

25/08/22 – Notes of Friends of Melksham Assembly Hall (FoMAH) Meeting

Venue: 48 Spa Road

Attendees:

Graham Ellis, Geoff Mitcham, Paul Seemayer, Julie Lavery, Howard Jones

The meeting commenced with introductions. Graham Ellis then provided a visual presentation with some basic questions; Where we are now? Where do we want to be in a year's time? How are we going to get there? For the presentation which Graham posted on the FoMAH Group Facebook page; please [Click here](#) or scan the QR Code below:



The meeting (which drew heavily on the experience of both Paul Seemayer and Geoff Mitcham) considered the great historical successes of Melksham Assembly Hall and its fall from grace in recent times and the reasons for this sad decline. Several factors for the recent position were offered:

- The hiatus and stagnation caused by the Covid-19 Pandemic
- An apathetic attitude by the majority of Melksham Town Councillors who have seldom used the Assembly Hall and perhaps have a vested interest in promoting other local venues instead
- Poor communication and an absence of cooperation or commitment from those members of staff currently employed within the Melksham Town Council Office. (The inter-working relationship within the staff on the Town Council was described as 'dysfunctional')
- Insufficient marketing of events advertised at the Assembly Hall (an example was cited of an apprentice who was an integral part of the sales and marketing team who did a superb job but has never been replaced)
- Poor Event coordination (examples were given of 'last minute' arrangements, staffing issues etc)
- Complete lack of Governance – no one has at their disposal accounts for the past 7 years which means that any financial projections are speculative at best. We need to know which events have consistently provided the best profit.

All of the above factors have led to those that staff Melksham Assembly Hall feeling somewhat downtrodden and harbouring the belief that there is a certain 'inevitability' that the Assembly Hall has been earmarked for demolition in the not-too-distant future.

The meeting then looked at other potential venues which could be used if the Assembly Hall was mothballed: Forest Community Centre, Riverside, Spencer's Social Club (amongst others) were

mentioned and a map was provided with colour coded push pins (Graham's slide presentation refers). The attendees discussed each of these venues in turn and none of them could possibly offer the capacity of what the Assembly Hall has, although it was recognised that perhaps some of the smaller gatherings at the Assembly Hall could divert to one of these other locations as a better and more cost-effective solution which would free up the Assembly Hall for larger events. There was mention made of possible 'fringe' locations where a brand-new venue could be built (Avon, Melksham East for example) but it was felt that this would cost a huge amount and might never happen.

The meeting then looked at what could be done by way of a 'Reset' to reboot and revitalise the Assembly Hall. Suggestions were made that the FoMAH could visit venues in other nearby communities to gain a good insight into what they are doing and how they are run. Devizes and Frome were seen as equitable market towns both enjoying a vibrant community; The Corn Exchange and Wyvern Club in Devizes were mentioned, whilst The Cheese and Grain and Memorial Hall in Frome shining examples of community success. Part of the 'fact finding' mission would be to ascertain how these establishments are run; council, charity, community? Would this model work for Melksham? Are we able to look at the business models of these thriving venues, apply it to the Assembly Hall and make sensible and pragmatic changes to lift it out of the doldrums?

This discussion led neatly on to the matter of Governance. It was agreed by all attendees that it was in the interests of FoMAH to form a committee of 5 – 8 committed volunteers outside of the Town Councillors and Assembly Hall staff who could represent the interests of the wider community and produce a long-term plan. A committee would need to be elected and a constitution devised. This committee would have more gravitas in terms of working with the Town Council whereas the air of 'secrecy' and 'partial information' being provided within the Town Council meeting infrastructure does not engender the spirit of cooperation required to move things forward in a positive way.

All those attending the meeting were passionate about what the Assembly Hall has offered to the Melksham and wider Wiltshire community and could offer again given the right infrastructure through a network of committee members, staff and volunteers. All felt that to lose this important space which has hosted many memorable and important events over the years would be hugely detrimental to the community and the utmost should be done to make a compelling case for the future of the venue. It was suggested that a realistic appraisal should be made on the cost of repairing the leaky roof and providing internal decoration as appropriate. It was suggested that fresh tenders could be placed with local companies to get a 'Firm Price' Quote for the work.

It was also suggested that there needs to be a much more innovative and aggressive marketing campaign particularly when advertising events at the Assembly Hall. The website is archaic, it needs a complete makeover. This is the first thing a promoter will look at when ascertaining whether an artist or band should perform at the Assembly Hall and the website needs a more professional touch. Any advertising needs to be multi-faceted; social media and viral marketing; billboards, leaflets and newspaper ads. It needs to attract more customers and that will bring bigger acts. Look at how well the Cheese and Grain has done in recent years in attracting big bands. Why can't The Assembly Hall have some of that success? It would really put Melksham on the map as a local and viable venue for touring bands, comedians and other well-known performers. Could sponsorship be sought for the Assembly Hall as has been the case with other small venues? Should we be looking for Charity funding?

Other ideas promulgated included a membership which would make a small financial contribution but would get a regular entry (how regular was not determined) into a '100 Club' where the winner would win £100.00 but the surplus could be fed back in to the coffers.

Some discussion was had amongst attendees about the elected committee having more control over setting room/venue hire rates. Should we approach the Town Council and see what can be done to make the Assembly Hall more competitive? Perhaps a look at flexible rates for block bookings for example?

The meeting concluded by addressing the issue of who would be prepared to stand as a committee member. Of those present, 3 people indicated that they would be prepared. This is not going to be enough. FOMAH needs at least 2-3 more people to come forward if this is going to be a viable working committee.

Actions:

Graham Ellis – start putting together a constitution

Geoff Mitcham – reach out to the organisers of other venues in Devizes and Frome and put together a plan to visit them (if necessary) and report back to the committee.

Paul Seemayer/Geoff Mitcham – approach Barry/Kevin.

Graham Ellis – approach other prominent members of the community as potential committee candidates.

Julie Lavery – put together a survey. What does the local community want in the way of functions at the Assembly Hall? What size of space would they require for the event they have planned?

Howard Jones – start putting together a Business Case (using some of the input from Geoff and Julie) to look at what Melksham needs from a venue and investigate various options available.

The next meeting was proposed for 13th or 20th September. It is hoped that with school holidays having concluded that more people will want to attend the next meeting as broader physical support is vital if a committee is going to get established.