



BATTLE WAR MEMORIALS AND THE MAKING OF THE MEMORIAL HALL

In Battle the commemoration of the dead of the two world wars was much affected by the fact that there was no town or village hall, though many other English villages were to have theirs. A village hall performs many of the functions needed: the council usually meets there, there is room for meetings, performances, films, fund-raising events, markets, exhibitions, voting and other things. Battle still has no building with the name town hall (though the metal archway leading to the Almonry and the Museum uses the term *Town Hall*), but all these needs are now met there or in the Memorial Hall.

It took a long time, from 1919 to 1960, for these needs to be satisfied.

Until the twentieth century and with rare exceptions there were no memorials of wars that listed the dead. Highly-regarded men were remembered in statues, plaques or other ways – usually admirals or generals and/or people of the higher classes – but the mass of the fighting men were lost to memory outside their families and neighbours. The first general memorial in Battle was for those dying in the South African War of 1899-1902. St Mary's church has a plaque.

Concerted attempts at some larger and more inclusive form of memorial arose immediately after the carnage of the First World War. In 1919 Augustus Raper, the chair of the (then) Battle Urban District Council, set up a committee to make proposals, but it had difficulty coming to an agreement. One of the local doctors, George Kendall, and Mrs Ida Smithe, who had a distinguished war record in nursing, led those who wanted a nursing home. Others wanted a monument like the cenotaph in Whitehall. Ex-servicemen wanted a club. Also suggested was a suitable hall, which, according to the Hastings and St Leonards Observer,¹ was 'sadly needed for the social well-being of the town'. A further committee was set up to make proposals.

Meanwhile Edward Reid Currie, Dean since 1882, was determined to go ahead on a self-funded project that led swiftly to the erection of the memorial cross in the churchyard. Remembrance events are still held there, despite the fact that the Dean could find only 41 names for it from his parish, even with his fairly wide set of criteria for inclusion. It was dedicated on 15 February 1920 by the Rural Dean of Hastings.

Maybe it was this cross that caused any new project to wane. After all, the town now had its memorial; why have another? The alternative might well be a building and that would cost money that was not forthcoming. Soon the idea was abandoned and for more than twenty years there were no efforts to resurrect it.

¹ 19 June 1920



It was right at the end of the European part of the Second World War that public attention was again drawn to the need for a building that could act as a memorial but now could also be a village hall. The local council, just a parish since the changes of 1934, met and approved the idea on 13 April 1945, with specific reference to the war even if it was still raging outside Europe; on 5 May a public meeting at the Drill Hall (which was a favourite place for large meetings and social events such as dances), voted overwhelmingly in favour, by 132 to two. There was slightly greater dissent on the matter of a memorial: 101 agreed it and six did not. The dissenters claimed that the project was on too grand a scale and that many relatives of the dead would wish to keep their losses personal (and of course such feelings may have been one of the many reasons why the 1920 cross contains so many fewer names than it might have done).

Accordingly a committee of 14 members was set up to take the matter further. It was composed of a wide range of Battle people. Wilfred Youard (1869-1964), the Dean, and Edmund Loman (1894-1957), the Roman Catholic priest, were the two religious leaders and Edward Davis (who was to die only three years later) was a retired priest; Reginald West Fovargue (1892-1968), the solicitor of 1 Upper Lake, and Walter Eardley Freeland Davidson (1892-1984), a doctor at Martins Oak at Battle since 1942, were the professionals; James Percy Woodhams (1882-1953), auctioneer and estate agent, was one of the best-known people in town, who had been the last chair of Battle Urban District Council at its dissolution in 1934 and thereafter a prominent member of the Battle Rural District; and Alfred Harry Sinden who was the owner of Thorpes, the shoe retailer. The others were all active in the town except possibly Mrs Helen Appleton (1888-1972), mother of two men, one of whom had died in the Second World War and the other Bob Stainton (1910-2000), a former Captain of Sussex County Cricket Club and then head of Glengorse School. (Stainton had been at Glengorse since 1934, with a gap for war service in the RAF. In 1944 his Mosquito was shot up over France but he managed to return to Ford airfield, where he crash-landed. Those who knew him as headmaster were reportedly terrified of him and his frequent use of the cane. His régime was strict and the food poor; there was an emphasis on sport.²)

The chair was Fovargue and the secretary Davidson,³ though not long afterwards Stainton held the chair and the secretary was George Meppem (1903-63), a solicitor's clerk and the very hard-working town clerk. Five sites for the centre were considered:

- 1 a portion of George Meadow between the cricket ground and Park Lane,
- 2 the Towers Hotel, (where the fire station now is),
- 3 land adjoining the market (where Market Square now is),
- 4 land at the top of Powdermill Lane,

² See on the internet: The Memory Wanderer: Glengorse - 1

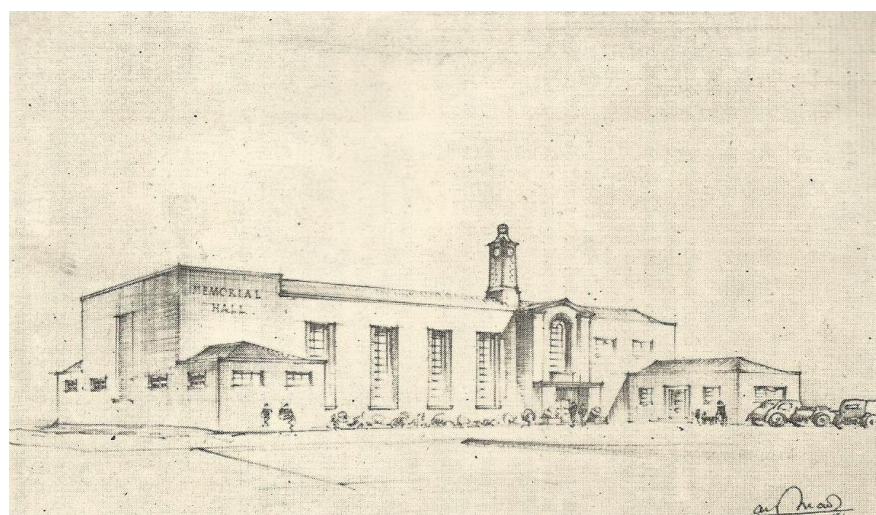
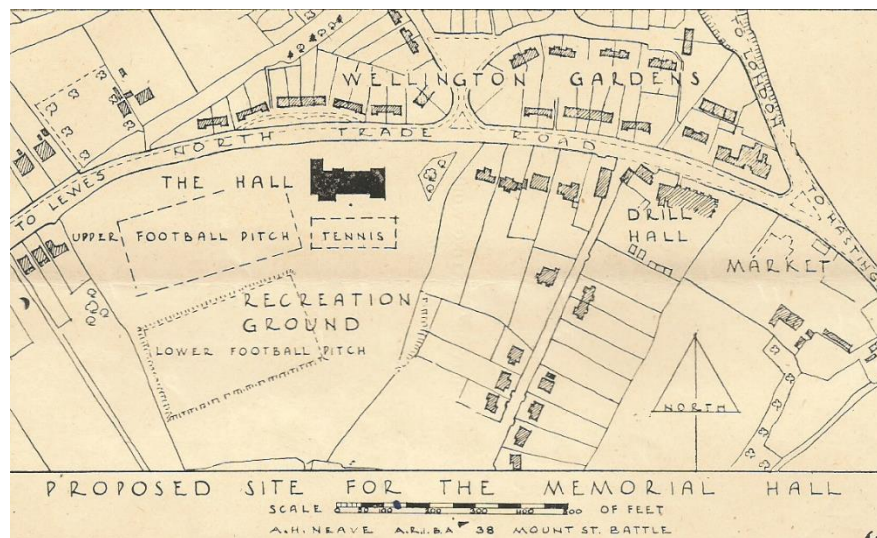
³ Davidson was born at Carleton, Ontario in 1892 and died in 1984. He was educated at Lancing College. In the First World War he was Second Lieutenant then Captain in the East Yorkshire Regiment before as a Major joining the Royal Flying Corps, later the RAF; he left the forces in 1921. He was awarded MA at Cambridge.

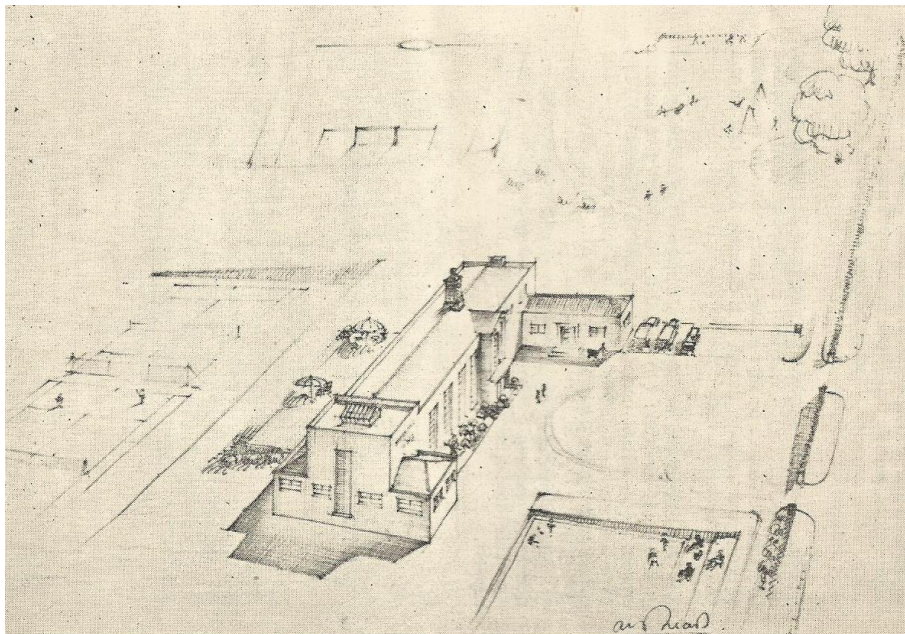


5 the Recreation ground.

Of these, the conclusion was that the best would have been the (now closed) Towers Hotel, but it had been sold and contact with the new owner was not productive. On various grounds options 1, 3 and 4 were also ruled out. Investigation of the Youth Centre site in Upper Lake had been unproductive. This left the recreation ground, owned by the parish council, and the appropriate part of it seemed to be at the top of its slope where today there is a car park. Despite misgivings that this was just a little far from town the planning went ahead.

Early in 1946 the local architect Alfred Henry Neave (1905-2004) had been asked to produce a plan for a hall once the site had been determined. As will be seen below he was a modernist, though his work is not well-known today.





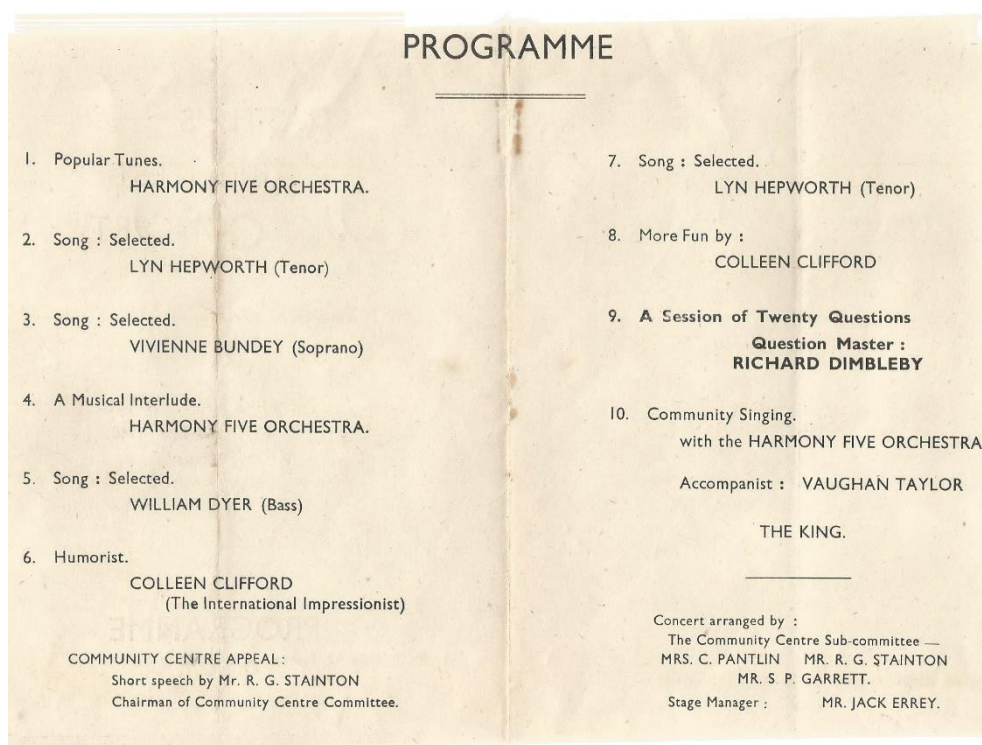
Illustrations from the appeal pamphlet of 1948.

This was an enormous project, and preliminary costings came in at £16,500. Nevertheless a pamphlet was produced containing the three pictures above as part of the appeal for funds. Throughout 1947 attempts were made to ascertain what grants might be available, but slowly interest waned. A rethink was needed, and inevitably a smaller project was envisaged.

Some notes indicate that to create a community centre it would be necessary:

- 1 to raise £5000 in two years;
- 2 of this, £2000 should be by donations
- 3 and a further £2000 could be raised by weekly collections of 1d; forty collectors of 50d per week would obtain over £2000 in two years.

If the target of £5000 were not reached then whatever the balance was should be found from dances, whist drives, fêtes and similar social activities. Donors of £50 or £25 should be recorded as 'founders'. There was a considerable search for grants that might be available. Action was required and in mid-1947 the committee was restructured to include a wide spread of representatives from local organisations. Almost all agreed to join, except for the Baptists. Later in the year an appeals sub-committee was created. On 24 May 1948 'Battle's Brightest Concert' was held at the Drill Hall.



Programme for Battle's Brightest Concert, 24 May 1948

Despite this event and efforts at collection the prospect of a successful project died away. It certainly didn't help that the government had suspended the grant system for village halls but a smaller project must have failed to attract those who wanted a hall that could meet all the needs originally proclaimed. In 1949 Father Loman left the committee, finding that the project was very likely not to succeed. An influential local, J W Cummins, wrote a long and well-argued letter declining to join the committee, demonstrating that enthusiasm was almost dead. Rising costs made it an impossible venture.

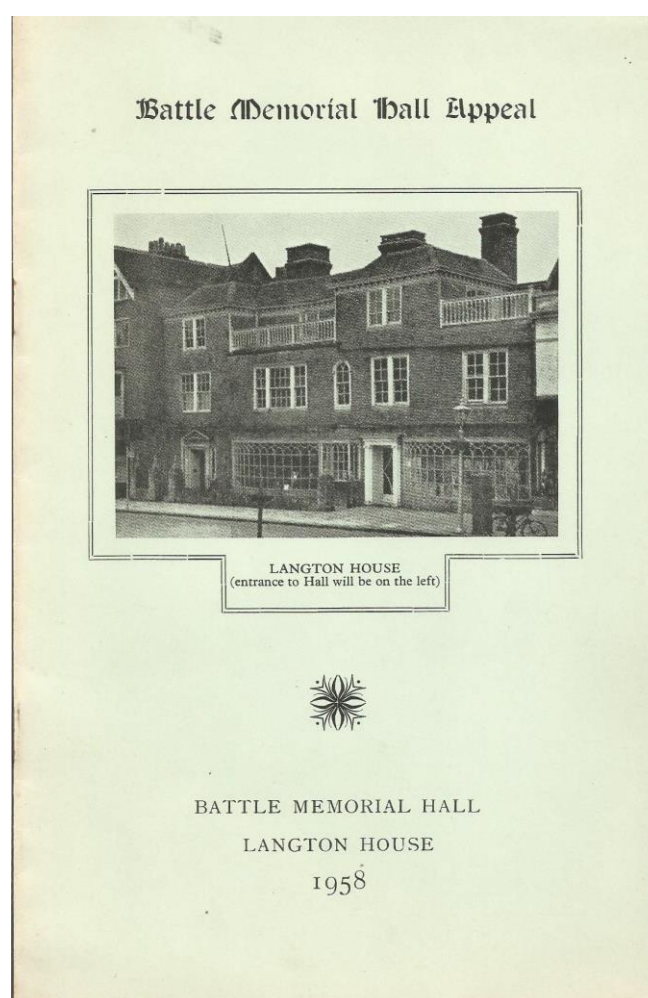
Nevertheless the idea did not die. In 1953 the scheme was referred to the parish council, which resolved to leave to the direct subscribers the funds already gathered. The subscribers decided to hold them in trust. In 1955 official grants for village halls were resumed, and the council had a new project drawn up. However, in 1956 it rejected the recreation ground as the place for a hall, and it seemed that all was over. Direct subscribers were then given the choice of withdrawing their contributions, but they left £1000 in trust. A proposal that the remaining funds should be added to the Battle Charity Fund seems not to have been proceeded with.

But soon there was a saviour: the Battle Rotary Club. Late in 1957 a member, Richard Shephard of Marlpits Farm, Ninfield bought Langton House for £7000 and handed its north-western part to the four trustees for £1000. It was said that perhaps he had no real intention of buying the property but his bid was accepted. The ancient and most attractive house, composed of two separately leased properties, had belonged to Richard Prebble Rowe, an antique furniture dealer who had died in April of that year. Originally intending to



replace the whole front of the house with plate glass, he had changed his mind and very sympathetically enlarged it at its south-eastern corner, building over the yard that had stood there; he had planned to create a hall there capable of seating 350 people – but it was never completed.

Shephard wanted to give Battle a real opportunity to create a village hall. A parish meeting strongly agreed, and the council agreed to give £3000 to the project. A provisional committee was formed, and an application for grant aid was made to the government. In 1958 a General Committee was established and an appeal booklet issued. The appeal was for £2000.



The Committee was large:

John Newbery, <i>chair</i>	1891-1966. Jam factory director/ manager. Rats Castle, Hastings Road.
Miss E A Kennedy, <i>vice-chair</i>	Bowers, Chain Lane.
Mrs Barbarina Helen Seton Arnould BEM	1889-1975. Widow of Francis, solicitor and former councillor. WVS in WW2. Old Court House, Caldbec Hill.
Ernest Edward Beaney	1906-81.
Richard Buckman	1908-1977. 1939 private gardener. Harbours Yard, Upper Lake.
William Victor Burgess	1912-88. 1939: dairy farmer, Nash's Farm, Crowhurst.



Harold Benjamin Chatfield	1892-1974. President, Battle Rotary Club. Falaise, North Trade Road.
Arthur Robert Clough MICE	1891-1974. Civil engineer. Normanswood, Crowhurst.
John Wallace Cummins	1896-1969. WW1 service. Sudan civil service 1919-47. Tollgates House/Swales Croft, Staplecross..
Stephen John Day	1898-1962. 1939, electrician, engineer.
Dr Walter Eardley Freeling Davidson MB ChB	<i>see earlier details</i>
Henry Hugh Fovargue	1925-94. Solicitor.
Robert Alan Guthrie, <i>Hon Treasurer</i>	1909-76. Kinross House.
Sydney Hollis	1892-1969. Teacher. Hill Top, Starrs Green.
Henry Albert Hughes	1898-1966. War service in Royal Artillery then Service Corps.
Miss Sylvia Mary Jenner	Assistant secretary. From April 1960 Mrs R D H Farthing.
George William Meppem	4 St Mary's Villas. <i>See earlier details.</i>
Mrs C W R Pantlin (Mary Agnes Cather)	1883-1962. North Lodge.
Wilfred Ramsden FISA	1911-68. 4 Tollgates. Deputy Surveyor, Sanitary Inspector, District Council.
James Gerald D'Urban Shearing TD, <i>Hon Secretary</i>	1910-87. Sundayle, Caldbec Hill.
Herbert George Seymour	1900-2001. Motor engineer. Whitehayes, Caldbec Hill..
Richard David Shephard	1913-2003. Marl pits Farm, Ninfield and/or Wylands Farm, Catsfield.
Robert George Stainton MA	<i>see earlier details.</i> Oak Heads, Starrs Green.
Mrs Kathleen Mary Tucker-Williams	1901-81. District councillor. The White Cottage, Battle Hill.
Mrs R White	Committee of Battle Players. 3 St Mary's Terrace.

The appeal booklet set out a brief history of the previous efforts made to find a hall in the town centre, and remarked that the Drill Hall would no longer be available. It envisaged space being available for a main hall (seating about 250), a well-equipped stage and dance floor, dressing/ committee rooms, a meeting room for the council and other bodies, a projection chamber, cloak rooms and lavatories, a store for chairs and tables, a modern heating and ventilation system and a kitchen with serving hatch and counter and the items appropriate to a kitchen. The activities envisaged were drama, music, choirs, lectures, dancing, whist, badminton, boxing, table tennis and floral exhibitions. £1000 had already been spent and a further £8000 would be needed; the current appeal was for £2000.

At the opening in April 1960 the Provisional Working Cttee acknowledged the services of the four trustees (E E Beaney, H H Fovargue, A H Sinden, R G Stainton) who had purchased the site and declared it to be used as village hall for use of Battle and its+ neighbourhood. Under a declaration of trust a committee of management was set up: four elected members, nineteen representatives of founder organisations and up to three co-opted members. By 1960 the cost had come to more than £10,000: there had been £3000 from the council, £3229 from grant aid and £1000 from the old appeal: the remainder of £1600 was still needed. In the next year a new trust deed and constitution were adopted and tenders called for. Allnatt Ltd were appointed builders. The provisional working committee was as follows; some members cannot be traced. It contained a large number of names active in earlier projects: John Newbery was again chair and Miss Kennedy vice-chair, and they were accompanied by Mrs Arnould, Ernest Beaney, Richard Buckman, William Burgess, Harold Chatfield, Arthur Clough, John Cummins, Stephen Day, Eardley Davidson, Hugh Fovargue, Robert Guthrie as treasurer, Sydney Hollis, Wilfred Ramsden, James Shearing as secretary, Bob Stainton, Mrs Tucker-Williams and Mrs White. In addition there were



Richard David Shephard	1913-2003. Marl pits Farm, Ninfield and/or Wylands Farm, Catsfield.
Albert Edward Stevenson	1924-99.

Assistant Secretary Miss S M Jenner

Legal advisers Raper and Fovargue

Bankers Barclays

Architect A H Neave ARIBA

The founder organisations were:

Battle and District Historical Society	RAF Association (Battle branch)
WEA (Battle branch)	Battle Youth Centre
Battle and District Young Farmers Club	Battle Players
Battle Allotments and Gardens Society	Battle Choral and Orchestral Soc
Battle Bowling Club	Battle Rifle Club
Battle Rangers FC	Battle Boxing and Athletic Club
Women's Institute (Battle branch)	Battle Whist and Social Club
Royal Naval Association (Battle branch)	Battle Parish Council
	The Rotary Club of Battle

The Memorial Hall, now commemorating the dead of both world wars, opened on 22 April 1960. Its programme acknowledged support from businesses well-known in the town:

	£		£
Abbey Antiques	295	Jenner and Matthews, auto engineers	500
Allwork, W C and Son, grocers, wine dealers	8	Jenner and Simpson, corn merchants	2671
Arvoy, D A, watchmaker, jeweller	0	Judds of Battle, furnishers, removers	118
Barrett of Battle Ltd, printers	212	Kandies, the, confectioners	569
Battle bookshop, library	458	Loaring, E W, outfitters	236
Blackman, T C and Sons, coal merchants	102	Olivers Printing Works, printers, stationers	431
Burstow and Hewett, auctioneers, estate agents	570	Rosaline (Battle) Ltd, ladies and children's outfitter	25
Clock Shop	517	Thorpe, B H & Co, shoe retailer, rubber bootiers	38
Earl Norman, radio + electr specialist	69	Tickner's Newsagency (Battle) Ltd, stationers etc	194
Higham, tobacconist and toys	0	Till, W C Ltd, ironmongers, agricultural implements	12
Holland, A, family butcher	19	Vicary's Ltd, engineers, coach builders	425
Humphreys the grocers	66	Winsborrow, F B & Son, drapers, men's outfitters	54
International Tea Co	63	Woodhams, James & Son, chartered surveyors	37
Total			7689

The opening event began with a memorial ceremony and several speeches. John Newbery, chair of the provisional working committee (who had earlier opposed the notion of a memorial), introduced the Marquess of Exeter, former athlete and MP, who unveiled the memorial plaque. The Dean, Alfred Naylor, performed an act of dedication, and the known names of those who died in either world war were read out, followed by the Last Post.

The ceremony then continued with thanks to all involved, including the Ministry of Education, the parish council, Richard Shephard, subscribers and others. The Marquess gave an address, followed by Commander J D Ross RN, chair of the parish council. Then there was Alfred Neave, the architect, and R G Stainton. The National Anthem ended the proceedings.



The first performance was on the next day and the events of the week attracted excellent notices in the local press.

INAUGURAL EVENTS	
Friday, April 22nd at 3 p.m.	THE OPENING CEREMONY
Saturday, April 23rd at 7.30 p.m.	GRAND OPENING CONCERT Hastings Girls Choir Mary Illing, David Winnard, Verity Anne Bates and distinguished supporting Artistes Tickets — 4/- & 3/- from Newton Hadfield, High Street, Battle. All seats are bookable.
Monday, April 25th	AMATEUR BOXING (Under I.S.B.A. Rules) Admission —
Wednesday, April 27th at 7.15 p.m.	WHIST DRIVE Attractive Prizes, Admission — 2/-
Friday, April 29th at 8 p.m.—1 a.m.	GRAND OPENING DANCE Eric Delaney and his Band Tickets — 10/- (Limited), Dress Optional
Monday and Tuesday, May 2nd and 3rd at 7.30 p.m.	THE BATTLE PLAYERS present “Caste” by T. W. Robertson produced by Thea Wells Tickets — 4/6, 3/6 & 2/6, available from Battle Bookshop
Wednesday, May 4th at 7.45 p.m.—11.45 p.m.	GALA OLDE TYME DANCE Ray Elgar and his Music Admission — 4/- (Club Members 3/6)
Thursday, May 5th at 7.30 p.m.	HISTORICAL SOCIETY LECTURE “The Bayeux Tapestry” C. H. Gibb-Smith, M.A., F.R.S.A. Keeper of Museum Extension Services, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Admission — 2/-
Friday, May 6th at 7.30 p.m.	BATTLE CHORAL & ORCHESTRAL SOCIETY Admission — 1/6 & 2/6

Programme for the opening week of the Hall, April-May 1960. There was also an exhibition of oil and water-colour paintings by the Battle and District Arts Group.

The files contain a brief poem ‘Battle’ by Patience Strong, a local resident then living at Woodmans in Sedlescombe and nationally a well-known and popular poet, though it is not known whether the verse was read to an audience:

Battle keeps her secrets in the day's broad light,
But if you stand a-dreaming in the quiet of the night
You will see the ghosts that haunt this place of destiny
Moving in the shadows that haunt through the Gate of Memory.
Moving in the shadows through the Gate of Memory.



Here where every field and meadow has a tale to tell
Saxon England passed away as noble Harold fell.
In our Island story great the part that we have played.
Proudly do we walk the streets where history was made.

At this point only the first stage of creating the Hall had been afforded. A further major fund-raising campaign began early in 1962, looking for £2380 for immediate improvements omitted from the first stage. A significant event were summer fairs in July 1962 and 1963. The AGM in August 1964 must have concluded that sufficient funds had been raised – people could now see the value of the Hall and perhaps were more willing to give – and work started as early as October of that year to finish stage two which was completed by mid-1965.

By 2000 it was only too clear that the Hall needed refurbishment and upgrading. Simon Alexander (who ran the Battle Festival) and Peter Mills (Town Clerk) approached the Hall's Management Committee and pressed for improvement and extension. Only recently the Heritage Lottery Fund had rejected the Hall's application for aid, so other possibilities had to be explored. The largest offer was made by the executors of Richard Wynne. At the time of writing it has not been possible to ascertain who he was or had been. The sum was around £200,000 out of the £400,000 needed. The Wynne Fund wanted a permanent home for the Battle British Legion, then at Watch Oak, but there was also pressure from the Battle Light Opera Group (BLOG), then the Hall's largest user. The improvements would include the upgrading of the main hall to meet the requests of some of the principal users, for example improved lighting for the benefit of the art and photographic clubs, enlarging the Sheppard Room, creating a staircase from the new Wynne room as an emergency exit, refurbished floors, better seating in the main hall and other matters. It is this succession of improvements that would leave the Hall and its extensive range of facilities in the condition they are today.

Architects were asked to draw up plans for a large extension to the rear and considerable improvements to the older parts and it was clear that the rest of the funds needed had to be found, and soon. Michael Hodge (a recently-retired diplomat) was now chairman of the Committee, and a small team was formed to develop the project. He chaired it, and a fellow member of the Rotary Club, Bob Finbow (formerly with Unilever) became treasurer. The rest of the team comprised John Barthorpe (a retired civil engineer), Peter Sutton (a former Mayor of Battle) and Colin Eldridge (on behalf of BLOG).

More money was needed, and throughout the project it was clear that very tight control was needed on its progress and on expenditure. The first new funders were to Rother District Council and Battle Town Council, where Peter Sutton's experience and contacts were invaluable: Rother gave £50,000. The rest needed was provided by the Sussex Partnership and the European Union (through Wealden and Rother Rural Fund).



The project included a large extension to the rear and was to be funded to a large extent by a bequest from Richard Wynne (hence the name of the Wynne room at the Hall), who wished to see a permanent home created for the British Legion.⁴

Building the extension and carrying out refurbishments was a difficult job, encountering manifold serious obstacles to their completion. The architect lived in Hertfordshire but was highly supportive throughout the project. Keeping things going while awaiting payments from donors, each with its own schedules, was problematic, as was obtaining access to the rear of the property, especially for bringing in machinery and materials. There was also a difficulty in sorting out various legal problems. Bookings for the Hall had to continue because continuing operational expenses still had to be met. One unfortunate consequence was that a BLOG musical had to be performed under an unfinished roof – lucky indeed that the skies did not deliver rain on it.

Even when the contract was successfully finished there was more to do: soundproofing and tiered seating in the main hall.

The Memorial Hall remains the central place – and for most activities the only place – for the town of Battle where large meetings, films, lectures, choir and play performances and exhibitions of all kinds can be held. The Langton House entrance hall, which has a ceiling dating probably back to its origins in the sixteenth century, houses the various plaques of remembrance. It is invaluable to the life of the town. For that we owe a great debt to many people, and in particular to Richard Shephard and the Rotary Club.

This article could not have been written without the records held by Peter Mills, currently Secretary of the Hall Management Committee, and Michael Hodge, who led the major development in 2000. Details of individuals, unless acknowledged in footnotes, have been obtained from ancestry.co.uk.

George Kiloh

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⁴ Unfortunately no information has been found about Wynne himself other than at one point he investigated converting Pyke House into a medical centre.