

THE HUNDRED PARISHES SOCIETY

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There are thousands of village halls in England, owned and run by local councils, churches or independent trustees for the benefit of local communities. The Hundred Parishes has its share, with a great variety of buildings and history.

Probably the oldest is in Hunsdon: it dates from the 15th century and was once a school. Barley's 16th-century building - once a guildhall - still looks ancient, while Westmill has a converted 17th-century barn. Ashdon claims to have the only local thatched village hall: that element of the building, once a house, dates from the 17th century. Radwinter's hall is part of village redevelopment in the arts-and-crafts style after a disastrous fire in 1874.

Many purpose-built village halls appeared after the First World War, funded either by public subscription or a generous benefactor and often built as a lasting memorial to those who died in the conflict. Ugley's hall was built in 1920, funded largely by the local Tennant family, while Blackmore End in Wethersfield benefited from the generosity of Samuel Courtauld.

Several halls have been converted from their original use: Wethersfield has a second village hall, part of what was once a brewery. Little Chesterford, Hempstead and Stocking Pelham have found new life for their old schools, while Chrishall and Stebbing re-purposed former churches. Hildersham's village hall started life as a First World War army surgical ward and was brought from Cambridge.

Our village halls are greatly valued and used by all manner of community groups for meetings, sport and exercise, pre-school activities, cultural performances, quizzes, exhibitions, farmers markets and so on. We see new village halls appearing quite regularly, for example at Great Hornead in 2015 and Duxford in 2020. Some are now referred to as "community centres" but we all know what they mean!

Ken McDonald, Secretary