

## **A drill hall**

In 1897, T E Ellis MP said that communal buildings, which are 'scoffed at by busy, pushing, prosperous' people 'have a curious knack of being recognised as permanent and solid truths by the more thoughtful men and women of our time'. He valued what he recognised as, 'almost instinctively in the builders... a natural taste for what was fitting and pleasurable and beautiful.'

Public buildings are part of the infrastructure of the community. Every neighbourhood is anchored in its buildings, which include its churches, civic buildings, premises connected with utilities, schools, shops and hospitals, which have had to be deliberately planned for and provided. In the era prior to and including the Great War, the list of cornerstone buildings included the drill halls and this is part of their significance and importance.

Contemporary archive material conveys the considerable pride with which towns regarded their drill halls and the immense public support which they attracted. From the first timber or iron drill sheds built in the 1860s for the Rifle Volunteers, via the grand architecture of the turn of the century, to the purely functional structures of the Great War era, these buildings were usually funded by the efforts of the voluntary soldiers themselves; subscription lists often show the officers and men as the primary donors, with fêtes, bazaars and concerts providing monies toward the repayment of loans for the costs of building and fitting out. These events were so well supported by the community that many debts were cleared within months. Often, too, philanthropic wealthy locals made generous gifts of money or land.

A drill hall was a purpose-built building, providing a space sufficiently large for soldiers to practice marching, drilling and tactics. As a large room, heated and well lit with various facilities to hand, it was often let for dancing, concerts, plays, entertainments and bazaars. This provided valuable income, or permitted a donor a sense of pride as he allowed the community to enjoy his architectural gift. The size of this main room varied from the relatively small to the massive, and capacity varied accordingly from a couple of hundred seated to over 10000 standing.

Alongside the main hall, offices and stores were provided. Most drill halls had a small armoury, as well as stores in case of mobilisation. Artillery, engineers and medical units had specific storage for their needs. Depending on the size of the drill hall and the requirements of its owners, other features may have included a band room, an armourer's workshop, a tower with an extensive view from which signalling could be practised, cellars, lecture rooms, baths, an ambulance room, or a hospital, infection ward and mortuary.

The drill hall was often adjoined by areas provided for leisure and self-improvement, such as a reading room, a recreation room, a library or a gymnasium. A typical recreation room was supplied with newspapers, books and games, with facilities for billiards and smoking, like a club. It is clear that the intention to improve the lives of

the men by exercise and education was considered a valuable part of their military training.

Catering facilities were often installed, ready to cater for banquets and tea parties. Some could even function as a soup kitchen to provide for large numbers of people in times of crisis.

Daylight was usually admitted by long roof skylights with bars. Gas lamps were often used to provide artificial lighting. Heating was often by hot air apparatus, steam, hot water, or fireplaces with hearths.

Space was allocated for firing practice. Some drill halls had a narrow rifle range, some a practice gallery, some a Morris tube practice range. Annual camp and regular competitions demonstrated use of the rifle, and cups and prizes were awarded for rifle skills. Drilling practice took place outside where possible, though as drilling often had to take place indoors, purpose-built halls were constructed with solid floors to deaden the sound of marching.

It was common for a drill hall to be cared for by a retired sergeant, who might also carry out some training, in exchange for accommodation. This is often a roomy two storey house adjoining the drill hall. Alternatively, the house may have been the home of the Sergeant Instructor.

Drill halls speak of local men who were often too poor or too uneducated to leave us much of their lives. They probably did not make proper wills so their property or homes have been dispersed; many did not have the skills to keep detailed diaries and nor did their families. For some, as war approached, the drill halls moulded their final destination, marked the end-stage of their lives, shaped their mental or physical disabilities, closed down their aspirations and in a strange sense are now the one remaining physical theatre for their voices.

There are people who are passionate about preserving a single rare orchid. And why not. But we also ought to demand far more in the preservation of an old building with a community story. It is too late to save the oral history because the speakers are dead, but we can save the keys to those people's stories: the buildings where they happened, which shaped their lives and sometimes deaths. Preservation of drill halls is vital because it is doing exactly that.

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