

Benjamin Britten at Gresham’s

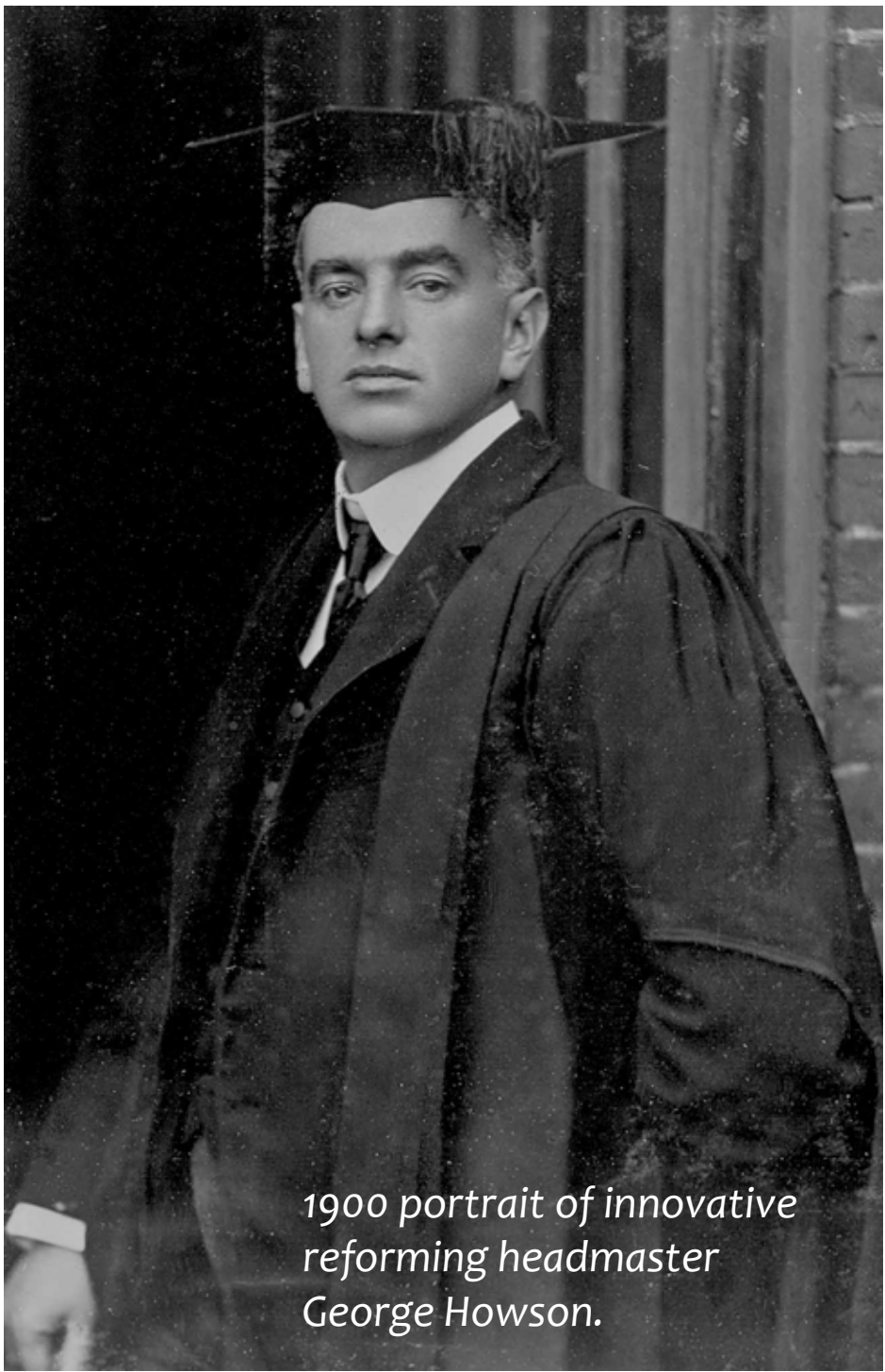
2: SCHOOL IN THE 1920s



Sir John Gresham had founded his School in 1555 and entrusted it to the care and governance of the Worshipful Company of Fishmongers. By the nineteenth century, it was still very much the local grammar school where merchants and tradesmen educated their sons, but nevertheless managed to send an impressive number of pupils to Cambridge. In 1900 a new headmaster was appointed and the School moved from the site of the Elizabethan manor house in Holt to that it occupies today and building work began for an entirely new and much larger establishment.

Howson’s new school

In his letter of application for the post of headmaster George Howson had outlined his vision for the School – “There seems like a great need in England of first-class secondary schools giving a purely modern education of the highest quality; based chiefly on linguistic discipline in English, French and German, going to a high point in Mathematics, teaching History, Geography and Literature searchingly, and disciplining every boy in natural sciences – such a type of liberal education being a natural avenue to intellectual interest in modern commerce and industry.”



Such a broad ranging curriculum, which also included music, theatre and the arts, was very rare in public schools in England at the time, the general pattern being the three ‘R’s, the classics and plenty of competitive sport. Pupils were encouraged to read widely and to study on their own in the well-stocked library, and to use the modern science labs for their own experiments. Howson’s own interests included travel, walking, fishing and photography, and he gave his pupils every opportunity to explore and enjoy the beautiful countryside on their doorstep.

PUPILS IN THE EARLY 1900s

Below: Howson, camera in hand, with a group of boys by the River Glaven.

Above: Boys enjoying the freedom to roam in nearby woods July 1903.

Above: Geoffrey Gwyther (left) and friend 1903.

Eccles continues the tradition



Portrait of charismatic headmaster J.R. Eccles.

J.R. Eccles became headmaster after Howson’s death in 1919. Like his predecessor, he too had a lifelong interest in the scientific world and made sure it had pride of place in the curriculum. Geography became a major subject, Biology was also more important, and the refusal to worship games remained. One OG recalled that at sixteen almost half of his lessons were study periods, leaving plenty of time to enjoy sailing, bird-watching and other outdoor activities. It is not surprising perhaps that such a School with its emphasis on science coupled with the freedom to roam inspired many of its pupils to develop a lifelong interest in natural history. By the 1920s and 30s there emerged a ‘distinguished stream’ of naturalists and biologists such as Sir Alan Hodgkin, David Lack, Bernard Gooch and G. Evelyn Hutchinson, as well as a number of OGs such as David Keith Lucas, Christopher Cockerell and Ian Proctor who became engineers and inventors.

The School in which a fourteen year old Britten found himself in 1928 was not only modern in its curriculum and attitude to sport, however, but was known for its liberalism where discipline was concerned. Howson made an early decision to have no printed rule book, instead explaining carefully and clearly to all new boys that he trusted them to behave honourably. Unlocked doors and tuck boxes and

unbarred study windows were the outward signs of his trust, and Howson gave exemplary leadership where punctuality and honesty were concerned. By the 1920s, this ‘honour’



Well lit and spacious first floor classrooms from the 1903 prospectus.

system, which required boys not to swear, smoke or commit indecency, was losing its effectiveness, but corporal punishment, which had been rare under Howson, ceased under Eccles.



The modern, well equipped physics laboratories in 1907.

Liberalism

Gresham’s uniquely liberal regime of self-discipline and encouragement of individuality made it extremely attractive to the parents of unusually gifted children. It is thought that Britten would have been seen by Eccles as a rare catch, and no doubt his parents were relieved that the School agreed to allow him to continue his music lessons in London which had begun earlier that year. Gresham’s register for the 1920s and early 30s reveals a large number of doctors, academics and businessmen who sent their sons to benefit from the modern education on offer. Eccles, like Howson, hotly pursued bright pupils from distinguished backgrounds, his ‘high-minded and straightforward philosophy’ commending itself to many artists such as William Nicholson and Liberal MPs like Lord Simon.

The youngest son of another Liberal MP, Sir Donald Maclean, was to become one of Gresham’s most notorious pupils. Donald, who excelled at School, winning colours for games and being appointed prefect, won a scholarship in modern languages to Cambridge in 1931 from where he was recruited into the Communist Party, leading to his famous flight to the USSR with Guy Burgess in the 1950s. Other pupils such as Tom Winttingham, James Klugman, and



Donald Maclean (Woodlands 1923-31) in a 1931 house photograph.

Bernard Floud were drawn into the ranks of Communist sympathisers at university, and there has been much debate on the importance of the political atmosphere and formative influences at Gresham’s in this period.

Eccles himself made no secret of his Liberal politics, and many of his staff and pupils were anti-establishment, rather unusually for such a school both then and now. It has been claimed that the seeds of the ‘radical mind-set’ which became an important part of Britten’s life were nurtured at Gresham’s. He refused to join the cadet corps on principle, and was instead allowed to practice at the cricket nets with like-minded pupils such as Gerald Holtom who went on to design the peace symbol for the CND. Britten’s hatred of the use of force and violence continued into his adult life and he became a conscientious objector in 1941.



Gerald Holtom (1924-31) designing the peace symbol. Holtom won several prizes for art at School and went on to study at the Royal College. He is known for his design of the logo for the newly formed Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in 1958 which became an international peace symbol.

Music at Gresham’s

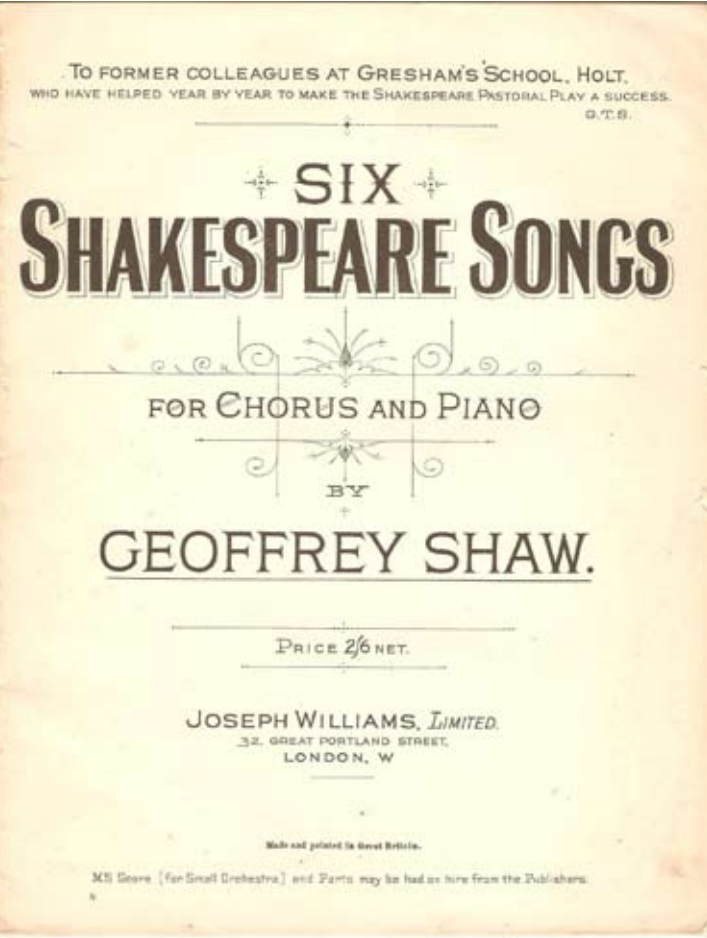
In this progressive atmosphere with its expansive curriculum and gifted pupils young



Influential music master Geoffrey Shaw. When Shaw left in 1910, the school magazine recognised that during his time here he had “taught us what is best in music”.

Britten was able to concentrate on developing his musical talents further and to study for his School Certificate. Despite Beth Britten’s assertion that Gresham’s was not known to be particularly musical, by 1928 pupils were being exposed to a wide range of performances and lectures on the subject given by nationally respected practitioners. Music had in fact been very important in the School under Howson and there were regular concerts and recitals by staff and boys in Big School. It was also central to the annual Shakespeare play performed in a delightful theatre in the woods from 1902. A small choir had existed since 1900, and in 1906 the ‘long expected and much talked of’ orchestra made its debut.

New music master **Geoffrey Shaw** immediately began to build on the musical interest that was already prevalent at the school using his impressive array of connections. Visiting performers and lecturers at this time included Harry Plunkett Green, a close friend of Elgar, Geoffrey’s brother Martin, an important figure in choral music, and Cecil Sharp, who has been described as the founding father of the English



Score for Six Shakespeare Songs written by Geoffrey Shaw in 1912.

folk song revival to which Britten later contributed. As a composer, Geoffrey Shaw played a vital part in the establishment of the annual Shakespeare play, writing all the incidental music and songs for both choir and orchestra, a tradition which continued for many years.

One particularly gifted pupil of Shaw, Heathcote Statham, became organist at Norwich Cathedral and conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra during World War Two. Geoffrey Gwyther became a singer, actor and songwriter of some repute and was well known for his rich baritone voice. Perhaps his finest achievement was a musical entitled *Patricia* which achieved 160 West End performances at Her Majesty’s Theatre between 1924-5. The Shaw legacy of excellence was continued by his successor **Walter Gcreatorex** who actively encouraged the performance of both Shaws’ music at the School. G.T. Shaw returned in 1920 to give a lecture on the Public School Hymn Book which he had co-edited and published the year before.



Walter Gcreatorex director of music during Britten's time.

In the 1920s the concerts continued with a wider range of composers than ever before. The first school performance of Handel’s *Messiah* was conducted by Gcreatorex in 1920,

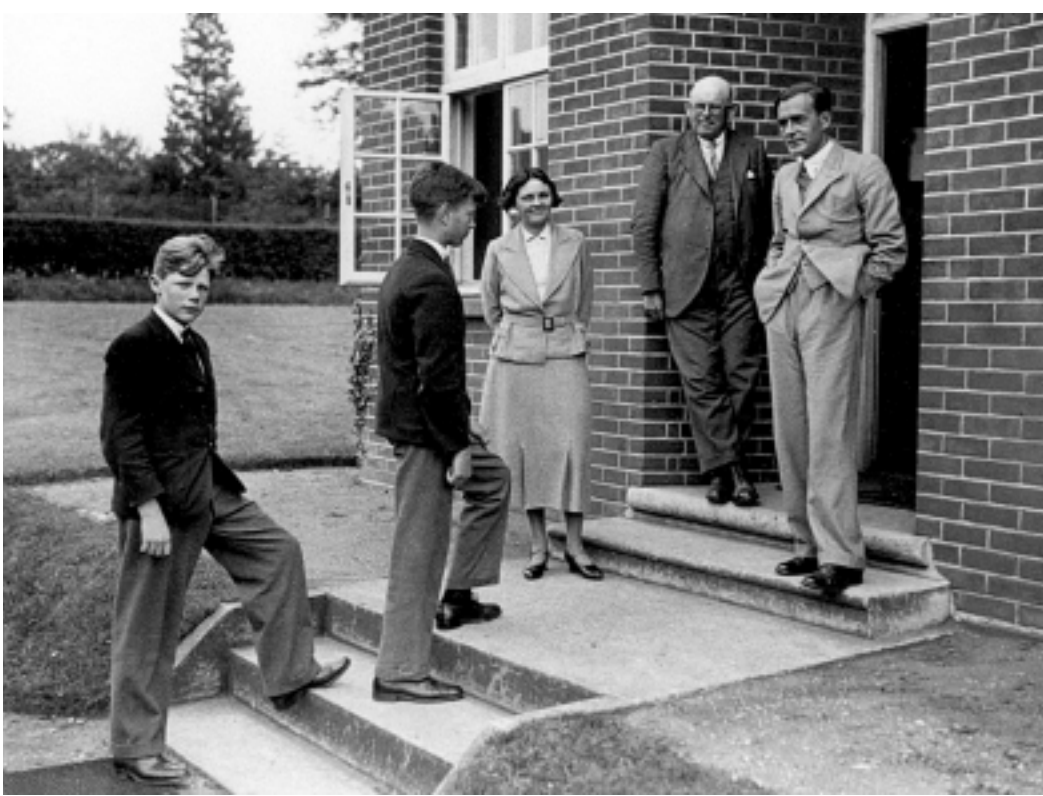


Britten and Lennox Berkeley (Howson’s 1914-18) enjoying a picnic on the beach in 1961. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.org).

and another concert dealt with music by entirely ‘modern’ composers including Debussy, John Ireland, Ravel, and Frank Bridge. Lennox Berkeley, who left in 1918, went on to become one of the foremost English composers of the twentieth century, and after meeting Britten in 1936, became the dedicatee of his piano concerto. Berkeley in turn dedicated an orchestral piece to Britten before they started working together on composition projects. Richard Austin, who left in 1921, went on to forge a remarkable musical career, working with giants such as Stravinsky and Rachmaninov, before becoming professor of music at the Royal College.

The School continued to attract top musical names of the day to its new Saturday Music series, and in October 1921, one of the best known English pianists Myra Hess visited to give a recital. The Public School Yearbook of the time suggested that music was being “encouraged in every possible way”, and in a speech in 1923 Eccles stressed the importance of the subject for encourag ing earnest study, team spirit and the formation of character. An article on Gresham’s that appeared in *The Times Educational Supplement* in the same year stated simply that “The school is becoming famous for its musicians and indeed for its individual musicians.”

In 1925 the new Music Rooms were completed and were officially opened in the summer term. They comprised four practise rooms, three lesson rooms including a large ensemble space and a music library. The rooms were equipped with seven pianos, including three new instruments, which must have made a very positive impact on the already extensive musical activities. The School now had three full-time music staff, perhaps reflecting the reputation it had gained. It was certainly no accident of fate that the young Britten with his exceptional talent and sensitive nature found himself at such a school as liberal, humanitarian and cultured as Gresham’s in 1928.



The music department and staff in the 1920s.

Review and programme for the concert given by Myra Hess in October 1921.

MISS MYRA HESS.

A feast, a veritable feast of music, was provided for us when Miss Myra Hess gave a Pianforte Recital on October 21st. We need hardly comment on her flawless technique: such, indeed, is the necessary equipment of all great musicians. Rather would we dwell on her consummate musicianship, which, unlike perfect technique, is rare—all too rare—in the musical world of to-day. Her programme was eclectic, ringing over the whole gamut of musical literature for the Pianforte. Scarlatti, Bach, Franck, Schumann, Brahms, Chopin, Debussy — all these great composers passed before us and gave us their message. The spirit of music brooded over us, and we forgot Miss Hess, until she released us from the magical spell of her playing. If we would bestow it on her. But we think the summit of perfection is reached when a great musician, disdaining to draw attention to herself by any

trick or mannerism, allows the music to come first and foremost and yet presents it to us with all possible art and skill. Thus it was with Miss Hess, and we give her our hearty thanks for the rich treat she provided for us. We felt greatly honoured by the presence of such a distinguished musician in our midst. We shall not forget it.

PROGRAMME.

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| SCARLATTI | Three Sonatas. C min., D min., C maj. |
| BACH | Prelude and Fugue, B flat maj., Book I. |
| CEsar FRANCK | Prelude from Prelude, Aria and Finale. |
| SCHUMANN | L'apillon. |
| BRAMHs | Rhapsodie in E flat, op., 119. |
| DEBUSSY | Three Preludes
La Cathédrale engloutie.
La fille aux cheveux de lin.
Minstrels. |
| CHOPIN | Nocturne in C minor.
Ballade in A flat.
Etudes op. 10, no. 5.
op. 25, no. 1. |

from The Gresham (school magazine).