

Skelton Village Hall

The eve of a new millennium provides us with an opportunity to pause and reflect at a time when the pace of change facing many rural communities seems ever greater. The community of Skelton and district has no doubt experienced many changes in recent years, but it is fortunate in retaining a number of assets which help maintain the framework of a rural community. These assets include the school, church, chapel, post-office, public house, general store and village hall.

The village hall, or, the "John Castlehow Toppin Memorial Hall", to use its full title, has for many years been recognised as one of the best examples of its type throughout the Eden district. The hall was originally bequeathed to the people of Skelton and districts by Frederick Toppin, in the memory of his father, John Castlehow Toppin. Musgrave Hall, was for many years the family home of the Toppin family. John Castlehow Toppin devoted his life to public service and was widely respected for his active involvement with agriculture, local government and the Church.

John Castlehow Toppin died in 1915 at 80 years of age. His death prompted his son Frederick to provide a lasting memorial to his late father, which would be of lasting benefit to the local community. The outbreak of the Great War in 1914 and the nation's preoccupation with the war effort resulted in the hall project being postponed. Following the end of the war, Frederick Toppin presented a new lych gate to St Michael's Church in memory of those men who fell in the war, and it wasn't until some years later that it was considered appropriate to progress the village hall project further.

A prominent site adjacent to Glebe House and the main road extending to approximately an acre was chosen as a suitable location having previously been used for the annual show. The land to be occupied by the village hall was kindly donated by Geoffrey C Cowper, of Carleton Hall, Penrith, who was the owner of a number of large estates within the Skelton Parish.

Following the acquisition of the land a number of local architects were invited to submit plans, their brief to design a quality community building capable of providing entertainment throughout the year. The plans submitted by Mr J H Martindale, FSA, FRIBA, of Carlisle and Wetheral, were considered to fulfill the requirements and the sum of £6000 was set aside by Frederick Toppin for the construction of the hall.

Mr A Grisenthwaite of Penrith undertook the main construction work with ancillary work such as electrical lighting (via a generator) and a heating system being installed by Messrs Hetherington Brothers, of Penrith, and Mr Corbett, of Carlisle. The hall was constructed of locally quarried stone with a slate roof and when completed featured a large function room, a reading room, billiard room, kitchen and subsidiary rooms including a ticket office. The hall was fully equipped and could accommodate up to 260 people when finished.

The official opening ceremony was held on 24th August, 1923, and was attended by over 300 people. Frederick Toppin, who by this time had established a successful career in the shipping industry in New York City, presented the hall to the people of the village in the memory of his late father John Castlehow Toppin. In his presentation speech Frederick Toppin repeated his strong views; 'that the building and all it meant should remain completely non-sectarian. I wish it to be clearly understood that Churchmen, Methodists, Baptists or another denomination stand on equal ground here, if possible for all time.... '

Following his presentation speech Lady Mabel Howard of Greystoke Castle conducted the opening ceremony. Since the village hall was officially opened over 75 years ago, it has successfully established itself as a focal point in the community for social events and meetings. A committee has administered the care and management of the hall over the years and it is interesting to note that a number of the current committee members are direct descendants of the original committee.

Skelton Village Hall faces the new millennium with confidence. The bowling club behind the hall was successfully re-established in 1982 and today has a bowling green and bower to be justly proud of. A car park was constructed on the site of a former garden to Glebe House in 1988 and as with the bowling green, owes its existence to the hard work of many local people who contributed their time and effort to its construction. More recently a small extension was added to the hall to provide much needed storage space.

The village hall continues to be used by a wide variety of folk from the local community, whether from the Women's Institute, Nursery, Toddler Group, Agricultural Show Society or the Bowling Club, not to mention the regularly held craft fairs, domino drives, and supper dances.

The management committee is currently involved with securing grant funding to enable necessary maintenance and improvements to be carried out. The proposed improvements will help ensure the people of Skelton and district continue to have a village hall to be proud of and thus perpetuate the generosity of Frederick Toppin and the memory of his father John Castlehow Toppin.

J.M. Pickup, Oct.2000

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It's interesting to note: according to UK N.O.S.
the value of £6000 in 1923, would have been £215500 in 2000
£365200 in 2020