**Timeline for New Hall and Redevelopment of Reading Room**

2003 – works started on a Parish Plan which was finally produced in 2006, out of which came clear objectives:

*“The need for a ‘better heart’ to the community was cited as an area of concern. A number of respondents posed there should be an improved community hall in Buxted – and the need for this to act as a centre for all ages was noted. An associated village green was also noted by a small number of respondents. This appears to relate in part to use of the Ionides Land – with some respondents noting that developing it just for a playground, thus far has been a missed opportunity.*

*The Parish Council will continue building a budget to help fund the construction of a new Buxted Parish Hall, which may also include some, albeit limited facilities for local services, notwithstanding our commitment to support local shops and businesses wherever possible by favourable consideration of planning applications etc.”*

Around the same time, proposals were put forward to redevelop the Grampian Chicken site in Five Ash Down and initial proposals were received to develop the land behind the Buxted Inn. To assist with both the creation of the new hall and a ‘heart to the village’ on the Ionides site, the parish council secured the promise of Section 106 contribution of £100,000 from the development in Five Ash Down. However, the same was not forthcoming from the developer of the land in Buxted (as it is a voluntary contribution), but what was achieved was to negotiate the moving of the allocated play space which was to be situated on the estate, to across the road to the Ionides site – thus the receipt of developer contributions for ‘off site play equipment’ which totalled £156,000. This would help to provide a play space for all in the community to use and would assist in creating the heart to the village.

The original vision for the Ionides site was to have a new hall and a replacement, more modest looking doctor’s surgery. It was very much hoped that the works could be carried out simultaneously, thus having a cohesive, less interrupted period of development and an integrated site. However, the NHS were able to provide funds for a planning application and subsequent development of the surgery before the parish council were able to move this project further forward at that time.

Having had the vision, based on the Parish Plan, the parish council were very keen to ensure that it was the community that took the project forward. The last thing the parish council wished to do was to enforce a new village hall onto a community that did not want it. It committed to assisting the project as far as practicably possible, but it had to be driven by those who lived in the community. Thus, the formation of the HOBI Group (Heart of Buxted Initiative) which subsequently became the Buxted Community Hall Trust, formed by members of the community with a representative from the parish council. The parish council said they would obtain the planning permission for the new hall.

*Quote from Minutes of Parish Council meeting held on 13th October 2009 states:*

*“Members went on to discuss the cost implications and the hall project questioning the Parish Council’s future involvement and if the scheme has taken on a life of its own yet. Concerns were raised that the more the Parish Council appear to lead the project the less likely parishioners will feel the need to be involved. Councillors who have attended the hall meetings assured Members that only stakeholders of the existing hall have been engaged*

*to date, but word is now spreading across the parish which will be aided by an article in the forthcoming Community Voice newsletter. Given the constructive engagement of stakeholders up to this point it should be recognised that this is the first time in many years that so many groups within the community are working so positively together towards a common goal.”*

Unfortunately, there was very little response from the community, and the Buxted Community Hall Trust was formed by willing volunteers from existing user groups.

After meeting with several architects, Simon Barker was chosen to design the new hall. Community engagement was initiated by the hall group who held two open days inviting schools, clubs, societies and parishioners to share ideas on designs and meet the architect. A public consultation of the hall design took place in March 2011.

The planning application for the new hall was submitted in September 2011, initially held up due to the required reports which needed to be acquired from the architects of the surgery site, followed by the necessity to have a meeting with the planning officer over initial concerns – all of which were frustrating as WDC had previously advised the scheme would be supportable.

Very unexpectedly, in May 2012, the parish council were invited to a meeting at WDC where it was advised that the new hall was no longer supportable, and the application would be refused, if the parish council did not withdraw their application. The reason given, by WDC, for this abrupt and unexpected refusal was due to the introduction of the newly minted 7km Ashdown Forest rule. (which affected all planning applications in the pipeline) The chairman of the parish council and representatives of the Buxted Community Hall Trust objected to this refusal and negotiated with WDC for a compromise. It was then suggested by WDC that a smaller design (with a similar footprint as the Reading Room) would be supportable on the proviso that once the new hall is developed, the Reading Room would have to be closed/knocked down or boarded up. This was clearly opposed to the parish council’s plans to sell the Reading Room site to financially aid the building of the new hall. However, as the parish council was committed to the project they decided to proceed with the hope that there would be a change in policy and the site of the Reading could be used in the future to help fund the new hall. In addition, WDC informed us that there could be no provision for parking at the new site. This was also opposed by the parish council and Hall Trust given the increasing parking problems within the village and the closure of the old site. More negotiations took place to allow provision for a car park which were successful. In January 2013, a permitted development application was submitted to WDC which would effectively increase the floorspace of the Reading Room which could then be transferred to the new site (approved).

Whilst a new design was worked up the parish council stated the following in November 2013:

*“If the rule (7km rule) is removed we wish to be in a very strong position and have actual planning permission in place for our new hall and be able to look for a new use for the old hall and be very quick off the mark with gaining planning permission for change of use for the old hall if it is required. As you can guess if the restriction of no development within 7km of the Ashdown Forest is no longer applicable, there would be a deluge of planning applications.*

 *Wealden will impose the restricted use of the hall as a condition of planning permission. However, we will make sure, under this planning condition that, should the 7km rule be overturned this restriction would no longer be relevant.”*

In April 2014, a new planning application for the village hall was submitted to WDC, once approved by the BCHT. Planning permission was granted for the new hall in July 2014 subject to the signing of a Section 106 agreement to restrict the use of the Reading Room on first use of the new hall. Originally, WDC requested that the hall be boarded up or bollards put in front of the hall and all services cut off. However, the parish council negotiated that just the services should be cut off and the building not be used, so that it looks a little less like a derelict building in the centre of the village.

In November 2016, a planning consultant was appointed by the parish council to challenge the stalemate with regards the redevelopment of the Reading Room. A rather dismissive letter was received from the Head of Planning at Wealden. In January 2017, the chairman had a meeting with WDC at which it was advised that a planning application could be submitted as traffic movements could be credited from April Cottage. Baseline figures for traffic movements calculated by WDC would have been when April Cottage was still a doctor’s surgery. Now that it is a single dwelling it effectively has ‘spare’ traffic movements which can be used to redevelop the Reading Room.

A mixture of builder/developers and architects were therefore requested to provide designs and costs to redevelopment the Reading Room in accordance with parish council standing orders which state:

*“Local authorities are given powers under the 1972 Act to dispose of land in any manner they wish, including sale of their freehold interest, granting a lease or assigning any unexpired term on a lease, and the granting of easements. The only constraint is that a disposal must be for the best consideration reasonably obtainable (except in the case of short tenancies, see footnote 3, paragraph 1 of the Consent), unless the Secretary of State consents to the disposal.*

*The ‘best consideration’ is normally the open market value of the land or interest in the land. Before making a disposal, a council must in practice seek professional valuation advice, either from the District Valuer or from a private valuer or surveyor, for which it will have to pay a fee. If an application is made to the Secretary of State for consent to dispose at an undervalue, a valuation report must accompany the application.*

*A disposal in breach of the ‘best consideration’ rule, otherwise than in accordance with one of the statutory exceptions would be unlawful in the sense that the matter could be investigated by the auditor, and/or be the subject of an objection at audit; it could also be restrained by the courts”*

Iain Miller was chosen as the parish council’s architect and together with the parish council working party, worked up the plans which were submitted to WDC. In addition to the planning application, the parish council was asked to submit a building survey, bat survey, traffic impact assessment and subsequently a Heritage Statement (the need for this is questionable as the Reading Room is not a listed building, nor does it impact on one). Professionals were appointed to provide all but the Heritage Statement, which was provided by the chairman of the parish council free of charge as she is qualified to provide this.

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I**n response to the general comments and objections to the current application, Iain Miller has stated the following:**

In terms of the traffic generation, parking provision and layout:

* In their Transport Report GTA Civils state that ‘*It is proposed to provide 6 car parking spaces for the proposed 4 houses. This is in accordance with East Sussex County Council parking demand calculator for residential developments. The parking spaces are located along the frontage of the site as shown on the proposals layout in Appendix B. This requires the use of Church Road for manoeuvring and is considered acceptable as it is the same as the existing arrangement and due to the quiet nature of Church Road’.*
* In an earlier scheme, I illustrated an arrangement of eight car parking spaces (for a scheme with flats) that did not require the use of Church Road for manoeuvring. At a push, this arrangement could be used for the current scheme (by pushing the houses back) but more likely a similar arrangement comprising six car parking spaces could be used. The attached mark-up illustrates this. I didn’t use this layout because I wanted to maximise the front garden space for the houses, not give the space over to car manoeuvring, but if it is going to be an issue this layout could be used.
* It seems strange that the redevelopment of the Reading Room site with parking that is the same as the existing arrangement could be seen as somehow the ‘last straw’ when the Reading Room pre-existed much of the development further along Church Road.
* Traffic associated with the redeveloped Reading Room site would, for the most part, travel to and from the High Street, not further along Church Road.
* The footway from the High Street along the west side of Church Road that terminates at the site access could readily be continued past the Reading Room site without any impact on the current proposed layout so that Church Road would have a footpath along the portion where traffic associated with the redeveloped Reading Room site would, for the most part, travel. The attached mark-up illustrates this. In the current scheme, the cars are set back to allow this but the mark-up makes it more obvious. I didn’t draw this as it would involve work outside the site. This could be a planning condition for a full planning permission if necessary.

In terms of the bulk and massing of the proposals:

* A planning officer suggested a development of 2.5 storeys might be acceptable in a pre-planning meeting.
* It is normal for development density to increase in sites closer to the town centre (e.g. the High Street).  In this case the retail unit at the corner of the High Street is 2.5 storeys and raised on a plinth that is four steps up from footway level. The proposed units are 2.5 storeys but down a slope from road / footway level. If April Cottage ever came to be redeveloped the architect may opt for 2.5 or 3 storeys there.
* It is also normal for development density of individual sites to increase over time as settlements urbanise.

In terms of disruption this is a reasonable concern with a tight site but tight sites are redeveloped all over the place. The houses could be prefabricated with timber frames to speed up construction and the contractor would have to devise an acceptable site logistics plan especially for deliveries and collections and the parking of cars and vans belonging to site operatives (presumably somewhere off site). Basically, most things are possible at a price - such as out of hours deliveries, portacabins above the site entrance, cocooning the site in sheeting on a scaffold frame etc.

The above information not only gives a timely reminder to those who have forgotten the history of the development of a new village hall but also counters most of the recent dialogue that has mostly been carried out using the local Social Media. The architect has also provided an explanation of the planning procedures and possible solutions to some of the criticisms. The main points are summarised in bullet points below:

* The issue to build a new village hall started in 2006 driven by the Parish Plan
* The parish Council clearly stated they did not wish to build the hall themselves
* The parish council were committed to achieve planning permission
* A separate community group was set up to take the project forward and consult with the wider community
* It was always the intention of the parish council to use the Reading Room or site of the Reading Room to fund the building of the new hall
* Plans for a larger hall, indeed any hall were refused planning permission
* Negotiations took place for a reduced size hall on condition the present hall could not be used for any future purpose
* Negotiations took place for provision for a car park on the site of the new hall.
* A new planning application was submitted which had a slightly larger footprint of the old hall
* This was approved on the proviso the old hall would be ‘mothballed’ as soon as the new one was opened.
* Negotiations took place to allow the parish council to develop the reading Room site to raise as much money as possible to help fund the new hall.