**The History of the Parish Hall in Bere Alston, Devon by E.R.Toll**  
*retyped by Clive Charlton*

The site where the Parish Hall exists was owned by the Earl of Mount  
Edgcumbe, who lived at Mount Edgcumbe in Cornwall. It was built and presented to the parish of Bere Ferrers for use as a small indoor rifle range[[1]](#footnote-1). He also at the same time presented the playing field on the Down for the use of the parishioners.

The following contents were described to me by my late father Mr John  
Marchant Toll, together with the information collected by myself on carrying out work on the Parish Hall.

The site where the Parish Hall exists proved to be more difficult than expected. A thin layer of clay was exposed (and) also a small freshwater stream rising from above Tap Hill. This area seemed to be a watershed with water rising round Tap Hill. The stream was piped away to the valley in Sarah Park. There must be evidence of this somewhere?  
  
The surveyor who drew up the plans and specification was Dan Ward, who  
was the Mount Edgcumbe estate surveyor, living at Hewton House on the road to Holes Hole. Dan also looked after the farms owned by the Mount Edgcumbe estate and the builders yard at Weir Quay. It had a large workshop and sawmill worked by an oil engine. A Mr. Archie Andrews was the foreman carpenter and John White the foreman mason. They did not take part in the building of the Parish Hall. It was built by J.L Richards, who had a large workshop behind the old butcher’s shop in Fore St Bere Alston (the workshop was burnt down approx 1920).  
  
I have no details of the foundations due to the amount of clay in the area. it could have been by placing very large stones to obtain a good firm foundation and was there any concrete used?  
  
My father & John Luxmore (‘Lucky’)were two masons building the walls and brickwork. A small incident told to me by my dad was that Mr Richards used to visit the site every day and watch the two masons. One day Lucky, who was known to bring out some old sayings, said to Mr Richards “Sir can you play draughts. He replied ‘what do you mean Luckv?’. Sir it’s your move - if you don’t, you will lose two men.” The hint was taken and the visits were not every day!

The stone used was from a quarry at Buttspill Farm on the road to Ferry Farm, owned by the Mount Edgcumbe estate, a verv hard stone with no grain or suction. The haulage was by horse and cart - whose this was I was not told. The face bricks were bought from the clay works at Exmouth. The common bricks came from Rumleigh Brickworks, carted to the site by a team of three horses and wagon. The driver was Jim Dawe (the father of George Dawe who used to live in part of Ivy House in Bedford St). Three horses were needed to pull up the load of bricks from Rumleigh to the new site. Only two horses were used after the junction at Mount Tamar.  
  
The existing play area was once prepared for a tennis court but was not a success due to the incorrect amount of preparation. Clay underneath made it impossible to play on in the winter. It was at one time surrounded with iron posts and netting. This rotted out and was removed. I have a photo taken at the front entrance to the Parish Hall showing part of the old railings. The photo included the Earl of Mount Edgcumbe and Parish Council. My dad was one of the council members.  
  
The mixing of the materials used was on what was the old tennis court with banker boards as a base. The materials for use were wheeled into the hall with timber wheelbarrows and iron wheels through the openings for the windows. Messrs Richards carried out the carpentry, which was of a good standard, making the joinery in the workshop which burnt down many years after.  
  
Many years later the Parish Council requested me to examine the area under  
the hall floor as some rot was suspect to the flooring. I was able to check most of the area, which was found to be clay going hard. The whole of the hall flooring was removed; half was laid reversed, because the knots were interfering with dancing, but otherwise in fair condition. The other half was new 11/2 T & G flooring to match the other half. A contractor was employed to sand the whole area with a motorised sander. We then treated all with Bournseal as requested by the Parish Council - one coat and then the second after 48 hrs.  
  
Going back many years, a new projection room was built at the rear of the Parish Hall, which included a new winding room with an iron ladder from a door as an escape route, should there be a fire. The access to these rooms was up a steep concrete stair from the stage.

We carried out some remedial work to the building on the car park side due to moving the tie beams to suit the film from the new projection room. This allowed the wall to move outwards. Under the supervision of Mr E Large, holes were taken out to fit new purpose-made steel bars. This prevented the wall from further movement.  
  
Before mains electricity was available to work the apparatus, a galvanised hut was built at the rear of the hall containing a small engine and generator. This was demolished after electric supply was laid on.  
  
Several years before the new projection room was built there was a wooden  
structure inside the hall entrance with wood steps up to the new room. A Mr Jack McCloud, who lived in a cottage at Lopwell used to show silent films, assisted by Harry Wise (my cousin). The light came from gas jets formed by allowing water to be dripped on to calcium chloride. This had to be replaced quite often. The projector was operated by a small handle.   
  
It was possible on some films to increase the speed according to what was  
showing. I was allowed to turn the handle by Harry when it was boring. During the showing of the old silent films. Charlie Statton’s sister used to play the piano and also watched the film, speeding up the music according to its nature. During this time, Roy Lidster used to take his father to the hall to watch. He has unable to read or write so Roy gave a running commentary of what was on the screen.  
  
Old Mrs Sleep (Curlv Jack’s mother) was the caretaker; she used to sit and  
watch and also keep order. One of her jobs was to see to the fuel used to heat the pipes in the hall, not always making sure the temperature was high enough.

During the war, the hall was occupied by the ‘red caps’ and the Americans. A temporary kitchen was erected. In the corner of the car park near the anti-room, one can still see where it used to be.

At one time there used to be an outside toilet but was vandalised and done  
away with. The offender was taken to court and fined. My dad was on the  
Parish Council and remarked that this was the only way to stop it. From that date, vandalism ceased. It’s a pity the present day offenders couldn’t be caught  
and taken to court. It would save the Council many hundreds of pounds making  
good the damaged caused.  
  
Much new work has been done to the car park and the adjoining area including the re-roofing of the existing toilets. A nice layout has been produced on the piece of land across the road with new tables etc.

The interior of the hall was redecorated to the scheme proposed by  
Mr Archer and looks very nice and bright. The war memorial has had work to stabilise the movement due to it being built over a clay base.

1. In fact, it was not built specifically as a rifle range, but as a public hall, although it was also used as a rifle range – but how? [↑](#footnote-ref-1)