

Benjamin Britten at Gresham’s

6: FRIENDS AND CONTEMPORARIES



The Hon. David Layton (5/7/1914) Woodlands 1928-33

Ben and David started their schooldays at Gresham’s in the same form and soon discovered similar interests that drew them together in friendship. Both joined the choir, played the viola and were members of the orchestra, shared a love of cricket and tennis, and enjoyed long walks and discussions. At the end of their first term in 3C Ben was promoted to 3A and the pair saw less of each other, but their friendship was to continue throughout and beyond their time here. Neither joined the OTC, eventually being allowed to opt out after hours of arguing and questioning of motives. Instead they would practice cricket at the nets or take part in non-recruits’ matches with boys of similar mind such as Hope-Simpson and Hodgkin.



David Layton (seated left) in Love’s Labour’s Lost, 1929.

It was perhaps music that really drew the two together, and the friends spent many hours in the music room practising their instruments and monopolising the gramophone. David remembered how Ben would discuss with him what sort of music he planned to write, claiming he had such a facility for imitating other composers he did not know which way to turn and found this very frustrating. Describing himself as a “musical illiterate”, David was certainly able to appreciate music, and Ben wrote that he was “terribly sorry” to see boys such as him leave in 1930. Several weeks later Ben began composing a ‘sketch’ for strings in an attempt to capture the essence of his friend in music and dedicated the first movement of his *Alla Marcia* to him.

Oliver Berthoud (25/1/1911) Howson’s 1924-29

The youngest of three brothers, Oliver was two years Ben’s senior and a house prefect. They were soon drawn together through their mutual love of music, and Ben often records in his diary that he has spent a happy time in the music room playing trios and duets with Berthoud and other boys and staff. Being of similar disposition in many respects, Ben sought the counsel of the older boy in discussions about bullying in Farfield, noting in December 1928 to be more careful over his choice of study mates after taking Berthoud’s advice. When Oliver leaves in July 1929, Ben records his disappointment, adding that Berthoud has been “marvellous” to him despite being a house prefect and the pair stayed in touch for many years.



Oliver Berthoud (back row, right) in Howson’s XV 1928 .



Christopher Eyre playing Antonio in The Merchant of Venice 1930.

Another boy, again slightly older, who spent a great deal of time with Ben and Berthoud practising trios and duets in the music room. Berthoud wrote to Ben in 1971 recalling an incident where the three were happily playing Mozart when Walter Greatorex marched in seemingly furious at discovering them, but soon retreated “baffled” on realising it was three of his “right-hand boys” and not three “ruggier hearties”. Eyre often performs at school concerts with Ben, and is described in *The Gresham* magazine’s review of

John Diver (22/12/1911) Howson’s 1922-30

Saturday Music in March 1930 as a “sympathetic accompanist” and praised as a soloist when he “played the Mozart *Phantasia* with quiet dignity and restraint, and yet with the necessary forcefulness”. He shared the Wyndham Birch music prize with Ben in 1930.

A senior pupil who shared Ben’s interest in music and is often remembered in his diaries as great fun to practise with. Haydn quartets with Diver, Floud and Berthoud, or with Miss Chapman, are regular favourites, although Ben is sometimes scathing about the playing of the others. In June 1929 John performs a trio in his first concert with Berthoud and Eyre, and is also part of the March 1930 concert with Ben, proving “fully competent” as a soloist and “obtaining a pleasant tone from his instrument”.

SATURDAY MUSIC.

The Recital on March 1st opened with a duet arrangement of a Schubert March, in which the second part was taken by Irons. Diver and Eyre appeared as soloists, and proved fully competent in their allotted tasks. Diver obtained a pleasant tone from his instrument, for which an audience is always grateful. Eyre was a sympathetic accompanist, and, as a soloist, played the Mozart *Phantasia* with quiet dignity and restraint, and yet with the necessary forcefulness. Review of Saturday Music recital in which John Diver and Christopher Eyre performed with Ben.

Peter Floud (1/6/1911) Woodlands 1923-29

Sons of distinguished civil servant Sir Francis Floud, Peter and younger brother Bernard were both part of Ben’s close circle of friends. Another senior pupil, Peter was a boy who took an active part in School life, speaking at the debating society and being editor of *The Gresham* magazine. His 1960 obituary describes him as having integrity, breadth of vision and a quiet humour, all qualities that obviously appealed to young Ben in his choice of companions. Ben writes that Peter is one of the few boys in the School who thinks, being a “joy to talk with” as he is so knowledgeable on subjects such as music, art and literature.

Once again it is music that draws Ben and Peter together, and Floud is often noted as being present at practice or gramophone sessions, making them more enjoyable. In July 1929 Ben writes of practising a Haydn quartet with Floud and Diver, saying it was “great fun” but not exceptionally brilliant playing. When Peter leaves in 1929 Ben is sorry to see him go as he has had a marvellous time in his company and learnt a lot from him. In January and March of 1930 Ben is cheered by long and very nice letters from Floud major, and the two would later continue their friendship in London. Peter was intended to be the subject of the third section of his *Sketch for Strings* composed in 1930 but this part remained unfinished.



Peter Floud (Woodlands 1923-29) Keeper of Circulation Dept. V. & A. Museum.



Farfield house photograph featuring Ben (first left front row) and many of his friends, study-mates and contemporaries, July 1929. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.org).

Other friends and acquaintances

Douglas Goolden (16/11/1914) Farfield 1928-33

In July 1929 Goolden is listed in Ben’s diary as one of three boys who attend a study tea with invited masters. Later that month Ben records that he has spent the whole day in Goolden’s room ‘gramophoning’ and putting the finishing touches to a song Dr Hendrie has asked him to set to music. The two enjoy walks together, and Ben writes that he is sorry to leave boys such as Layton, Willcock and Goolden.

Michael Goodeve-Docker (9/11/1911) Farfield 1925-30

Ben plays table tennis with School prefect Docker and records having a “long and cheering” talk with him in his diary for July 1930.

Anthony Willcock (7/7/1918) Farfield 1928-36

Henry Willcock (13/2/1913) Farfield 1923-32

In his diaries Ben often mentions Willcock as a frequent companion on his walks and notes that he is sad to leave boys such as him in 1930. Although Henry is closer in age to Ben, it is possible that he befriended the younger brother who contributed to the *Grasshopper* magazine in 1933 and was later killed in action in World War II.

Richard Hines (6/7/1914) Farfield 1928-32

Hines was another walking companion and Ben writes of a happy day spent with Richard and his parents in June 1929 when they drove round the Norfolk countryside, visiting Warham Camp and picnicked at Morston. In March 1930 Ben records that Richard has invited him to stay in the holidays but writes that he plans to get out of it as the holidays are far too short and he prefers to spend them with his own family. It is not long before the ‘dear boy’ is getting on Ben’s nerves by following him about and Ben drops hints that he does not like this attention but worries about hurting his feelings.

Study mates

Junior boys were four to a study and Ben generally does not seem to have made many lasting friendships from his study mates, but tolerates them and joins in social events such as study teas when masters would be entertained. Ben’s initial reaction to his first set of study mates in September 1928 was far from favourable, describing them as “full of swearing and vulgarity” and concluding “I do not like the outlook of 13 weeks of this!” In July 1929 he notes some “atrocious bullying” in the study when he was absent which leaves the small new boy (unidentified) in tears, concluding angrily, “And this is the school of the honour system!”

Matthew Meiklejohn (4/7/1913) Farfield 1927-31

Ben often writes in his diary of walks and games of table tennis with the house prefect, and is pleased to see Meiklejohn when he visits him in London after leaving School.



Typical study of the period from a prospectus.

BACK TO SCOLE

BI FEL that in Septembere I did goe
To Holt upon a trainè rightè slowe.
(For men will clepe the slowest railè-way,
The Midlande and Greet Northerne, any day.)
Whan that the traine was crawlèd to Southe Lynne,
A worthy scolmastere ther entered in.
(Scathè it was that when the whistle went,
I could not changè my compartiment.)
A knobè had he sitting on his nosè.
He read him in his 'Lower Latin Prose,'
So that I woot he was a lernèd wight,
To read 'De Bello Gallico' at sight.
Wo wer his boyes whan that he did them smoot,
Nor could they sitten doon for days, I woot.
Twa smale childern hadde he, that did sing,
Whan that they did not wepe, like anything;
They read the signes againe and yet againe :
'To stop the trainè, pulle down the chainè';
And 'Penaltyè for impropre use.'
'To lene out of the windwe's dangerous.'
They hadde a bagge of oranges to eat
And threw the skinnès underneath the seat;
They haddè, eek, an Olde Scole House Bunne,
That must, I trow, have cost a minte of money,
So hard was it, it would not shew a smere
Whan that men smoot it with a sledge-hammere;
Ther-to they threw the beestlè thing aboute,
So was I rightè glad when they got oute.

M.F.M.M.

Poem by Matthew Meiklejohn published in the 1930 Grasshopper magazine.

Thomas Purdy (2/6/1914) Farfield 1928-31

Purdy is noted in Ben’s diary as a study mate in September 1929 with Blanco-White and Tyler.

Thomas Blanco-White (19/1/1915) Farfield 1926-32

After a couple of months of sharing a study with Blanco-White Ben notes in November 1929 that he is one of the cleverest boys he has ever met and says likes him very much. By February 1930, though, Ben has changed his mind and finds Thomas disagreeable and selfish, writing in his diary “I am getting absolutely fed to the teeth with Blanco-White”.

Paul Harris (31/8/1913) Farfield 1925-31

Colonel Paul Harris, who remembered sharing a study with Ben, reminded him on meeting years later of an incident when Britten first had the idea for creating an opera from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* whilst waiting backstage to accompany a School production in the Theatre in the Woods, he with drum, Ben with trumpet.



Hubert Bryant (back row, left), Michael Goodeve-Docker (front row, centre) and Geoffrey Marshall (front row, 2nd from right) in 1930 1st XI hockey team.