



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 28, 2022 at Beech Village Hall

A year of recovery

The beginning of our financial year on July 1, 2021 coincided with the removal of most of the Covid 19 restrictions which had severely impacted the Village Hall in 2020-21. We took full advantage by relaunching our programme of social activities in the village, and by opening our Friday coffee and cake shop, which has become a focal point for friendship and community.

Most of our hirers returned with regular classes, which are enjoyed by many Beech residents as well as people from the surrounding area. The pent-up demand arising from two years of restrictions meant that we became very busy with weddings and private parties, which are now making a significant contribution. To help tide us over as activities built up, we received a further grant from the local authority.

Sadly, we lost Nick Sorby early in 2022. We miss his inspiration, drive and company, but the phone box book exchange and the Copse on the Rec, now named after him, serve as permanent memories.

Back in business for the Beech Community



Damp but not dampened: Jazz on the Green 2021

We ran our first post-Covid social event, a barbecue, in July 2021 with more than 70 people of all ages attending. We followed up with a rescheduled Jazz on the Green in August. Undeterred by the village green being vandalised the night before, around 20 villagers dropped everything in the morning to clear the green so that the event could go ahead. More than 100 people came and enjoyed the Farnham Big Band, their singer Anna, and a pleasant social occasion – despite the rain. The *Alton Herald* summed up our village spirit with its headline: “Broken glass and nails can’t stop us”.

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.

The coffee and cake shop opened at the Village Show in late September and has become a weekly feature on Fridays. A team of volunteers now bakes cakes and serves coffee weekly, and around 40 people typically come along to take the opportunity to socialise during the day in an informal setting, including those who find it difficult to come to evening events.



Service with smiles at Beech Coffee & Cake



More than 80 people attended the celebration ball in early October, with drinks, dinner, music, dancing, a raffle and, of course, a great atmosphere.

Beech celebrated the end of lockdown in style

On November 6, the village came together for our first Bonfire Night since 2018. More than 250 people enjoyed the procession, bonfire, food, beer and mulled wine, as well as the spectacular firework display.



Bonfire Night was a roaring success

The Christmas season started well with the return of the annual Christmas Fair, but unfortunately the Christmas Lunch was not such a popular idea and had to be cancelled due to lack of numbers. Likewise, the Burns evening also failed to attract enough bookings to allow it to go ahead.

In contrast, the first big event of 2022 was the March Comedy and Curry Evening, which sold out within 10 days of tickets going on sale. Many attendees commented on the high standard of the comedians, and it was great to see so many people laughing after such a

difficult two years. However, the food was disappointing so there will be a different food offer next time.

In April, a smaller group gathered for a wine tasting evening hosted by Neil Gibson. A selection of Ridgeback wines from South Africa was soaked up with cheeses and savouries. Shortly after that, the ever popular Spring Quiz made its return, hosted by Peter Cox and delivering the classic mixture of tricky questions, trick questions, drinks, nibbles and humour.



June saw Beech celebrating our late Queen's Platinum Jubilee in style, with two very enjoyable and convivial events. Our Fizz & Chips Night was a sell-out, with around 90 people enjoying traditional fish and chips, along with drinks including local sparkling wine and Jubilee Ale, and Buckingham Palace gin. Several villagers entered fantastic Jubilee-themed puddings into the Great Beech Jubilee Bake-off. After Carol Kemp's creation was declared the winner, the puddings were all eaten and live coverage of the beacon lighting ensued.

Jane Freeman-Hunt and her assistant, Caleb, judged the great British puddings

Three days later, around 170 people convened on the Green for the BIG Beech Jubilee Lunch. They enjoyed entertainment from Farnham Big Band and Anna, as well as an amazing buffet including more traditional English food and a fantastic cake. Unlike Jazz on the Green, the rain held off until the band were playing the last number!



Great food, great music, great company - a typical Beech celebration, this time for the Platinum Jubilee



Hall bookings



Progressive Motion Dance for young people with additional needs

Most of our regular classes re-established themselves in the early part of our new financial year, and we now host around a dozen clubs and classes each week, including bridge, baby and toddler classes, dance, pilates and yoga. The Beech Art Group meets in the Annexe every week, and Beech Embroiderers have been meeting every other month. However, we are conscious that some of the clubs and classes have been running with reduced numbers since the pandemic. We are doing our best to encourage new classes and we hope a new Tai-Chi class will start soon.

We have been very busy with weddings and private parties since the pandemic, helped by strong demand, the attractiveness of our Hall and village, and our promotional efforts. These include the online booking system, Google advertisements and the promotional video, which has now been viewed over 900 times. We now offer standard packages for weddings and children's parties, and we have substantially increased the cost of the wedding package for future years. This has made no discernible difference to the demand! We receive consistently great feedback from hirers about the Hall and the village.



A wedding setup from 2022

Improvements to the Hall and green spaces



Following an amazing initiative led by Nick Sorby, the little copse on the Rec was officially opened in August 2021 by East Hampshire councillor Tony Costigan, who also unveiled the roll of tree dedications which is now in place in the Hall. Following Nick's sad passing, we have renamed this Nick's Little Copse, and we have installed a welcome sign celebrating the efforts of Nick and the whole village to make this happen.

In the Hall, the opening of the coffee shop in late September followed several weeks of hard work and modifications. This project involved buying a bean to cup coffee machine, making new shelving in the bar area from Thedden Oak, new chairs, pictures on the walls, a host of smaller items, and a lot of work to ensure we meet food safety regulations, culminating in a glowing 5 rating after our first food inspection. A number of villagers enjoyed decorating cups and plates. The initial investment costs were largely covered by donations from villagers and grants from East Hampshire District Council and the National Lottery Communities Fund.

At the same time, we installed a permanent 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. This 65in screen sits inside an elegant frame made from Thedden Oak and is often taken over by hirers to show family photographs or a welcome to their guests.

We are now supporting the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Air Ambulance by hosting a collection bin for clothes, shoes and bed linen outside the Hall.

Inevitably, maintenance works have been necessary during the year. We had some roof repairs done to keep the Hall and Annexe waterproof. We have replaced a large section of the grass on either side of the path across the Village Green, so that we could remove all the last traces of glass and nails following the vandalism incident. We have bought new barbecues and trestle tables for our outside events.

Public benefit

Many Beech residents have enjoyed our varied and comprehensive programme of events, including Jazz on the Green, the Jubilee celebrations, comedy, the quiz night, the Celebration Ball and Bonfire Night, as well as our monthly Friday night socials and the coffee shop. Our green spaces continue to be appreciated. Anyone who has not so far participated in our village social scene, including those who have moved in recently, will receive a very warm welcome should they wish to join in.



All these activities are run by volunteers. Dozens of people are involved in some way, either year-round or on specific projects or events. A great camaraderie always develops as volunteers come together to support their village, and this in itself boosts our community spirit. We are always ready to welcome new or returning volunteers who would like to help!

Our neighbours

Since we reopened after Covid, BVH has re-established itself as a very popular venue for weddings and private parties. They make a big contribution to the running costs of the Hall, allowing us to offer Beech residents a wide range of social opportunities at an affordable price, and to build a fund for future refurbishment. This has led to a small number of complaints about noise and disturbance from people who live near the Hall. The management team is very sensitive to this issue and is addressing it.



Beech is a great party venue but hirers must monitor and control the noise

We have an automatic system which cuts off the power to amplifiers when party noise reaches an unacceptable level. It has not been working, but this has been corrected and we will perform a noise survey and make adjustments if necessary. We will also install a noise monitor in the Hall with a digital display to allow hirers to monitor the noise level.

We are now asking hirers to finish their parties 30 minutes earlier than our licence permits, so serving of drinks and playing of music stops at 10.30pm instead of 11pm, and all guests leave by 11pm. This change will take place over time, as we already have contracts in place with a number of hirers. It will not apply to community events.

We are now limiting the number of bookings for wedding receptions that we will accept, and we will not allow teenage parties for people outside Beech.

Everyone who hires the Hall for a wedding reception or private party is informed both in person and in writing about the noise sensitivities and the actions they need to take.

The Village Green is a big attraction for our private party hirers, but we are now making it clearer to hirers that they do not have exclusive use of the Green, and that local residents will be walking across the green and using the play equipment during their events.

We have updated our Website and marketing materials to reflect these changes, and to emphasise the importance of minimising noise and disturbance generally.

Managing the charity

Our preparatory work during the pandemic meant that the Hall was ready for action as soon as it was needed, and it was very satisfying to welcome our Beech residents again for events and socials, our regular hirers for their clubs and classes, and our occasional hirers for weddings and private parties.

Meetings of Charity's core management team, known formally as the Management Committee, have become smaller, following the sad loss of Nick Sorby, Ingrid McCormack's

decision to retire from the team and, more recently, Ian Gibson's serious illness. Additions to the team would be very welcome. It's a satisfying role and does not have to be time-consuming; we are a flexible, informal team of like-minded people, and fun and friendship are as important to us as the formal business that needs to be done. If you are interested in finding out more, please talk to me or one of my colleagues.

Fortunately, we have a great social team, who have run an amazing programme since lockdown, with the help of many villagers who have pitched in to help with the larger events. Our village has benefited enormously from the volunteer cake-bakers, coffee grinders and shop stewards who have turned our dream of a coffee shop into weekly reality.

Our book-keeper, Lynda West, left us this summer and we have welcomed Sarah Branch, who has taken an expanded role covering book-keeping, accounts preparation, bookings administration, and Secretary to the charity. Max Laney, Simon Hodgson and Lucy Loosemore continue to do sterling service to make sure everything in the Hall is clean and in working order, and the green spaces are tidy and attractive. The Alton firm of accountants, Wettone Matthews, have once again kindly reviewed our accounts on a pro-bono basis.

The future

We have emerged from the pandemic with a revitalised social programme, a good selection of clubs and classes, and a healthy pipeline of bookings for wedding receptions and private parties. This balance of revenue streams is essential; if some of the clubs and classes do not continue into the long term, the party bookings will help to compensate.

We are fortunate that we have been able to increase our cash balance further, and we have decided to split this into two parts. Our "General Funds" category of a little over £18,000 is working capital that we need to make sure we can pay our regular bills and cover urgent repairs without running out of cash. We have allocated the remaining £50,000 to a "Refurbishment Fund". This is intended to support capital projects, the principal one being the potential redevelopment of the Annexe.



There is potential to replace the Annexe with an attractive, up to date facility

Part of the original hall building, the Annexe is a single-skinned structure which is suffering from unresolvable damp issues. We believe it would be desirable to replace this building to offer additional opportunities for the community. Our intention is to expand this fund over time until we have sufficient funds available to contemplate this project, which would also require substantial grant funding to match what we are able to raise ourselves.

We have begun informal discussions about what form the replacement Annexe might take. In order to take this project forward, we will need to establish that there is demand for an additional room that would be smaller than the Main Hall but a bit larger and much more attractive to users than the existing Annexe. We will also be looking for help from any villagers who have skills in architecture, project management and planning.

Thank you

This post-pandemic year has been especially busy. Many people have been engaged in restoring community life to its former glory, not that the spirit of the village was diminished! We have seen a gradual return to socialising and it has been fantastic to see many villagers in our coffee shop.

Our community depends on a team of a great team of volunteers who run the Hall and the Rec. A huge thank you to our Management Team and Social Team who work so hard to ensure the Hall and its surroundings are a welcoming place to be. Our social team work their socks off to provide a programme of events for villagers to enjoy. This group of people are amazing to work with and give so freely of their time. I can promise that if you would like to join us, you will find village life all the more rewarding. There are always things for people to help with, so don't be shy!!

Many other people contribute to village life; emptying dog waste bins, running the coffee shop, cooking for social events, serving drinks, erecting the dreaded marquee and so on. There are way too many to name individually, but heartfelt and abundant thanks to you all. I would, however, like to thank Sheila Sorby, who has taken on the care of our green spaces.

I also want to thank our team of contractors who help us run the Hall and Rec – Simon Hodgson, Max Laney, Lucy Loosemore, Lynda West and Sarah Branch.

We have many new villagers and I want to welcome you to this stunning village. It's great to have been able to meet many of you and get to know you.

Dr Jane Freeman-Hunt

Trustee and Chair, Beech Village Hall & Recreation Ground Management Committee

October 28th 2022