

Benjamin Britten at Gresham’s

4: THE LIFE OF A BOARDER



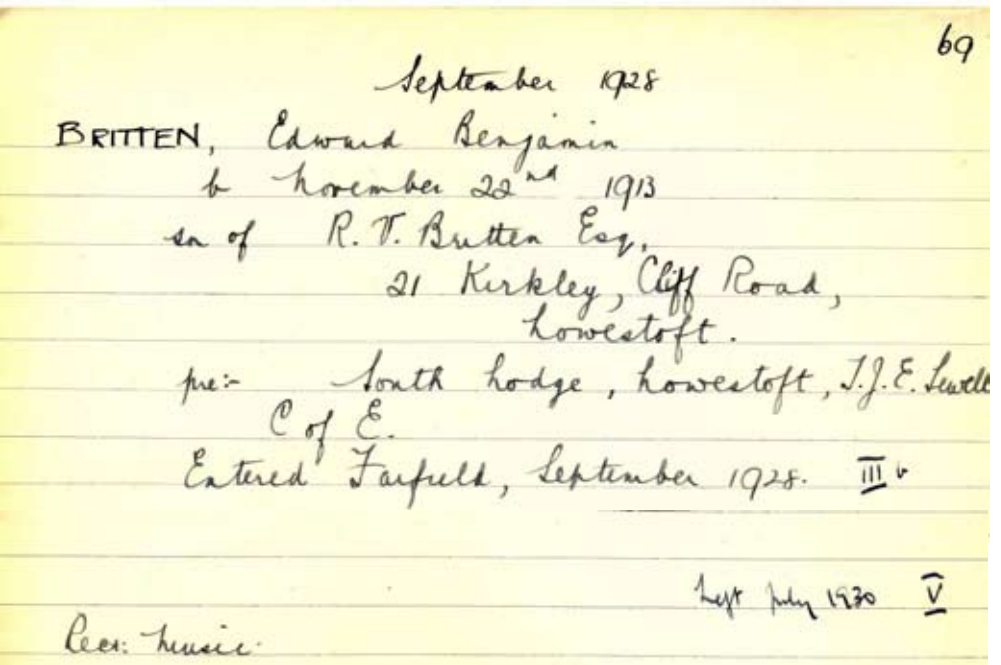
Britten from a 1929 Farfield House photograph. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.britten-pears.org).

Ben was in Farfield House, the third senior house to be built at Gresham’s. By 1905 numbers of pupils had reached 150 and plans for a new house to accommodate 44 boys were drawn up by Chatfeild Clarke, the architect of Howson’s and Big School. Farfield was opened in 1911 and although Edwardian in character, the architecture reflected earlier styles.



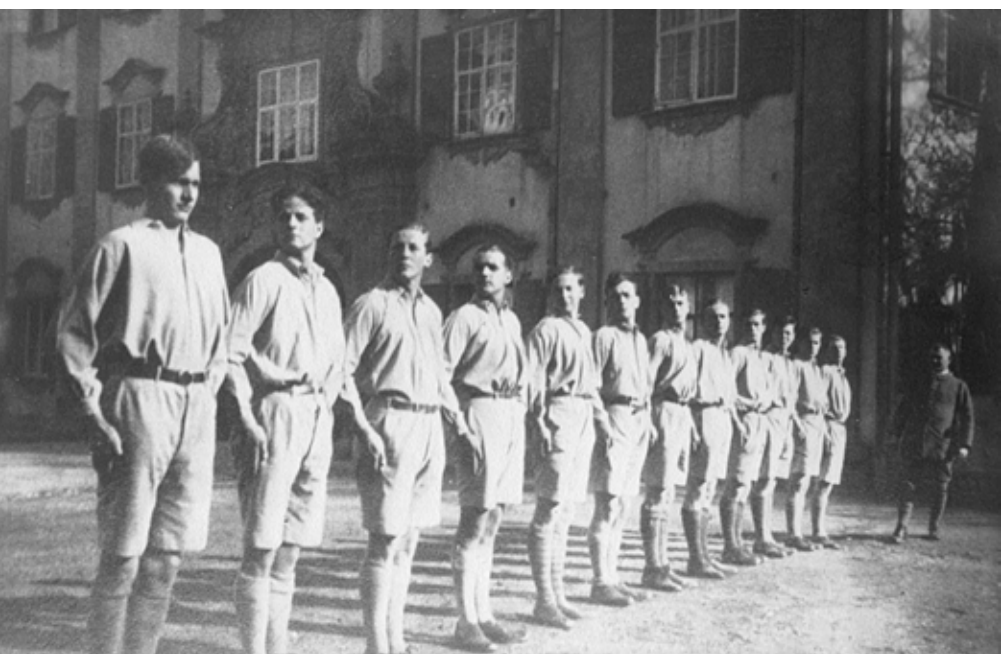
Postcard of Farfield House.

Edward Robertson took over the helm at Farfield in 1920. Pupils fondly remembered the Sunday afternoon walks he led to Kelling Heath and Weybourne. During the holidays he visited boys at home, throwing himself into family activities with great enthusiasm. Robertson’s desk drawers were full of notes, observations and plans for the house, and before he died of a long illness in 1929, he wrote “If anything of me lives on earth after my departure, it must be found in Farfield boys, and in those who have left.”



Farfield House register entry, Michaelmas 1928.

though, impressing him with his ‘marvellous’ lectures and contributions to the debating society, and leading an enjoyable choir holiday to the Broads in July 1929.



‘Boys must learn group discipline’ from an album showcasing the Salem School visited by a group of Gresham’s pupils in the 1920s.

Farfield’s new housemaster was a “fiery little Irishman” George Thompson, known as ‘Tommer’, whose physical disabilities in no way impeded his success. Excellent maths teacher and organiser of School Certificate exams, Thompson was a housemaster for sixteen years, and in organising the many tasks that make up that role he was at his best. He took a keen interest in everything concerning his house, and was always ready to ‘aid and abet’ his boys in all their activities. Modest, kind and courteous in manner, he soon gained their cooperation and ready response. Many successful house plays have been performed in the Farfield Auditorium which was his brainchild.

Ben seems to have made a real connection with the Thompsons, who no doubt realised that he was homesick and in need of some kindness. Mrs T. makes frequent visits to Ben in the sickroom, bringing jigsaws and records, and playing patience with him. On particularly cold days the sickly pupil is allowed to sit by their drawing room fire, and he recalls long talks with Mr T. who led the second violins in the orchestra and shared his love of music. In his diary entry for 6th October 1929 Ben writes of



George Thompson, from a 1930s staff photograph.

No. required	No. in stock	ARTICLES	No. required	No. in stock
1	1	White shirt (long)	1	1
2	2	White shirt (short)	2	2
3	3	White shirt (long)	3	3
4	4	White shirt (short)	4	4
5	5	White shirt (long)	5	5
6	6	White shirt (short)	6	6
7	7	White shirt (long)	7	7
8	8	White shirt (short)	8	8
9	9	White shirt (long)	9	9
10	10	White shirt (short)	10	10
11	11	White shirt (long)	11	11
12	12	White shirt (short)	12	12
13	13	White shirt (long)	13	13
14	14	White shirt (short)	14	14
15	15	White shirt (long)	15	15
16	16	White shirt (short)	16	16
17	17	White shirt (long)	17	17
18	18	White shirt (short)	18	18
19	19	White shirt (long)	19	19
20	20	White shirt (short)	20	20
21	21	White shirt (long)	21	21
22	22	White shirt (short)	22	22
23	23	White shirt (long)	23	23
24	24	White shirt (short)	24	24
25	25	White shirt (long)	25	25
26	26	White shirt (short)	26	26
27	27	White shirt (long)	27	27
28	28	White shirt (short)	28	28
29	29	White shirt (long)	29	29
30	30	White shirt (short)	30	30
31	31	White shirt (long)	31	31
32	32	White shirt (short)	32	32
33	33	White shirt (long)	33	33
34	34	White shirt (short)	34	34
35	35	White shirt (long)	35	35
36	36	White shirt (short)	36	36
37	37	White shirt (long)	37	37
38	38	White shirt (short)	38	38
39	39	White shirt (long)	39	39
40	40	White shirt (short)	40	40
41	41	White shirt (long)	41	41
42	42	White shirt (short)	42	42
43	43	White shirt (long)	43	43
44	44	White shirt (short)	44	44
45	45	White shirt (long)	45	45
46	46	White shirt (short)	46	46
47	47	White shirt (long)	47	47
48	48	White shirt (short)	48	48
49	49	White shirt (long)	49	49
50	50	White shirt (short)	50	50
51	51	White shirt (long)	51	51
52	52	White shirt (short)	52	52
53	53	White shirt (long)	53	53
54	54	White shirt (short)	54	54
55	55	White shirt (long)	55	55
56	56	White shirt (short)	56	56
57	57	White shirt (long)	57	57
58	58	White shirt (short)	58	58
59	59	White shirt (long)	59	59
60	60	White shirt (short)	60	60
61	61	White shirt (long)	61	61
62	62	White shirt (short)	62	62
63	63	White shirt (long)	63	63
64	64	White shirt (short)	64	64
65	65	White shirt (long)	65	65
66	66	White shirt (short)	66	66
67	67	White shirt (long)	67	67
68	68	White shirt (short)	68	68
69	69	White shirt (long)	69	69
70	70	White shirt (short)	70	70
71	71	White shirt (long)	71	71
72	72	White shirt (short)	72	72
73	73	White shirt (long)	73	73
74	74	White shirt (short)	74	74
75	75	White shirt (long)	75	75
76	76	White shirt (short)	76	76
77	77	White shirt (long)	77	77
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79	79	White shirt (long)	79	79
80	80	White shirt (short)	80	80
81	81	White shirt (long)	81	81
82	82	White shirt (short)	82	82
83	83	White shirt (long)	83	83
84	84	White shirt (short)	84	84
85	85	White shirt (long)	85	85
86	86	White shirt (short)	86	86
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92	92	White shirt (short)	92	92
93	93	White shirt (long)	93	93
94	94	White shirt (short)	94	94
95	95	White shirt (long)	95	95
96	96	White shirt (short)	96	96
97	97	White shirt (long)	97	97
98	98	White shirt (short)	98	98
99	99	White shirt (long)	99	99
100	100	White shirt (short)	100	100

Britten’s Farfield clothing list 1930. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.britten-pears.org).

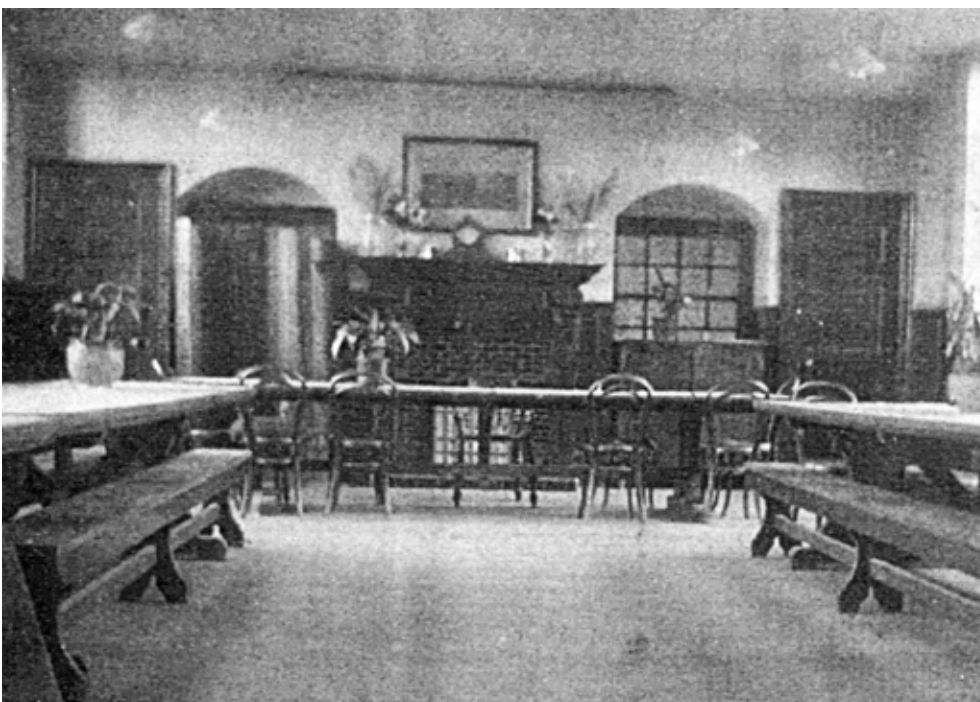
the “glorious time” he has had listening to a concert on the Thompson’s wireless in great comfort. He enjoyed every moment, despite some ‘atmospherics’ and the occasional “burst of conversation” from the chatty Mrs T.

Life in Farfield

In an article entitled ‘My Schooldays’ one OG remembered a somewhat austere Farfield at this time. Junior boys were four to a study. Each had a table, chair, and three shelves. An easy chair could be purchased from the previous occupant. Two large pipes ran round the walls but were never warm. Ben often complains of the cold in letters home, asking that his parents excuse his untidy writing owing to his hands being so cold and stiff. Boys brought curtains to hang over the bare varnished wood of the walls. Tuck boxes were kept beside the chairs, but contained little apart from biscuits and fruit, as treats such as sweets and cakes were not allowed. Boys had to buy their own jam and cornflakes for breakfast and kept these in their tuck boxes. Ben often thanks his mother in his letters home for gifts of jam, socks, grapes, honey, etc.



A typical study from the 1903 prospectus.



Farfield dining hall in the 1920s.

Ben was appointed bell fag in June 1929, a chore he found quite enjoyable, except for fearing the wrath of J.R. Eccles if he was late.

Farfield had two dormitories, one for seniors, one for juniors. Twelve partitioned cubicles ran down either side of the room. Each had a window which had to be open six inches at the top, summer or winter. Permission to close a window was only forthcoming in heavy rain or snow. Each boy had an iron bedstead, with mattress, one pillow and two blankets. As the dorms were never warm,



A typical dormitory, from the 1903 prospectus.

clothes would be piled on top of the bedclothes at night. Ben writes in May 1930 of his new dorm which is a “gigantic improvement” on the previous one, despite his hard lumpy bed. He talks of being fascinated by the rhythm of two boys snoring in harmony in spite of being kept awake by it for some time.

Changing rooms for each dorm had eight basins, four showers and four baths. Water in the showers was cold, but they were compulsory every morning. A bath was a once-a-week luxury. They were filled once, with the poor juniors enduring cold and filthy water. There were no indoor toilets, but a block outside the back door known as the ‘topos’, Greek for ‘the place’. Farfield had two sickrooms, a small one for isolation cases, and a larger one with several beds, the Sanatorium being used for more serious illness. Being prone to infections, Ben

From diaries and letters written at school

17th Jan. 1929 – I do detest leaving home, there is that utter loneliness of school, which I loathe.”

25th Nov. 1929 – “I really believe that being happy here or rather successful makes me think of home, and that makes me realise how far I am from love.”

13th March 1929 – “probably one of the most miserable days in all my life” – in bed in the form, feeling rotten and homesick after a visit home.

8th May 1929 – “Oh! It is a ghastly feeling to be away from one’s own darlings for so long.”

24th June 1929 – goes to a strawberry tea followed by a Beethoven concerto with the Fletchers – “Have a simply marvellous time, like a bit of home”.

16th Jan. 1930 “How I loathe this abominable hole. I am still in the Biddy-hole (junior dorm.) with the most impossible crowd. I simply cannot see how I can bare up through it, and suicide is so cowardly. Running away’s as bad; so I suppose I’ve got to stick it. But 83 days.”



Score of Hymn to a Virgin, July 1930, one of many compositions Britten wrote in the Farfield sickroom. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.britten-pears.org) © 1935 Boosey & Co. Reproduced with permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

spent a good deal of time in the sickroom, being looked after by matron Miss Gillett and visited by Dr Hendrie, the School doctor, and often by his parents.

The onset of his first Norfolk winter saw Ben in bed with “a nasty cold and my usual bilious complaint”. He missed most of his second term with a long illness, which started as a feverish cold and went to his chest, necessitating time at home to convalesce. Throughout his time at Gresham’s he was often in the sickroom with similar complaints, no doubt at least partly the result of the emotional upheaval from going away to school and being parted from his family. In times of academic pressure he can also be seen holed up in the sickroom, often relieved to be away from the noise and hurly burly of school life and able to concentrate on his musical composition in peace.

Discipline within the house was largely carried out by house prefects. Ben seems to have got on

POCKET MONEY			POCKET MONEY		
Date	Particulars	Balance	Date	Particulars	Balance
2nd Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	1.00	3rd Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	2.00
4th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	3.00	4th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	3.00
5th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	4.00	5th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	4.00
6th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	5.00	6th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	5.00
7th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	6.00	7th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	6.00
8th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	7.00	8th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	7.00
9th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	8.00	9th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	8.00
10th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	9.00	10th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	9.00
11th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	10.00	11th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	10.00
12th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	11.00	12th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	11.00
13th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	12.00	13th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	12.00
14th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	13.00	14th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	13.00
15th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	14.00	15th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	14.00
16th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	15.00	16th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	15.00
17th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	16.00	17th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	16.00
18th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	17.00	18th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	17.00
19th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	18.00	19th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	18.00
20th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	19.00	20th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	19.00
21st Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	20.00	21st Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	20.00
22nd Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	21.00	22nd Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	21.00
23rd Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	22.00	23rd Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	22.00
24th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	23.00	24th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	23.00
25th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	24.00	25th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	24.00
26th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	25.00	26th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	25.00
27th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	26.00	27th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	26.00
28th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	27.00	28th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	27.00
29th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	28.00	29th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	28.00
30th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	29.00	30th Nov	From M. A. P. 1.00	29.00
1st Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	30.00	1st Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	30.00
2nd Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	31.00	2nd Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	31.00
3rd Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	32.00	3rd Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	32.00
4th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	33.00	4th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	33.00
5th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	34.00	5th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	34.00
6th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	35.00	6th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	35.00
7th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	36.00	7th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	36.00
8th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	37.00	8th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	37.00
9th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	38.00	9th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	38.00
10th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	39.00	10th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	39.00
11th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	40.00	11th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	40.00
12th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	41.00	12th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	41.00
13th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	42.00	13th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	42.00
14th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	43.00	14th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	43.00
15th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	44.00	15th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	44.00
16th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	45.00	16th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	45.00
17th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	46.00	17th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	46.00
18th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	47.00	18th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	47.00
19th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	48.00	19th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	48.00
20th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	49.00	20th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	49.00
21st Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	50.00	21st Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	50.00
22nd Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	51.00	22nd Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	51.00
23rd Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	52.00	23rd Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	52.00
24th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	53.00	24th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	53.00
25th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	54.00	25th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	54.00
26th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	55.00	26th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	55.00
27th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	56.00	27th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	56.00
28th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	57.00	28th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	57.00
29th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	58.00	29th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	58.00
30th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	59.00	30th Dec	From M. A. P. 1.00	59.00
1st Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	60.00	1st Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	60.00
2nd Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	61.00	2nd Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	61.00
3rd Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	62.00	3rd Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	62.00
4th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	63.00	4th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	63.00
5th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	64.00	5th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	64.00
6th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	65.00	6th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	65.00
7th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	66.00	7th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	66.00
8th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	67.00	8th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	67.00
9th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	68.00	9th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	68.00
10th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	69.00	10th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	69.00
11th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	70.00	11th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	70.00
12th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	71.00	12th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	71.00
13th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	72.00	13th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	72.00
14th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	73.00	14th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	73.00
15th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	74.00	15th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	74.00
16th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	75.00	16th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	75.00
17th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	76.00	17th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	76.00
18th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	77.00	18th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	77.00
19th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	78.00	19th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	78.00
20th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	79.00	20th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	79.00
21st Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	80.00	21st Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	80.00
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23rd Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	82.00	23rd Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	82.00
24th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	83.00	24th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	83.00
25th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	84.00	25th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	84.00
26th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	85.00	26th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	85.00
27th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	86.00	27th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	86.00
28th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	87.00	28th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	87.00
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30th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	89.00	30th Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	89.00
31st Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	90.00	31st Jan	From M. A. P. 1.00	90.00