

Mystery at the village hall

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Danish architect, William Douglas Caroe, designed the nineteenth century Chilbolton Village Hall at the same time that he visited Chilbolton as the architect of Testcombe House on the bank of the River Test.

As architect to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners he was among the most prolific of church designers in nineteenth and twentieth century England.

The son of Anders Caroe, Danish Consul in Liverpool, he trained under the great J. L. Pearson and worked on drawings for Truro Cathedral, after which he was appointed to the prestigious Commissioners' post.

He was constantly busy with new churches and restorations of old ones, especially those with chancels. The range and variety of his innumerable buildings is attested in Jennifer Freeman's book, *W.D. Caroe: His Architectural Achievement*. (1990).

Among cathedrals restored by Caroe are Canterbury, Durham, Southwell, Brecon, and St David's. Malvern Priory, Romsey and Tewkesbury Abbeys also bear his restoration marks.

His prominent offices for The Ecclesiastical Commissioners in London's Millbank in a free Flemish Renaissance style in 1903 are well known.

Chilbolton, Caroe's Vil-

The Sword of Damocles hangs over Chilbolton Village Hall after it failed to win listed building status. With its fate uncertain, Eleanor Lockyer traces the hall's past and fears for its future

lage, has escaped even the notice of his biographers. His design for Testcombe was made as early as 1884. Also a coach house and possibly even the unusual garden privy straddling the river; surmounted by a Victorian finial crown. Through the seat of the privy can be viewed the prized brown trout of the River Test.

Chilbolton Village Hall was built in the early 1890s and is a model of its kind among nineteenth century village clubs and community centres by being designed by a major architect.

Next come the attractive terrace of small cottages, Room Cottages, on the other side of the street, dated 1893. Here, W. D. Caroe appears in a quite surprisingly progressive idiom, conversant with contemporary work by Lutyens in the Arts and Crafts Movement of the 1800s.

Several larger houses in the village followed in 1911. In addition, Caroe restored the Chilbolton parish church of St Mary, in 1893, at the same time adding a vestry.

The building of the village hall was considered of great importance at the time and among the aristocracy attending the laying of the foundation stone ceremony were Captain the Hon Victor

Montague and Lady Montague of Wherwell Priory, the Earl of Hardwicke and Lady Stuart, who were also among the many subscribers.

The foundation stone was laid by the Revd G.W. Kitchen, Dean of Winchester, April 11th, 1891. The dean, a great antiquarian and historian, said he trusted that the hall would be a centre-point of the village and would accommodate as many as 250 persons, and for a great many years to come, supply all the necessities of the parish of Chilbolton.

Built by public subscription, the land was presented as a free gift, for the purpose of a village hall, by Richard Durnford, Bishop of Chichester and his family.

He was the son of the Revd Durnford, for many years the 'fishing diary' rector of Chilbolton.

Charles Grace of Clatford, who built the hall for £310, —less than £1 per resident— came across a Roman burial ground of the time of Emperor Constantine the Great when preparing the land.

One wonders what a Roman was doing in mid-Chilbolton around the year 306 AD and how did he come to die? And what reli-



Staying put or coming down? Chilbolton Village Hall's future is in doubt J177/62/12

gion was he, to be buried, next to today's closely adjacent churchyard?

Years later, Brook Kitchen, son of Dean Kitchen, returned the silver trowel used by his father when laying the foundation stone, to the village, where it was kept in a glass presentation box above the beautifully carved fireplace in the village hall.

Rodney Hubbuck says that Caroe's Chilbolton Village Hall, though almost certainly one of his minor works, deserves appreciation as a

good example of humble late Victorian vernacular at its simplest and most basic.

"Few villages in Hampshire can have such a variety of buildings by one outstanding London architect. The village hall is valuable as part of a scattered group of diverse vernacular buildings by Caroe, and is surely in itself of some interest and importance within the under appreciated type of Victorian Club houses."

Chilbolton Village Hall has failed to win listed building status from the Depart-

ment of the Environment despite letters of objection to its proposed demolition and being in the heart of a conservation village.

The Village Hall Committee wants to sell the site for housing after demolition and to use the revenue to build a modern all-purpose hall at the top of Drove Road.

• Help for this article was given by Rodney Hubbuck, who is architectural historian and co-reviser of *Hampshire and the Isle of Wight* by Nikolaus Pevsner and David Lloyd.