School’s hall and library are 20th century building gems

LAST week’s Nostalgia feature on the listing system to record and preserve notable buildings and other structures included one interior. That is the Memorial Library, Lupton Hall and Corridor at Bedales, the independent co-educational school at Steep. Archivist and librarian at the schools Jane Kirby has documented the history of the linked buildings.

“In the 1901 edition of the Bedales Record, Mr John Badley (Bedales founder) wrote of his delight at the offer made by some Old Bedalians, of a new hall for ‘plays, concerts, school services, singing’.

“At the time, the dining hall was the only space large enough for such events, and so there was a great deal of furniture moving to be done most days.” Mr Badley looked forward to the construction of a building of ‘such simple dignity and such solid workmanship’.

“Writing in the summer of 1911 he observed that ‘its walls and massive roof-timbers’ had been rising steadily all term, and he hoped that they would be in by Christmas.

“In contrast to 21st century Grand Designs, they were indeed in by Christmas, with the first official event being the end-of-year play, A Midsummer Night’s Dream. By the following summer, the hall was a central part of the school life, not only for all the events envisaged but also for the ‘quiet half-hour’s reading... between the end of dinner and the beginning of the afternoons work or game’. At least 300 people could be accommodated – something that Health and Safety regulations would not allow these days.

“They were especially pleased with the acoustic, a great improvement for speakers and audience in comparison with the dining hall.”

“Lupton undertook the building work himself. He came from a wealthy background, and, although Mr Badley refers to a group of Old Bedalians as the donors, Lupton largely financed the project as well. The final cost was £1,000.

“Richard Holder, OB, in his History of the Memorial Library, describes the architecture: ‘The hall is of cruck-construction, with great wish-bones of oak dominating the interior.’

“The hall has none of the conventional decorative elements of school halls, such as paneling, ornate plasterwork, or portraits of the headmasters.

“The walls are white-painted brickwork, the benches are simple solid oak, and the main aisle is floored with large quarry tiles.

“The benches, it has to be admitted, are profoundly uncomfortable. Many a Bedalian and Bedalian parent has suffered through school assemblies and school plays.”

Memorial to war victims used today

THE MEMORIAL Library at Bedales was built in 1921 to commemorate former students and staff who died in the First World War. Designed by Ernest Gimson, it is considered to be one of the finest Arts and Crafts-style buildings in the country and is Grade I listed. Partly due to the influence of Bedales, Gimson and Lupton that East Hampshire became a centre of the movement.

The library is arranged in a series of bays with furniture by Gimson and the Barnsleys, whose workshop was set up at Foxfield by a former pupil at the Steep school, Edward Barnsley. As well as being available for students as a place of study, the library houses the Bedales archive of 4,000-plus items relating to the school.