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There's no place for loneliness with a thriving village hall

Kate Green

Last Saturday it was Wassail Night in the west Somerset village of Stogumber (population 600). This involved a procession in the freezing cold from apple tree to apple tree, singing songs and warding off evil spirits, in the parish council-owned field before revelries in the village hall – supper, accordion music and dancing, tickets £7. Next week, the same building will host the monthly community lunch for the over-60s – my 89-year-old mother never misses one – the week after, a showing of the Downton Abbey film as part of a calendar of monthly cinema evenings.

Like thousands of other rural village halls, this modest building is a nucleus of sociability: the place to go for quizzes and teas, parties and wakes, lectures, meetings and murder mysteries. In June, it's Open Gardens Weekend, when hundreds of lunches and teas – a spectacular spread prepared by volunteers in the village hall kitchen – will be served to visitors from far and wide, raising thousands of pounds for charity.

There's Wi-Fi, easy access for the infirm and disabled and a terrace that offers a glorious, uplifting view to the Quantock Hills.

Village halls are rarely the most distinguished architectural features of a locality, but they're arguably the most indispensable. They've long been used for playgroups and parish meetings; now, they double up as doctors' surgeries, internet hubs, polling stations, schools and blood-donor venues. According to ACRE (Action with Communities in Rural England), volunteers give up 18.5 hours a week to look after village halls – unsung, unglamorous work for which we should give heartfelt thanks.

Where I live, in Kingsclere, on the North Hampshire Downs, the village club, as it's known, encompasses the much-loved, volunteer-run library (now under threat of closure), police and parish council offices and hosts myriad events.

These include wine tasting, yoga, art and “Move it or Lose it” classes, films, clubs and an annual midsummer performance in the garden by a touring Shakespeare company. As in any village, everyone converges there to have their say on the latest local planning developments.

The village hall is where local talent springs to the fore – who knew the doctor had such a rich bass singing voice? That the B&B owner could do a mean Lady Macbeth or the retiring ex-bank manager a turn as a brilliant jazz pianist? And where else would Midsomer Murders scriptwriters set the AGMs and dramatic outbursts that are a prelude to (fictional) homicide?

Many village halls now have Facebook pages, yet, despite the accessibility of social media in all its guises, we have collectively never been a more lonely population.

As rural communities haemorrhage buses, pubs, shops, schools and libraries, it’s welcome news that the Government is marking Village Halls Week by offering a round of grants of up to £75,000 for village-hall repairs and improvements.

But though our national disease may now be loneliness – the root of so many serious mental health issues – you can never really be lonely as a country dweller if your village hall is active. If anything, you’re likely to find the choice of activities and opportunities almost too exhausting. And you’ll discover fascinating things you never knew about your neighbours.

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