



Frances Harris

A Very Brief History of Village Halls



ACRE
Northamptonshire

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Reconstructing the Rural Community: Village Halls and the National Council of Social Service, 1919 to 1939

By Dr Jeremy Burchardt

Errors, omissions and inaccuracies = Frances Harris!

Village Halls before WWI



- ▶ Village Halls were very rare
- ▶ Community buildings were usually either
 - ❑ **school rooms** often only building for public hire in village (no leisure activities, lack of space, child size benches); or
 - ❑ **reading rooms** (not many) from late c19th also run by committees by drawbacks
 - Limited activities (e.g. newspapers, billiards)
 - Adult men only
 - Strict rules e.g. alcohol, swearing & political discussion
 - Earliest recorded 1860s (Oxfordshire)
- ▶ Political meetings often held outside (village greens)
- ▶ Or...there was the pub!



World War One

Effects of WWI

- ▶ Rural labourers better off (financially) in army:
 - ❑ disposable income
 - ❑ leisure opportunities
- ▶ Rural women war work
- ▶ Drift away from the land (rural life dull/deferential)



What could be done?



Answer: *enhance rural leisure provision*

Growth of organisations to enhance rural social life, for example:

- ▶ National Federation of Women's Institutes (1919)
- ▶ YMCA (mid c19th)
- ▶ Workers' Educational Association

Key:

- ▶ National Council of Social Service (1919)

Now: National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)

- ▶ Oxfordshire Rural Community Council (1920)

“to co-ordinate local voluntary effort in the countryside”



Edward Birchall 1884-1916

The “Village Halls Policy”



National Council of Social Services 1921 Report:

“for generations English village life has been based on the feudal system”, so need to find a way “to enable country men and women to help themselves”.

First, village social councils (not much enthusiasm) then

From 1924 onwards, Village Halls became focus

- ▶ Range of activities
- ▶ Community initiated, built & community fundraising
- ▶ Managed by committee (reps from local organisations & elected)
- ▶ Trusts using NCSS’s model trust deed

 democratic spaces free from interference

By 1939 over 1,000 village halls (estimate)



Northamptonshire ACRE's Older Members

Barrowden & Wakerley Village Hall

Indenture 31st December 1925

Building 1927



Harlestone Village Institute Opened 20th November 1924



Lowick Recreation Ground

Conveyance and Trust Deed 25th October 1921



Sibbertoft Reading Room

Founded 1911



Guilsborough Reading Room (now Village Hall)

Built 1901



Helmdon Reading Reading Room

Given to the village in 1884

HELMDON
READING
ROOM





Thank you for taking part today!