

**‘This Very Dear Building’:
A History of St Margaret’s Institute**

Catherine Robinson and Elizabeth Wade

St Margaret’s Institute, Oxford

Published by St Margaret's Institute, 2008
c/o 19 Polstead Road, Oxford, OX2 6TW
www.smi-oxford.org.uk

The committee of St Margaret's Institute is grateful to all the many people who have contributed to the management of the community centre and helped to ensure its survival over the years. Only a very few are mentioned by name in this booklet, but they have all earned the gratitude of present and future generations.

The authors would welcome further information, with a view to producing an extended edition. If you can contribute memories or photographs, please contact Catherine Robinson at 12 Hayfield Road, Oxford, OX2 6TT; or Elizabeth Wade at 28 Polstead Road, Oxford, OX2 6TN.

More information about the Appeal and about current activities at St Margaret's Institute is available at www.smi-oxford.org.uk.

© Catherine Robinson 2008 (Part 1)
© Elizabeth Wade 2008 (Part 2)

Contents

Part 1: At the Heart of the Community: the Social History of St Margaret's
Institute 4

By Catherine Robinson

Part 2: The Legal and Management History of St Margaret's Institute 12

By Elizabeth Wade

Appendix 1: Current Users 17

Appendix 2: Development Phases 18

Appendix 3: Committee Members during the Period of the Appeal, 2004–2008 19

Part 1: At the Heart of the Community: The Social History of St Margaret's Institute

The working men's club

St Margaret's Institute owes its foundation to a typically Victorian blend of philanthropy and self-help. It was built in Polstead Road, north Oxford, on the initiative of some well-to-do members of the congregation of St Philip and St James. These public-spirited parishioners raised subscriptions for the building of a Working Men's Institute, "*to provide rational amusement and instruction for working men of any creed, sect, or opinions, who may thus be kept out of public houses*" – according to a letter from one local gentleman to another, soliciting a contribution in August 1889. He added: "*The working men are taking it up and raising money themselves.*"

Presumably the landlord of The Anchor Inn next door to the proposed Institute did not subscribe to the cause! The working men in question, who would have been the pub's regular customers, lived round the corner in the terraced cottages of Kingston Road, and in the newly built terraces of "artisans' dwellings" in Hayfield Road, on the western edge of the prosperous middle-class suburb of North Oxford. They worked at Lucy's Iron Foundry or the Oxford University Press, on the railway or the coal yard on the nearby canal wharf, or as seasonal labourers on building sites. They were men like Agabus Green, a builder's labourer born in Botley, who had lived with his wife Ann (a laundress) and their five children in one of the old dilapidated cottages in Hayfield Hutt Lane in the 1870s and moved with his wife to live in the relative comfort of a new house in the street when it was re-built in 1886–88. (When he died in 1901, the parish magazine recorded that he "possessed the respect and regard of all who came into contact with him".)

In raising money for a working men's club, the middle-class parishioners of St Philip and St James were continuing a tradition of philanthropy that had begun in 1875 with the establishment of a Mission Room on the wharf opposite The Anchor. The women members of the church had paid half the rent of the premises, and several of the men served as volunteer teachers at a small night school held at the Mission during the winter months. The Mission Room was demolished in 1883, perhaps in response to the opening of St Margaret's Church (the daughter church of "Phil and Jim") in the same year; some of its social and educational functions were taken over by the Working Men's Institute, which opened in 1890.

The community of North Oxford was expanding rapidly at the time. The suburb had begun to develop outside the city walls, on land owned by St John's College, in the 1830s, in response to the scarcity of building land in the city centre. Small businesses were crowded out by the expansion of the University in the mid-nineteenth century. Their proprietors and employees found modest new homes and premises in Walton Street and Kingston Road. The families of academics, clergymen, and retired civil servants of the Empire established themselves in the neo-gothic splendour of villas in Banbury and Woodstock Roads, and the leafy connecting streets. Their laundry was done by the women of Hayfield Road, and their shoes were cleaned and their fires were laid by the children of Hayfield Road, earning a few pennies before setting off for school each morning.

Enough money was raised by public subscription to buy from St John's College the 99-year lease of a plot of land on which to build a three-storey parish institute (the first building to be erected in Polstead Road). The architect was H.G.W. Drinkwater, who also designed St Margaret's Church in nearby St Margaret's Road (opened 1883, finished 1893) and the parish school in Leckford Road. The dedication stone of the Institute was laid on 8 May 1883, and the building (originally

named “The St Philip and St. James Working Men’s Institute”) finally opened in 1890. On the ground floor was a large room for boys, with its own separate entrance to the left of the front door. There were two rooms for men on the first floor, a flat in the attic, and lavatories in the cellar. Within five years the Institute had become so successful that an appeal was launched to extend it. The appeal leaflet read plaintively:

Music, Dancing, Boxing, and Gymnastics...Concerts and Dinners have frequently been held, but with great inconvenience...the space is limited and the ventilation insufficient...readers find it impossible to obtain quiet where games are played, and ... by the loss of some of its oldest and best members the Club has suffered considerably...

The target of the appeal was £800, which was duly donated, and by 1895 the Institute had been doubled in size with the creation of a committee room on the ground floor and, next to the billiards room on the first floor, a spacious games room for cards, darts, chess, and dominoes. Off this was a washroom and bathroom (a boon to the working men whose houses had been built without baths). The billiards room was said to be the finest of its kind in Oxford, with raised cushioned seating round the table. The Oxford Billiards League held its championship matches here. The library contained all kinds of books and numerous periodicals. In every room there was a blazing coal fire. Everything was of good quality: real silver cutlery and real china. The Club, which was open from 2 pm each day, was a flourishing concern. It usually numbered about 150 members, who had to apply for admission and be sponsored. But history does not record whether it succeeded in its initial aim of keeping working men and boys out of public houses.

Magic lanterns and Sunday School treats

In any case, the Institute was soon serving the whole community, and in particular functioning as a hall for St Margaret’s Church; perhaps inevitably, it became known as “St Margaret’s Institute” – the name that it still bears today. The early parish magazines are full of accounts of Penny Readings, Lantern Lectures, Sunday School treats, and Missionary Pageants. There was a Girls’ Happy Hour at the turn of the century, when the members made rugs and toy theatres. A short-lived Literary and Scientific Society heard lectures on subjects such as “Italian Masters in the National Gallery”. Far more enduring was the St Margaret’s Horticultural Society, which organised social events as well as grand shows: in 1902, for instance, a Concert and Dance, to the accompaniment of a Banjo and Mandolin Band. An insight into the close-knit life of this community is given by a poignant entry in the parish magazine in 1901. Referring to the recent terrible loss of HMS Cobra with all hands on board, it mourns the drowning of 23-year-old Leonard Tuffrey of Hayfield Road – “*present at our recent Flower Show*”.

The parish magazines of 1906 give a lively picture of community life in the years before the First World War. The issue for January records:

On January 3rd the Sunday School assembled at the Institute and found everything prepared for a happy evening. The tea left nothing to be desired; but there was more to follow. In the smaller room a Christmas Tree of large proportions was brilliant with presents and lighted candles, and there was much excitement when the fruits of this Tree were distributed. The children then returned to the larger room, to find that a transformation had taken place: the tables had been removed and a Magic Lantern was ready to commence a varied entertainment under the management of Mr Hallam. The evening closed with a distribution of cake and oranges as the children left the Institute. We are indebted to Miss J. Green and the teachers of the Sunday School for their hard work to secure the great success of the entertainment, and to several friends whose contributions made it possible to give so much pleasure to our children.

In the same month, “the Girls’ Guild enjoyed a Tea and a delightful Magic Lantern display, with splendid views of Alpine scenery ... the Boys’ Guild and Choir Boys had their Christmas Treat: an evening of games and refreshments ... the younger members of the Band of Hope gave an entertainment to a large audience ... the Men’s Guild discussed ‘Disestablishment’ and ‘Religious Education in Public Elementary Schools’ ... and Sir William Herschel conducted Men’s Bible Conferences on Sundays.”

In April 1906, the church magazine recorded “addresses to men on social subjects on Friday evenings: by the Rev. John Carter of Pusey House on ‘The Problem of the Unemployed’ ... by the Rev. A. J. Carlyle on ‘The Church and the Labour Party’ ... and by Rev. W.E.P. Hogg, of St Barnabas’ Church, on ‘Christianity and Socialism’. ... These meetings have afforded very great benefit and pleasure to all who have been able to attend them.”

In December 1906 the magazine recorded that “a Bible Class for Servants is held every Sunday afternoon by Miss Foster at the Institute. ... Mrs Hobson and Mrs Long hold a Sewing Class for Girls on Friday evenings, and would be glad to welcome any girls of fourteen years old and upwards.”

Lest it should seem that activities at the Institute were run entirely by well-meaning middle-class parishioners, it is worth noting that – continuing the local tradition of self-help – the enterprising women of Hayfield Road ran a Clothing Club there in the 1920s. And the children of Hayfield Road were quite capable of organising their own entertainments. One resident recalled more than 60 years later:

Eddie Dean got all the children to put on a show. We practised every night under her lamp-post, and when we were ready we gave a performance at the Institute. The money was given to a home for blind children. ... Eddie was a nice-looking girl. One night she climbed out of her bedroom window and ran away from home. She went to London and became a film star. She came back to visit Hayfield Road a few times. We were all very impressed by her leopard-skin coat.

From the Daisy Club to Maggie’s Club ...

Eddie Dean’s variety show must have been performed on the stage in the hall at the back of the Institute, which was designed by Mr Fred Openshaw, a local architect, and built in 1928. The total cost of £3,000 was paid by another parishioner, Mrs Rashdall (the childless widow of the Very Revd. Hastings Rashdall, a Fellow of New College and a distinguished moral philosopher). The Vicar anxiously recorded in the parish magazine: “I have asked Her Highness Princess Marie Louise to come and perform the opening ceremony, and this she has graciously promised to do in November. Between now and then we shall want about 200 chairs, stage curtains and a piano.” Donations to the Furnishing Fund ranged from £5 given by Lady Teignmouth to two shillings and sixpence contributed by “Anon”.

The hall was duly opened on 21 November 1928 by the Princess. A concert followed the opening ceremony, featuring Miss Orrea Pernel, “a brilliant violinist”, and songs sung by the Hon. W. Brownlow. Soon afterwards, according to the parish magazine, the Daisy Club began its new season. This club had 56 members, 34 of whom were in domestic service. It ran a Lending Library and a full programme of dances, suppers, drama classes, and entertainments. Cubs, Brownies, Guides, and Scouts were also based at the Institute. Mrs Joyce Newman recalled in 2004: “I became a Brownie at the age of 7 [in 1931], and we used to meet in the Hall. We often went out on summer evenings and took our tea on to Port Meadow.”

By 1939, fifty years after its foundation, the Institute had proved its worth by serving the entire community – not only the working men, or the congregation of St Margaret’s Church, but everyone resident in the neighbourhood. But then, in the darkest days of the Second World War, it acquired a new role. In 1940, after the evacuation from Dunkirk, 45,000 soldiers from all over the British Isles were camped on Port Meadow nearby. Mr and Mrs Openshaw and their daughter Peggy, who lived on the corner of Polstead Road and Woodstock Road, conceived the idea of organising social evenings in the hall at St Margaret’s Institute to entertain the men. And so “Maggie’s Club” was born ...

150,000 cups of tea

Funded by donations from friends of the Openshaws, club nights were held every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for the next five years. Entrance was free to members of the forces, and local people were also welcomed. Refreshments were served (tea, buns, chocolates, and cigarettes), and there was dancing to the music of Victor Sylvester (at 78 rpm on a radiogram). The club was a huge success. The camp on Port Meadow eventually closed down, but the Royal Army Medical Corps was billeted at St Hugh’s College in St Margaret’s Road, and “Maggie’s” continued in being, serving nurses and orderlies, as well as RAF personnel from nearby aerodromes. The Openshaws’ main helpers were Miss Hancock, a lady in her seventies who lived at 19 Chalfont Road, and Mrs E. Badham, who lived at 11 Frenchay Road. Violet Ford, who served in the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force, is recorded as saying in 1941, “*St Margaret’s is the friendliest and jolliest place I have been to in Oxford*”, and Private Johnny Ball asked rhetorically in 1943: “*What would Oxford be without Maggie’s?*”

For some time during the war, the club co-existed with classes of Thomas Road Central School, which had been evacuated from London. Martin Koretz, who attended it from 1942 to 1944, remembers:

In winter there was a large open coal fire in the main hall on the ground floor. The headmaster, Mr Davis, used to take lessons in this hall and always stood with his back to the roaring fire. We always noticed the smell of smouldering trousers, while all of us were shivering with cold. ... At the time there was a tuck shop on the corner of Aristotle Lane, and the boys would race out at break time to buy “Fatty Cakes”, oozing with fat. They can’t have done me much harm, as I have weighed only a little over 8 stone for the whole of my adult life.

By June 1945, Maggie’s Club had held 838 sessions, and *The Oxford Times* printed the following report:

PRESENTATIONS AT FAREWELL DANCE

St Margaret’s Hall, Oxford, was the scene of a farewell dance for the Forces last night, when “Maggie’s”, the club which Mr. F.E. Openshaw, Mrs Openshaw, and Miss Peggy Openshaw have organised for the Forces, held its 838th session.

The RAMC No. 4 Company dance band gave its services. Mr Openshaw, in a tribute to the help of friends, said that Miss Hancock, who dealt with the tea, had missed only five evenings out of the 838 and had poured out 150,000 cups. Mrs Badham had cut over 60,000 sandwiches and had only missed ten evenings.

Mr Openshaw made presentations on behalf of his family to them and to Mrs Badham, Miss Judy Thorne, and Mr Geoffrey Turner.

Miss Mollie Goodall had collected from the Service men and members of the club, and from these gifts presentations were made by Colonel Maguire, RAMC, to Miss Peggy Openshaw, Mr Openshaw, Mrs Openshaw, Miss Hancock, Mrs Badham, Mr Badham, Mr Geoffrey Turner, and Miss Judy Thorne.

On 21 June 1945, 14 demobilised servicemen who were returning to their homes all around the British Isles wrote the following letter to the Openshaws:

On behalf of our little gang in the corner, we wish to express our grateful and sincere thanks for the happy and most enjoyable evening we had on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of “Maggie’s”.

We all feel sorry to hear that “Maggie’s” may have to close in the near future, for deep down in our hearts, memories of “Maggie’s” will always remain. Most of us will be homeward bound in the near future, and on our return to civilian life if anyone should enquire as to which University we attended during our stay at Oxford, although our answer will be none, we shall be proud to be able to claim the privilege and pleasure of attending “Maggie’s”.

It is with the greatest pleasure that we thank you, Peggy, Granny, and the many other kind helpers of “Maggie’s” staff for the many happy evenings we have had in the past, and we will always associate “Maggie’s” with being the one bright spot in Oxford and a home from home.

Our best wishes to everyone, and may God Bless You All.

Peggy Openshaw (who later married and became Peggy Bainbridge, living at 149 Woodstock Road until her death in 2005 at the age of almost 90) recalled much later: “They were very happy times, and we were very sorry when the club closed. We ended solvent, in spite of charging only one penny for a cup of tea.”

Jazz and jumble sales

After the war the Institute’s local popularity began to decline. Even the billiards saloon lost its appeal. Part of the reason was the advent of television, and part, perhaps, was the refusal of the trustees to allow the sale of alcohol on the premises. But – as one of the few public buildings in Oxford that was equipped with a stage – it was used occasionally for rehearsals and performances by undergraduate drama groups, among them the famous Experimental Theatre Club, which numbered among its members Kenneth Tynan, Michael Flanders, and Sandy Wilson (who wrote a satirical musical which was performed in the Institute in 1947 and is still remembered by a local retired doctor who had a walk-on part in the production).

The Institute was still being used by student drama groups twenty years later. Another local resident remembers rehearsing *The Cherry Orchard* there (with Maria Aitken as Madame Ranevsky) in about 1966, and Harold Pinter’s *The Public Eye and the Private Ear*, both of which were put on at The Playhouse, and the gory Jacobean melodrama *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, which was performed in the cloisters of Christ Church.

By the late 1970s the Institute was becoming shabby and neglected. The congregation of St Margaret’s Church had dwindled, the church seemed doomed to close, and a small band of

stalwarts had great difficulty in keeping the Institute running. A member of the management committee at that time recalls:

The whole building was in a horrific state of repair. There was no money, and the lease, with its attendant dilapidations bill, was due to expire in a few years' time. But amazingly the ground floor was well used by a variety of clubs and groups. My favourite was Civil Defence, who practised measures to protect us from nuclear attack by abseiling down from the balcony in the hall, and trundling stretchers around. ... Once we were able to rent the first floor to d'Overbroeck's tutorial college, we were able to build up a small fund for dilapidations and carry out a few much-needed repairs. We engaged a resident caretaker, put in a basic heating system, mended the roof, installed children's toilets, and put up a dividing wall in the front room.

This was the start of an epic programme of refurbishment, described in more detail in Part 2 and Appendix 2 of this booklet. Among the beneficiaries of the battles against dry rot and blocked drains was the Balkan Folk Dance Group, which is the longest-established of all the current users of the Institute. For about 40 years the group has used the hall for its weekly gatherings (attended in the early days by ex-prisoners of war from Balkan countries). Twice a year enthusiasts come from all over Britain to dance to live music, often in full traditional costume.

The Polstead Road Playgroup has been based at the Institute since the 1970s. Thirty years later, the parent-run group is still going strong and plays a central role in the local community. Other long-term users include the Tibetan Buddhist Meditation Group, which has been using the centre for weekly meditation meetings and weekend gatherings for almost 20 years.

Humphrey Carpenter's jazz band, *Vile Bodies*, which played regularly at the Ritz Hotel in London, occasionally rehearsed at the Institute in the 1980s. The multi-talented writer, musician, and broadcaster also founded The Mushy Pea Theatre Company – a drama group for children, including his own two daughters, which met at the Institute on Saturday mornings, improvising stories which they gradually built up into full-scale plays for performance in the hall (but presumably not on the stage, which was demolished some time after 1985 to make space for a larger kitchen). His obituary in *The Times* recorded that Humphrey, having written a jazz musical called *Babes* for the Mushy Peas, spent his royalties from the *Mr Majeika* books on taking the entire cast of more than 50 to London for a run of shows at the Shaw Theatre. "If you have an idea that sounds fun," he remarked, "and you can just about afford it, you really have to do it, don't you? Never know how long you've got." Humphrey died in 2005 at the tragically early age of 58 – a great loss to the local community.

The Institute (when not being used as a polling station at election time) has been, and still is, host to an extraordinary variety of groups, from Alcoholics Anonymous ("The Institute is an invaluable asset to the community", says the Secretary) to the Limes Club day centre, run by the charity Daybreak Oxford, which has used the Institute twice weekly since the mid-1980s, providing day care for older people with mental-health problems or memory loss. ("We provide a friendly club, a supportive environment, a hot lunch, and mentally stimulating activities. We also give some respite for carers.")

Local residents' associations use the hall for public meetings and social events ("It is our second home" – Secretary of the Waterside Residents' Association). Until recently, Suzuki violin classes were held for local children, led by a teacher who lived on a narrowboat on the canal nearby; their twice-yearly concerts raised several hundred pounds for the NSPCC and the Oxfordshire Association for the Blind (shades of Edie Dean!). The Institute has hosted community planning

exercises and political hustings. Retired people enjoy Two O’Clock Talks on every subject under the sun. There are classes in Tai Chi, Yoga, Judo, and Pilates ... tango classes ... cello lessons a chess club and a bridge club ... jumble sales ... wine-tastings ... music sessions for pre-school children ... Christmas carols with mince pies and punch ... New Year’s Eve parties ... Valentine’s Day dances ... There is always something going on. The list seems endless and is ever-changing.

One thing, however, has not changed since the very foundation of the Institute in 1890, and that is the unsung contributions of the many volunteers who keep it running – from the members of the management committee who take the difficult financial decisions to the folk who turn up to wield paintbrushes when the place needs redecorating. It is all done cheerfully, in a spirit of good will, and Violet Ford, if she could come back today, might indeed repeat her words, uttered in 1941: “*St Margaret’s Institute is the friendliest and jolliest place I have been to in Oxford*”.

“This very dear building”

“For everyone here who, like me, has benefited from this marvellous place – playgroups, societies, thespians, fitness fanatics, dancers, party goers, and many more – it is the greatest pleasure to be here at the start of this new phase in the history of this very dear building. It is easy to think of a neighbourhood as streets and houses; but a neighbourhood as a community is, of course, so much more: the people, the relationships, the friendships, and the joint activities – and today more than ever, a vibrant neighbourhood community needs common ground, a shared facility. For so many years, this Institute building has been just that.

Many of you will have spent happy times here. Many will have seen their children enjoying themselves as if there was no tomorrow, finding themselves, in a safe and supportive setting. Some of you *are* those children. One of my abiding memories is of one of my sons appearing as a donkey in a Christmas play – a memory lodged all the more forcibly in my mind by the fact that, at a critical moment, he forgot to go to Bethlehem, thereby raising a whole new revisionist theory of the Christmas story. ...

... The Institute is based on the rock-like support of the local community, and is a most welcome beam of light in an uncertain world. The Victorian building has been transformed, with modern facilities, and in an environmentally sound way. It is an enduring and very practical tribute to the power of voluntary effort and community spirit in the area.”

(Sir Derek Morris, speaking on 29 October 2005 at a celebration to mark the most recent refurbishment of the Institute)

Sources

- Copies of St Margaret's parish magazine from 1901, 1902, 1906, 1928, and 1929 (stored in the Bodleian Library).
- Archives of *The Oxford Times*, June 1945.
- Notes written by Miss Eleanor Wood and Miss Jinner Snodgrass (both now deceased).
- Interviews and correspondence with local residents and organisers of activities: Lisa Astley-Sparke, Peggy Bainbridge (now deceased), Susan Coleman, Nancy Drucker, Graham Hooper, Helen Hunter, Martin Koretz, Dorothy Metcalf, Lisa Morgan, Sir Derek Morris, Joyce Newman, Sandra Steeples, Stuart Skyte, Joey Slessor, Dr Ann Taylor, Barbara Wanklyn, Roger Wickstead.
- *Hayfield Road: Nine Hundred Years of an Oxford Neighbourhood* by Catherine Robinson and Elspeth Buxton (1993).
- *The Encyclopaedia of Oxford*, edited by Christopher Hibbert (Macmillan, 1988).
- *North Oxford* by Tanis Hinchcliffe (Yale University Press, 1992).

Part 2: The Legal and Management History of St Margaret's Institute

1889: the 99-year lease

On 23 June 1891 the President and Scholars of St John's College, Oxford, signed a lease for a piece of land at the end of Polstead Road, next to the Anchor Inn. The St Philip and St. James Working Men's Institute, as it was called, was the first building to be constructed in Polstead Road and was opened in 1890 – prior to the signing of the lease!

The lease was to run for 99 years from 10 October 1889, and in 1891 that must have seemed a comfortably long stretch. The three original lessees were the parish priest, Rev. Robert Hartley; the first committee chairman, Rev. Henry Pickard; and a respected local architect, H.G.W. Drinkwater, who prepared the original plans for the Working Men's Institute. The purpose of the lease was not made explicit in the original indenture, but it was well established that the building erected on that wedge-shaped piece of land was to provide facilities for the local community – in particular for working men.

Trustees continued to be appointed as and when necessary, both from the local churches – St. Philip and St. James, and St. Margaret – and from the local community. The system seems to have worked perfectly well until after the Second World War, when the Institute committee, having for so long focused on its tremendous wartime effort (described in Part 1), perhaps just ran out of steam. Whatever the reason, by 1952 the Trustees had ceased to function as a body, and by 1956 only one trustee, Mr Frederick Coates, was left. The decision was finally taken to request the Diocesan Board of Finance to take over as Custodian Trustee, with the Parochial Church Council of St Margaret's Church as Administrative Trustee, operating through a small committee. The legal process to achieve this was slow and tortuous but was concluded by a resolution of the PCC on 13 May 1964, accepting the Administrative Trusteeship of St. Margaret's Parish Institute and Hall (as it had become known) and the signing of a Deed of Appointment. As a result, the future of the Institute was legally secured.

In 1974 the Institute's Secretary and Treasurer, Mrs A.M. Skuce, began a correspondence with St John's College about the renewal of the lease, which was due to expire in 1988. The College Bursar responded in 1975: 'I think it likely that the College would prefer to sell the freehold rather than to renew the lease.' However, at that stage the PCC seemed only to be looking at an extension of the lease 'for another 25 years or something like that', not at an outright purchase.

100 years on: the low point

By 1984 the Institute was in a sad state: 'The building had a high wooden fence with enclosed concrete yard to which there was no public access...there was a small kitchen where water dripped on to bare wires. The hall was painted in greys and browns with large locked cupboards spread around the walls, and there was one urinal off, which smelt. The building was in a state of disrepair and there was rampant dry rot...there were four regular community users in the hall and a church group or two in the small room...' (Romy Briant in a letter to the committee).

At this unpromising stage in its history, the Institute had the good fortune to find a champion in Dorothy Metcalf, then church warden, who spoke up for the retention of the Institute at a time when the PCC could see no future in it. A new committee was set up by the vicar of St Margaret's, Rev. John Gawne-Cain, and they began to 'grapple with the problem' (David Smith, church warden). They held public meetings, liaised with health and social services, talked with voluntary groups. The consensus was that the Institute should be totally renovated and, by

encouraging local users, would once again be a catalyst for the community life of the area. The PCC gave its full support to this new initiative.

There was a burst of confident activity. Public and regular users' meetings were called, and teams of volunteers were involved in epic hall-painting and garden-laying sessions. The Treasurer, Richard Briant, wrote to ask the Diocese for financial support. As Trustee for the Institute, it was asked to make a loan of £30,000 for seven or eight years, which would pay for a substantial refurbishment of the ground floor to create a 'drop-in centre'. The loan was to be repaid from the rental income of the first-floor (let to d'Overbroeck's Tutorial College) and the second-floor flat (then let to the St Margaret's curate). In fact the Diocese agreed only to an initial loan of £10,000, with a further £6,000 later, but the money required was raised from other sources, and the renovation began. The present lay-out of the rooms on the ground floor, including the creation of the large kitchen in the former 'back stage' area, is the result of that 1987 initiative. The design was the work of students at the new Oxford Brookes University.

There was sadness about losing the stage, which held wartime memories for so many people, but it had been unused for a long time and Humphrey Carpenter (then setting up the Mushy Pea Theatre Company) made it clear that he would not use it

1987: the Institute rises from the ashes and negotiates a further 12-year lease

As 1987 drew on, it became imperative to negotiate a renewal of the 99-year lease, which was due to expire in October 1988. The committee, led by Richard and Romy Briant, were able to reflect with some pride on the enormous improvements in the Institute's facilities and community outreach which their labours had brought about. But there is a sense in the archived correspondence that neither side wanted to bring to a head the question of the long-term future of the Institute: the College offered a further (and apparently rather arbitrary) 12-year period and, although there was no definite promise of a further renewal after the Millennium, the committee received a letter from the President, suggesting that such a request might be considered favourably. With that the committee had to be satisfied, and they duly continued to make improvements to the Institute and encourage more users. They had to be more mindful than before of the Institute's financial viability, as the rent was set to rise in October 1988 from £8 p.a. to £1,000 p.a.

Between 1988 and 1990 a grant of £21,000 from the Tudor Trust paid for the work on the ground floor. A grant of £10,000 from the Wolfson Foundation paid for the rebuilding of the balcony at the north end of the hall and the rooms below it. The hall was given new flooring and lighting

By the early 1990s the Institute was again flourishing, with many regular users and also one-off functions. In 1996 it was possible for the first time to employ a co-ordinator to take over the day-to-day running of the Institute. In 1999 the new vicar of St. Margaret's, the Rev. Dr. Andrew Bunch, increased the membership of the committee and, under the chairmanship of Ben Simpson, Development Officer at Wolfson College, the Institute moved into a new phase.

2000: the start of negotiations to secure the Institute's future

For those concerned for the future of the Institute, the year 2000 marked not only the New Millennium but also, on 9 October, the expiry of the Institute's 112-year lease. There appeared to be a very real likelihood that this building, which had been the hub of the community for more than a century, would be repossessed and redeveloped by St. John's. There was clearly no time to waste, and in the spring of 2000 negotiations over the future of the Institute began in earnest, the Institute's team being led by Ben Simpson, Andrew Bunch, and Griselda Hamway, church warden of St Margaret's.

At the same time, Adele Smith was appointed as the Institute's co-ordinator, her brief being to build up the regular use of the Institute. She has encouraged, overseen, and skillfully managed an astonishing growth in activity over the last seven years, and this has enabled the committee to assert confidently that the Institute is a much-needed and well-used resource.

The situation in early 2000 was as follows: a survey carried out under the terms of the lease meant that the new committee faced a potential bill of over £20,000 for dilapidations to the building at the end of the lease. Negotiations with St John's secured agreement for a year's grace and, under the direction of John Ashby, the committee member and local resident who acted as honorary building adviser, a programme of contracted and voluntary works was begun which resulted in the first phase of the face-lift that was to follow, and the reparations necessary to satisfy St John's. Between 1999 and 2004, under John Ashby's supervision, the dilapidations were made good and the structure of the building was made safe. This included repairing the drains and the (very hazardous) business of mending the chimney. We gratefully remember Jinner Snodgrass, whose £15,000 legacy in February 2001 made it possible for John Ashby to undertake this work.

The legal situation was that St John's could require possession of the Institute if it wished to use it for its own occupation, or for redevelopment, or if the management committee had substantially failed to comply with the various covenants in the 1988 lease. Otherwise the Institute was entitled to a new lease, but legally this could last for a maximum of 14 years – and no more. In practice there was a strong likelihood that, should the lease be litigated, the Court might well limit the new lease to five years if St John's wanted the land for redevelopment.

Nigel Braithwaite of James Styles and Whitlock, Chartered Surveyors, and Clare Jones, Solicitor, were brought in to advise the Institute committee. On 3 June 2000 there was a Consultation Day at the Institute, which was well attended by local people. A ripple of concern began to spread through the community about the future of local and charitable activities in the Institute, and a public meeting was called for 13 June – and then postponed to allow time for the results of a meeting between St John's and the SMI Committee on 14 June to be known.

On 14 June 2000 the Committee put to St John's the need for the Institute to survive: the current population of the parish was some 7000 to 9000 people but was likely to grow by some 20–25 per cent in the near future, as a result of the huge building programme on the brown-field land between Oxford railway station and Wolvercote. In a letter of 11 June the committee had said: "We are therefore keen that the whole of the building, which was built, extended and improved by funds contributed voluntarily, should remain available for community purposes. We would if possible like to purchase the freehold."

The outcome of the meeting was St John's offer of a five-year extension – which would not be long enough, Ben Simpson argued, to persuade trusts and statutory agencies to fund work at the Institute: "No one will be interested when the planning horizon is as short as five years." Moreover, the five-year lease was to apply to the ground floor alone, with the expectation that any further lease of the ground floor would be at the full commercial value of the property. Subsequently the committee was able to negotiate a ten-year lease, with a break clause after five years.

In September 2000 the PCC ratified the management committee's proposal, resolving that the new ten-year lease should be entered into with St. John's as a holding position, while the terms of a long lease/purchase proposal were worked out.

During the early part of that ten-year lease an opportunity arose to purchase a long lease and, in 2003, Jeremy Thorowgood, property adviser, was instructed on behalf of the PCC to start negotiations. In early 2004 this resulted in an agreement to purchase a 999-year lease of the Institute from the College, with the object of providing a building for the use of the whole community. The cost of the purchase was £400,000, payable in three installments over a four-year period. St John's further agreed that the income or use of the two upper floors would be transferred to the lessees, to increase the Institute's solvency and, in the longer term, allow for greater community use of the building.

2004: the Appeal is launched

The Committee then began an Appeal to raise the funds necessary both for the purchase and for the refurbishment. Events were organised in and around the Institute, to raise its profile in the community and raise funds for the lease. Some of these have become annual fixtures: Variety Evenings, the Valentine's (now Spring) Ball (organised by Gloria Brunner and Sue Arbuthnot), Concerts (by Hugh Petter and Gabriel Amherst), Wine-tastings (Graham Harding), Art Week displays, Gardens Open Days, and New Year's Eve parties. Particular mention should be made of the Promises Auctions, to which numerous people have donated promises ranging from dog walking to weeks in holiday cottages. At the heart of these events has been Meg Movshon, events co-ordinator, whose enthusiasm and sheer hard work has been vital to their success.

Ben Simpson, Bryan Wardley, and others lodged numerous applications with grant-making bodies for funding for both the renovation of the building and the purchase of the lease. At a meeting of the North Area Committee of Oxford City Council in May 2004, Ben Simpson referred to the 'one-in-a-thousand-year opportunity' to purchase the 999-year lease. The Council members were persuaded, and this resulted in the original Council grant. The support of several Councillors throughout the fund-raising period has been crucial: Corinna Redman, Jim Campbell, Stephen Brown, Tony Hollander, John Goddard, and Alan Armitage, who, at the historic May NAC meeting, referred to the Institute as a 'Beacon of Light' which needed to be recognised and supported (*Oxford Times* 21 May 2004). Oxfordshire Community Foundation (Nigel Hamway and Simon Stubbings) were hugely supportive during this period.

Among those who generously supported the refurbishments were Waste Recycling Environmental Limited (WREN), the North Area Committee and Oxfordshire County Council. Since 2004, Bryan Wardley, with the unstintingly generous help of Tony Clear, former Diocesan surveyor, has managed the modernisation of the building. Much of the hard labour has been provided by local residents as well as by committee members. A Certificate from the Oxford Preservation Trust was awarded for the excellence of the refurbishments.

2008: the final push

The purchase of the lease has been generously supported by the North Area Committee and the Pye Family Trust. Our most generous corporate benefactor has been the Garfield Weston Foundation, which has given two donations of £10,000. Much guidance has been received from Rebecca Carley, the North Area Co-ordinator for the City Council.

The Appeal for the lease has raised £50,000 from grants and £100,000 from lettings, while £250,000 has been raised from local residents, businesses, and fund-raising events. Substantial support and an offer of underwriting have come from Oxford City Council. Most importantly, members of the local community have been prepared to dig into their pockets, as their predecessors did in the 1890s. In all, 62.5 per cent of the total £400,000 has come from local people, many of whom have joined the '400 Club' – the creation of our Treasurer and

indefatigable fundraiser Bryan Wardley. Without the commitment of Bryan and others this Appeal would not have succeeded. The committee decided to revive a historical precedent: the names of the 400 Club have been put up on boards in the Institute, as those of their predecessors were displayed in the 1890s.

The management committee can say with some pride that the first two installments of the lease purchase monies were paid on time in April 2006 and April 2007.

The final installment becomes due in April 2008, and money is still being raised from local people, as it was 120 years ago, to ensure that the Institute remains at the centre of our community and continues to provide for its changing needs.

Appendix 1: Current Users

This list is not exhaustive and cannot include all the people who have used the Institute for their own and their children's birthday parties, wedding and silver wedding celebrations, commemorations, residents' groups meetings, and street parties. We are grateful to users for making the Institute a place where people go to celebrate major events in their lives.

As at July 2007 the following groups were making regular use of the Institute's facilities:

Pre-School Playgroup

Activate (young people's drama group)

St Mary's School of Dance (for 5–17 year olds)

Family Karate class

Monkey Music (for 1–4 year olds)

Balkan Country Dancing

Contemporary Dance

Oxford Tango Group

Pilates classes

T'ai Chi classes

Yoga group

Martial Arts group

Tibetan Meditation group

Tea and Talks

The local branch of the Women's Institute

The Limes Club (for adults with mental-health problems)

Alcoholics Anonymous

Oxford City Chess Club (for all ages)

Bridge Club

English for Polish Citizens

Mandarin classes

Cello classes

Violin classes

Northumbrian pipes

Appendix 2: Development Phases

During the stewardship of the following committee members, the Institute was extensively redesigned and renovated at a total cost of more than £210,000.

1985–1999

Richard and Romy Briant

Old stage removed and replaced by a new kitchen. Dry rot eliminated. First-floor fire escape installed. Building rewired. New hall floor and lighting installed. Balcony repaired. Central heating installed in front rooms. New chairs bought. Garden designed, paved, and planted. Playgroup's outside area revamped.

Work in excess of £50,000

1999 – 2004

John Ashby

Dilapidations made good and structural safety improved, including repairs to the roof. Cellar drained and made useable. Large new glazed side window installed. Cowls removed from roof. Light wells repaired. Blocked sewer cleared. Wall between the Institute and the Anchor pub rebuilt.

Work costing £50,000

2004 – present day

Bryan Wardley

Hall

New toilets for disabled users, plus revamp of the playgroup toilets and washing area. New modern gas boilers. Roof insulated. Double-glazed windows installed. Loop installed for hard-of-hearing users. Floor re-sanded and sealed. Blinds installed to cover playgroup's collages. New curtains. Refurbishment to modern standards.

Kitchen, passageway, and toilets

New cupboards, cookers, and modern gas boiler. Wooden block floor refurbished. Modern lighting installed. New toilets, including one for disabled users.

Front rooms

New sprung floor for dancing. Secondary glazing. Old cupboards removed. New curtains. Kitchenette installed. Plaque to commemorate major donors.

Top-floor flat

Complete refurbishment.

Whole building

Fire-alarm system improved to cover full usage of the building. Doors fireproof. Repainting throughout.

Work costing £110,000

Appendix 3: Committee Members during the Appeal, 2004–2008

Andrew Bunch Vicar of St Margaret's and St Giles' Churches
Ben Simpson Chairman

John Ashby
Tony Clear
Richard Cooper
Rachel Faulkner
Chris Goodall
Pascale Lafeber
Chris Levick
Jane Martineau
Meg Movshon
Corinna Redman
Gwynneth Royce
Elisabeth Salisbury
Adele Smith
Derick Wade
Elizabeth Wade
Bryan Wardley