

# Melksham Town Council

## Assembly Hall Outline Design Brief



### 1. Background and Context

Melksham is a lovely market town situated on the banks of the River Avon. With a rich history and heritage, the town boasts a number of architecturally significant buildings not least of which is the iconic mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Town Council owned Town Hall, located in the Market Place adjacent to the Assembly Hall.

In terms of demographic profile, the 2011 census recorded a population for the Melksham Community area of some 28,390 persons (48.9% male and 51.1% female) the seventh most populous and the fourth densest community area in Wiltshire. The approval of new housing development in the community area will mean that local population numbers are likely to increase significantly within the next ten years.

### 2. History

For over fifty years, Melksham's Assembly Hall has provided a venue for a wide range of gatherings, events and activities. In terms of structural background, it is understood that the Assembly Hall was originally a first world war drill hall constructed of steel framed walls and roof with corrugated iron sheeted walls and roof. It was built against a stone built stable/residential building dating from c1850; and brick/block extensions were added in c1950 for bar and toilet facilities. The hall was reroofed in 1976 using an aluminium structure and roof sheeting to reduce the load on the old iron framed walls.

Operated by West Wilts District Council until 2001, the threat of closure prompted the Town Council, supported by a community referendum, to take over the running of the Assembly Hall with effect from that time.

The Assembly Hall site is accessed by pedestrians and vehicles from the Market Place but does not currently possess a dedicated car park for patrons. The prospective development of Melksham's health and well being centre in close proximity provides potential opportunities in terms of passing footfall, vehicle traffic and car parking.

### 3. The Current Facility

The current building is an unprepossing structure and sits incongruously behind the architecturally significant and aesthetically pleasing Town Hall. The view from the Market Place to Melksham House and the prospective health and well being centre introduces the Assembly Hall and this redevelopment project therefore provides an opportunity to improve the built environment and enhance the important first impressions for visitors to the Assembly Hall and indeed the town generally.

The overall size of the current Assembly Hall site is approximately 600 sq.m. and encompasses a large mixed use building with a bar, foyer and back stage space. With a

proscenium arch stage; two dressing rooms; stage lighting; cinema quality projection and screen; digital state of the art sound system and audio loop the Hall is able to host conferences/seminars, dinners, dances, wedding receptions, fund raising events, bazaars and fairs. The Hall has a Canadian ochre dance floor and can seat approximately 200 people in cabaret style for dining and dancing and c.450 in a theatre style setting.

The Hall has very little natural light and whilst this is a clear advantage when staging live theatrical and cinematic performance, it is perceived to mitigate against staging functions such as weddings and conferences which typically benefit from a light airy space. It is hoped that the redesign can address this apparent dichotomy.

The current structure incorporates disused residential accommodation (now used for storage) and is adjoined by the Blue Pool, a swimming pool owned by Wiltshire Council. It is understood that the swimming pool facility will be reprovisioned within the prospective health and well being centre, whereupon the Blue Pool will be demolished and the area given over to car parking.

It is perceived that the Assembly Hall should relate to and complement the adjacent Town Hall and be a building of merit in its own right or with an aesthetically pleasing facade that provides an attractive and welcoming gateway to the prospective health and well being centre venue. The viability and practicality of a structural (glazed) link between the Assembly Hall and the Town Hall, facilitating the possible integrated use of facilities in both buildings to host conferences, weddings, and shared office space for example, and serving as a foyer or entrance to the main auditorium, is a concept that the Town Council would be keen to explore.

The site is in relative close proximity to residential dwellings to the west which provides some challenges in respect of noise. The Crown House site in particular houses senior citizens and noise pollution particularly in respect of live musical performance is known to have proved distressing on occasion for residents in this location. The Town Council would wish to see effective noise suppression to minimise and preferably eradicate the incidence of problems in this regard.

#### **4. Social and Recreational Offer**

Melksham's Assembly Hall is a unique, versatile and welcoming space. As a community facility, it aims to provide a vibrant and valued social and recreational hub at the heart of the community it serves and thereby to improve the quality of life within the town.

The Assembly Hall represents the primary social and recreational amenity provided by the Town Council. One of the largest community halls in Wiltshire, the facility is an established and well loved part of the town's social fabric, though this provision comes at a price with its ongoing operational costs accounting for approximately 30% of the Town Council's annual expenditure. Integral elements within the Assembly Hall's offer include:

#### **4.1 Cinema**

The lack of a cinema within the town was specifically referred to as a weakness within the Melksham Area Community Strategy (2004-2014) document, and prior to the advent of the rural cinema White Horse Pictures Initiative (“WHPI”), the community was evidently underserved in respect of high quality film provision. The absence of a cinema facility (the previous cinema in the town - “The Maxine” - closed in 1965) meant that those able to afford the travel costs have been enticed away from the town, their community, and the local economy, for cinematic entertainment, whilst those unable to afford or cope with the travel implications have simply been denied the opportunity.

The Town Council has embraced the opportunity for rural cinema through the WHPI and for the first time in a generation, residents have been able to enjoy film in their own locality. In addition to mainstream films, the ability to screen Saturday morning films with a children/family bent; and the initiative by the Seniors Forum to screen classics for a mature day time audience, has ensured that this is an accessible resource for the enjoyment of a wide demographic of the community. The “Movies at Melksham” brand has now become an established part of the social and recreational scene and adds significant value to the town’s cultural offer.

#### **4.2 Alternative Content**

Given the infrastructure installed to facilitate the WHPI and the Movies at Melksham brand, the potential was recognised to expand the offer to incorporate alternative content – the ability to screen a varied range of live and recorded entertainment such as sport, opera, musicals, ballet, and music performances.

In accord with the Assembly Hall’s stated aim to provide an eclectic mix of quality entertainment for local audiences to enjoy, screenings have included ballet, opera, musicals and concerts. This has resulted in local audiences having the opportunity to enjoy live performances from the Royal Opera House and West End theatres together with spectacular international productions and contemporary pop concerts from locations across the globe.

#### **4.3 Live Performance**

In 2011 the decision was taken to pro actively facilitate and promote live entertainment at the Assembly Hall. Hitherto live entertainment had only been provided through events arranged by user groups, and it was perceived that the facility was underutilised and the community under served in this regard.

The Live at Melksham concept was launched in 2012 and since that time featured artists at the Assembly Hall have included Jon Richardson, Marcus Brigstocke; Jimmy Tarbuck; Des O’Connor; the Royal Air Force Squadronaires; Lee Evans; Alan Carr; and Rich Hall.

However, whilst attempts have been made to ensure that the Assembly Hall is regarded as a potential national tour venue, particularly for comedy, the lack of infrastructure and facilities associated with a big theatre inevitably makes this a difficult ambition to achieve and sustain.

The provision of live musical entertainment is now being afforded particular priority in accordance with the aim to provide an eclectic mix of entertainment across a wider socio economic and socio demographic range. It is clear however that the small stage acts as a constraint in the Hall's current ability to host events that require a large area such as dance or orchestral performance.

#### **4.4 Community and Commercial Focus**

The Assembly Hall hosts a wide range of events and activities such as Rock and Roll dances; organ club recitals; sportsman's dinners; model car club racing; cultural talks and lectures; conferences; dinner dances; pantomimes and charity events.

The inaugural Comic-Con event staged in 2012 and developed further in 2013, attracted large numbers of visitors from within and outside the local community and highlights the Hall and town's potential as a destination venue. Such has been the success of the event that since 2014 Comic-Con has been extended to a two day event.

### **5. Aims**

The Assembly Hall has three core aims going forward:

- To be a vital constituent of the social and recreational fabric of the town by promoting and hosting an eclectic mix of events and activities
- To be a valued asset and an accessible resource for the community, at the heart of the community it serves
- To run as cost effectively as possible and generate income streams that will reduce the financial burden on the local tax payer

### **6. Objectives**

The Assembly Hall seeks to fulfil these aims by:

#### **6.1 Hosting community activities and events with cross-demographic and cross-socio-economic appeal**

The Hall will continue to provide a home for community based activities and events. Community (as opposed to commercial) hire rates will be available and financial support to hire the Hall will be made available through the Town Council's annual grants award process. Current users include: West Wilts Model Car Club; Seniors' Forum; Melksham & District Historical Association; Comic-Con; North Wilts Fine & Decorative Arts Society; Melksham & District Gardeners' Society; 2385 (Melksham) Squadron Air Training Corps.

#### **6.2 Promoting an eclectic mix of live and screened live entertainment that will increase and diversify audiences**

The Hall will continue to promote live entertainment in its own right and on a private hire basis, and will provide a venue for user groups who stage entertainment related events which members of the public are able to attend and enjoy. In all cases secondary spend revenues will provide an important and vital income stream.

Whilst striving to be recognised as a venue for nationwide tours for comedy and speciality acts, “one off” performances (evidenced in the past by performances from such well known names by Monty Halls; Dick Strawbridge; and Steve Parrish) will be explored and promoted where it is perceived that they will attract an audience and are economically viable.

Regular dances presented by the Melksham Rock ‘n Roll Club; and Ginger Jive; Big Band concerts; and charity events in aid of organisations such as Help for Heroes; the Royal Air Forces Association; the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund and Wiltshire Air Ambulance have been held at the Hall and its continued usage in this vein will be encouraged.

A focus on live musical performance to appeal to a wider audience base thereby increasing the variety of entertainment on offer for the community (and visitors) to enjoy, has been well received and will continue in the future

### **6.3 Providing a sustainable, ongoing and established community cinema facility that will attract audiences throughout the demographic spectrum, thereby promoting social cohesion**

The cinema facility and its role as an important element within the town’s social and recreational offer will continue. However it is perceived that whilst this will never be economically lucrative, cinema provision aligns with objectives identified within the Melksham Community Plan particularly in relation to leisure and community inclusion of young people and senior citizens.

Indeed, in this regard, the film festival aimed particularly at families and children in February 2013, allied to the popularity of Saturday morning screenings, suggests that a children centric audience exists within the community and that the cinema is a well received and valued entertainment asset.

At the other end of the age spectrum the popularity of regular monthly film presentations by and for the Melksham Seniors’ Forum demonstrates that the cinema facility is well received by this demographic also.

### **6.4 Attracting commercial patronage of a versatile and flexible facility for a wide range of events and functions**

The Assembly Hall provides a large and versatile space for a wide range of commercial functions. The Hall has been used for Police conferences; retailer induction seminars; conflict and safety management practical training sessions; Masonic dinners; Christmas and other celebratory parties, and sundry other activities and events.

It is apparent however that the lack of break out space is often a constraining factor for users searching for a suitable function venue and this redevelopment provides an opportunity to incorporate partitionable space and/or additional rooms for this purpose.

**6.5 Showcasing the Hall as an attractive recreational venue with a customer focused hospitality team offering high quality but affordable entertainment, and raising the profile of the Hall as a destination venue for those living outside the immediate area.**

The Assembly Hall will provide an eclectic mix of events and activities that are accessible to all users including those with disabilities. It is in essence a versatile space that can be used to host a wide range of functions that promote inclusion and community life and well being. It follows that the Assembly Hall should be a welcoming and comfortable environment with a clear focus on optimising the customer experience. The role of the foyer and bar/lounge areas in providing physical ease, comfort and relaxation are seen as particularly important in this context; and the promotion of wet sales to encourage secondary spend is seen as vital to ongoing economic sustainability.

## **7. Development to date**

Wiltshire Council's decision in 2011 to commission a new community campus (health and well being centre) for Melksham was welcomed by the Town Council who immediately recognised that the Assembly Hall with its social and recreational offer readily complemented the aims and aspirations of the proposed facility. To this end the Town Council asked Wiltshire Council to consider *how the Assembly Hall might work with or as part of the Campus facility*.

In the absence of a positive response the Town Council committed to progress the redevelopment of the Hall in order to provide a facility that would serve the community for the next 40 to 50 years.

However by July 2015 it had become apparent that difficulties had arisen as regards the funding of the campus and, in these circumstances, Wiltshire Council welcomed the proposition that the Assembly Hall (and potentially Town Council administrative facilities) could be accommodated within the Campus facility. As a consequence, the Town Council resolved, in principle, to embrace and support exploring the concept of working with Wiltshire Council to formulate a joint collaborative proposal, to incorporate the redevelopment of the Assembly Hall and Town Council operations within the Campus proposition.

In the event, the Town Council decided in January 2017 that it was unable to progress the concept of integrating the Assembly Hall into the prospective health and well being centre and determined instead to redevelop the Assembly Hall in situ.

## 8. Schedule of accommodation and requirements

The Town Council perceives that the Assembly Hall should provide a versatile and flexible space that would provide an amazing social and recreational facility that will accommodate and complement a wide range of community and corporate activities and events and that the redeveloped facility should ideally include:

- Large Hall auditorium space (maybe split level or tiered retractable seating) to seat at least 450 in theatre; 250 in cabaret 600 standing possibly with ability to be partitioned into smaller spaces
- Bar/foyer/lounge/atrium type area, suitable for informal and non confidential meetings
- Entrance/reception area and focal entrance point.
- Suite of rooms offering flexibility to provide between 1 and 4 discrete breakout spaces of varying size/capacity for meetings/training/conferences etc
- Large (maybe retractable) stage at least 1.5m high and at least 15m x 8m capable of staging orchestras/bands/dance
- Stage storage/backstage facility with level load in at stage height and roller shutter for truck access with capacity to accommodate bulky equipment e.g model car club
- Dedicated access for delivery or production vehicles to stage storage facility and ample parking for two large vehicles and three vans/cars
- Purpose built dance floor
- Box Office
- Integrated lighting and audio facilities including cinema projection and retractable screens that will provide flexibility to screen to large audiences as well as a smaller groups in a partitioned room
- Quality acoustics and sound proofing internally and externally
- Ergonomically designed commercial standard catering kitchen facility including cold prep room; chiller room (walk-in fridge); and washing up room
- Larger bar and cafe area including tables and chairs with common circulation potential
- Facilities management office
- R&R facility/communal area that staff may use for breaks
- Cloakroom space (desirable if space allows)
- Toilets – (suggested provision: M= 4 cubicles; 8 urinals; L = 12 cubicles; D = 2 cubicles)
- Strong room (central location to service bar and catering areas for cash handling and safe storage)
- Bar cellar adjacent to bar area and external wall for ease of delivery
- Furniture storage (chairs, tables etc)
- Dressing rooms x 3 with en suite toilets and showers
- Production room close to dressing rooms and stage
- Amp room (air conditioned)
- Front of house control room or facility
- Plant room
- Cleaner's storage
- Facility accessible to all users, environmentally friendly and energy efficient

## **9. Design Elements/Issues**

The Assembly Hall should be an attractive and welcoming building, perceived and valued as a community asset. In short, a town legacy fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The building must comply with all planning requirements and comply with all current building regulations as a minimum. It must be compliant with DDA and all other statutory requirements for a public building and offer accessibility for all users thereby promoting inclusion.

Effective sound insulation between rooms and partition-able spaces should be incorporated as well as noise insulation to minimise noise pollution that may impact upon the amenity value that local residents might reasonably expect.

It must be a secure building with one main entrance and with lockable rooms, storage areas and windows. A 24 hour remotely monitored intruder and fire alarm system will be required.

The building must be durable, environmentally friendly and easily cleaned and maintained. Sustainable measures should be considered to exceed building regulation requirements, and cost effective use should be made of renewable energy sources in eco-friendly heating and lighting systems.

## **10. Anticipated Funding Arrangements**

The Town Council will look to finance the redevelopment from its reserves and loan finance from the Public Works Loan Board. It follows that its funds are limited and derive from the precept paid by local residents, and that the implementation of this project will be accountable to and scrutinised by the local community to ensure that it is achieved on budget.

## **11. Initial Way Forward**

The Town Council is seeking initial ideas and costed schemes from local architects who wish to express an interest in this project. As part of a feasibility study process, a maximum budget for the project should be indicated including all professional and technical fees and permissions and allowing a contingency of 20%. In any event the Town Council will look for cost savings on the agreed budget if feasible and will seek assurances that design and construction costs will be kept under close control.

The Town Council would be interested to receive recommendations on the most appropriate design to accommodate and cater for as many of the facilities, aims and objectives detailed herein as possible. However this document does not purport to contain an exhaustive list of all the elements required and the Town Council would be receptive to ideas and suggestions that will promote and enhance the redevelopment of the Assembly Hall as a community asset.