

Chapter 32

Wymeswold's Memorial Hall

The first official record of discussing a war memorial for Wymeswold comes in May 1919. It is written, not in the minutes of the Parish Council, but in the Church Parish Meetings and Vestry Minutes. A parish meeting had been convened, with Mr Reuben Charles in the chair. The minutes note briefly 'Principal business – should there be a War Memorial? Motion carried'. That decision was taken on 22nd May, and the meeting went on to discuss what sort of memorial would be fitting. However, there are some other records that provide a background to what followed next.

The war had resulted in many social changes in the country. Hundreds of thousands of men were due to be demobilised, but the army was very slow to respond. There were some good reasons for this. Firstly, it was by no means certain that the German army would accept the Armistice (it had not surrendered). Secondly, Russia had collapsed into civil war, and Britain was firmly against the 'Reds' (Bolsheviks). British troops had already been sent to Murmansk, and there was a definite possibility that the army would be required in another major conflict.

There were also some less good reasons. The sheer magnitude of demobilisation was a problem, as was deciding who should be sent home first. Another problem was working out how to cope with a huge influx of men onto the labour market. War had brought with it a boom in manufacturing – munitions, clothing, processed food and so on. Steel production and coal mining had been doing well. With the Armistice, many of those industries had to contract enormously, and far too quickly. It was a perfect recipe for social unrest. Just ten months after the Armistice, there were still a million men in uniform. Small mutinies were breaking out, as men refused to accept the unquestioning and, to them, pointless, military discipline.

As 1919 progressed, the wartime boom turned to bust, and the already saturated labour market was swamped by ex-soldiers. There were riots in Liverpool – tanks were called in and a battleship sent to the river Mersey. Shots were fired over the heads of the rioters and 370 people were arrested. Women, regarded as heroines and indispensable workers during the war, were now publicly criticised for occupying jobs that men might take.

There is no evidence of this level of discontent in Wymeswold, though Peggy Mills does report that her father remembered food being in shorter supply in the First World War than in the Second. The vicar, Rev Claud Edmunds, did report some

changes, though, in response to his Bishop's visitation in 1921. Sadly, we do not have the Bishop's questionnaire but Rev Edmunds began by observing:

(ii) (a) I think on the whole the war has been unfavourable to religion. Many of the men who served seem to have no use for it: those who were Churchworkers have become less regular and reliable.

He also listed among the 'Hindrances' (presumably hindrances to increasing his flock):

The increased pressure in domestic life owing to general lack of servants.

An interesting comment. Even though times were hard, people were not going back into service. Perhaps the well-to-do had less money, or perhaps the poorer classes were not prepared to take that type of work. It certainly seems that, to the vicar at least, some fundamental changes were at work. True, when he listed 'A reaction from religious exercises on the part of the faithful, since the end of the war', he did follow it up with the hope that 'Time will presumably supply the remedy for them'. This expressed wish was typed on a separate line, and stands curiously alone – whether for emphasis, or whether he himself did not really believe it, is hard to say. Granted, these are just one man's reports – but they are carefully thought through, by an educated and sensitive observer of the times.

Against this backdrop, the vicar received a letter written on 22nd March 1919 by the County Secretary of the Young Men's Christian Association, P. Escott-North. The YMCA had been started in 1844 by young male shop workers who met for Bible readings and prayer. In the mid-1800s it had grown rapidly to become an international organisation. During the war, it had been very active in providing rest and recreation facilities for the troops behind the lines. The YMCA was quick to respond to the welfare needs of the troops, and the first centre was opened in June 1915. The same month saw the opening of a hostel in France for the relatives of wounded soldiers.

The YMCA centres – sometimes just a makeshift shelter within the range of enemy guns – were all staffed by volunteers. Most of the staff were women, but there were also a number of men who were either too old or physically unfit for active service. At any one time, there were as many as 1500 volunteers on the Western Front. The YMCA logo – the 'Red Triangle' – was distinctive, trusted and held in great affection by the men. In particular, the YMCA had acquired great experience in providing 'YMCA huts' – or 'Institutions' as the YMCA called them – that the soldiers relied on for tea and sandwiches, and conversation. They were islands of rest in a sea of destruction and confusion. (The description of a concert held at the YMCA in Meaulte on the Somme found its way into the war diary of 2nd Battalion, Grenadier Guards – see the chapter on Bramford Sparrow).

Escott-North's letter of 22nd March seems to have been unsolicited – we might even call it 'junk mail' today. There is no suggestion that he knew Rev Edmunds. He opens

by explaining that the 'enclosed literature' (which may be a document in the same folder of papers – see below) shows how the YMCA is taking 'immediate steps to meet the expressed needs of the smaller communities'. Wymeswold itself had not expressed any needs to the YMCA, because he goes on to say:

I do not know if any steps have as yet been taken in Wymeswold to mark the appreciation of its inhabitants of the self-sacrifice of those of its sons who have fallen in the terrible strife of the last few years, but the probability is that if you are not already considering a War Memorial, you soon will be, and I beg therefore to draw your attention to the enclosed particulars of our Scheme which will acquaint you with it in broad outline.

The YMCA was certainly in tune with the mood of the country. At least, with the mood of the civilian population. There is a lot of evidence to suggest that many ex-servicemen were less enthusiastic for monuments and memorials. For four years, millions of young men had been trained to kill. Their lives had been dominated by anger, fear, and the indescribable sights and sounds of violent and bloody death. There are many accounts of former soldiers who would remember their comrades over a pint with other veterans, but who saw little point in the vast public outpouring of grief. Nevertheless, the move towards remembrance was powerful and unstoppable. The Cenotaph was unveiled in London in 1920 – the same year that the Unknown Warrior was laid to rest in Westminster Abbey.

The red poppy as a symbol of remembrance had been introduced in 1918 by an American YMCA worker, Moina Michael. She had been inspired by John McRae's poem 'In Flanders Fields', and her campaign for an international symbol was later taken up in France by Mme. Anna Guerin, a French YMCA worker, who had the idea of making artificial poppies for sale. It was she who enlisted the help of Sir Douglas Haig, formerly Commander in Chief of British Forces on the Western Front. By 1921, the British Poppy Appeal had been launched.

Escott-North's letter also appealed to the practical nature of the British:

I take it that Wymeswold, in common with most other places, would desire something of a utilitarian type rather than a memorial that was merely ornamental, and when considering any project or perhaps number of Schemes that may be in mind for this purpose, it would doubtless be a help towards choosing the best and most useful Memorial if, along with the others, the enclosed Scheme were discussed.

The language is not exactly the hard-hitting marketing speak of the twenty-first century, but it is clear that the YMCA had a 'Scheme' that it wanted to spread around the country. Even without the literature to hand, subsequent correspondence and YMCA history explains the scheme. It was to build YMCA Institutes across the country, for the benefit of young people. Then, as now, the YMCA was committed to providing places and activities that young people could enjoy safely, and that would give them opportunities to relax, make contacts and have fun.

The letter seems to have inspired Rev Edmunds. Maybe he had already been discussing a memorial with villagers – maybe some had even come to him, as a village leader, to ask what should be done. The village losses had been terrible. At least a quarter of those who fought had died; 1918 had seen sixteen young men killed; around twenty of the war dead came from families that were related to other families in the area. He wrote back on the 25th, thanking Scott-North for his letter.

Our returned lads say there is nothing they miss at home more than the Y.M.C.A., and are very keen on having an Institute in the village, if possible.

Clearly, he had been canvassing opinion in the intervening forty-eight hours. He wasted no time in getting the ball rolling:

Could you come over one evening in the week after next? ... and discuss the matter with some of us? ... we shall be glad to give you supper before the meeting at the Vicarage.

A printed explanation of the county YMCA's scheme is included in Rev Edmunds' papers. It may not be the original enclosure, but it gives sufficient background to understand what was going on. The YMCA was aware that before the war, its activities were mostly confined to towns and cities. The scheme was intended to change that:

The war has altered all this. The men who are coming back expect to find a Y.M.C.A. everywhere! ... Enquiries from all parts of the country are pouring in...

Leicester's YMCA secretary, Mr H.E. Smith had been appointed chairman of a new committee, and he had secured the service of Mr Escott-North to get the project under way. The document continues:

Mr Smith will have the active help of Mr Escott-North, just returned from military service, who has had world-wide experience in Y.M.C.A. and organising work. Mr North is a man of strong initiative and energy, and his extensive soldiering experience has brought him into living with touch and understanding with men of all shades of opinion and outlook.

The scheme was to build institutes as war memorials, funded by the local community, but with advice and expertise supplied by the YMCA. The concept was for a large hall, with separate women's and men's areas, though the men's area was to have a concert platform and could be used for community functions. Interestingly, the concept included not only toilets but baths. This was an age when hygiene and cleanliness were not only beginning to be understood as healthy, but were also a moral duty. Given that many homes were without flushing toilets, let alone baths, these facilities would have been very much in demand in many parts of the country. The cost, however, was considerable. To build the 'complete package' was estimated at between £3,000 and £5,000 and 'was being adopted in scores of large villages throughout the country.'

The proposals were careful to include conventional war memorials within the plans:

Memorial Tablets, Shrines, or other suitable means are adopted to place on permanent record the names of those who have given their lives in the great war.

Mr Escott-North wrote back directly. The letterhead he used had 'Leicester Young Men's Christian Association' at the top, but directly underneath was a banner that read 'The Y.M.C.A. with H.M. Troops' and featured the silhouette of a British soldier against the background of a burning and devastated landscape, with a YMCA hut in the right foreground. He would bring Mr Smith with him, and was comfortable about finding the vicarage – he mentioned that he had several times called upon the previous vicar, and enquired whether it was correct that Mr Campion ('of cycle fame') had come to live in the village.

The meeting evidently took place and it appears that a building had been identified. However, a letter from Joseph Wootton a few days later informed the YMCA that his tenant was not prepared to leave. This appears to have been the building in question, because Escott-North now wrote to Rev Edmunds, remarking that there now seemed 'no alternative to endeavour to secure a site, and transfer an Army Hut to your village'. He continued with the suggestion that a suitable site might be found, and that 'this might arise if we had a large village meeting sometime early next month, and put the whole thing before your people, endeavouring to get everybody there'.

This was the background to the village meeting in May 1919. The YMCA proposal was not the only one on the table. The vestry records show that there were at least three options that were seriously canvassed:

(a) a Village Hall, (b) a Fixed Cross with the names of the fallen (c) a row of trees down the centre of Brook Street.

The vicar's notes also allow for the possibility of a memorial in the church alone, or a memorial in the village, and one in the church. Serious thought had evidently been given to the idea of a cross opposite the church. The same set of notes considers the possibility that it could be a cross on a series of steps, with a 'recessed tomb', and again 'regimental devices... Inscriptions'. A cost of £100–£300 had already been put down beside the idea, so it had obviously been thought about in some detail.

In the event, Mr James proposed a hall, and was seconded by Mr Watson. However, no vote was taken, since no costs were available. Therefore a committee was formed, comprising Rev C.H. Edmunds, R.W. Charles, J.W. Wootton, W. Woolley, E.W. Campion, E.F. Hayes and W. Taylor. Rev Edmunds and Joseph Wootton have already been mentioned; E.W. Campion, too, as the cycle manufacturer who had come to live at Wymeswold Hall during the war. The vicar's notes also included 'Site:- Enquire as Parish Ground', and then underneath, 'Sound College'. Most likely this is a note to 'sound out' Trinity College, the largest landowner in the village, to see if it would make a site available.

There followed more correspondence between Rev Edmunds and Mr Escott-North. The YMCA was very keen on getting this moving, and finding an army hut to bring to Wymeswold. Rev Edmunds, however, had to dampen their enthusiasm:

We had a village meeting' [i.e. the 22nd May] 'on the subject last Thursday, and appointed a Committee to report on the cost of building a hall. The meeting was so decidedly against erecting a wooden structure of any kind as a permanent war memorial, that I don't think it is worth considering a hut.

Within days the YMCA had offered to provide the vicar with all the information he required to build a hall. He accepted gratefully – adding the proviso, of course 'I take it you submit these *gratis*'.

The next crucial meeting took place on 17th June 1919. Another village meeting was held, with about thirty people attending, and the Vicar in the chair. This time Mr Escott-North was invited to attend, and was able to present the idea directly to the villagers. He had brought with him costs and plans, so the meeting was in a position to make a decision. And it did. Mr Escott-North's message was simple and direct:

There could not be a better type of War Memorial, since a worthy memorial should be costly, and do something to achieve the object for which our men died, of making the country better and happier. The names of all the men who had served should be inscribed in each institute.

He offered two suggestions, both for a solid construction of brick or concrete with concrete floor and asbestos roof forty feet by twenty feet, at about £550, or sixty feet by thirty feet at £1200. Furnishing would be extra. These would definitely be Christian clubs, but not denominational. 'Gambling and strong drinks were not allowed'.

The vicar, as chairman, was in agreement.

A Village Hall would be an appropriate Thankoffering to the men who had returned, and a sphere for united Christian work.

Other questions persisted, though. Some villagers had evidently wanted a memorial in the church. Rev Edmunds was supportive of that idea as well. 'In any case,' he told the meeting, 'the wishes expressed by many that there should be a memorial to the fallen in the Parish Church would be carried out.'

There only remained the problem of finding a site. Some people had obviously wanted to use the village Shrubbery. This appears to have been situated on what is now known as Queen's Park, at the bottom of the Stockwell. The Parish Council had agreed its use as a village amenity back in 1905. Although it appears to have been regarded as village 'property', and therefore subject to the decisions of a village meeting (held, as this one was, under the auspices of the Parochial Church Council), the formal agreement of the Parish Council would be required for any change of use.

In fact, the Parish Council had met the previous week, and agreed to defer a decision on handing over the Shrubbery until the outcome of the village meeting was known.

With the exact location of a hall being put to one side, the motion was carried unanimously, and a Committee was formed. Those 'founding fathers' of the Memorial Hall were:

Messrs Campion, Watson, H. Emmerson, Garner, J. James Senr, Burrows, Hayes, F. Bailey, Taylor, W. Wootton, F. Jalland, Everard Collington, T.G. Brown, Dr Tawse, J. James Jnr, J. Smith, Woolley, Baker, C. Mills, Jas Wootton, Jas Smith, P. Brown, F. James, C. Hubbard and the vicar.

The meeting minutes add, almost as an afterthought 'It was decided also that a Ladies' Committee should be formed'.

Several Committee members demonstrated their enthusiasm with very generous donations (bearing in mind that a modest house could be bought for a few hundred pounds). Mr Campion donated £100, the chairman (vicar) £10, Mr Hayes £10, and Mr James Senr £10. The project was off to a good start.

With that, the Memorial Hall disappears from the public records for nearly five years. This does not mean to say that nothing was being done. Ellen Smith, in *Memories of a Country Girlhood*, says:

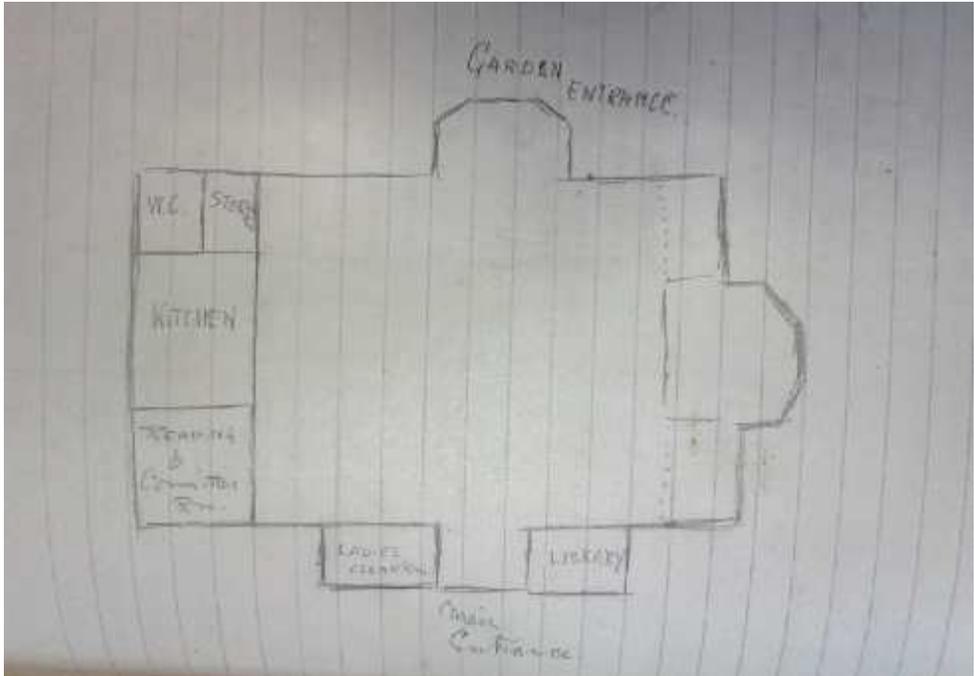
Eventually, after many garden fetes, concerts, dances, whist drives and sewing parties, the hall was built.

The next official document seems to be the indenture (deed) recognising that a Memorial Hall charity exists, and 'conveying', in lawyers' speak, the property to the charity. The Indenture is a handsome work in its own right. Handcrafted, with a large and florid capital 'I' at the beginning, it really looks more like a Victorian document than a twentieth century one.

The village had identified a plot of land – two roods and twenty perches to be precise – just off Clay Street. The land was used as allotment gardens at the time, and was owned, as was much of Wymeswold as a whole, by Trinity College, Cambridge. Trinity College (legally 'the Master Fellows and Scholars of the college of the Holy and Undivided Trinity within the town and University of Cambridge of King Henry the Eighth's Foundation') had owned land in the village for centuries, and still held the 'living' – the right to appoint the vicar – as well as being responsible for the maintenance of the chancel in St Mary's church. The college sold off its landholding *en bloc* to a consortium of tenant farmers in the mid-1950s, but its connection with the village still survives in the street name 'Trinity Crescent'.

The indenture and the deed of conveyance are dated 26th September 1922 and obviously part of the same deal. No record survives of the discussions or correspondence which must have gone back and forth between the Hall Committee and the college, but they must have been extensive, since the two documents are very detailed. The documents also contain a declaration by the Bursar of Trinity that

Wymeswold's Memorial Hall



How Wymeswold Memorial Hall might have been. A pencil sketch from the notes taken at the time.

the land actually belonged to the college (presumably the college had owned the land for so long that all proof of ownership was lost in the mists of time).

It would appear that Edwin Campion, the owner of Wymeswold Hall at the time, was the leader of the charity's trustees, since his name heads the list, which in itself is interesting, as it lists their occupations as well: Edwin William Campion, Motor Cycle Manufacturer, Reubon William Charles, Farmer, William Garner (a space has been left against his name, and someone has written 'Grazier' in pencil), Thomas Warner Wootton, Builder, Thomas Glover Brown, Grocer, Edward Frederick Hayes, Blacksmith and John James the Elder, Farmer.

From the original committee three years before, there had been one addition – Reubon Charles – and nineteen had dropped out. That is not to say, of course, that they no longer had anything to do with the project. A committee of twenty-six would have been very unwieldy in getting decisions made, whereas a trustee board of seven made very good sense. It was these seven men who had paid over the sum of £62 10s to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fishery, at the request of Trinity College, to secure the purchase of the land. (It seems that the money had to be administered by the Ministry under the Universities Estates Acts.) The actual sum of money was not a problem – more than double that had been raised at the first meeting back in 1919 – but the negotiations must have taken some time. And of course, someone had to pay the lawyers' fees!



Wymeswold Memorial Hall. Photographed in 1991 by Bob Trubshaw.

The indenture made very clear that:

The Charity hereby created shall be known as 'The Wymeswold Memorial Hall' and is created with the object and intention of perpetuating the memory of the brave men of Wymeswold who gave their lives for their King and Country in the Great War...

There follows a list of twenty-seven men. All twenty-seven are still commemorated today, but have been joined by Albert Bacon, William Dykes, and Frederick Robinson. Albert Bacon's family was primarily associated with Loughborough, and his father had moved to Leicester after the war. William Dykes had been mostly associated with Wymeswold through his stepmother, Harriet Morris, though the family seem to have moved to Wymeswold latterly (possibly after William had enlisted). Frederick Robinson had lived and worked in Wymeswold for some time before joining the army, but his wife had moved back to Loughborough. The relatives of these men must have come forward in the years between the founding of the charity and Amos Clarke's gift of the Roll of Honour to St Mary's church.

The land and any buildings erected on it was clearly intended as a village resource:

... to be used and enjoyed in perpetuity by the inhabitants of the Parish of Wymeswold aforesaid as a public hall and/or reading

was a magnificent building for a small village. Internally, the main hall was forty-eight feet long and twenty-seven feet wide, with a stage area of twenty-seven by twelve feet. The stage itself was set three feet six inches above the floor – higher than it needed to be, but the extra height allowed for a large amount of storage underneath. The ground slopes away quite steeply, so the builders were able to use that to create a large basement. The hall had toilets for both sexes, and a kitchen that was big enough to cater for any village event.

In just two years the last of the money had been raised and the hall had been completed. Apparently some of the money at least was lent to the Committee. Ellen Smith (then Ellen Wootton) noted that:

I believe it took nearly a decade before everything was paid off in full. My father [Thomas Warner Wootton] was one of the men who lent money, interest free, and these men were made the trustees of the hall.

On 12th March 1924, the Mixed School ‘closed at midday for the Opening of the War Memorial Hall’. The headmistress of the Infant School was more descriptive in her log book: ‘March 12th’

A holiday was given this afternoon for the opening by Colonel Martin of the Village Hall. This is the War Memorial for those who fell in the Great War 1914-1918.

And it still is.

Sources

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Wymeswold's Memorial Hall

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