

A brief history of our Sherborne Masonic Hall

The current Lodge of Benevolence, No 1168, was consecrated in the old Sherborne Town Hall in 1867 and held its meetings there in the 'Old Jury Room' until 1884, at which time the building was demolished. After that it appears to have met over various periods in the Digby Hotel – the building in Digby Road opposite the Pageant Gardens and where the Sherborne Boys School boarders now reside – then afterwards at the Newland Hotel.

Previously having been tasked by the Provincial Grand Master (PGM) to seek a more permanent home for the Lodge, this became particularly relevant in early 1895 when notice was given by the landlord of the Newland Hotel for the members to find alternative accommodation. In May of that year, as a temporary measure, it moved back to the Digby Hotel. By that time the Chapter of Benevolence No 1168 had been formed and was in a similar itinerate state of existence.

The threat of once again having to move prompted the brethren to renew their efforts to establish a more permanent home for the Lodge and Chapter. An offer therefore was made to purchase a plot of land from the Earl of Digby's Estate, for the sum of £50. Presumably this was the same plot of land in Digby Road, with a frontage of 40 feet and a depth of 66 feet that had first been offered to the earlier Benevolence Lodge by the Earl of Digby back in 1820.

As part of the agreement however, there was an interesting caveat in the deeds:

'And also will not at any time or times herein after exercise or carry on upon the said premises or any building or buildings to be hereafter erected thereon any noisome or noxious trade business or calling nor use or permit the same to be used as a public house tavern common lodging house coffee house or for any other purpose other than a Meeting House for the use of the said Sherborne Lodge of Freemasons.'

It was also resolved that Trustees of the new Hall, in the event of an future re-sale, would be required to offer to re-sell to Mr. Digby the plot of land first purchased from him – at the going commercial value - provided that the Lodge was not called upon to pay expenses of so doing.

The records at the time indicate that events moved along quite quickly. From the tenders submitted, an estimate of £500 was accepted for the cost of building suitable premises and approval was given to proceed. Inevitably, this created financial difficulties for the Lodge members, but these were resolved in part through one of the members taking out a £300 mortgage on the property at an interest rate of 3.5%; this was not finally discharged until December 1913. A further £200, however, was also raised to pay for the additional furnishings required in the new Masonic Hall. The final balance sheet showed that the cost of site, building, furnishing, etc., to have been £749 15s 5d. It was noted also that the garden at the front of the building was landscaped and planted out by the then IPM, WBro William G Pragnell, at his own expense.

Unfortunately, although attempts were made to invite him, the PGM at the time: RWBro Montague John Guest, could not fix a date for opening the new Masonic Hall and Lodge-room before the end of October that year, it was therefore resolved that it be formally taken into use on the 22nd September 1896.

In 1902 it was decided to enclose the land belonging to the Lodge on the north side of the building by-a stone wall, at the cost of £9. Six years later an opportunity was taken to acquire an additional strip of land on the south side of the building from the Digby Estate. This appears to have been an exchange rather than purchase for a small parcel of land at the rear of the hall, which subsequently was bought back four years later for £50. Then in 1966 the final piece of land at the rear of the property was purchased at a cost of £500. This meant there was now spare ground to the south and north (rear) of the building.

Over the years there have been modifications to the building internally and externally. This has included the construction of an ante-room to the lodge temple, the addition of a gents', then a ladies', toilets, and subsequently a kitchen and small dining room.

However, after years of the members and guests having to dine off-site, it was not until 1985, after a considerable time in planning and raising of funds, the existing dining room extension was built at the rear of the Masonic Hall. This was a 'temporary' building, but which was fully integrated into the main building and, at the same time with considerable alterations to the kitchen, bar area and toilets, was truly transformed into fine dining facility. Apart from special occasions when the numbers attending warranted a bigger facility, i.e., more than 80, it was then no longer necessary for the brethren and their guests to have to undergo the disruption of moving to the Digby Memorial Hall, or the Age Concern building next door for the festive boards. The principal 'architect' of this venture was WBro L.P. (Len) Peterson, but it was mainly brought about through a small army of helpers from the brethren of the Lodge who invested their time, efforts and resources so that the 'do it yourself' project was achieved – notwithstanding the considerable investment of the brethren of that time.

In 1992 the number of brethren using the Masonic Hall was bolstered by the consecration of the daylight lodge - Sherborne Conduit Lodge No 9484 and, in addition, in the last ten years, the Yeo Valley Lodge of Lady Freemasons have based themselves in the building.

In 2010 proposals were drawn up to replace the 'temporary' dining room with a more substantial and permanent building. Unfortunately, following the down-turn in membership and attendance of both Lodges and Chapter, the projected cost of £100,000 was deemed to be too much for the existing brethren using the Masonic Hall to afford. However, planning permission having been obtained, and in order to protect this for a number of years, preliminary work was commissioned to install some foundation footings – so that should it become financially viable to proceed – it would be feasible to do so. In the meantime the temporary building, having already exceeded its anticipated 30 years, has been pronounced structurally viable for, probably, another 20 years.

Although – perhaps with the thought of the original caveat placed upon the use to which that land or premises may not be used – the Hall at present is not commercially hired out, albeit the dining room is used from time to time for social events, as recommended and sponsored by the members and for which an appropriate donation is often made.