

SALE OF THE PARISH HALL BY OPEN PUBLIC AUCTION

The days immediately preceding Friday, 12th June, saw increased activity in the precincts of the building and by the tongues of all interested in the Hall's future. Two local businessmen were reported to have been shown round by the staff of our selling agent, Michael C L Hodgson. Two firms of solicitors had asked to be sent auction packs on behalf of their clients. "Would the Hall become a cinema?" was a further interesting query. A property developer was exploring the possibility of sending a proxy. "Could there be any leeway in completing the sale if funds were not immediately available?" was a further question put to our auctioneer.

Within St. Paul's itself, the Standing Committee debated the setting of a reserve price: what would we do if the bidding didn't reach that level? How could we subsequently approach interested parties and ask for a higher offer? Did we go for a "safe" reserve or one that we really wanted to achieve? Had the market lost any of the "fizz" which we sensed when we originally decided to go ahead with the sale? Did rumours circulating about the intentions of Tesco and Booth's indicate a rise or a fall in market sentiment?

So Victoria Hall at 2.30 p.m. on the 12th saw an interesting gathering: the auctioneer and his charming assistant, the Rector, two churchwardens, several members of the PCC and congregation, interested members of the public, a shop-owner from Kents Bank Road (a possible expansion project perhaps in view here?), a member of staff from a rival firm of estate agent and auctioneers, plus 6 or 7 probable bidders, hopefully with cheque books in their pockets and ready to pay the 10% deposit at the fall of the hammer.

After a short introduction, Colin the auctioneer opened the bidding by offering £120K. A muted collective gasp from the St. Paul's contingent – how much? So LOW? What was going on?

A silence. Oh, dear, was this IT? The reserve we had agreed upon was nowhere in sight. Then a movement of a paper on the back row and we were up to £125K. Then rapidly, in jumps of £5,000 with interest from other prospective owners, we reached £180K, then £185K, then £190K – still not what we wanted. Things were now proceeding VERY slowly. "Running out of gas" to use the auctioneer's phraseology. "£195K" bid the auctioneer on our behalf; a pause, a flash of a white paper at the back indicating £200K. "Two hundred thousand pounds" intoned the auctioneer. And again. Then a careful check around those who had already bid to be sure that none was willing to go any further. Shakes of heads. "Once more at two hundred thousand pounds" and the hammer fell.

A sense of relief, a feeling of success, perhaps of disappointment, from sellers and purchasers alike, and by 2.50 p.m. it was all over. A solicitor with offices in Windermere and Ulverston "acting for an undisclosed client" came forward with his cheque book, the sale document was quickly reviewed, Christine and Mike added their signatures, and away we went. We had fulfilled our duties as trustees to obtain –and to be seen to have obtained in an open and totally transparent manner – the best possible price. We only knew of the Hall's future use at that time that it would be "subject to planning" but it will have a new owner on Friday, 10th July, and we look forward to a new era in our church's activities. Subsequently, we suspect that the firm of solicitors has actually bought the Hall for themselves with a view to establishing their business in the centre of Grange; this is unconfirmed as yet.

There are inevitably very mixed feelings about this sale. The Hall has been an integral part of St. Paul's mission in Grange for more than 100 years. Its uses and role have varied greatly during this time: many people recall school days within its portals, as well as dramatic presentations, lectures and leisure times. But its use by St. Paul's has declined sharply in recent years – we were occupying it for less than 5% of its available time over a year. At the same time, its management and maintenance and the relationships with users and tenants were demanding more and more time from the church's officers, and the costs of repairs and renewals have mounted steadily. So, a feeling of regret and nostalgia (we have removed the original stone from inside the building commemorating its construction) mixed with relief and almost liberation. We can now turn our energies to other places and forms of mission – and hope that the new owners will look after it, maintain it well, and keep it as a powerful and attractive manifestation of our church in this community.

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