

## 'Mile stones in your life'

by John Collett

Buildings are probably the one thing that sets us apart from animals, buildings are the mile stones in our life that show us where we have been and where we come from, and it is said that only by knowing our own history and our past, can we move forward into the future with confidence. And therefore communal buildings are even more important to our own future progress and development, for as the word suggests, 'communal' buildings are the buildings for and used by the 'community' where we live and grow up further forming our own individual 'personality'. Buildings take us out of the jungle and into society where we can develop and flourish.

So we should always seriously consider what is happening when we hear about plans to demolish any premises that helped to form our past and will if retained, help to form the lives of our future generations. So I thought we should all think hard about what we want to happen in our own community, and one little 'Nugget of Rock's History' comes to mind for urgent support and consideration. That of course is the building we know today as the 'Far Forest Centre' but it had another life in times gone by when it was one of the first buildings built after the Enclosure Act was past in 1820. Before this act of Parliament the area we know as Bliss Gate, Callow Hill and Far Forest, then collectively called Alton Common, was just that, open common land, very much like the scrub land around Clee Hill is today, but with the passing of the Act the land here was divided up into 4/5 acre plots and sold to the highest bidder, the majority of these plots were just a piece of land the cottages came later. There was no Plough Inn, Duke William, Royal Forester nor the Bliss Gate Arms in fact in 1840 there was not even a church in Far Forest, the majority of the 'older' properties were erected after 1835 to perhaps 1860 in some cases. So lets look at our local history and this mile stone of Rock.

The story started back in 1808 when The Rev. John Cawood a curate from Bewdley, started a Sunday school at a cottage called Yew Tree Farm, Kinlet Road, Far Forest, in an attempt to bring education and the word of Jesus to the district. After some 20 years or so he decided a permanent base of their own was called for and so in 1829 Mr Cawood obtained a plot of land 24½ yards by 9½ yards, purchased from Shugars Farm which in those days extended as far as what later became know as Vicarage Lane, just off what eventually became 'Church Lane'. And on that land a building was erected that same year (1829) and described as 'a pretty building with a tower'. Lessons took place in the main block while the tower was used to house the school caretaker, the 1<sup>st</sup> being a Mr Richard Wyre. But the Rev, John Cawood was not finished and he continued to campaign tirelessly, stressing that there was a need for a church at Far Forest as well, and in 1844 his dreams came true when land was given by the Crown and stone was provided for the construction of a church and a vicarage to be built at Far Forest, From then on the school became known as the 'Church School' it became well established in the area and continued to thrive.

However by 1848 it became clear that the tower on the school was unstable and major repairs would be required, so it was decided to take advantage of the situation by demolishing the front of the tower area and rebuild some 7 foot further out on the road side of the structure, making the 'new' building bigger and more appropriate to house the head teacher, the caretaker would from then on be housed in a near by cottage. This enabled things to get back to normal again and also give us the frontage we see today at the left hand end of the 'church school'. Back to normal that is until in 1870 the government passed a law which said it was compulsory that all children should attend school.

Although that was obviously good for the world at large, unfortunately for Far Forest it brought it's own problems that had a major effect on Far Forest school, because the numbers of new pupils began to grow and grow over the next 10 years, until by 1883 the number of pupils attending had doubled and the building was just not big enough. Fortunately funds were found and in 1884 another quarter of an acre of land was purchased from Shugars Farm and the teaching block was extended by 26 foot, plus a playground was also added to the rear of the school. And so life quietly plodded on again for a few more years, until by 1900, with growing pupil numbers and stricter controls on school facilities, new problems arose. It was deemed unacceptable to have a situation where children were sharing desks and the archaic toilet facilities just could not cope plus the building in general simply did not meet the 'new/current' required standards, and so the school board were asked to fund a project to make room for the extra children and to upgrade the building, but alas the money was not available. It seemed that if the school did not meet these requirements then it would have to close and the pupils would have to attend a school further afield. But as sometime happens (usually only in fairy stories, but on this occasion in real life) at the last minute a solution was found, when the Reverend William Lea offered to personally fund the building of a new school and head teachers house at Far Forest and provide the land on

which it could be built. All he asked was that it should be named after his beloved parents, and so in 1902 work started on the 'Lea Memorial Church School' in New Road and was completed in 1903, opening for pupils in September of that year.

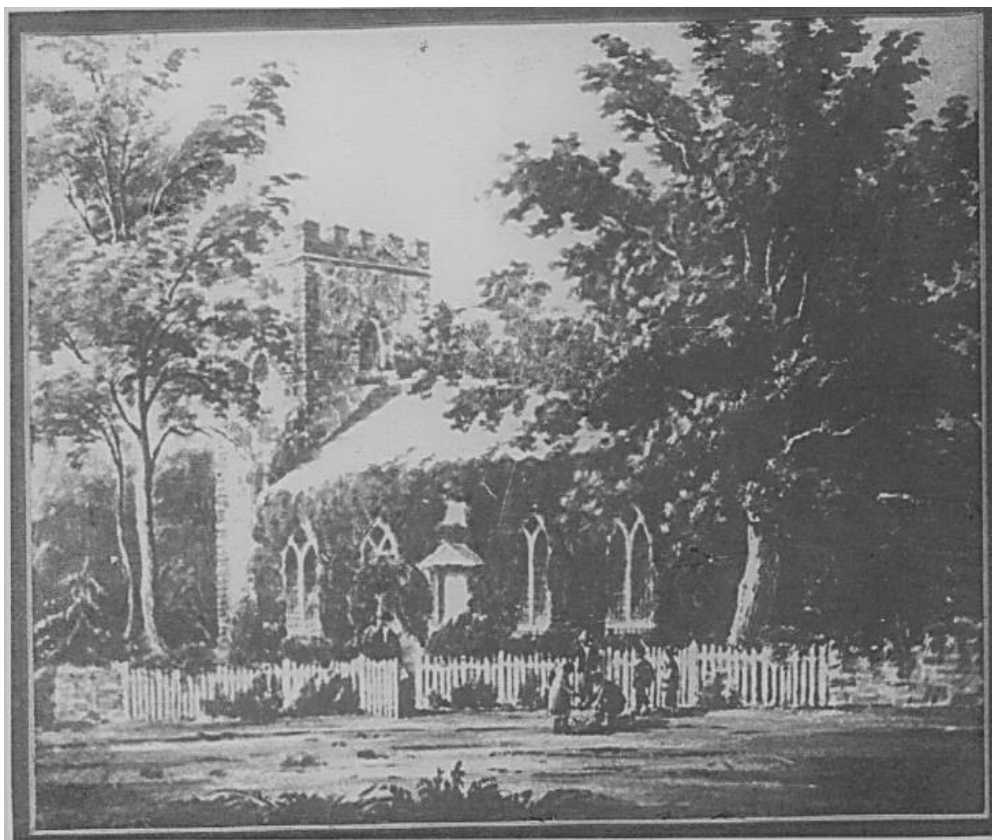
Perhaps I should just clarify a couple of points at this stage for those not so aware of the background, firstly Rev. Wm Lea's father had been vicar at Far Forest Church from 1854 up until his death in 1899 serving the area for an amazing 45 years, his son William having been born and grew up, at the 'old' vicarage which was/is the large house in the same little lane as the Far Forest Centre now sits, but further down and on the other side of the road, which is why that road became known as Vicarage Lane for a time, and just to confuse you further the road we now call Church Lane only became so called after the church was built in 1844 obviously, before 1844 there was no Church to name the lane after, it was known at the time as Crunns Lane after the family farm at the end of the lane, which was occupied by the 'Crunn' family. And just to confuse you further I gather that before the church and old vicarage were built that little dead end lane the present Far Forest Centre sits in was called ---- yes you've guessed it, School Lane, but enough of me showing off, back to the plot.

Once the new school in New Road opened in 1903 the old building was suddenly spare, to be used for what ever purpose it could be put to, and this over the last one hundred and fifteen plus years has been many and varied. Some of its uses include a Working man's Club, Scouts and Brownies, Dancing lessons, school lunches were served there when the pupils were marched down from New Road to be fed and then marched back, during World War 2 with evacuees billeted in the village, it became used as extra class rooms, the WI used it and we must not forget the wedding, wakes and whist drives that were accommodated in the building, and of course the now famous Far Forest Society Countryside Show held it's first show there in 1902 continuing there until World War 1 brought about a temporary halt to that. Plus the many and varied private functions which have been held at what became known locally as the 'Old School'.

Then in 1974 under the guidance of the Rev. William Elliott it became an adventure centre being renamed as the 'Far Forest Centre' with rooms converted to dormitories where schools, particularly from the inner city areas, plus other private groups of youngsters, could come and stay and explore the wonderful Worcestershire countryside. But even with this additional usage plus much of the aforementioned events carrying on it would appear funds to maintain the centre's existence are no longer forth coming,

**SO THE RALLYING CRY GOES OUT TO YOU ALL**

please come forward with ideas, suggestions or offers of help of how we maintain the future of a great piece of our past, present and future heritage by initially contacting your local Parish Councillor.



The original Far Forest Old School, built 1829.