

History of
SAMPFORD BRETT
VILLAGE HALL

Peggy Straddling

SAMPFORD BRETT VILLAGE HALL

The earliest recreational meeting place that is remembered in the village consisted of two rather derelict cottages where The Croft now stands. Men used the rooms for reading, playing billiards and darts and, no doubt, gossip.

After the 1914-1918 war the Rector, the Rev. H. A. Folkard, thought that men discharged from the forces should have a proper place to meet; a "general parish room" separate from church control. Army halls were for sale and it was agreed to buy one costing £260. The parish provided £113 and the rest of the money was collected by fund raising activities. Lord St. Audries gave some land adjacent to the school playground where there was an old cottage. The foundations were dug by men in the village and the hut erected. It was opened in 1921 by Mr. J. Tracey.

The building had a stove and a sink, and was lit by oil lamps. The last man leaving the hut always had to attend to the lamps; not a popular job. There was no kitchen or cloakroom. Billiards, darts and cards were the usual activities and refreshments were cooked on the stove, roast chestnuts being particularly popular. Mrs. Whelsher, the cleaner, was a very particular lady and the men had to keep in her good books.

It should be noted that the club was for men only and they met every night. There were, however, occasional whist drives to which the women were invited.

So it remained, until 1938 when the Hall was offered to the women of the village for one night a week and the Women's Social Club was thus founded.

During the early days of the 1939-1945 War "the Hut", as it was called then, was little used by the few men remaining in the village. In 1942 the Ministry of Food rented the building and it was not released until January 1945. A general meeting of the villagers elected a committee to consider the future. Although founded as a Men's Club "The

"Hut" was the property of the parish and the men decided to relinquish their sole right. Thus a management committee of both men and women was elected to arrange lettings to both Men's and Women's Clubs.

The building was in very poor condition when it was returned to the village and over the next few years very considerable fund raising efforts were needed and voluntary help was given to paint and repair the structure.

It was discovered, in 1946, that transfer of the land from Lord St. Audries had never been legally completed and it took a personal letter from the Chairman of the Committee to Lord St. Audries to finalise the conveyance of the land to the Committee Trustees. At about this time, "The Hut" became known as the "Village Hall".

The absence of a kitchen and lavatories remained a serious problem and their provision was a major priority. Adjacent land was given by Mrs. Gillet and in 1949 the kitchen and cloakrooms were built. Land for a car park was donated by Mr. Yandle who was chairman of the Hall Committee for many years.

Maintenance continued to be a serious drain on resources and the Minutes of the Management Committee meetings through the 1950's and 1960's indicate the continual concern with heavy repair bills and maintenance work. Jumble sales, whist drives and socials contributed to fund raising and replacement of old chairs.

Increasingly, the Hall became the centre of recreational activities. The Women's Social Club met regularly and produced an annual Christmas pantomime and, at their meetings, created their own entertainments; there were regular socials and whist drives. The annual Christmas whist drive and draw was a major event organised by the Committee. In 1949 eight cinema shows were given in the Hall. The annual Art and Craft Exhibition was started by the Rev. Charles Coleman in 1962 and the Sampford Brett Players performed for the first time in March 1971

subsequently using the Hall, sometimes twice yearly, for their productions.

At first, recreational activities were limited, because the records indicate only the purchase of a dart board. However, after the War the Men's Club lapsed and in 1962 the Rev. Charles Coleman founded the Recreation Club: billiards, cards, table tennis and darts were available to everybody.

As the building aged repair costs continued to increase; a general survey revealed serious damage to the woodwork. The Committee, under the chairmanship of Mr. Kenneth Pittard, decided that a new Hall was the best answer. The first estimate to replace the old Hall was £2,500 and fund raising began in earnest and grants were sought from various authorities. Many fund raising events appear in the Minutes of the Management Committee in the early 1970's. A Viennese evening with music, candle-lit tables, refreshments and wine was a great success. A car rally; clock golf in a garden; many raffles, whist drives and sales were held. The proceeds of waste paper collections also contributed. The Art and Craft Exhibition and the Sampford Brett Players donated a proportion of their profits.

The Minutes of the committee reveal that enormous efforts were made to raise money for the new Hall. This can be a slow process in a small community. There were many delays because of unexpected costs and inflation and five years elapsed before building could commence. The final bill for the Hall was £13,000; £4,900 raised by the villagers and the balance from grants. A considerable amount of work, including demolition of the old Hall and internal work in the new Hall, was carried out by volunteers. The stage was bought by the Sampford Brett Players and later a store was built in the car park to house equipment.

On September 25th, 1976, the Hall was opened by Mr. Pollard of the Rural Community Council for Somerset.

Registration as a Charity in 1979 brought the benefits of tax relief and a change of constitution and committee structure: half the twelve members were to be elected at the A.G.M., and the other half were representatives of the main hall users.

During the period 1980-88 additional amenities were added. New chairs were bought which have been a great asset. A carpet gave a warm and welcoming atmosphere and cut down noise and eliminated condensation on the previously vinyl tiled floor. A projector screen and blackout blinds improved the facilities for slide shows. A disastrous flood in 1987 from a burst pipe made the committee take precautions and frost stats were installed in vulnerable places.

Many Hall activities have changed since the Hut was acquired in 1921. There is no Men's Club and there are no whist drives, socials or Christmas pantomimes. In 1988 the Sampford Brett Players were disbanded, entrusting their assets to the Village Hall Committee. However, there are now weekly meetings of the dress-making class, the Recreation Club and coffee mornings, and, until recently, a regular Yoga and Music Class. A Gardening Club meets monthly. Where once the Men's Club flourished now the Women's Social Club, with men invited, meets weekly and prospers. The Parish Council and Parochial Church Council meet there and bookings are taken for various social activities such as anniversaries, engagements, wedding and children's parties. The Harvest Festival Dinner fills the Hall to capacity.

It has distinguished itself by winning the Cup for the Best Run Village Hall in West Somerset in 1978, 1979, 1986, 1987 and 1988, a record unmatched by any other Hall since the Cup was offered. To crown these achievements, in 1988 it was awarded the Championship Trophy for the whole County.

Sampford Brett can feel proud of its Village Hall and of all the people who, over the years, have contributed to making it such a successful, attractive and welcoming establishment.

Peggy Stradling, 1988