

## **The Story of the Old Scholars' Club - 22.3.07**

After the First World War, Mr Laming, the Headmaster of the Boys' School in Park Lane, decided that the boys returning from the Front needed somewhere to meet for recreation and education. In 1926 he recruited Mr Erlebach from Woodford House, the Vicar and several other public-spirited people and together they organised a plan to achieve this. Mr Erlebach negotiated with Major Powell-Cotton for the land and with a loan from the bank, plus some funds from the public, the hut was built. The work was done partly by a local building firm and partly by the lads themselves.

In the early days of the Club, they used it for table tennis, darts and social events. They had a small library and evening classes were arranged in subjects which the young men requested. Gradually the need for such facilities decreased, until it was becoming very difficult to keep up the membership to a viable number.

By the late 1930s, the Trustees, who were supervising the running of the Club, began letting it out to organisations to add to the revenue, so that maintenance bills could be met. During the Second World War the club hut was used for a number of different activities and then in 1947, during an acute housing shortage, it was requisitioned by the Government to be used for living accommodation. The Government converted it into a small bungalow and it was much appreciated by those returning to the village with nowhere to live.

In 1953, the Trustees asked if it could be returned to them, which it eventually was. The Trustees sought advice from three different people as to what they should do with the building. All three advised them to sell it as it was, and then invest the capital to help form a fund for giving grants to youngsters in Birchington when they left school. This advice was ignored, and instead, they converted the building back into a hall. It was then let to Park Lane School for a short time until, in 1955, it was let to the Birchington Silver Band at a rent of £35 a year, a not unreasonable sum in those hard times. The money was used each year to pay for the insurance on the building and to give grants to boys and girls for text books and tools when they went for further training or started in apprenticeships. The lease on the Club Hut was renewed every three years.

In 1973, the lease was again renewed, and a rise in rent was discussed. However, it was not implemented until the next renewal was due in 1976. The rent was then raised to £52 - again, a not unreasonable amount for the time. The rent was the only expense the Silver Band had to pay at the time and has remained the same ever since. Up until 1985 the Old Scholars' Club Trustees continued to pay the insurance on the building each year. However, in 1986 the insurance on the building was going to be more than the rent they were receiving, and it had become impossible to make any grants for some time, so

the Band was asked to take on this responsibility of paying the insurance - which literally doubled their expenditure that year. This was in lieu of a rent rise.

The Band has continued to pay the £52 plus the insurance, which has risen each year. For this sum, the Band has had sole use of the building ever since they took over the tenancy. The rent money was put into the Old Scholars' Charity Fund, and it should have been again possible to help youngsters and youth groups in Birchington, as their charter decreed. With so little coming in, the last time any grants were made was when a single one of £500 was made to the Birchington Active Youth Group being run by Peter Francis in February 1994. Previous to that, the only other donation for many years was for £50, made to the Birchington Junior Corps in February 1982.

During the time when Mr Alfred Walker was one of the Trustees, he arranged with the Charity Commissioners that when there was only one Trustee left, the Old Scholars' Club Charity would be handed over to the Crispe Charity. Unfortunately, he did not tell the Crispe Charity Trustees what he had done, so in 2004 it was a somewhat surprised body of Trustees who were suddenly in receipt of all the paper work connected with the Old Scholars' Club Charity. After a meeting of the Crispe Trustees, the Charity Commissioners were contacted and advised the Crispe Charity that they must manage their newly acquired asset far more diligently than its predecessors. They stressed that the Trustees' charitable activities were to be towards the youth and widows of the village, not towards the business tenants of the newly acquired property.

After advice from land and property agents, the Crispe Trustees suggested the new annual rent should be nearer to £3315, a more realistic rent for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which would be arrived at by stages. As the Silver Band have stated that they only use the hut for two hours practice each week, the most realistic solution would be for a shared tenancy, with one lessee taking over responsibility for finding the rent, but with permission to sub-let to other groups. By the scheme drawn up by the Charity Commissioners many years ago, the rent from the hut is intended for the youth of Birchington. The Crispe Trustees are now obliged to honour that commitment. Their own charity has existed for almost 300 years because each succeeding generation of Trustees had fulfilled their task.