trade. He readily agreed to undertake the work and find volunteers to help him. From 1948 to 1953 he devoted most of his spare time to the work.



Mr Bert Nicholls working at his escriptoire presented to him after the hall's completion.

And so it was that in November 1948 the village turned out to watch Bert Nicholls and ten helpers start digging the foundations for their very own hall.

Bert spoke highly of his pals who had helped him, especially Ron Winters (Bert's shadow as he was known) who had been with him all the time. Mr. Nicholls has been the only skilled man on the job but he said his helpers have been quick to learn, (in all, Bert had up to 40 "apprentices"). At a later stage Bert recalled these early days and said "It was a Saturday night when we were putting down the foundation concrete. We hadn't finished by 8p.m. so I asked for a few volunteers for 6 o'clock on Sunday morning. I needn't have worried; ten men turned up and we completed the job by 9 a.m.

At this time the Committee realised that, although the fund raising was going well, they would need more money to complete the hall so they made an application for a grant from the Ministry of Education. This proved a protracted negotiation but was, in the end, successful.

The whole village was always enthusiastic to see their hall being built and to help out where they could. Over all the years the building work continued Mrs Fitchew who, with her husband owned the newsagent shop, provided refreshments for the workers throughout the build to keep their energies up.



Three on the site – August 1951

As the build continued the young boys and girls of the village (when the builders were at their day-job) would play hide and seek or cowboys and Indians around the emerging wall (their fort) with no fears; certainly no thought of the unheard of “Health and Safety” but even these young children wanted to help with the build. When the London Brick Company delivered a fresh supply of bricks, they would be

there to help unload the bricks and pile them where Bert required them, and to their delight, the driver rewarded them by given them a ride in his lorry to the end of Glebe Road.

Mrs Goodwin said “There had never been lack of feminine support, and now the hall was nearing completion, the enthusiasm was even greater.” She pointed with pride to the window frames and the girders in the roof. “The womenfolk couldn’t do the bricklaying, but we did paint those before they were put in.”



Painting the windows, July 1951

Left to right: Unknown, Gladys Williams, Florence Goodwin, Ron Winters, Jean Buckmaster, Bert Nicholls.

Bert said “The only non-voluntary work has been the putting in of the gas pipes and the roof lining – the latter is rather a specialist job. We have done everything else including the plumbing; and young Mr Harris, who is an electrician and lives in the village, did all the wiring for us.”

It was 1952; sadly King George VI died and Princess Elizabeth ascended to the throne; knowing there would be a Coronation, this set a date in everybody’s mind and work to complete the hall was stepped up a pace.

The County architects had inspected the hall and, other than minor details to be adjusted, the hall was all in order. The hall was ready and in use for the Queen’s Coronation, along with the many other celebrations. Bert Nicholls said “We worked ‘tooth and nail’ to get it ready for the Coronation” and at 5 o’clock the day before the Coronation, he walked out of the Hall and said “There you are”.

Among the many celebrations in the village the Committee arranged for the Co-op to bring a projector and big screen and many villagers gathered into the hall to watch the Coronation.

At the AGM in October 1953 following the Hall’s opening Mr Theobald, (who was now the hall Committees Chairman) was able to announce that the Committee had been fortunate to

buy an adjoining piece of land to the west of the hall for £200. This enlarged the site to as it is today.

It was Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> October, the day of the official opening – the hall had been used for many functions already.

The hall was officially opened by Mr Anthony Hurd, MP for Newbury. Distinguished people were present including his wife, Mrs. Hurd, Hon. Humphrey Legge, Chief Constable of Berkshire and Miss M McCullough, HM Inspector of schools for Berkshire and Oxfordshire. The hall was packed with villagers.

In his speech Mr Hurd – whose pleasure in taking part in Purley's "great day" was very evident – said "This is indeed a great day for Purley and I am glad to be here to share in your joy at having built this for yourselves. It is a great achievement and I congratulate you, you have done something fine. This is a voluntary effort, and at a time when we are accustomed to look to the Welfare State to provide a great deal of the things we want, It is all the more worthwhile." He went on to say "The village will find fuller enjoyment in life by having its own social centre. It is a good thing to keep alive and foster the community spirit."

A vote of thanks to Mr Hurd was proposed by Miss Scott-Stokes, These speeches were reported with pictures in the national press and The Reading Mercury and Reading Standard, who both started their article with the phrase "The finest village hall built by voluntary effort since the war".

These were lovely speeches but the limelight throughout the meeting was directed particularly on three people who gave between them untold hours, and without whom the hall would never have been created – Mrs Florence Goodwin, Mr Bert Nicholls and his "shadow," Mr Ron Winters. Mrs Goodwin was presented with a brooch as a token of the village's gratitude; Bert was presented with an escritoire (and a vociferous "for he's a golly good fellow"). Ron received a barometer.

It was a memorable occasion. So too was the party held within the hall that night for all the villagers.

The population of Purley in 1947 was c900 rising to c1000 by 1953.

These Purley villagers, by all their efforts, collected £2,500 which equates to £56,625 at present day values. The total cost of the hall was £3,733 which included a £733 Government grant and a mortgage of £500. When added up, the total cost for the materials to build the hall at present day values would be £84,552. Of course the value of voluntary work is priceless.

*Compiled and written by John Murphy*

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Reminiscences with Ian Nash

The Farmers Weekly, Reading Mercury & Reading Standard