



BRANDESTON NEW VILLAGE HALL

The Story From Conception to Completion

The original village hall was a wooden army hut which had been set up in 1922 by the Women's Institute on land later given to the village by the Austen family in 1953 to celebrate the Coronation.

Prior to 1971, the hut and playing field were run by separate committees but, following a new Trust Deed, the Parish Council became Custodian Trustees with the hut and playing field being administered by a management committee. The building was wooden, weather-boarded and raised on brick pillars over the gently sloping ground. It had been well maintained over the years and the demands of the authorities had seen safety lighting installed, fire escapes constructed and restrictions placed on the use of the kitchen. At the time it felt comfortably 'lived in' and was an integral part of village activities.

By 1996, however, in spite of the best efforts of the management committee so successfully lead by Eileen Leach, the hut no longer met the needs of its users, and became subject to complaints about the kitchen, the general design of the hall and the fabric of the building. Demands for improvements inevitably increased as its primitive facilities and fragile fabric failed to match increasingly sophisticated expectations, and the ravages of time took their toll. It became impractical and less used, and as the fabric deteriorated further it would inevitably be condemned. The loss of the hut would be a severe blow to the community traditions of the village. So in the Annual Parish Meeting of May 1996 our Council Chairman, David Risk asked what we might do for the Millennium – what about building a new hall to replace our much loved village hut?

The Parish Council, therefore, sought the opinions of the village about its future through full consultation at all times and, by way of a public meeting and a questionnaire, investigated the possible design, costing and funding of a replacement building. Some preliminary reviews and costings were carried out and presented to the Parish Meeting in January 1998.



A well-worn floor and familiar surroundings.....



And a worn-out hut having served us so well....

The hut held many happy memories for generations of Brandestonians and there was a natural reluctance to dispose of it, but a recent survey had confirmed that practical refurbishment would cost £60,000+ but would still not offer a permanent answer. After extensive consultation the village strongly supported a feasibility study to assess whether a new hall could be built and what support it might enjoy.

Feasibility

In early 1998 a Feasibility Study team was formed to review what Brandeston needed, how it could work, and outline plans and costs.



The results were presented to the village at a public meeting in April 1998 and were followed by a survey of opinion. The results were impressively supportive. The survey of all adult residents achieved an 82% response, with 90% (74% of the total number eligible to vote) in favour of extending the range of activities provided and developing the ideas for a new hall. There was a natural concern that rebuilding would be beyond our reach and the future running costs be impractical, so these reservations had to be examined in detail.

Being strongly in favour of the Feasibility Study conclusions, which were that Brandeston passionately wanted a new hall to redevelop a community spirit and that a modern hall could be financed, the village enthusiastically authorised the next phase which was the Development Project.

Design and Planning

The Feasibility Study had provided a definition of what the village expected and this was turned into a design brief for our architect, Simon Merrett, who came up with an inspired conceptual interpretation of this requirement to offer a building of grace, elegance and functionality, all of which have been well proven in practice.

Quite rightly, the formal planning approval process was rigorous and required the proposal to demonstrate that it fitted the need and the environment in an optimal way so that it blended into the centre of the village. Part of this process, of course, included taking proper account of the very real concerns raised by some locals who were understandably worried about the possible impact of a new hall and related activities. The design brief had specifically addressed these concerns by ensuring that sound would be isolated by placing the main hall on the south side of the building and insulated by utility areas, specifying an acoustic limiter, reducing the size of an original design which was recognised as being too large, and by the committee also committing that the operation of the hall would be in empathy with nearby residents. Negotiation with the District Council enabled the car parking area to be made a suitable rather than a regulation size, and funding constraints also governed the scale of the building to realistic proportions.

Fund-raising proved to be a major challenge but was achieved through much effort by committee members **and** the essential



support of the village. A promise had been made by the committee that no loans would be taken out or the village put `in hock'; ie either we could afford the rebuild or we would not proceed. Three mammoth bids had to be made to the Lottery – the first was rejected because the criteria for selection had changed in the meantime, the second (which had to be reduced to £200,000 to gain a chance of selection) because insufficient funds were available although the `case' was accepted as proven, and the third was finally successful at the end of 2003. To complement this, a number of key sponsors also provided critical funds such as Garfield Weston Foundation, Suffolk Coastal District Council, Suffolk County Council, WREN, Suffolk Environmental Trust, Biffaward, Brandeston Parish Council, The Mills Trust, The Adnams Trust and this was matched by the astounding contributions of village people which amounted to £70,000, nearly 20% of the total! This showed the commitment behind the project and was raised through many ways which included donations, auctions of promises and sale of personal brass plaques to be mounted in the main hall. The events held varied between low and high value so that everyone had an opportunity to contribute, and it is true that the smaller contributions were of equal **value** to the project as the larger ones. Significantly, some of the events started out as small contributions have since become part of the fabric of the village programme and support the original aim. Many people, of course, were responsible for driving all this through but the consistent support over the years made the task seem worthwhile and achievable. One key factor in all this was the regular exchange of information between the committee and villagers throughout the programme.

So 2003 was dedicated to planning, fund-raising and negotiating with the Lottery over the programme which demanded great dedication from the committee and supporters, but this effort was made worthwhile by the aid given in many ways, of which one was the exemplary help provided by EDF whose overhead wires ran above the old hut and so precluded work starting. In an example of negotiation and teamwork, Brandeston dug a trench and EDF replaced the overhead conductors with underground cables FOC, having brought forward strategic plans to do this work to accommodate our schedule. Subsequently, when construction had started it was discovered that the overhead transformer by the entrance was too close for traffic to pass safely and again EDF moved in an exceptionally short time to re-locate the transformer and provide a new ground-mounted alternative, also by bringing forward plans – what stars!



Part of the planning and preparation included a tense tendering process over many weeks culminating in the final review where all tenders opened, until the last, proved too expensive for our funds. The relief at securing SEH French at a price we could afford was immense and we are most grateful to our Project Manager, Bob Neve of Burr and Neve, for his consistently professional contribution throughout the programme until completion. SEHF took Simon Merrett's conceptual design and massaged it slightly from an engineering perspective and the result we see today is proof of the quality of design, materials and workmanship.

Construction

By May 2004 construction began, but was preceded by a Brandeston hit-team lead by David Risk to demolish the old hut.



Dismantling – a sad time

However it was a huge watershed when SEHF took possession of the site to commence building – needless to say in weather conditions resembling a swamp.



The first foundations

Progress was astonishing and remained mainly on schedule, and it was rewarding and exciting as the new building took shape from the paper plan.



Some nice brickwork in soft red

The elegant roof aspires to reflect local barn structures and blend into the village locale without domination.



The elegant roofline takes shape

By late 2004 the roof was in place and the building made weatherproof so that internal work could proceed, such as laying the beautiful wood floor and installing the kitchen with all its equipment, not to mention the basic services such as heating and electricity.



A superb sprung wood floor



The topping out ceremony with the builders, SEH French in December 2004

Open for Business

Eventually, of course, the building was formally handed over to Brandeston at the end of February 2005 and the celebrations began. Much work was then required to fit out the hall in time for a formal opening on 1st April 2005, but in the meantime the hall was opened to villagers so that they could inspect what their contributions and unwavering support had enabled to be built. The unanimous opinion was greatly in favour of what had been achieved and some were heard to say: `never would have thought it in my time.....’



1 April 2005 – the Grand Opening



The Result



27 February 2005

Our beautiful hall, which is the pride of our village, is in frequent and regular use doing exactly what was envisaged all those years ago and encapsulated by **Folka/Point Brandeston**. Since its opening a huge range of functions, events and activities have been run in the hall and its range of capabilities continue to evolve.

It was a hard trail to trudge at times but the end well justifies the effort expended and, what's more (my son), the hall is financially solvent - with **no debts!**

In hindsight, did Brandeston make the right decision in replacing its old hut with a new hall? Answers on a postcard

Note: An extensive pictorial record of the replacement programme is to be seen in the hall foyer, and records with grateful thanks the people who made it possible **under the critical leadership of our Chairs – Darryl Morgan (Feasibility), Mark Hounsell (Design and Build) and Sue Thurlow (New Hall Operation)** who drove the project through from conception to glorious completion.

Here's to the next 80 years.....

Nick Hayward
Brandeston
December 2006



Nick Hayward at the opening of the village hall.

1 April 2005