

Why we can't build a new village hall on land owned by the Church

By Hilltop Community Association Chairman COLIN SMITH

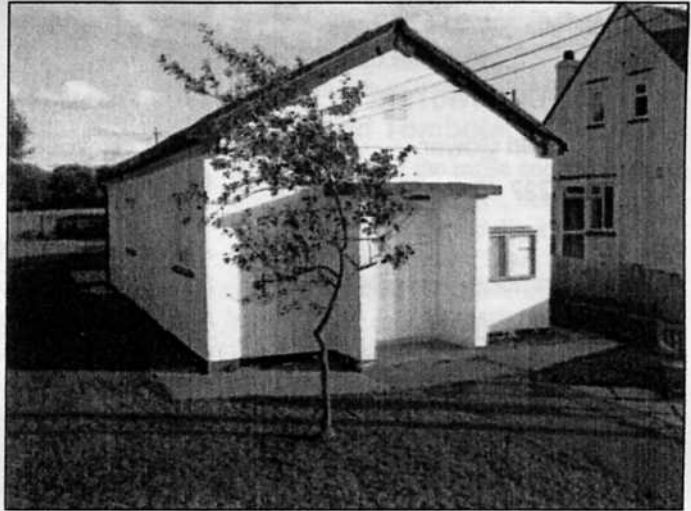
THE PAROCHIAL CHURCH Council (PCC) of St Nicholas Church, under the chairmanship of The Reverend Ian Aveyard, continues to refuse to sell the freehold to HCA taking the stance that they alone can retain our hall for future generations—always reminding us that they hold the Title to the property. Your Trustees have no argument with who owns the Title. But who built the hall? Who funded it? Who still funds it today?

Seventy years ago the first fundraising events to build the hall, a Harvest Festival and a Supper organised by the community, raised the magnificent sum of £1 14s 9d (that's about £1.74). Multiply it by inflation and it would be a considerable sum today. No money came from the Church. In PCC minutes from 1951 there is reference to a sum of £25 that was to be paid on completion of the building. Having researched the history, particularly in the Cathedral Library, I cannot find any record that confirms this was ever paid. In 1949 it is reported the "Diocesan Board would not make a grant if the work of building the hall was carried out by voluntary labour". This perhaps answers the question.

Yes, the Church has a longer history than the Hilltop Community Association (formed in 1999 and entered on to the Charity Commission's register in 2003) but this offers no guarantees for the future of our hall. HCA was formed after the PCC commissioned a survey of the building which condemned it. The survey suggested "the Church no longer invested funds in it better to channel funds to St Nicholas Church".

Where would the building and land be today if HCA had not intervened? The answer has to be that the site would have been sold, commercial factors would have driven it. At the time of the survey, the property next door was being demolished and we now have two four-bedroom houses on that site. Combined with that development, how many houses might the hall plot have created? Who would have been the beneficiary—HCA or the PCC?

The PCC no longer has any interest in the village hall other than to use it for three token services a year. Pastoral care comes from within the community, as it always has and as it did back in 1951 when the hall was being built. One of



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Hollowmede with a covenant stating that the land was to be returned to the farm if the PCC no longer required it. The PCC let the building fall into disrepair, the farm changed hands and the site now has a house on it. The same benefactor donated the parcel of land from the then existing churchyard boundary to the recreation ground for an extension of the cemetery and the building of a vicarage. The vicarage was built and subsequently sold, as was the remaining land, which went for housing.

While we are grateful for the Bishop of Dover's sincere wishes for the future of St Faiths, it would be foolish to ignore the lessons of history. As custodian of property it has inherited, the Church's record is perhaps rather poor.

The 99-year lease, as offered, seems wonderful at first sight but it requires HCA to rebuild the hall at the community's expense (for a second time) and the community will still not hold the Title. You have to ask yourselves this: Who will serve your community best when it comes to preserving the village hall for future generations as a place for the people.

the volunteers, Mr Shand, was nursing his wife who had terminal cancer. You can only imagine the trauma of the situation. However, while he worked on the hall project, his wife was never left alone, as the wives of the other volunteers would take turns to sit by her bedside.

Over the years St Nicholas PCC has been particularly lucky in securing assets which they have subsequently sold on commercially. Mr Lilywhite of Wincheap Farm loaned the PCC the site of the village hall opposite