

# Benjamin Britten at Gresham’s

## ON REFLECTION



Britten, aged 14, at the home of Frank Bridge in 1928, at work on a composition exercise. Drawing by Marjorie Fass. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.org).

by his peers. Gresham’s provided a feast of music for the young musician, through its talented music staff as well as from visiting musicians, continuing a tradition started by reforming headmaster George Howson in 1900.

During his two years at Gresham’s Ben was able to mature and grow in confidence both educationally and socially. Despite his lack of faith in his academic abilities, he passed the School Certificate exams with five credits, providing his parents with the necessary insurance against failure in the music business. Far from the rather cossetted upbringing he had enjoyed in Lowestoft Ben was thrown into the company of boys from different social backgrounds and forced to stand on his own feet emotionally. He formed friendships through his music and love of sport, many of which would last a lifetime, and developed the maturity to cope with the independent life in London he had long yearned for.

Much has been written of the beautiful surroundings of Gresham’s and the influence it has had on its creative alumni. OG poet John Bradburne wrote “Serene were the surroundings of my school and pleasant her fields whereon we played”. For two years the serene surroundings of Gresham’s, with its beautiful old buildings, leafy woods, vast Norfolk skies and proximity to the coast were the young Britten’s familiar fields. Here he enjoyed walks in the countryside, gentle games of cricket and tennis and outings to the Broad in favour of hearty rugby matches and marching to order, exercising both his freedom to roam and his right to choose more peaceful activities. Here he was able to draw inspiration and to develop his creative genius, to grow into a young man, and to prepare himself for the next big step on his career path, the Royal College of Music.

Benjamin Britten was often desperately homesick during his two years at Gresham’s, feeling the separation from his family keenly and finding the rough and tumble of school life an insult to his delicate sensibilities. His diaries and letters home, many written from the sickroom, are full of protestations of unhappiness and anxiety, but they also portray a much brighter and far more positive picture of his life at boarding school. He writes of happy times spent with like-minded friends, playing sport and making music, of kind staff that provided support and encouragement, and of the many activities that made Gresham’s such a cultured environment in the 1920s.

Although Ben only received tuition on the viola at School, he was enabled to continue his music lessons in London and allowed the time to develop his own composition skills. The music staff encouraged his involvement in choir and orchestra, lent him books and invited discussion, but most importantly they provided a platform for his music through allowing him to perform in school concerts, giving him confidence in his abilities and bringing acceptance



Honours board, Gresham’s School.



The Royal College of Music, c. 1930. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Foundation (www.brittenpears.org).

Oct. 8th 1945

Dear Mr. Hales,

Thank you for your letter. I was glad to get news of Gresham’s, and to hear that the school is now returned to Holt. I am afraid that my interest in the School is not dictated by inclination, but by the amount of free time at my disposal – strictly limited! In many ways I am very grateful to the school. On the whole I was happy there. Owing, I am afraid, to mutual suspicion between Mr. Greateorex and myself I didn’t get much encouragement or help musically, although Miss Chapman was always very patient with my scratchings on the viola!

But in many other ways I remember the school with great affection. Basil Fletcher – now at Bristol University, when I occasionally see him – was especially good to me. I should like to hear news of the school from time to time – but preferably not via Old Boys’ Meetings which I abhor – especially if there are particularly promising boys in some direction when I could help and encourage. Perhaps you could write occasionally?

Thank you for your kind congratulations. In many ways I have been very lucky.

With best wishes,  
yours sincerely,  
Benjamin Britten

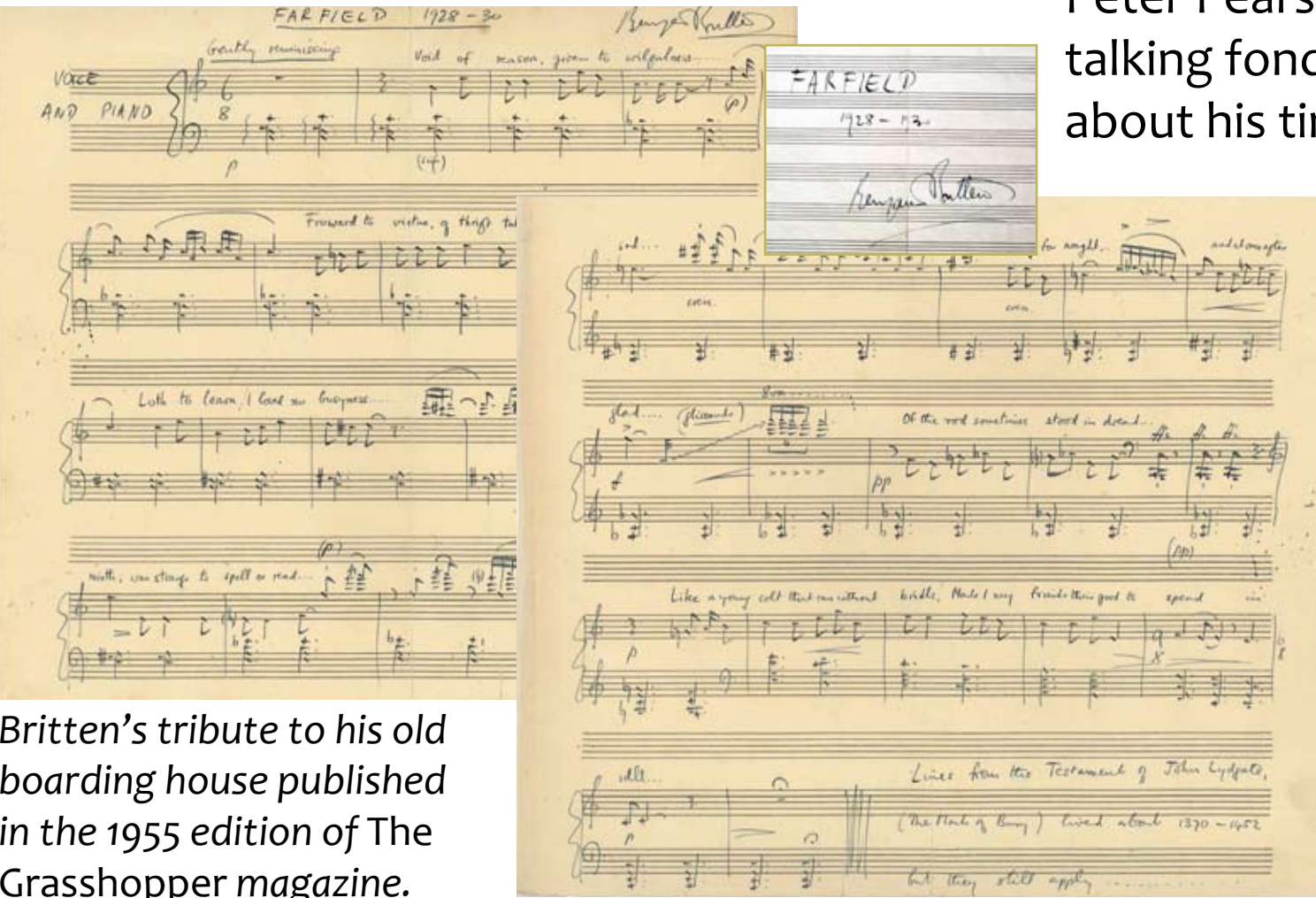
Letter to music master Hubert Hales published in The Gresham magazine 1987/8.

In his post-war letters to music master Hubert Hales Britten was himself to acknowledge that he was “very grateful to the school” despite his differences with Walter Greateorex, and remembered it with ‘great affection’. To celebrate the School’s 400th anniversary in 1955 he was commissioned to compose a piece of music, choosing to write a personal tribute to his old boarding house ‘Farfield’, affectionately subtitled ‘gently reminiscing’.

In 1964 headmaster Logie Bruce Lockhart wrote to Britten asking if he would be prepared to give a recital at the School, and after one postponement due to illness, he returned to Gresham’s with his partner

Peter Pears to perform, Programme for 1964 concert.

talking fondly to his host about his time here. In his reassessment of Benjamin Britten’s two formative years at Gresham’s Christopher Smith concluded “it is clear enough that he did quite well at Gresham’s and that Gresham’s did quite well by him.”



Britten’s tribute to his old boarding house published in the 1955 edition of The Grasshopper magazine.

GRESHAM'S SCHOOL CONCERT SOCIETY		
Wednesday, 4th March, 1964, at 8 p.m., in Big School		
RECITAL		
by		
PETER PEARS and BENJAMIN BRITTEN		
PROGRAMME		
1. How blest are shepherds Man is for the woman made Let me wander not unseen Under the greenwood tree Blow, blow thou winter wind The Beau's Lament on the loss of Farinelli		H. PURCELL G. F. HANDEL T. A. ARNE H. CAREY
2. Auf der Bruck Fischerweise Auf dem Wasser zu singen Im Frühling Der Musensohn		F. SCHUBERT
INTERVAL		
3. Winter Words (1953)		BENJAMIN BRITTEN Lyrics and Ballads by Thomas Hardy
At Day-close in November Midnight on the Great Western or the Journeying Boy Wagtail and Baby, a Satire The little old Table The Choirmaster's Burial or the Tenor Man's Story Proud Songsters—Thrushes, Finches and Nightingales At the Railway Station, Upway or the Convict and Boy with the Violin Before Life and After		
4. Three Old English Characters Sally in our Alley Tom Bowling The Lincolnshire Poacher		arr. BENJAMIN BRITTEN

### Acknowledgements

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