

Chapter 32

Flags and Bunting

The First Village Hall of Castor and Ailsworth

One Thursday evening, at the beginning of the 1920s, there was a well attended meeting of the ex-Servicemen from the villages of Castor and Ailsworth. The meeting, held in the Infants' School, was chaired by Sir Richard Winfrey, MP. Its purpose was to consider *'the desirability of an additional memorial to our fallen heroes and in memory of the victory achieved by our brave Servicemen in the 1914-18 war'*. Before the week had ended, another meeting was convened by Mr Fitzwilliam, Chairman of Castor Parish Council. This one was held in the Fitzwilliam School to consider what sort of further memorial should be adopted in the village. By a large majority it was decided to have a hut or building to use as a village facility.

A committee was formed comprising three members from Castor Parish Council, three members from Ailsworth Parish Council and six members of The Comrades. (The Comrades were soldiers who had fought together in the First World War). There were also six ladies from the village – Lady Winfrey, Mrs Carter, Mrs WT Cooke, Mrs Speechley, Mrs Harry Sharpe and Mrs Morse, as well as four gentlemen – Sir Richard Winfrey, MP, Mr Speechley, Mr Wooten and Mr Heighton. The future Village Hall was beginning to take shape.

The need for village clubs was becoming an issue of national importance. Newspapers from 1921 urged their readers of the need for village clubs citing;

'country living as being fairly tolerable in the summer but the winter dreary and unattractive with nothing in the way of social entertainment. This condition may satisfy the pre-war villager but the return of the ex-soldiers, bringing with them new ideas, are becoming a dynamic force within their respective localities. The towns and villages are becoming great magnets with ever increasing powers; the country people themselves must make their own entertainment.' (Peterborough Advertiser, 1921).

The Village Clubs Association, started by the Agricultural Club in connection with Wages Board, had been formed to urge the pressing necessity to establish in each rural community a social centre where all people of the community could meet for common recreation. It was suggested that this would provide *'a social uplift that would bring the community together and inspire a free and compete circulation of ideas which would endow the people with the ties of community spirit'* (Peterborough Advertiser, 1921). In this way *'families would be bonded together and labour stabilised'*. The need for a Village Hall was further established.

The news of the new hut spread quickly around the village – there was no doubt that such a place was urgently required. The folks of Castor and Ailsworth had always enjoyed a good social life – the only drawback being the lack of a large hall where lots of people could meet together. Until this time the Infants' School had been used to accommodate the village whist drives, dances, concerts and such like, but it was far from satisfactory.

General enthusiasm for the Village Hall produced amazingly quick results. In just over twelve months from the initial idea the 'Comrades of the Great War' club was founded. The aim was to create a meeting place, for the ex-Servicemen from the villages of Castor, Ailsworth, Sutton and Upton, to meet and enjoy themselves together was underway. However, it was not all plain sailing. The proposal to create a meeting place **solely** for ex-soldiers was an



Fig 32a. Sir Richard Winfrey MP, first treasurer of the Village Hall Committee.



Fig 32b. Percy Heighton, first secretary of the Village Hall Committee.

unpopular choice which met with a good deal of opposition. After many meetings and much wrangling it was decided at a public meeting to fundraise throughout the villages to provide a hall which could be used by **both ex-Servicemen and parishioners**. So the Comrades agreed, threw in their funds and a public subscription list was opened.

Mr RP Heighton and Mr Mackman became secretaries whilst Sir Richard Winfrey, MP, took on the duties as Treasurer. He was able to use his influence discreetly - consequently the fund thrived tremendously under his enthusiastic guidance, aided by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners who also generously granted a lease for the site of the hut, and a donation for £50 as well!!! The site chosen was 25a Peterborough Road, Castor, a plot suitable to accommodate both proposed Village Hall and a bowling green round the back. Terms agreed were to lease the site for twenty one years at a 'nominal rent of one shilling per annum'.

So well did the public respond to the appeal that by 29th June 1921 the committee

was able to purchase the Hut from the YMCA. It was a spacious affair, made of wood, measuring 65 feet by 35 feet, previously used as a YMCA hostel at Luton.

The cost of the building was £100. The local newspaper enthusiastically described the new Hut as 'all that can be desired as a public hall. It is splendidly ventilated and lighted by windows and skylights in the daytime. In the evening three brilliant oil illuminations light the room, and by a little tact and good taste the interior has been beautifully transformed. The walls covered in two shades and bordered in stencil work'. Figure 32d is the only known surviving photograph of the old Village Hall.

In December 1921 the fundraising was over and the Hut was opened by Mr George Fitzwilliam. There seemed to be some confusion as to the correct name for the hall for it was referred to as the 'Village Hall', 'The Victory Hall', 'The Red Triangle Hut', 'The Hut' and 'The Comrades Hall' and at the opening it was referred to as 'Castor's Town Hall'. In his opening speech Mr. GW Fitzwilliam gave special thanks to The Comrades who: 'throughout the summer had spent their evenings and Saturdays digging out and laying the foundations, and also undertaking the actual erection of the Hut itself'. Mr GW Speechley was singled out for special praise for providing horses and vehicles for bringing bricks from Norman Cross and 'presenting and carting gravel, roofing and etc'.

At the opening ceremony three hundred

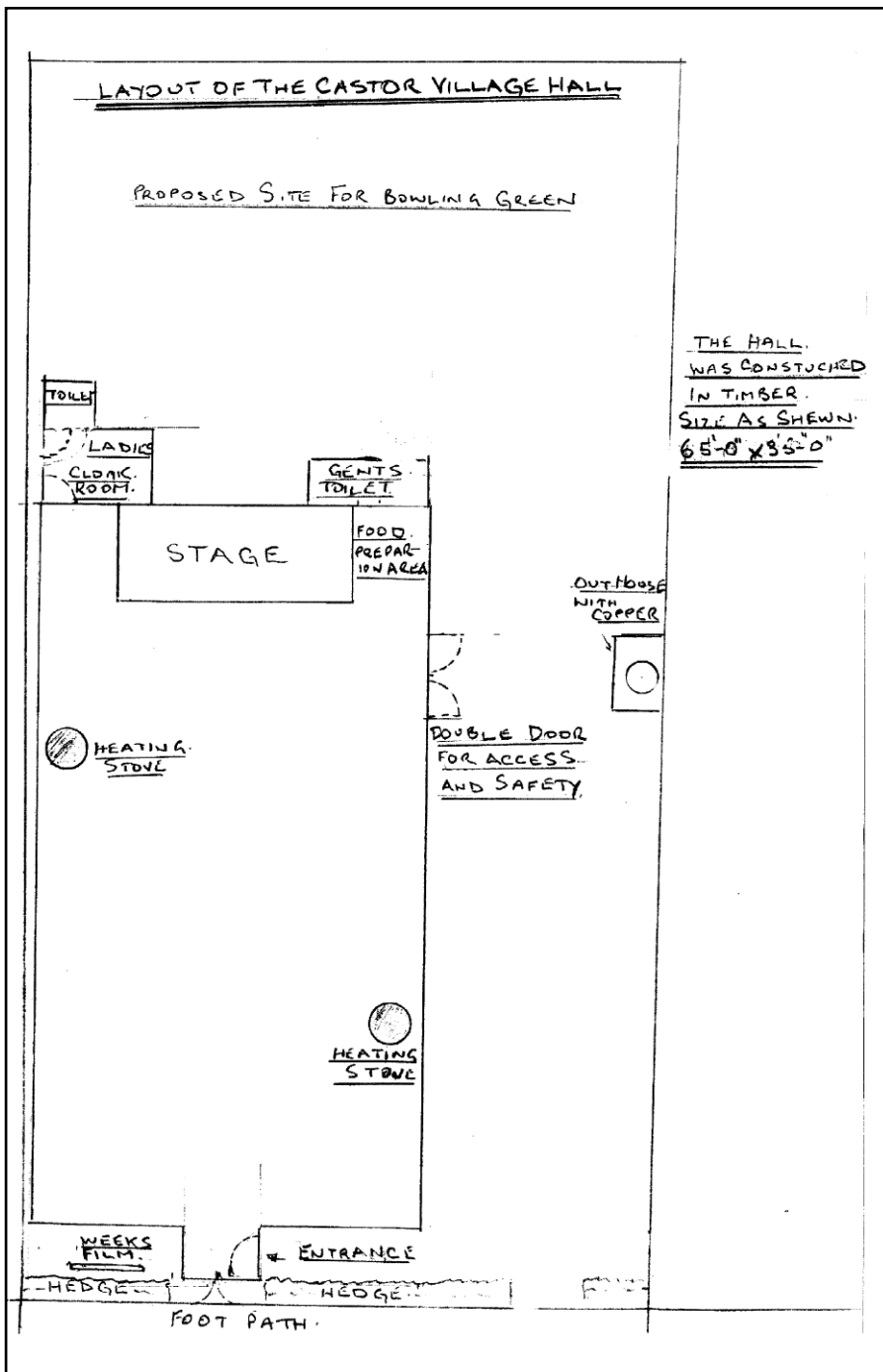


Fig 32c. Outline plan of the interior of hall.

people from the four villages sat down and tucked into a MEAT TEA followed by music, games and dancing. The sheer number of people made a numerical record for the largest tea party ever held in Castor up to that time. The Hall itself was bedecked with flags and bunting for this splendid occasion. Lady Winfrey led a team of 32 tea-makers and assistants for this grand affair. Mr WT Cooke presided at the opening tea supported by Mr G Fitzwilliam, Sir Richard Winfrey, Mr Heighton and Messrs Mackman. Mr Cooke told the assembled people about the development of the Hall. Whilst Mr Heighton, possibly overcome by the event, looked round the flag bedecked room and said “*he had come to the conclusion that Castor was one of the finest places in the country*”. Next, Mr Reynolds from the YMCA Northampton enlightened the audience, informing them “*the Hut was an old acquaintance of his where he had trained lads for their more serious part overseas*” – for the Hut was previously used by the Army to train soldiers for hideous warfare in France. He spoke of the origins of the ‘Red Triangle Huts’ saying “*at the present time the YMCA has five hundred of their huts in the rural districts of England*”. It was a momentous evening as the opening of the hall was a great success - a good omen for the future social life of the village.



Fig 32d. The only known surviving external photograph of the old village hall.



Fig 32e. Two members of the First Committee: George Speechley buying a car from Percy Heighton (driving) in front of Manor Farm, Ailsworth.

By January 1922 the Hall opened its doors – the job was done and the fun could now start! The villagers had at last got their Village Hall and they intended to use it. The programme was both extensive and varied with events well attended. The Comrades enrolled 80 members on 1st April 1922 – no doubt the old soldiers felt themselves on familiar territory in the old army hut, talking about campaigns won and lost in which they had fought, as well as remembering their poor comrades who never came back.

Work continued to develop both amenities and entertainments. Sir Richard had mentioned in his opening speech “*now we have the hut we could do with a billiard table*” and by March 1922 a full sized table was purchased and fitted. Interestingly the opening match featured Peterborough’s one armed billiard expert. The price for a game was 3d for half an hour.

The new Village Hall was used for an extensive range of purposes. There were Whist Drives where 132 people sat down to play cards, making 33 tables. In June 1922 the Hall was let out to Church Army Evangelists who slept overnight on their way to Blackpool. Ailsworth Methodist Church hired the facility for a splendid concert when a choir from Boroughbury entertained with duets, quartets and recitations. The enthusiasm of the villagers was tremendous -

supported by Sir Richard and Lady Winfrey, who were now busy organising events for the Hall Lighting Fund. One of their first functions on 21st December 1922 was ‘two dramatic humorous Dickensian recitals’ given by Mr Laurie Toseland and his small son, Iain (aged nine years) to which they extended a hearty invitation to all the inhabitants of the villages. During the interval, delightful music was played on a piano and violin by Mrs V Read and Mrs P Scott. This was much appreciated by the audience which included prominent guests including Sir Leonard and Lady Brassey and Mr and Mrs George Fitzwilliam. At the end of the evening, mindful of his Treasurer’s role, Sir Richard said “to avoid entertainment tax there would be a silver collection instead of tickets”. The event raised £8 15s. **And so the pattern of varied entertainment for the village was set.**

In 1923, Mr E Hales wrote enthusiastically of a visit to Castor after a 30 years absence, highlighting ‘cinematic entertainments held in the Village Hall one night a week’ although he noted that despite ‘the now splendid road, the pedestrians have been neglected because there were no paths or very few, although it was possible to go to Peterborough by bus on three days a week’. Intriguingly, Mr Shaw from Peterborough hired the Village Hall for the purpose of showing films. The safety conscious committee records that ‘the apparatus to run the cinema would be in a fire proof cabinet. The electricity would be obtained from a motor lorry outside of the building’. They gladly gave permission for Mr Shaw to fix up an advertising board outside the Village Hall. In March 1924, Castor even held a whist drive and dance for ‘The Castor Nigger Troupe Fund’.

The Hall had many other uses apart from entertainment. The Education Authority approached the Village Hall Committee to hire the facility for six weeks from November to January to enable the older girl pupils from the Fitzwilliam School to attend Domestic Science lessons. The scheme was approved and the Hall let for this purpose for four shillings per day. Miss Hollywood was engaged to teach these invaluable skills returning like a migrating swallow for many, many years. She would arrive in the cold mornings on a large ‘sit up and beg’ bicycle, which she rode from Helpston, a distance of over five miles. The Hall would be made ready for her arrival – the combustion stoves, which provided the heat for the Village Hall, were removed and two large portable cooking stoves (which ran on solid fuel) were set in place. These stoves were temperamental things, especially difficult to light. They had a habit of belching out thick black smoke into the cookery class – the cooking utensils were ancient and became blackened by the smoke and heat. There was a very large steamer, big enough to steam a pudding in a cup for every member of the class. Pastry was also one of Miss Hollywood’s fortes; the recipe would be chanted to make sure that it was never forgotten: “Eight ounces of flour, four ounces of fat, pinch of salt, water to mix”.

By the end of 1924, Mrs WT Cooke and her lady helpers had raised £19 17s 7d for the Crockery Fund. With that money they purchased a storage cupboard, white crockery lettered ‘Castor Memorial Hall’ and teaspoons. The balance left after this major purchase was £1 1s 6d with which they planned to buy new tea towels. However, the billiard table had not proved a great success and was to be sold for a proposed price of £50.

The ‘Roaring Twenties and Thirties’ did not pass Castor and Ailsworth by. Popular dance bands were used time and time again - indeed, some bands were rebooked for a period of over 20 years. Favourites included The Castor String Band, The Castor Brass Band, Dick Handcock’s Band, The Three Nibs, Excelsior Dance Band, The Wansford Jazz

Band, Don Maycock’s Band and the local trio – WT Cooke, G Handkins and R Taylor. By far the most favourite evenings were the Fancy Dress Dances. To give a taste, in January 1930, over forty children and adults wore fancy dress costumes, which were reported to be both ‘exceedingly clever and original’ – obviously much thought and creativity was involved in the making of these splendid garments. For example, Peggy Garfield dressed as a candlestick, Cloris Gibbons bounced along as an airship, Don Harman went as a hot water bottle only to be outdone by Vera Hammond as a picnic closely followed by Alma Glover adorned as

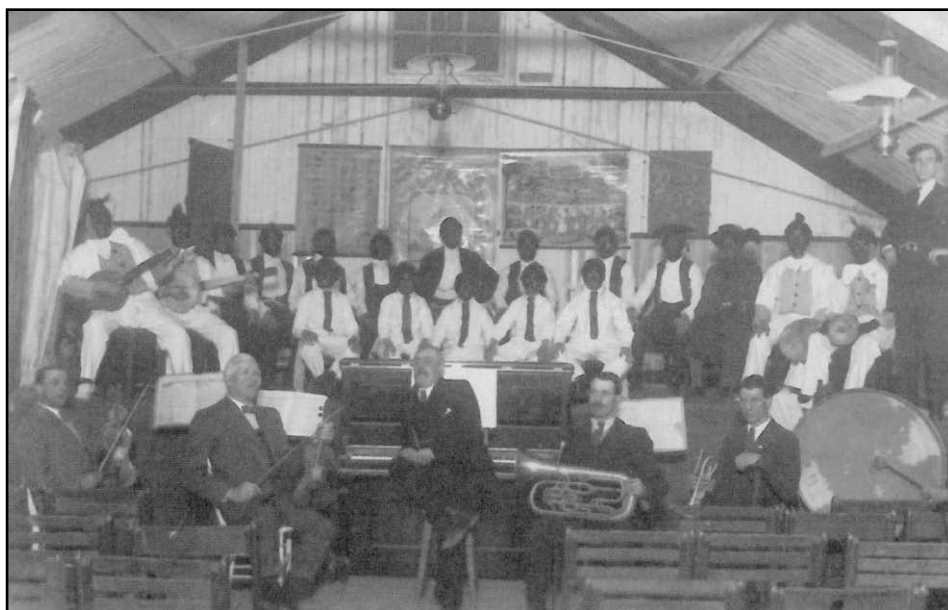


Fig 32f. The Castor Minstrel Troupe.

a Brussel sprout whilst Burt Woodward purred his way in as a black cat. Nippies (Lyons Corner House waitresses) seemed to be a very popular and modern costume – for at one ‘do’ there were four of them as well as ‘*Charley Afford who came as a carrot!*’ A few people carried life long legacies from these ‘frolics’ gaining permanent nicknames, the classic one being Alec Jakes, who went as that well known Indian leader and was for ever after known as ‘Ghandi Jakes’.

As with the dances, so the Whist Drives were well supported. Players competed for a dazzling array of prizes including silk stockings, a pork pie, a ladies bag, bedspread, new bolster, table cloth, string bag or silver plated trinket box for the winning ladies, whilst the gentlemen might hope to win a case of pipes, a new safety razor or tobacco pouch.

But nothing is new, for even then there were disruptive elements whose anti-social behaviour had to be checked. On 3rd May 1929 police were informed of disorder in the Village Hall – the chief offender being a Mr Simpkins from Peterborough. Sir Richard proposed “*the committee should write to Mr Simpkins and request that he does not use the Hall again.*” Again, on 2nd September 1929, Peterborough visitors who were attending Castor Dances were behaving badly and ‘*using disgraceful language*’. Consequently, Dances were banned for over six months only to resume ‘*subject to the policeman visiting the Village Hall sometime during the evening of dance*’.

By the early part of the 1930s physical culture had arrived in the village – so popular was this new venture that the Village Hall was booked for two evenings each week for the participation in **keeping fit**. Perhaps this was an antidote to the grim economic situation for many working people throughout the country. In April 1931, in the Peterborough area alone, 3,634 people were unemployed – a misfortune which seemed to dominate the whole of this decade. Surprisingly, the social life of the village did not appear to be badly affected. New societies continued to be formed including the Gardening Society, which proposed to hold an annual produce show. A popular joke enjoyed throughout the four villages originated from a Village Hall entertainment. It went something like this:

Elderly gent to modern mother, “*Your son has swallowed a tin soldier.*”

Modern mother, “*I will buy him a new one.*”

In March 1930, a survey was conducted in the two villages to ascertain if residents would ‘*accept electricity in their homes*’. The Village Hall Committee was keen to consider the benefits that this would bring such as ‘*lighting at the touch of a switch*’. However, there was a delay in supplying the whole village with this service. Investigations reported to the committee by Sir Richard Winfrey found that owing to ‘*connection difficulties with way - leaves and similar matters, electrical connection would be delayed for up to ten weeks*’. Social events carried on regardless. Peterborough and Fletton Football Club enjoyed a dance in the Village Hall. The Women’s Institute had over 200 people attend a social where the Hon Mrs Pelham recited a poem about the motor car. Not to be outdone, Mrs Jakes performed her favourite ‘*I do like a good drop of milk in my tea*’. Community singing and dancing followed.

Despite the economic hardships, £2 4s 6d was raised in April 1930 to provide a complete ‘first aid outfit including a stretcher’ to be used in case of accidents by the residents of Castor and Ailsworth. Around Christmas time the annual Comrades’ Tea was eagerly anticipated. This was the highlight of the year for the many children of the local ex-servicemen. In 1931, 130 children from the four villages came for a sumptuous feast, laid out in the Village Hall. There were sandwiches, cakes and jelly for tea. The boys would compete with one another to see who could eat the most sandwiches, of which there were always plenty. Then they would brag about how much they had eaten; sometimes the claims were quite staggering. The writer clearly recalls one boy, who shall be nameless, boasting he had scoffed 32 sandwiches alone. After tea there would be crackers, then games, followed by singing. Before leaving the Hall the children were given sweets and oranges. On the way home the boys would usually sing the same song:

A woman stood at the churchyard door, - ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh, aaah, aah, aah, aah,

She saw three corpses carried in - ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh, aaah, aah, aah, aah

The woman to the corpses said - Shall I be like you when I am dead - ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh, aaah, aah, aah, aa

The corpses to the woman said.....yaaahhhh

At this point the boys would bellow the *yaaahhh* as loud as they could; so loud that the little girls would cry. Boys being boys, didn’t care one little bit, and would go laughing off into the darkness.

After years of making their own entertainment in the villages, villagers found that rival events in Peterborough ensured a fair bit of competition. Tantalisingly, local papers advertised feature movies such as ‘*Damaged Lives*’. This risqué movie was the talk of Castor. It was shown in the City Picture House in Peterborough; the most censored film which had broken all records in the film business attracting a record attendance of over 300,000 people. The new craze - roller

skating- was also on offer in Peterborough at a price 3s for men and 1s 6d for ladies. If a Castor person wished to stay at home, radio programmes could be enjoyed; anything from 'Music Hall' to 'In Town Tonight'. Alternatively, you could do-it-yourself and provide your own musical entertainment with a piano from Claypole's Music Shop for £50.

On 1st July 1932, there was a momentous social occasion when the Duke and Duchess of York passed through Castor and Ailsworth en route to Burghley House after a visit to Peterborough Show. The village was gaily decorated with flags and bunting. Almost the whole population of the two villages lined the main street to wave and cheer this important couple who were destined to become our next king and queen. At one point in their visit they kindly stopped their car and stayed a while to acknowledge the crowds. It is easy to imagine the excited population talking about this important occasion over a nice cup of tea in the Village Hall.

Unemployment in the Peterborough District continued to rise. In 1934 over 3,000 people were without jobs and the local mayor instigated an unemployment fund. Nevertheless, this grim figure did not stop the local papers advertising a Hillman Minx car for £150, a new OK Supreme motor cycle for £35 and a man's new suit for £2 10s, whilst £3 19s 9d would purchase a brand new racer bike. No doubt the local youths would gaze longingly at the adverts which were every bit as tempting as they are today. But on the whole most girls and young men stayed put and did not venture further afield than Castor for their entertainment.

National events were celebrated with great enthusiasm – usually with community celebrations and parties in the Village Hall. 1935 brought the Silver Jubilee when every house in the village was decorated and the Village Hall was bedecked with flags – even the tables inside the hall were spread with bunting instead of table cloths. The sumptuous tea was provided free for children up to the age of 16 and village residents aged 65 and over. In 1937, around Castor and Ailsworth, meetings galore took place to plan the celebrations for the coronation of King George VI. Ailsworth held special meetings in the Wayside Café – a tea stop owned by Mr Frank Taylor situated in the last house on the right hand side of the road as you leave Ailsworth (78 Peterborough Road). A donation of £1 18s 1d had been received to start the ball rolling (26th February 1937).

Facilities at the Village Hall had been steadily improving although the planned bowling green had failed to materialise. Electricity was eventually installed and by March 1938 water was gushing from the solitary tap. What a relief this must have been for the users of the Village Hall for the following letter shows what a hard slog it had been to introduce water into the villages of Castor and Ailsworth.

THE WELLS OF CASTOR
BERKENHAMPSTEAD
April 12th 1935

TO THE EDITOR

Sir, - When I read the "Advertiser" I was surprised to see many villagers of Castor opposing the pure water scheme for the village. When I lived there, I can state my experiences about the wells of Castor. We drew our water from a dilapidated arrangement, with bucket and chain, and very often in the bucket found large, black snails, some fresh, some out of date. On examination you could see they were covered with tiny insects, no doubt living on the remains. I also drew up a kitten which had been missing for over a month, badly damaged by the descending buckets. Since then I have had no faith in wells.

I saw several opened, made only of loose stones, partly fallen in, with rat runs clearly seen round the outside. I also noticed that people were being buried in the low lying part of the Churchyard, only a few yards from the well supplying the Infants school. The drains, too, were just left open after leaving the cottages making the country lanes places to get off as quickly as possible. A learned doctor described it as the most unhealthy village he knew of; indeed, he used stronger language than that. I wonder if these items have anything to do with the curse of cancer, which so long has hung over the village. I once read Castor had a greater percentage of deaths from this cause than any other village or town in the district. Of recent years I hear of five deaths from this complaint, of persons living within a space of 100 yards from the village green.

You may publish this if it will help to convert one or two to your great cause. Enclosing my card, I beg to subscribe myself,

A LOVER OF THE OLD VILLAGE.

*(Peterborough Advertiser,
April 12th 1935)*

Perhaps these new amenities were instrumental in raising the letting fees for the Village Hall on November 1st 1937. New charges were introduced namely: Village functions 17s 6d nightly; Non village functions £1 nightly.

The caretaker was Mr Johnnie Glover, a veteran of the 1914-1918 War, in which he had lost a leg. Industriously he also mended shoes in a little shed tucked away behind his house at 6 High Street, Castor. His caretaker's wages were 5s per week for the summer and 7s 6d for the winter. For this Mr Glover worked extremely hard for there was

an enormous amount of work to do. He was responsible for lighting the stoves in the winter and filling and lighting the copper in the little wash house for the committee ladies to have hot water to wash the dishes. What a relief it must have been for him when the water was laid on to the Village Hall. He kept everywhere clean and spotless. The dance floor would be gleaming as round and round the floor he would go scattering a substance (which may have been soap flakes). This made the surface slippery – just right for dancing.



Fig 32g. Old Village Hall: Fancy Dress Party in 1930s; Alec Jakes at right standing (wearing a straw hat).

Castor folk particularly loved dancing and all would enthusiastically join in with a variety of steps. There would be village favourites, like 'The Lancers', 'The Pally Glide' (Palais Glide) and 'Spot Waltzes' with prizes, as well as the regular dances of the time: the Quickstep, Military Two Step and some even tried the Charleston. There was the 'Paul Jones' when men and ladies formed two circles – one within the other. When the music struck up the ladies walked in one direction and the men the other until the music stopped - whomever you were opposite was your partner until the music stopped again. In this way many new relationships were formed and the regular rhythm of village life continued.

The Women's Institute learnt how to make gloves. New crocks were purchased for the Village Hall and a dance was held to buy a new clock. Mr and Mrs Coles made afternoon tea for nine bus loads of people who were returning to Leicester after a holiday in Great Yarmouth and **THEN.....WAR**

The ARP held a special meeting in the Village Hall (on a Sunday evening of all nights) to make special arrangements to carry out effective services if needed. The Village Hall was adapted as a Clearing Station in the event of an emergency!! How the Old Comrades must have shuddered when 70 people attended a lecture in the Village Hall on the subject of air raid precautions and anti-gas know how. On 15th September 1939, 100 children from London arrived in the Village accompanied by their teachers and a Toc H helper. They were all homed within the villages. They seemed to be interested in the countryside, although somewhat perplexed. One child shouted to his friends, "Come over here and look at these ants". The ants were, in fact, chickens! Consequently, at the annual Comrades Tea Party, an additional 70 evacuee children were invited to join with the village children, making 180 children in all. The Village Hall was turned into a school for them but this did not last long for, by 14th February 1940, both village schools were temporarily closed through shortage of fuel. The winter weather was particularly severe and long icicles hung enticingly from the Village Hall roof. Children, starved of sweets and ice creams, broke off the icicles and sucked them like sweets.

Mr WJ Cooke was quick to organise alternative wartime uses of the Village Hall. The ARP and WRVS met there. The London County Council was charged 10 shillings a day for the use of lights, fire and cleaning for out of school activities for the evacuees. This may have resulted in surplus funds for the Village Hall because finances showed £85 in hand. This was to have been used for renovation work but because of the war, work was unable to start. May Day festivities were also cancelled because of the War. Village life was changing fast.

Raising money and aid towards the War Effort became the main priority for village functions. The Hon Mrs Pelham



Fig 32h. Old Village Hall: The Longfoot Family (l-r)- Walter & Kathleen, Dick & Lucy, Jack, Harry & Nelly, Len & Gertie.

formed a Working Group and under her guidance Christmas parcels were sent to every Serviceman from the villages of Castor and Ailsworth. Each parcel contained hand knitted socks, mittens, helmets, caps, scarves and a box of sweets. On 3rd May 1940, WI reports that a new resident, Mrs Saunders, had enrolled as a member. If there was ever a person to be in the right place at the right time it was Mrs Saunders.

Irish songs, **and** play the piano. Mrs Saunders quickly became a great favourite at all the 'Village Hall Dos' and soon everyone was singing one of her songs. The chorus, went something like this:

Mrs Saunders was Irish and like most Irish people she was full of fun. She could sing, mostly comical

*If you ever go to heaven,
You can bet your bottom dollar note,
That the angel with the whiskers on
Will be Paddy McGinty's goat.*

Living almost next door to Mrs Saunders was the film actor, Gussie MacNaughton. He appeared in George Formby films. Gussie and Mrs Saunders did much to improve the village social life in the early Forties when everyone needed cheering up, **and, as well**, Gussie called all the ladies, "DARLING".

A different kind of social life was now emerging in the villages exclusively connected with the War Effort, although the Brass Band still played on the lawn at the Fitzwilliam Arms. The support among the villagers for any function to do with the War was overwhelming. People would regularly walk from Upton and back, often in the dark as there were no streetlights, to attend Village Hall functions. There were dances to support the Spitfire Fund, The Lifeboat Fund, The Air Raid Relief Fund, the ATS Comfort Fund, The Air Raid Victims Fund, Soldiers' Parcel Fund, The Lord Mayor's

Air Raid Victim Relief Fund, The Hospital Relief Fund, The Nursing Fund and the St John's Ambulance Fund, as well as for overseas aid including Aid to Russia and Aid to China. On top of these £34 4s 2d was required to put together 42 Christmas Parcels for local Servicemen. The Village Hall also provided a useful venue for the services based around the District –the Milton ATS and RAF organised a splendid two night function featuring the Starlight Band on Friday night followed by the Star-Dusters on Saturday - tip top entertainment. It was also rumoured that Clarke Gable joined in the Village Hall fun one night whilst based at Polebrooke. As well as dances, regular Spitfire Whist Drives took place although the Knockout had to be abandoned because of an air raid warning in 1940. It is not surprising that the Garden Fetes were cancelled although donations could still be given to the Church Fund instead!



Fig 32i. The Hon Mrs Pelham.

The Hon Mrs Pelham, a prominent and influential village lady, proved an able leader in organising the village woman to make and send welfare to the Service men. They made, from their own materials, 193 knitted pairs of socks, caps and helmets, 46 pairs of mittens, 50 pairs of gloves, 120 pairs of mine sweeping gloves, 82 pairs of steering gloves, 29 pairs of seamen's waistcoats, 29 knitted quilts and 188 children's garments. In addition, Mrs Pelham sent fresh vegetables to the Minesweepers every other week. She understood that children of all ages could be useful especially when there was a War on; she organised this force to collect salvage and take it to an old stable in the grounds of her house (Cedar House) for recycling. Children went from house to house to collect old paper, toothpaste tubes and similar stuff; at other times they were sent out to forage for acorns and rosehips. Village life had altered but the strong social bond was still

there. People worked together to support the Servicemen, to try to make them comfortable in their terribly dangerous lives.

The wartime village was a hive of activity; children dashing about collecting salvage, woman leaving their household chores to work in factories and on the land. The whole scene was changing. Men left their families to go to war in strange place overseas, whilst other men came here to assist our country in a time of great need. The Village Hall Social Committee worked hard to provide some sort of social life for the Service people who found themselves within reach of Castor. They came from all directions drawn by the magnet of entertainment in the Village Hall. They came on foot, by bike or by lorry from bases at Wittering, Kings Cliffe, Milton Park, and Sibson. The American Servicemen often came on extra large khaki bicycles and would arrive in a pack like cowboys in the movies. The Village Hall would be packed, heaving to the music of Glen Miller, Joe Loss and Harry Roy, played on the records of Dick Uff and his Radiogram. There was hardly ever any trouble, as all just wanted to enjoy themselves. One evening some French sailors jumped so high in the 'Pally Glide' that they went right through the floor. Mr Glover quickly covered the hole with some chairs and the dancing continued.

Half way through the evening, refreshments were served. Considering the rationing situation, the Ladies' Committee who served the food had a very difficult job to supply the eats. There were sandwiches made from egg and cress, tomato and cucumber, salmon and shrimp paste followed by a few cakes for the lucky ones. As soon as the refreshments were announced there was a virtual stampede as people jostled three deep just to get at the food. The ARP had its eye on the Village Hall though. The Village Hall Committee got into trouble because the black out curtains were too thin and showed light *'through and around the edges'*. (*Peterborough Advertiser, 1941*).

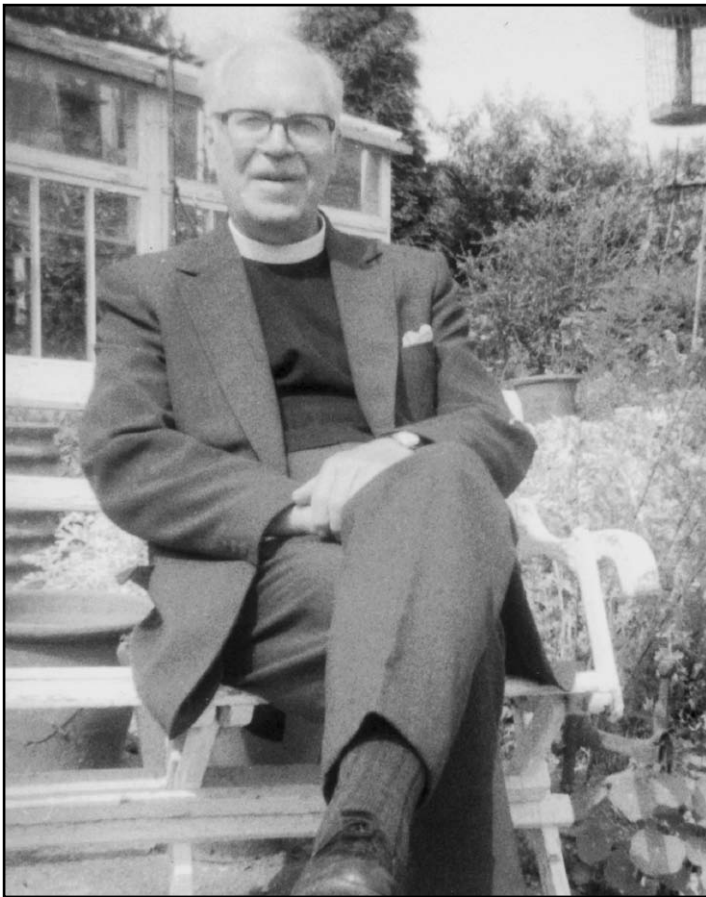
Increase in hall bookings had its benefits. Village Hall funds had risen well enough for the Committee to invest £75 on War Saving Certificates during Wings for Victory Week 1943. To commemorate this week a daily programme of entertainment took place over six days. The success of this effort was rewarded with a certificate, which was framed and now hangs in the present Village Hall. A particularly successful 'Salute the Soldier' week took place in March 1944 involving a programme of activities including a keep fit display, old time dance as well as other fundraising events throughout the other villages. The aim to raise £2,000 was exceeded with a staggering total amount of £3,953 10s. In 1945, the Director of Education was once again in touch with Committee to discuss the use of the Village Hall, this time to serve school meals for the village children. This proposal was agreed. Meals were considered excellent costing 5d a day or 2s 1d a week. Food was prepared in Peterborough and fetched every day by Barbara Sharpe (now Osborne) in a large shooting brake.

However, as the Village Hall was approaching the end of its lease, it was necessary to review the situation. The Committee approached the Ecclesiastical Commissioners to renew the lease on the same terms and conditions as before. It was at this time, after a period of almost 25 years (during which time he was the instigator of much splendid entertainment on offer in the Village Hall, especially in the early days) that Sir Richard Winfrey declined to become a Trustee again.

By 3rd January 1945 people, on the whole, were feeling more relaxed. The War was going well; Allied Forces were now advancing rapidly towards Germany and the end of the War at least seemed to be in sight. In the Village Hall a concert was in full swing, playing to a packed audience when suddenly there was a most tremendous explosion. The roof and the walls of the Hall seemed to lift and expand in one fear-filled moment. The lights went out and a colossal feeling of fright swept the audience. A voice shouted, *"Keep in yer seats"*. Everyone was aware of the activity of the people in charge. In the darkness someone played 'Land of Hope and Glory' on the piano and the policeman arrived. Pandemonium ceased and something like order was restored – even the lights came back on. Later, everyone, found out that the bang was caused by a Doodlebug flying bomb – a bit off course but near enough to the railway line at the bottom of the Station Road for one old resident to remark, *"Old Jerry knew what he were doing 'cos, make no mistake, that bomb was bound for Castor railway station."*

After the big Doodlebug scare things gradually started to improve. There were big parties and celebrations in the Village Hall as some of the Servicemen started to come home for good. There were flags everywhere – pretty well every house flew a flag. There were special church services of thanks and an air of relief swept the village.

New users took advantage of the Village Hall. The Anton's daughter and father started a tap and ballet class called the Antonians. On 27th March 1946, the Committee agreed that the Village Hall could be used for Infant Welfare. A place where babies, toddlers and expectant mothers could meet with a specially trained welfare nurse, to be weighed and get a free allocation of rose hip syrup, milk or orange juice powder. Sound Services, SW19, applied to show film



32j. *The Rector: Revd Tom Adler.*

entertainment. For a hire charge of £1 each night the residents could enjoy a modern film each Monday evening.

By the early 1950's it became apparent that the dear old Village Hall, which had served everyone so well through many difficult years, was coming to the end of its life. A new Village Hall was discussed on 2nd August 1951. At this meeting Mr G Sharpe and Miss C Sharpe representing the Ailsworth Committee offered the following terms - £500 for a new Hall if Castor Committee would contribute the same. For this sum they would want equal representation on the Committee and a suitable site for a new building to be found between the two villages. The Revd Tom Adler, on behalf on the Committee, said that he would make enquiries for such a location. However this proved unnecessary when it was agreed that the old Fitzwilliam School would become the new Village Hall.

On October 1953, the old hall was valued by Fox and Vergette (Auctioneers) as £250, with the furniture etc worth an estimated £234 11s 4d. Interestingly, four years later, after the hall was sold, Mr Paten made a statement of the building account saying '*the sale of The Village Hall and the Reading Room together made a total value of £100 much less than they had hoped to get*'. By February 1956, the Committee came to the conclusion that it was no longer possible to maintain the Castor and

Ailsworth War Memorial Hall after 30th June 1956.

On 21st November 1957 the new Village Hall opened its doors. At the opening ceremony, the Revd Tom Adler in his introductory speech, referred to the old hall and its place in village life, outlining previous plans to build a new hall on the new housing site. He explained that this had proved to be too expensive. Then the Fitzwilliam School had become vacant and a scheme to adapt this building was formulated after Earl Fitzwilliam had said "*he would be pleased to hand the building over to the village if it could be used to their benefit*". Mr Paten thanked the people of Castor and Ailsworth for raising the money for this venture. The Chairman then called on the Earl Fitzwilliam to open the new Hall. He said "*it was a real pleasure to be here on this occasion*" and recalled the fifth Earl who had originally provided the building as a school in 1829, and the dedication of the old hall in memory of the men who had fallen in the First World War. The new Village Hall was ready to receive future generations of the people of Castor and Ailsworth and a new chapter in their village social life was about to begin.

As for the old Village Hall it ended its days as chicken sheds in the Oak yard opposite the Royal Oak Pub.

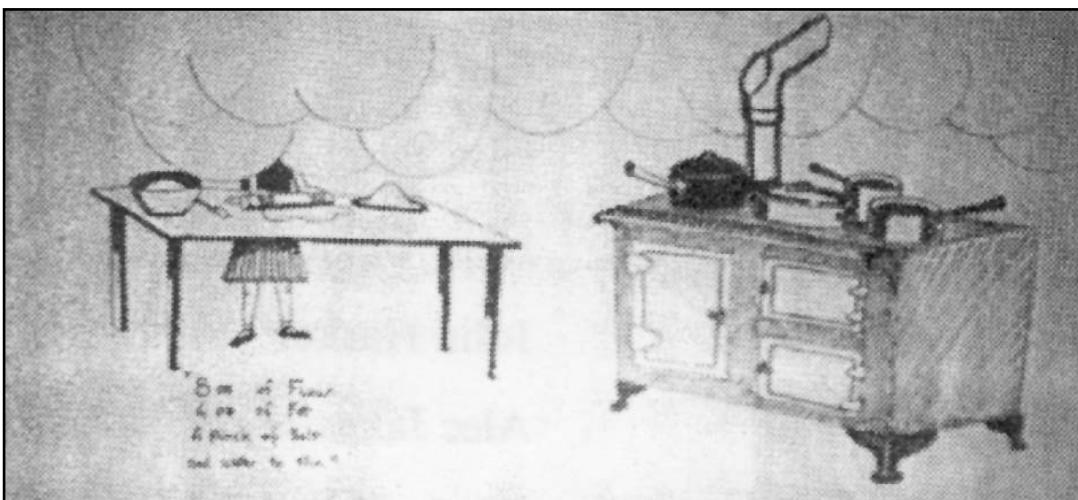


Fig 32k. *Cartoon of cookery classes.*

Fred and Grace Gibbs

I, Grace, was born at Christmas time in Jasmine Cottage, Main Street, Ailsworth, the youngest member of the Burton family and grandchild of the Gibbons Thrashing Machine family. When I was six years old we moved to Cow Lane, now 18 Stocks Hill, Castor. Fred, who originates from an old fishing family in Great Yarmouth, and I were married at St Kyneburgha's Church on Easter Monday 1954. Although we have lived in many other places, we were always drawn back to Castor and Ailsworth. We now live in Ailsworth.