

Account of Purley on Thames

The Barn as a Community Resource

R200112 9/4/2017

Using the Barn Initially

The barn had been rebuilt in two sections, the eastern portion consisting of a small hall with four small offices under the arcade and occupying three bays. The western end was left open although a small kitchen was built in one of the bays under the arcade. Between the two was a lobby with toilets leading off and a fire escape door.

The eastern part was used mainly by the scouts although for one evening a week the youth club took over. Because of the limitations on usage imposed by the planning conditions the large hall could not be let at the same time as the scouts and youth club were using their part so they were allowed to use the whole barn.

The eastern hall was used only sporadically as it was quite unsuitable for some types of lettings and the closing time restrictions inhibited a lot of the more suitable lettings such as weddings and parties. However over the years a surprising variety of events have taken place there.

When the graveyard was laid out next door and additional parking provided some of the usage restrictions were lifted.

Problems

As time has gone by the poor quality of the restoration work has become apparent. The fire doors were constructed so flimsily they became very easy to open from the outside and had to be reinforced. The cladding boards were not put in with sufficient overlap and were secured only by two nails so as the boards weathered they distorted and had to be nailed back again. For several years there was a steady growth of mould resulting from water penetration around the windows on the south side. This was cured eventually by reconstructing the window frames. The barn has suffered a bit from vandals who broke in several times from the north side so the windows there had to be reinforced and secured. They also used to throw bricks onto the roof to break the tiles and so protective shields had to be erected above the guttering to prevent broken tiles and bricks from falling onto people nearby.

Perhaps the worst problem was the cluster flies which invaded the upper roof timbers in late summer and autumn. The Parish Council tried fumigating and spraying but this had only marginal effect and at peak times one was confronted by hundreds of dead flies falling from the roof.

The heating system was far from satisfactory. Originally only the eastern section was heated by a hot water system run by gas. Unfortunately it could not be kept on all the time and when it froze the barn was flooded. The radiators had to be removed and the whole barn provided with hot air burners which were reasonably effective although a bit noisy.

In 2001 the Parish Council resolved to maintain the barn only at a minimal level as the cost of maintenance and making good the poor restoration work would be prohibitively expensive. The key problem however was that Reg Marshall, who was Chairman of the Parish Council had a relative living on Beech Road and he was always under pressure to restrain usage of the Barn. He stood down from the Council in April 2000. However for a few years thereafter there was no attempt to market the facilities and generate income.

Making Improvements

It was not until 200x that the potential of the Barn was begun to be realised. The Parish Council gradually made improvements, the key one being to install much better heading which solved the cluster fly problem overnight as it prevented the large Barn from wide variances in temperature. Fire doors were replaced and the old tiled floor was replaced with sealed plastic panels.

As the facilities improved it was possible to reach a much wider audience. The small Barn remained the headquarters for the Scouts but was let for other purposes such as for teaching IT to senior citizens. For a while its day time during the week was occupied by the Barn Owls Nursery and special toilets for the youngsters had to be installed. They proved to be unsatisfactory tenants and moved to a new site on the main road.

A licence was obtained and many more facilities were added such as blinds for the windows and eventually a permanent screen on the western wall. A Farmers market was started and has run every second Saturday since although it is struggling a bit.

Additional parking was obtained when the cemetery was constructed but we still suffer from the somewhat dogmatic (some say pig-headed) attitude of the County Council.

However after a Barn Committee was established to oversee operations there has been a steady increase on patronage and in 2016 a profit was reported for the first time. Also in that year a new group entitled The Friends of Purley Barn was established and they have held social events and raised useful sums to help add facilities.

