

A History of Dolton & Dowland Village Hall

From the Dolton & Dowland Diary, May 1980 by Harold Piper & Jack Mardon. Edited.

Dolton has built two village halls to be proud of. Until 1928 all village functions – and there were many – took place in the school. Concerts, theatricals, many dances, sales, lecture courses, cookery classes, political meetings, etc. etc.

Mr and Mrs Smythies of Hilliers (now the Dower House) were largely responsible for organising the building of the first village hall. Mr Smythies owned the two fields called “Hilliers” and “Atkins” in front of his house and he gave the top end of “Atkins” as a site for the hall. The Village Hall committee, and some members are in the village now, including Mr H. Piper, decided to buy a hall, a wooden structure from a Community in Plymouth who provided this constructional work for tubercular invalid ... me (*Presumably Harold Piper. Ed*). It was duly erected.

Here is an account of the opening on December 12th, 1928 from a letter written by Mrs Smythies. “The opening has been the very greatest success. Everything went with a swing. Mr and Mrs Baxter from Plymouth told of the Community who made the hall, and Mr Smythies and Mr Harry Furse of Halsdon made excellent speeches. The room was crowded. Then came the tea: I don’t think Dolton folk had ever seen the like and they were so enthusiastic. Mrs Furse had provided the sort of tea you get at a garden party, and though 160 sat down in relays, there wasn’t a hitch or wait. It all looked so festive with lights and decorations - candles and oil lamps of course, there was no electricity.

Then after tea the room was got ready for the concert at 7.00, Mr. Weeks got on to the platform and entertained us splendidly as only he can. Mrs Vincent (nee Winnie Heaman from Iddlecott) also sang. Performers from Exeter were really good. They were all friends of Mr Weeks who organised the concert. The hall was packed. Altogether we made £30 which will help to bring down the debt.”

The hall was well used. There was a Young Men’s Club. There were dances, parties and concerts – for Dolton was never a dull place – and celebrations for the Jubilee of George V and Queen Mary were held there. When the war came the hall was used more than ever. The evacuees held their school classes there. It was headquarters for the Home Guard. Concert parties came and stayed, sometimes each fortnight, putting on shows. On one occasion, when the cast was one short in a play about “Old Bill” Mr. H. Piper took on the part of the missing actor. Many concerts were put on and money raised so that gifts could be given to men on their return from the war. But alas, even the best of places can last only so long and in the early 60’s it was seen that the hall was showing signs of age. It was shored up with huge timbers but even so, during rock and roll dances, the hall just swayed with the dancers.

In 1962 the Village Hall Committee, with Mr H. Piper as Chairman, decided that a new hall must be built. They had just £18 in the kitty and many people felt it was a hopeless task – but not Harold Piper. He meant to get a new hall at whatever the cost. Everyone set about with a will. A car was bought and raffled all over the County. Farmers ran sheep with their own flocks. Whist Drives, concerts, dances and sales were organised. Mr Piper was in touch with the National Council for Social Services, who sent the late Group Captain Walker. He was so impressed with all the effort being put in that he gave every assistance. In the end grants of £5,727 were received. They started the Carnival again, the prospective Queens having to earn the honour of being Dolton’s Carnival Queen by selling the most draw tickets. Mrs W. Piper herself sold over £2,000 worth of draw tickets all over Devon. The hall was built on the old site but the access was very narrow. Mr C. Fishleigh offered as much land as they needed. Mr Jones who lived at Bay Cottage and Mrs Holwill also gave up parts of their gardens so that the access could be widened. News of these gifts came on a Monday evening. Mr Piper said “right, lads, picks and shovels tomorrow” and sure enough, next evening all the Committee men turned up for work together with other men from the village.

The first meeting was in 1962 and the hall was opened in 1967, and such a hall!!! Many large towns would be proud to own such a place. The last payment was made in 1971.