

# Benjamin Britten at Gresham’s

## 5: BRITTEN’S TEACHERS

### Walter ‘Gog’ Greateorex (1877-1949)

Walter Greateorex came to Gresham’s as a well-qualified and experienced teacher. A composer of hymn tunes and gifted performer, boys would debate whether his organ playing entitled him to be ranked the eighth greatest musician in the country. On meeting the gifted young Ben, Greateorex is reported to have wounded the sensitive youngster with disparaging remarks on his liking for Stravinsky, ensuring a distrust on Ben’s part and a difficult relationship between the two. In November 1929 Ben records that Greateorex has criticised his style on the piano and often mentions that the master has lost his temper with him.



Greateorex playing the organ in Chapel.

Ben had a great deal of contact with Greateorex, who encouraged him to perform in school concerts, lent him books, and often played duets and trios with him and Joyce Chapman. Participation in both choir and orchestra also meant frequent contact, and Ben often refers to piano practice in the master’s room after rehearsals. A devotee of Bach, Greateorex would often gather a small group of pupils in the organ loft after Chapel on Sunday evenings to enjoy his rendition of preludes and fugues. His library of music reference books, kept on the balcony in Big School was well used by choir members such as Ben.

Biographers have pointed out the problems of dealing tactfully with such prodigious talent without showing favoritism, and some have suggested that Greateorex harboured some degree of resentment over the London lessons, perhaps feeling this a threat to his authority. Greateorex in fact was much admired at the School both as performer and teacher. Concerts often included works by masters, such as his own hymn tune *Woodlands* and his *Idyll for Violin and Piano*. He took pride in the success of his pupils and encouraged the performance of their work at School.

As a teacher Greateorex was remembered by many for being kind and patient. OG John King found him inspiring and tolerant, helping to encourage and develop his musical taste, his lessons being popular and hugely enjoyable. He remembered ‘Gog’ as a giant, imposing figure, with bald head and “decidedly Pickwickian face” which radiated good nature. Poet Stephen Spender who was very homesick in his short stay here tells a story in his autobiography where Greateorex comforted him after an unpleasant episode of bullying, drying his tears and assuring him that he would not always be so unhappy.

Despite this kind and sympathetic nature Greateorex could often appear somewhat gruff and blunt, perhaps owing to the health problems he suffered, and it has been claimed that by 1928 he had become bit of a caricature at the School where he had been teaching for twenty years. Ben’s scathing comments about Greateorex continue throughout his letters and diaries for the two years he was here culminating in 1930 in a Poem of Hate. Christopher Smith has claimed that Greateorex showed great sensitivity when nurturing the ‘cuckoo’ in his nest, Benjamin Britten, reminding us that despite their uneasy relationship Ben produced an enormous amount of music in the two years and went on to win a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in 1930.

**7th December 1929**  
– Following choir and orchestra practice – “Gog with unnecessary comments (if he expects me to break all my chords he is slightly mistaken)”

**April 1930** Ben wrote rather loftily “I am afraid I don’t trouble myself terribly about his opinion!!”

**December 1929** - “He ought to have retired 50 years ago or better never have tried to teach music ever.”

**22nd May 1930** – “Greateorex seems to have taken offence to me lately. I really cannot be bothered about him any longer.”

**1st February 1930** – A ‘most awful’ recital by Gog in the evening – “however the man got the job here I cannot imagine. His idea of rhythm, logic, tone, or the music is absolutely lacking in sanity.”

**2nd February 1930** – Gog has asked Ben to play in a concert – “Ugh! – I don’t know what I shall play yet but I shall insist on playing what I want this time.”

**From diaries and letters written at School**

### Joyce Chapman

Miss Chapman, or ‘Ma Chips’ as she was nicknamed, taught music here from 1925 until 1954. She came to Gresham’s fresh from studying at the Royal College and accompanied the School for the wartime evacuation to Newquay. Highly thought of by many, including Walter Greateorex, she taught strings and piano as well as leading the orchestra, whose strings were said to have increased both numerically and in quality since her arrival. A string quartet coached by Miss Chapman won first prize at the Cromer Music Festival in 1954, and her solo playing was described as “an education both technically and artistically”.

The only one of the three music staff to give regular Ben violin and viola lessons, Miss Chapman initially came in for some typical criticism in his diaries, being unfavourably compared with his beloved earlier teacher Miss



Joyce Chapman with string ensemble accompanied by Hubert Hales.

undiagnosed progressive brain disease which might well have explained the somewhat unpredictable quality of her playing. In his 1945 letter to Hubert Hales, Ben writes fondly of Miss Chapman, saying she “was always very patient” with his “scratchings” on the viola.

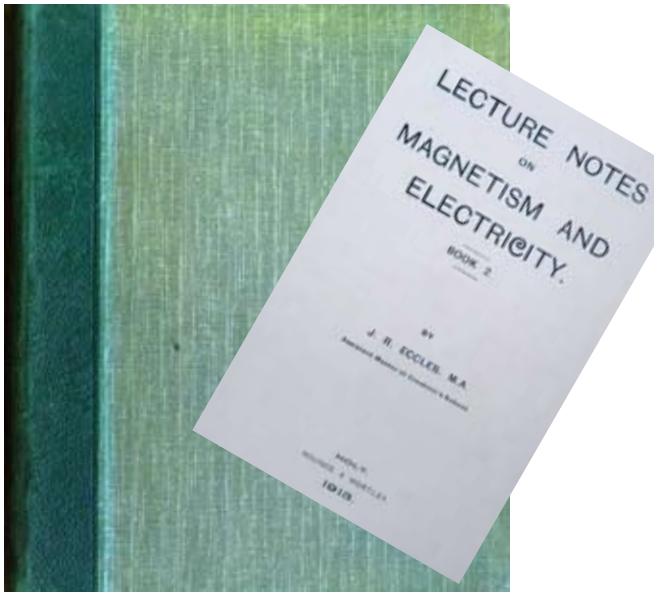


**1 Ernest Dyson** - Bursar. **2 Eric Kelly** – Australian who taught Ben History, finding his work ‘very satisfactory’ in 1930. **3 Frank McEachran** – taught Ben Languages. **4 Mr Russell** – taught Ben Chemistry, reporting ‘steady progress’ in 1930. **5 Hoult Taylor** – taught Ben English. **6 F.L. McCarthy** – Ben’s first form teacher (Michaelmas 1928) taught Biology. **7 Hugh Ramage** – Zoology teacher. **8 Arthur Gamble** – long-serving English and History teacher. **9 Basil Fletcher** – Ben’s housemaster, form teacher (Lent & Summer 1929) and Physics teacher. **10 F.A. Spencer** – Maths teacher. **11 Derek Addleshaw** – Ben’s Languages teacher. **12 A.B. Douglas** ‘The Bird’ – served for 42 years, 20 as second master, Ben’s form teacher (Lent 1930). **13 D.H. Greatwood** – ‘Monsieur Grandbois’ – taught Ben English & French and reported his steady progress in the latter subject in 1930. **14 L.A.M. Parsons** – teacher of English and Latin. **15 Dr Hendrie** – the school doctor who was a familiar figure at school concerts and sang with a local concert party. Ben would often have come into contact with Dr Hendrie through his time in the sickroom as well as musically, dedicating a number of scores to him such as I dare not ask a kiss, written in July 1930. **16 S. Wilkinson** – taught Ben Geography, reporting “disappointing work” followed by steady progress in 1930. With characteristic pessimism, Ben writes in his diary that he doesn’t expect to pass the exam even though it was not as bad as he expected. **17 Joyce Chapman** – taught Ben viola. **18 C.H. ‘Toot’ Tyler** – Ben’s last form teacher (Summer 1930) taught Classics and English. **19 Walter ‘Gog’ Greateorex** – Director of Music. **20 Rev Frank Field** – School Chaplain, taught English and Latin. **21 J.R. Eccles** – headmaster 1919-35, taught Ben Physics. **22 Col. Joseph Foster** – Ben’s form teacher (Michaelmas 1929) taught him English, reporting on his instinct for style in 1930. **23 George Thompson** – Ben’s housemaster and Maths teacher, who reported in 1930 that Ben thinks clearly and produces ‘thoroughly good work’. Ben wins a prize for maths in July 1930. **24 Miss D.M. Bristow** – taught Ben Art, commenting on his very good drawing in 1930. **25 J.C.H. Daniel** – taught Maths. **26 Major W.A.L. Kerridge** – taught Ben Manual Training which he dropped in Michaelmas 1929 to specialise in German.

### J.R.Eccles (Physics)

OG Robert Lymbery was filled with respect and awe by the reputation and stern appearance of his headmaster. Ben too records how he found his first physics lesson with J.R.E. “terrifying”, but not quite as bad as expected. He often writes that Eccles is cross with him about his bad prep, expecting to have a “rotten time in physics” as the master is always “disgustingly rude”. Ben in turn is scathing about his headmaster in his diaries, finding his sermons “Quite harmless”, but “lacking in any original or helpful thought”. On 19th September 1929 Ben reports that he has been moved up two sets in maths and science, so “no more J.R.E.” In his last term, Ben is pleased to report that he has given up science and will finally have more free time for his music.

Eccles was obviously pleased to have the talented youngster at Gresham’s. In a letter to Ben’s parents in 1929 he says, “all I have seen of your boy makes me very glad that I decided to take him last year.” Adding that Ben seems to have settled down, he writes, “I very much value his presence in the school ... particularly his work and conduct, in addition to his music.” When Ben is awarded his scholarship to the Royal College, Eccles makes a great fuss of him, telling the School in assembly and adding his name to the honours boards in Big School. He writes to Ben’s parents expressing his delight at the boy’s success, saying, “I am very glad about it all. He is such a dear boy and so modest about all his brilliant performances,” concluding, “I shall miss him very much”.



Privately published physics text books written by J.R. Eccles, 1913.

### H.D.F.Taylor (1903-1983)

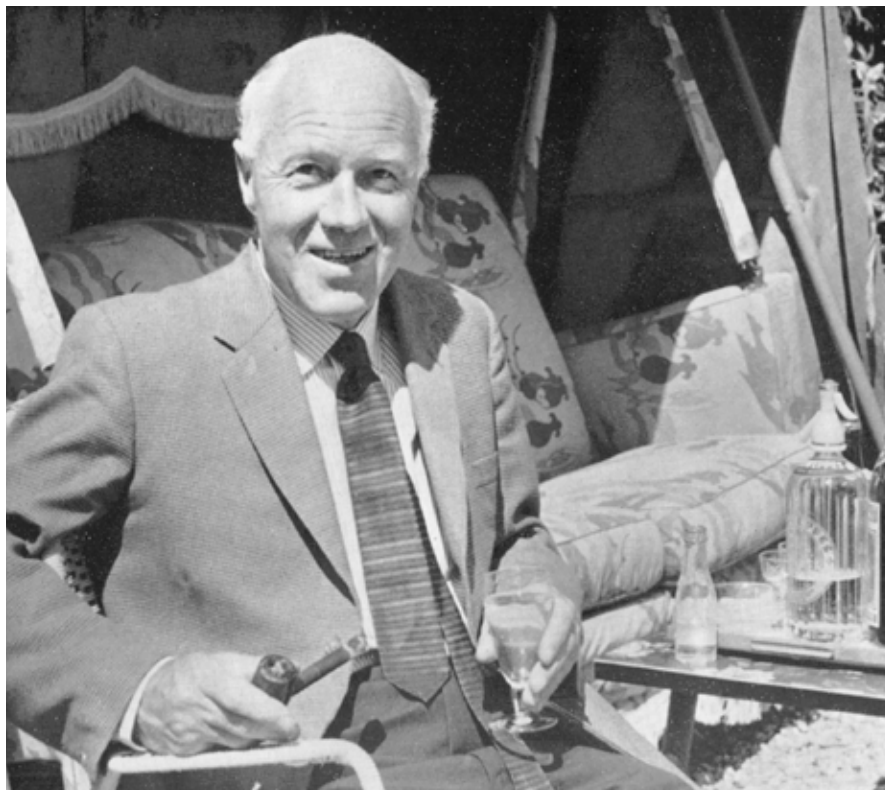


The Music Department in the 1920s with Joyce Chapman. Walter Greateorex and Hoult Taylor.

Hoult Taylor was appointed to replace Hubert Hales in 1928. Already an accomplished musician and classical English scholar, initially he taught piano and other instruments, also producing plays with great success and going on to teach English. He was remembered by many as a rather flamboyant character, who wore outrageous colours, but an individual who had a ‘civilising’ influence on those he taught. In his diaries Ben often records that he has had tea with Mr Taylor, playing duets and having long talks on music. The master lends him scores and books, giving Forsyth’s Orchestration and Kitson’s Counterpoint to the youngster as well received leaving gifts.

Although he tolerates Hoult Taylor, on the whole Ben is typically rude about the master’s musical performances. Following one recital in October 1929, Ben writes “Mr Taylor was given a great Reception, tho’ he didn’t deserve it”, appearing as if he was a poor sight-reader and had never seen the music before! Similarly, after a ‘ghastly’ Chopin recital which ‘surely needs a great personality to be bearable’, Ben concludes “Mr T. was very courageous, but that’s all.” Others, including OG Robert Lymbery, remembered him as an excellent pianist who inspired many with his great gift through his ‘alive’ and ‘mellifluous’ playing of both piano and organ.

### Derek Addleshaw (German/French)



Derek Addleshaw on his retirement, from The Gresham magazine.

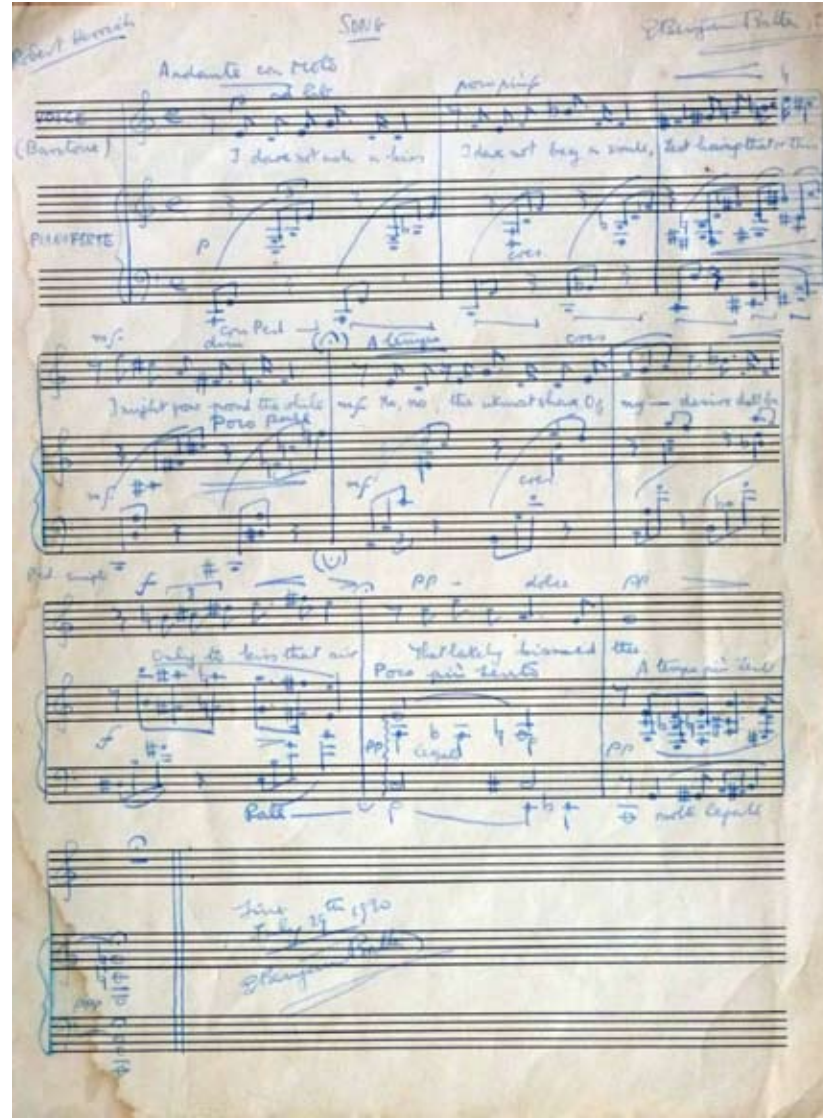
Languages master Derek Addleshaw or ‘Dow’ as he was nicknamed, came to Gresham’s in 1928 from Worcester. He taught German and French, occasionally assisting with junior History and English. He also took over hockey and swimming coaching and assisted with other games, playing reluctantly for staff rugby and cricket teams when required. When the School was evacuated to Newquay in wartime he ran bathing and surfing in Fistral Bay and the Gannel Estuary.

### Frank McEachran (French)

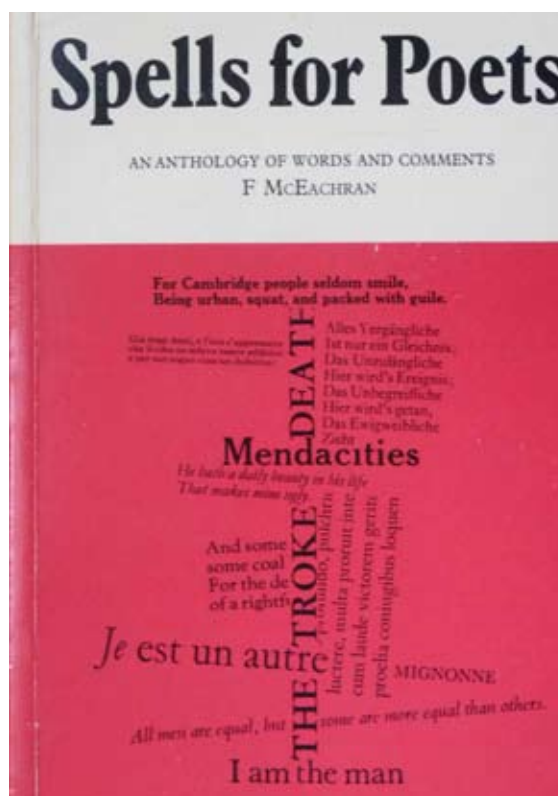
As a teacher Ben found Derek Addleshaw difficult to understand, complaining that he wouldn’t stop to explain. By September 1929 he has dropped Manual Training to specialise in German, though, and Addleshaw was one of a handful of masters who attended Ben’s study tea in that year. By Lent 1930 the teacher writes on Ben’s report for German that he has worked well and “made very excellent progress”. Ben records that although the others found the exam relatively easy, he lost his nerve and fears he has done very badly in comprehension and story.

Charismatic modern languages teacher McEachran, known as ‘Mac’ or ‘Kek’, was appointed in 1924. Having gained a first in German and a second in French at Oxford, McEachran was hired to teach modern languages at Gresham’s at a time when the classics were officially abandoned. His idiosyncratic teaching style soon became conspicuous, not least for his tendency to mix quotes in Greek and Latin amongst his French and German. With his strange gnome-like appearance and erudition, he was a lone figure but nevertheless very popular with colleagues. He loved teaching and was deeply religious.

Ben was enchanted by the rhythm of McEachran’s words even though he claimed not to understand all of them. Whilst recognising him as a “very clever” teacher, Ben writes of doing prep for “an impossible and foolish” man. On returning to School in January 1930 he claims to be “Feeling much happier altho we have our first French lesson with McEachran whose periods I detest.” In return the teacher records Ben’s progress in French as ‘Good’ in the following term and despite Ben’s disappointment with his exam performance he manages to pass.



Score for I dare not ask a kiss written in July 1930 dedicated to Dr Hendrie. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.org).



Spells for Poets by Frank McEachran. His lessons often included a dazzling range of quotations and he encouraged his pupils to re-cite fragments of poems or ‘spells’ in order to appreciate both sound and sense.