

More Dedham Schools

Shermans Hall

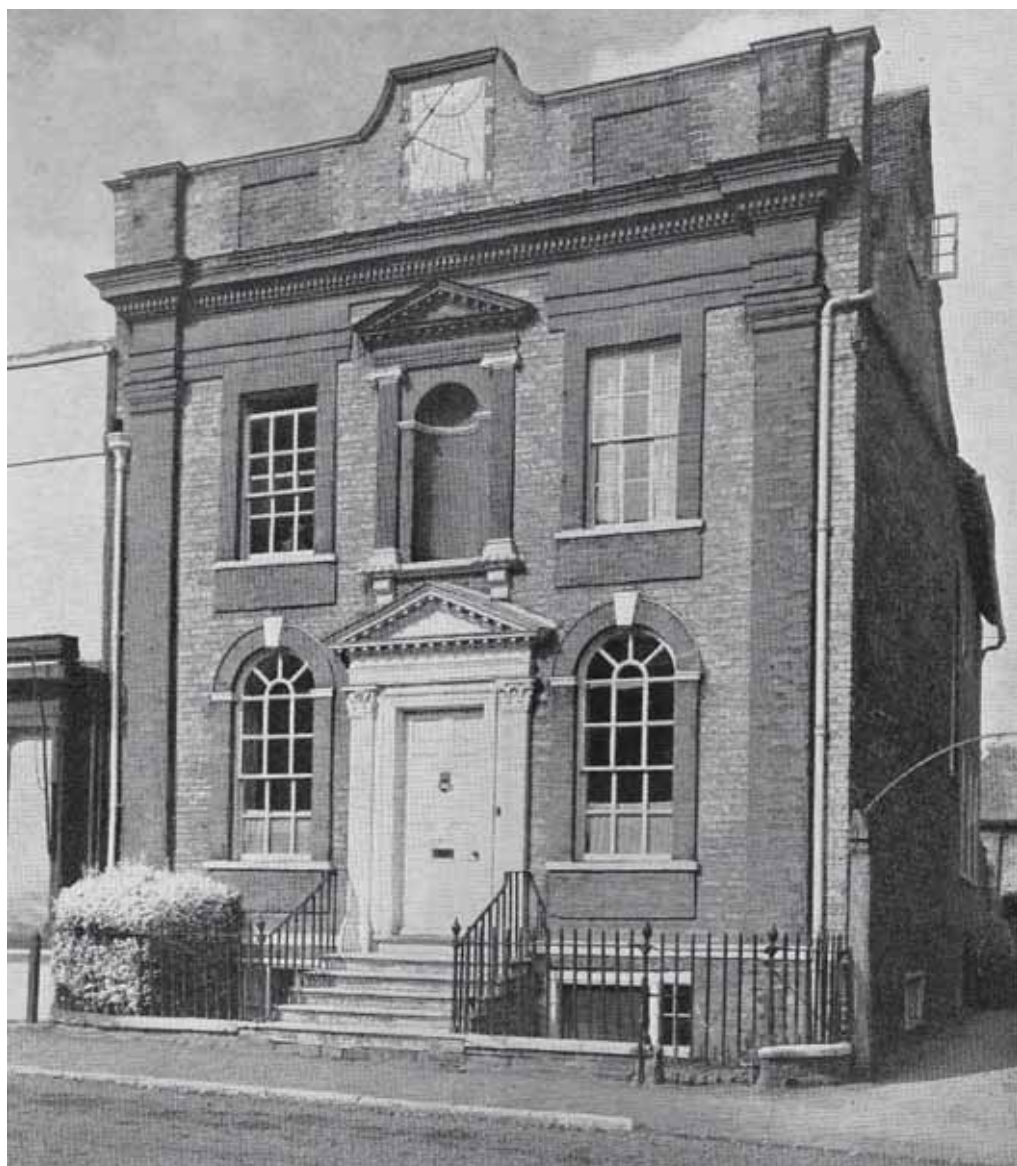
There was already a house on the site of Shermands Hall opposite the church long before Edmund Sherman, one of the original Governors of the Grammar School, left money in his will for it to be improved as a dwelling house for a schoolmaster, "*which schoolmaster should freely teach one poor child.*" A new school was needed because, while the Grammar School offered a classical higher education, it did not include the basic grounding in reading, writing and arithmetic which poorer children needed. It was this which was provided at Shermands, which came to be known as the English or Writing School. Later donors who added to its endowment included John Marsh in 1642, Mr Cockerell in 1719 and a list of benefactors who contributed to enlarging and rebuilding the school in the early eighteenth century. At that time the schoolmaster was William Colchester, who himself contributed to the cost of the renovations.

Alterations in 1730-31 included the addition of the elaborate brick front which gave the house its present distinctive appearance. Evidently the work of the same master mason who in 1732 built an extension to the Grammar School (now Well House), it made the building appear taller and more impressive at the expense of blocking the view towards the church from the attic windows.

The handsome brick facade with its giant pilasters, ornamental door case, parapet with sundial and pupils' names and initials carved into the brickwork has survived unaltered, apart from the addition of an urn in the empty niche above the front door. This was designed by Quinlan Terry to record the architect Marshall Sisson's gift of the house to the National Trust on his death in 1979.

Sisson (1897-1978) lived at Shermands with his wife Margery from 1934 until 1946 when they moved to Huntingdon. They are both buried (with a headstone he designed) near the south-east corner of Dedham churchyard. In his *Journals of Wartime Colchester* E.J. Rudsdale (1910-1951), a curator at Colchester Museum describes his frequent visits to them there during WW II. After they left the house they leased it to a succession of tenants including, in the 1950s-'60s, Robert Goodden (1909 - 2002), Professor of Silversmithing and Jewellery at the Royal College of Art from 1948 to 1974, his wife Lesley and their four children. It is now let to tenants by the National Trust and is occasionally accessible to the public on Heritage Open Days in September.

The house retains eighteenth-century features such as panelling, fireplaces, a plank door with strap hinges and pupils' graffiti at the back of a bedroom cupboard. The present dining room was probably one of the classrooms and the first floor drawing room was divided to form two more.



The front of Shermans Hall c.1950, unchanged since it was built c.1730/31.



Pupils’ names carved into the brickwork on the front of Shermans, sometimes apparently by professional masons.

As numbers increased the English School expanded into Ivy House next door and the initials SWC of William Colchester (1708 -1773) and his wife Susannah (1714 - 1799) can still be seen on the plasterwork of its side wall. The two houses are intricately linked and it was she who started a girls' school at Ivy House; it is believed that the east wing dates from her time.

The 1833 Charity Commission's report states that Shermans had a schoolroom detached from the rest of the house. In the mid nineteenth century when Corder Platten was headmaster the school had about fifty paying pupils, all boys, some of them boarders who joined at the age of ten and stayed on average for three years. Twenty-nine were living in the house at the time of the 1841 census and nine in 1851. The cost of pens, ink and writing books was set at no more than a shilling a quarter.

The schoolmaster also had eight free pupils from Dedham and the surrounding area who were taught separately up to 1859. However, by 1873 elementary schools were being set up by the government to educate poor children free of charge. Shermans Hall reverted to the ownership of the Grammar School, which was obliged to close it down and required to pay for building a new Boys' Elementary School in Crown Street (now the Old School House). The pupils were transferred there in 1875 and Shermans was let to tenants.

Ivy House

The provision of education for boys at the thriving Grammar and English Schools led to a growing demand for schools for daughters and sisters in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Among many girls' schools recorded are a young ladies' boarding school in 1750, a school for the daughters of farmers and tradesmen opened in 1769 and a private boarding school in 1824. Emma Barber, a 21-year old trainee teacher of French and Music, was living at Ivy House at the time of the 1861 census and in 1877, on the death of its owner Robert Stannard, she bought the house as "Ivy College" for £875 with the help of a loan from a relative.

Emma was the Principal of a girls' school there which had forty girls in residence at the time of the 1881 census. In 1878 she married the Rev. Henry George Nichols, Minister of the Congregational Chapel in Brook Street, who was eleven years her junior. Mrs E. M. Nichols's advertisement in the *East Anglian Daily Times* of 22 July 1880 says that as well as a sound education her establishment offered "*a generous diet with home-made bread, healthful development of mind and body of Youth, an unsectarian but wholesome religious training, Calisthenics and Lawn Tennis etc.*"

In 1891 she emigrated with her husband to Adelaide, Australia and leased Ivy House to Margaret Booth who probably continued to run it as a school until 1898 when it was sold. She may have expanded the school next door to Shermans, where a private school for

girls is recorded at that time. In 1897 Ivy House was bought by Thomas Alfred Dunnage for £1000. After he died in 1907 it was owned by Harry Gammer, who established his general stores there until 1913, when he sold the house as a private residence to Ida Graham Langton, mother of the family I remember living there when I was a child.

Gould House

The school at Shermans transferred to Gould House after 1914 and was still there in 1937 when my sister Becky Curtis, then a small baby at Dalebrook House, used to be held up to the window to enjoy watching the children going across the street to play in the orchard opposite, where Beech House is now. Run by the Misses Saunders, the school provided tuition in English, French, Latin, etc., music, painting, German and dancing and charged the parents for new books, new music and boarding fees. We know that it was taking boys as well as girls in the 1920s because John and Dick Langton and their sister Joan, who lived at Ivy House, were all pupils there then.

The Former Grammar School

A short-lived school in the premises of the former Grammar School, which had recently closed, was run by the erudite philologist the Rev. Richard Morris (1833-1894) from 1889 until 1892. He leased the main building and the new schoolroom on Frog Meadow (since demolished) for three years at a rent of £50 per annum before a terminal illness

forced him retire to Harold Wood two years before his death in 1894.

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In this account I have been fortunate in being able to draw on information provided by the National Trust for visitors to Shermans. I am also greatly indebted to Andrew and Leonie McLoughlin, who have kindly allowed me to make use of their extensive research into the history of Ivy House and have helped with many points of detail. I am grateful too for information provided by Becky Curtis and William Langton.



Initials of schoolmaster William Colchester & wife Susannah with date 1767 on west wall of Ivy House



View from the church tower in 2001 showing the complex roofs of both Shermans and Ivy House.



The back of Ivy House, clothed in Ivy c.1900. On the left is the addition built in the mid eighteenth century; on the right the older timber-framed wing which is now Ivy side Cottage.



The Misses Saunders' school at Gould House in the 1920s. The child in front of the teacher in a hat is Joan Langton and the boy on the right may be her brother John.



The school at Gould House in the 1930s.

The captions to the illustrations were omitted from Lucy Archer's article on 'Dedham's Chapels', as printed in last month's Magazine. A corrected version of the article which includes the missing captions can be found with all Lucy's other articles on the Dedham Parish Council website under Dedham > Historical Dedham > Dedham Reminiscences