In 1979 the village hall used by the Parish of Kington St Michael was considered to be somewhat inadequate for the wide range of activities carried out in the village, having once been used as a skittle alley, and having the main dimensions of 13’ by 80’. Following a public meeting, the Parish Council was instructed to try to obtain the use of the Old School premises to form a new village hall. This policy was maintained through three consecutive Parish Councils.

The following document sets out the historical facts pertinent to the acquisition of the Old School premises and playground by Kington St Michael Parish Council.

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In 1903 Herbert Prodgers, Squire of Kington St Michael Manor gave the school, adjoining teacher’s house and land upon which they stood in a DEED OF GIFT to the Bishop of Bristol as Trustee, for the use of the people of Kington St Michael. In June 1913 a Mr T Aland conveyed a small piece of garden land, for use as school playground, which was also added to the trust. The school continued in use, with the Head Teacher occupying the school house until 1968, when the school managers let the school house to a person not otherwise connected to the school. This is significant as at that point it was deemed (at a later date) that the school house reverted to the heirs of the Squire, but none being aware of this, the Church commissioners were empowered eventually to claim that property under a possessory title (squatters’ rights!).

The old school continued in use until 1978, when it was replaced by a new purpose built school at the other end of the village. Between 1978 and 1979 various persons, but most notably the Parish council considered the future of the old school. Consultation with the vicar and the school Managers unearthed the original
Deed of Gift signed by Herbert Prodgers and everything stemmed from there. It should be noted that the main reason that the Parish Council were so interested was because the current village hall, with its dimensions of 80’ by 13’ was considered inadequate for the wide range of activities carried out in the village. A village meeting was called to discuss the matter and the Parish Council was given a mandate to acquire the premises for the village’s use.

In 1979 therefore, the Parish Council made representations to the Church Authorities of its interest in the property following the original Deed of Gift, and started to identify the family of the late Herbert Prodgers in order to ascertain the reversioner to the property. A number of false starts were made as to how the reversioner might be identified. At first it was thought that he/she would be descended from the Squire’s eldest son as required by Church Law. After finding the Squire’s last descendent, an elderly lady living in Scotland, the Church Authorities stated that no, the reversioner actually needed to be traced via Herbert Prodgers’ will, birth, marriage and death certificates, and so on down each generation. This had taken three years so far.

It was understood right from the start, that the reversioner could retain his/her interest in the original Deed of Gift he he/she so wished, and the Parish Council would have no grounds for complaint.

1982-84. A copy of Herbert Prodgers’ will was obtained and a family tree made out to assist identification of individual members. Initially little headway was made at this point as it appeared that a number of Herbert Prodgers’ heirs could be joint residual legatees, depending on who died first. The situation was eventually clarified by the legal help of Sir Richard Gaskell (President of the Law society at the time) and the residual heir of the Kington St Michael property was identified as his son,
Greville John Prodgers.

Further difficulties continued as Greville had not married and had died in Nairobi. Initial enquiries could not identify any will as having been made. If this was so, then Greville’s residual heirs would be all his brothers and sisters in equal shares, and all their heirs who were still alive. An exceedingly daunting prospect.

A start was made on this and some members of the family contacted, including
Mrs Dorothy Prodgers, who would have been heir to one third of Greville’s estate, and who also wished her share to come to the Parish Council. However, approximately a year after the initial enquiry was made a letter from Nairobi informed the Parish Council that a will had been made, and where a copy could be obtained. Probate had been granted to the National Bank of India and Greville’s heir was his friend, also living in Kenya, William Henry Gunson. William Gunson’s will gave an interest to his wife during her lifetime, and thence equally to his two children,
Greville Richard Gunson and Beatrice Constance Anne Roberts (née Gunson). Both of these persons were still living.

Enquiries were continued and it was found, via a letter to the Channel Islands,
re-addressed to Jakarta, Indonesia and thence to Surrey, that Mrs Roberts lived in England and Greville Gunson in Africa. In was also found that each had made a deed of gift between themselves assigning each all of their interests in England and Africa respectively. Mrs Roberts was identified as the sole Reversioner to the Herbert Prodgers gift. The various documents needed to establish the wills and to identify each person as being the person stated (birth, marriage and death certificates) were obtained and Mrs Roberts invited to the village of
Kington St Michael to see the property in question and also to see the village’s current village hall and hence the need for an additional community property.

Mrs Roberts was then given all the information obtained by the Parish Council and left to make up her own mind as to whether she would give the school property to the parish for community purposes.

The Parish Council was delighted to hear that Mrs Roberts would indeed give the property to the village!

May 1984. A letter from the Church solicitors informed the Parish Council clearly for the first time, that the school dwelling house would not be the subject of any reversion since the Bishop of Bristol had already obtained it under a possessory title (squatters’ rights).

23rd November 1984. The Church seemed to be making moves to sell either or both the school and dwelling house.

3rd December 1984. The Church Authorities accept the Reversioner’s claim to the property, but claim the teacher’s dwelling house as theirs by possessory title, and, despite many and various arguments, both legal and moral, continued to hold that position.

11th December 1984. Whilst confirming Mrs Robert’s title, the Church solicitors notified the Parish Council of their intent to dispose of the Aland land and claim that part of the old school was extended on to that land and a need for further negotiations was required! This was refuted and, fortunately, evidence found to support this. The need to find Reversioner(s) to the Aland land now becomes pressing.

1984-5. Having succeeded so far with the Prodgers Deed of Gift, the Parish Council now knew how to set about the same with the Aland [playground] land. Again perseverance, luck and the willingness of certain members of the Parish Council
(Mr Isaac and Mrs Kirby) to go to the last recorded address of one of the legatees to find out what had happened to her and to her son, enable this to be done. Within six months all eight Reversioners are identified and substantiated with documentation.

October 1985. Church Authorities agree to the Reversioners of the Aland land and these are now contacted.

21st October 1985. When accepting the Aland reversion, the Church solicitors once more raise the matter of the Parish Council purchasing, at market value, the dwelling house.

25th October 1985. The Parish Council explain that whilst they would very much want to use the dwelling house in their plans to provide a proper sized village hall, they are dependent on a very small level of rates, and they are still paying for the purchase of the village playing field, which will take another 15 years to complete. (1p rate raises £600).

January 1986. A further meeting is held to see if there is any way in which the parish could acquire the use of the dwelling house without having to purchase it.

20th January 1986. A letter is sent to the Archdeacon of Swindon outlining the parish need for the building, with the moral and legal grounds for the Church to accede to this request, vis-à-vis the original intents of the Deed of Gift by Herbert Prodgers, the wishes of the Reversioner to that Deed of Gift, the extensive efforts of the villagers over a long period of time to achieve this aim, and the inability of such a small parish to be able to purchase the property at market value. The Archdeacon was asked if there was any way in which the property could be incorporated in to the village hall project whist still remaining the property of the Bishop of Bristol.

22nd January 1986. A letter from the Church solicitors still indicates the intent to sell the dwelling house.

18th February 1986. A lengthy reply from the Archdeacon includes within it an offer for the parish to purchase the dwelling house at 75% of market value, if this is agreed by the Charity Commissioners. The monies so obtained would have to remain a as fund to carry out the original intents of the Deed of Gift and remain within the Parish of Kington St Michael.

7th March 1986. The District Valuer gives a market value of £23,500 for the dwelling house. This is still outside the range of the Parish’s finances.

11th April 1986. Four representatives of the Parish Council (Maureen Hall, Bill Isaac, Kathy Kirby and Roger Sealy) meet with the Bishop of Bristol to discuss the problem and to put the Parish Council’s case. The Bishop is sympathetic, but states he is bound by his legal advisors. A further approach is suggested for consideration by the parish and this is put in writing.

13th June 1986. A written reply from the Bishop of Bristol reiterates the possessory title; he must abide by his legal advisors’ decisions, but makes suggestions as to other possibilities if these can be achieved within the limits of the purposes of the Trust.

14th July 1986. A letter is received from the Church solicitors stating that the trusts of the original Deed of Gift must be strictly adhered to and there is no way that they could be altered to achieve the parish’s request. The parish is advised to put in an offer for the dwelling house that it can afford and this would be put to the
Charity Commissioners to see if this would be possible.

December 1986. After very careful consideration, the Parish Council makes an offer of £10,000 for the dwelling house, conditional on its ability to raise such monies in a management scheme for the whole of the Village Hall Project, via grants from the Community Council, etc.

22nd June 1987. The Deed of Gift of the Old School, from Mrs Roberts to the
Parish of Kington St Michael, is finally signed by all parties concerned, including the Bishop of Bristol! This gave the school building to the use of the village for community purposes and was tied in to the existing scheme for the management of the Village Hall Charity.

22nd July 1987. The Church solicitors inform the Parish Council that the Charity Commissioners have accepted the purchase price of £10,000 for the dwelling house, in principle, and have further started to devise a scheme for the new Trust for Kington St Michael, which would be established with the money. The Parish Council is delighted and stunned and awaits further information as forthcoming from the Charity Commissioners.

March 1989. The Parish Council was notified that in June 1988 the
Charity Commissioners had recommended that Parish Council be made Trustee of the dwelling house under a variation of the existing Trusts, for the use of the said dwelling house for community purposes in conjunction with the Old School, and that they considered that there was no need to the Parish Council to purchase the property. After 10 years work, a scheme could now be drawn up, discussed by the village, and, when approved, could allow grants to be applied for and fundraising begin.

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1990. Plans progressed from that point, with a series of village meetings, consultation with the Community Council for Wiltshire, emergency repairs to the roof and windows, and even the interim hiring out of the Old School to help raise funds for its eventual conversion. In 1992 grants were approved and builders instructed to start work in March 1993.

The Bishop of Bristol agreed to come and open the new Village Hall on
Sunday 5th September 1993. The whole saga had taken 14 years. Even we were amazed at our own tenacity.

A search for a tenant for the Old Village Hall was on, with 1,000 square feet for either offices or workshops. Having easy access to Junction 17 of the M4, in a very pleasant and friendly environment, it was hoped that this would not be too much trouble. Meanwhile fundraising continued.

Maureen A Hall 1993.