

## Dry Drayton's Reading Rooms

"The History of the Dry Drayton Village Hall" by John Hacker and Cinnamon Bear was published in the Dry Drayton Village Newsletter in February and March 2021. The article tells a great story about the local community working together for the common good to bring about improved village facilities. The story of the Village Hall was the latest chapter in the efforts of the community to provide places of entertainment and learning in the village.

The mid to late 19th century saw the spread of reading rooms, village clubs and libraries into rural areas. Philanthropic land owners, rural clergy and local schoolteachers often provided the driving force behind the introduction of village reading rooms. There were a number of reasons behind this. First, it was believed that essential family values were at risk if the labourer spent all his time outside work in the local alehouse. An alternative could improve both the labourer and his lot. Second, improving local facilities might help to stem the flow of workers from the poorer rural areas into the towns.

Recognising the advantages to be gained, a meeting was held in the Alderman's Parlour of the Cambridge Guildhall, on Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> February 1893 for the inauguration of an Association For Promoting Village Clubs and Reading Rooms in the County of Cambridge. (endnote <sup>1</sup>). The meeting learned of the benefits which had been promoted by a similar association in Suffolk formed some 17 years previously. Mr C W Townley, the Lord Lieutenant of the County, was elected President and the Duke of Rutland and Lord Bishop of Ely Vice Presidents. The banker, Mr E J Mortlock JP, was elected Treasurer and Mr C W Martindale Hon Secretary. The meeting recognised the central problem of finding suitable accommodation at Parish level, concluding that this depended on the charity of the wealthier of the inhabitants to either provide a suitable room or make themselves responsible for the rent of a room. No subsequent newspaper reports have yet been found on the work of this Association, but it may well be that the Lieutenancy's network was a helpful influence behind the scenes.

Whether or not with any direct help from the County Association, there were at least two attempts to provide a reading room in Dry Drayton as an alternative to inhabitants spending all their time in one or more of its six public Houses.

The reading room, as its title suggests, was a place where books and newspapers were available to those who could not afford such luxuries at home. It was also a place where educational talks or classes might be given, or where locals might come together for a game of chess or other activities not involving copious alcohol consumption.

Today the provision of a village reading room sounds like an undertaking every bit as difficult to achieve as the later Village Hall project. But the obvious obstacles could be overcome. In a letter to the Editor of the Cambridge Chronicle 11 March 1892, a writer signing himself as "Ab Initio" wrote about the rural labourer. "*Why should he not have his reading room and his daily paper to instruct him what to do with his vote now it has been given to him? Surely one is as necessary as the other. Education is,*

*or should be, progressive, and should end only with life, for I contend the longer we live the more we see and learn. Let those who are interested in work in the county help us — and by so helping the labourer help themselves — to do something in starting reading rooms in all country districts."* Having made his case the writer then addressed the practicalities. *"All work must have a beginning, and from small commencements good foundations are laid. In every village where there is not a parish room available, a cottage can be hired for a very small sum. In this age of cheap publications and literature a few illustrated and other papers can be bought for a few pence, the price of a box of dominoes and a chess-board is not expensive, while for those who have funds in hand a bagatelle-board is not ruinous. Lectures might be given, and surely the clergy and farmers would help. I have seen rooms which have been self-supporting from the halfpence of the poor."*

Successful reading rooms were established in a number of local villages (Endnote <sup>2</sup>) in Cambridgeshire and other counties.



*Figure 1 Fred Crisp, local farm owner and successful businessman in his uniform as Deputy Lord Lieutenant of the County Photo with kind permission of Martin Edwards*

We do not currently know where the first Dry Drayton Reading Room was situated. It was probably in an empty one or two-room cottage in the village as suggested by "Ab Initio". Funding, at least in part, came from successful businessman and farm owner, County Councillor Fred Crisp, JP, the Deputy Lord Lieutenant of the County. Fred Crisp owned Scotland Farm and View Farm in Dry Drayton and would have been the biggest employer of Dry Drayton folks. The Cambridge Chronicle 6th January 1899 p4 reported: *"Dry Drayton. Reading Room. The Reading Room continues to be well patronised by the young men of the village and is well supplied with papers and periodicals at the expense of Mr. Crisp."*

Not much more is known about the first Dry Drayton Reading Room. If its survival depended on the generosity of Fred Crisp then it seems unlikely that it continued beyond his death in November 1905. By 1913 the first Reading Room had long ceased operation. On Friday 17 October 1913 the Cambridge Independent Press, p.12 reported:

*"Dry Drayton Reading Room. For some time past the need of a reading room in the village has been felt by the young men. A disused Baptist Chapel has been regarded as a likely place for the purpose, and Mr. Walter Silk, the owner, having been approached, has agreed to let the chapel, promising to put it in proper repair. A meeting was held on Monday night to form a committee to go into the matter of entrance fees, etc. Mr. W. Berridge was voted to the chair, and among others present were Messrs. Walter Silk, D. Shipp, F. Thompson, William Silk and George Curtis. The Chairman observed that they had got plenty of support, and the Rector had promised to get some subscribers. He thought it would be an excellent thing if it could be carried through, but the appointment of officials, etc., would be deferred until a later date. Mr. George Curtis also spoke in high terms of the reading room, and said he was willing give 2s. per quarter towards it. A number of those present gave their names as willing to become members. The following were elected to act on the committee, who are to take the necessary steps to forward the scheme: Messrs. Thomas Melsher, S. Huddleston, R. Hagger, George Curtis, sen., and E. Blunt."*

The project moved on quickly. A week later the Cambridge Independent Press on Friday 24 October 1913 p.12 reported: *"DRY DRAYTON. Parish Council. A meeting of the Parish Council was held the Schoolroom Friday, when there were present: The Rev. R. Winkfield (chairman), Messrs. W. Silk, W. Berridge, D. Ship, R. Impey, S. Huddleston and W. M. Silk, with Mr. T. Thompson (Clerk). An estimate was given as to putting the old Baptist Chapel in repair to make it suitable for a reading room. The Rev R. Winkfield promised to bear the cost, £7 10s. An offer was made to the owner of 10s. a year, the owner to pay the rates. This was agreed to and the room is to be opened as soon as the necessary alterations are completed."*

Work on the building was quickly carried out and the Reading Room opened on New Year's Eve 1913. Covering the opening, the Cambridge Independent Press on Friday 9 January 1914 p10 reported: *"a fairly large number of members joined. The Rev R Winkfield has been elected Treasurer and Mr B.Barker Secretary. The Committee consists of Messrs Webb, Silk, D.Ship, W. Berridge, E.Blunt, T.Melcher, and H.Hacker. Several new members have joined since."*

Currently we do not know when the Dry Drayton Reading Room closed. It might be expected that during WW1 there was a demand for news and newspapers. By 1923 another approach had brought free reading material to the Village. The Saffron Walden Weekly News - Friday 28 September 1923 P16 reported: *Public Library. A branch of the County Library has been established in Dry Drayton and books can now be obtained free by all residents over 14 years of age. Intending borrowers should make application to the hon local librarian, Mr Archer, at the school.*

Let us hope that more information may come to light about the Dry Drayton Reading Rooms. Do the minutes of the managing committee survive somewhere? Has anybody got a set of Rules of the Society, or even any of the Reading Room's old books, no doubt their ownership comprehensively labelled



*Was the second Dry Drayton Reading Room in this building, a former Baptist Chapel, now a private house at Duck End, known at the time as Meetinghouse Lane?*

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cambridge Independent Press - Friday 17 February 1893 p7

<sup>2</sup> Village reading rooms are believed to have been established in the following Cambridgeshire villages – (source: Cambridgeshire Collection card indices) Bottisham, Bourn, Burwell, Chatteris, Cottenham, Doddington, Downham, Little, Dry Drayton, Fen Ditton, Grantchester, Haddenham, Longstanton, Soham, Stapleford, Stow cum Quy, Sutton, Swaffham Prior, Weston Coville, Whaddon