

The Bircham Centre

The Bircham Centre, for those in Reepham who are not familiar with it, is the large, pale yellow house on the Market Place that houses the County Library and the WI Market, besides much more.

The building was left to the people of Reepham and surrounding parishes by Samuel Bircham in 1919 as a war memorial, to be used as club rooms and a reading room. The part now leased to the county council as a library broadly fulfils the bequest, and several of the other rooms are used regularly as meeting rooms for small clubs.

Five or six years ago, after an upsurge of “let’s provide more community amenities”, the Bircham Centre became the focus of a need to improve and enlarge. Thankfully, the building was improved and renovated, especially the roofing. This cost nearly twice as much as estimated because the rapid rise in building costs unfortunately took off at this time. However, the committee and donors managed to pay for it all by March 1988. Since then we have continued to raise cash to improve the heating and decorating.

Meanwhile, in 1988 another charitable family had followed Sam Bircham’s lead and very kindly donated a leased field, known as Stimpson’s Piece, to the town as a gift and the parish council is purchasing the adjoining field. So, now the idea, broadly, is to build on and use the playing field area for the larger clubs (mainly sport-based) and continue to improve the town centre and Bircham Centre area for the small indoor clubs and societies, archives and library, etc. and hopefully to establish a day garden at the back. I say, hopefully, for needs are one thing, but with the best will in the world one cannot foresee with certainty and no one can expect the voluntary members to take on too much.

The present management of the Bircham Centre consists of voluntary members from clubs and societies in Reepham, plus other volunteers from the members of the public. This is the usual Charity Commissioners’ scheme of management for what they call “village hall” type buildings. The present chairman feels that this particular scheme is not ideal, for membership changes very frequently, often 70% each year, thus providing little continuity. Also with more “best will in the world” many committee members cannot contribute as much time and energy that voluntary community halls demand.

Every community would tell you the same story: that a few stalwart members of the community aim to provide facilities. They either have to provide many hours of voluntary effort to keep the cost of using the facilities within reach of the numerous small clubs and societies or increase the price of hiring to cover more professional help, whereupon several small clubs have to close. The result is stalemate and the building becomes the proverbial white elephant. This must not happen to the Bircham Centre area. We know that once the improvements have been made, management will become a lot easier and perhaps the estimated 400 people who now go through that Market Place entrance every week will double in number.

However, we do need continuing cash for some time yet. The deeds of covenant that were offered to us four years ago mostly ceased last year. They had been a welcome source of

income. (It means that if a taxpayer kindly donates a set sum to the centre each year for at least four years, the Bircham Centre can claim back the paid tax as well, i.e., £20 per annum for four years is £80 and, depending upon the rate of tax, it will be worth approximately £100 to the Bircham Centre.) If you can help in this way, please get in touch with Dr Arthur Garrett.

Meanwhile, the management committee will continue running the building as well as they can. If you haven't been inside the "Bircham" recently, please do so. Inside are notices relating to clubs, etc. – WI Market: Wednesdays 9–11; Library: Wednesdays and Fridays (on Friday the library remains open until 8 pm).

The building is a great asset. It gets no money from public rates other than a rate rebate and, unfortunately, running costs grow, as we all realise with our own homes, but we will continue the improvements although it needs hard work and patience and the good will of you all.

June Betts

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