

## The National Schools and The Walter Nelson Hall

“At a public meeting held in Groomsport Presbyterian Church on the 28<sup>th</sup> August 1844” runs an extract from the Kirk session Minute Book “the state of education and the facilities through which it may be obtained in this neighbourhood, being taken into consideration, it was unanimously resolved that efforts to provide better accommodation for the members of the congregations and others who wish to avail themselves of the advantages of a better education than at present can be obtained in this place”.

Hard to believe, but true, in less than four months, under the vigilance of an appointed committee, chaired by Rev Isaac Mack, Groomsport’s first school was built at the rear of the Presbyterian Church and parallel to the Hill with above its entrance door, facing The Hill, this inscription:

*“Erected by the Minister and Congregation, 1844. Isaac Mack, Pastor.”*

So successful was the first Teacher, appointed in January 1845 and so numerous were the pupils attending, that not only was an Assistant Teacher appointed in November of the same year, but an extension known as “the female school” was both needed and completed on 16<sup>th</sup> March 1846. This was added to the “Donaghadee side” of the original school and ran at right angles to The Hill. At the cost in old money of £46 and a few shillings and pence, this might seem cheap but when one considers that the total congregation finances for the year 1849, of £45 and a few shillings and pence, it certainly wasn’t. There is unfortunately no record of the cost of the original school building.

Despite being small, poorly lit and ill equipped by modern standards, that first school, with a very meagre grant for books and pencils, from the Board involved, served the congregation and community for exactly 50 years, from 1845 to 1895, when a new school was built on the Main street on the opposite side to the Presbyterian Church.

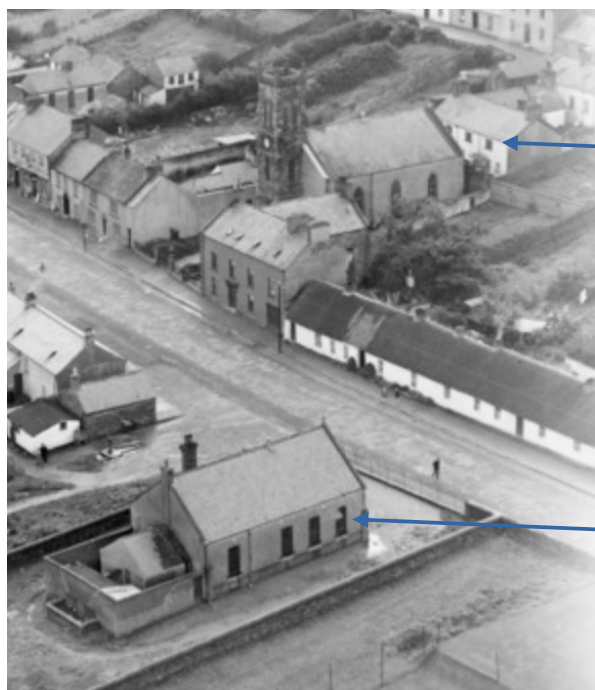
Some history in the case of Groomsport’s first school, however, has happily been preserved for the keystone of the original school and of “Providence Place” that lay around the back of the church until all the restoration and extension work of 1970/71, and is now sited in a purposely made rock garden beside the church.



**Keystone of Groomsport’s first school**

Photograph by Peter Gibson

This extract from an aerial photograph taken in 1929 shows the locations of the schools that served Groomsport from 1845 to 1962.



First National School (1845-1895)

Second National School (1895-1962)

[www.britainfromabove.org.uk/image/XPW028698](http://www.britainfromabove.org.uk/image/XPW028698)

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When, in turn, the second school closed in 1962, a new all purpose modern Primary School, being built on Springwell Drive by the Down County Education Committee, the building, with some alterations, became the Presbyterian Church's much needed Hall, named after the long serving minister at the time, Walter Nelson. In time, it too, with increasing membership, number and variety of activities, required a complete refurbishment, inside and out. Fundraisers of all kinds followed, as with those specific church extensions in 1971 and 1991, and with a brand new entrance foyer and a suite of rooms, including a purpose built Coffee Bar, all with a panoramic sea view, the Walter Nelson Hall was re-opened and Dedicated in October 1978 by another Moderator of the General Assembly, Dr David Burke of Hamilton Road, Bangor.



**The Walter Nelson Hall**  
**showing some of the extensions to the school building**

Photograph by Perry Moore

Rev Dr David Irwin  
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