

Building of the Public Hall

by Ralph Hack

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Shirehampton Parish Council

With the opening of the first dock at Avonmouth in 1877, then part of Shirehampton Tything, a considerable residential development was to take place across the years, particularly in the villages of Avonmouth and Shirehampton. Many had moved into the district when the dock was under construction with others settling in search of employment following the opening. They were to need houses, shops, schools, places of worship and other amenities.

By the September of 1884, the Bristol Corporation purchased from the Bristol Channel Dock Company the dock they had built. By January 1885, a Boundaries Bill had been introduced outlining boundary changes followed by an Act of Parliament with part of Avonmouth being included within the City and County of Bristol.

Shirehampton had become a civil parish in south Gloucestershire with a Parish Council. Mr George Collins, traffic manager of the Avonmouth Docks was to serve as Chairman of the Council. Their meetings were held in the Manor House opposite the church. They dealt with problems such as the maintenance of the roads through the village from the Park to Avonmouth and from the Green to Lamplighters. They had been described as 'disgraceful'. Through Forestier Walker, Vice-Chairman of the Council, and Steward for Squire Miles of Kingsweston, they had a piece of land for recreation purposes adjoining the Police Station at Avonmouth offered by the Squire at a rental of six pounds per annum. They were also to have from him control and management of Shirehampton Village Green. This was followed by a new burial ground and a Men's Reading Room in High Street. For the Diamond Jubilee festivities, Forestier Walker handled subscriptions for the bonfire on Penpole, the dinner in the Tythe Barn, Children's tea, bands and decorations. By the September he announced the Jubilee Drinking Fountain and fixing would cost £42 6s 9d. On the death of the old Queen, the Parish Council convened a special meeting in January 1901 at which they agreed, 'that this council do convey to His Majesty, King Edward the Seventh, its deep sense of the loss sustained by the Parish in common with all other subjects of the Empire of Her Gracious Majesty.'

On the occasion of King Edward's coronation they received £50 2s 0d. The money was spent on a dinner, tea, medals, bonfire, prizes for sports, a band, programmes, and a gas used in the School Room.

Members of Shirehampton Parish Council 1885



Back row: (?), (?), W. Pretty, A Hatherall, I. Osman Front row: (?), Forrestier Walker, George Collins, (?), A. Heard Those queried are F. Poole, G. Whirehead, G. Davis and G. Goodwin Norris. We would be pleased to hear from anyone who can connect name to face - to 'SHIRE', The Library, Station Road, Shirehampton, BS11 9TU

Residential Development

Since the first dock at Avonmouth, rows of terraced houses had been built in what was to be called Bradley Crescent and Pembroke Road. Larger houses had been built on one side of Station Road. The new dock extension commenced in 1902 which saw another large labour force moving in. More huts and houses were required to accommodate the rising population. Work was to start in building Priory and Walton Roads along with Penpole Avenue. Bligh Bond, the architect commissioned by the Squire, was to build a number of houses large and small, the latter for dock workers at a rental of 6 shillings per week.

With the business of building on Kingsweston Estate lands he designed a fine Estate Office in the High Street. With a rising population there was now overcrowding in the village school and another classroom added. The only public meeting places were the Temperance Hall at the bottom of Park Hill and, when available, a school room for an evening, or sometimes the Tythe Barn which was still a barn. There was no Church Hall, but opposite the church in Pembroke Road a hut known as the Navvie's Mission.

Plans for a Parish Hall

After the success of the coronation celebrations with a large number of people being present, a suggestion was made by Mr George Carter, of Bradley Crescent, to Mr George Collins, Chairman of the Parish Council, saying the district now needed a large permanent public meeting

place. This suggestion was then put to the Council. Squire Miles was approached and in October 1902 the Council received a letter from him saying he was prepared to give the site and £100 towards the cost of building which the Council was very pleased to accept.

The site chosen was the field a few minutes walk away from the nucleus of the village. Plans were prepared by the architect, Bligh Bond, and it was estimated the cost of the building would be £2,000. The problem now was where the required sum was to come from. They considered getting it from the rates but found it impracticable, for the lowest estimate would be 2d in the £1 on the rates for the next 30 years. On making enquiries, they were to learn that there was nearly £3,000 with the Barton Regis District Council belonging to the parish.

This was paid by the City of Bristol when they took over the dock at Avonmouth. The Parish Council would be justified in using this money, when the plans were finalised it was found they would require £2,700 of the £3,000.

Laying the Foundation Stone October 3rd, 1903

A platform had been erected at the entrance to the site where the Chairman, Vice Chairman, and members of the Council received Mr and Mrs Napier Miles. The Chairman who presided, then made a statement about the plan of the building. This was followed by the Vice Chairman who read the Deed conveying the site as a free gift from Napier Miles to the Parish Council. After making a few remarks, Napier Miles then handed the Deed of Conveyance to the Chairman. Mrs Miles was then conducted alongside the Foundation Stone where the Chairman presented her with a Silver Trowel and the Vice Chairman an Oak Mallet. Mrs Miles then laid the stone, saying, "I declare this stone to be well and truly laid." The Reverend A. J. Harvey, Vicar of Shirehampton, then said a prayer The Chairman then deposited a box containing a record of the proceedings along with a copy of the Parish Magazine in the cavity of the stone which was then sealed up.

The building was to be of local limestone from the quarry under Penpole Point with dressings of Bath stone, the roof of gray Cumberland slate. In the centre of the roof a small turret with a louvre and a cupola, at the south west end a large ornamental turret with a louvre and above a cupola in which a clock was to be placed and a weather vane. The eaves of the roof to project over an attractive white painted cornice crowning the top of the walls. Along the outside upper storey walls, a rough stucco rendering over the stonework broken by large semi-circular oriel windows of small glass panes. At ground level, the stonework to be exposed contrasting with the rendering above with large windows flush to the walls bordered by Bath stone with quoins of the same material for the cornerstones of the walls.

There was to be an imposing main entrance under a shell doorway and a small circular window with attractive carving on each side. On a pillar a gas lamp. Above was to be carved 'SHIREHAMPTON PARISH HALL 1904'. The Hall, designed to accommodate at least 500 persons, of whom 370 would be seated on the ground floor the rest in the gallery. [Editor's note: This is a substantial overestimate. The present capacity of the Hall is a maximum of 200 people.] There was to be a stage the full width of the Hall, all under a coved plaster ceiling with dormer windows in the walls. There were to be other rooms leading off to include the caretaker's accommodation. At the south west end on the ground floor, a Reading Room with a Library upstairs from the Andrew Carnegie Fund. The contract price was finally £2,715. One may wonder if the stone from the Squire's quarry was given gratis or at some low rate per ton and if any timber came from his carpenter's shop. The Council said they would let the new hall on easy terms for local people and for others outside they would make the expense as light as possible.

The Men who built the Parish Hall

With the contract signed, work started. The contractor was Mr C. A. Hayes of St Thomas Street, Bristol, with Mr James Long, Clerk of Works. At this distance in time, now 95 years on. one may picture the work involved. Men wielding picks and shovels digging the trenches for the

foundations. At the Penpole Quarry, a labour force employed blasting the rock face for the stonework needed, followed by breaking up large stones with sledge hammers, then loading horse drawn carts to be driven along the rough track on to the narrow road through the village to the workings. The Bath stone for the dressings may have come to the railhead at Shirehampton station or down river in a barge and then brought to the site. With the offloading, masons dressed the stone and then aided by labourers, laid the foundations. As the building progressed, wooden poles for scaffolding erected from which stones and mortar had to be hauled. With the walls up, the carpenters and glaziers put in the windows. After the chimney stacks and cupolas had been erected, the roof timbers set by the carpenters were covered in by the slaters. Nearing completion, the doors, windows, inside and out, were painted along with the palings and notice board. The plaster work on the walls inside painted and other fixtures put in by the plumbers and gas fitted with carpenters finishing the flooring.

The building must have attracted a great deal of interest. The Squire occasionally coming down with his lady in a carriage to see the workings and to talk with the Parish Council, the contractor and the Clerk of Works. He may well have mused about the concert parties he would put on. The work was hard and the hours long, starting at six in the morning until six in the evening and often a six day week. The wages were low, varying from craftsmen and labourers of about 4d to 5d per hour or just over £1 a week.

The building was completed in a year thanks to their labours. We do not have the names of these men who built the Parish Hall with the exception of Mr G. Jones who lived at Penpole Place who, with his workmates, stood in front of the entrance for a photograph. Then there was a watchman, usually an old man, who during the night sat outside of his hut in front of a brightly burning fire occasionally doing his rounds to ensure the materials were safe from thefts. These men have now passed on although their fine work remains a monument to them.

Opening of the Parish Hall and Carnegie Library September 29th, 1904

It was now an attractive building in an early eighteenth century style with gravel paths and a lawn enclosed by a low stone wall with a white painted fence. The members of the Parish Council received Mr and Mrs Napier Miles, Sir Edward Fry and others at the main entrance of the building. The Chairman then invited Mrs Miles to open the building presenting her with a silver-gilt key for the main door. On unlocking the door she said: "I have much pleasure in declaring this Hall and Library open, and I trust that same may be of much benefit to the Parishioners." Mr and Mrs Miles, Sir Edward Fry, the Parish Councillors, and others then made their way to the Library where Sir Edward was invited to enrol his name in the Library Register. The party afterwards proceeded to the Hall where the Reverend A. J. Harvey said prayers.

Extension of the City and County of Bristol Boundary 1904

A Poll had been held in the Parish as to its being included in the City Boundary with the result that a majority of 102 being in favour of the inclusion. In 1904, Shirehampton, Westbury on Trym and part of Henbury were added to the City and County of Bristol after centuries as part of south Gloucestershire. Following the boundary change, stones with the incised letters 'C.B.' were laid near the Iron Bridge and in the wood of the inner Kingsweston Park near Penpole Lane.

The Shirehampton Parish Council was now dissolved. In the January of 1905 at the Shirehampton School, not the Public Hall, the Vicar, the Reverend A. J. Harvey, presented Mr Collins with a handsome clock with an inscription in gratitude for his services. Each member of the outgoing Council also received a framed photograph of the Parish Council which had been taken outside of the newly built Public Hall near the foundation stone.

On the 6th March, 1905, the new library was opened to the public by Alderman Walls, Chairman of the Libraries Committee in the presence of Norris Mathews, City Librarian and other members. After the opening ceremony, vouchers to enable borrowers to obtain books were issued. It was

now part of the City and County of Bristol Municipal Public Libraries. Over the doorway to the main building the inscription had now been changed to 'SHIREHAMPTON PUBLIC HALL'.

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