

How the construction of the School extension happened.

When I was asked by the Lemsford Local History Group to write a piece about how the school extension happened, I thought well that's not a long time ago in terms of a historical event. Having trawled my records and memory the story really begins back in early 2003, wow how time flies!

In the period 2000 to 2002, following Ofsted inspections of the school and the growing need locally for more primary school provision, it was becoming clear that the existing school facilities were not going to meet long term needs for potential numbers of pupils, but also meeting increasing needs for teaching space, requirements of the then Disability Discrimination Act, and also safely accommodating the whole school in the main hall space. A space that was used as assembly, dining room, sports hall and music room! Alongside this the senior class of the school (Class 4 - Years 5 & 6) were being taught in a temporary external building detached from the main school buildings.

The then Head Teacher Debra Massey with the Governing body started formulating a plan to make a bid for government funds to create a better combination of rooms extending the existing school buildings. The aim being to create a dedicated sports and school assembly hall; new classroom for Class 4, a dedicated library (rather than the existing 'space' used to shelve some books!); Toilets and changing rooms for the children; better provisions for disabled or less abled children or staff, including toilets. Alongside this was the ability to properly partition off the original school room from the dining hall.

Having taken on the services of a local architect, Paul Burdess, it quickly became clear this project would cost in the region of £500-600k. As a voluntary aided school (ie linked to the church) the school would have to find 10% of this budget, which would be a substantial task for a school of 106 pupils.

Fund raising for the portion of the budget we needed began in 2003, with a premises committee of present and former parents at the school, including myself, Terry Densham, Tracy Irving, Elaine Fisher, Julie Jones, Paula Partridge, Andy Chapman and Trevor Harrison with later additions of Nicki Coles & Julie Mansbridge. This group took on the role of organising a whole variety of fund raising activities to appeal to not just the immediate families associated with the school but also extended family and friends and ideally wider members of the community to help spread the financial burden and hopefully draft new sources of money. We held quizzes, several 'Hall Ball's' (at Bush Hall Hotel), auctions, clay pigeon shoots with the Sherriff Family and food evenings.

Alongside the fund raising we set up a management committee between the school and church to work under the school governors to deal with the day to day of helping the Architect deliver the design and act as a link to the fund raisers, this again included myself, vicar Rev Edward Cardale, new Head Teacher Christine Hall (2006 onwards), Nicki Coles and Elaine Fisher.

We started negotiations with the Diocese to help get their support for our planned bid. We also negotiated with Brocket Estates to enable us to take on a long term lease of a square plot of land next to the school that we could use of playing field space. The aim being to offset the loss of playground we would have once the new building was created. It would

also allow use to swing the playground through 90 degrees and paint out a usable space for a netball pitch.

As we developed plans for the project a key consideration for the architect and ourselves was how the new buildings would need to match or be different to the existing buildings given that whilst the original school buildings did not have any listed status, the church next door does and the village of Lemsford is in a conservation area. So any designs would get special scrutiny from the Planning Authority (Welwyn Hatfield Council).

We decided early on to try and reflect as much as possible the existing colours of the school in the bricks and roofing and also some of the brickwork details and patterns of the brickwork. This went down really well with the Planning Authority and their conservation office. We also held several exhibitions for the local community to come along and look at our developing plans with a view to make sure we didn't receive any objections later on. This included a 3 dimensional scale model so that people could get a feel for the scale of the new buildings alongside the old school. These activities all went very well and we received planning permission in August 2006.

Our bid for government funds were submitted in December 2005, which was actually our fourth bid, as others over the previous 3 years had been rejected. We received confirmation of our bid being successful in February 2006, at which point the race was on to commit to a contractor and construction programme to start in the 2006/07 year and be complete by 2007/08 year.

We hurried our construction plans together, formulated a tender list and got prices together and agreed a contract with Potters Bar based Newland Construction in autumn 2006. Construction started in early 2007 and the buildings were ready for use by October 2007, when the building was formally opened and a commemorative plaque was erected in the new school hall to mark the occasion.

It can't be overlooked how intrusive the construction works were on the school's operation as they effectively slashed the playground space in half, severed easy links to the playing fields and created a lot of noise. The children in those 6 months had to put up with a lot, though they did get some good lessons on how construction sites work and hopefully a few of them have gone on into STEM subjects/careers afterwards. We also had to move the annual village field to a new venue at the Lemsford Village Hall and grounds.

The buildings have been in use for nearly 15 years now and it is hard to think of them not actually having been part of the school for a lot longer. They blend in so well to their setting and the school and community are making great use of them, whether that is for school plays or enabling parents to be more of a part of school assemblies each week, or by the church for special events such as Christmas or harvest festival. Then as a centre point on village Fete Day.

Paul Butler

St John's 150th Anniversary memory