

Dedham Primary School

The schools which existed in the village before 1800 were all privately endowed but during the nineteenth century Dedham had both a National (Anglican) and a British (Non-Conformist) School, examples of the many free schools which were being set up by charitable organisations at that time to provide education for the children of the poor. The National School in School Lane had an adjacent teacher's house (now the Old School House) dating from the seventeenth century. At the time of the 1911 Census it was known as School Cottage and was home to the headmistress Ellen Walden, her widowed mother and two nineteen-year-old girls who were school teachers boarding with her. It continued to be the headteacher's house until after the School relocated to Parson's Field in 1973, when it was sold off as a private house.

In c.1842 the Dedham Lecturer, Dr Taylor, established a separate small school for boys and girls aged five to thirteen in a converted malting at the "Anchor Corner". It taught up to fifty or sixty pupils living on the Heath or on the Long Road but came to an end after a virulent fever wiped out many of the inhabitants of that part of the parish in 1856. The following year Dr Taylor, launched a successful appeal for funds to build a new schoolroom designed with diaper-patterned brickwork, Gothic windows and gabled porches on a freehold site at the Heath crossroads

which he provided himself. The building which opened in 1858 was also licensed to hold church services and Sunday School was still being held there when I was a child. The number of pupils in that part of the parish gradually dwindled until the school closed down in 1951. The building is now a private house called Old Church House.

A surviving commemoration stone, now displayed on the front of the almshouses in School Lane, tells us that in 1825 a new school on that site was "*erected upon land granted by the Crown at the sole expense of Edward Betts Esq of this Parish*". As time went on the school outgrew this building. In 1813 it taught twenty boys and seventy girls but by 1841 numbers had risen to 69 boys and 60 girls. In 1859 the older boys were moved out to the English School at Shermans and eventually to a new Boys' Elementary School built in Crown Street in 1882 (now The Old School House). The younger children remained in School Lane but as numbers increased more space was needed there. A simple rectangular red-brick School with a low-pitched slate roof was built in 1875, either incorporating or replacing the 1825 building, and projecting classrooms were added at the front in 1891 and 1904-5.

This School, known by now as The Dedham Mixed School, was subsequently absorbed into the State system and reorganised as an infant and junior school; this went on to become Dedham's Church of England (Controlled)



Dedham Junior School c.1915, photographed in the south-west corner of the playground. South Cottage can be seen in the background.



Peggy Bullet's year, Class 1, in 1931
Left to right, Back row: Dennis Tucker, Fred Barber, Claude Bird, Peter Barber, Jim Eley,
Derek Thorpe, Ron Tucker, Frank ?
Middle row: Eileen Scowen, Ivy Osborne, Peggy Payne, Mary Rudge, Lily Smith, Doreen Star-
ling, Stella Clary, Pam ?, Thelma Offord
Front row: Ken Starling, John Clary.

Primary School in 1954. Eleven-year-old Peggy Payne was among the first of its pupils to move on to the newly-opened senior school in Manningtree in 1937. The headmistress at that time was Miss Mabel Nye. After she retired in 1949 she lived at Colwyn next to the Assembly Rooms with her friend Miss Smith, another former teacher at the school and I remember that they were very proud of their garden which was most beautifully kept.

The next headmistress was Miss Wenda Hooker, appointed in 1949. The original school building had three rooms. In the late 1950s to early '60s two classes were taught in the largest, middle room, which served multiple purposes as well, even accommodating the desk where the School Secretary worked. The pupils' desks had to be cleared away for morning assembly and again at lunchtime when the room was used as a dining room for the school lunches, which were delivered on a van from Manningtree by Mr Harold Read and dished up in an adjacent kitchen by the dinner ladies, Mrs Marsham and Mrs Daisy Duff. The room on the right was for the youngest pupils taught by Miss Steggall. She drove over from East Bergholt in a little Morris with her dog Bessie, who was a great favourite with the children. The room on the left was for the top class taught by Miss Smethurst, whose pupils were preparing to move on to secondary school. An extra class for children in their penultimate year, taught by Miss Smith, was held in a side room of the Hewitt Hall (as the

Assembly Rooms were called then); those pupils had to shuttle backwards and forwards between the two buildings many times in the course of the school day. The playground attendant was Mrs Winnie Coates.

In the playground there was a drinking fountain for the pupils mounted on the side wall of the headteacher's house. The row of outside toilets for the boys was on that side of the school building, those for the girls were inside. There were two air raid shelters, one in the north-west corner of the playground and the other behind the teacher's house. By then they were used for storage and the pupils were forbidden to go into them. In poor weather, the children sometimes went out by a door at the back of the School to play in the Vicarage garden; the main schoolroom had a window with a shutter on that side. Practice for maypole dancing took place in the playground in front of the school to music supplied by a wind-up gramophone. A path behind the garden of the headteacher's house led through an orchard of apple trees to the recreation ground which was used at play time and for games, including rounders.

By the 1960s there was serious overcrowding as well as a lack of extra facilities which could not be provided on such a limited site; so it was decided that the Primary School should be moved to a new £50,000 purpose-built school in Parson's Field. Its open-plan classrooms were furnished with low-level units round the walls and with the

help some of the older boys their grey plastic drawers were taken out and carried over to School Lane, so that they could be used as trays for the children to ferry their personal belongings across the playing fields from one school to the other. On Friday 23rd February 1973, carrying these and assorted cardboard boxes, they set off across the Vicarage garden and along the churchyard to walk through the playing fields and up Crown Street to Parson's Field. Miss Hooker retired the following year and Michael Atkins, who was one of eighty applicants for the post, was appointed Headmaster in 1974. In the half-century since then the school has gone from strength to strength.

After the children left the abandoned school stood empty and deteriorating

for eleven years while rampant purple-flowering buddleia invaded the playground. The building was demolished in 1984 when it was decided to sell Samuel Barker's almshouses in East Lane, dating from 1862 and use the proceeds to build new ones here near the centre of the village.

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Dedham Primary School in School Lane in the 1950s, showing, on the left, the two extra classrooms added to the front of the original building in 1891 and 1904 -5.



A maypole dancing performance in the school playground c.1960 with music from a wind-up gramophone.



Pupils leaving the old Primary School on Friday 23 February 1973, carrying their belongings to the new school in Parson's Field.



Ten-year-old Kerry Scolding presenting Headmistress Miss Wenda Hooker with a gift from staff and pupils at her retirement party on 18 July 1974



The old Primary School in the 1970s after the children left, showing the front classroom and the disused air-raid shelter. The wisteria-covered house in the background (now the Old Post House) was the former home of builder Harry Windell (1882-1965), whose wife Rose (1880-1950) was a teacher at the school.



The last remains of the old school in 1984. On the left is the door which led out into the Vicarage garden.