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DORMANS LAND INSTITUTE



(photo taken circa 2005 by Janet Bateson)

In August 1881 a "Navy Mission" was set up to cater for the spiritual needs of the men (known as navvies) working in the Dormans Land area on the construction of the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway line from Croydon to East Grinstead. Although the Mission's main aims were religious, provision was also made for the men's social welfare.

Mrs Emma St Clair of The Beacon enabled a hut to be built on land belonging to Mr James Cowdrey of Doggetts, close to the railway line and the navvies' huts, for use as a Mission Room/Chapel where services and social meetings could take place.

Night schools were held in the Mission Room, which housed a library, and a penny savings bank was opened. Fortnightly entertainments also took place, which proved very popular with the navvies and villagers - at one such event in January 1882 it was reported that "the room was crowded to excess, many having to turn away unable to gain admittance".

Emma St Clair subsequently had a Concert Room built, in order to leave the Mission Room free solely for religious purposes. This new building was located across the road, on her own land just up the hill from Starborough Cottages, in the north-west corner of what is now Dormans Land Cricket Club's ground. The Concert Room was opened on 27th April 1882 with a 'Grand Evening Concert', held in aid of the Endowment Fund for the newly-built St John's Church. As well as being a venue for concerts and similar entertainments, by September 1882 the room was open from 7pm on Tuesday and Thursday evenings for games and reading, and also twice a week for a night school. A cricket club was also formed in 1882.

As work on the railway progressed the navvies moved away, the last service in the Mission Chapel being held on 30th September 1883. Following this the original building was relocated to adjoin the Concert Room, and the Dormans Land Institute was set up.

The first Secretary of the Institute was Mr Albert Potter, who held the post for a number of years; and at least two members of the St Clair family always held senior positions on the committee. (Emma maintained a close association with the Institute until her death in 1909, when she left the buildings to her niece Juliet "for the benefit of the villagers and her own pleasure" - Juliet and her brother David had both also been heavily involved with the Institute since the beginning.)

Institute members, who paid an annual subscription, enjoyed regular entertainments such as whist drives and social evenings, and also had the use of a Billiards Room. At the AGM in September 1892 it was reported that subscription receipts for the year had totalled £15 18s 1d (nearly £2,000 today) and after payment of expenses there was a balance in hand of 11s 2d (around £70 today).

A Football Club was also formed and, like the Cricket Club, was allowed to use the field adjoining the Institute free of charge - this became known as the "Institute Field". The Concert Room and Lecture Hall were also made available to local groups at no charge for a variety of occasions.

Events held at the Institute during its early years included:

October 1885 - A meeting organised by the Primrose League (an organisation supporting Conservative principles) when prospective MP Sir Trevor Lawrence addressed constituents.

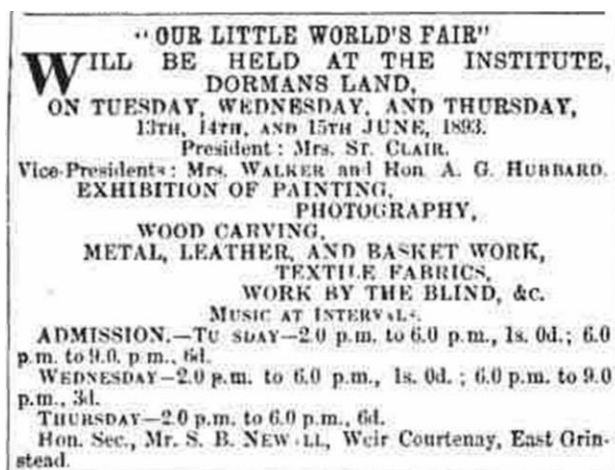
November 1888 - A Chrysanthemum Show, followed by an evening of miscellaneous entertainment. (Although not very well supported on this occasion, a similar event held in 1892 was far more successful and the Annual Chrysanthemum, Fruit & Vegetable Show soon became well-established.)

April 1889 - A concert by the Dormans Land Choral Society (also an annual event).

May 1889 - The first annual dinner of the Dormans and Lingfield Football Club.

April 1892 - A debate on the subject of Old Age Pensions (debates were held regularly).

June 1893:



(Sussex Agricultural Express - June 10th 1893)

November 1893 - A performance of Amateur Theatricals to raise funds for the Dormans Land Choral Society.

As well as cricket and football, Institute members played indoor sports such as billiards and snooker and various board games. In March 1899 a Games Match, consisting of whist, cribbage and billiards, was held between the Institute and the East Grinstead Working Men's Club. A similar event the following month, against the East Grinstead Constitutional Club, also included chess and draughts.

THE ANNUAL ATHLETIC OR WHIT MONDAY SPORTS

In the late 1800s a number of towns and villages held Athletic Sports meetings, generally on the Whit Monday Bank Holiday each year. Such an event took place at Dormans Land in 1883 on Mr Cowdrey's field near the Mission Room. The day started at 10 a.m. with a cricket match, followed by Athletic Sports at 2 p.m. and, at 8 p.m., a Musical Entertainment in the 'New Room' (as the Concert Room was often referred to at that time).

The sports consisted of running races over various distances - 100 yards, 220 yards, quarter of a mile, half a mile, one mile - along with hurdles, three-legged, wheelbarrow and sack races.

For a few years the Whit Monday Sports were held on a field at Quakers Plat, with the evening entertainment taking place at the Institute, but in 1892 the Sports took place at the Institute Field for the first time. This was deemed to be an improvement on the previous site, with the added bonus that competitors were able to use the Institute as a changing room!

Subsequently, the Sports were held at the Institute Field for many years, apart from a period during the First World War. However, in February 1930 it was decided to change the date from Whit Monday to July as various other local attractions on the former had led to a reduction in the numbers attending.

The Institute Field was also the venue for some local celebrations of royal events:

Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee (June 1887) - an afternoon of children's sports, cricket, music by the Dormans Land Brass Band, tea for nearly 700 inhabitants of the village followed by a performance from the local 'Jubilee Minstrels', the evening ending with a firework display.

Edward VII's coronation (August 1902) - a cricket match in the morning, children's sports in the afternoon and tea for about 250 school children (who had to shelter under the trees when it rained). Around 50 people aged over sixty were given tea in the Institute. This was followed by races for adults from Dormans Land only.

On 19th July 1919 Peace Celebrations were held in towns and villages across the country, and Dormans Land was no exception. In the afternoon sports took place on the Institute Field and the Dormans Land Band played a selection of music. A "sumptuous tea" was served in the Lecture Hall to Service and Ex-Service men and their families, together with villagers aged over sixty years, and the event was rounded off with a firework display in the evening.

The following year, in October 1920, the Dormans Land Memorial Club was opened. Although this also became a venue for local social events, the Club and the Institute seem to have co-existed successfully for a number of years.

During the 1930s the Institute continued to hold whist drives and socials evenings, including fancy dress competitions. Billiards and snooker remained popular, a billiards match against the Homes of St Barnabas being a regular fixture. Prizes for the December social evening in 1935 included coal, chocolates and cigarettes; on another occasion one of the prizes was a brace of rabbits!

The Institute was also used for village band practice nights, cricket club meetings and social evenings, the bowls club and, towards the end of 1935, a weekly ambulance class was held. In 1938 the Horticultural Society applied to hold a couple of social evenings, a social took place in aid of the Tennis Club, and card tables were loaned to the Church Fete Committee.

At a committee meeting in October 1938 it was agreed to change the name to the "Dormans Old Institute" (it is thought this was to avoid confusion with the Memorial Club, which was sometimes referred to as the "Dormans Land Memorial Institute"). At that meeting the subscriptions were agreed at 3/- for adult members (not under 16 years of age) and 2/- for juniors (not under 15 years of age) - roughly £10.50 and £7 today. No gambling or bad language was allowed and the room was to close at 10 p.m. except on special occasions.

In 1939 the AGM of the Dormans Old Institute took place on 28th August, when it was agreed "that all books and keys be left in the care of Miss St Clair of Farindons in case of War" (this referring to Juliet). At that time Mrs Louise St Clair was the President, with Captain William Farhill St Clair being Vice President and Treasurer.

Despite the coming of the Second World War, in May 1940 the Institute Cricket Club decided to raise a team for the coming season, together with a second eleven if enough players were available.

By 1949 the word 'Institute' had been dropped and the club was known as the Dormans Land Cricket Club. At the AGM in October 1949 (held at the Memorial Hall) Louise St Clair was elected as President while William Farhill St Clair retired as Treasurer and was elected as Chairman.

The Institute did not re-open after the Second World War. In November 1949 William obtained planning permission to convert 'the Old Institute' into a dressing room and pavilion, and in April 1951 a Special Meeting was held "to decide on the disposal of the assets of the Club".

However, the Institute Field remained the home of Dormans Land Cricket Club and, following William's death, in 1968 the land was gifted to the club by way of a trust on the condition that it was always to be known as the "St Clair Cricket Ground".

In due course a modern purpose-built pavilion was erected towards the top of the field. The former Institute building was used by the Cricket Club to store equipment until it was destroyed by fire in 2009.



(photo taken circa 2005 by Janet Bateson)

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Sources:

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