

PARISH HALL COMMITTEE

Meeting in the village hall for an EGM. 17 February 2003

Present for the Committee were Marlen Moss-Eccardt (Acting Chair), Elisabeth Deckker, Amy Markham, Margaret Levesley, Sylvia Kent, Tony Lewis, Peter Cox and Steve Kerr,

A public audience of approximately 31 people.

Marlen Moss-Eccardt opened the meeting at 19.30 by saying there was one issue to be dealt with only. Due to time constraints no agenda had been provided. There was to be a motion calling for the resignation of the committee, which needed a proposer and seconder. The motion would be read out; there would then be a vote.

MME said before things got under way she would step down and let **Steve Kerr** continue.

Tim Bennett represented the 10 people who had put their names to the motion.

He took to the stage to give a lengthy speech of where the committee had gone wrong in their decisions. This action was to unify the divided village and regretted that such a meeting as this had been necessary.

He praised the committee in their individual efforts that had been made over the years, however things had gone awry and the motion was not meant to be of a personal nature re individual members of the committee. The 10 concerned individuals were concerned that the village was not being kept abreast of news and decision-making. As a result rumours were bound to arise. His initial concerns arose due to the reporting of the Environmental Agency being prepared to pay for a new hall – he smelled a rat and things looked too cosy. He felt it was his duty to bring matters to the public attention and the 10 signatories would be willing to join in in future activities. The Parish Council should have acted sooner and not have been persuaded that they had no remit to comment.

His reading of a constitution of the village hall (not sure if it was the latest) indicated that the Committee did not have a remit to seek funds for the replacement of the existing hall by a new one. They were set up to run the existing one. There were no public consultations with decisions being foisted upon the villagers. He doubted if the make up of the committee was correct – insufficient representatives of other groups in the village (constitution requirement) – committee should have actively made sure that organizations were approached, such as letters to join. Other people should not be part of the committee in the first instance.

All income/funds should have been restricted to the management of the present hall – not a new one. The committee can only authorise expenditure to a fixed maximum amount; similarly capital expenditure spending has to be agreed at AGM by attending parishioners. This procedure has not been followed

Margaret Levesley interjected that no one turns up at AGM's.

Tim Bennett retorted that it was the committee's fault – procedure still needs to be followed.

There were financial irregularities – gaps in the accounts, no bank statements, Ian Shirley was unable to fully sign off the accounts due to the poor suspect actions of the then Treasurer Martin Kyne-Lilley (later in the meeting IS said that he had concerns re the accounts that M K-L had shown him) – these concerns were not reported to the committee). Resignations due to this state of affairs resulted. The £7K shortfall had been recovered, but should not have been allowed to happen over the 3 1/2 years. The resulting rumours re missing cash had done the committee no good.

It was said that the village lottery was for a new floor and refurbishment and not for use for funds for a new hall. Some £5.7K had been netted and none of this baked by the treasurer. In fact the lottery had been run illegally due to the license not being renewed, the authorities had warned not to continue without a license – but things carried on. From a legal point of view it maybe that £2.8K has to be returned and this may well fall on the committee members themselves.

Marlen Moss-Eccardt interjected that from the committee point of view a cheque had been raised for a new license (stub in cheque book) questions were asked and were informed that the license was in place.

[Tim Bennett] The lottery should have been for the existing hall and not towards a new one. It was evident that the committee preferred the existing site; they should have sought village opinion long ago re other sites.

To share the same architect with the rest of the developers was not good sense. Cheaper tenders should have been sought and used.

Marlen Moss-Eccardt interjected that it was relevant to have the same architect so that when the complete picture is viewed (obtaining extra footprint from Elgoods for free) a significant value to the village was obtained.

Tim Bennett asked why the rush, the lease does not expire till 2016. There also seemed a rush to satisfy the DDA act due to come in in 2004 (Autumn). Figures of £100K had been mentioned to put the hall in compliance, then £22K (at Parish Council meeting) – which was widely challenged and is now likely to be £5K. The changes are easy and low cost.

There is yet money to be allotted to the architect fees – originally reported as £1.2K, then £2K and now £4K – all on something that may never happen. Even the Parish Council was persuaded to put their names to the application to save £440. The committee had acted outside their remit and each may well be liable for the payment of these fees.

The committee should have immediately resigned en mass – not attempted to cover up issues and they should now resign so that a new body can be established. So he urged the audience not to vote for the present committee to continue.

Elisabeth Deckker asked to see whom the 10 signatories were, who stood up (two not present).

Margaret Levesley then read out a prepared statement from the committee:

Statement from the Parish Hall Committee

We wish to read a statement in response to a letter dated 12 January 2003 from 10 members of the community to Richard Green, then Chairman of the Parish Hall Committee.

Our statement is on behalf of all the committee members who were active in the events referred to in the letter, and we are not, therefore, speaking on behalf of Steve Kerr, Tony Lewis and Peter Cox, who were either not members of the Committee at that time or had joined too recently to have been involved in any significant way in those events.

We feel that some reply is necessary in view of the very serious nature and the implications of some of the comments. We hope also to help to correct some misapprehensions, or at the very least, give the Committee members represented by this statement an opportunity to put their case.

We are therefore addressing the points individually as raised in the letter of 12 January.

1. A lack of adequate research into potential sites and the likely specifications needed for a new building:

Quite a bit of research was undertaken and a number of sites were considered. One parishioner indicated that he thought there were seven potential sites, but he did not come forward to share his ideas with us. As no such decision can be taken lightly we examined the alternatives, but no sites were identified which didn't have a number of problems attached to them and in some cases the problems appeared to be insurmountable. Just two of the sited we considered were:

1. The field to the back of the Post Office – reasons for rejecting this site were:
 - The vigorous objections raised by New Road residents
 - The owner was not planning on selling at that time or in the foreseeable future
 - And if we had eventually wanted to buy the land it was likely we would have had to pay the full commercial value of prime building land (and this would have applied to other sites considered as well) in addition to the costs of building.
2. Playing Fields – this has always been seen as the serious alternative to the current site. However, a few – and we stress that these are only a few – of the considerations were:
 - To provide safe pedestrian access along the March Road would be extremely complex since it would involve the compulsory purchase of land from all the owners of the adjacent properties to fill in the dyke to make the necessary width, Hern Drove would have to be properly made up, and street lighting would have to be installed.

- Mr. Harold Carter had confirmed in writing to the Committee that he was not willing to sell the land to provide pedestrian access from Wisbech Road.
- Car parking would have encroached on the playing field. Rendering it too small for sports.

It is our view that the current site, despite all the drawbacks, is still the most viable site. It will remain for the new Committee to test this view with the community, and to seek solutions to the challenges we have identified.

The community's views for the potential usage of the new building ranged from using the Village Hall as a sports hall to a Fenland Museum, as well as a gym for the school. However the more numerous the uses for the building, the more demanding the ongoing income generation and maintenance will be, especially if the Hall should be used less than anticipated in future years. Common sense would suggest that it would be impossible to satisfy every individual's demands for the site so another challenge for the Committee is to determine which of the community's requirements can be satisfied within an achievable budget, and which cannot without alienating those whose preferences cannot be provided for.

It is true that a referendum was not held as promised. The committee told the newsletter at short notice not to run the referendum and with hindsight it was a good thing. Because until definite, practical alternatives were identified, free of problems and achievable at realistic cost, what choices did we in fact have to put before the community in the form of a referendum?

- 2. That the committee has not been open-minded in its deliberations, and**
- 3. Poor communication with the community**

The Committee has used every avenue reasonably available to them to communicate with and consult the community. Starting as long ago as 1999 a series of articles, some including illustrations, appeared in the Welney News, requesting parishioner's views and ideas, and in August 2002 there was a full page of considerations, to which no one responded. The AGM is always advertised and various articles in the News have invited people to attend meetings and notified of vacancies on the Committee, but over the last three years only 4 members of the public have attended the AGM's and they were all subsequently co-opted on to the committee.

At two Open Meetings, the first of which was held only five days after the Parish Hall Committee and the Playing Fields Committee jointly found they had important news to share with the community; volunteers were invited to join and/or support the committee. No one responded.

Communication is a two way process, it needs people to listen and more importantly, to respond. We are therefore disappointed that the signatories have chosen to stand back and criticise us rather than join in and help.

- 4. A failure to behave in a proactive manner, especially in connection with planning proposals affecting the current hall site.**

We were unclear what this meant so have not prepared a response. Elsewhere in the letter the signatories appear to be saying we were too proactive, so this is rather confusing!

What should be noted, however, is that the Committee has no control whatsoever over other peoples planning applications.

- 5. A readiness to prematurely spend significant monies given in good faith by parishioners on a project that doesn't have the full support of the community.**

Any major project is unlikely to have the full support of the village; the best that can be hoped for is the support of the majority.

We contend that taking the steps we did would ensure that Elgoods would gift us a substantial strip of land, help with financial costs (which they already have done to the tune of £880) and also retain their goodwill which is essential to secure a strong negotiating position and in order to take advantage of the use of their parking area. This strip of land together with the present hall site (if purchased from the EA) could accommodate a sizeable village hall or be valuable building land owned by the village.

Had we not gone ahead, the additional strip would be lost forever by the developers leaving the original site as it is now.

6. A failure to address rumours of questionable accounting procedures.

Committees don't address rumours. Otherwise they'd have no time to do anything else. However committees are accountable and a full account has been given by Peter Cox to the proper body, The Parish Council. Richard Green in the Welney News also addressed this issue.

It should not be forgotten that, in the wake of the recent adverse press interest in the village, any rumours which were widely circulated could have resulted in a renewal of their intrusive activities and had a very unfortunate effect on others perception of this village.

Lastly, anyone who had heard a rumour could have, if they wished, attended a committee meeting and asked a question in the proper way and been given a proper answer instead of spreading rumours.

7. That it was unclear of its origins and relationship with the Parish Council. That it was unaware of the true status of the current parish hall and the land on which it stands.

The same charge could be leveled at the Parish Council and possibly every Parish Council and Parish Hall Committee since the late eighties. The documentation is unclear and it has been suggested to the Parish Council that a county solicitor be asked to turn the document into plain English because no one seems to know what it means. We feel in hindsight, that this matter may have been allowed to lapse until a critical need arose, and it should have been addressed sooner- perhaps at any time over the last three decades.

An additional complication in the clarity of our relationship with the Parish Council was around their strategy for the village. We understand that they set up a strategy committee in 2001 to ensure that all the parish's groups worked together to bring about the best possible outcome for the village. In May 2002 Councillor Ian Warrington representing the Parish Council asked us to sit on their strategy committee, which was agreed. Due to drastic changes at the Parish Council, Councillor Warrington resigned and that is the last we heard of the strategy or the committee.

In conclusion, we strongly suggest that the business and purpose of the committee changed radically and suddenly. We went from being a volunteer fund-raising and care-taking body to realistically needing paid professional help to navigate our way through the complex and detailed maze of regulations, legislation and negotiation, together with other specialised expertise. Had the Elgoods offer not needed to be dealt with at very short notice, we would probably gone on in good faith with our fund-raising activities and started to work with our partners such as the Parish Council and the Playing Fields Committee in this endeavour. We would have been able to carry on at a reasonable pace, weather the changes. Until we felt the time was right.

We believe that there is much to celebrate about what this committee has achieved, not least in the significant sums raised, and the contributions of individual members such as Amy Markham who has served for many years and whose single handed efforts have been of enormous benefit to the community.

Marlen Moss-Eccardt made reference to a petition of some 20 names giving confidence in the committee; this was provided by **Tony Lewis** who read out the details.

Before the vote **Richard Green** asked to read out a statement. He covered the chequered history of the hall and how it did not fit the expectations of users. It was often too hot or too cold, with poor access. The committee had aimed to provide a better hall, where Elgoods had provided £880.00 and the possibility of £10K in land value.

At this point **Peter Cox** walked out of the meeting unable to listen to what RG had to say. RG finished by saying that the Parish Council should aim for doing the best for the village hall and not the least to make do. This is best achieved by consulting potential users.

At this point the motion was proposed and seconded.

Steve Kerr took charge of the vote. The result was 14 for the motion and 7 against. The committee then resigned.

[These minutes were apparently made by Derek Levesley. The original document was e-mailed to me (Peter Cox) by Mrs Marlen Moss-Eccardt in September 2003 following my request for details of the Committee's statement to complete the Minute Book of the old Committee. The text is unchanged and in the order received, but I have substituted names for some initials, added a name in square brackets, changed the font and margins to reduce the number of pages and made some changes to the layout to improve clarity. Peter Cox, 16th September 2003]