Benjamin Britten at Gresham's

3: DAILY LIFE AT SCHOOL

Teaching

The academic system at Gresham's at this time was quite different to the norms of most British schools. On arrival boys were placed in forms and sets depending on their standard in the main subjects and not by age. Promotion from one form to another depended solely on achievement. There were three third forms, three fourth forms and three fifth forms. A boy could spend up to three years in each of these levels, or, at the other extreme, proceed through all three in three years, leaving a couple of years to prepare him for Oxford or Cambridge.

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Timetable from Britten's diary Michaelmas 1928. Image

this lack of academic success, real or imagined.

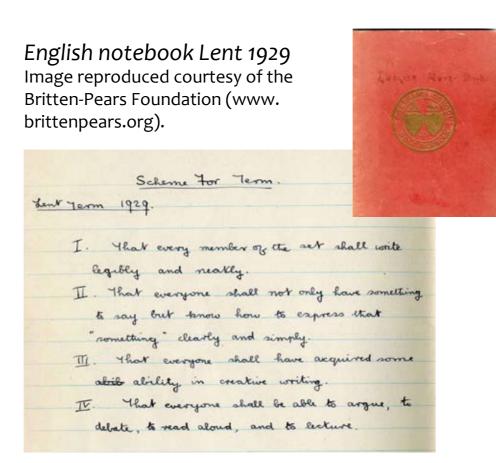
reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears. five credits in his School Certificate exams from his second and third sets in the fifth form was a great achievement, and one that took him by surprise. The accolades he won for his music never seemed to compensate in his own mind for

up by working extra hard.

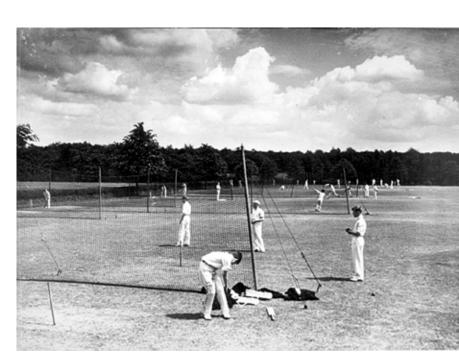
Despite Ben's constant worries about his academic success, his reports give the impression that he was seen as hard working and making progress. Only in Geography is his performance "disappointing", and he is praised for his clear thinking in Maths and having an instinct for style in English. It is perhaps ironic that his viola teacher comments that he needs to take more care, adding that when his intonation improves he will be a very useful player. Ben finds Physics lessons with the headmaster "terrifying" but Eccles in turn finds Ben a "delightful

and satisfactory boy" overall. He claims to "detest" French lessons,

dropping manual training in 1929 to concentrate instead on his German



Games and exercise



Evening nets.

Ben's childhood love of sport continued at Gresham's, despite it having little importance here compared to other public schools. It has no mention in his first timetable, but merits almost daily comment in his diaries, not necessarily for organised games but more often of informal or practice sessions of tennis or cricket. In July 1929 he plays in a house tennis tournament, recording that he finished "about third".

When he arrived at Gresham's for the Michaelmas (Autumn)

term in 1928 Ben was placed in the middle third form, and after

one term was promoted to the lower fourth. He refers to this

in his diary as a double promotion. Regular absences due to

ill health probably account for his spending four terms in the

fourth form, but he always seems to have been able to catch

Within each form the main subjects were all setted. To achieve

Watching house matches was compulsory, and Ben appears to take great interest in the achievements of his house, Farfield. He writes with pride to his parents that he had been selected for the house first cricket XI in July 1930. Whilst appearing to enjoy hockey, Ben does not seem to have been

particularly good at it initially, writing that he was sworn at by the exasperated teacher during one early game! Ben is frequently off games owing to illness, sometimes being allowed out for walks instead. Despite opting out of Corps fairly quickly, Ben enjoys shooting on the range, and often mentions games of table tennis in his diaries and letters.

Music

Gresham's provided Ben with a "constant feast of music" throughout his two years here. There was an orchestra, a military band, a good music library, and plenty of facilities for practice, so he was able to continue

with the time-consuming musical regime that he was used to. He was to develop such a formidable technique on the piano that as an adult he never needed to practice anything he had to play. In Ben's first term the series of Saturday evening concerts was dedicated to the three famous Bs, and four times in his second year he played in concerts, always heard by his parents who came up from Suffolk and stayed at The Feathers in Holt afterwards. These school concerts gave Ben the first proper platform for his music, giving him confidence to perform and also making the school community take note of his genius.

Each performance was progressively more demanding - first he played the viola in trios by Mozart and Brahms, then came the first performance of one of his own works, a

SATURDAY MUSIC.

We knew that Britten was a composer, but this was our first opportunity of hearing any of his work. He contributed a Pianoforte Trio in one movement called "Bagatelle," in which he played the Viola part. Written in a modern idiom, the Trio shows that Britten has already advanced a considerable distance in the technique of composition. He should go far and we take this opportunity of wishing him every success in the future. Review of an early recital from The Gresham magazine,

17th Feb. 1929 – "I do frightfully badly in Geography in the morning...

19th Feb. 1929 – "I am astounded at my

I do as badly as possible in all subjects."

ridiculousness. I cannot get over it. Today

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List of works borrowed from the School music lib-

rary, Michaelmas Term 1929 Image reproduced courtesy

of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.org).

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From diaries and letters written at school

21st May 1929 – "I seem to be doing very badly this term.

19th June 1929 – "How I shall pass the School Certificate next summer I don't know."

10th July 1929 – "the thing that is so awful about school, the monstrous routine, broken occasionally by tennis. and music."

OXFORD BOOK

Wyndham Birch music prize won by

Britten in 1930. Image reproduced courtesy o

the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.

Wyndham Birch

Prize awarded

E. B. Britten

Bagatelle for violin, viola and piano, and finally, in the last concert of his school career, he played two show stopping pieces on the piano to great accord. Rev Frank Field, the retiring school chaplain, wrote of this last performance in The Gresham – "the apex of the concert, well placed in the centre of the programme, was the playing of Britten. We have had fine pianists in the School ... but it is no slight to any of them to place Britten above them all."

In Ben's case a highly unusual arrangement, even for Gresham's was made for him to continue having composition lessons with Frank Bridge in London that had begun in the previous January, as well as piano lessons with Harold Samuel. In the event the planned lessons seldom took place and he only went to London three times in the next

two years. These lessons had a great effect on Ben, pushing him to achieve high standards, a debt he later acknowledged.

in the choir for his first term only, his breaking voice preventing further inclusion.



The School Band in 1929 Wakeham album

Part of the same

Score of 'O, Fly not Pleasure' with words by

W.S. Blunt composed July 1930, dedicated to

S.M. Courthauld (Woodlands 1926-30). Image re

brittenpears.org).

The only music lessons Ben had at Gresham's were for

viola with Miss Chapman, but he often refers to practice sessions and discussions with other staff members from whom he borrows books and records. Viola lessons are usually described as being "quite nice" and "fun", but often in rather scathing terms as being "quite entertaining" and not geared towards making much progress. He plays various instruments in the school orchestra which he also finds great fun, but is equally rude about the general standard of the players, finding them "dull" and "irritating". He sings

During his two years at Gresham's Ben composed 160 pieces of music, a list which includes fragments as well as completed works. Unlike many composers who reject their juvenilia in later life, Britten kept the enormous

number of manuscripts of his youthful music and treasured them, concealed behind a curtain next to his piano at home. It has been described as "a remarkable body of work, almost unique, for one so young." Despite this huge output, Ben complains constantly in his diary of having insufficient time for music in general, finding time spent on school work and other activities distracting. He also complains of the poor piano he has to practice on, finding it "the most frightful instrument it has ever been my misfortune to play on". However, his diaries are also full of references to the happy times he spent in the music room playing duets or trios with friends and staff practising for the many recitals he took part in or playing records on the gramophone.

Social life

When not at lessons or practising his music Ben had many social and cultural opportunities at Gresham's to entertain him. He writes of interesting lectures on gypsies, birds, and tea produced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www. planting, as well as a talk on Venice with lantern slides.

Each of the four boarding houses put on a play in the Michaelmas Term. Ben recalls the chaos in his own house during practices, when all the study furniture was commandeered, and enjoyed watching Howson's perform You Never Can Tell in December 1929. There were



Gresham's Contingent (OTC) at the Mytchett Farm Camp August 1923. Gerald Holtom (1924-31) remembers marching alongside a reluctant Britten before they opted out of Corps – "His usual enigmatic smile twinkled as he marched deliberately not on the beat but after the beat. This angered the company sergeant major ... "

School and house debates in which boys and staff participated, discussing subjects such as 'England is a free country', which Ben records was lost by ten votes.

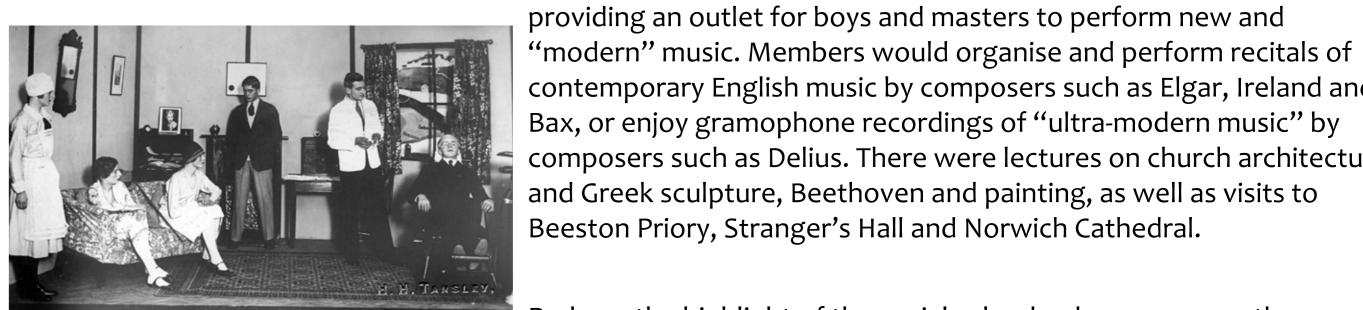
Gresham's also ran many clubs and societies such as the Sociological Society, founded in 1921, which broadened the minds of pupils through political discussion and taking them on visits to factories in Norwich. Described as "a meeting of the keener political spirits of the School", the group was formed with the aim of studying the society,



Love's Labour's Lost performed in the open-air theatre June 1929.

politics and economy of the day, inviting outside speakers to give lectures on subjects such as Nationalism in India, world unrest and Free Trade.

In 1922 the Society of Arts was founded and was no doubt a significant movement within the School, with around 100 members, including pupils such as W.H. Auden and attracting professional musicians to play here, providing an outlet for boys and masters to perform new and



Scene from Howson's play You Never Can Tell, December 1929.

contemporary English music by composers such as Elgar, Ireland and Bax, or enjoy gramophone recordings of "ultra-modern music" by composers such as Delius. There were lectures on church architecture and Greek sculpture, Beethoven and painting, as well as visits to Beeston Priory, Stranger's Hall and Norwich Cathedral.

Perhaps the highlight of the social calendar, however, was the annual speech day and prize giving at the end of term which took place in the outdoor Theatre in the Woods. Proceedings were rounded off with the performance of a Shakespeare play accompanied by the school orchestra. Ben records that the play was

performed over three days, firstly for Holt people, secondly for a wider Norfolk audience, and lastly for pupils and parents. The production of Love's Labour's Lost in June 1929 was much praised in The Gresham magazine,

not least for overcoming the difficulties of performing it in a wood with "fledgings" as actors. Ben writes that both play and music have gone quite well and were much enjoyed by his parents. He is more critical of the orchestra's performance for the 1930 production of The Merchant of Venice, however, saying the play went well apart from the musical accompaniment which went very badly. The magazine reviewer seems more impressed, though, commenting that "The sound of music is always beautiful among the trees; and what was given us on this occasion had in it variety, yet a total harmony."



Speech Day in 1931 with headmaster Eccles giving his annual address.

According to Colonel Paul Harris who shared a study with Ben in Farfield, Britten's idea for an opera of A Midsummer Night's Dream (1960) came from a school production in the Theatre in the Woods. While waiting backstage, Harris with drum, Britten with trumpet, Ben turned to Paul and said "This would make a good opera!" Years later, Harris met Britten at a performance of his opera and remembered "standing behind a bush at the back of the stage when the opera was conceived!" It is perhaps fitting that after so many years of music being inspired by Shakespeare at Gresham's, its most famous musical son found such success with his own Shakespeare composition.

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Report for Summer term 1930. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.org).