



## **MINUTES OF THE TWENTY SIXTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE ASSOCIATION HELD IN TODDINGTON VILLAGE HALL ON WEDNESDAY 16 NOVEMBER 2016 AT 20.00.**

**Coffee and biscuits, served by the committee, were available from 19 30.**

### **PRESENT**

2015-16 Committee Members: Doug Dix (Chairman); Dee Curtis (Hon. Secretary); David Millen (Hon. Treasurer); and 10 members of the public.

### **1. WELCOME**

The Chairman welcomed everyone present; explained the emergency evacuation procedures; declared that the meeting had been called in accordance with the rules of the Association's governing document; and drew attention to the papers provided for those attending.

### **2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Received from Glynis Wragg (U3A) and Bob Hughes (Beds RCC).

### **3. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES OF 25<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

The Minutes of the previous Annual General Meeting, held on 25 November 2015 were agreed and signed as correct. It was requested from the floor that draft Minutes of the 2016 AGM could be published for information on the Hall noticeboard as soon as possible after this Meeting. Matters Arising: Gill Whitfield reminded the Chairman that he had agreed to display a list of Committee Members at the Hall. Doug agreed to rectify the omission.

### **4. CHAIRMAN'S REPORT**

A copy of the Report is appended below. Requests to remedy the malfunction of the security lights at the rear of the Hall, and to confirm that the hearing loop was operational, were noted.

### **5. FINANCIAL STATEMENT**

David Millen highlighted specific areas of the accounts and responded to some enquiries from the floor. The Statement was accepted by the meeting and a vote of thanks given to David.

### **6. ELECTION OF MEMBERS FOR 2016/17**

Nominations had been received from Isobel Rae and Sarah Pither, and these were approved unanimously by those present.

### **7. APPOINTMENT OF REPRESENTATIVE MEMBERS FOR 2016/17**

Five qualifying local organisations appointed the following Members to the Committee

- Dee Curtis (St Georges Ladies Fellowship)
- Doug Dix (Toddington 41 Club)
- Rod Heal (Toddington Carpet Bowls Club)
- David Millen (Toddington Parish Council)
- Glynis Wragg (Toddington U3A)

### **8. RESOLUTIONS OR RECOMMENDATIONS**

None had been received.

### **9. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

Dee Curtis expressed thanks on behalf of the Committee to Doug and Matthew for all their efforts during the summer break on sorting and clearing the area under the stage.

### **10. CHAIRMAN'S CLOSING REMARKS**

Doug declared the meeting closed at 21.20 and thanked everyone for attending.



## CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 2016

This is my first Report as Chairman, and it's a bit longer than the one my predecessor delivered, as I felt it important to set out what the Committee has had to deal with in the past year.

In 2003, after fifteen years of detailed involvement with the planning, building and management of our Village Hall, I decided that it was time to let someone else have a go. All was quiet until the Spring of 2014, when the new Secretary asked for my help to sort out a few issues which were causing her concern, and by the Summer of that year I became aware from various sources that the affairs of the Hall weren't being conducted as they ought to have been.

Some inexplicable and apparently arbitrary restrictions on access to the car park (more of which later) brought matters to a head, and the AGM in November 2014 found the management committee being unable to give satisfactory answers to questions from parishioners. The situation was compounded when the new committee members effectively elected themselves, without following the procedures laid down by the governing document and by the Charity Commission. Issues remained unresolved over the next six months, in spite of approaches made by individuals and the Parish Council, and sensible communication with the committee became even more difficult.

In July 2015 I decided, reluctantly, to re-join the committee to try to establish what the problems were and to make sure that the proper processes were followed for the next AGM. It didn't start well, when (after I'd completed and submitted the necessary appointment forms correctly) I was told that I wasn't allowed to attend my first meeting, but I went anyway. I found that, in spite of having received advice from Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity, the committee showed a general reluctance to act in the manner expected of charity trustees. Decisions were being made by forceful individuals rather than the committee as a whole, and often without any proper discussion or research. The minutes of meetings were pretty woeful. My interventions, which compared the committee's actions with what the law and best practice required, were regularly resisted and two members employed some aggressive tactics to get me removed from the committee on the basis that my appointment wasn't valid. They failed - but (in the absence of any other candidates, and having done most of the preparatory work myself) I was nominated to chair the 2015 AGM, at which virtually all members of the previous committee declined to stand for re-election.

At the close of the 2015 AGM I announced my intention that the Association would try to do things properly in the future. Only four other members of the community had offered their services as charity trustees, and when they elected me as their Chairman, I had to try to live up to my promise! I already knew that the previous committee was responsible for a good number of "sins of omission and sins of commission", but as the days went by it became clear that the scale of the challenge was greater than I imagined. I don't propose to list everything in detail, but it's right to put on record at least some aspects of what the Association and our employees have achieved in the past twelve months.

For a start the books hadn't balanced in the previous financial year - so our new Treasurer spent many hours poring over the figures and getting them approved by the Independent Examiner. It didn't help that we needed to change the signatories on the Santander bank accounts before we could operate them, and that turned into a nightmare! I visited their local branch on 1 December 2015 and followed the prescribed process to set matters in train. Little did we know that the previous committee hadn't advised Santander of previous changes of details or that Santander would get themselves confused with their own procedures, lose our application, give us wrong information, and end up sending documents to a stranger's house in Houghton Regis, which a previous Treasurer had vacated several months beforehand. Seven visits to the branch later, numerous frustrating phone calls and a formal complaint to the CEO led to matters eventually being resolved by the end of March, and we were then able to start writing cheques.

The previous committee had been reluctant to hand over information, and we've been unable to recover some of the records, which may have been destroyed. What we did have hadn't always been conscientiously kept, so there were some things that we didn't have a clear picture about. One example of where this caught us out was inheriting problems with the toilets. The male toilets were cursed with an indescribable odour which had apparently hung around, on an off, for about eighteen months and which (in spite of complaints) nobody had tried to fix. Lifting a drain cover and relocating a baffle so that a U-bend worked properly cured the problem overnight. We also discovered that various plumbers had attacked the female toilets with plungers because of recurring flushing problems, but nobody had "had the drains up". So, when the whole sewerage system became solidly and very unpleasantly blocked in early December, we called in an emergency contractor. It transpired that several pipes had been damaged over a long period by the ingress of roots, and when the blockage was cleared it was necessary to line the pipes to prevent future problems. In the absence of any proper records we had had no idea that we should have called the insurers before getting the work done, and when we put in a belated claim, the insurers response was to pay only about a quarter of the £6,600 cost. With a bit of perseverance however, and a lot of help from the brokers, we did eventually get fully reimbursed.

That incident raised the question of how the damage had been caused, and led us to look a bit closer at the vegetation around the site. As a consequence we've had some of the larger offending (or dying) plants removed, all of the other shrubs thinned out or cut down to a manageable level, and the canopies of the large trees lifted. The local contractor we employed took two days to clear it all and told us it was a pity the landscaping hadn't been cared for on a regular basis. At least we can now see what's growing, and we're planning to make the site look a bit tidier in the Spring, and to put in a proper maintenance programme.

When the contractors cleared the sewers we also got them to clear the drains in the car park, which had been flooding repeatedly in wet weather for some time. It made no difference, so we asked Central Bedfordshire Council to clear out the gullies all along Leighton Road, which also flooded in places. It took a while to persuade them (using the original site plans) that the flooding was their problem, but then we found out that they didn't have a gully cleaning programme, that the whole of Toddington hadn't had any attention for at least three years and that only one machine was available for the whole of Central Bedfordshire. Apparently it was used to clean the gullies in Leighton Road at the end of October, but the early signs are that it hasn't made a lot of difference.

The climate inside the hall was also leading to complaints, particularly about the heating. That wasn't surprising when we discovered that every hirer was instructed to turn the temperature down to 10° when they left - so the hirers after them came into a cold building, which didn't warm up unless they stayed for a couple of hours. A change of policy and re-programming the thermostats so that the temperature stayed at an acceptable level all day soon fixed the problem - except that some people now complain that it's too warm (in spite of the fact that we've left clear instructions about how to turn it down without affecting those who come after). We also discovered that, as well as having a boiler system to heat the water, the heater in the immersion tank was permanently on! Nobody had reviewed the costs of our gas and electricity tariffs either, so our Treasurer set about getting a better deal on those.

On top of that we found an emergency exit door which was letting water in and that sixteen of the double glazing units in the hall had "blown", making the insulation ineffective as well as being unsightly. So we had those fixed. Then we kept getting rumblings about the hall curtains, which had been fitted in August 2015, and purchased largely on the personal instructions of one committee member. The curtains didn't all hang or close properly, but above all the material was unsuitable and they had no blackout lining, which was no good for the several organisations who regularly wanted to use a projector at their meetings. Research showed that it would be far cheaper overall to replace the curtains with more substantial material than have them re-lined, so that's what we've done (much to everyone's delight, it seems) and we'll try to get some money back on the old ones.

Along the way we've had to deal with all sorts of small maintenance issues and lighting/electrical problems and we've still got to work through a long list of repairs and replacements in order to rectify what has turned out to be several years of neglect. If you look closely they're all fairly evident, but one of the worst areas was a place where most users of the Hall never tread - underneath the stage. I can safely say that it hadn't had a spring clean for donkey's years, because in sorting it out we found a lot of stuff which was in the same place as it was when I left in 2003, but covered in a thick layer of dust. It wasn't until we'd filled our large commercial waste bin three times, taken four Zafira loads to the tidy tip, and had 35 kilos of paper commercially shredded, that we began to see the wood for the trees. The organisations which use the

space for storage are now proving more than equal to the task of having their own spring cleans and we're well underway with our plan for re-organising the area in a safer and more logical fashion.

Fire-fighting aside, and trying to make the premises more amenable and useful to its users, we were also conscious that some of the activities and attitudes of the previous committee had made the Hall less attractive to potential hirers. A case in point was the 20% increase in hire fees in 2015, at a time when the country was going through an unprecedented period of austerity and low inflation. The previous committee had been deaf to representations from regular hirers about the amount of the increase, and there was evidence that prospective hirers were going elsewhere. I couldn't for the life of me work out how the increase had been justified, so I took an in depth look at how the hire tariffs had developed over the years. It quickly became clear that, while the Association had started with (and initially maintained) structured tariffs which were reasonable in relation to each other and to comparable local facilities, a point had been reached where across the board rises of 5%, 10% and then 20% had been made with little regard to the overall impact. Added to that there had been some unnoticed miscalculations which clearly favoured "outsiders" against Toddington residents, and the whole structure had become a mess. The Committee considered things from a number of angles and settled on a much simpler (and reduced) tariff, which was not only much easier to manage but was more attractive whichever way you looked at it. Our regular hirers in particular were pleased, and those who want to arrange individual events appear to be welcoming it too.

One way of promoting the tariff and the facilities available at the Hall is to tap into available technology. We've begun to contribute occasionally to social media through the Toddington Facebook pages (stopping short of having our own page, for a number of reasons) but we did inherit from the previous committee what was a pretty basic and scrappy website with inaccurate content. Unfortunately the previous committee member who had set it up refused to let us have the password, which would have enabled us to make the necessary changes, and it took a few months to persuade the Internet Service Provider to allow us to have access to managing the site. The domain name expired in June and we've since set up a new site ([www.tvh.org.uk](http://www.tvh.org.uk)) which is currently under construction, but which we aim to make more informative and useful as time goes by. On the back of it we've also created a new e-mail address ([info@tvh.org.uk](mailto:info@tvh.org.uk)) as a contact point for the Association. We've been asked several times if we could include an online booking facility, but experience has shown that it's more beneficial to potential hirers and to the Association if our Bookings Secretary has a chat over the phone about what's needed and what's available.

On the subject of facilities, we're in the process of having a gadget installed in the kitchen to provide an instant supply of hot water for drinks, replacing the urn which can be awkward to use and not terribly efficient. Then, also underway, is the installation of Virgin Broadband, so that all Hall users can benefit from a fast Wi-Fi connection. I say "underway" with some reticence at present as Virgin Media organise their UK commercial installations from the Philippines, which brings its own communications difficulties (as the staff there have no concept of "a village hall") and a distinct lack of control over what goes on. Having ordered the installation in July we've reached a stage where Virgin Media's contractors have dug a channel across two areas of grass and a paved path just to reach the outside wall of the Hall with the conduit which will house the cable. As we weren't told when they were coming, there was nobody around to oversee the work, and they contrived to make a complete mess of putting the turf and the pavements back. We arranged for them to return to do a proper job, but they turned up at a different time than we had arranged and made another, but different, mess. The matter is now in the hands of the Virgin Media Directors Resolution Office in the UK, so we live in hope.

That brings me to the outside of the Hall and the topic which forced me back into harness last year - the car park. In January 2013, during a period of cold winter weather, a lady allegedly slipped on ice in the car park, resulting in a back and shoulder injury, and a public liability claim was made to our insurers through an aggressive "no win, no fee" solicitor. There is little written evidence available about the event, but it appears to have been the catalyst for the committee's actions in 2014-15 in regard to the use of the car park. The committee minutes of the time leave a lot to be desired, but the inference is that one member in particular was instrumental in instigating *ad hoc* rules for the management of the car park, which were neither formalised by the whole committee nor communicated to the public at large. As far as we can ascertain, entrances to the site were often closed arbitrarily and without explanation; "donations" were accepted from local businesses to allow long term parking by their employees (which wasn't desirable in any case; was done without a written agreement; on the face of it contravened the Association's governing document; and resulted in inconvenience for Hall users); and large sums of money were spent on a worthless risk assessment and on inadequate and confusing signage which was riddled with errors and ignored the wording prescribed by professional advisers.

On renewal of the Hall's insurance policy in March this year we learned that the insurers had coughed up £20,000 plus £9,000 expenses in settlement of the claim, which was reflected in the increased cost of the renewal premium. The Committee couldn't understand why the company had admitted liability, and there began a long series of correspondence and phone calls with the insurers (who refused to release any details, which blunted the hope of any possible challenge) and the brokers (who did their best to explain how the system worked). It appears that insurers in general at that time were inclined to "pay up" rather than have matters decided by the courts, as there were many precedents of spurious claims being settled in favour of the claimant, where common sense dictated otherwise. More recently, reforms introduced by the Ministry of Justice have begun to take effect, which aim to reduce the cost of such claims.

Neither the insurers nor the brokers have been able to explain exactly how the Association was at fault, and in addition there are only vague recommendations as to what action should be taken to avoid such a claim in the future. As an interim measure, a draft policy statement has been agreed by the Committee, which sets out when and by whom the car park may be used, and this will form the basis for a document which is being prepared to cover all aspects of the future management of the car park. New, and more appropriate, signage has now been commissioned and will be erected in conjunction with a detailed communication exercise to hirers, hall users, local schools and businesses and the community at large.

That's the story so far, but we know that there are many things still to be done, and no doubt a good number of worms still wriggling in unopened cans. I think it's fair to say though that the Committee has made some good strides in putting the Hall and its management back on an even keel and (as its governing document requires) providing a facility "for the benefit of the inhabitants of the Parish of Toddington . . . . with the object of improving the conditions of life for the said inhabitants".

In achieving that I must, on my own behalf and that of the community, offer my gratitude for the support provided by all of my Committee colleagues, but in particular by our Hon. Secretary and Hon. Treasurer, who bear a larger share of the work; our team of cleaners, who are largely invisible to the public, but who keep the Hall in the condition that users would wish to find it; our caretaker (and his lady wife), who get involved in fixing 101 different things; and, of course, our Bookings Secretary, who is the main point of contact for hirers and keeps the events calendar running smoothly and the hirers satisfied.

I learned long ago that, if things are being done well and they run smoothly, it's human nature not to say very much to those who run them. If things go wrong, and particularly if complaints aren't listened to, people either get very vociferous or simply vote with their feet. Unfortunately the latter scenario had applied, and last year the Committee inherited a valuable community facility with something of a tarnished reputation. It's been enormously encouraging however to hear our Bookings Secretary say recently "I haven't had a complaint for three months" and also to learn that some of our hirers have written in to say "Thank you for helping to make our event successful". There's still a lot to do by way of maintenance and in terms of reviewing our policies and processes - but we'll get there!

**Doug Dix**

Chairman, Toddington Village Hall Association  
November 2016