

Fighting to save an old school



Soon to be redundant . . . the Church of England Primary School buildings in Wheatley (the old master's house on the left is already closed). But need the village lose these facilities? (Picture: Antony Moore)

The people of the village of Wheatley, just outside Oxford are not badly off for social facilities, but they are worried about losing some of the riches they have.

There was strong backing in the village for the education authority's plan to amalgamate the split campus of Wheatley Secondary School at Holton, thus leaving the old Church of England primary school building redundant. Now there are plans to sell the primary school as part of a "package" to a developer, along with other land.

So far, so good. But now the villagers are putting their heads together to see if there is any way that the old primary school can be preserved — not as a building to be converted into private housing, but as a community facility.

There is a great fondness in Wheatley for the old school. It was opened in 1858, as the result of a campaign by the new vicar, the Rev. Edward Elton (appointed by Bishop "Soapy Sam" Wilberforce in a bid to improve Wheatley's tarnished reputation), on land donated by the Morrell brewing family. At that time Elton was convinced of the "turbulent and lawless" nature of the villagers.

When the school closes its doors to Wheatley's under-11s for the last time at the end of this summer term, it will also signal the departure of the headmaster, Mr G. Rees Evans, who has presided over the village's primary education for an unbroken 27 years.

The parish council, with other amenity bodies in the village including the Wheatley Society (the local history section has published a booklet on the school) and the Church itself, has considered various possible

uses for the old twin-gabled school building with its adjoining schoolmaster's house (now boarded up).

Attempts to attract local GPs, a chiropodist and a dentist, have all failed, and a lack of funds will prevent it being used as a new home for the village library. There is already a community centre, soon to be extended, at the Merry Bells building in the village.

But in spite of a rather-too-obvious lack of takers for the facilities going begging, the village's representatives are not giving up. They believe the short-term cash gain by selling the school for housing could prove to be a long-term loss in village resources — particularly as housing expands and social needs along with it.

"We are looking for something of a holding operation," said the chairman of the parish council.

In the list of ideas for possible use of the old school is an approach to CoSIRA (the Council for Small Industries in Rural Areas) in case the building could be adapted as craft workshops plus, perhaps, a small village museum. A possible "partnership" scheme with the developer of the new housing is also being considered.

Meanwhile, there are plans for a "Village Appraisal" to discover by questionnaire exactly what the needs of the community are now, and are likely to be in the future.

Finally, the most important priority of all, everybody in the village is being asked to think positively about the problem — before it is too late, and the chance of retaining the school as a community asset has been lost.