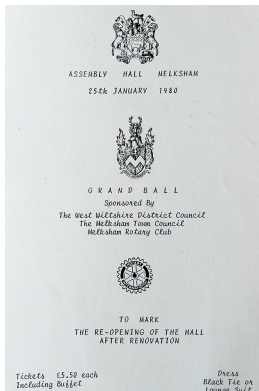


# A History of the Assembly Hall in Melksham

compiled by Lisa Ellis of [The Well House Collection](#)



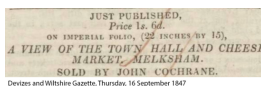
## DETAILS

**December 1846** - The Melksham Market Company was formed to provide the necessary accommodation for the sale and storehousing of cheese by selling shares of £20 each to not exceed £3,000; dividends would be collected from persons using the buildings to store cheese.

## SUMMARY

- **1846** - Melksham Market company is formed; money raised to erect buildings

- **1847** - Town Hall, with cheese market underneath, and cheese store behind are completed



- **1847** - Cheese market opens; fortnightly cattle market moves from Mondays to Tuesdays

- **1848** - First passenger train travels from Thingly Junction to Westbury, coinciding with cheese market day

- **1859** - Cheese Market revival

- **Quotes from Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, 24 December 1846:**

*"A numerous and highly influential meeting of the inhabitants of the town and neighbourhood of Melksham, was held at the King's Arms Inn, on Monday last, for the purpose of considering the propriety of establishing a pitched market for cheese in connection with the present cattle market in that town."*

The cattle market was in decline, and the thought was that farmers would take advantage of the sale of cheese (as well as cattle) to bring business to both. Chippenham had built both cattle and cheese market and this competitive edge caused the decline of cattle sales in Melksham.

*"He (William Heald Ludlow Bruges) had no doubt that if suitable erections were made, a large proportion of dairy farmers who lived at a distance, who could not use the cattle market, would gladly avail themselves of the use of the cheese market; and that as in a short time the Wilts and Somerset Railway would be opened to the public, other districts would be opened, and it was most likely that farmers residing in the neighbourhood of Frome, would avail themselves of the use of this market."*

*"The decay of the Melksham market was ... to be attributed to the*

• **1860** - Push for subscriptions to Melksham Volunteer Rifle Corps, reaching capacity two years later

• **1888** - First public-purpose performance at new Drill Hall on Church Street

• **1891** - Melksham Market Company attempts to sell market property

• **1898** - Melksham Market Company again attempts to sell market property

• **1906** - Property owner Kelson requests H Company find another building for their use

• **1907** - Drill Hall moves to behind Town Hall, enclosing the old cheese market

• **1914** - Urban District Council purchases Town Hall, Drill Hall and Police Station at auction

• **1939-1945** - World War II

• **1939** - Military authorities requisition building, needing premises to store ARP equipment

• **1942** - caretakers hired for "Assembly

*apathy and indifference of those who ought to have imitated (Chippenham's) example. 'Melksham market was formerly one of the best, (if not the very best) markets in the county. It was now one of the worst; and surely no human being could feel displeased if those who lived in the neighbourhood and were interested in its renovation, united together for that purpose.'* -- Thomas Lavington"

**September 1847** - The New Market Hall opens in Melksham on 7 September, with 150 tons of cheese changing hands. The cheese market would continue on the first Tuesday of each month; the Monday cattle market will move to Tuesdays, in conjunction with the cheese market, and be held fortnightly.

• **Quotes from Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, 16 September 1847:**

#### Describing the Town Hall

*"The foundation-stone of the building, the whole of which is composed of Bath stone, and now forms so noble an ornament to the town, was laid in March last; and the satisfactory manner in which the undertaking has been conducted and completed reflects the greatest credit on the energy and talent of Messrs. D. and C. Jones of Bradford, who have been both the architects and contractors. The Hall (which occupies an area of 50 square feet) is in the Italian style, having pilastres, frieze and cornice in the centre compartment, surmounted with a pediment, and bell turret. The ground floor is to be devoted to the sale of poultry and eggs; and immediately over is the hall, a noble room 45 feet by 22, having an open ventilation in the centre of the ceiling. Attached to this, are two ante-rooms, each 22 feet by 16; one of which it is proposed to use for a reading room."*

#### Describing the Cheese Market

*"The remaining portion of the ground, forming a quadrangle in the rear of the Hall is occupied with the covered market for cheese, extending 320 feet; over which are three tiers of store rooms. To this there are two entrances, one for ingress, the other for egress, and also four counting-houses for the dispatch of business. Altogether, the building is in every way adapted not only to the commercial purposes for which it is more especially erected, but for any public occasion, either of amusement or business, for which it may be required. The cost of erection is between £3,000 and £4,000." (for both buildings, probably)*

Hall”

- **1946** - Drill Hall becomes Assembly Hall with major interior redecoration, addition of entrance lobby, stage, and bathroom facilities, exterior painting
- **1947** - first public performances following war
- **1950** - Entrance archway to Assembly hall demolished; entrance pillars to Melksham House moved back and walls behind the pillars demolished
- **1954** - Major renovations to Assembly Hall include new flooring and amplification system
- **1955** - Further renovations include bar and kitchen alterations, new stage curtains and extension at the front
- **1978** - Gaiger of Devizes transforms building

• **Quote from Reading Mercury, 18 September 1847:**

*"Tuesday last was a gay, a busy, and a proud day for Melksham. the labours of the Market company were brought to a successful issue, and the building, which only a few months ago was planned, and the mart which was projected, were then made available for the destined purposes."*

**August 1848** - The Melksham cheese market was held the same day the Wilts and Somerset Railway, from Thingly Junction to Westbury, opened to public traffic.

• **Quote from Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, 31 August 1848:**

*"MELKSHAM GREAT CHEESE MARKET OPENING OF THE RAILWAY*

*The great cheese market will be held on Tuesday next, on which day the line of railway from Thingly to Westbury, passing through Melksham and thus opening up all the surrounding country to that place, will be open'd for public traffic. The great facilities which will be thus afforded to Melksham, as a place of business, will, doubtless, ensure a large supply of cheese, and a good attendance of dealers.*

Sometime after this first opening the cheese market went into decline and apparently closed, because there was a second "grand opening" of the cheese market 11 years later.

**August 1859** - Landholders and agriculturists meet for the purpose of reviving the Melksham cheese market; first cheese market to be held Tuesday, September 6th 1859.

• **Quote from Swindon Advertiser and North Wilts Chronicle, 1 August 1859:**

*"From the interest taken by the landed proprietors, and the good feeling among the tenant farmers, and their determination to accomplish their object, there appears every prospect for a good cheese market being established. It has always been regretted that, with every accommodation, and situated within one of the finest dairy*

*districts in the county, Melksham should not have a cheese market worthy of so rich and fertile a vale."*

**January 1860** - Melksham Volunteer Rifle Corps successfully pushed for subscription, enlisting 40 members. This seemed to be a push all over the county; towns reporting in February that "required number of members has been obtained", with Melksham numbering 60.

The need for a Drill Hall around this same time was apparent, as military groups were rapidly forming and competitions were being held in various towns for performances of precision and displays of rifle expertise. They would need some place to practice.

The revival of the cheese market must have been a failure, because for the next two years, there were several local large farms selling off their cheese-making equipment. The cattle market continued.

**May 1888** - The newspapers published a report of the first public-purpose performance in the "new" Drill Hall. Its first location was on Church Street, a portion of which is where the Tourist Information Centre is now.

• **Quote from Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, 31 May 1888:**

*"This being the first occasion on which the new Drill Hall (on Church Street) has been used for public purpose, the walls were effectively decorated in a martial style with stars composed of bayonets and ramrods, swords, rifles and other weapons of warfare, which with flags and shields of various colours, gave a pleasing appearance to what is now the largest public hall in the town."*

**February 1891** - The Melksham Market Company wanted to sell its buildings, the front building was mainly used as a Town Hall, the cattle market continued in the yard behind.

• **Quote from Bristol Times and Mirror, 7 February 1891:**

*"... a crowded meeting of ratepayers was held at the Town Hall, Melksham, convened by notice, issued at the request of memorialist, by the chairman Mr. A. G. Smith to consider a proposition from the*

*Local Board to purchase the Town Hall and Market Company's property, for public improvements, at the price of £2,500. It was shown that 1/2d rate would repay a loss to the amount in 50 years, principal and interest. The object of the purchase was to remove the calf and pig market from the open street to sheds in the hall yard. The meeting rejected the proposal by a large majority. Mr. C. Maggs, one of the directors of the Market company and a member of the Local Board, demanded a poll. The meeting was an exciting one."*

**25 February 1891** - Melksham townspeople obviously objected to the Council's decision.

• **Quote from Bristol Mercury, 25 February 1891:**

*"The poll demanded by Mr. Stratton on the question of the buying of the Market Hall has been decided in favour of buying by a majority of 25. About 500 papers were distributed, and of these 87 were spoilt."*

**February 1898** - Although it doesn't appear this action moved forward immediately with any consequence.

• **Quote from Wiltshire Times, 12 February 1898:**

*"A special meeting of the Urban Council considered the offer by the Melksham Market Company to sell the Town Hall, Police Station and premises adjoining for £2,500. After considerable discussion in Committee, it was decided to leave the question until after the April elections, and to ask the Company to reduce the price asked to a more reasonable figure."*

**April 1906** - Officers for H Company, 2nd V. B. Wilts Regiment meet to discuss obtaining a proper Drill Hall. Owner of the rented facilities at Church Street, businessman T. A. Kelson, gave notice that he required use of the premises for his seed business.

• **Quote from the Wiltshire Times, 28 April 1906:**

*"He (Captain Taylor) invited suggestions from those present, remarking that he and his subalterns had done all they could to secure a site for a hall, but had not yet been successful. As a last resource he*

*thought they might go back to the Town Hall, but he hoped that would not be necessary. There should be patriotism enough in the town to provide a drill hall."*

**November 1907** - After various efforts had been made to meet the requirements of a Drill Hall, the officers came to the decision that the only course would be to build a hall, and an appeal was made to the generosity of the gentry in the district towards this end. That appeal was not made in vain; a number of generous contributions were promised, and a suitable site was secured in the Town Hall yard behind the Town Hall.

• **Quote from the Wiltshire Times, 23 November 1907:**

*"As a result, the Company have now to be congratulated on the possession of one of the best drill halls, if not the best, in the county; a rifle range with four targets being also included in the building. The length of the hall is 118 feet and the width 50 feet. It is admirably adapted to the purpose for which it is required and has been erected at a moderate cost. Although not quite completed and furnished, the hall has been in use for some time, and on Tuesday evening the formal opening took place. The outlay incurred up to the present has been about £620 and some £627 has been contributed, so that there is a small balance to hand. But another £120 or so is calculated to be required for completing the furnishing, thus leaving a sum of something over £100 to be raised... The contract for the building was taken by Messrs. Bigwood and Co., and the ironwork by Messrs. Lysaght, of Bristol."*

Not only indicative of the low cost, but the new build inferred also almost exacted the same footprint of the cheese market. The cement flooring was obviously kept, as well as the three floors of attached stores on the west side, and the roof. The original build in 1847 was described as a "covered market" and it appears that Bigwood and Lysaght basically enclosed the three sides to make the Drill Hall.

**May 1914** - Upon the death of Charles Maggs in 1912, his various landholdings were put on the market in 1914.

• **From Wiltshire Times 16 May 1914, and quoting the sales**

## **catalogue:**

*"The Drill Hall is said to be built of corrugated iron, with floor, partly cement, extending to 114ft by 50ft; two large store rooms, armoury, lecture room, orderly room, clothing store, etc."*

**July 1914** - The Melksham Urban District Council decided it was prudent to purchase at auction the Town Hall, Drill Hall, Police Station for £1,600 which formed part of Charles Awdry's estate. They were the only bidders.

### **• Quote from Wiltshire Times 18 July 1914**

"The Inspector: The Drill Hall, what is the rent of that?

Mr. Smith: £20 a year, and it is leased for 21 years which began in 1907. The hall cost £500 to build. It is built of iron."

**July 1939** - Just before the British joined the fighting during World War II, the Drill Hall needed to be cleared; storage was urgently required by military authorities.

### **• Quote from Wiltshire Times 12 July 1939**

*"Persons storing material or equipment in the Drill Hall or adjoining premises are to be requested to remove it, in view of the demand for space to store ARP equipment."*

**1942** - With the end of the war, the Army de-commissioned the Drill Hall and returned the building to the town, along with a small payment to make amends for any damage done during its use. Mr and Mrs Baker were hired as caretakers of the now repurposed and renamed Assembly Hall, remaining there until 1954.

**November 1946** - In responding to a Letter to the Editor complaining about the seemingly extravagant expense of refurbishing the Assembly Hall right after the war, Percy Hughes wrote: *"...throughout the war the building was in the occupation of the Army authorities and that when it was re-requisitioned and handed over it was understandably in a very deplorable state of decoration. The money received from the War Department to cover the agreed cost of*

*dilapidation has, therefore, been applied to renovate and recondition the Hall to make it usable by the Melksham public, who for many years have urgently needed such an amenity."*

The new Assembly Hall was opened by George Ward on 30 November 1946. During his remarks, he mentioned the hall had been built approximately 50 years ago; originally used as a drill hall for the volunteers and territorials; it had been a builder's yard, a store shed, and cattle show. *"Only 1/4 of work is done, but we wanted something for the people by winter 1946."*

(Personal note: I feel the words "built approximately 50 years ago" is quite a stretch in that the present-day Assembly Hall retains most features from the 1847 original Cheese Market building.)

The hall was open to all organisations for the town; Ward hoped they would make full use of it. In particular he urged the religious bodies of the town to arrange Sunday evening functions. *"Every Sunday night",* said Ward, *"thousands of young people tramp the streets of Melksham because they have nothing to do and nowhere to go. It is up to you to take them in hand."*

**October 1947** - The Melksham Drama Club formed in May 1947, and they had their first appearance at the Assembly Hall in October with "Great Day".

Other performances there in 1947:

- 12 February 1947 - Grand Variety Show by Joe Coulson
- 14 February 1947 - Melksham Youth Centre Valentine's Fancy Dress Party
- 19 February 1947 - Lowbourne choirs and "Figaro" performed by Beltane School
- 31 December 1947 - New Year's Eve Dance; Johnny Monks and His Band

**June 1949** - "The Whispering Gallery"

- **Quote from Wiltshire times 25 June 1949**

*"Melksham's Assembly Hall, considering its open metal roof and thin walls, is remarkably free from echoes when filled with people. But the*



*other day I was in the hall when it was empty, and was talking to the caretaker, Mr. A. F. Baker, at one side of the hall. I remarked on the very noticeable echo, and he told me a strange thing about it. His old dog is losing her sight and can only see him very close. If he calls her from one side of the hall, she immediately goes over to the opposite wall, showing that the echo of his voice is louder than the original sound."* -- The Gleaner

**August 1954** - Major renovations were being made to the Assembly Hall.

• **Quote from Wiltshire Times 14 August 1954:**

*"A fine job has been made of the new flooring in the Assembly Hall, which has now re-opened. The old concrete surround to the dance floor has been replaced with a completely new floor of beechwood blocks. It is interesting to hear that the area of the surround is greater than that of the original floor of oak blocks in the centre of the hall... Appreciative comments have been made about the new amplification system for music, and the new catering arrangements by a Trowbridge firm.*

**October 1955** - Renovations continued. • **Quote from Wiltshire Times 1 October 1955:**

*"The surveyor (Mr N H Cooper) told members of the Urban Council on Monday that good progress has been maintained on the Assembly Hall. The roof, the new block floor and the bar and kitchen alterations have been completed. New stage curtain and hangings have been hung and the decorations to the main hall are nearly finished. The new extension to the front has also been completed, apart from some decoration, pointing and provision of fittings."*

**1978** - From this point, more research will have to be conducted by locating documents that are currently not online. Apparently major restoration became necessary in 1978 by Gaiger at a cost of £169,876.81, according to a programme for a grand opening event two years later.

**25 Jan 1980** - A Grand Ball was held to mark the re-opening of the

hall after renovation.

September 2021 - The rest of the story is yet to be written ...

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Assembly Hall.**

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