

LAVANT MEMORIAL HALL ANNUAL REPORT 2024

2024 was a successful year for the hall with users broadly satisfied, occupancy up, various improvements carried out and no flooding. Nevertheless, substantial challenges lie ahead with attracting new volunteers to replenish, or at least support, the dwindling and ageing management team (current average age 79) and the increasing need for paid assistance.

Whether due to climate change or otherwise, flooding remains an existential threat. After the floods of 2023, the year began with an anxious wait to see whether the River Lavant would again overtop. Fortunately, it did not do so, although coming perilously close. A small “flood watch” team responded on a number of occasions at short notice to erect the hall’s flood barriers when there was a risk of an overnight inundation and this action managed to keep the hall open for hirers. We continued to support Lavant Parish Council in making representations to the Environment Agency and Southern Water to take flood mitigation action.

It also became apparent that the remodelling of the car park entrance in 2023 had introduced a new risk of flash flooding to the car park and entrance following heavy rain, the surface levels with respect to the highway having been incorrectly set. Representations to WSCC Highways resulted in some action to clear storm drains, but the threat remains. A considerable amount of time has been spent on trying to find a solution that does not require the erection of flood barriers (which temporarily close the hall) every time there is a threat of sudden heavy rain in winter. To-date, a suitable scheme is yet to be identified. Following the withdrawal of insurance cover for storm and flood risk in 2023, we continue to maintain a substantial reserve as a self-insurance against further flooding.

Against this backdrop it was pleasing to see that hirer occupancy was slightly up on 2023, with a corresponding increase in revenue. Hirings have now returned to pre-Covid levels with a core of some 30 organisations using the hall on a regular basis. During the year we were pleased to welcome a further Pilates provider, catering for early morning classes, although an attempt to re-start a Creation Station franchise did not succeed.

The trustees gave some consideration to the role of the Hall within the village, given its charitable purpose, whilst noting that the Lavant Churches provide a number of activities aimed at addressing social needs. It had been hoped to solicit village attitudes alongside the Parish Council’s wider community survey, but ultimately this was deferred, at least until after the Council’s survey. Nevertheless, we went ahead with a survey of our regular users, the first time this had been done, which produced some valuable insights into our users’ demographics and hall experience. What emerged was a picture of a hall operating as an unattended venue for hire – much valued by its regular users and occasional hirers – but less the social hub of a village. This probably reflects changing social patterns and the proximity of Lavant to Chichester.

Some two thirds of user organisations responded, representing upwards of 500 individuals. Gratifyingly, user experience was overwhelmingly positive and the hall is clearly valued, particularly its setting and ambience. There were useful suggestions for improvement, many of which are being addressed, but little common themes beyond a wish to ensure users left the hall as others would wish to find it – a particular challenge for an unattended hall. A final report on the survey and the actions taken, will be published early in the new year.

The trustees discussed whether to hold a Christmas Fayre in 2024, the feeling being that the event had become a little “tired” and was in need of a re-fresh. It was agreed that such an event should primarily be a village event that might serve to strengthen the connection with the village and elicit heightened interest in the hall. Nevertheless, funds raised should at least cover the opportunity cost. The event was re-branded a Christmas Market and re-launched with a bigger and wider variety of stalls, some activities specifically for children, and a more extensive publicity campaign covering both traditional and social

media to increase footfall. Despite the event coinciding with the peak of storm Bert, results were very encouraging, with gross receipts up three-fold and positive feedback from both stallholders and visitors.

The rolling programme of redecoration and improvements has continued. The Green Room and both kitchens were re-decorated and both the Green Room and Bleaches Room lighting were converted to energy-saving LED based illumination. The Green Room lighting was supported in part by a donation from the Lavant Fete Committee. Several roof repairs were carried out along with the replacement of a number of Main Hall ceiling tiles that had become damaged or marked. Some electrical work was undertaken to facilitate the use of radio microphones, mostly funded through The Lavant Players, and some modifications made in the Bleaches Room to make the installation more “hirer friendly”. Outside the hall itself, the pavilion was in need of renovation following the 2023 flood and the work is now being undertaken in partnership with Lavant Cricket Club who are providing the labour.

After careful consideration, hall hire rates were raised by around 5% overall in response to the normal inflationary pressures and, more particularly, entering into a new fixed-price electricity supply deal. The previous historical fixed deal had become excellent value, so the impact was an increase of about 80%, with electricity now contributing around 30% of operating costs. We also had the Hall re-valued for insurance purposes, resulting in a small increase in premium.

Amongst the policy issues considered were a review of safeguarding arrangements, although these largely devolve to users, and a response to the government consultation on Martyn’s Law, which proposes placing a “duty to protect” (against terrorism) on the trustees. There appears to be no recognition as yet as to how this might be applied proportionately to an unattended venue such as ours.

A risk assessment update was carried out, resulting in a number of minor actions that have been completed, including the marking of some potential hazards for those users with visual impairment. A specific fire risk assessment was also completed by a competent third party. Following a change of cleaning contractor the hall is now storing cleaning consumables and has instituted a CoSHH register.

I am grateful to the management committee, several of whom have undertaken particular tasks to progress our endeavours, for their support over the year. Booking Secretary, Jennie Lindfield, and Caretaker, Tony Bleach, also continued to ensure that the hall operated successfully on a day-to-day basis. My thanks and appreciation are due to all of you.

Sheila Sims has continued to combine the roles of Secretary and “200 Club” promoter with her customary efficiency and good humour, for which I am truly grateful.

Richard Wignall
Chair
December 2024