

Benjamin Britten before Gresham’s

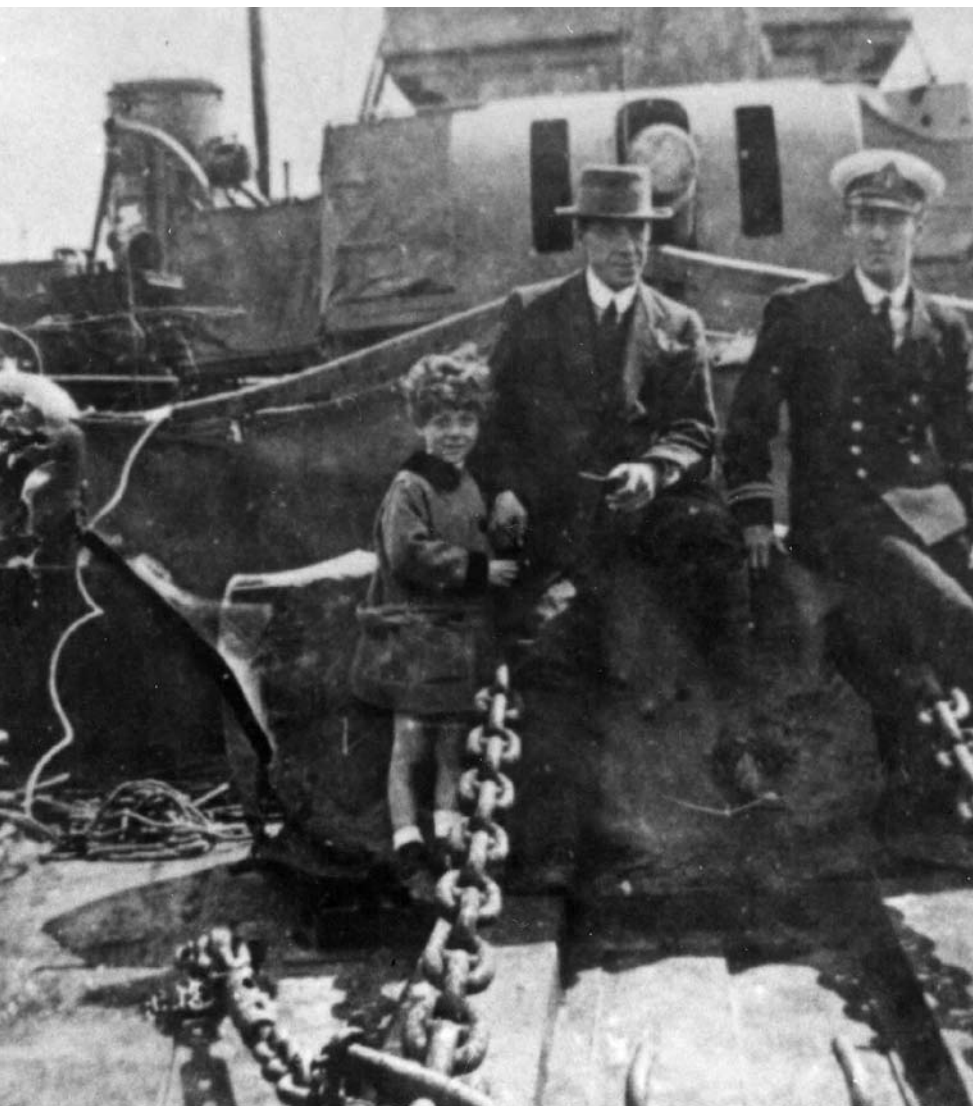
1: FAMILY LIFE AT LOWESTOFT



Miniature of Benjamin Britten as a young child, painted by Sarah Hockey 'Aunt Queenie' in about 1915. Sister Beth pays tribute to her charming little brother with his golden curls, remembering his sweet nature and how he was always a favourite with visiting ladies.. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.org).



Britten with his mother and elder siblings: Barbara (b.1901), Robert (b.1907), Beth (b.1909). 1914-15. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.org).



Britten with his father on the deck of HMS Burslem c.1921. The Britten's were a loving family, despite the usual quarrels and fights, and Beth recalls lots of laughter, especially associated with her father. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.org).

The Britten family

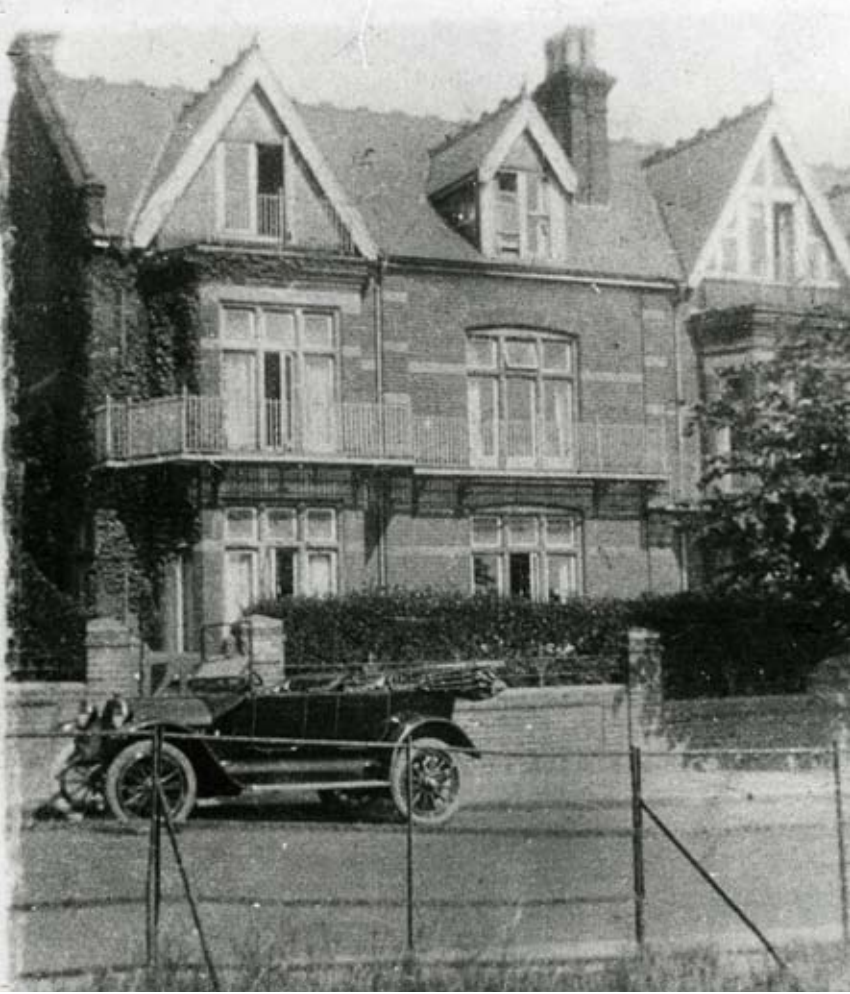
Edward Benjamin Britten was born in Lowestoft in 1913. His birthday, 22 November, fell on the feast day of St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music, a fact that delighted his mother who had high hopes for her fourth and youngest child. As well as being the fourth B in the family - Bobby, Barbara and Beth - Edith Britten soon decided that young Britten was to be the fourth B in the musical lineage - Bach, Beethoven and Brahms.

When Ben was three months old he contracted pneumonia and nearly died. The illness left him with a weak heart and prone to infections, a problem that continued throughout his life. The family doctor told them that he must be treated with great care and protected from any excessive strain or effort. Sister Barbara recalled him as being sensitive and a worrier, but also a tough little character. His father wanted Ben to live as normal a life as possible, but there was already a sense in the

family that his life had been saved for a reason, and his doting ambitious mother was determined that her 'ewe lamb' should live to fulfil that purpose.

Edith Britten was a keen amateur singer and pianist who was active in local music groups and her children were thoroughly immersed in music. Rehearsals of the Lowestoft Choral Society often took place at home and visiting professional soloists would stay with the family. Ben's interest in music was evident from an early age and he later recalled his fascination with the 'dots and dashes' he saw on the page and his efforts to recreate them on the piano. From the tender age of five little Beni was playing the piano with his mother and was soon attempting his own compositions such as the charmingly titled *Do you no that my Daddy has gone to London today?*

Although his dentist father **Robert** did not play, he very much enjoyed the music-making that was at the heart of family life. Known as 'Pop' he appears strict but kind and Britten often refers to his father's financial worries. There was no gramophone at home as this was considered a waste of money, but education was held to be extremely important and all of Britten's siblings attended private schools. On Sundays the family would attend church together in the morning and there would be tennis or badminton parties with local families later, or father would take them out in the car to visit friends at a nearby pub. He would always remember to buy sweets for his children on return from his Saturday golf matches!



Britten's childhood home, 21 Kirkley Cliff Road, Lowestoft. The ground floor of the house was his father's dental surgery. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.org).



The Britten siblings in nursery theatricals 1915 (Benjamin is cross-legged on front row) Nanny encouraged the Britten children to perform plays at Christmas for friends and relatives. They also took part in local productions such as *The Water Babies*, and Britten started writing his own plays aged six. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.org).



Britten playing the piano to his mother and sister Beth in their living room c.1921. Whenever 'Beni' wanted to practise, his older brother had to give way, which not surprisingly led to a certain amount of rivalry between the two. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.org).

Beside the seaside

From his bedroom window Ben could see the ever-changing sea, with its shipping and busy harbour, which was to remain an inspirational backdrop throughout his life. The Britten children were fascinated by their seaside surroundings of fishing boats, lifeboats, wrecks and cliff falls. They played on the beach, shrimping in rock pools, swimming in the sea, watched Punch & Judy shows on the pier with their nanny, and enjoyed all the donkey rides, funfairs, scenic railways and military bands that Lowestoft had to offer. In wartime the town became a naval base and suffered zeppelin raids, necessitating Robert Britten having the cellar fortified to protect his family, and the children would often spend holidays on Suffolk farms. These were the young Britten's 'familiar fields' of 'marsh and sand' which he often invoked in his later music including the tragic atmospheric opera about the life of fisherman Peter Grimes.

From his early attempts on the piano Ben soon progressed to lessons with Ethel Astle, one of the teachers at his pre-prep school, and viola lessons with mother's friend Audrey Alston. Britten

established a close and lasting friendship with the former, later writing to her that he could never say enough how much he benefitted from her teaching and acknowledging a "tremendous debt" to her. Soirees at home and concerts in Norwich and Lowestoft added to the boy's musical experience, and he would often listen to records at a local shop, Moorlings. In 1924 Britten saw Frank Bridge conduct his orchestral suite *The Sea* in Norwich, which proved to be a highly significant episode in his life, as his viola teacher organised a meeting between the influential composer and the talented young man who was to become his only pupil.



Britten on the beach with his mother around 1920. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.org).



Britten on the beach aged about seven or eight. A good swimmer from an early age, Ben spent a great deal of time on the beach with his family, often eating meals together in their beach hut, with dog Caesar in tow. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.org).



Britten and Frank Bridge dressed for tennis, 1930. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.org).

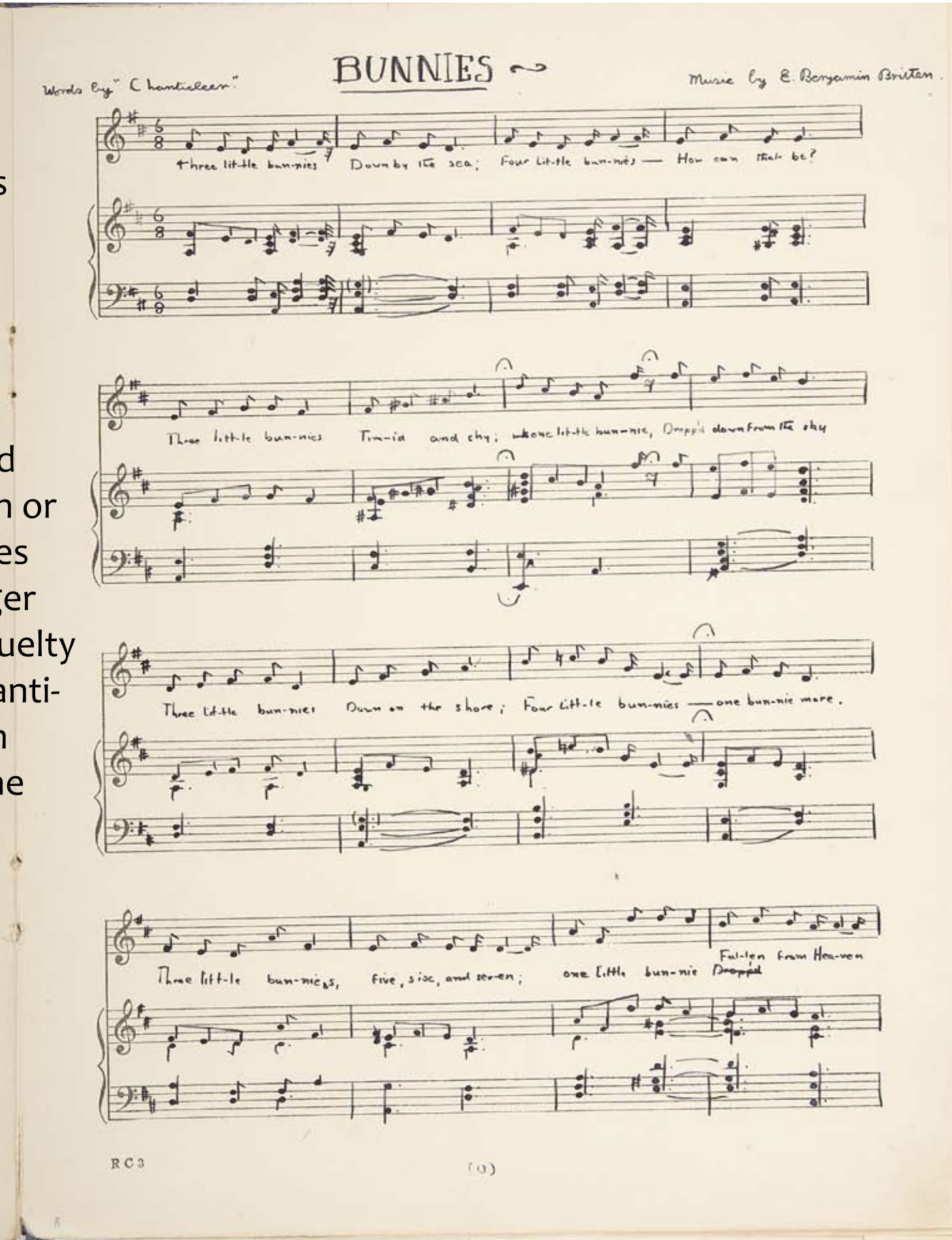
Schooling

From the age of eight Ben attended South Lodge Preparatory School, a short walk from his home. As his later recollections make clear, he enjoyed his time there, especially the cricket and other sports. Beth Britten was sure her brother could have been a sportsman or mathematician, the latter career favoured by his father and headmaster, but it was already clear that music was his destiny. In his last year at South Lodge Ben excelled and was crowned School captain, cricket captain, and Victor Ludorum or winner of games. As head prefect he took his duties very seriously, particularly where bullying of younger boys was concerned. His controversial essay on cruelty

against animals with its anti-war message earned him a nought and shocked the school authorities in this post-war era of national pride.



Britten at South Lodge Prep School, where according to his sister he excelled at everything, although some biographers have claimed his poor spelling bordered on dyslexia.



Manuscript for 'Bunnies' 1924. Between the ages of 5 and 18 Britten composed around 730 pieces of music. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.org).

Already producing musical compositions at an astonishing rate, Britten wanted to go to London to study at the Royal College at the age of fourteen, a wish shared by his mother, but his father and siblings were determined that he should earn his School Certificate as a sort of insurance against failure in the musical world. The Public School

Yearbook of the time stated that Gresham's was located "near Sheringham, in one of the healthiest and most bracing parts of England". This factor, and no doubt the beautiful surroundings of coast, woods and heaths, that were not dissimilar to those of home, would surely have appealed to the family. As sister Beth recalls, Gresham's was "in those days, considered to be an advanced school, although not particularly musical".

Britten won a music scholarship on entrance to Gresham's which was worth £30 a year, much to the delight of his family. However, he was allowed by the Headmaster to continue having piano and composition lessons in London, a reflection of the School's ethos of developing the individual and encouraging precocity.

On 21st September Ben wrote to his parents,

reporting his safe arrival at Gresham's the previous day. He said that he quite liked the place but felt "horribly strange and small." After a good night's sleep and meeting his study mates, however, the new boy was able to write that things did not seem quite so bad and to report that he had been included in the choir, despite his breaking voice! I am sure this experience must ring bells with many a new young boarder, but it was particularly acute for the delicate and sensitive Benjamin Britten who had always been told he was destined to be different.



Scene painted by Britten in 1922 *The British Fleet Sighted*. According to his sister Beth, Britten produced many beautiful and expressive drawings as a child and many thought he might become an artist. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.org).



Britten on the sea wall at Lowestoft about 1929. His love of the wild Suffolk coast and countryside continued throughout his life. © copyright Will R. Rose, c. 1929. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation(www.brittenpears.org).



Postcard of Big School, Gresham's School, Holt.

Gresham's School, Holt. 9