

June 2014

Baldock Town Hall Group AGM

CHAIRMANS REPORT

It is almost a year ago today (on 21st June 2013) that the 99 year lease on the Old Town Hall building was signed and our group took over responsibility for the building from NHDC, after the best part of 3 years of negotiation.

It took another 8 weeks or so for us to actually exchange contracts and officially receive the keys for the building, but in that time we started work, with the help of a team from probation services, to get our usable space ready for event use and initiate phase 0 of our building works. This phase was introduced to get both halls, and usable areas such as toilets, kitchen and dressing room areas decorated and functional.

Therefore there was a flurry of activity involving committee members, available volunteers and all superbly supported by probation services community officers to ensure that the building was made good internally and eventually decorated throughout. We also had support from NHDC, providing agreed funds during our lease negotiations, as the building had not been properly maintained or actively used for over 20 years and was therefore in a neglected state, although structurally sound.

However, those early efforts paid off and thanks to the commitment of our committee and volunteers (with special thanks going to Bob for working closely with the PS supervisors), we held our first events in October 2013, culminating in what will be our annual Arts Festival, run by Joanna our Arts Director as 'The Fireside Festival', which was a fantastic achievement.. The Fireside Festival was a great success, but I must also mention the newly formed Drama Group, run by Maureen (ably supported by Nick) who also put on a 'Victorian Parlour Evening' to celebrate the buildings opening and gave us a practice for running the bar during the Festival.. We also owe a very big thank you to the management and staff of Baldock Community Centre, who have been such a great help to us in lending equipment and for the guidance they have given when it comes to running a community based building, for which we are extremely thankful.

So from all of these efforts, we were able to bring all of the phase 0 space back into use as Baldock Arts & Heritage Centre, in the 'Old Town Hall'.

I must also mention the small Museum, ably run by Brendon and volunteers, which has been the only occupied space over the last 20 years.. It is still operational and open twice a week for a couple of hours.. However it is our intention to renovate the museum space and provide facilities to expand the Heritage Centre on the ground floor, focusing on Baldock's rich and varied past and giving talks and providing workshops to local people of all ages.

After the Fireside Festival we spent a relatively quiet Christmas with a Comedy night and a couple of music events that were held with the support of our affiliation with Richard from London Road Studio's. Richard has provided lights, a sound system and help with the acoustics in the first floor Theatre space, which has been gratefully received.

However we did hold a special Friends Event to thank our past friends for their support and this also included our Grand Opening, where we invited Roddy Pryor to come and officially open the main hall as the Thomas Pryor, after our original benefactor for the building in C1897, who was Roddy's Great-Uncle.

In early January, after some weeks of form filling, we were granted Charitable Status and a special thank you to Brendan, Becca and John for the roles that they played in getting the charity status through.. This is going to be enormously helpful for future funding opportunities and other gift aid donations.

As previously mentioned, probation services worked doggedly throughout the year repairing, restoring, plastering, painting and cleaning so that today, with the enormous financial help we have received from local community groups such as The Baldock Bear Festival, The Baldock Mail, The Baldock Festival and KTS Ladies we were able to finish the decorating throughout the building, buy much needed comfortable seating and purchase new flooring for the downstairs foyer, where, just a year ago, it looked more like a building site than a usable event space.

We have been able to provide a bar at our functions thanks to our dedicated volunteers and we are looking to expand our volunteer pool to extend to our recently opened box office and coffee bar sessions on Tues – Sat.. Our thanks go to Joanna for donating lots of nice finishing touches in the foyer and to our booking's secretary Jenny for her very keen eye for an eBay bargain!

The last year has certainly been one of organisation, where I believe we have all played a significant role in bringing this together and really do feel that we should be very proud of what we have achieved in such a short space of time. We now have a few regular bookings, we get great feedback from those hiring the hall spaces and we are going from strength to strength.

Saying that, we still have our work cut out for the year ahead. We do have a few regular bookings, but we are still nowhere near covering our monthly costs and have not yet reached the income we forecast in our business plan. Part of our costs we can put down to the unforeseen utility costs, which are much higher than we had anticipated.. Therefore our building sub group are looking seriously into making energy savings before the winter months are upon us.

The planning group have worked hard to organise the foyer into a box office coffee bar during the day. This space is proving very popular and we have a couple of regular clubs using this space in the evenings. Our bookings secretary, Jenny, is receiving regular enquiries, supported by the communications team, who are looking to put a small glossy pamphlet together, including a financial summary from Anna, taken from our latest accounts. Our thanks go to Anna, for her extremely professional final accounts summary, too. It is this pamphlet that we are hoping to use to advertise the halls for hire. We recently had a small theatre group using the space for rehearsals and they gave good feedback.. Perhaps we could get some testimonials from these groups to include on our website.

Our events group are working on a late summer / autumn calendar, to include a joint event with St. Mary's Church and another performance by the drama group, hopefully nearer Christmas.. The Fireside Festival takes pride of place in November, this year and we are all very much looking forward to supporting Joanna and the team.

The funding group are also looking into future structural changes with the building group, so that costs and therefore funding streams can be identified and applications made. Depending on the grants/funding we can secure, it will take many months before any structural work is undertaken, but in the meantime we can really get the building on the events map in the local area.

So again, I would like to thank everyone for their solid commitment to this project and very much look forward to the year ahead and being part of such a great community scheme.

Alison Gentle
Chair
June 2014