# REPORT ON CONDITION
# STELLING MINNIS VILLAGE HALL
# KENT CT4 6AG


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**Date of Survey** **22 May 202**

## INTRODUCTION

Instructions were received from Max Couch on 1st May to undertake a condition survey of the property known as Stelling Minnis Village Hall. The scope of the inspection was confirmed to you by email on 4th April and the survey undertaken on 22nd May 2024. The survey was prompted by continuing problems of damp penetration, and this is the primary focus of the report together with an evaluation of the anticipated future expenditure on maintaining the external fabric of the hall. The service installations were not examined.

At the time of inspection weather was overcast with occasional rain. I inspected all reasonably accessible internal and external parts of the property. Hidden parts of the building were not opened for inspection, but where this is considered necessary to better understand the condition of the property it is highlighted within the report.

Floorboards were not lifted and service installations including underground drains were not tested. Where specialist surveys or tests are considered necessary to help diagnose the cause of defects they are however included within my recommendations.

Defects have been prioritised in terms of urgency, but recommendations have not been costed. The report should not be considered as a basis for obtaining prices to undertake works of repair or alteration from a builder. I offer guidance on the need or otherwise for consent from the Planning Authority for any proposed repairs or alterations and a general commentary on the historical development of the building where it has had a bearing on the condition of the property.

The report is prepared exclusively for the benefit of the Stelling Minnis Village Hall Committee, and no liability will be accepted for actions taken by any third party resulting from its content.

In offering directions, the front of the building is assumed to face due south.

## GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE BUILDING

The property comprises a single-storey Village Hall, once Methodist Chapel, dating from the 1855 with two extensions constructed in 2001 built to its side.

The building is not Listed.

The Village Hall is situated to the southeast of the village centre and to the north of Bossingham Road which leads from Stelling Minnis to the villages of Rhodes Minnis and Lyminge. A footpath runs to the west of the hall and there is agricultural land to its north.

The original main entrance sits centrally in a porch extending forward from the south elevation. This entrance is no longer used. Behind the porch is the main hall (of worship) with a kitchen at its rear and a further meeting room beyond. This second hall originally housed the Sunday School. These three rooms are all within the footprint of the original chapel.

The main extension is to the west of the chapel and now provides the principal entrance to the hall together with accommodating toilet facilities. A smaller further extension was built to the east of the chapel to provide enlarged storage facilities.

A flight of stairs rise behind the kitchen to a mezzanine floor which is understood to have been added during the 2001 refurbishment. The mezzanine sits above the kitchen and meeting room. It does not extend above the main hall where the underside of the pitched roof remains visible.

The 2001 refurbishment also involved overhauling the slates to the main roof, replacing rainwater goods, strengthening the structure, repointing and repairs to brickwork and terracotta, renewing all service installations and laying a new solid concrete floor.

Historical records suggest that an earlier major refurbishment was carried out in 1895: only forty years after the date of the original construction. At this time a choir gallery added at the southern end of the hall of worship was removed, the porch added, the original timber floor renewed and the dividing wall between the hall of worship and Sunday school repositioned to create a larger space for the latter. It is quite unusual for a timber floor to require replacement twice in 150 years.

## REPORT ON CONDITION

### DAMP INGRESS

*Photograph from the 1930's prior to application of external render.*

The external walls of the original building are of solid construction, those to the extension are likely to be formed by two masonry skins with a cavity between. The cavity has the benefit of improving the thermal performance and weather resistance of the wall. It has been the preferred method of constructing masonry walls since the 1950's.

The original walls are constructed in brick with a flint facing. There are brick buttresses arches, band courses and dressings to windows which have been retained on the front elevation but are now concealed behind a painted render coat elsewhere. The front porch is entirely built of brick and the gable end on the front elevation once in flint is now faced in brick.

The buttresses are unlikely to have a structural function.

On the front elevation terracotta has been used to frame a central circular rose window and to form the cills to the openings at its side.

The external walls appear to structurally sound with no evidence of significant instability affecting them or settlement of foundations.

*Terracotta rose window to front elevation. Minor disrepair and some open joints but in reasonable condition. The gable above once in flint is now formed in brick.*

The render finish to the original building is likely to have been applied in the 1950's or 1960's. It was not present in a photo from the 1930's. It is probable that the walling was in poor condition and perhaps considered to look old fashioned. Applying the render which is hard and cementitious has unfortunately prevented any moisture within the thickness of the walls from evaporating through the external face. It is forced inwards.

The render is applied to both buttresses and main wall surfaces.

The render could be removed and replaced with a lime-based rather than cement-based finish which would allow the walls to breath. This would be expensive and cause significant damage to the underlying fabric. It is not considered necessary at this stage.

There are several ways in which moisture might be entering the wall. Any cracks in the render because of initial drying shrinkage or slight structural movement and/or defects in rainwater goods could offer a pathway but it is most likely that the dampness is the result of moisture rising from the ground by capillary action. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as rising damp.

Moisture readings taken inside the building found that the highest levels of dampness are at the foot of walls which conforms this supposition. The exception being the southern end of the hall where the dampness is primarily caused by the condition of the brickwork.

In many places the dampness has caused decay to timber skirtings which suggests that the problem has been occurring for many years.

*Decayed section of skirting to wall between kitchen and main hall.*

In the main hall most walls are lined with radiator cabinets. In the smaller meeting room, the walls are dry lined with plasterboard and in the kitchen cupboards and appliances prevent full access. The extent of the problem may be more extensive than is currently visible. Any timber in direct contact with damp masonry will be vulnerable to decay.

Rising ground moisture is normally prevented in modern buildings by using a damp proof course (DPC) at the base of the wall. The DPC is often made of slate, bitumen, or plastic. It is sometimes introduced retrospectively by the injection of chemicals which form a barrier. There is no visible evidence of a DPC at the base of the walls to this building and injecting a chemical DPC in a wall of this kind is unlikely to offer long term effective solution.

Moreover, if the floor in a building is of solid construction the DPC in the wall must be linked to the damp proof membrane (DPM) in the floor to offer a continuous barrier.

Equally if a new solid concrete floor is laid with a DPM in an old building that previously had a timber floor (which is likely to have been the case during the 2001 refurbishment), the moisture beneath the floor will be forced to the edges of the slab and up the walls. This is a common problem that is now sometimes solved by using limecrete rather than concrete as the material to construct the new floor. Taking up the floor and replacing it is an option but would be extremely disruptive and expensive. It would however offer the opportunity to improve the thermal insulation and add under floor heating.

The fact that two timber floors have been replaced in 150 years in this building, which is not a common occurrence, suggests that the water table across the site is high and the amount of moisture directly beneath the slab and being forced up the walls may be considerable.

Many old buildings do not have dampproof membranes and courses. Constructing a French drain which is basically a trench with a perforated land drain at its base backfilled with gravel will help take way some the water at the base of the external walls and is commonly used in churches where the ground level is often higher outside the church than the floor level within. The drain is then connected to a soakaway. It should ideally be dug to the full perimeter of the original building. This alone may however not be sufficient to remedy the dampness.

A further dimension to the problem is the condition of buttresses and other exposed brick details at the southern end of the building. Whilst flint is hard and impervious, the red brick used on the building is soft and absorbent. They are very different materials. The mortar used to point the bricks should be sacrificial and the route by which moisture evaporates. It should not contain cement.

Using cement will not only result in internal dampness as described above in relation to the new render coat it will cause the bricks to erode and crack primarily during cold weather as a result the freeze-thaw action of frost.

*Repointing is a highly skilled operation and should only be carried out by craftsmen/bricklayer/masons using historically appropriate materials.*

The extension has been designed to have a painted render finish to match the hall as it existed in the 1990's. It does not suffer from the same problems. There is no evidence of internal dampness. The failure of the paint finish here appears to be the result of poor preparation and should be relatively simple to remedy by ensuring the paint manufacturers recommendations are followed when this part of the building is next redecorated.

It recommended that the remedial measures already outlined be undertaken initially. If the problem persists it may be necessary to dryline the walls internally. This has already been done in the small meeting room where there is no evidence of dampness on the walls. It is however important that the cavity between the lining and structural wall is ventilated and that the boarding and the framework to which it is fixed is moisture resistant.

The lining could also allow thermal insulation to be introduced to improve the energy performance of the property.

Applying a standard masonry paint to the render is likely to have made the situation worse. Limewash or a calcium silicate paints such as Keim allow the walls to breathe. Limewash will not adhere to masonry paint, but it might be worth carrying out trials with Keim to see if it makes any difference to the situation.

**ROOF COVERINGS**

The hall and extension have pitched roofs covered with natural slates. There are clay tiles to ridges and hips and abutments to parapets at the gable ends and valleys are weathered in lead. There is a single Velux window set in the rear roof slope and PV panels on some pitches. The roofs drain to eaves gutters fixed to timber fascia boards.

There is a hatch in the ceiling above the mezzanine floor offering access to the roof space where the roof structure and underside of the coverings are visible. There is no undelay beneath the slates to catch wind driven rain and snow. This is not unusual in properties of this type and age but does not comply with modern standards of construction. There is evidence of water ingress and damp staining to battens and rafters.

It is understood that the roof coverings were overhauled but not stripped and re-laid during the 2001 refurbishment.

The slates are of good quality and the number that are slipped, missing or damaged is few. The lead detailing at intersections however needs locally redressing and eroded and cracked sections of mortar pointing to ridges, hips and abutments renewing. Generally, however the roof coverings are in reasonable condition.

The lack of an underlay is a concern particularly as ventilation of the roof space is restricted to the ridge. There should be a cross flow of air from eaves to ridge to reduce the risk of timbers becoming damp for extended periods and thus susceptible to decay. Fascia boards are fixed tight to walls and accommodate gutters. The opportunity to introduce additional ventilation is therefore limited. Additional ventilation might usefully be introduced by inserting vent tiles at intervals at the base roof slopes.

The roof will deteriorate over time and at some point, in the future the cost of annual maintenance will be so prohibitive that it will become more economical to strip the coverings and relay them. This is likely to be in 10-15 years. On this basis it would seem sensible to improve the standards of thermal insulation and insulation now whilst also carrying out the local repairs to lead and mortar pointing.

*Underside of roof: note no underlay and damp staining to timbers.*

*Roof surface: note parapet upstand, slight sagging, vent tiles set along ridge and fascia board fixed tight to wall.*

*Leaking plastic gutter.*

The downpipes and gutters are understood to have been replaced in PVC as part of the major refurbishment. Joints are leaking and some gutters and lead detailing need redressing or adjustment to ensure water is effectively collected. This is relatively simple to do and is essential in eliminating issues of internal dampness. It should be an ongoing task.

The performance of all gutters and downpipes should be checked at least twice a year during periods of heavy rain. The security of fixings to gutters and downpipes should also be periodically checked, and brackets adjusted or renewed as needed.

The failure of rainwater goods is the primary cause of damage to buildings.

*Lead detailing to valleys and parapets need regular maintenance.*

There is visible movement and open joints through the exposed timber trusses in the main hall and the western slope noticeably sags. Although the deflection is not excessive it should be monitored. If substantial repairs are needed to the structure, it would make more sense to bring forward the date for re-roofing. This is not currently the position.

*Open joint to side of post and wall and spandrel panel to one of the trusses in the main hall.*

**EXTERNAL JOINERY**

There are a variety of different window types in the property. All are constructed in timber. They are predominantly side hung casements but with vertical sliding sashes to the side elevations of the main hall.

There are three doors also constructed in timber. Most doors date from 2001.

The windows are in generally satisfactory condition although localised repairs are needed to decay mainly found in cills and to bottom rails on casements and doors. Repairs as part of genera redecorations will be adequate. Replacement is not needed. Original windows are generally in better condition than those installed 25 years ago. This is not unusual. The quality of timber used in the C19th is better than today.

In some locations the collar joints at the abutment of frames to brick reveals need to be reformed in mastic.

The timber architrave to the canopy over the main entrance is decayed and localised repairs are needed to fascia boards. In both locations the lead detailing should be checked and refixed or redressed as needed.

*Localised decay to doors, windows and other external joinery can be attended to as part of routine maintenance. It is not excessive.*

Consideration might be given to installing secondary glazing behind the primary windows to improve the thermal performance of the property.

The level of ventilation in the disused porch is poor and must be improved. Vents could be introduced in the door, windows, or roof. There are very high levels of damp and humidity. Items held in storage should be relocated and the door to the hall left open. To encourage a fee flow of air.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The building is of local historical significance although not Listed. Its relationship with the community is very important. It has been a dominant building on a main thoroughfare through the village for centuries and a focus of community events and special occasions.

Like many religious buildings it has had to accommodate to change, and the major refurbishment carried out in 2001 has given it a new lease of life. The provision of good quality toilet and kitchen facilities is always a bonus for any community building.

The building is structurally sound, and the defects found relate to the ingress of water.

The fabric has been reasonably well maintained and the committee are to be congratulated on their diligence in keeping both the inside and outside of the building looking good.

There are however fundamental issues that are now beginning to materialise that require more radical interventions beyond routine maintenance.

The decision to render the flint external walls of the building appears to have been taken in the mid C20th and with hindsight is likely to have been misguided. The same might also be said for constructing a concrete floor to replace a previous timber one.

It is important when changes to buildings, particularly historic ones, are made that they are considered holistically. Older buildings were constructed to allow unobstructed absorption and evaporation of moisture. This needs to be respected, otherwise moisture becomes trapped causing damage to internal finishes and decay to fabric.

Unpicking damaging alterations that have been done in the past is always difficult and it is likely that exercises in mitigation will be a better option.

Further investigations (as outlined below) are needed to decide how to best tackle the damp problems but repointing open joints and redecorating will not be sufficient. That said it is crucial that these basic reoccurring tasks are done using the right materials by contractors having the appropriate skills.

Replacement of the roof coverings was not done 20 years ago possibly because of budgetary constraints. The slates do not have an underlay and there is evidence of water ingress. Renewing or relaying the slates will be needed in the long term and will be a major expenditure although it is not considered critical at present. Improvements to ventilation and ongoing routine maintenance of the roof coverings and rainwater goods should however be included in your budget plan together with repairs to decayed timber as part of cyclical external redecorations which should be done every five years.

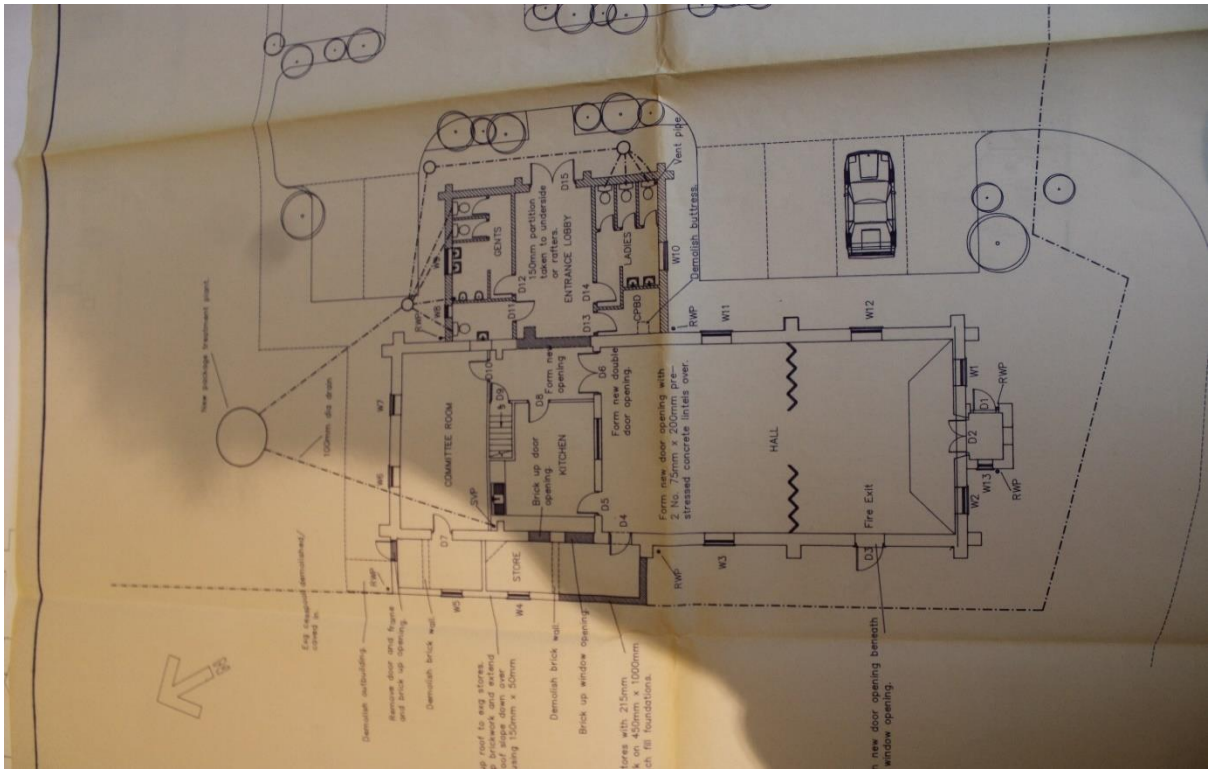
Grants for enhancing community buildings are available but tend to be directed towards projects that extend community out-reach and/or involve repairs to Listed buildings or buildings in Conservation Areas. The best opportunities for you are likely to arise through linking the repairs to upgrading the energy performance of the building. Maintenance works will not be eligible.

Action for Communities in Rural England, Kent County Council, the National Lottery Community Fund, and the Landfill Communities Fund are all bodies that are worth approaching. I would encourage you to appoint a fund-raising leader on the Committee to explore avenues and assemble applications. It takes time and persistence.

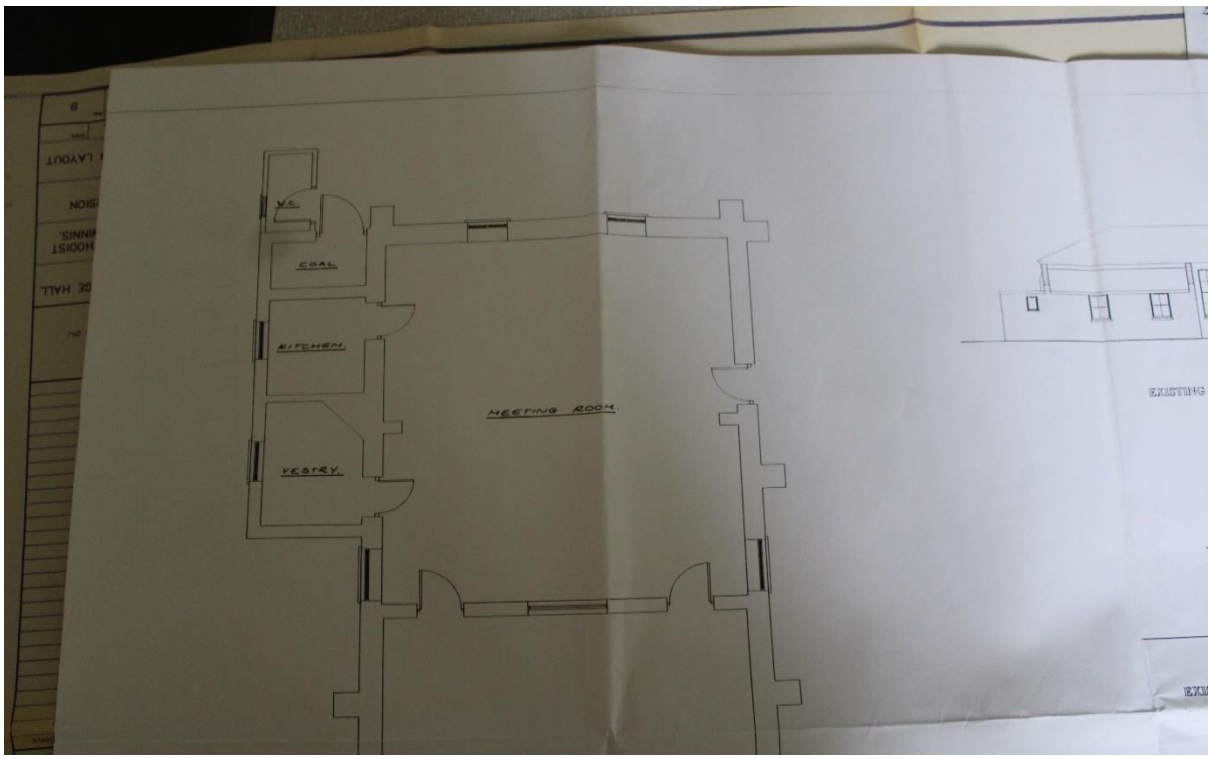
## RECOMMENDED FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS

1. Examine specification and drawings for the 2001 refurbishment to establish materials used to repair the external walls and the scope of damp proofing works undertaken.
2. Remove radiator casings in main hall to allow inspection of concealed wall surfaces.
3. Locally open-up section of wall/floor abutment to establish form of damp proofing works undertaken to the walls and floor and the linkage between the two.

## DRAWINGS




*2001 extension drawing*




*Layout of northern end of building prior to construction of extensions and insertion of kitchen and mezzanine.*