



# Holbourn House

Day Nursery & Pre-School



**Educating children since 1840**

## A SITE OF EDUCATION SINCE 1840

**In the early 1840s the bell in the bell tower on top of the former Parish School of Dodford rang out across the village for the first time calling local children to lessons.**

Built in 1840, The Old School building (part of Peterborough Diocese), now the site of Holbourn House Day Nursery and Pre-School, started life as a single-roomed red-brick building with a pitched slate roof, and was created to serve the community, predominantly as a space for education, but also as a village hall.



The bricks used to build the original building were hand-made and individual brickmaker's marks, used to identify their progress through a batch when returning from breaks, can still be seen today, alongside a symbol of an arrow and straight line which was used to record how far the ground was above sea level – these are called Datum or Benchmarks.

The Parish School, which was headed up by School Mistress Miss E. R. Otridge, was mixed gender and built to accommodate 80 children, although its regular attendance levels typically averaged around 47.

Funded by a series of endowments and charitable trusts, the school was extended in 1905, creating two classrooms divided by wooden panelling, a toilet block to the right-hand side of the building and smaller extension at the front, which now houses the kitchen.



Amongst donations from The Charity Commissioners, the interest made on funds bequeathed by Joseph Cook of Dodford and Thomas Reeve Thornton Esquire of Brockhall – to be used to pay the Master of the Parish School and to fund education within the community – provided the capital for the extension of the building. A charitable trust in their names was founded and to this day the Cook and Thornton Trust is used to fund educational resources for children who need them in the area.

Records of the Parish School are scarce, and therefore it is uncertain how long the building was used as a school for, however, under the Education act of 1921 a conveyance of the school was recorded dated 13<sup>th</sup> February 1940, so it was clearly still being used as a site of education 100 years after it was built and by 1946,

the school was known as C of E School, Dodford. From there the name was changed to Holbourn House School in approx. 1974, and finally in 1990, Holbourn House Day Nursery, with the 'Pre-school' part added 15 years later in 2005.

In addition to the brick building, the nursery utilises a section of land (approx. 225 sqm) to the left-hand side of the property, gifted to the Cook and Thornton Trust, to provide the education site with outdoor access. This is still an outside play area comprising a variety of sectioned spaces for children to explore and learn in.

## ACCOUNT OF SCHOOL LIFE FROM 1938 TO 1941 BY CHARLIE DILKS

Mr Charles Dilks, known locally as Charlie, was born in January 1931 and attended the Parish School from 1938 to 1941. He met his wife Margaret at school, she was a year younger than him and they were still married until she sadly passed away in November 2022. They remained residents of Dodford village all through their time together.

When asked about his memories of school days, Charlie said, "A typical school day began at 9am, ended at 4pm and we all went home for an hour at lunchtime. My teacher at the time, Miss Little - and she was quite little too". He explained that all the basics were covered, known as the 3 R's; reading, writing and arithmetic. The children sat two to a desk in the classroom.

He continued, "There was no such thing as a PE class, but we spent most of our free time exploring the village, woodland and fields. During the war, German bombers would drop their ammunition on the surrounding area to lighten their aircraft for the return journey and a group of us would go looking for bomb shrapnel"

Charlie has some good and bad memories of school, including regularly getting the cane across his hands: "This was a regular occurrence for most of the pupils at school, but I did get the cane a lot, perhaps I was one of the naughtier boys in class... I was often the instigator of a game of kiss-chase."

Photo's courtesy of Charlie Dilks and Dodford Past Facebook page



Charlie Dilks: 2<sup>nd</sup> row from the bottom and 4<sup>th</sup> in from the right



Photo above shows pupils outside what was then the C of E School in 1946

## A FAMILY AFFAIR

**Cliff and Bernadette Martin bought Holbourn House Day Nursery in 1990; the aim of building a fulfilling and enriching career in childcare and education. Then in April 2023 completed on the purchase of the Old School building, which had been a 30 year ambition.**

Originally, the plan was that Cliff would take on maintenance and cooking on a temporary basis whilst the nursery established its footing locally, however 30 years on he is still working hard on the upkeep of the building, constantly refreshing and improving the environment for children and employees alike – he never returned to his trade as a carpenter.

Bernadette focussed on shaping the nursery into a space that offered a home-from-home approach, building strong relationships with parents and families, supported by a professional team, giving a warm welcome every day. She was so good at it, that over the following decade the business grew from word-of-mouth alone, increasing the number of families it worked with and supported year-on-year.

The couple have two daughters; Andrea and Rachel, who were three years old and eighteen months respectively at the time they took the business over. Rachel joined the business in 2006 and is now the Nursery Manager, having completed her BA Hons in Early Years and her Forest School leader qualification. During her years in the business, Rachel has had a huge impact on the nursery; influencing ethos, modernising practice and shaping the setting into what it is today.

The owners of Holbourn House Day Nursery and Pre-School, Cliff and Bernadette Martin, recount their journey over the past three decades:

“We had been searching for new career opportunities for about a year before we finally found Holbourn House - a quaint nursery within a quiet and picturesque village. (See Appendix)

“Cliff was employed as a carpenter and I was in between work, having just given birth to our second daughter Rachel.

“We'd seen a lot of childcare settings, but it was Holbourn House's village charm and room for potential that really caught our eye.

“At the point of our acquisition, the nursery was regularly audited by Daventry Council's Environmental Health Department and was registered with the Social Services (later changed to Ofsted) for a maximum of 30 children, aged two to five years old. Its business hours were 9am until 3pm, 38 weeks of the year.

“The business' client base had been dwindling for the past few years, but we saw opportunities to make small changes, such as adjusting our opening hours to 8:30am to 5:30pm 48 weeks of the year – which immediately provided clients with more flexibility.

“Despite our initial impressions of the quaint Old School, the building and the business were in need of some serious TLC. From attracting new clients, improving employee training and redefining services to improving the heating, resources and environment – the kitchen for example was in a state of disrepair.

“Cliff, utilising his skills as a carpenter, set about improving the building and environment, whilst I focussed on refining our childcare services, and once the kitchen was refitted, we were able to provide home-cooked meals for the existing children in our care – a happy group of children, who were content in their play.”

## CHANGING PLACES

"The following year saw our first hurdle – bringing in the changes from the 1989 Children's Act.

"One important amendment was to the provision of physical space for each child. This resulted in a reduction of children per session, re-registering the nursery for 20 children at a time, instead of 30, and a drop in revenue from the business only one year in.

"Several years later, recommendations changed again, requiring additional amendments in our outdoor spaces. This was really the birth of our 'learn through nature' ethos, a key focus for the nursery today.

"We developed small sections in the garden to provide a wider range of activities and stimulation for children, to enrich and encourage them to learn across a wider platform of spaces and environments.

"As time passed by and our daughters grew up, they both were involved in the nursery, with Andrea supporting with some marketing activity and Rachel joining the team full time in 2006.

"Through the years we built up a relationship with the local newspaper (no social media then); the Daventry Express, known locally as The Gusher, regularly receiving coverage on our involvement in the many local community activities.

## A great day out at the beach for youngsters



■ A day out at the beach: Jake Gibson, two, Summer Hallum, three, Catherine Hall, two, and Luke Rowles, four. Photo by Ian Spencer. (P194DE-01-08-12 BEACH AUG05 (2))

IT WAS bucket and spade time at a village nursery yesterday (Wednesday).

Holbourn House Day Nursery, based at the Old School House in Dodford, kicked off its Fun Filled Fortnight on Monday and as part of it held a beach day yesterday (Wednes-

day). Rather than take their youngsters to the coast, they decided to bring the best of the British seaside holiday to the village instead.

Rachel Martin, from the nursery, said: "It's been a fantastic day and the children

have loved it. We had the beach out, a bouncy castle, soft play, ice creams – everything really. "For the rest of the fortnight we've got things like Zumba tots, a pirate day, Olympics, a trip to the Country Park and a visit from a member of Daventry Brass.

## THE WHEELS ON THE BUS

"As part of the acquisition we inherited a minibus, which was used to pick up and drop off children using the nursery's services. It was an old orange transit van, kitted out with bench seating and quite honestly should not have been on the road. In fact, it managed a meagre three weeks after taking ownership before the engine seized and it gave up on us," said Cliff.

He continues: "We spent that Christmas searching for a replacement to ensure we could continue to provide our promised services to our families.

"The service was gradually phased out over the following five years, and Holbourn House's pick up and drop off service became a thing of the past.



■ Left: The Easter bonnet competition winners at Badby Primary School, Natasha Wright, five, East Hamilton, five, Nick Goodie, six, Kiera Midson, eight, Ellie Quinn, nine, Kaitlin Hamilton, nine, and Alex Wheeler, 10. Photo by Ian Spencer. (P194DE-21-03-12 BUNNET P194DE (1))



■ Above, children from SureStart in Daventry receive their eggs from Harlequin Toys. (unattributed photo)

## Bonnets, eggs and giving over Easter

CHILDREN and businesses across the Daventry area have joined together to celebrate Easter in a variety of ways.

Harlequin Toys' Daventry headquarters in the Heartlands, donated over 300 Easter Eggs to be divided between the NSPCC, local children's homes and SureStart Children's Centre in Daventry.

The donation from the staff and company has become an annual tradition.

Chairman for the SureStart Core Group Natalie Simms said: "The kids are all very grateful to Harlequin and really excited."

"It's great to be able to give Easter eggs to those who are less fortunate and cannot afford to buy them.

"I'm sure all the children will really enjoy them!"

At Badby children were set the task of decorating bonnets. Office administrator Chantelle Shaw said: "There were lots of flowers, ribbons and of course chicks. They were judged in their year group in our assembly by the chairman of our government."

While at Daventry's Playhouse Nursery children also worked to create some seasonal headwear for the preschool's annual competition with the end results being judged on Thursday last week.

And in Dodford Thursday also saw toddlers, children and parents head out from the Holbourn House Day Nursery for an Easter egg hunt around the village centre.



■ Children and parents get set for the Holbourn House Day Nursery egg hunt. Photo by Wilis Baker. (P194DE-04-04-12 Egg Hunt April 18 (1))

## THE STORY CONTINUES

Regarding their 30-year journey with Holbourn House, Bernadette said, "Looking back, we were very naïve at the beginning and in our inexperience, we just made sure the building was safe, secure and as presentable as it could be for our first day of business - 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1990.

"All the hard work required did not quell our excitement, enthusiasm and passion and we put our heart and soul into making it work, and as time went on opportunities to make small changes and alterations where and when we could presented themselves to us.

"Within the first week we had meetings with Social Services and the Environmental Health Department and agreed a plan to move forward with the necessary work to establish a safe and healthy environment for the children in our care. The work was completed within a six-week timescale and both agencies gave us the go ahead to continue trading. That was when the real work began to establish a reputable high-quality childcare setting that would serve the village and wider community."

Holbourn House continued to flourish, gaining it's golden reputation and keeping the nursery flowing with children. Until, the 2008 recession hit, forcing Bernadette and Cliff into some difficult decisions, including making a small number of redundancies. Client numbers dropped and the business to increase its marketing activities including flyering the local area, advertising and PR with the local press, developing a web presence, setting up a 'stay and play' scheme and eventually lowering its age range from 2 years to 18 months.

In 2012, Rachel was promoted to Deputy Manager and with the newly formed management structure, the team began enhancing it's outdoor ethos weaving Forest School sessions into its offering. The children started accessing them through The Everdon Experience initially and then developing their own programme delivered on local woodland and farmland, which can be accessed by the children on foot. The nursery now has a dedicated Forest School Leader and assistant who support children twice a day to access the rich and varied outdoor environment.



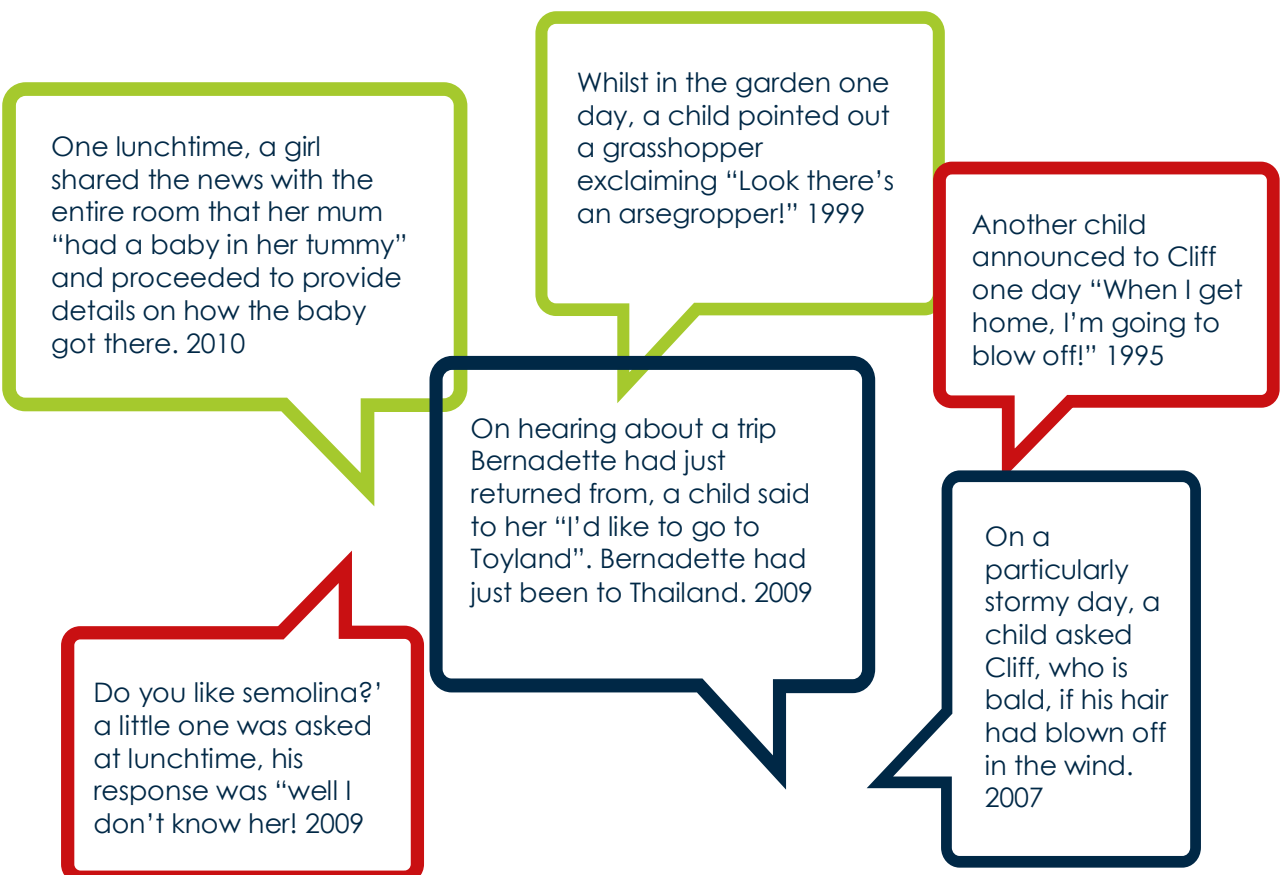
## OFSTED AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

From day one, Ofsted inspections became the benchmark for the nursery, and the team through the years worked hard to ensure the setting was continuously improving and ensuring it achieved a 'Good' standard.

"For many childcare and educational settings, Ofsted inspections can be a daunting experience and we have had our fair share of challenging inspectors visit us at Holbourn House," said Bernadette commenting on the experience, "From day one our teams worked tirelessly to drive up standards with the aim of achieving an 'Outstanding' grade every time we were accessed. Finally, in 2017, our hard work paid off and we were awarded 'Outstanding' – a standard we have been able to maintain now for five years. A very proud moment for the whole Holbourn team."

The same can be said for the nursery's Environmental Health standards. After refitting the kitchen all those years ago, Cliff worked hard to achieve and maintain excellent kitchen safety and hygiene standards and was granted five stars (the highest grade) when the Daventry District Council introduced its 'Scores on the Doors' system. A number **5** score was given and been held by the nursery for more than two decades.

## OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES



## THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

From 2017- 2019 the childcare sector in Northamptonshire experienced a funding crisis, where rates paid to providers were grossly under par. An expansion plan was decided, which would double the building space and enable the nursery to grow its client base, extending its services to cater for babies from aged 9 months.

Plans were put together over the course of the year and planning permission was granted to build a large cabin on the land to the side of the original property was granted.

The construction, comprising a large open space with office, toilets and a covered veranda, was completed in February 2020 - Just one month before the covid-19 pandemic hit forcing the nursery to close its doors for the first time in 30 years.

Although closing the doors and furloughing employees was a tough decision for Cliff and Bernadette, the lockdown also presented an ideal opportunity to complete the works on the cabin and renovate the gardens and play area with the a reopen date of June 2020, in-line with government guidelines.

The reopening brought mixed emotions for everyone involved. Covid-19 still posed a great threat and everyone was anxious about contracting it. Closely following best practice guidelines, we separated children and team members into 'bubbles' and the team maintained additional cleaning rotas to keep everyone safe.

Bernadette said, "What was supposed to be an exciting time of growth was overshadowed by the covid-19 pandemic, but our team pushed through in difficult circumstances and our practices were adapted until they felt like they had become the norm. There were other nurseries forced to close to stay in the black, and I feel fortunate that we were able to remain open from then on making it possible for our families to get back to some level of normality.

"Sadly, our plans to hold a 30<sup>th</sup> birthday party at the nursery were scuppered by the pandemic, however Rachel arranged a surprise montage of virtual birthday messages from children and families past and present, which made all the hard work worth it."

Today, the cabin is in full use and alongside some developments on the original building, the site now offers a free flowing space for children to access activities inside and out, whenever they want. And the development has been a huge success, enabling the company to increase its client base by more than 50%.



## References

Wikipedia [www.wikipedia](http://www.wikipedia) [accessed on 12/11/20]

Dodford Past Facebook page Daventry Express

## Appendix

(Dodford is a village in the county of [Northamptonshire](#), England, within the [Weedon](#) Ward of [Daventry District](#).<sup>[1]</sup> The village is just north of the [A45 road](#) 1½ miles west of Weedon. The population of the [civil parish](#) at the 2011 Census was 203.<sup>[2]</sup> It is 3½ miles east of Daventry and ten miles west of [Northampton](#). It is also close to junction 16 of the [M1 motorway](#). The parish consists of some 1,384 [acres](#) (560 hectares) and is bounded on the east by the [A5](#) trunk road which is the old [Roman road](#) of [Watling Street](#). Most of the village and parish sits astride the valley of an east-flowing stream which is a tributary of the [River Nene](#)).