

## The Dedham Grammar School

*For photographs and information I am indebted to Charles Clover, Chris and Emma Wheeler and Howard Bridge.*

The Grammar School was founded in 1571 by a prominent Dedham clothier, William Littlebury to provide free education for twenty poor boys from Dedham, Ardleigh, Great Bromley, Bradfield and Stratford St Mary and soon began to admit some fee-paying pupils as well. In 1575 the school was granted a charter from Queen Elizabeth I and that explains why the space in front of the building is still known as Royal Square. The school's statutes describe how strictly it was run with long hours and few holidays. The boys' parents were expected to provide them with paper, ink, candles and a bow and arrows. Shooting practice took place on Archery Piece near the corner at the eastern end of the High Street, off what is now Brook Street and there were sports such as ball games and wrestling on the adjacent Camping Close. The Grammar School provided a classical higher education for boys destined for university, which was unsuited to the needs of many poor scholars; so in 1599 another clothier, Edmund Sherman, made provision in his will for an English or Writing School (the present Shermans) to teach the 3 Rs.

The Grammar School appears to have gone downhill after 1662, when the folio recording its statutes, ordinances and proceedings comes to an end, and headmasters came and went in swift

succession but then its fortunes revived dramatically. During the eighteenth century there was a fruitful collaboration between two outstanding headmasters, the Rev. Thomas Grimwood at the Grammar School and William Colchester, who took over at the English School in 1730 and stayed nearly 43 years. Grimwood, who was appointed to the Grammar School in the same year at the age of twenty-four, was there for 48 years and his son, who was headmaster when John Constable was a pupil, followed him for another 20. Handsome new buildings for both schools were put up in the 1730s, evidently to the designs of the same master mason. Both are covered with the names and initials of the pupils carved into the brickwork, a practice evidently condoned by authority. Well House, which provided accommodation for boarders, has a Latin inscription reading "Thomas Grimwood, Master of this School, 1732". It is thought to have been built slightly later than the Headmaster's House (the present Old Grammar School) facing the square, so as to connect it with an earlier timber-framed schoolroom to the east (demolished c.1920) on what is now the front garden of the Beech House. The boys had dormitories on the top floor of the headmaster's house and the prefects slept above the old schoolroom.

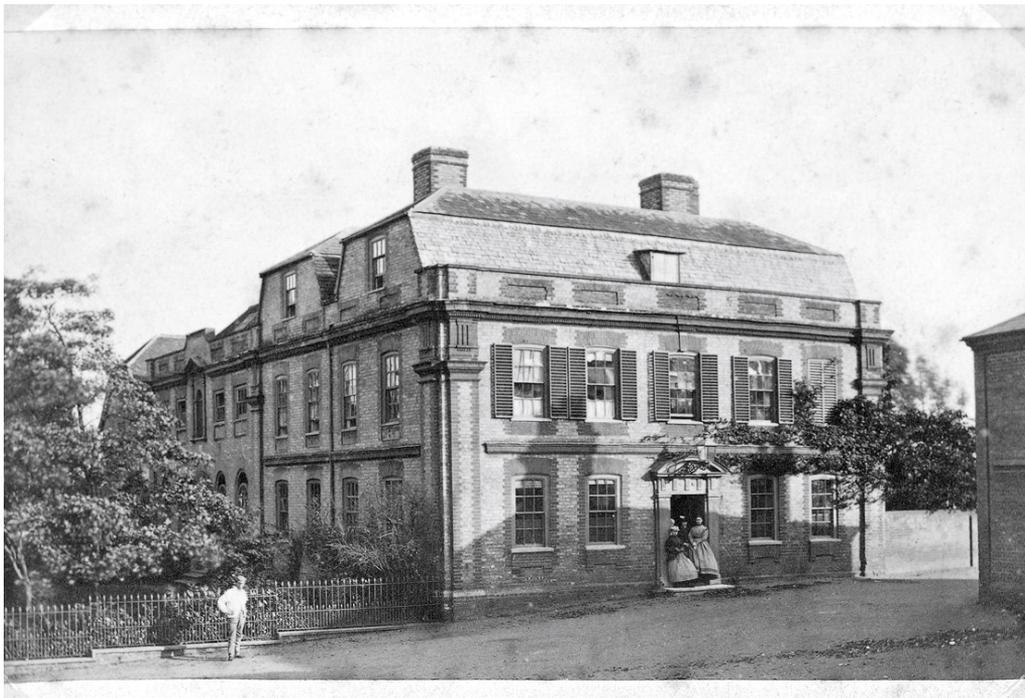
In its heyday during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Grammar School with this long range of three combined buildings must have dominated the centre of Dedham and

the social and commercial life of the community. Its success is reflected in the architecture of the High Street, where many of the late medieval houses belonging to well-to-do residents, whose sons were among the pupils it educated, were given fashionable new Georgian fronts. Sheldrakes opposite the school is said to have been its tuck shop. An extra schoolroom on Frog Meadow was added by headmaster Dr Gerald Thompson Lermit in 1868 to accommodate the growing number of pupils and cater for the increased demands of science in the curriculum at that time. A few years earlier a cottage on Royal Square was replaced by Duchy House described in a later legal document as “the hospital”, suggesting that it was the sanatorium for the Grammar School.

Just before the Christmas holidays in 1875, when there were 90 boys on the school roll, there was an outbreak of scarlet fever in Dedham. Dr Lermit reacted swiftly and stopped the return of the boys until he had arranged alternative accommodation for them all at Dovercourt, where lessons carried on as usual. This costly, protective isolation was successful and the disease did not spread. However other problems were looming. The Endowed Schools Act of 1869, set up to regulate existing Grammar Schools, had required the English School to be replaced by a new Boys’ Elementary School in Crown Street (now the Old Schoolhouse on the corner of Parsonsfield), which was built in 1882 and cost £712 - 10s. A considerable outlay on sanitary works



*A print by Alfred Montague showing the Grammar school in 1839. The gate in the south-east corner of the square led to the school playing field. The cottage beside it was replaced in the mid nineteenth century by Duchy House.*



*Members of the Lermitt family on the doorstep of the Grammar School in the 1860s. Note (far right) the corner of the recently-built Duchy House*

and other improvements to the Grammar School's property was also needed. Then, after an outbreak of diphtheria, the water supply was found to be impure and a new artesian well had to be sunk where the pump still stands. This was of great benefit to the community, which had free use of it with the Parish Council paying a shilling a year in rent. However for the Grammar School it was the final blow. So much heavy expenditure had caused an unmanageable debt and on the resignation of the Headmaster, the Rev. William Corbett in 1889, the decision was taken to close down for the time being. The Dedham Curate continued

teaching the few boys left until Christmas 1893 but the school never re-opened.

The building was let to a succession of tenants until 1906 and then left empty. By the 1920s it had become The Old House Hotel and from 1937 to '49 it was the home and antique shop of the Hon. Mrs Stella Hamilton, mother of the cookery writer Elizabeth David. Since 1950 the Old Grammar School and Well House have been separate private houses.

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