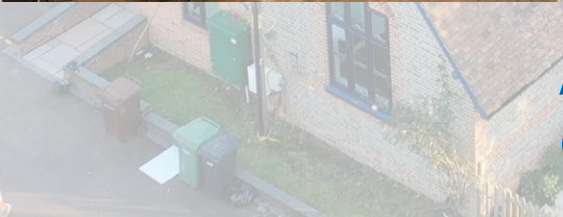




# Eye & Dunsden Village Hall

[www.dunsdenvillagehall.co.uk](http://www.dunsdenvillagehall.co.uk)  
Registered charity number 273293



A short history  
of the building



# A short history of Eye & Dunsden Village Hall

Based partly on Brian Law's *Eye & Dunsden Two Centuries of Change*, 2001

## A school for Dunsden

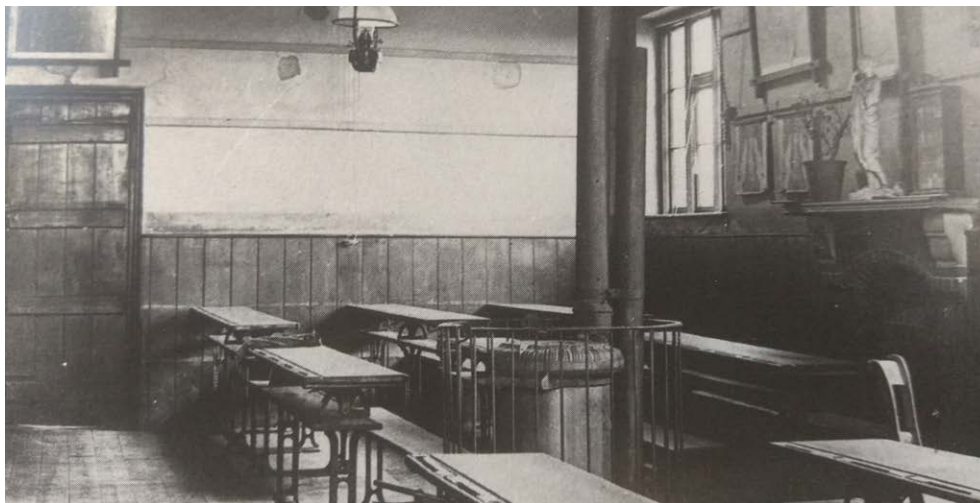
Dunsden's first known school was established in 1829 in a cottage in Tagg Lane. It was a branch of Sonning school and served 30 pupils. It was followed in 1833 by another for 30 children in Playhatch. When All Saints church in Dunsden was consecrated in 1842, it quickly became obvious that something had to be done to provide proper education facilities in the parish, and Sonning parish magazine duly recorded the building of a new school opposite the village green:

*'well-situated, and commanded a beautiful view and was superior in all respects to anything of the school kind hitherto seen in this inaccessible country'*

Much of the funding was provided by the Palmer family of Holme Park in Sonning. The part of the building today called the Palmer Room was first used as a Sunday School on 20 December, 1846. In 1851 Mary Preston was recorded as the school mistress, living in the house attached to the school together with her daughter, who was an assistant teacher.

At a time when most people worked on the land, children aged between ten and 12 were only required to be in school for half a week. They were exempt from attendance during the harvest and their education ended once they were 13.

The school in Playhatch closed in 1869, just before the Education Act of 1870 set new standards for teaching and enabled funds to be raised for new schools.



A much-needed new main classroom was opened in 1869. It was to serve as the 'Mixed School' for all but the infant pupils who remained in the original smaller room. This new larger space included folding doors separating a space now known as the Phillimore Room and was equipped with a fireplace. The original foundation stone is today re-set in the retaining wall of the terrace.

The schoolroom was heated by a central stove with light provided by paraffin lamps. Piped water had yet to come to Dunsden, and a large cistern beneath the building stored rainwater for drinking purposes. The school and its land belonged to the Diocese of Oxford and was inspected annually by a church representative. Later the school was also inspected by the Government, which provided much anxiety and some funding. Other sources of income were money from church collections, donations from local people and the one penny per week paid by labourers for the education of their children. Six pence per week was required from farmers for the education of their children.

Education was basic, the learning by rote, with a focus on religion. Reports were generally good. Because they were needed in the fields, many boys over ten did not attend. Special classes were held two evenings a week from 1869 to 1909 for older youths who had missed out on learning to read and write.

In 1891 William Hulcoop, 22, was appointed as a new college-trained master with a staff of three. He was a popular figure and remained in post until 1923. A contemporary photograph shows a well-disciplined and well-dressed group of pupils.

Cookery demonstrations were held in the school and a popular summer school festival took place in the vicar's field. Discipline was tight, and the cane was used often on the boys. No meals were provided, although cocoa was available for an extra payment. The classes were so crowded children often had to stand, heating was a constant problem and the health of the poorest children was especially bad. After the death in 1891 of two pupils from diphtheria, the school was temporarily closed and had to be thoroughly disinfected.

The celebrated first world war poet Wilfred Owen arrived in Dunsden in October 1911 as lay assistant to the vicar. He was also secretary to the school board and superintendent of the Sunday school. On 16 April, 1912 he wrote to his mother:

'I am correspondent of Dunsden School'; Yes ma'am; hi! you there on your knees, man; don't-cher-know who I am? ... All manner of red-lined accounts, greasy vouchers, and type-written letters come under my lock and key. I pull the strings, and set five teachers and a hundred scholars chattering. You know how I detest 'ledgery'. Still, I suppose, it can do no harm to gain a working knowledge of mon-eyes and usurances'.

He disliked Hulcoop and described him in 1912 as 'self-important and a windbag' but he enjoyed his time at the school, writing on 16 March, 1912:

'On Friday afternoon, I was also in a pleasure-vein; spending an hour and a half in the School. I made a careful inspection of the drawings, dealt out the usual supply of encouraging praise, and found the usual merriment in the dunces' work; tigers, for instance, which looked like your slavey's old boots... Then I went out to see Mrs Hulcoop drill the smaller boys and girls; begged permission to give them a few commands...and so put them thro' the old familiar "Hips - FIRM! Neck - RESST!" Darlings, some of them are! I could have hugged them, rather than put any in the corner.'

By 1928 there were 120 children packed into the school. When Hulcoop's



replacement made off with a month's staff wages, the school had again to close. Electric light finally arrived in Dunsden in 1933, by which time the school was in the control of the county, with the vicar chairing a board partly appointed by the parish council and partly by the county. A few pupils managed to pass the 11+, going on to the grammar school in Henley. By 1938, a major development of housing for out-of-work Welsh miners at Micklands brought 70 new pupils to the school, and as a result in 1939 Dunsden's seniors were transferred to Peppard school. The school-leaving age was finally raised to 15 in 1944.

By 1949 school numbers had declined and the buildings were in a poor state. The county estimated that it would take £8,700 (a considerable sum) to bring the school up to an acceptable standard. Meals were finally being served to about one third of pupils that could afford them. In the 1960s a Mrs Warren looked after just 30 pupils, then mainly aged five to nine. There were trips to Windsor Castle and elsewhere, nativity plays and Christmas parties and free milk from Clifford's Dairies.

When Mrs Warren retired in 1969, the county's concerns for the future of the school were made plain when no successor was appointed. The school limped on with a declining roll and a succession of temporary teachers, before finally closing in spite of a vociferous protest campaign in December 1973. By then it had just 23 pupils, mostly from Binfield Heath. To this day, a number of local people remember their time at the school with great pleasure. With closure, ownership of the building reverted to descendants of the Palmer family who had originally provided it.



## A new beginning as a village hall

A former mission hall on the village green had long since been demolished and so without the school premises, the community lacked a meeting place. It was keen to retain the building. Parish Councillor Gilbert Craddock set about trying to track down the building's owners who eventually agreed to sell the school at half its market value. Eye & Dunsden Parish Council bought it for £8,000 in 1977 and refurbished the near-derelict hall at a cost in excess of £30,000.

A separate charitable trust was set up to run the school from 7 February, 1977. This was to include representatives of seven village organisations including the Dunsden branch of the Women's Institute, Dunsden Village Association, Dunsden Football Club, Dunsden Young Wives and the Dunsden Church Women's Fellowship, all of which have since vanished.

The hall's objectives were defined in its deed as being

'for the use of the inhabitants within the present boundaries of the said Parish of Eye and Dunsden in the County of Oxford (hereinafter called "the area of benefit") without distinction of political religious or other opinions including use for meetings lectures and classes and for other forms of recreation and leisure time occupation with the object of improving the conditions of life for the said inhabitants'

The community contributed generously to a local fund-raising campaign, many of them by buying tiles for the new roof, which still bear their signatures to this day. After much refurbishment work, in 1980 the parish of Eye & Dunsden was proud to open its first ever Village Hall. When a bell fell from the turret at All Saints Church sometime in the 1980s, the school bell was installed there, commemorating the church's long association with the hall.

In 1987 the daughters of Robert Phillimore generously gave a field behind the hall to the Parish Council. It was the venue for an annual village fête. A dedicated band of volunteers continued to run the hall, led from 1990 by Christine Bland, wife of the parish clerk and from 1999 by Chris Jensen, Vice-Chairman of the parish council, with Susan Spiers as Secretary amongst many others who gave their time for the community. George Englefield and Beth Timms subsequently served as Chair of the trustees and began the long and demanding process of seeking grants for major improvements to the hall. Their first tasks included providing insulation for the roof and the installation of replacement windows. They were aided in particular by Tony Stevens, a dedicated caretaker who gave enormously to the hall before his tragic death in 2015 and by Diane Honey as treasurer.



In 2006 Eye & Dunsden Parish Council was asked to sell half of the field behind the hall back to the Phillimore Estate. Instead, however, the Parish Council proposed selling for the sum of £21,800 plus a land swap for 0.6 acre of land behind the village green, where a community orchard was then established. The proceeds were used to resurface the hall car park. A much-needed car park extension was also established. The parish council continued in its long-term support of the hall and made regular grants towards improvements.

## Plans for transformation

Around 2012 the trustees began to talk about a complete modernisation of the hall. Solar panels were installed and Colony Architects, led by Ed Mather and Stuart Hall, were asked to re-design the hall. At the suggestion of the trustees they added an extension to the main hall and a terrace area. The plans were passed by the District Council in December 2013, and included an imaginatively conceived new foyer area, which would transform the building by linking the two halls.

Using income from the rental of the teacher's house, a paid hall and bookings manager were appointed. They transformed the day-to-day running of the hall, removing a burden from volunteer trustees. Dedicated fund-raising efforts by the trustees brought in around £400,000 to fund the re-building work, including a grant of £200,000 from the district council and £100,000 from the Phillimore Trust. New local resident George Clooney donated £1,000. An 'audience' with Dame Judi Dench at the Mill at Sonning raised over £20,000, and an auction at the Loddon Brewery contributed around £5,000. Long-time supporters Dunsden WI also made a grant when their branch finally closed.

Regular fireworks and quiz nights continued to contribute to the appeal, as did a number of musical evenings, including appearances by the nationally renowned

folk duo Ninebarrow. Trustees successfully obtained many other grants from individuals, charitable trusts and local bodies, including from the parish councils of Eye & Dunsden and from the larger community of Binfield Heath, formed in 2003.

A structural engineer and new architects drew up the final plans which were passed in April 2017, with work beginning in the July of that year. By December 2017 the new main hall was in use. A two-storey outdoor store was included in the re-build together with an attractive south-facing terrace which makes the most of the fine views from the building. By integrating what was originally intended to be a separate extension into the main hall, the trustees succeeded in creating a bright and airy space which has proved extremely popular for affordable weddings for local people, with bookings being taken for 2020 and beyond.

Sophisticated new lighting and heated wooden floors make the space bright and cosy at all times of year. A hearing loop, alarm systems and a sparkling new kitchen in the main hall make it fit for the 21st century. As part of a national project, sculptor Anthony Padgett donated a cast of his statue of Wilfred Owen for the new foyer, linking the hall with other locations connected with the poet. On 5 May, 2018 the hall was officially re-opened by Jeannette Matelot, Chairman of the district council. The celebration featured music, photography and poetry.

In 2019, 150 years after the building of the main hall, we continue to raise funds for improvements, including a new kitchen with pitched roof for the small hall, new surfacing and lighting for the car park extension, new tables, chairs and crockery. We also hope to fund the landscaping and re-fencing of the grounds.

The trustees are united in their hope that the hall's transformation will fit it to serve the needs of the whole community for many decades to come.

**David Woodward, Chair of the Trustees and Chairman of Eye & Dunsden Parish Council**

