

# The School and the First World War

## 3: ON THE HOME FRONT

### At the outbreak of war

In Wynne Wilson's memoirs of life at Old School House, he recalls his times as housemaster of the Junior School. He describes the setting as being as near to Germany as any place in England and has a photograph of his small son, aged 3, paddling at Sheringham. In his album it is labelled "*the nearest English boy to Germany*".

There is no mention of war in his diary until July 27th, the day that Austria declared war on Servia (Serbia). On August 4th, at midnight, news was to be posted in Holt at Rounce & Wortley's Stationery Shop. He writes: "*It was read out – the fateful message that England had declared war against Germany at 11 p.m. There was a crowd in the street and an outburst of cheering, and I remember our school doctor, Kentish Wright, shouting: 'Don't cheer, you fools; you don't know what you are in for!'*".



The School Chapel was consecrated on 23rd June 1916 by which time it had already become a memorial to the fallen.

Wynne Willson rode over to Cromer on August 9th and saw the first real sign of war; a Camp of Regulars on the cliffs near the golf links. Early that week, Red Cross lectures were held in the school gymnasium close to his house. He remembers one incident, "*one of the Masters attended as in duty bound, but he was a sensitive soul, and when a very realistic picture of a compound fracture of a leg, with the bone sticking out and blood dripping from it was shown, he subsided heavily on the floor and so gave those of us who were learning ambulance work an opportunity for practice.*"

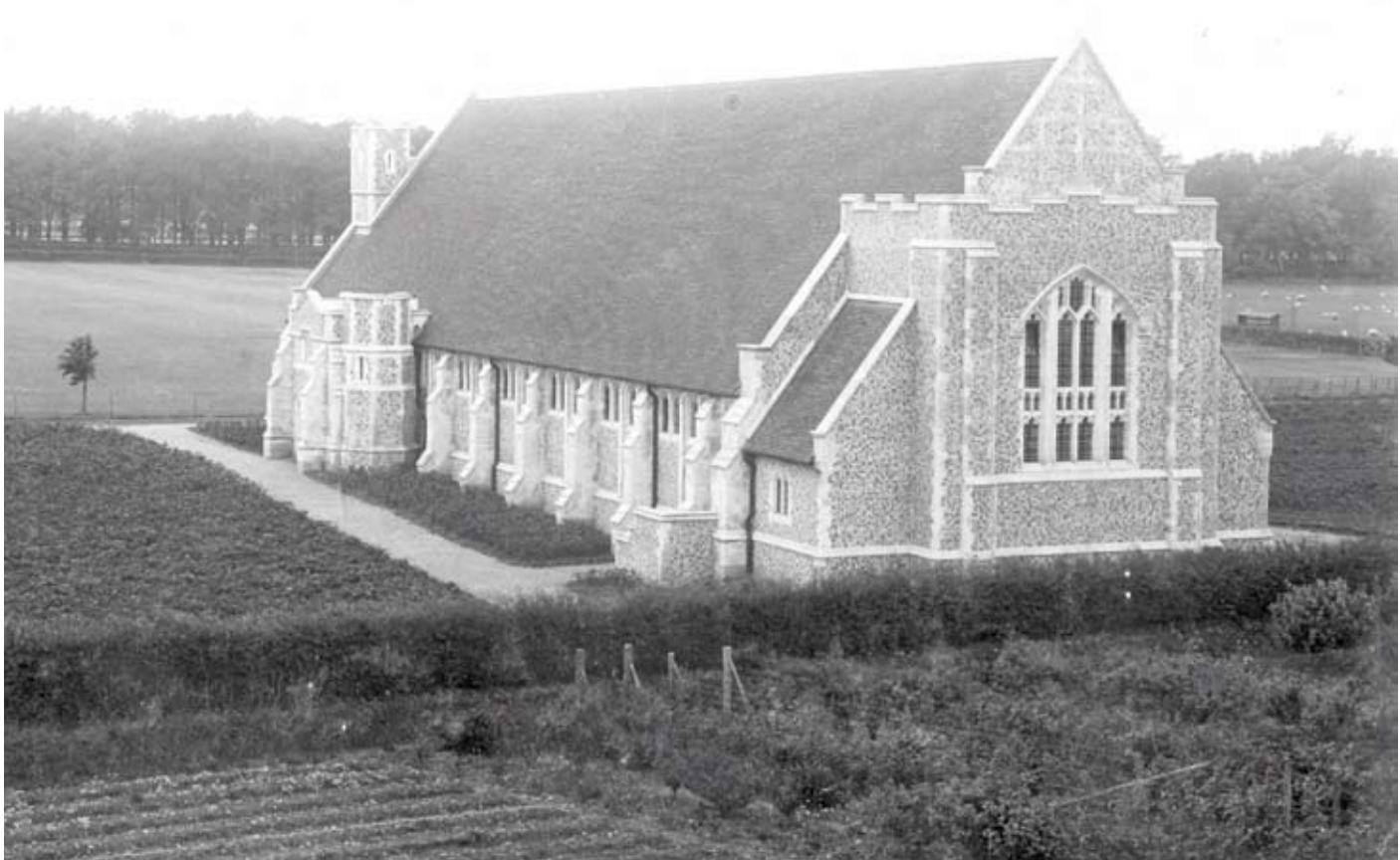


Housemaster D. A. Wynne Willson surrounded by pupils in a 1912 Old School House photograph.

The situation had soon changed, and Autumn 1914 was an anxious time for the schoolmasters. Willson had a household of 50 small boys under 14, and three children under 6, and they were told that in case of a raid they might have to evacuate the place at 2 or 3 hours' notice. Another important aspect was the problem of feeding such a large household. He writes: "*of course we ate all sorts of odd things during the war, but I cannot say that the boys ever actually went hungry*".

*"It is the intention to plant the ground on both sides of the Chapel with potatoes .... which seems the right thing to do at the present moment"*

The Gresham February 1917



### Life at School

In his memoirs, Geoffrey Diggle recalls that the War caused pupils very little hardship or abstinence. Breakfast at the O.S.H. in 1915 consisted of porridge "sometimes with lumps in it", bread and butter and eggs. Lunch, on a good day, was roast mutton, potatoes and veg. with various puddings: Ginger, Rice, Treacle Tart, and Rhubarb. For tea, bread and butter - extras such as jam, potted meat and treacle had to be bought with pocket money. Water had to be used sparingly, and at one stage the flow from their morning shower was cut down to a rather miserable trickle, far from exhilarating to stand under on cold winter mornings.

'Games' were considerably pushed aside by O.T.C. Parades. On three days a week there was no afternoon school. The course of the War was seldom a topic of conversation amongst the boys. At the Old School House they were a little better off for war news, though, as there was a day boy, the son of a local chemist, and a notorious rumour monger, who would burst in upon them from the outside world with such items as 'Admiral Jellicoe Drowned' or 'Twenty British Cruisers and Thirty-two Germans sunk'. Rumours of spies and airships were commonplace, and the housemaster was told to be prepared to evacuate his house at short notice. Boys were instructed to have their bicycles at the ready and to go west on side roads towards Kings Lynn.

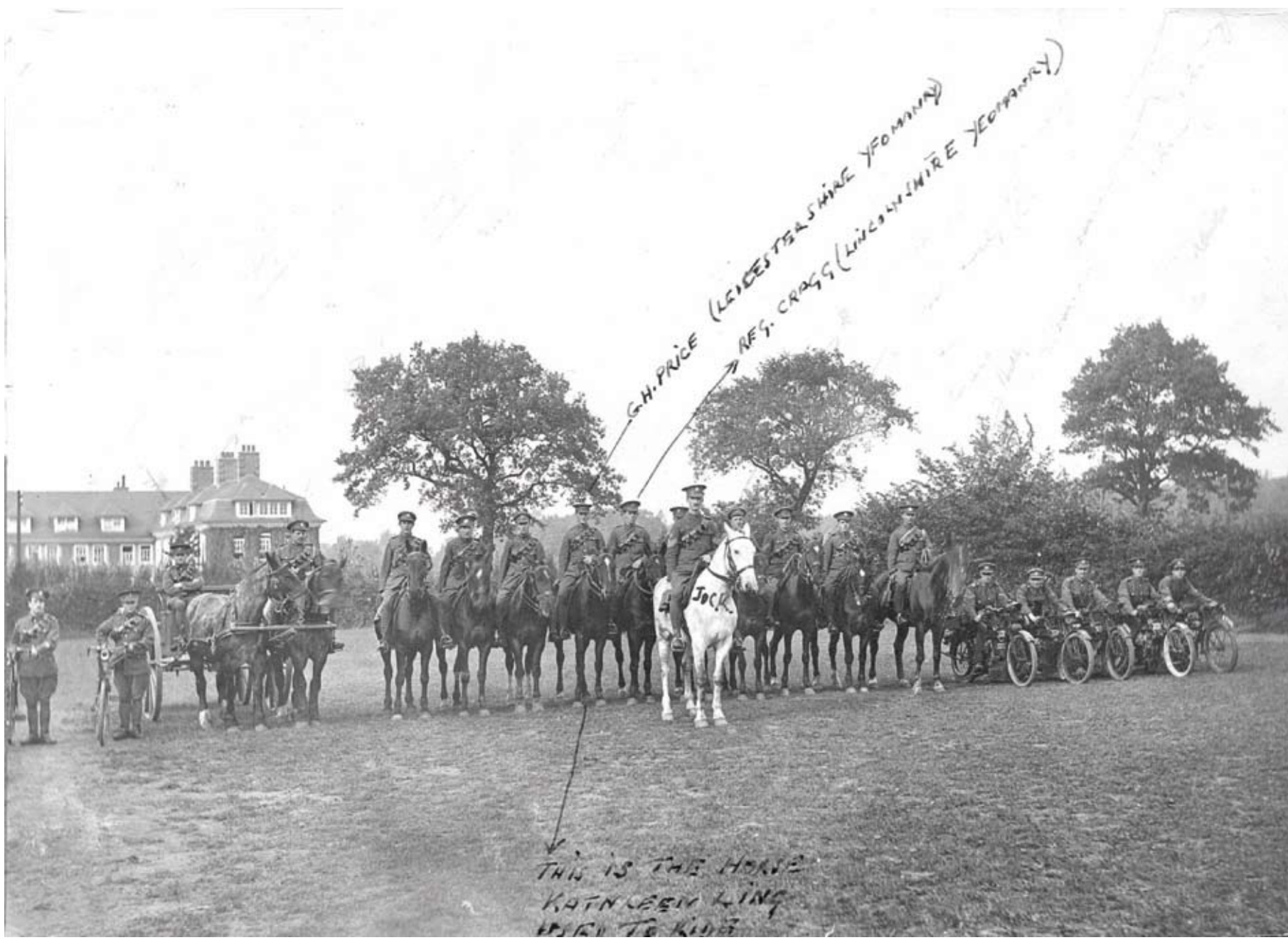
A detachment of motor cyclists from Brighton took up residence in OSH, followed by a battalion of Sussex Territorials. These were the forerunners of large numbers of soldiers to be garrisoned in Holt for the duration owing to fears of invasion along the north Norfolk coast. Wynne Willson became a special constable, patrolling the streets at night, checking bridges for explosives and helping to enforce the blackout. The first zeppelin raid took place in January of 1915; the first bombs to fall on English soil. The little boys of OSH were on the whole more excited than alarmed and eagerly explored craters left by bombs in the Glaven valley the next day, although some had to be gathered together around the fire and read stories to stop their tears.

When ordinary games were not possible, boys were formed into troops of scouts and taken on exercises.

### Women at war

With the men away fighting, women had to fill many roles at School apart from the usual ones of housemasters' wives and matrons who were kept busy making blackout curtains and dealing with food shortages. Wynne Willson tells a story of the first air-raid in 1915 which took place during prep – "*I remember a lady mistress, who had taken the place of one of the masters who had left for the war ... collected the boys round the fire and told them stories*". He also recalls how difficult travelling was as there were very few porters, mostly women, and feeling it rather unchivalrous to let a woman carry a heavy suitcase. Willson continues, "*Of course women were everywhere besides on the railways; they conducted omnibuses, drove lorries, and the very telegraph boys were of that sex.*"

Another story involves an epidemic in OSH when a nurse had to be brought in from a nearby nursing home to help matron cope with a house full of sick boys. Suspicion of strangers was rife, and, as the poor nurse had a slightly foreign sounding name and often talked to the soldiers billeted in the neighbourhood, she was the subject of some enquiry and her perfectly innocent letters were opened and scrutinised. Matron too was vulnerable to the paranoia, returning from a walk on Kelling Heath one evening with tales of seeing unmistakeable Morse signals that turned out to be merely the planet Venus behind the trees! Before the end of the War a terrible epidemic of flu broke out, but the School kept clear of it and as a precaution matron insisted the boys gargle, using some prescribed pink fluid twice a day. This gave rise to the story in the Kenwyn Magazine entitled 'The Ghost that Gargled'.

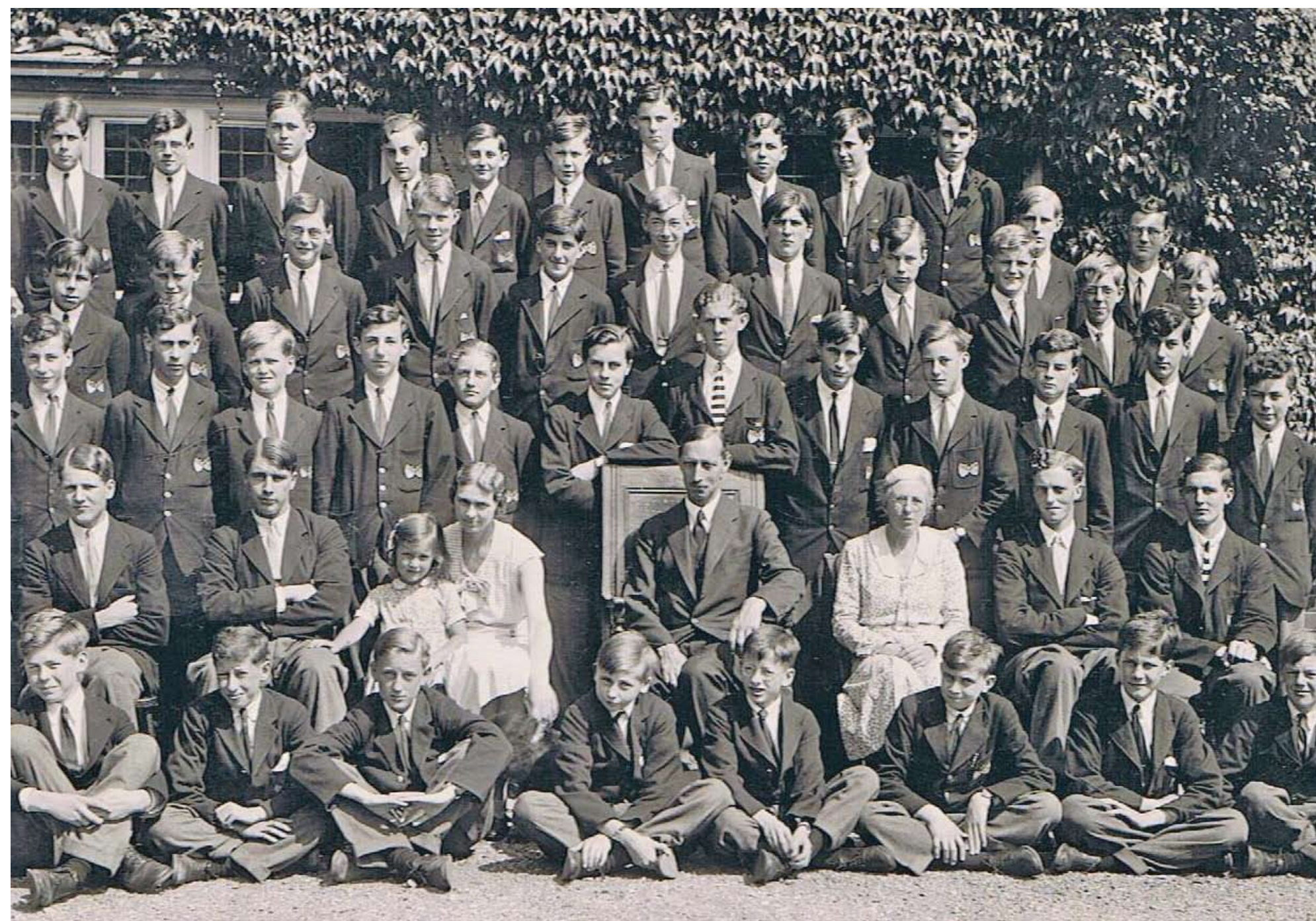


North Midland Mounted Brigade on the School playing fields in 1916.

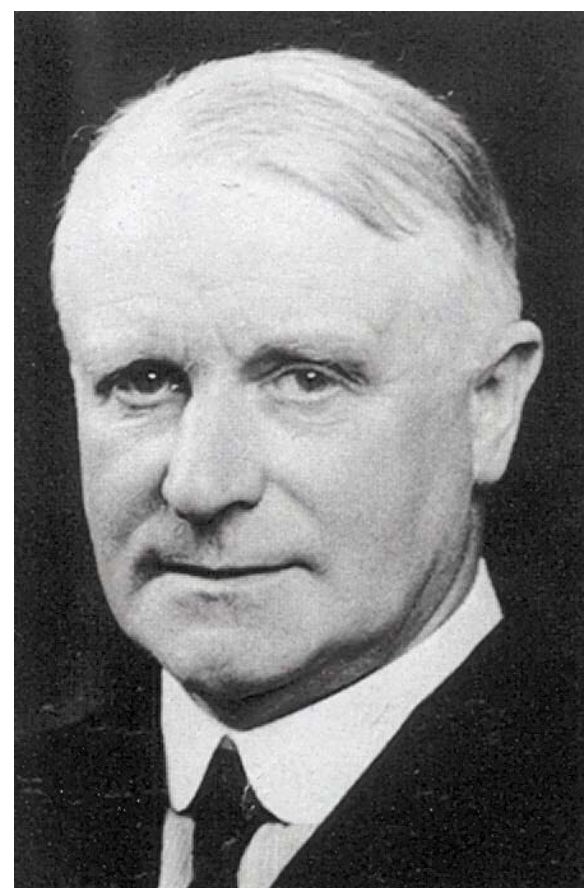
### Staff changes

OG Henry Kemys Bagnall-Oakeley (Kenwyn 1914-23) remembered staff being much reduced and 'pretty inadequate' leading to insufficient supervision and bullying. He went around with his friend Lennox Berkeley for protection. Wynne Willson noted that "The school staff was naturally depleted," adding that "some of the ersatz masters were queer birds." Two members of staff left straight away to join up: art master Captain Vivian Smith who was killed in 1916, and French teacher Lt. Col. 'Joe' Foster who was twice mentioned in despatches and returned to become second master, and later acting head.

J.R. Eccles, who wrote a book on his Hundred Terms at Gresham's School, recalls that he was considered too old for service when War broke out, but in June 1918 was called to Norwich for medical examination. He passed with grade I and was issued a railway voucher. Headmaster Howson, much agitated at the thought of losing such a valuable assistant master, immediately wired the Board of Education. On July 9th, as no



exemption had come through, Eccles set off for Norwich in a state of 'mild excitement'. On reaching the recruiting office he was informed that the necessary document had just arrived, and so returned to Holt and his 'more humdrum duties' somewhat crestfallen. Eccles describes his wartime duties patrolling the roads running out of Holt as a special constable in the early hours of the morning accompanying Mr Wynne Willson.



J. R. Eccles, Headmaster 1919-1935

### They became famous

The School brought Wynne Wilson in contact with interesting people like Geoffrey Winthrop Young of the Board of Education, the climber who went on climbing after losing a leg in the Great War. Sir William Bull, the Member for Paddington had a son at the Old School House. He said that "the father thoroughly looked his name."

### Lennox Berkeley

Howson's 1914-18

*One of the most influential composers of the mid-20th Century*

Arriving in 1914, Lennox was to endure four long years dominated by war, with OGs soon back from fighting at the front staying in his boarding house and reports of serving men and their deaths haunting the pages of the school magazine. He recalled having to take part in rifle practice and to learn about musketry. Boys were not obliged to join the cadet corps, but by Christmas 1914 it had become more important than games, and Lennox joined a boy scout troop instead, obtaining a second class certificate.

Lennox Berkeley (front row right) in a Howson's photograph of 1918.



### Tom Wintringham

Farfield 1912-15

*Gresham's original action man Communist*



Tom Wintringham in a Farfield photograph.

Already a radical thinker when he arrived at Gresham's, by the time Tom went up to Oxford he was responsive to the attractions of Communism, joining the party in the early 20s. His university career was postponed during the War when he joined the Royal Flying Corps, serving as a mechanic and a motor cycle despatch rider. In 1925 he was jailed for seditious libel, but went on to play a key role in the 1926 General Strike. A dinner party conversation in 1940 led to him training the newly formed Home Guard at Osterley Park. The death of this 'uniquely English revolutionary' went largely unnoticed by the press.