

The Assembly Rooms

Our eighteenth-century Assembly Room dates from the period when Dedham was a thriving market town with a popular school and busy social life at the centre of a district where there were a good many comfortably-off families living in large houses. Local historian Gerald O. Rickword, who assisted Canon Rendall and annotated a copy his book *Dedham Described and Deciphered* (1937) with meticulously attributed information, states that it was erected by John Fox in 1730. I have been unable to verify this but the building is likely to have been put up at about this time to cater for a growing demand for local entertainment, when a dynamic new headmaster Thomas Grimwood was enlarging the Grammar School and increasing the number of pupils. Some primary timber in the main hall has been tree-ring dated to 1744 and the Assembly Room was certainly in existence by 1748 when Horace Walpole, who was staying with his friend Richard Rigby at Mistley Hall, made a satirical reference in a letter to “a quarrel at Dedham assembly that is capable of involving all Europe in a new war.”

Ours is one of the oldest Assembly Rooms in the country and the earliest known to have been built to the full design on its own site rather adapted to fit a restricted space in a town centre. Unusually for its period it was built with a timber frame and stuccoed walls instead of solid masonry. The interior with its a shallow arched ceiling, original chimneypiece and balcony with flat vase-

shape balusters have all survived. In John Constable's view of *The Vale of Dedham* painted in 1828 (now in the National Gallery of Scotland) one can see the pedimented front of the building without wings but there must have been service rooms of some sort further back out of sight; single-bayed extensions on either side were lengthened in the mid nineteenth century.

The Dedham Assembly had a wide catchment area, since the nearest rivals were at Bury St Edmunds and Bocking. Jane Austen's contemporary description of a ball in a country Assembly Room in her novel *Pride and Prejudice*, published in 1813 helps us to visualise these occasions. A detailed account of our Dedham assemblies from 1818 onwards was written by Mr P. L'Estrange Ewen, who lived at the Rookery (now Dalethorpe) and lists the many “*families of distinction*” from country houses such as Giffords Hall, Hintlesham Hall and Wivenhoe Park who attended them. The balls were funded by local residents who subscribed for tickets costing about five shillings each for themselves and their guests.

The company included nobility and gentry, members of the Diplomatic Corps and Army and Navy officers. The balls, attended by between 140 and 180 people, always took place on Fridays and a night with a full moon would be chosen for the benefit of the coachmen. Until 1840 there were three balls every winter, one in early December, another around New Year and a third towards the end of January. Five or six musicians

provided the accompaniment for the dancing which began at half past nine. There were card tables in an adjoining room where three or four rubbers of whist would be in progress during the evening. At midnight there was a break for supper and men-servants brought six long tables into the hall, as well as extra chairs so that all the ladies could sit down. Refreshments consisted of ham and tongue sandwiches, bread and butter and cakes. There was tea at one end of each table and coffee at the other. No wine or other alcohol was allowed. By the mid nineteenth century the Assembly Rooms had become less popular. Only 40 people attended an Easter ball in 1852, the only one held that year but some dances such as Hunt Balls or the annual County Ball

continued to be held until about 1870. In 1830 the building belonged to a Mr John Fox, who was a substantial property-owner in the parish and possibly a descendant of the original builder. It then passed to a Mr Freeman and subsequently to a Mr Welbore Ellis of London. After his death it was bought by a group of local residents who used part of it as a Gentlemen's Club. Ted Eley told me that their meetings were not always very gentlemanly! Sometimes the members were a bit "fresh" with the girls who served their meal, he said, or got rowdy on the way home; on one occasion the awning of Ray's shop was pulled down.



A play on the stage in the Hewitt Memorial Hall, 1908, perhaps the first after the re-opening in September that year

By the early twentieth century the Assembly Rooms had fallen into a dilapidated state with part of the building being used as a furniture store by the antique dealer Mr Griffiths, who had a shop in the High Street. In 1908 it was bought by Mr William Wilkins Hewitt (1840-1917) of Lower Park, a considerable benefactor to the village. As well as making structural repairs he increased the accommodation by extending the wings on either side and giving them projecting gabled fronts, so as to provide space for new toilets. The present Reading Room was added then and in the main hall an internal staircase leading up to the gallery. Bookshelves were installed in the recesses where there are now two doorways on the wall opposite the fireplace.

William Hewitt presented the renewed hall as a gift to the parish in memory of his brother James (d.1905), whose portrait by Charles H. Parker now hangs in the gallery above the entrance beside the donor's own portrait by the same artist. Other gifts included three full-sized copies of paintings by John Constable, done by Sydney A. Driver of Ardleigh who had trained in London at St Martins School of Art and the Slade. Only two of these have survived, *The Cornfield* above the chimneypiece in the main hall and *The Valley Farm* which it is intended should be hung on the opposite wall. Canon Rendall records that further gifts to the community included "*portrait prints and engravings of notable personages connected with past of Dedham*" and "*an illuminated reproduction of the Charter*" of the Grammar School.

All surviving material relating to Dedham is now preserved in the Muniment Room. A *well-chosen selection of topical and educational books for the use of villagers*", protected with grey cotton covers, was kept on the shelves with lockable doors in the Hall; these books were still available for parishioners at sessions of the Essex County Library held there every week in the 1970s but I do not remember anyone ever consulting them. They were eventually sold to raise money towards the 1999 restoration of the building.

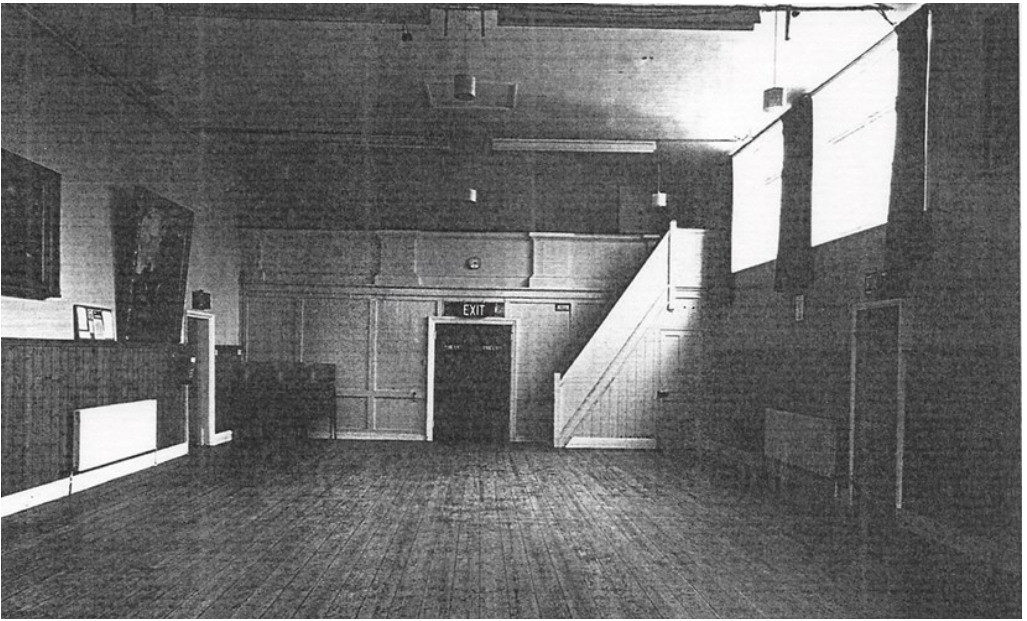
In his Deed of Gift William Hewitt set out the purposes for which the hall was to be used: for holding divine services of the Church of England, as a meeting or lecture room for bible and confirmation classes and religious instruction and for the instruction, recreation and entertainment of the people of Dedham. In gratitude for the donor's munificence the parish decided that the building should henceforth be known as the Hewitt Memorial Hall, a decision now perpetuated in the name of the main room. The restored Hall was inaugurated on 26 September 1908 and throughout the twentieth century it was used, as it still is, by numerous village clubs and societies such as the Brownies, Girl Guides, Good Neighbours, Horticultural Society, Mothers' Union and the Youth Club. Colchester Borough Council used it for elections and the Parish Council for meetings, the Dedham Players staged their plays and for a time it was home to Smartys Playgroup. In recent years it has been hired for Antiques, Book and Craft Fairs.



The "HEWITT MEMORIAL HALL, 1908" c.1960



The renamed "ASSEMBLY ROOMS" in 2007; the windows on the right lit the classrooms created for Littlegarth School in the 1960s and '70s.



The Hewitt Hall before restoration in 1999. Note the boarded dado round the walls, the staircase leading to the gallery and the panelling which conceals its Georgian balustrade.



A wedding reception in the Hewitt Memorial Hall in 1949



Restoration of the Assembly Rooms under way in 1999



Portraits of James and William Hewitt in the gallery



The Assembly Rooms prepared for a wedding reception in 2019

In the 1960s and '70s Littlegarth School used classrooms created for it on the western side of the building. The present Mallett Room is named after the school's co-founder Miss Betty Mallett (1903-97), who played an important part in the community life of Dedham for half a century.

In time the fund which William Hewitt had provided for maintenance proved woefully inadequate and nearly a century later the deteriorating hall, by now a listed building, was again in serious trouble. It did not comply with modern fire regulations, disabled access or hygiene standards and was on the point of being condemned for public use. A thorough structural overhaul was essential and in 1997, thanks to the determination and organising ability of the Vicar, the Rev. Gerard Moate and his Management Committee, fundraising was begun to secure nearly £600,000 needed for a Millennium Restoration.

A magnificent 75% grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, due to the building's exceptional historic importance, was supplemented by contributions from Colchester Borough Council and Dedham Parish Church as well as donations from individuals and local businesses and the proceeds of fundraising events. The major restoration was carried out in the course of 1999

and the building reverted to its original name. After a formal Re-opening of the Assembly Rooms on 4th December, a Millennium Community Party was held on New Year's Eve.

The architects John Burton with Simon Marks of Purcell, Miller and Tritton had skillfully replanned the interior of the building to make flexible use of its facilities. The two side rooms now provide further meeting rooms of different sizes and each has access to the modern kitchen, cloakroom and toilets without the need to go through the main hall. There is a new, more convenient staircase to the gallery. The permanent platform previously in the hall has been replaced by a demountable stage for performances and a Green Room extension was built behind the south wall. The Hewitt pictures have been reinstated and the walls are hung with reproductions of paintings by Sir Alfred Munnings donated by the Munnings Museum at Castle House. The Assembly Rooms are once again a splendid asset for the people of Dedham and the surrounding area, providing an unique venue for meetings, weddings, gatherings, and events of many kinds.

© **Lucy Archer**

*With many thanks for their help to
the Rev. Dr Gerard Moate and Tracy Woods*



The Assembly Rooms
have a new website
<http://dedhamassemblyrooms.essexonline.net>