

Dedham Vale Society

Article: Sherman's, Dedham

Dedham High Street is a spectacular piece of architectural stage scenery. Few of the frontages that present themselves to the street are anything like as old as the structures that lurk behind; most of them received a dramatic facelift in times of Georgian prosperity, in order to 'modernise' the essentially medieval fabric of the village. There is no more striking example of this tendency than a house right at the heart of the village, opposite the parish church. This is the house variously known as Sherman's Hall, Sherman's House or just plain Sherman's.

It is worth saying a little about the Sherman family, who built the house and who have had a remarkable influence well beyond Dedham, in the New World. The first known Sherman to settle in Dedham was Henry S. Sherman, who arrived in 1532 and established a successful cloth business. This was one of many such businesses established on the back of the wool trade, which had made this one of the wealthiest parts of the country. His sons Edmund and Henry were amongst the first governors of the Grammar School in Dedham, which was founded in 1571, and Edmund also founded the English or Writing School at Sherman's.

A number of the descendants of these three were amongst the many families from Essex and Suffolk who emigrated to America in the 1630s, wishing to start a new life in what they hoped would be a more congenial political and religious environment. One Sherman or another was to feature prominently in many of the landmark events which were to shape the future of that colony: its struggle for independence, the devastation of the Civil War, early 20th century revival, and up to the Second World War. It was a Sherman who helped to draw up and then sign the Declaration of Independence. Later, as Commander-in-Chief of the US Army, General William T Sherman brought the Civil War to a close by his famous march through the Southern States (and it is this Sherman who gave his name to the Sherman Tank of World War II fame). A Sherman was Vice-President of the United States in the early years of the 20th century, and after the Second World War Forrest P. Sherman was the Chief Naval Officer of the US Pacific Fleet. Fragments of glass in the north eastern window of the north aisle of Dedham Parish church include the initials E.S., commemorating Edmund Sherman. There is also a brick and stone table tomb in the churchyard looking towards the house, marking the final resting place of other members of the family.

The earliest known reference to the present building comes in the will of Edmund Sherman, clothier, which dates from 1599. In his will Edmund gave to his sister Judith 'the tenement wherein Richard Browne...dwelleth' and stated that 'after my sister's death I give the field and tenement before given to her during life unto the Governors of the Public Grammar School in Dedham to be improved for a dwelling house for a schoolmaster...which schoolmaster should freely teach one poor child'. The English or Writing School which was developed from this legacy occupied the site of Sherman's from 1599 to 1873. As the name suggests, it was in effect a proto-elementary school, providing a basic education for the sons of tradesmen.

In 1833 the Charity Commission wrote a report on the management of the school, which provides several interesting details. £18 in rent was received each year by the Governors, which after payment of insurance went to the master of the school. The master 'had been given a bond to keep the house and property in repair and teach the free boys reading, writing and arithmetic and the English Language only and to take no more than one shilling a quarter from each scholar for pens, inks and writing books'. The boys were admitted at the age of 10 and usually remained for three years. The master had 8 non-paying boys from Dedham and the surrounding area, and 50 other scholars, some of whom were boarders. Some came from further afield; the 1841 census even records a boy from Africa among the students. It is interesting to speculate as to what circumstances brought him to an Essex village.

In the 1870s a Commission was set up to look into the running of the Dedham schools. It recommended that a new elementary school should be built, and that the remit of the Grammar School should be expanded to meet the educational requirements of the middle class, as well as offering an education to poorer children showing academic promise. And so in 1873 the English School at Sherman's closed. However, a tangible reminder of the long years of school use can still be seen in the many initials carved by Georgian and Victorian schoolboys in the soft red brickwork of the façade.

The elaborate brick frontage that we see today is the result of extensive alterations carried out in 1730-31. The ‘principal undertaker’ for this work was Mr Nicholas Freeman, who also oversaw the rebuilding of the Grammar School in the same year. The total cost of the remodelling of Sherman’s was £533 2s and fourpence half-penny. While this sum included provision for internal remodelling, this was relatively modest in character; the chief display was reserved for the facade, as if wishing to outdo the Grammar School.

This front façade is one of the great showpieces of the village and the county. It is a narrow, busy frontage which manages to accommodate all three of the principal classical Orders as well as a host of other architectural details. The façade is framed by a giant order of Doric pilasters surmounted by a dentil cornice, all in beautifully cut and jointed soft red brick. There is a fine timber door case with Corinthian pilasters and pediment. Above this there is an arched niche, also pedimented, and framed by Ionic pilasters, all in the same red brick. The niche now contains an urn, designed by Quinlan Terry and added in 1980. Crowning the elevation is a high parapet, swept up to accommodate a large sundial. There are four large sash windows, with typical early Georgian thick-section ovolo moulded glazing bars, and red brick surrounds and aprons.

The urn in the niche commemorates the Sherman family and the fact that Marshall Sisson, architect, gave the house to the National Trust in 1979. Sisson had moved to the village in 1934; like Raymond Erith he was (after early experiments with modernism) most at home working in the classical idiom. Also like Erith (and Sir Alfred Munnings), he was an original committee member of the Dedham Vale Society, which had been formed in 1937. Mrs Sisson, herself an accomplished artist and musician, was Secretary to the committee.

Sisson was known for his sympathetic approach to the repair and adaptation of ancient buildings such as Thorington Hall and Deanery Tower at Hadleigh. He also oversaw the post-war restoration of St John’s Smith Square and the reconstruction of the bombed-out Wren City Church of St Mary Aldermanbury in Fulton, Missouri. This church, having been declared surplus to the Diocese of London’s requirements, was dismantled and re-erected on the other side of the Atlantic at Westminster College, Fulton as a memorial to Sir Winston Churchill, who had delivered his famous ‘iron curtain’ speech there in 1946. Thus was added a further layer in the story of Sherman’s and its American connections.

Although they moved to Cambridgeshire after the war, the Sissons’ hearts were always with Dedham, and they both they now lie buried in the village churchyard. When Marshall Sisson died in 1979, he ensured that Sherman’s would be protected for posterity by leaving it to the National Trust. The house is now let, and is not generally open to the public. However, there is an Open Day in September, details of which can be obtained from the National Trust.

Andrew Derrick, February 2005