

How Not to Choose a War Memorial

The 10th February 2021 is the Centenary of the dedication of the Bicester War Memorial Cross that is situated in the churchyard of St Edburg's Church. It was erected to commemorate all service personnel from Bicester who had died in the First World War and subsequently those who died in the Second World War and other conflicts.

At the end of the war in November 1918, many towns and villages throughout Great Britain were already proposing some sort of memorial to those who had died. These usually took the form of stone obelisks, plaques, statues, etc.

Memorial rolls of honour were put up in factories, sports clubs, railway stations, schools, universities and so on. Church windows were designed and dedicated to military units or individuals. Memorial buildings

were constructed to provide "living memorials", for example, as community centres, libraries and village halls, or areas of communal space such as playing fields, gardens and parks.

The members of Bicester Urban District Council were already looking at some way of remembering the dead before the armistice was signed and at their meeting of 2nd December 1918, the War Memorial Committee was formed. But it wasn't until the 17th January 1919 that they met and (as was the normal practice in those days) the Bicester Advertiser carried the full report of the discussions with the heading:

"ELABORATE SCHEME BEING CONSIDERED: TOWN HALL, PUBLIC GARDENS, SWIMMING BATH, PUBLIC URINAL, AND ELECTRIC LIGHT STATION."



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What had triggered this suggestion was that Bicester Hall (now Hometree House) was now vacant, having been used as a V.A.D. Red Cross Hospital during most of the war (V.A.D. = Voluntary Aid Detachment). It had been offered by the owner, Major Herman Hodge, at a price of £3,500 if it was to be used for the purpose of a War Memorial. The Memorial Committee proposed that this building would provide: "a council chamber, a large memorial room specially set apart it was hoped in continuity, where provision for names and photographs of all those respected townsmen who in the prime of manhood made the great sacrifice and fought to the death to free us from tyrannic thraldom, and who are now heroes of God, and where there would also be recorded the names of those who went forth to battle and were spared to return to their homes as the heroes of humanity and who rejoiced in the peace of victory; a public library, a games room; Council's clerk's office; Surveyor's office; Surveyor's

residential accommodation; Collector's Office; and further rooms for future utility. The grounds could be adapted as public gardens at very slight expense. There were good sites for a public urinal and a swimming bath, but these would be for a later development."

It was looked upon as too good an opportunity to miss! But then came lengthy discussions as to how it would be paid for – not just the asking price of £3,500 but the cost of alterations, cost of furnishings, books for the library, etc. It was proposed that the YMCA hut that had been built in the grounds could be used as a town hall and adapted for use so that it could be used for dramatic performances, cinema, billiard room, refreshment room and more.

It was decided that a public meeting would be needed to discuss the proposals and that a public referendum be held. A public meeting was later held in the Corn Exchange (a building that stood behind the Crown Hotel, the entrance to which was to the side of the hotel more or less where Crown Walk meets Sheep Street). The Bicester Advertiser reported the meeting as a disorderly affair and gave a comprehensive account running to over three full columns of its then broadsheet format. It was at this meeting that two new proposals were put forward – that space for a Town Memorial Recreational Ground be found, and that Bicester Hall be utilised to form a Memorial Secondary School for the town. The meeting eventually got too rowdy and was adjourned.

Several BUDC and War Memorial Committee meetings later and with the owner of Bicester Hall becoming somewhat impatient with the prevarications of the Council, it was on 28th May 1919 that it was decided to hold a referendum of the town as to the choice of a War Memorial, the questions to include: the purchase of the Bicester Hall Estate; a recreation ground; a secondary school and a public convenience. By the time the Council next met on the 16th June 1919 the referendum had been held and the results were in. The town's population was around the 3,400. The Minutes state that 1,224 papers were sent out (presumably to males only) and 742 were returned. Of the results:

- 51% in favour of a Recreation Ground
- 25% in favour of Public Lavatories
- 12% in favour of Bicester Hall being an Institute
- 9% in favour of Bicester Hall being a Secondary School
- 3% had other proposals.

In the discussions that followed it was noted that the other proposals included the endowment of beds in Bicester Nursing Home, a shrine in the churchyard or cemetery, erection of a shrine in Market Square and the installation of an electric light plant in Bicester. One member proposed that a shrine in the churchyard was amply sufficient for a memorial and that the council should support that, but there was no support from the other members. Despite the clear majority of voters suggesting a memorial recreation ground, members still continued to discuss the other alternatives. It was also pointed out the anomaly that the majority of those who had fought in the war had been unable to vote in the

referendum despite the fact that they were now allowed to vote in the Parliamentary Elections. (The Electoral Reform Act of 1918 gave the vote to all men of 21 years and over and also gave women aged 30 or over the right to vote). Why the Council were still sticking to the old electoral rules is unexplainable!

It was agreed, albeit somewhat reluctantly, that a second public meeting was needed to discuss the results of the referendum. However, at a later meeting they decided not go ahead with a public meeting as they were unsure it would achieve anything. They subsequently formed a new Committee of twenty, consisting of the whole council and representatives from other organisations which include people from the armed services, three representative women, the vicar and one representative member of the Free Churches. The three ladies were Mrs Scott, Mrs M. Paragreen (shopkeeper in the Causeway) and Mrs Keith-Falconer (Garth House). Their mission was to carry out the recommendations of the recent referendum - to provide a recreation ground for the town. The meeting occurred on the 10th September 1919 but their meeting was reported by the Bicester Advertiser as being nothing short of disgraceful as only eight of the twenty turned up! They weren't able to achieve much at that first meeting as there were no suggestions as to where the funding for the purchase of a recreation ground would come from. However, several possible sites were identified, which included Barn Piece, Bell Field, Spring Close and a field in Bell Lane and they decided that the owners would be contacted to see if their land would be available. And that appears to be the end of the recreation ground suggestion!

Whilst all these non-productive meetings were going on, on Sunday, 27th April 1919, the vicar of St Edburg's Church, the Rev. W. O'Reilly, along with the churchwardens invited the congregation of the evening service to remain behind to discuss the best means of establishing a memorial in remembrance of those of Bicester who had made the supreme sacrifice in the Great War. Several suggestions were made – a stained glass window in the church, but this was thought to be not elaborate or conspicuous enough, the erection of a small chapel at the front of the extreme right of the church facing the choir stalls, a nice oak screen across the chancel, and a churchyard cross or crucifix with the names of the fallen inscribed. The vicar had several illustrations as to what a churchyard memorial might look like. Those present agreed unanimously that was the way forward and a committee was formed to look further into the matter. Later in September 1919 it was reported that this committee had discussed the various options and designs for a churchyard cross and decided on one designed after the fashion of the old Oxfordshire crosses by Mr F E Howard of Oxford which was built of Portland and Ancaster stones and would stand on the triangular piece of land between the north porch of the church and the vicarage. It was estimated the cost would be between £300 and £350.

The design was duly submitted to the Oxford Diocesan



Advisory War Graves Committee and a faculty applied for – the equivalent of obtaining “planning permission”. There was a slight hiccup when the above Committee indicated they were prepared to pass the design for the cross but “we earnestly deprecate the introduction of the form of a modern soldier and sailor. We would prefer some more

symbolic figure such as St George”. By the late summer of 1920, the design and the necessary approvals were received. It included a decision not to have the names of the fallen inscribed on the cross (too many names!) but to have them inscribed on a stone tablet to be placed inside the porch of the church. The cross was purchased and ready for installation in the late summer of 1920, the monies having been raised by public subscription.

And so, on Thursday, 10th February 1921, the Bicester Memorial and Tablet of Names were dedicated by the Bishop of Oxford accompanied by some 1,000 of the town’s population. The unveiling ceremony was performed by Captain H.G. Fane of Bicester House, who sadly had sacrificed three of his sons to the Great War.

As for the B.U.D.C. attempts to provide some kind of memorial - Bicester Hall was purchased by Oxfordshire County Council in 1919 and a county school was established there in 1924, which gained grammar school status the same year. The school moved to Highfield to form the new comprehensive in 1963. The building was then used as government offices before being converted into retirement apartments in 1986 as Hometree House. The B.U.D.C. did get some grander accommodation in 1946 when The Garth and Garth Park were given to the town by a group of well-meaning local residents and this is where the present Bicester Town Council resides. The public supply of electricity arrived in 1929. Public urinals were eventually built but thankfully were not named as being “Memorial Toilets” !!!

As for the Memorial Recreation Ground – the referendum choice – please let me know if you find it! At least Bicester has a memorial seat situated in Garth Park dedicated to all those who served their country in the Great War 1914-1918 – presented by Bicester Local History Society!

- Bob Hessian



The dedication ceremony - 10th February 1921

5th January 1861

OLD PEOPLE'S DINNER

On New Year's Day, the usual annual dinner given to the old people, among the labouring classes, took place at the Black Boy Assembly Room. An excellent dinner was provided. Seventy-eight persons were present and dinners were sent to the houses of forty-five more.

F.B. Mills, Esq., and George Kirby, Esq., were the chairmen, and Messrs. Mansfield and Wakelin, the vice-chairmen. Several gentlemen were present to assist; and many attended as visitors, including Mr Edward Watts, who kindly provided the old folks with a supply of ale.

27th January 1893

GRAND YEOMANRY BALL

Since the extinction of the Hunt Ball, which was attended with so many gorgeous and fascinating attractions, Bicester has never had a grander ball coupled with its history than that held in the Corn Exchange on Wednesday evening. But the Hunt Ball, until a revival sets in, is a thing of the past, its pleasant memories are faded, and now the Yeomanry Ball, in connection with the "F" Troop, after a slumber as it were of some ten years, has made a reappearance, none the worse for its seclusion.

Whatever the intention of the promoters was in inaugurating such a gathering must be to a certain extent a matter of conjecture, but certainly one essential particular was uppermost - the improvement and extension of the popularity of their troop, a contemplation that must have been fully realised to their entire satisfaction. To the company who attend such gatherings, the weather for the most part is a very little hindrance, for had it have been otherwise it might have had a dastardly effect. The elements about six o'clock were not at all pleasant, the dense fog and fall of small rain being a peculiar feature, and towards nine o'clock this turned into a heavy downpour, thus rendering even the passage to the door of the Crown Hotel anything but pleasant.

The adaptability of the Corn Exchange, with all its excellent accommodation, is well known, but on this occasion it seemed to have been fitted expressly, the retiring rooms being easy to access, the refreshment rooms also affording ample space for the largest influx of visitors. To describe the decorations is a matter of no small importance, for without them a ball of any description would appear dismal and uninviting, therefore those gentlemen who were entrusted with this part of the arrangements deserve the highest commendation for the taste and ability displayed.

It goes without saying that the Committee were the chief movers in the direction, and through their untiring energies and patient but persevering exertions, not only the decorations but even the ball itself owed its existence. Sergt. T. Grimsley (Causeway) had the superintendence of the room, and was responsible for the splendid floor,

a duty which is by no means an enviable one, but his efforts on the one hand, and those of the Committee on the other hand would have been futile, had not a happy union set in, the effect of which we are about to describe.

Starting at the entrance, from which by the way an excellent view of the room could be obtained, it was at once evident that expert and adept fingers had been busy. The lower portion was dotted here and there with loungers, and other suitable seats, and on the walls were placed pictures, ornamented with greenery and other suitable attachments.

Upon mounting the steps that lead to the entrance to the spacious room it was almost like gradually wending the way into fairyland. The first striking feature was the stage, on which was stationed the Regimental Band, encompassed about with drapery, greenery and other hangings, which almost extinguished them from view. A long curtain extending to the whole extent of the stage took off the bareness of the upper portion, and on the base was placed a splendid row of hot-house plants, kindly lent by H. Tubb, Esq., relieved by varied appendages in the shape of green and pink tapestry.

On either side of the stage, oblong and square mirrors were placed, with Japanese ornaments resting on the top; a pair of beautiful bullock's horns largely contributing to the artistic appearance. Two lances arranged at the extremity with red and white pendants were also attached to the walls.

The side walls were both treated for the most part with mirrors, stags horns, banners, etc, overlapped with curtains of various hues. On one side the Regimental Roll of the Oxfordshire Hussars was placed, and the stove was almost hidden from view by a row of ferns, etc, also kindly lent by Mr Tubb.

The top of the room was one mass of coloured tapestry, intermingled with brilliant lights. The supper room also looked exceedingly pretty.

The Regimental Band discoursed excellent music throughout the evening, and gave every satisfaction.

Supper of boiled turkey, braised beef, roasted fowl and game pies was provided about one o'clock, and at about half-past five, one of the most popular balls in Bicester concluded.

18th January 1918

CONCERT AT THE CORN EXCHANGE

The concert arranged by the Bicester Urban District Council, in aid of the Prisoners of War Fund, took place in the Corn Exchange on Monday evening, and, as was generally expected, was a great success - in fact it exceeded by far the expectations of the promoters.

For some time previous to the hour at which the proceedings were advertised to commence a huge crowd was to be seen wending its way towards the Corn Exchange, and by seven o'clock the commodious room was taxed to its utmost limits. All the seats were

taken by this time and a queue some four or five deep had gathered in the gangway, preferring to stand rather than be disappointed. Though a considerable number of people were forced to go home disappointed.

Shortly after seven o'clock the concert commenced with a selection by the Orchestra, followed by that well-known song "Glorious Devon" by Sapper Gallagher. Mrs Wood gave an excellent rendering of "Down in the Dear Old Home" whilst the song by Mrs Lewis, "Mr Dear Soul", was none the less meritorious. Miss Truman gave a much enjoyed recitation, and Lieut. Warner and Sapper McKellan also contributed items in first class style before the interval.

The feature of the first part of the programme was, however, the concertina solo by Sapper Nolan, entitled "Bells of Normandy". The applause which followed the rendering of this piece was great and demonstrated the audience's appreciation of talent, which Sapper Nolan undoubtedly has.

In the second half the artistes gave further contributions, all of which met with the applause they deserved. Perhaps the item looked forward to most in this half was, however, the performance by the Minstrel Troupe of the 13th Company, Canadian Engineers. This band of laughter-makers kept the audience highly amused for upwards of an hour with songs, dances, jokes, patter, etc. The Minstrels entered with a song with a "swinging" chorus, followed by a song by one of its members, entitled "I'm on the Staff", which caused much amusement.

As a result of the concert over £34 will be handed over to the Prisoners of War Fund, and tomorrow a house-to-house collection will be made in Bicester to further swell the donation.

7th January 1938

LARGE COMPANY SPEND HAPPY AFTERNOON

One of Bicester's most worthy events - the annual dinner to the old folk - established many years ago, and showing no sign of becoming extinct - was held on Tuesday, when, through the liberality of numerous subscribers both in town and district, some 120 old people were entertained to dinner. The County School hut had been tastefully decorated and the lighting effects admirably carried out. In this warm atmosphere of friendliness, waited on patiently and willingly by the

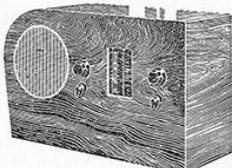
large number of helpers, the old folk spent a happy time, and their evident enjoyment, reflected in their faces and by their obvious appreciation, was ample reward for those responsible for the affair.

The event involves much preparation, and considerable work on the day and afterwards, but all this is carried out with quiet and cheerful efficiency. Then there are those who convey the old people from outside the town and thus afforded to a few veterans an hour or two's happiness among their old friends. Again, there must be music and song, and each year artistes come willingly forward to keep up the spirit of conviviality which reigns throughout the afternoon.

This year's menu consisted of the "Roast Beef of Old England", roast pork, roast mutton, rabbit pie, vegetables, and Christmas pudding, and Mrs J. Dearn and her helpers gave further proof of their cooking abilities, evidenced in the universal approval of the guests.

It was a memorable scene. Numerous fairy lights dotted around formed a harmonious blaze of colour among evergreens and festoons, beneath which tables were laid and spread with the many good things, the old folk - several "Darbies and Joans" among them - sitting contentedly there. Though not so large in number as previous years, inmates from the Woodstock and Banbury Institutions were present to exchange greetings and reminiscences with friends. Mr Sam Harris (89) was the oldest among the company, Mr William Dale and Mr J. Wiggins running him close for the "honour".

After the feast and entertainments had finished, Mr F. Markham, who said he found himself allotted his usual place at the happy function, viz. "among the ladies", offered the toast of the Chairman, Mr Smyly, and included the name of Mrs Smyly. In reply, Mr Smyly expressed his thanks for the privilege afforded both Mrs Smyly and himself to be present at the gathering. He understood the dinner had been in existence for about 100 years, and it was indeed most interesting to know that, except for a break during the War, old people had been meeting at such dinners annually for all that time. It was not the event itself which mattered so much as the thought behind it, and the feeling which prompted those ladies and gentlemen to organise such a gathering. He thanked the committee and guests, and concluded by hoping the Old Folks' Dinner in Bicester would continue for many years to come.



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Roll of Honour

The following are the local men who died in the Second World War, 80 years ago this month.

Warrant Officer Isaac Thomas Baggett, of Upper Heyford.
Died: 13th January 1941 Aged: 45 Served in: Royal Artillery



Picture Puzzle

None of these pictures had anything written on them to indicate where they were, but the seller thought they were from Bicester. They're actually from nearby villages, but can you recognise where? Answers below.

1. The burnt out thatched cottage was demolished in the 1920s and replacement houses of that period built in its place.

2. The sign over the door says: H.L. GOSTELOW, Grocer. The cottage still exists but has been made longer.

3. Possibly Ambrosden, but we can't identify it. If you think you recognise it then please let us know.



1: East Street, Fritwell. 2: Main Street, Grendon Underwood 3

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