

Lighthorne Village Hall – a history, by Russell Douglas

Lighthorne Village Hall dates back to Saxon times. It was the country palace of Ethelred the Unready and was known as 'Vil Halla'. The Map of Lighthorne (1353) clearly shows the Hall as a black blob. This original, three-sided Hall was remarkable for its triangular thatch. Vil Halla was destroyed by a meteor strike in 1531.

The 'Newe Vyllage Halle' was designed in 1632 by the architect Inigo Jones. His East Portico was a rip-off of the classic Palladian style. Jones cheekily used sketches left by the great Andrea Palladio, when the Italian maestro had a weekend get-away break in Lighthorne, in 1570, and sketched his vision on the gents' lavatory ceiling at The Antelope.

The planning permission was quite restrictive. The only activities allowed were "gatherings for public amusement with dancing by bears, dog fighting, cat baiting, drinking of strong wines, merriment and the exchange of wives, one with another." The residents appealed and finally, in 1640, "displays of public lewdness" could be enjoyed.

The original kitchen (in 1699) and Drama Group costume store (in 1701) were designed by Sir Christopher Wren and erected to the north by north west of the Old Village Gaol, roughly parallel to the front wall of the Old Bakery and adjacent to the Old Millinery, Tannery and Cordwainery, all of which were contained within the curtilage of Jones' Newe Vyllage Halle. All the doors, which were vernacular, spectacular and perpendicular, opened onto the children's playground, which was landscaped in 1770 by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. His slide, horse and toy car led the way in Georgian playground chic.

In 1835, John Nash submitted a design for an extension to the Halle. This involved demolishing the Great Daisy Window, with its accursed stained glass depiction of scenes from a Lighthorne panto. Against advice from some old village hag, who foresaw Nash's end, the work proceeded and was finished in 1836. This was after Nash's untimely death on the M40. Eftsoons, the crone was right.

Charles Barry and Augustus Pugin had agreed to finish the work for cash-in-hand, after a Lottery Grant Application failed. It was the duo's undoing.

Their main contract, the Houses of Parliament, was more time-consuming than they had estimated. Thus, the work in both Lighthorne and London was shoddy. The original Big Ben (in Church Lane) fell down, but anyway, by then, Barry and Pugin had been castellated without issue.

The last architect to add a flourish, a wing and a ladies' withdrawing room to the old Newe Vyllage Halle was Sir Edwin Lutyens. In 1936, he passed through Lighthorne on his way to Aston Martin at Gaydon to discuss the purchase of a brand spanking new Aston Martin Abdicator, costing £9 4s 3d. He saw the dilapidated state of the Palladian corbelled escutcheons, but was captivated by their symmetry. He drew up plans. Aston Martin paid his fees.

This second Hall on the site of old Unready's palace was thus a *paella* (Sp., a mish-mash) of architectural styles. It stood until 28 November 1948, when Hortense, La Comtesse de Vernee, drove her central-throttle Massey Ferguson through Jones' East Portico. The Hall in which you now sit is the third and, arguably, most recent. Locally sourced materials have been used throughout. The ceiling and floor are from the decks of the defunct Lighthorne whaling fleet. The lights were pre-owned by the War Department and once lit the runways at RAF Gaydon. The kitchen equipment is new, however, and came from Warwick Services on the M40. It was installed overnight. The whole is a sympathetic evocation of village life – we like to think the fabric of our Hall was liberated. Others are rude, and differ in this respect.

Just in passing, it might be worth noting that Lighthorne Village Hall was the venue for the Allied Powers summit in February 1945, before the surrender of Germany. The more famous Yalta was a decoy. Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt met in secret, using the Drama Group cast changing room to share out Europe. When the vicar brought in sandwiches and beer, he confided to Churchill that an iron curtain had descended across the continent. 'Rubbish' said Stalin, and it wasn't mentioned again.