

The many lives of Chippenham Town Hall

It is now a symbol of good local government and the hub of a thriving town, but as Gary Lawrence discovered, Chippenham Town Hall has a colourful past as a market, a hospital and a concert venue – and it was built by a man with a scandalous back story.

IT WAS its first major wash and brush up for decades and the thorough renovation brought back the honey-coloured warmth to Chippenham Town Hall's limestone frontage. Those stones, first assembled together in 1833, have seen the world around them change beyond all recognition.

The restoration recently carried out by Chippenham Town Council provided an excuse to look back at the history of the town's civic cornerstone and the changing role it has had in the town. Its creation came at the end of a turbulent time for Chippenham, a topsy-turvy time of boom and bust throughout the Georgian period. At its height, the town was known as 'Little Bath' because of its fine buildings paid for by the booming cloth trade. Huge houses, grand balls and even its own spa brought the well-heeled of the day to the town and its surrounding villages.

At its lowest ebb the town suffered riots over taxes after the cloth trade faltered and a corruption scandal involving allegations of a rigged by-election in Chippenham was the final straw for Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole's Whig government, forcing him to resign. But it wasn't all doom and gloom for Chippenham, despite its apparent dodgy democracy. The Wilts and Berks Canal had brought transport, jobs and a new working population to the area, and the new Great Western Railway was just a few years away.

In July 1830, a new character stepped on to the stage of the town's life in the shape of one Joseph Neeld. His rise in the world was like something out of a Jane Austen romance. Born in unpromising Hendon, he had suddenly come into money as the sole heir of a rich and lonely uncle who left him £1.5 million, which at today's rate is something akin to finding a bag on your doorstep containing a lost Turner painting, a Penny Black and a winning Euro Millions lottery ticket.

It is hard to imagine the extent of the fabulous wealth suddenly bestowed upon him and the opportunities it presented to a



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHIPPENHAM MUSEUM

relatively young man of 39-years-old, but in those days money alone did not guarantee social acceptance. Good deeds, a title and a well-placed marriage were what counted. Well, he got two out of three right.

His first move, in 1828, was to buy the run-down manors of Grittleton and Alderton and then to begin renovating and modernising them. Having got this under way, he found favour in Chippenham and was proposed as the town's MP in 1830.

So far, so good. The final part of Project Social Climbing was a society wife and the beautiful daughter of Lord Shaftesbury, Lady Caroline Ashley-Cooper, fitted the bill nicely. He fell in love with her breeding and connections and she fluttered her aristocratic eyelids at his fortune – £1.5 million buys a great many ball gowns. What could possibly go wrong?

Quite a lot as it turned out. When the newlywed Lady Caroline Neeld arrived at Grittleton House to see how her new home was coming along, she found a young French girl called Anna Marie playing happily.

When inquiring who the child was, she learned she was Neeld's illegitimate daughter. Among all the things you might mention to a new wife when selling the virtues of the home she would be living in, you would think your child born out of wedlock might be one.

Not surprisingly this did not please Lady Caroline one bit and she high-tailed it back to London, where she and Neeld began a very public legal row. She sued him for 'restitution of conjugal rights' and he countered with the allegation that she had given birth to the child of a Guards officer six weeks after their marriage. She hit back again with accusations that he had locked her in a London hotel room, deprived her of money or access to her family.

In a series of letters to Lady Caroline, an increasingly frustrated Neeld implored and then ordered her back at his side. "I take this opportunity to declare, and to impress upon you that I shall require from you that duty

Above: The front of the Town Hall as it appears today



riff proved too much for 1,000 over-excited teens who invaded the stage. The group were forced to flee out of the hall's rear door.

The Neeld remains a vibrant concert venue after Chippenham Town Council invested more than £300,000 in adding new seating, lighting and sound equipment three years ago. The town hall itself was redeveloped in 1999 to improve the reception area, add new meeting rooms and extend the rear of The Neeld Community and Arts Centre, as it is now known.

Joseph Neeld would be content that the building he funded remains his lasting legacy to Chippenham. Just as it was when it was built, the town hall remains a symbol of the town's confidence and Neeld's public spirit and desire to improve the town is still embodied in the Council's latest bold project – to take control of a number of assets from Wiltshire Council.

This summer the Council is set to take on Monkton Park, The Yelde Hall, the Market Place and its Friday and Saturday Markets, street cleaning, grass cutting, and a range of other amenities from the cash-strapped unitary authority. Council leader, Sandie Webb, says: "What we are saying is that we would like to own these assets for the town. We would like to be able to deliver a good service for the people of the town, just like we do with assets they know we deliver brilliantly, such as the Town Hall, John Coles Park, Stanley Park, The Neeld and Chippenham Museum."

Joseph would no doubt agree with that. **WL**

and obedience in all things which a wife owes to her husband and which I am determined to enforce," he wrote on July 14, 1831.

The *Wiltshire Gazette*, which since its foundation in 1816 had had to content itself with pig prices, adverts for boil medicine and stories about drunken brawls to fill its pages, was breathless with excitement at this high born melodrama, labelling it as 'the farce of low life above stairs'. The marriage was annulled in 1831 after a bitter court case during which, to her credit, Lady Caroline never mentioned Anna Marie.

If this public humiliation brought shame on Neeld he didn't appear to show it. He offered to build a new town hall for Chippenham at a cost of £12,000 and by 1833, amid much fanfare and celebration, the High Street welcomed its new landmark. Built on the site of the former Cannon Inn, the hall featured a market on the ground floor and a council chamber above. In 1850, Neeld paid for a new cheese hall to the rear, later called the Neeld Hall. Within five years, 2,000 tonnes of cheese a year was sold there.

Neeld remained MP for the town until his death in 1856, never once uttering a word in the House of Commons. He died at Grittleton, leaving the magnificent house to Anna Marie, who had stayed at his side.

As the memory of Neeld faded so did the cheese trade and the hall built in his name fell into near disuse. It found a new lease of life in 1915 when it, along with the upstairs chamber of the town hall, was converted into the Unity and Loyalty wards of the VAD Auxilliary War Hospital for the wounded brought home from the Front.

Although Salisbury Plain was home to a number of military hospitals, they were overwhelmed with casualties. The hospital

treated 1,872 patients until its closure in April 1919, with only one fatality, a Canadian buried in the town's London Road cemetery beneath a headstone paid for by public subscription. Three staff members also died from the flu.

After the war, the upstairs chamber over the town hall was restored to its previous use and the concerts and shows that took place on the Neeld Hall's stage played an essential role in rebuilding the morale of the town. That stage became a barometer of the changing world outside the town hall as big bands and crooners gave way to rock and rollers, before the likes of The Who strutted their angry stuff there on May 15, 1965.

Their gig seems to have passed uneventfully, which is more than can be said of The Kinks when they played there on September 7, 1964. The very week they played, You Really Got Me topped the hit parade and the song's opening



**Above: Early 20th Century; Inset: Joseph Neeld
Right: View of the Town Hall during its use
as a hospital during the First World War**