

ALRESFORD "TOWN HALL"

By

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"This beautiful, excellent and very attractive building was designed by our ingenious talented skilful and highly esteemed young architect, Mr. William Hunt and built by W. and F. Fowler, father and son, of Alresford." So wrote John and William Fremantle, Lecturers and publishers of Broad Street on the opening of the New Market House in Alresford in the Spring of 1866.

The histories of Alresford tell us that in the days gone by the Market House stands "nearly on the highest ground in the centre of the town". There are two freestanding buildings shown on the Enclosure Map of 1807 at the southern end of Broad Street in the centre of the road and of these the northern building would be The Shambles, finally removed in 1823, and the southern building would be the Market House. Robert Boyes tells us, in 1744, that this Market House is far from being a handsome building and previously it was described by Defoe as a "small market house standing on wooden pillars". In the brief History of Alresford compiled chiefly from old manuscripts with Notes etc. by "Bookworm" he states he can "well remember the old market place which stood at the upper end of Broad Street. It was, in his boyhood, called the 'Round House' and, I believe, the 'cage' for the temporary confinement of prisoners, was also there". The Bailiff and Burgesses accounts also include various payments for insurances and repairs to the Market House from 1781, but the payments to Mr. Piper in 1824 would appear to refer to the removing of the building.

The coming of the railway encouraged Alresford to provide a new Market House and late in 1864 a Promoting Committee was formed. The subscription list reached £268 within four weeks, but problems arose in selecting a suitable site. By the 8th of April 1865, however, the Committee had selected the premises known as the Rose and Crown on the south side of West Street and in the centre of the Town as the most eligible site for the proposed new building and a general meeting would be held at the Swan Hotel on Thursday the 27th April at 3.00 p.m.

The earliest reference to the chosen site is in title deeds dated 27th November 1685 when it was owned by Abigail Bath who let it to Thomas and Joane Standen on a 500 year lease for a peppercorn rent. The building standing thereon must have been destroyed in the great fire of 1689 when the Church, Market House and many, many houses in the Town were burnt. There is no further information until 26th July 1865 when Edward Hunt, described as a brewer, sold the property to the Alresford Market House Company for £550, it then being known as the Rose and Crown Public House.

This public house was then a very seedy establishment frequented by tramps and other undesirables who passed through Alresford and whose presence was a constant dismay to the Townsfolk. The sale of the site and demolition of the buildings was therefore greeted with much relief and it is recorded that from thereafter the unwanted persons avoided Alresford and sought shelter elsewhere.



At the public meeting held in the Swan Hotel the Committee's report was adopted, the selected site agreed, and the architects' plans approved. Also the Alresford Market House Company was constituted, the Directors appointed and all other necessary business agreed and completed. On the 8th of June builders were invited to tender for the erection of a "Market House, Assembly Room, Reading Room and Committee Room in accordance with the plans and Specification to be seen at the offices of the architect Mr. William Hunt in West Street Alresford." Building commenced on site in the late summer and early in 1866 the New Market House was complete and ready for occupation.

On the 22nd of March 1866 at a formal dinner held in the first floor Assembly Room, and with the High Sheriff to the County of Hampshire, The Hon. J.T. Dutton being the principal guest of honour, the new premises were formally declared open.

The building was described as forming a conspicuous and elegant structure with the listed accommodation being - A Market Hall 28 feet square and 12 feet high, at the back a Settling Room for market purposes, a Reading Room appropriated to the Library and Scientific Institute with lofty folding doors which divide these rooms and can be opened to give one room 24 feet by

16 feet by 12 feet high. A lobby leads from the Settling Roan and Market Hall to the staircase, from the landing of which the Assembly Room is reached. This room is 45 feet long by 24 feet wide by 18 feet high having three large plate glass windows on the front and the like at the side. At night the room is illuminated by 3 stars, the 2 end ones having each 16 and the middle one 32 (gas) burners. There is an orchestra recess 12 feet wide by 6 feet deep and 3 feet above floor approached from the landing. The Assembly Room is also intended for magisterial uses and so for the convenience of policeman and criminals an open passage is provided between the Market Hall and Hall Keepers residence.

During the speeches after dinner Mr. William Hunt recorded that the Directors at first set down the sum of £1,500 as the amount to be expended -the site had cost £550 and the Contractors paid £650 with a further £880 to be paid.

The new purpose built Market House fulfilled its functions admirably and with much satisfaction. At the same time its popularity and use as a centre for all public and social activities grew rapidly and this constant use for all needs has proved again and again the wisdom and foresight of its creators. Within a very short time the building became known as the "Town Hall" and this title, though strictly not correct, has persisted until today. Under the guidance of the Market House Company, as well as the market business which however reduced year by year, all other events and happenings in Alresford were held within this building and at a glance through the columns of the Hampshire Chronicle, from the opening to through to this present day, seldom does one week pass by without a report of one or more meetings taking place in the premises. Even during the reconstruction of the Parish Church in 1897 all services were "held in the Towne Hall at the usual times."

Sadly however in the early 1920's after nearly sixty years' service, coupled with the decline in market business, the Market House Company ran into financial difficulties and went into voluntary liquidation. On the 11th January 1924 the Liquidator wrote to the Parish Council stating it has become necessary for the Market House premises to be disposed of and enquiring whether the Council are likely to be interested in the purchase of the property. Also stating that an offer in the region of £2,000 would be required by him in order to discharge the Company's liabilities. The Parish Clerk stated the buildings could only be bought by the Council on the condition that they were used as Council offices and so the Parish Council "Resolved that this letter be laid on the table".

On the 1st of March 1924 an advertisement appeared in the Hampshire Chronicle offering the substantially built premises known as "The Town Hall" for sale by auction on Friday the 14th March at three o'clock, on the premises! There is no record of this event, but on the 30th August 1924 the premises were conveyed to Miss Mary Matilda Baker for the sum of £800.

During this period the use of the building continued as constantly as before and its new Owner carried on the tradition in all respects.

Miss Mary Matilda Baker together with her sister Margaret Anne Baker lived at Mitford House in Broad Street. They were sisters of Henry Baker who carried on a Drapers business in Broad Street and pioneered the development of the Alresford Town House Estate, between Jacklyns Lane and the south side of the railway, in 1906. Miss Mary Baker was well known in the Town as a very efficient business woman and perhaps purchased the "Town Hall" as an investment; she was also secretary to the Womens Institute at Old Alresford for a number of years.

In the early 1930's we find that the large ground floor room, the original Market Room and today known as the Meryon Hall, was let to Hazelgrove and Son, as a butchers shop. Many residents of Alresford will remember this shop - the east and central entrance doorways gave access to the Butchers department and the west doorway to the greengrocers department. There was a partition between the central column and rear wall to screen the office, ice box store and sausage making machine and other equipment was stored in the Basement below (which is of course the old cellars of the Rose and Crown public house). Frank Hazelgrove commenced business in East Street, next Brandy Mount, in 1892, later taking over the Eureka Fish Shop in West Street, now M. E. Anderson the greengrocers. About 1930 the business moved to the "Town Hall" where, now known as Frank Hazelgrove & Sons, the business continued as family butchers with the Misses Hazelgrove looking after the greengrocery department.

However in 1942, on the 15th September, Miss Baker sold the premises to Mr. Harry Phair, a well-known Alresford businessman, for £1,100. and he took immediate steps to reoccupy Meryon Hall. The outcome of this was resolved when Messrs. Fairhead built a new single storey shop in West Street adjacent to the corner Chemists shop and Hazelgrove & Son took possession. Subsequently the butchers business was sold to Messrs. Baxters who occupy the premises today.

Now the Petty Sessions were held in the Assembly Room every alternate Thursday at 11.00 a.m. and during Miss Baker's ownership. In 1935 changes were required, and a Retiring Room was needed for the use of the magistrates. This was erected at a cost of £62.5.0d and was ready for use on the 29th August. Subsequently the rent for this additional room, paid by the Council of the City of Southampton, was increased from £25. to £29.7.0d. per annum.

Mr. Harry Phair ran a grocers shop in Broad Street and later opened a new general store. He married May, the daughter of Mr. George Lawrence the newsagent on the corner of Broad Street and East Street and they took up residence over the shop. After the death of his wife, Harry Phair bought St. Joans, on the corner of Jacklyns Lane and Pound Hill and the lettings of the "Town Hall" were organised by his housekeeper, Miss Batty.

And so the use of the old Market House carried on - local societies meetings, social gatherings, dinners, dances, concerts, operas, music etc. mixing with Parish Council and Public meetings and also various parochial functions, it now being fully, but erroneously established in the public mind, including the Press, that "this building must be the only Town Hall in England which is privately owned".

At their regular meeting on 6th October 1953 the Parish Council debated at considerable length the proposal to provide a village Hall or Community Centre and it was resolved to call a public meeting on the 6th November at, where else, but the "Town Hall". In the meantime it was reported, on enquiry, that Mr. Phair "was quite prepared to discuss the sale of the Town Hall to the Parish". But the resolution arising from the Public Meeting was "that this Parish Meeting considers the provision of a Public Hall a necessity and appoints a Committee to consider ways and means of providing this Hall". After three and a half years search and investigation this Committee handed their report to the Parish Council on the 7th May 1957. Briefly only two practical proposals emerge from the report, (1) to build a New Hall on the Stratton Bates Recreation Ground, but no funds were available and no enthusiasm for such a project and (2) to purchase the "Town Hall" from Mr. Phair, and a subcommittee was nominated to try and negotiate such purchase. At the next meeting in June the subcommittee reported back that the price for the premises would be £4,000. subject to valuation; revenue was about £150 per annum, the rates £50, gas £20 and electricity £30, but cleaning was done voluntarily. This report was received and measures taken to hold the

requisite Public meeting for agreement to proceed, being fixed for Friday 28th June in the "Town Hall". However the public meeting turned down this proposal and carried an alternative resolution that the Parish Council consider all sites and properties especially those referred to in the Committee's report and also to proceed forthwith with plans for raising money for the purpose! At their next meeting the Parish Council fully considered this public meeting resolution but resolved instead to consult the District Valuer with a view to purchasing the "Town Hall" as a temporary measure and then further consideration could be given to possible new premises combined with recreational activities. On the 5th November the Parish Council minutes record that the valuation of £2000 by the District Valuer had been received and the Owner of the premises approached for agreement. This figure was not acceptable and therefore nothing could be done about acquiring the "Town Hall". The Council further resolved that at the moment the building of a new Hall was not a practical proposition.

But the four long years of hard work by the Parish Hall Committee was not to be completely wasted because within a few more weeks i.e. on the 14th December 1957 the Hampshire Chronicle reported joyous news - "The future of the Alresford Town Hall is secured for the Public use, it has been acquired by the Alresford Chamber of Trade, who will administer it as a non-profit making concern, for the general good of the Town. They are taking it over from the present owner, Mr. H.J. Phair, at terms which are described as 'generous to a degree' and have already appointed four Trustees to be responsible for its administration. The initial purchase would become effective on 1st February 1958 on payment of £500 and a further £500 before the end of the first year, the balance to be paid over 12 years free of interest. A considerable sum had already been offered by members and the Chamber proposed to launch a public appeal for further funds forthwith." Purchase price was £2000.

It is wise perhaps to pause and consider that this grand old building, this Market House, erected for Alresford by public subscription in 1866 was now, some ninety years later, to be 'rescued' for Alresford by further public subscription in 1958.

With great enthusiasm the Chamber of Trade at its annual dinner in February celebrated the special occasion of its 25th anniversary of foundation coupled with the purchase of the "Town Hall" on behalf of the citizens of Alresford, which dinner was, of course as always, held in the "Town Hall".

Under the administration of the ambitious Alresford Chamber of Trade Management Committee remedial works and improvements were carried out to the buildings and the use and lettings continued apace. Plans for a theatrical licence were examined in depth and all possibilities were carefully considered in order to develop more use of the premises, but by 1962 expenses were mounting and public interest waning and so a tentative enquiry was made to the Parish Council to take over the buildings. This was duly considered by the Parish Council and at their meeting on the 19th February 1963 it was resolved that the Council "was not in favour of the Town Hall being put in the hands of the Parish Council".

It must now be understood that should the buildings be managed by a Community Association then under Government legislation certain capital and maintenance grants could become available and rating and tax reliefs (not available to a private organisation such as the Chamber of Trade) could collectively be of immense value to the building and its use. This matter was now fully examined by the Parish Council in conjunction with the Hampshire County Council of Social Service and then explained to a public meeting in May 1964 - in the "Town Hall". The resulting resolution was "that this meeting resolves to form a Community Association in Alresford

and to invite all local associations to serve on the Council of the Association". So at the following public meeting in June, held in the "Town Hall", the rules and constitution of the Alresford Community Association were adopted, the premises were to be handed over to the new Association free of any liability, and the affiliation fees to be one guinea for each association, two shillings and sixpence for individual members, tenpence for school children and old age pensioners would be honorary members. In the meantime the four Trustees were directed by a resolution of the Chamber of Trade on the 5th October to

"hold the property on behalf of the Alresford and District Community Association" giving the Association "management and control".

Again during the passage & all this talk and investigation and decision the use and lettings of the various parts of the "Town Hall" carried on and business continued as usual.

During the next few years the Parish Council continued investigating ways and means to construct a new Community Centre building to replace the "Town Hall". The Alresford Town Map of 1964 sponsored by the Chamber of Trade had allocated a site in Station Road. Outline planning permission was obtained and the architects proceeded. In 1969 under the guidance of the Hampshire County Council the Alresford Conservation Area was implemented, and this introduced more stringent requirements in any planning applications for 'change of use', to buildings in the area. This showed that in order to sell the "Town Hall" outline planning applications to change its use to offices, or shops and offices would have to satisfy requirements on traffic hazard, loading and unloading, car parking and the prime need to maintain the fabric of the existing street frontage. These applications did not prove successful. Also it was found that the proposed new Centre in Station Road had been costed and there were insufficient funds available for the work and so it was abandoned. Tentative proposals to provide new buildings in the Perins School complex in conjunction with the Education Authorities also failed, so renewed efforts were made, and successfully, to rethink and refurbish the "Town Hall" now known as the Alresford and District Community Centre as a good working unit for the various uses of the Community Association.

During this period with encouragement from the Alresford Society and with help from the Parish Council unhappily the splendid brick frontage of the "Town Hall" was painted. This expensive procedure will now have to be repeated every few years, when a good scrubbing brush with running water and lots of 'elbow grease' a happier, cheaper and longer lasting solution would have been achieved.

Throughout its first 117 years this building erected and financed by the Townsfolk of Alresford has consistently served the people well, being the focal point in the structure of the town; with care and attention it will continue to satisfy all needs for many years to come. It is interesting to note that the draft Winchester Area Local Plan, New Alresford section published in June 1983 says - "The allocation of a site for a new Centre is no longer required and should be omitted from the New Plan". The Community Centre is now a Grade 2 Listed Building.

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