

# The Building Of A House Of God 1942 – 1960.

Written by N.R.J Bradshaw, MA, Headmaster of Lewes County Grammar School for Boys (1930 – 1960)

"O how amiable are thy dwellings thou Lord God of hosts"

The holding of a regular School Service in a Lewes Church was a feature to which the war years gave birth. The decision to build our own Chapel sprang to life at the same time.

I remember it was in January 1942, as I lay in a hospital bed recovering from an operation, that the thought occurred of how appropriate a chapel would be as a memorial to those lads, sadly growing in number, who were sacrificing their lives in the Forces.

It was of course impossible and inappropriate to do anything on a large scale until the conflict ceased. One could, however, make known to parents and Old Boys what I had in mind.

As casualties occurred, the parents of those boys began to send "In Memoriam" donations to a "Chapel Fund". "Leaving Gifts" likewise helped to increase the total.

Furthermore we had, when the war broke out, several acres of rough land awaiting levelling and conversion into playing fields.

This land became a source of income. It grew vegetables which we sold to the school kitchen. We claimed the government "ploughing up grant" and when we grew potatoes, the "potato subsidy".

Sometimes we grew a grass crop, borrowed a cutter from a farmer and converted it into hay which we sold to a Lewes corn merchant.

I had estimated that we should need about £10,000. This was based on the cost of a new church at Hove which had been completed immediately before the war broke out.

It also allowed for the contribution that we could make in the school workshop to interior fittings, and in digging foundations before the builders came in. But I did not appeal publicly for funds.

With all the contention in religious matters which had surrounded the spread of a State system of Education, I was apprehensive of what uproar might arise over a school chapel in a State school, especially when I recalled reactions at a Governors meeting to my proposal to build a school swimming bath.

I felt it was more expeditious to say little. Allusion was made to the project in the School magazine and donations recorded there. My own Governors knew what I was about and I could generally count on their support. On this occasion they approved my action in raising money without committing themselves on the objective.

The School magazine of February 1943 contained a first list of subscribers and a recorded sum of £183, a small amount no doubt, but evidence of effort and of self-denial. Some boys who had worked on farms in the previous summer holidays handed in their earnings.

A junior form had held its own "Chapel week" and raised fifty shillings. A gift of £5 was made by a boy who was leaving. Rabbits reared at school and sold produced £4.0.0d. A

young widow sent £10 in memory of her husband, one of our R.A.F casualties of 1940. The school hayrick had been sold for £30 and vegetables from the school garden, used in school dinners, £57.17.0d. Subsequent wartime magazines included such items as £1 for digging a neighbour's garden, £13 from a Saturday night dance at the school. A number of leaving gifts, more "In Memoriam" donations, the "Headmaster's Geese" £43 (hatched out at his home and reared at school), further Saturday night dances, £194, and "Porcus Primus" reared in a shed in the school field £11.

In such ways £1292 had been raised by the end of the war. This sum was modest, trifling perhaps compared with the ultimate total required. But assessed before inflation it represented dedication and effort of a high order. It also implied indirect benefits.

A Saturday night dance at school when a very modest charge was made, provided recreation for young people who had left school and were as yet too young to commence National Service in the Forces, and kept them off the streets. The master who organised the dances suggested the Chapel should be dedicated to St. Vitus.

At last the war ended and it was now possible to think of the shape of school life in a post-war world. I apprehended that many schemes which had lain dormant while the war lasted would get under way and that there would be a deluge of appeals for financial help. I was determined to get in early before purses were empty and generosity exhausted. And so we held our first fete in November 1945. Our objective, a memorial to our fallen Old Boys, came soon enough to exercise a strong appeal.

Help was solicited from anyone who had been in any way connected with the school since its opening. A Parents Committee was formed to organise all money-raising activities on the day, and through one of its members we secured Commander Campbell, a leading B.B.C personality, to open our fete.

In addition to subscriptions, a mountain of articles, old and new, came pouring in for the stalls. Articles of above average value were auctioned or raffled. On the day hundreds of teas... at a profit... were supplied to visitors.

At midnight, a dance ended the day's proceedings. Quiet descended on the building at last. The Headmaster and the school caretaker sank exhausted onto seats in the deserted hall. But our Chapel Fund had increased by £1738. Never again did we operate on so ambitious a scale.

A small sale event was held yearly in each Autumn term and larger efforts were made in 1948 and 1952, when Tommy Handley and Gilbert Harding in turn performed the opening ceremony.

But even with such popular public figures we could not expect to clear more than about £700, and our usual small annual sale brought in little more than £100 or so.

One also had to take care that the normal work of the school was safeguarded in case the boys suffered academically. A parent gave us 500 Chapel boxes for the boys to take home and also to be placed in shops in our recruitment area. We had printed "Chapel Cards" divided into twenty squares or "bricks", each section representing sixpence. These were distributed among the boys and kept by them for a year and then returned with the proceeds. The school secretary, a lady, borrowed a street organ and with boys to pull it for her, collected £50 in Lewes streets one Saturday morning.

On a Saturday morning too, four boys in the neighbouring small town of Uckfield, from whence many pupils came, with a cap on the pavement inviting passers-by to subscribe, played musical instruments and collected in a couple of hours £14.

Meanwhile in 1953 we experienced a major stroke of good fortune. The London organ building firm of William Hill & Son and Norman and Beard had an office and storeroom in Lewes. The firm was asked to quote for the removal of the organ from the Chapel of Cuddesdon Theological College near Oxford.

A sympathetic secretary in Lewes enquired whether I was interested. I made a hurried visit to the College with my Music Master and was invited to go to the Chapel and examine the organ. My Music Master expressed surprise that the College should want to dispose of it. The organ had been built in 1874, the middle of the last century, by Messrs William Hill & Son one of the great English organ builders. It needed an overhaul but was basically sound.

Asked why he wanted to get rid of it the Principal of the College said that the space it occupied in the gallery was required for students. Musical services could be held in the Village Church opposite the College.

And so with the consent of the Bishop of Oxford it was removed to Lewes and placed in store until such time as we were ready for it. Ultimately £1850 was spent on renovating and installing the organ.

The Education Committee could not help with the cost of building the Chapel. But they were free to meet the cost of the organ and did so.

Official approval for the Chapel Scheme had been given by the Governors in 1951 and by L.E.A in 1952. But we were dependent on our own efforts.

Our local Authority were faced with a great construction backlog left by the war years and, in any case, a chapel in a maintained day-school was not included in the Ministry's recognised official schedule of school buildings.

Until we had amassed a substantial sum, sufficient to indicate that we were likely to attain our objective independently, it was not wise to start to build.

But building costs, which had been obscured during the war period through lack of private construction, were rising all the time and the £10,000 which we had originally made our target had long ceased to be adequate.

Furthermore, after several years of effort, with nothing visual to show for our struggle, our well-wishers were becoming disheartened.

A start seemed essential. As a post-war emergency measure requested by the Ministry, technical sections had been formed at many schools to supply urgently needed entrants to the building trade. We had such a section at Lewes and soon included in its organisation were day-release apprentices.

This, in turn meant that we had men with building and technical qualifications to teach them. Although the Local Authority could not sponsor our effort financially, the County Architect's department took us under its wing and produced designs and a scale model of the proposed chapel.

All building operations were still controlled and so we had to make application to the

Ministry of Works as a private concern since the proposed building was not being sponsored by the L.E.A.

In 1953 a member of the County Architect's staff accompanied me to London. My reception by an underling was unsympathetic but a licence to build was granted, but almost immediately afterwards control ceased.

So by 1954 we were free from official building restrictions and could go ahead. But we did not do so. Our plans depended on voluntary labour as well as on a continuing supply of money.

A new nearby building housed the day-release apprentices and these as well as boys in the 11 to 16 age group in our technical stream could make a big practical contribution. It was not forthcoming.

Perhaps it was foolish to have imagined that youths released from their day to day tasks in the building trade to widen their background of knowledge should use much of this time in the practical task of laying bricks, though I had been assured beforehand by the man in charge, on the occasion of his appointment, that this would be possible. Footings were staked out and dug - but by boys in the Grammar School section.

I began to ponder on alternative expedients. Post-war extension of our school buildings owing to increased numbers would include a new Assembly Hall.

Would a combined chapel/assembly hall built by adding the money we had raised for a chapel to the L.E.A's financial commitment in building a new Assembly Hall solve the problem? For the moment I did not pursue this idea.

But circumstances compelled me to revert to it. Bishop Bell of Chichester tried to get us "The Week's Good Cause" appeal, which was broadcast each Sunday night, but in vain. A parents Committee, set up to deal with our Chapel project decided that it was beyond us.

Tenders had been received for the Chapel designed by the County Architect and these revealed it would cost at least £28,000. In the first instance we had set out to raise £10,000. We had now (1955) raised about £12,000. But the goal receded as fast as money was raised.

The trustees of the Chapel Fund informed the Governors at their meeting in November 1955 that they were willing to devote the fund to the construction of a dual purpose building, a chapel assembly hall provided the essentials of a chapel were preserved. The Assembly Hall would be paid for by the L.E.A, the cost of the chapel would be met from the funds raised by voluntary effort. A majority of parents by now favoured a dual purpose building unless the scheme was to be deferred indefinitely.

The Governors accepted the proposal and the Education Committee in turn agreed to include this in their building programme for 1957/8. But the Ministry were unable to sanction construction until 1958/9.

However, all was far from plain sailing. The ideal site for a separate chapel was East of the school, where it would stand surrounded by a pleasant sweep of green turf.

For an assembly hall the County Architect insisted that this must be at the West end of the existing buildings nearest to the school entrance.

But here there was insufficient space to include adequate provision for a dual purpose chapel/assembly hall building extension worthy of the name.

The plan to make considerable savings by using voluntary labour had been abandoned. The County Architect on second thoughts doubted whether a building firm would take over such a partially built structure and hold itself responsible for the final result. Moreover it would be necessary to have someone constantly on the site to check in the supply of materials as they arrived. In addition there was the risk of injury to boys working on scaffolding or the lads underneath from falling bricks.

So nothing remained but to go ahead in raising funds to pay our share of a dual purpose building, built entirely by a firm of outside contractors.

Attempts were made to obtain from the Ministry permission for the Local Authority to help us with our share of the cost of the chancel. We still needed about £8,000. The support of our constituency M.P. was enlisted and he urged our cause on successive Ministers of Education. Mr. David Eccles and Mr. Geoffrey Lloyd.

From both we received sympathy in our enterprise and hopes for our success. Both however asserted that they could not sanction a contribution to a separate chapel which was not recognised as part of a maintained school, but were such a chapel built, permission to the L.E.A to maintain it would be granted.

There would be no difficulty in using money raised by private effort to enlarge and embellish a new assembly hall which had been approved, thereby providing a chapel/assembly hall. But the Ministry could not do more than this.

And so alternative designs for a chapel/assembly hall were submitted to the Governors in February 1957. Delay had occurred owing to the switch from the plan of a separate chapel to a combined building.

Considerable dismay was expressed by Governors at the new designs and at the proposal not to use the site East of the school building. That the new designs failed to satisfy the Governors was not surprising.

With the parents representative on the Governing Body I had spent a Saturday afternoon exploring dual purpose post-war halls which had been erected for community needs, secular and religious, in Crawley New Town.

None successfully solved the problem which was probably incapable of solution, of building a hall which would provide for secular activities and at the same time preserve a religious atmosphere.

At a meeting with representatives of the Education Committee in March 1957 the Governors were informed that the Ministry would insist on a design for a hall which could be used as a chapel and not vice-versa, and on a site West of the school near the main entrance.

Furthermore the Chapel Fund must contribute £20,000 towards the total cost. An immediate decision was required as the hall had been included in the 1958/9 County building programme.

The County Architect explained the reasons for the site West of the school and the difficulties of designing a dual purpose building which would meet both religious and secular demands.

He recommended a separate chapel at the East end to be built if necessary in stages. The Governors decided to recommend the L.E.A to build an assembly hall and to continue with their own efforts to build a separate chapel.

A feeling of weariness and frustration now began to be felt by those of us who had been

most active from the beginning. Fresh & alternative sketch plans for a separate chapel were submitted by the County Architect but these aroused little enthusiasm. However, the Architect expressed his inability through lack of time to supervise the actual building operations himself. He proposed to engage a local architect on our behalf for this subordinate purpose at a fee of 4 1/5%. We had reached the end of the road.

One of our Governors was a near neighbour of the eminent architect Sir Edward Maufe R.A. who had a country home in Sussex. Sir Edward had designed the R.A.F. Memorial at Runnymede, Guildford Cathedral, and several delightful churches in Sussex.

At the end of 1957 it was decided to ask him to design a chapel reduced in size which could be built for £20,000. Sir Edward, with the agreement of the County Architect, consented to do this and his designs were exhibited in the Autumn Exhibition of the Royal Academy.

But we were not yet clear financially and money-raising efforts had to continue. A fresh appeal in 1958 to parents and Old Boys to support the new scheme brought in a wonderful response of £2,700. The Chairman of the Governors, an Old Etonian ex MP persuaded the Dulverton Trust to give us £2,000.

To provide goods for the stalls at Chapel Sales, sewing parties were held in the evenings in Lewes or in their own localities by parents who lived at a distance. Weekly collections were made in each form. Several parents organised small local sales which produced sums of around £70 to £100.

The Headmaster wrote to some of the Public Schools and suggested that they might devote a collection at their own Sunday Chapel Service to our prospective chapel.

Fifteen schools including Eton responded and subscribed £177. A number of the staff of the "Sunday Times" visited the school and although no appeal was made, in the write-up which followed readers sent over £400 to the Headmaster.

Sir Edward, our architect, gave himself with complete dedication to his task. When I proposed that we could delay the erection of the figure of St. George, carved by a brilliant young sculptor, Alan Collins, over the West door, he decided to pay for it himself to save us £850. To have omitted it would have impaired the effect he aimed to achieve.

When a former Governor's family offered to give this figure as a memorial to a son who had been killed in 1940, Sir Edward gave us the altar and its hangings instead - an equally valuable gift. Every small detail received his personal attention.

In a letter to me he wrote on the designs he had made for the chapel, "I am so pleased that you like its classic character. I wanted this myself and think it was most right for your school. I was confident it could be done and yet bring people to their knees. Some people seem to think that this can only be done with Gothics but of course this is nonsense".

The Chapel was to be built in cast stonework, large concrete blocks treated on the surface with powdered Portland stone. A member of the firm which made them had Lewes connections and we were given a cost concession. Favoured treatment of this nature was enjoyed in other instances.

The cork floor of the nave and aisles was treated by Messrs Ronuk without charge. The firm supplying the cement used in the construction credited our account with £50 before the work commenced. The firm providing the bricks used in construction made a reduction

of 10/- per thousand. All the paint required for the interior was given by a London firm of manufacturers.

That we received such generous and favoured treatment was due I think to the interest and sympathy which had been aroused by the magnitude and uniqueness of our venture and of course to its religious objective.

Even the indifferent caught the enthusiasm. A wealthy local farmer and landowner who at the outset had volunteered the information that he would make no contribution to the project, changed his mind.

He enquired how much the lighting installation would cost. The estimate was too much for him. No elaborate building was necessary in which to worship God. He was a Quaker. He paid for the drainage instead.

The Chairman of the Governors was tireless in his efforts. Unknown to me he had paid £500 into the Chapel Fund at the bank. When I raised the question of its origin he said "Well, I thought you might be worrying over how you could meet your commitments so I thought this would help a little".

At a Governors meeting in November 1958 a tender of £21,612, the lowest of five was accepted. This was submitted by a parent who, like the architect, was dedicated to his task. I was able to report that the money collected or promised would cover this sum. But only the fabric was included in the tender.

Another £4,000 was ultimately required for architect's fees, furnishings, stalls, seating, hassocks etc. As already explained and in addition, the organ, the altar with its hangings and the figure of St George were given privately. In the end the total sum amassed was £26,500 and this left us with a credit balance at the bank of about £500.

One further piece of good fortune was experienced. The Borough Surveyor, a parent, informed me that in a builder's yard in Lewes was a bell taken from the recently demolished Lewes Naval Prison. The bell was ours if we wanted it. It had a mellow tone and was ideal for our purpose. Its value was enhanced by its historic connection. The prison had been built about 1793 to house prisoners taken in the Revolutionary Wars with France.

Fixtures of the Chapel, in addition to the figure of St. George, included a chancel floor of polished Purbeck freestone, sedilia on the South side of the chancel in York stone, the cork floor in the nave and aisles, conducive to silence, the altar hangings in blue cream and gold, toning with the blue of the ceiling and the blue kneelers and fluorescent lighting behind the altar cross.

The cross had been given by two Old Boys in memory of their parents. The aisles were raised above the level of the nave floor and were spanned at the base by beautifully constructed oak balusters. Seating in the aisles facing inwards behind the balusters considerably increased the capacity of the Chapel.

We could accommodate 300 with ease and more than that number if necessary. The names of our 55 fallen Old Boys were carved on the Portland stone wall inside the main entrance. Inscribed over them are the words of Pericles on the Greek dead at Thermopylae. "Seek for their resting place not in the earth but in the hearts of men".

The dawn of 1959 saw us free to go ahead at last. Even so we still had our frustrations including a gap of six weeks when work came to a standstill because building blocks of the required shape or size were not forthcoming. At last, on a Friday in June 1960 the builder's foreman came to my study and reported that they would be leaving that afternoon, all was finished.

I thought of a well-known prayer, so appropriate on this occasion ... "O Lord God, when thou givest to thy servant to undertake any great matter, grant us also to know that it is not the beginning but the continuing of the same until it be thoroughly finished which yieldeth the true glory".

We did not wait for the official dedication but began using the building straight away. The boys, who had shared in the struggle, and had watched the successful culmination, went home excited to tell their parents. On a lovely summer June morning I stood outside watching the boys enter the West door.

The mellow sound of the bell floated over the water meadows which stretched southwards to the coast. A six foot cross in gold-leaf on the belfry glistened against the sky, visible on both sides of the Ouse Valley.

The old groundsman who was working nearby shyly drew up to me and said "When I looks at it Sir, I calls to mind "When I survey", So the Chapel provided a silent witness to those outside as well as an inspiration to those within.

On Sunday afternoon, 10th July 1960, the Bishop of Chichester presided at a dedication service. Fifteen hundred parents, pupils and Old Boys were present. Parents of the dead were amongst those inside the chapel. Others were inside the school Assembly and Dining Halls and the service was relayed to them there.

Immediately following the dedication came an Act of Commemoration. I stood on the chancel steps, with four junior boys, each representing his house, "Let us remember here, in the presence of God those who gave their lives in the last war, particularly the Boys of this School", I said.

Each boy then read out the names of former members of his house who had been killed. This was followed by Bunyan's great and moving description of the passing of Mr. Valiant for Truth.

After this I said, "On the lintel of the door of this building are three words, "Dare Nec Computare" - "To give and not to count the cost", the School motto, to which the agonies of the war years gave birth.

And as you passed those names on the memorial tablets you no doubt read the inscription in the noble words chosen by our architect. "Seek for their resting place, not in the earth, but in the hearts of men".

Two thousand years ago a sacrifice was made on Calvary without counting the cost and ever since has rested in the hearts of men. The conception of giving springs from Christ himself and leads us back to him.

Giving prompted those whose memory we commemorate this afternoon. Giving prompted



you're affecting generosity, the dauntless struggles over the years, to erect a memorial to those who have given.

And that memorial is a house of God where the young people of this school may seek and find the One who has left the supreme example of giving. We start with Christ and we end with him.

This building is designed and built not for a day, not for a year, but for a thousand years. Those we commemorate, you who have built it. will rest in the hearts of men.

And many a boy in the quiet of this Chapel, will achieve an awareness of Christ and will learn the great lesson of giving.  
And for those who have learnt and practised in the trumpet will sound on the other side".

Sitting before me were parents who had suffered personal loss. Tears trickled down their cheeks.

Free Church as well as Anglican Clergy had taken part in the service. The Offertory was taken during the last hymn by craftsmen who had worked on the building and who had given up their Sunday afternoon leisure and travelled into Lewes to be present.

"From strength to strength go on; Wrestle and fight and pray; Tread all the powers of darkness down And win the well-fought day".

We sang with feeling and emotion. We too had wrestled, fought and prayed. Perhaps we could claim to have been true to the School Prayer, now pronounced by the Bishop before the Blessing.

"Teach us good Lord to serve thee as thou deservest; to give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil and not to seek for rest; to labour and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we do thy will"

In three weeks time, my head mastership, which had lasted thirty years, would have ended. As those who had been outside the Chapel filed through to see what they had helped to accomplish I slipped quietly away. The task was finished. To discuss it at this juncture seemed out of place.