



Beech Village Hall & Recreation Ground, 1 Wellhouse Road, Beech, Alton GU34 4AQ
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Registered Charity No. 301738

Annual report of the Chair of the Trustees

Presented to the Annual General Meeting, October 29, 2021 at Beech Village Hall

The impact of the pandemic on the Charity

When our financial year started on July 1, 2020, the Village Hall was still closed due to government restrictions imposed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. We had already prepared a comprehensive set of Covid-secure rules and guidelines so we would be ready to open. As restrictions began to ease from late July, we were able to open the Hall for very limited activities, and classes gradually built up. However, the requirement to maintain social distancing meant that we were unable to reintroduce social events or host large weddings or parties.

In the Autumn, the national situation worsened and a second lockdown came into force in early November, only to be followed by a third starting on January 6, 2021. The government relaxed restrictions in phases starting in mid-April, and we were gradually able to re-start classes again, but we had to wait until July before we could host large events and socials.

The pandemic resulted in our income from hall hire and social activities being about a quarter of what we would expect in a normal year. However, Government compensation, in the form of grants, helped us to cover our normal running costs. Generous donations from villagers, combined with a grant from the local authority, helped us to pay for improvements in the Recreation Ground.

Community activities

The pandemic meant that we were unable to hold any of our community social events indoors during the 2020-21 financial year. Our attention therefore turned to what we could do online, and outdoor projects that would deliver improvements in the village, along with some socially distanced camaraderie.



Spooky Week winner

There were some eerie scarecrow appearances in Beech during Spooky Week in the runup to Halloween, 2020. We ran a virtual Autumn Quiz. The monthly 100 Club draws took place on Facebook throughout the year. In Spring 2021, we arranged for the Posh



Posh Scoff burgers helped us get through lockdown

Scoff burger van to visit Beech on several occasions. This provided our locked down villagers with a different Saturday night dining experience. When limited outdoor socialising was allowed, we opened the bar as well.

The old telephone box, which had been hidden behind a hedge in lower Wellhouse Road for years, re-emerged as the Beech Book Exchange thanks to restoration work from a team of villagers led by Nick Sorby. This is now packed with books and a great, free resource for the village. We launched our first (mostly) online fundraising campaign to support this, and we are very grateful that villagers provided half of the funds we needed.



Our new book exchange

Our second outdoor project was much bigger and was also inspired and led by Nick Sorby. We realised that 30 ash trees, mostly on the Rec but including a large one on the village green, were suffering from ash dieback disease. For safety reasons, and following a consultation with villagers, we decided that these would need to be felled. After our professional tree surgeon had done his work, an energetic band of villagers cleared the massive amount of logs and brush. Logs were made available to villagers, who were invited to make a donation.



Family tree planting day, February 2021

In February, 2021, 11 families arrived in staggered Covid-compliant order to plant 110 tree saplings. A log trail and log castle were created for children. Log piles were left to nature. The copse is now a haven for wildlife, native plants and local people of all ages. It was officially opened in September 2021 by East Hampshire Councillor Tony Costigan. This expensive project needed very little funding from our reserves, thanks to very generous donations from villagers, who took the opportunity to dedicate trees to their loved

ones, and a grant from East Hampshire District Council.

Preparing the Hall for the future

The hiatus in normal Hall activity during the pandemic provided us with an opportunity to prepare ourselves to take advantage of future opportunities, and to make improvements to the Hall itself. With most people now searching for venues online, we upgraded our website and put in place an online booking system so that potential hirers can see when the Hall is available and make a reservation. As site visits were impossible, local media studies student Will Fleming made a promotional video of the Hall which includes drone footage and a

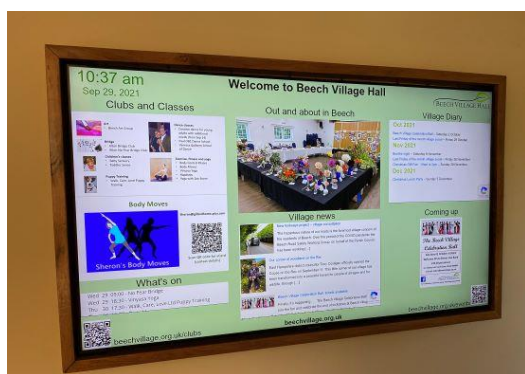


Our virtual tour helps potential hirers

walk-through of the Hall's facilities. This has proved very popular and has been a big help in securing party bookings.

To help would-be hall hirers find us, we improved our positioning on Google and on numerous wedding and venue search sites. We launched a modest paid-for advertising programme with Google, focusing on weddings and children's parties. This is paying off very well; more than 40% of our wedding and party sales now come from Google, with most of the balance being from recommendations or people who know the Hall already.

Inside the Hall, the new oven, taps and cupboards were fitted in the kitchen. New, brighter LED lights were installed in the Main Hall. We purchased a new point of sale system to allow us to take card payments; this is also giving us helpful sales data and is making stock management much easier.



The digital sign is now fully working

We installed a prototype digital noticeboard in the Hall, replacing a fairly chaotic set of hard-copy notices with a smart screen containing information about clubs, classes, future social events, village news and pictures. After the end of the financial year, we replaced this with a new 65in screen inside an elegant frame made from Thedden Oak. This can be taken over by hirers to show family photographs or a welcome to their guests.

During the latter part of the financial year, we started to investigate the feasibility of a popup coffee shop in the lounge. The idea was to offer people an opportunity to socialise during the day, in an informal setting, with a particular focus on families and other people who find it difficult to come to evening events.

Engaging with the community

We held online consultations on a variety of questions, including whether to hold a somewhat different, Covid-compliant fireworks event in 2020, how to deal with the ash dieback problem, potential changes to the monthly socials, and whether villagers would like a public charging facility for electric vehicles. The responses helped us to shape our plans and we are very grateful for them.

We are also extremely grateful for the generous donations from a large number of villagers, which have helped us to pay for the refurbishment of the phone box, the redevelopment of the Little Copse on the Rec and, later, the new Coffee Shop.

The 100 Club has been running successfully for several years and has been a lot of fun, but our experience with other initiatives led us to rethink our approach to fundraising. We suspended the 100 Club after the draw on June 30. Instead, we will run fundraising campaigns for specific purposes when needed, which means villagers will know exactly how

their contributions will be spent, the Hall volunteers will save on 100 Club sales and administration and, in many cases, the Charity will be able to benefit from Gift Aid.



The copse is now a great amenity for all the family

Public benefit

With limited opportunity to organise the usual social activities, we instead turned to other means, including the Spooky Week scarecrows, the virtual online quiz, the online 100 Club draws and the Posh Scoff burger evenings. The renovation of the Beech Book Exchange and the Copse on the Rec provided valuable outlets for people who were constrained by lockdowns, and both are now permanent amenities. In response to our survey on socials, we have put a greater emphasis on family activities and we will continue to do so.

Managing the charity

The Management Committee had a very busy year, bringing their many and varied skills together to make sure the Hall was ready for a future without restrictions, and leading the outdoor projects on the Rec and village green.

At the end of the financial year, Elaine King retired from the committee after many years of service to the village. I would like to thank Elaine for her unstinting support and look forward to seeing Elaine and Alan at future social events.

Peter Cox will retire from the Committee at the end of October, having led the Hall as Chair and managed our bookings and customers with extreme professionalism for many years. The Hall would not be what it is without Peter, so we all owe him a debt of gratitude. He has agreed to make an occasional appearance in the future, so we can expect see him at the Bonfire Night event, the Christmas Fair which Sally will be running for us, and the Spring Quiz in 2022. I am sure we will see Peter and Sally regularly at social events.

We have co-opted Martin Littlewood onto the Management Committee temporarily because he has taken responsibility for the overall running of the Bonfire Night event in 2021.

A dispute with a resident of Beech continued on and off throughout this financial year, and into 2021-22. This had started in mid-2019, when his offer to chair our Social Sub-Committee was declined. There was a lengthy series of emails and a number of personal meetings. The Management Committee offered mediation but this was declined. In July 2020, the villager concerned took this into the public arena by making allegations on the Nextdoor social media platform, which removed most of these posts.

In an attempt to force a vote of no confidence in the Management Committee at the 2020 AGM, he delivered a flyer to most households in the village and posted critical messages on

Nextdoor. He accepted an opportunity to speak at the meeting, apologised for the flyer and explained his grievance. Following a number of comments by villagers, all the Management Committee's resolutions were passed overwhelmingly.

More recently, he repeated his allegations on Nextdoor and urged people to boycott the Village Hall; again, these posts were removed almost immediately. The Management Committee continues to update the Charity Commission about this dispute, as we are required to do. This matter is now in the hands of our solicitors.

Developments since June

Social activities

The new 2021-22 financial year started with the relaxation of Covid restrictions, so we were able to run our first outdoor events, a well attended barbecue and the much appreciated Jazz on the Green. From late August, we resumed our monthly Friday evening socials, now with an informal booking system. The cooks have very much appreciated having an idea of how many people might attend. More than 80 people attended the celebration ball in early October, with drinks, dinner, music, dancing, a raffle and, of course, a great atmosphere.



Jazz on the Green: a great success despite the rain!

As many villagers are aware, the village green was vandalised during the night before the Jazz on the Green event. Around 20 villagers dropped everything in the morning to come and clear the green so that the event could go ahead. This was reported to the police and the Charity Commission, and the Alton Herald summed up our village spirit with its headline: "Broken glass and nails can't stop us".

Bookings

Bookings have almost returned to normal, with around 15 classes and clubs using the hall every week, a couple of weddings and numerous family parties.



The coffee shop is now open every Friday

Coffee and Cake

The coffee and cake shop opened at the Village show in late September and is now a weekly feature on Fridays. The project involved buying a bean to cup coffee machine, making new shelving in the bar area (again, from Thedden Oak), new chairs, pictures on the walls, a host of smaller items, and significant work to ensure we meet food safety regulations. A number of villagers enjoyed decorating cups and plates. A team of volunteers now bakes cakes and serves coffee weekly. The initial investment costs were covered by donations from villagers and grants from East Hampshire District

Council and the National Lottery Communities Fund. Many thanks to the launch team – Kim Eakers, Nick Sorby, Sarah Neish, Philip Bennett and Richard Whitaker.

The future

Most of our regular hirers are back, along with some new ones, our pipeline of bookings for private events is looking healthy, and we have a varied social programme planned well into 2022. So, the future looks bright, as long as there is no resumption of Covid restrictions.

We are fortunate that we have been able to maintain a healthy cash balance to enable us to maintain the hall and tackle things like roof repairs. We continue to build our cash reserve to support capital projects, the principal one being the potential redevelopment of the Annexe. Part of the original hall building, the Annexe is a single-skinned structure which is suffering from unresolvable damp issues. In the medium term, we believe it would be desirable to replace this building to offer additional opportunities for hirers and the community.



Over 80 people enjoyed the Celebration Ball

Thank you

Running a village hall that has been closed for a large part of the year, and severely restricted for all of it, has been interesting, and busier than you might expect!

As usual in Beech, our strong community spirit has come to the fore as we adjusted to a restricted social life. We are completely dependent on an amazing group of volunteers to run the Hall and the Rec. Our fantastic Management Committee and Social Committee form a cohesive unit of great people who are wonderful to work with. However, they are only the tip of the iceberg. Many other people in the village have helped in so many ways – refurbishing the phone box, shifting logs, planting trees, making the video and, more recently, baking cakes, serving drinks, cooking food and running the celebration ball. There are too many of you to list individually, but a thousand thanks to you all.

I also want to thank our team of employees who help us run the Hall and Rec – Simon Hodgson, Max Laney, Lucy Loosemore and Lynda West, as well as Wettone Matthews, the Alton firm of accountants who have kindly reviewed our accounts.

Last but not least, may I offer a big welcome to all our new villagers. It's great to have been able to meet many of you and get to know you better.

Dr Jane Freeman-Hunt

Trustee and Chair, Beech Village Hall & Recreation Ground Management Committee
October 29th 2021