

The story of the church hall begins, not in 1989, but in 1975!

At that point the village was developing rapidly, and more facilities were needed for the Sunday school. But isn't it always the way that when you need to do something there are lots of other things crying for your attention.

So the organ needed work at that time, the Bellcote on the roof was unsafe, and worst of all - there was dry rot and death watch beetle infesting the church floor and timbers. It looked like finding a bigger home for the Sunday school would have to wait.

11 years later - having repaired the church, some money was raised to purchase an old caravan which was in the vicarage garden for the Sunday school. But this was temporary and the dream was always "beyond the caravan".

Another 3 years - Jan 1989 - and someone saw an advert for an old building for sale in Somerset. The vicar and wardens went down to see it - and the PCC agreed to purchase it in Feb.

And now you have to grasp this.

We have a building, in the next county. We have no money, no work force, and at this stage no planning permission either.

It took a whole team to dismantle the building. Every bit of wire was wound up and saved in old tea chests. At night John and Dawn would go through all the wire to check it wasn't damaged. Then the whole building was dismantled, piece by piece. A local builder had 2 flat bed trucks free one weekend, and basically just 4 people loaded the whole thing up. John was nearly 60 at the time, so I can't imagine how difficult it must have been.

Brought to Alderholt it was stored in someone's barn, because at this stage there was still no planning permission to put it up!

Reading - Hebrews 11:1 - 18

I don't know what dealings you have had with the county council or with the planners. It is a very hairy experience I can tell you. You can think it's all going smoothly and suddenly there is a vote and it all goes the wrong way. You feel powerless and small, and can't rely on common sense or kindness to win out. But you can rely on God. For a month they sat there with a huge building, in pieces, and no where to put it. But finally in April (Easter of course!) full planning permission was granted. And then they were told that as it was a public building it would need to be fully compliant with current building regulations.. so there were lots of adaptations needed.

You may have watched Grand Designs and seen people self build before, and laughed at the stress they have - but most of them have machines and all sorts to help them. All Alderholt had was a team of willing people, and God.

First the site needs to be cleared

Then foundations dug, and footings laid

Then rubble added - 75 tonnes of infill 75,000 kg — by hand!

Then sand

Then one load of cement

Then a screed, and another load of cement

Given free or 1p

All that took 4 months. Every Sunday, the workforce, the church, labourers, caterers, all sorts. finally - August bank holiday - the building frame went up

Walls, easy

Each roof truss weighs 250 KG, or 40 stone! and there were no cranes!

Then each roof panel

4 days later - it was up and waterproof.

And ready for the fitting out...

stud walls needed to go in

All those electrics

A screed floor

Insulation

Plasterboard given by local firms

(wrong size, imperial noggins, then metric plasterboard)

All the time - no extra money, no extra labour - and the vicar left partway through as well.

Bathrooms needed tiling and installing and plumbing in

The kitchen units were sourced and fitted

Ceiling panels

Curtains, heaters.

Still the work went on.

Then there was outside - ramps to meet the regs

and landscaping and putting the garden back!

More than 35 people worked for more than 6000 hours for free to make this building stand.

So 30 years ago yesterday - there was one heck of a celebration.

18 months after they saw the advert, St James had a new church hall - a place for the Sunday school, for other church groups. For teas and coffee after church. It was the envy of parishes bigger and wealthier around.

And so on that evening - There was not just a vicar covering the interregnum, but the rural dean, the archdeacon, and the Bishop of Salisbury. Let me tell you - the only time I've seen those 3 together these days would be some confirmation service in the Cathedral.. but Alderholt was special and this was a special celebration.

Jean as Church warden gave a great speech

John Cox and project manager gave a great speech

in which he said - it says on this plaque (built to the glory of God, but I say - to God be the Glory.

And in a moment we'll go and see the building

But here's the thing - I've done some building projects and I know - although we start by needing a building, what we end up with is not really about bricks and mortar, or timber and glass - it's about people. What was built was a fellowship - trust and love and care - by spending so long, and risking so much.

Faith that said - we're going to try and do this, and trust God, and see what happens - and wow - by faith things invisible become visible. And if God can do this, then what more can he do?

I think this is a bit like Recreate - which is not about putting up tents and putting out chairs and running ourselves ragged - it's about working together, by faith.

And when this started - there was no money. The church scrapped through its repairs, and there were times when there were less than £200 in the bank. And then it built a hall. And all that was done was done with help from others, with a shoe string, reliant on God. And thank God, we're not in that hard pressed place any more - which is good, but also means we can forget what it means to have to ask for stuff, or to rely on God, or to want something enough to make it happen by hook or by crook.

So my challenge today is - what's the new venture that St James is being called to go on. We're never called to stand still. Never to rest on our laurels, or say - that's it now. We have Forest Edge Cafe and we have Recreate. Yes we need a children and families worker, but that's not the challenge. Let's dream big, as big as our God. Their motto was "beyond the caravan" - well let us look beyond the church hall, beyond Recreate.. what is it that God is calling us to, what is he giving us the faith to build, where can the kingdom of God grow in this place...

Thanks to those who have built it, continue to careful maintenance. that it is in such excellent condition today..