

Piddlehinton Book Authors Group

Piddlehinton Village Hall Committee has always been proactive in devising events for utilising the hall, and thus raising much needed revenue. When the idea of arranging an exhibition of village history was discussed in 1987, this was its single, and only, aim. The unforeseen consequences happily enabled the exhibition to evolve into a proud legacy of community involvement and historical record for Piddlehinton.

The exhibition in March 1988 was undoubtedly a success beyond our reckoning. The call for material and memories was taken up by parishioners and their families, locally and across the world. The exhibition was packed: attended not only by those with a personal interest, but also local historians and representatives from village societies, inspiring several other exhibitions over the next few years. Other complementary events were organised village-wide around the exhibition and our efforts were awarded First Prize in the 1989 County Village Ventures scheme. For Piddlehinton there were two further amazing legacies: a wealth of material information, both in content and quantity - manuscripts, memories and photographs; and an enthusiastic group of researchers who were keen to curate, utilise, and enhance this fascinating collection.

Curation was relatively easy: Susan Belgrave offered room at West Lodge to store the materials in archival boxes, and the group met regularly to sort, organise and reference these for future use. We carried on our research: visiting Eton College library and Trowbridge Records Office, for example, to glean official information from their archives. We were also keen to record the ever-changing face of Piddlehinton, collecting new materials and recording village events while Julian Wardlaw took a multitude of photographs throughout the village to capture features of contemporary life and landscape. We also responded to genealogy and village enquiries from across the world, which in turn fed into the archive. We gathered enough extra information to curate a second "Ten Years On" exhibition in 1998, which in turn was integrated back into the archive.

However, following the 1988 exhibition our main concern had been to ensure that the written and oral material and photographs were recorded in a more permanent and accessible form. We secured a contract with Dorset Books, a subsidiary of the now-defunct Wheaton publishing company at Exeter. We had to provide some funding towards publishing, this was achieved by subscriptions, over 200 subscribers responded, and thus the book could be retailed at an acceptable £8.95.

To operate without the Village Hall Committee, the group became financially independent as "Piddlehinton Book Authors Group". This enabled us to receive donations and funding for the book and future activities. At this time, the group members were Susan Belgrave, Angela Drewe, Wendy Gregory, Naomi Smeeth, Tessa Spiller, Gillian Vickery and Judith Wardlaw – all village residents. Julian Wardlaw reproduced all the photographs loaned to us for the exhibition, this was before sophisticated digital imagery, and so a major task in itself. The Book Authors group had the exacting and often contentious task of whittling down boxes of information, maps and photos into a manageable and readable form, as dictated by the Dorset Books representative!! After all the hard work "The Story of Piddlehinton" was launched with much ceremony in the Village Hall in April 1990. Books were available to buy in Piddlehinton Village shop, Dorchester bookshops and Dorchester Library. This was before the era of online shopping, so the Book Authors group bought a set of books to be locally available and for postal enquiries. In 1998, the books still at Wheaton were remaindered and the group bought 900 copies at 44p each. Susan stored all these in her attic rooms, bringing them out at village events and by request to The Thimble Inn.

As the money from sales accrued, the Book Authors Group reinvested it initially in the Village Hall, our parent Committee, but also in grants to the parish church and in individual ventures which we felt enhanced the village. This was particularly noticeable in the accounts from around the Millennium. Money was given for the Village Hall tapestry, Village Hall Millennium map and Millennium Green map.

In 2005 a grant was made to the Parish Council towards producing the Village Design Statement. As the internet has increasingly become the instrument of research, we funded digitisation of the Story of Piddlehinton in its original extended form, with more detail and photographs. Thanks are due to Andy Howard for the epic task of transposing the material, allowing a world-wide appreciation of our village history. The online version is available at http://www.piddlevalley.info/history/piddlehinton/sop/piddlehinton_preface.php/.

Over the last few years, the group felt it was time the materials in Susan's attic should be more formally archived and the collection was accepted by Dorset County Museum, who subsequently passed it to the Dorset History Centre. The archive was dismembered, but primary research manuscripts and original photographs which were deemed appropriate have been incorporated into the History Centre collection. Following the sad death of Susan earlier this year, Judith and Gillian (the remaining members) decided to wind up the group, find a home for the last 200 books and distribute the remainder of the funds. The books are with the Parochial Church Council and will be available (for a donation) in St Mary's church, Piddlehinton, or for postal requests, via the Community website (email: mail@whitepuppy.co.uk).

The outstanding funds (just short of £400) were given to Piddle Valley CE First School specifically for literacy. We felt that this was appropriate, for several reasons. The group had not given money to the school before, despite (its forerunner) Piddlehinton school being prominent in the Story of Piddlehinton and providing education for village children for 120 years. Susan, Judith and Gillian have been governors at Piddle Valley School. Angela taught valley children at St Mary's Middle School in Puddletown. Susan founded the national Volunteer Reading Help scheme in 1973. Now known as Coram Beanstalk (<https://www.beanstalkcharity.org.uk/>), it recruits volunteers to provide reading support on a one-to-one basis in schools. This support has been highly effective in raising standards of literacy. As Piddlehinton children attend Piddle Valley school, we felt that proceeds from a book about our village past should help provide books for the future. Overall, £1787.89 has been donated to local causes from the proceeds of book sales, which could not have happened had we not funded and bought the remaindered stock twenty years ago.

It is fitting that the group should complete its function as Susan passed away. There is no doubt she was a driving force in ensuring the book was published and the archive retained. The group has adapted over the years as Wendy and Tessa and Gillian moved away and Angela and Naomi both sadly died while still members. We all contributed our own individual interests and skills which brought ingenuity and freshness to our activities. As a group we achieved more than our parts and went on to become involved in other village initiatives, for example the visit by US veterans to Piddlehinton Camp in 1994. It is also worth remembering this was a technologically modest time when computers were word processors and not a household item; all research was done travelling to libraries, archives and past residents; there was no email, no scanning, no online resources, editing was time-consuming - "cut and paste" was just that with scissors and glue! We each put a lot of work and more than a little of ourselves into the Story of Piddlehinton and we all thoroughly enjoyed it. We are proud to represent the achievements of the group as the story comes to a close - but not an end. Remember you can still find copies of the book in the church, and maybe, someday, another group will take on a new Story of Piddlehinton.

Should you require a fuller set of accounts contact Gillian Vickery (gillvickery@gmail.com) or Judith Wardlaw (orchard444@aol.com 01300 348404).