

The Britten Centenary Exhibition

Britten at Gresham's 1928-30



“Once upon a time there was a prep-school boy. He was called Britten minor, his initials were E.B., his age was nine and his locker was number seventeen. He was quite an ordinary little boy; he took his snake-belt to bed with him; he liked cricket; only quite liked football (altho he kicked a pretty corner); he adored mathematics, got on alright with history; was scared by Latin Unseen; he behaved fairly well, only ragged the recognised amount, so that his contacts with the cane or slipper were happily rare...

... There was one curious thing about this boy : he wrote music. His friends bore with it, his enemies kicked a bit but not for long (he was quite tough), the staff couldn't object if his work and games didn't suffer. He wrote lots of it, reams and reams of it.”

This charming quote, written by Britten himself in 1955, might easily be applied to the young man who arrived at Gresham's in 1928. Some of his biographers have claimed that he never really grew up, but clung to his childhood routines, humorous schoolboy language, and love of nursery food throughout his life. Indeed, a great deal of his music was written for, or about, children and centred on the theme of loss of innocence, and Britten still referred to himself in adulthood as 'E.B. minor'. This exhibition explores Britten's time at Gresham's, looking at what life was like here in the late 1920s, identifying his contemporaries and teachers, examining the overall experience as part of our reflections on his life to mark the centenary of his birth. It uses sources in the School's Archive such as school lists, scores, Gresham magazines, and pupil and staff reminiscences, as well as other material such as Britten's letters and diaries to tell the story of this short but significant episode in his life.

Benjamin Britten c. 1923 © C. Wilson, 1923
Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.org).

