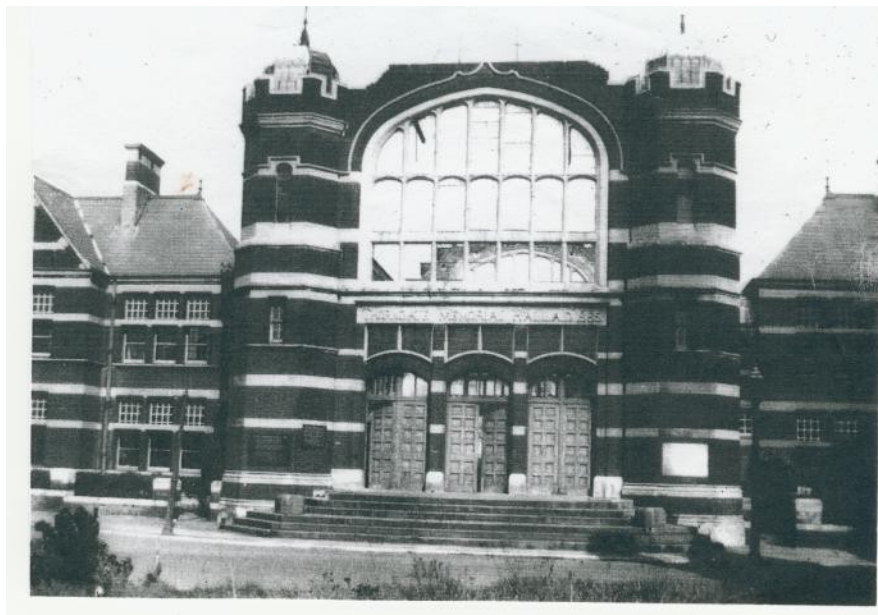


Gosport's Historic Thorngate Halls An Amazing Legacy

By Joan Russell 2010



1905 – Crowds waiting at Thorngate Memorial Hall for Queen Victoria's youngest daughter to watch a demonstration of St John's Ambulance work at the Drill Hall opposite.



1941 – The empty shell of the Thorngate Memorial Hall standing bleakly after enemy firebombs completely destroyed the roof and interior. Finally demolished and replaced by the present Town Hall in 1970.



Fig 1 – Bury House – as a tranquil Georgian Gentleman’s residence.

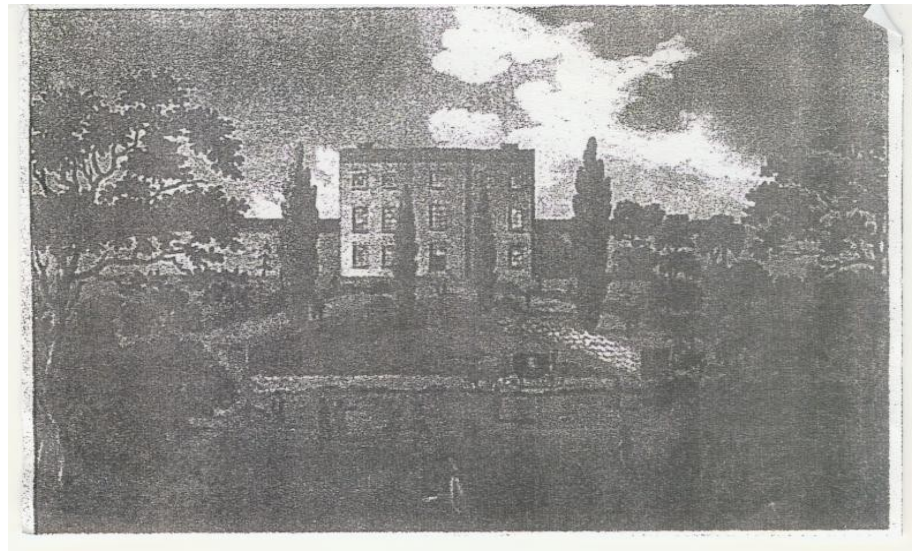


Fig 2 – Bury House in use as Gosport’s lunatic asylum.

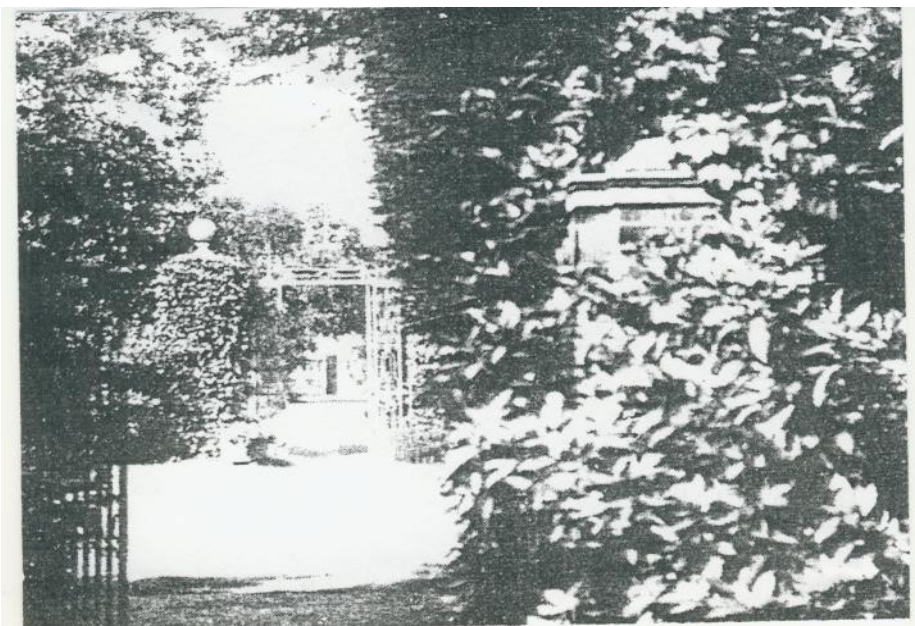


Fig 3 - Bury House Rose Garden, 1880s scene of Mr South’s spectacular bonfire of every copy of Mary South’s book!

Part 1 – Introduction

1. How Gosport's Post-War Community Association got its own Centre

In 1947, two years after the end of World War 2, a small, hopeful band of Gosport citizens met at the former Privett School. They wanted to form a club or association to help revive the cultural and social life of their badly bombed town, which Dr White, soon to become their Chairman, described thus:

“Gosport's town centre remained a decaying rubbish heap, with a burnt-out shell of jagged, broken masonry – all that was left of their fine 1885 Thorngate Memorial Hall. Gosport people had fought out their civic quarrels there and enjoyed their local reveries.”

But in 1941, enemy fire bombs had left it a gaunt shell and thus it remained, like Gosport's battered waterfront area, down on Portsmouth Harbour.

So the new Gosport Community Association made an enthusiastic start in cold classrooms – “poor tea-making facilities” - was their main grumble. However, their activities and membership grew. Eventually a need for their own Centre inspired them to set up a building fund and five years of hard fund-raising enable them to buy **Bury House!**

History tells us that Bury House was formerly the tranquil ‘Georgian Gentleman's Residence’ as shown in this old print. Nevertheless, it had a couple of dramatic episodes in its past. During its 200 years of changing ownership, it was at one time used as a ‘lunatic asylum’ situated next to the hospital – as the caption to the illustration testifies. The in the 1880s a Victorian owner, Thomas South, invited students to join him and his daughter Mary to explore how the “Mystical Powers of the Human Mind” could turn base metals into gold.....

When Mary published a study claiming that she had actually seen this done, her wealthy father brought up every single copy. He then had a spectacular bonfire in the Bury House Rose Garden (just a glimpse of it in the illustration) to avoid her being ridiculed by orthodox Victorian Society. But Mary fled to Scotland and never returned. So the pleasant Georgian residence housed other gentry until World War 2 when it was requisitioned for war use.

Finally, after years of damage from careless wartime occupiers, Bury House was sold to the War Memorial Hospital next Door. But NHS concern over strict new planning laws for Listed Period Buildings (as this was) led to discussing a sale with Dr White. He submitted a proposed offer to the GCA Committee, explaining the law of planning permits, supervised restoration, penalties etc. It was then put to an open Community Association meeting where members voted to buy the old property – and the first eager band of volunteers enrolled.



Fig 4 – Bury House in 1957, then a derelict mansion, sold to the new Gosport Community Association by the Hospital next door.



Fig 5 – 1957 Bury House – so derelict that the Hospital Board sold it to the GCA for £2,500, with two acres of derelict land.

Fig 6 – 1960 – The new Thorngate Halls were built between the War Memorial Hospital and Bury House – visibly under repair by GCA volunteers.

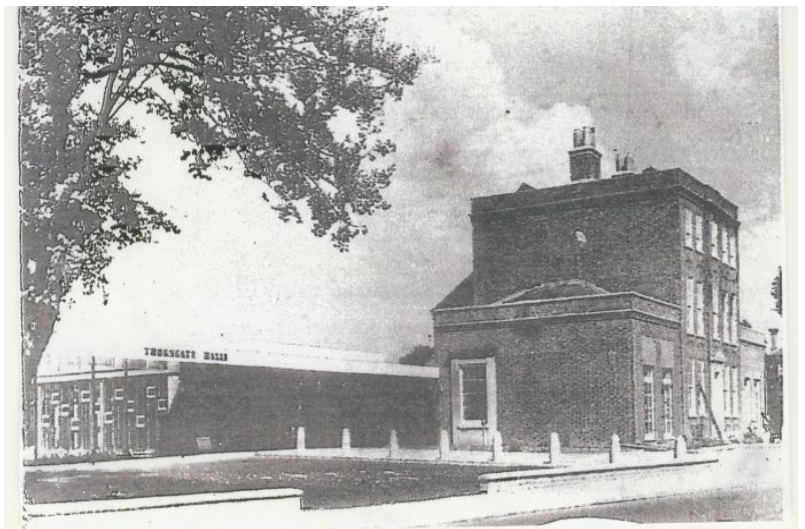


Fig 7 – By 1965 Bury House was restored and enlarged by an army of skilled GCA volunteers. The tireless work of the fund raisers had paid for a newly extended wing on the left of the original building, and furnishing for each room, ready for use by the GCA

2. Volunteers Win a Brand New Hall for the Community

So in 1957, the War Memorial Hospital Board sold the huge, derelict Bury House to Gosport's Community Association for £2,500. The price included 2 acres of debris-strewn grounds; but hard fundraising work, good luck and Dr White had made it their Centre.

A small army of skilled and unskilled men and women were organised for the huge task – for example, retired electrician Ron Lawrence completely re-wired the huge building in two years. Thanks to the superb efforts of everyone, together with the tireless band of fundraisers who continued to raise money to pay for materials and furniture, each room of Bury House was put into use for a new class or activity as soon as it was ready.

Then came the surprise!

In 1958, Trustees of Gosport's Thorngate Charities were so impressed "by the sound leadership of the community Association and its management of the Bury House enterprise" that they offered to build a modern new replacement hall in the grounds of Bury House. The surprise was gratefully and gleefully accepted.

The Trustees had long since pledged to replace the Thorngate Memorial Hall after it had been fire-bombed in 1941. Dedicated "To the memory of William Thorngate, a merchant of this town", it had stood alongside Gosport's old Town Hall in Upper High Street since 1885. Everyone had expected that it would be rebuilt in the same place. Now this last legacy to Gosport from William Thorngate's 1868 Charities was to rise again – beside Bury Hall.

In record time, plans were drawn up, agreements signed, the foundation stone laid and the new Thorngate Halls aimed to be ready for opening on 28th September 1960, to be presented to the Community Association. Built for £30,000, the new halls included an entrance foyer, the Thorngate Ballroom, the Thorngate Theatre, bars, dressing rooms, storage and offices. It had been agreed that the Gosport Community Association should profitably use, manage and maintain them for an agreed rental.

3. The Opening of the New Thorngate Halls on September 28th 1960

There were many speeches from Gosport's great and good when Mr Russell Churcher, the fourth successive Churcher to Chair the Thorngate Trustees, officially handed over the New Halls to the Community Association. A sense of elation was the keynote of that ceremony in 1960. Genuine gasps of awed surprise marked the tours of the ballroom and theatre. Remarks from an old craftsman that "the 1960s architecture looked a 'bit brash' alongside the period refurbishment of Bury House" met with cries of indignation. And the number of volunteers went up from that day.

More volunteers joined in the finishing off and furnishing of the new ballroom and bar. Before long they had added a platform and stage for Civic occasions and a band room for concerts. Others were installing more "scenery, machinery and gadgetry behind the scenes". Their theatre electrics, acoustics, foot-lighting and spot lighting stood up well to the demands of the first theatrical performances. With periodic updates, their work still enhances the Thorngate Theatre performances half a century later.

THORNGATE CLOSURE WARNING

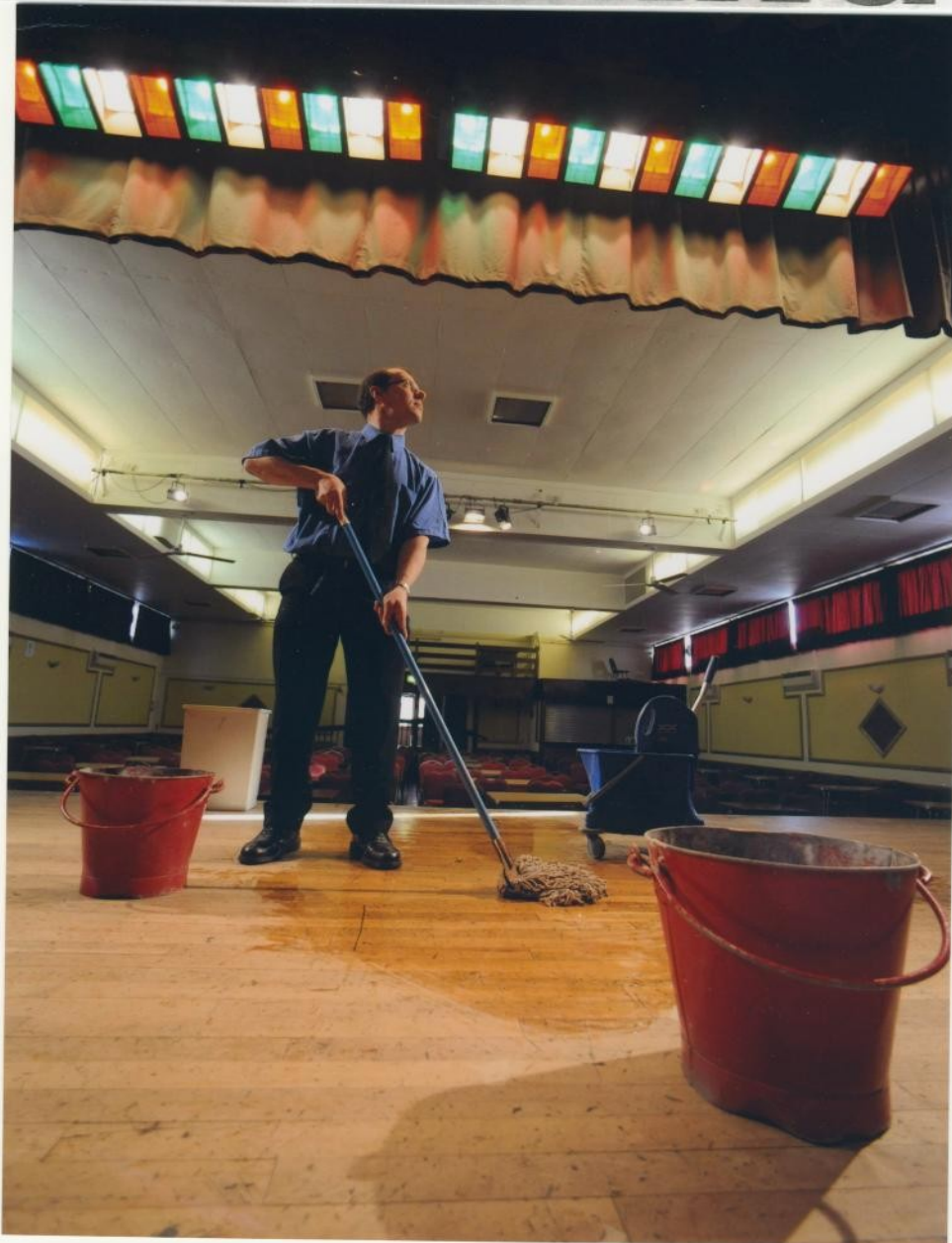


Fig 8 - Disaster – April 2008. Mopping up water from the Thorngate Ballroom after the flooding. (Picture courtesy of the News)

4. The Impact of the New Thorngate Halls on Gosport from 1960 until Now

The Thorngate Ballroom itself was soon voted – with no local exaggeration(?) – “the best dancing floor in the south of England”. Members and visitors cycled and bussed from far and wide to dance there. Older generations still have fond memories of the CAOTICs – **C**ommunity **A**ssociation **O**ld **T**yme (dancing) **I**nstruction **C**lasses; concerts – every kind of music to meet every taste – using the music rooms in Bury House as well.

A huge number of leisure and cultural activities were set up by the part-time Education Officer in day and evening classes. Always full, the place was buzzing and membership stayed high for a long time, gradually levelling out over the years. Growing prosperity had led to competition from new halls, centres, electronic entertainment and cheaper foreign travel.

In 1990 a complete refurbishment of the “loved to death” 30 year-old Thorngate Halls was opened by HRH The Princess Royal. This gave the Halls a new boost and encouraged new membership to the GCA. The changes of the 21st Century have not dented Gosport’s enthusiasm for the Thorngate Theatre productions, especially the pantomimes. The annual effort behind them is a mammoth task – mainly taken for granted, as is – sadly – the organisation behind the Civic events hosted year in, year out at the Thorngate Halls.

It is hard to imagine Gosport over the past half century without the cultural and social benefits of the present Thorngate Halls. But sadly, we can no longer take for granted their place as a hug for so much of our community activities and community spirit.

5. In April 2008, Disaster Struck the Thorngate Halls

It took the form of a heavy, freak hailstorm, followed by torrential rain, which broke through the 50 year-old flat roof. Water flooded the precious ballroom floor and caused serious structural damage to the whole Thorngate building (illustrated). Mr Bullimore, a very generous builder, responded to the GCA’s pleas for help with an offer to repair the leaks free of charge, thus making the halls useable once again for civic and community events. Many thanks to you, Mr Bullymore.

But in May 2008, the damage survey was received along with alarming repair estimates. The result was that the Gosport Community Association’s management had to set up the Thorngate Halls Repair Appeal, a fundraising target of £240,000, and a massive amount on top of normal running costs. There was a heart-warming response from the many clubs and activities groups that have belonged so long to the Community Association and who regularly used the Halls; also from users amongst Gosport’s families and residents who have fond memories of happy occasions there. By January 2009, £25,000 had been raised and the processes to place applications for various grants were in the pipeline.

However, much more is still needed and you can help – no amount is too small.

Part 2 – The Origins

Foreword – Most of the information for this section was taken from a single detailed account printed on Page 3 of the Hampshire Telegraph dated 31st October 1885, downloaded from 19th Century British Library Documents.

1. 1885 The Opening of Gosport's First Thorngate Hall

To many of the townspeople of Gosport, Wednesday 28 October 1885 seemed like the most important day in their whole history.

The busy little military seaport, looking across Portsmouth Harbour toward the huge Naval Dockyard, was bright with ribbons and bunting. The muddy, narrow streets and alleys had been cleared of rubbish and tidied. From high to low, from rich to poor, even ragged paupers put on the 'glad rags' to celebrate this unique event – the opening of Gosport's first own Public Hall.

With the ladders and scaffold removed, the visual impact of the long range of interlinked buildings was impressive. A year earlier – in 1884 – the news that building was about to start on a Public Hall for Gosport's Civic events, as well as talks and entertainments, spread like wildfire. It was to be a gift from the Thorngate Charities' Trustees for all of the people of Gosport and events would not cost the citizens a penny.

No one was surprised to hear that the Hall would be dedicated "to the memory of William Thorngate, a Merchant and Benefactor of this Town". They were told often enough that the reduction in the number of paupers in Gosport during the past 17 years was thanks to the Thorngate Charities.

The 28th October 1885 dawned as sunny an autumn day as everyone could wish for. Well dressed Victorians with their children and nannies having taken their reserved places, a rush of cheerfully dressed onlookers gathered. They watched the guests assembling on the wide expanse of the steps outside the Memorial Hall where the ceremony was due to take place. The guests included many wives of Commanding Officers of the Military in Gosport; also high ranking local officials of Government Departments. The Mayor of Portsmouth took his place with members of the Portsmouth Corporation.

Promptly at 1pm, General Sir Frederick Fitz Wygram, Baronet and Member of Parliament for Fareham and Gosport, appeared. He was warmly welcomed by Mr William Churcher who explained that he was speaking on behalf of his father, Mr Emanuel Churcher, who had been the Thorngate Business Manager. Then, as senior trustee, he had managed their charities for 17 years and had laid the foundation stones of these new buildings in 1884, but now he was present in a wheelchair, recovering from a stroke.

Sir Frederick replied, praising William Churcher for his first public speech; he went on to congratulate Gosport on the quality of all the buildings that he was about to open and paid tribute to the generosity of the Thorngate Trustees. He felt sure the architecture - "handsome, commodious and solid" would ease the task of Gosport's recently elected Local Board.

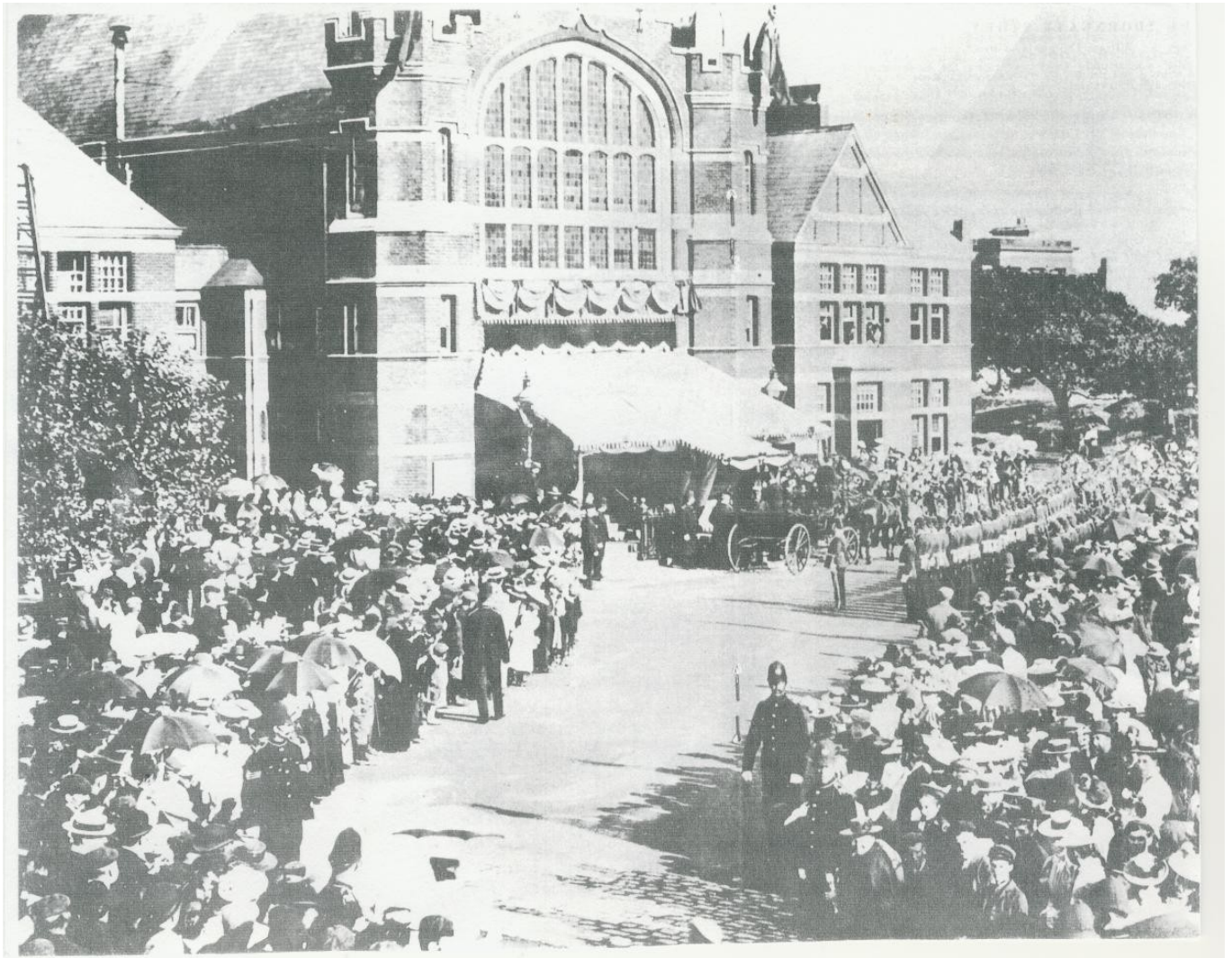


Fig 9 - It seemed that the description of Gosport's new Civic Buildings, with proud references to the use of modern 1885 technology, plus the wide range of local topics included in the 25 speeches (mainly after lunch toasts and responses) combined to present a unique snapshot of Gosport, past, present and future as it looked in the year 1885, almost 125 years ago when the first Thorngate Memorial Hall was opened.

Fig 10 - The Old Town Hall on the left of Thorngate Memorial shown in perspective with Gosport High Street (picture below)

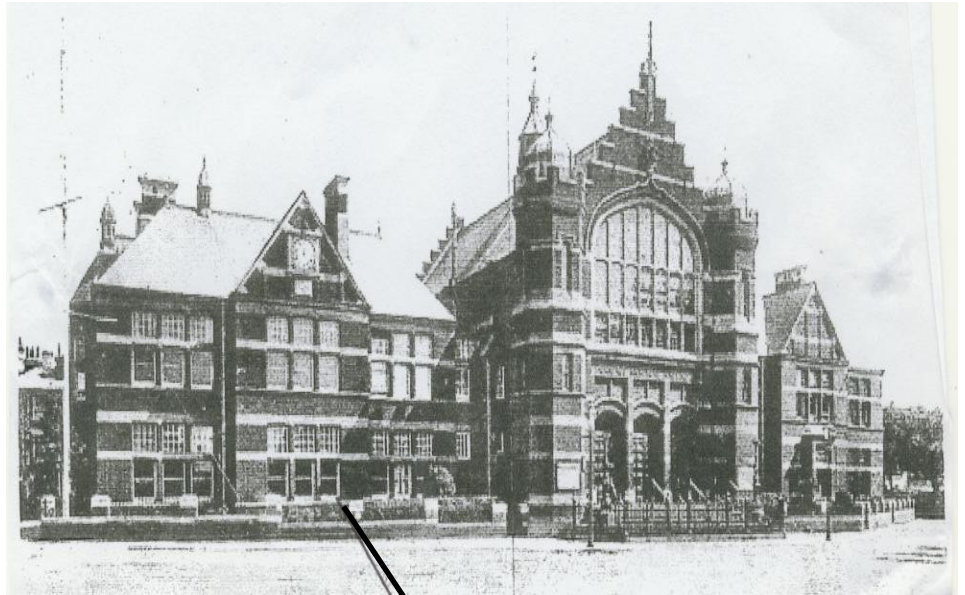


Fig 11 – Lady wheeling Victorian pram past tiny new trees outside new Thorngate Memorial Hall.

He then conjured up his memories of Gosport of the past. "In the days gone by, we have all seen the misery which resulted from the over-crowding of our streets and alleys. Homes without ventilation, without drainage, without any sanitary arrangements were common in this place before the 1875 Local Government Acts enabled Gosport to elect its first Local Board. Since then, we see with pride and pleasure, the improved cleanliness, health and sanitary arrangements of the Town".

Ironically, an earlier sentence on the same page stated that Gosport has no main drainage and that a big cesspool for soil drainage would be frequently emptied for the lavatories in the new buildings. Sir Frederick felt sure that the sole aim of the Local Board was "good health and welfare for all citizens". He then unlocked the main door, turning to declare:

"It is with great pleasure that I declare **open** this Thorngate Memorial Hall for the use, forever, I hope, of the Townsmen of Gosport."

The Chairman of the opening ceremonies, Colonel Mumby, then called for three cheers for the General, Sir Frederick Fitz Wygram, which were heartily given. Sir Frederick had then to proceed to the new offices of the elected Local Board and declare their 'Town Hall' duly **open**. Likewise, he visited the new offices for the Board of Guardians and the Overseers of the Poor (the Social Services equivalent in 1885) and declare them also officially – **open**.

He and his party finally joined the guests at the large luncheon party hosted by the Thorngate Trustees. When dessert was served, the Loyal Toast to Queen Victoria was proposed, so the very first words spoken in public in that new Thorngate Memorial Hall were words of loyalty to the Crown.

Chances of listening to speakers in those pre-wireless or television days were mainly restricted to long Church sermons. The audience settled down to listen, with frequent applause, to Chairman Colonel Mumby's thanks and praise for "this unique day in the history of Gosport". He warned that to avoid remaining "a stagnant and stationary Town of 18,500 people, with a military population of 3,500, Gosport urgently needed more powers of local self-government.

The guests applauded twenty-one more speeches before the seven toasts had received 14 responses. Then the guests – flushed and happy – dispersed to rest and prepare for a Gala Evening Concert.

"The acoustics of the New Hall stood the test well!, reported the Hampshire Telegraph, "and though the concert was unusually long, it was with genuine regret that they heard the strands of the National Anthem." This closed the Grand Opening Day of Ceremonies of the Thorngate Memorial Hall and New Civic Offices of Gosport.



Fig 12 – Connaught Drill Hall was used to train local soldiers and reserves for the Boar War in the 1890s and kept going until 1980. It was a popular centre, built on MoD land opposite the Thorngate Memorial Hall. It lasted from the 1890s until the 1970s when it was replaced by the new library (now the Discovery Centre).



Fig 13 - Mr Emmanuel Churcher (standing) after the 1884 foundation had been laid.

Other interesting extracts from those speeches in 1855 throw light on past, present and future aspects of Gosport's history:

Alderman J Baker said "The populations of Portsmouth and Gosport for the largest naval and military arsenal in the world" (No longer true). "Our joint prosperity is always linked with the welfare of the armed forces" (Still true).

Mr Baldwin Fleming, in a toast to the Thorngate Trustees, emphasized the difference made by the Trustees – not only in donating the Hall, but in arranging to unite it with new public offices for the Local Government use, with minimum cost to the ratepayers. "Hitherto the Local Board had very inadequate premises which hindered them from doing many things. Now they will be able to do much more that is right for the wellbeing of the community."

He added "The Guardians of the Poor had also been in urgent need of better accommodation. It might interest people to hear that the number of Gosport paupers this year was **down** by 14,000 as compared with 10 years ago. Also, the ratepayer money spent in actual relief of the poor was £63,000 **less** than 10 years ago." All thanks to the Thorngate Trustees paying for such generous outdoor relief, as well as for all almshouse costs.

Mr HJC Martin, as Senior Thorngate Trustee present, replied that the Thorngate Chairman, Mr Emanuel Churcher (present post-stroke in a wheelchair), had acted on his suggestion of a Public Hall for Gosport. They had paid out £142,800 over 17 years to fulfil even more than the aims set out in the 1868 Thorngate Charities, always with a surplus of £200 per annum. This 17-year surplus made it possible to build the Thorngate Memorial Hall for the people of Gosport and dedicated it to Mr William Thorngate, who Mr Martin believed was the sole founder. In fact, recent research by John Sadden showed that in 1865. it was Mr James, Thorngate, the eldest brother, who published the brothers' intention of building the almshouses, James had received the tenders for the job the day before he died in April 1865 aged 77.

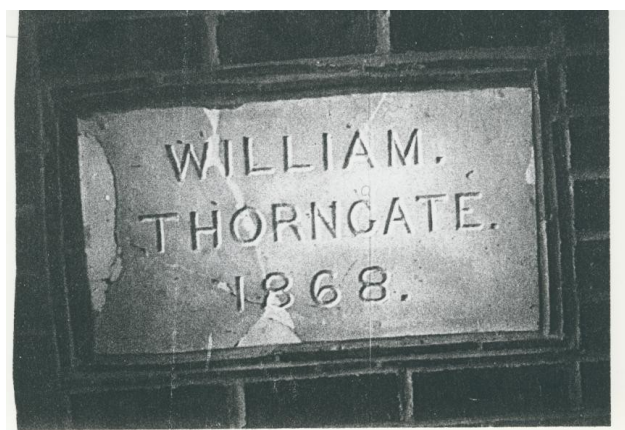
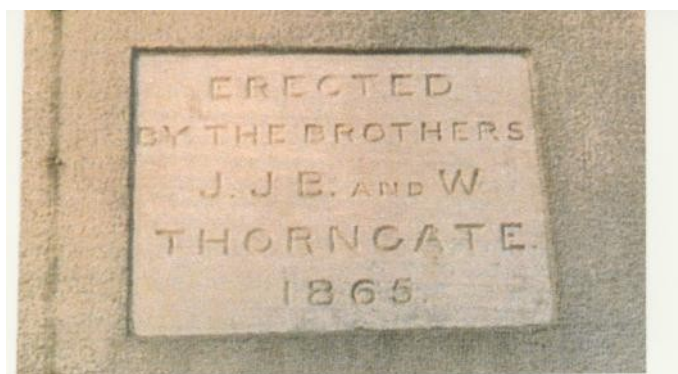


Fig 14 – Inscriptions taken from the first and last of the Almshouses built by the wealthy old brothers – James, John and William Thorngate. In 1865, the initials of all three brothers appeared. In 1868, only Williams appeared on the last one. In use for generations of Gosport's frail paupers until 1992 when they were demolished to make way for today's modern Russell Churcher Court.



Fig 15 – Melrose Terrace Almshouses in 1992 awaiting demolition.



Fig 16 – The grand new Russell Churcher Court for Gosport's frail and elderly.



Fig 17 - The tall Dutch style building at 131 Gosport High (formerly Middle) Street was the original bakery where William Thorngate took his newly wed wife Mary in December 1783. There she bore him six children between 1785 and 1794. Two of the boys died and later, alas, their father in 1801. So Mary was left to run the bakery, raise and educate her four children until they were old enough to take over, The boys' hard work paid off and the bakery extended into 132 High Street. Thorngate's Grocery Store then had a window on South Street. Sadly, it was bombed in 1941. Eventually a Co-op replaced the old 132 in 1960 but amazingly, 131 is still intact. Thorngate wealth still supports 200's frail and elderly citizens in Russell Churcher Court.



Fig 18 – Quaint Buttons Yard in 1925. Note open drains, narrow alleyway and ancient housing. (Watercolour by Martin Snape)

The Origin of the Thorngate Charities.

Having lost their father in 1800 when still schoolboys, the younger Thorngates regarded James as head of the family. They hastened to carry out the almshouse building immediately. Their solicitor drew up the deed, endowing the 16 almshouses rapidly for the 'respectable poor' of Gosport. The 1990 photograph shows the original inscription on the 16 almshouses prior to their demolition. The tiny building had been a haven of security, gratefully received, by countless frail old people for 125 years. Furnished in 1865 with a bed, two blankets, a table and a chair, a kettle, a pot, a pan, a bucket, two plates, a knife, a fork and a spoon – it was better than any workhouse. Moreover, long before the first old age pensions were paid in 1909, the alms people were given five shillings a week for coals, candles, bread, cheese and bacon, and an extra payment for a woollen shawl or boots in the winter.

How those grateful alms people would stare if they could see the ultra modern old peoples' home in the 1992 Russell Churcher blocks of flats for the frail elderly, now built on the site of the original almshouses planned by James Thorngate nearly 150 years ago. And the Trustees of the Thorngate Housing Trust still care for 200 of Gosport's oldest, frailest and poorest citizens with the help of the miraculous income from the good old Thorngate brothers.

The Thorngate brothers were born around the time of the French Revolution in 1789 and lived through the turmoil of the French-Napoleonic Wars, including Admiral Nelson's famous victories. At the same time, England's Industrial Revolution was getting up steam. This was greatly speeded up locally thanks to the Gosport Ironmaster, Henry Cort. His little foundry on Gosport Green produced the first cheap strong iron in the world, using cheap coal instead of expensive charcoal. Seven years later, French scientist Lavoisier revealed the role of oxygen (in coal but not in charcoal) in smelting.

The Thorngates and their neighbours hated the smoke and fumes, and the huge great clingers that Cort's foundry produced in their residential area. They persuaded Cort to move away to the thinly populated Meon Valley, where he continued to make a great contribution to England's Industrial Revolution. Sadly, he never received any payment for his invention.

The young Thorngates were running their bakery and high class grocery store under the mother's eagle eye during the French Wars. She taught them to save their profits and live modestly no matter how much they were earning. They were polite, unassuming young men who lived with their mother and Sophia, their sister, until they both died by 1850. It was the people of Gosport who reaped the benefit and are still benefitting today.



Fig 19 - Cory's Blacksmith's Forge on the Green at Gosport
(Watercolour by Martin Snape)



Gosport High Street showing its 1885 Town Hall, (and some 1907 fashions)

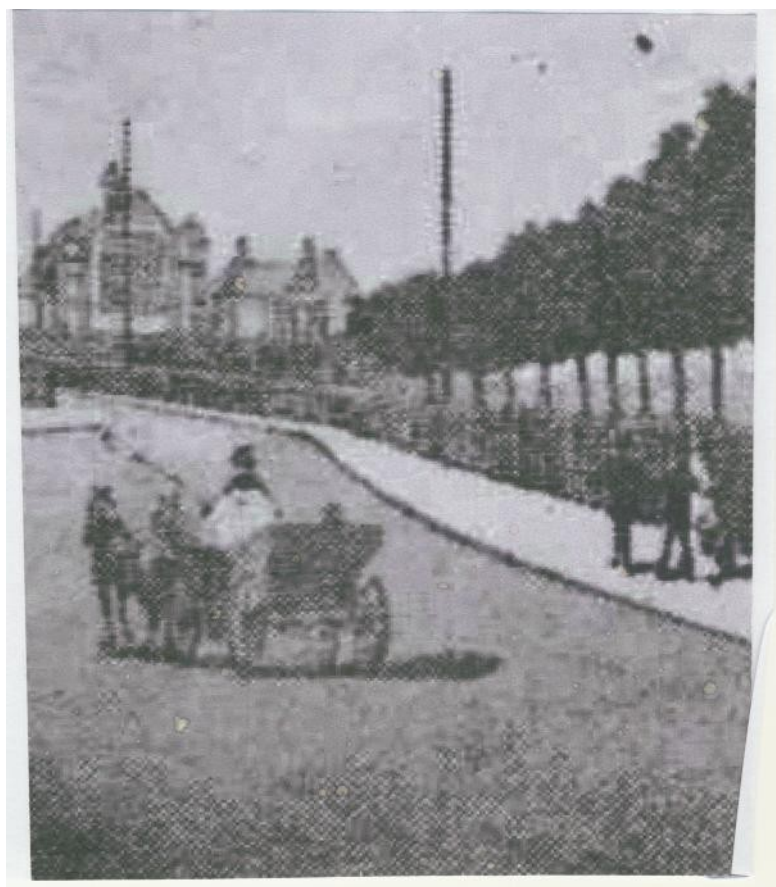


Fig 20 – Above and Left - 1885 Hazy view of Gosport's three new Civic Buildings from Walpole Road.
 1. The New Town Hall
 2. The New Thorngate Hall
 3. The Offices for the Guardians of the Poor and the Overseers of the Poor.

Acknowledgements

To everyone who has helped me collate this information; specially Friends of Gosport Museum and St Vincent Local History Club

Joan Russell June 2010