



The School and the First World War

1: THE YEARS BEFORE THE WAR 1900-1914

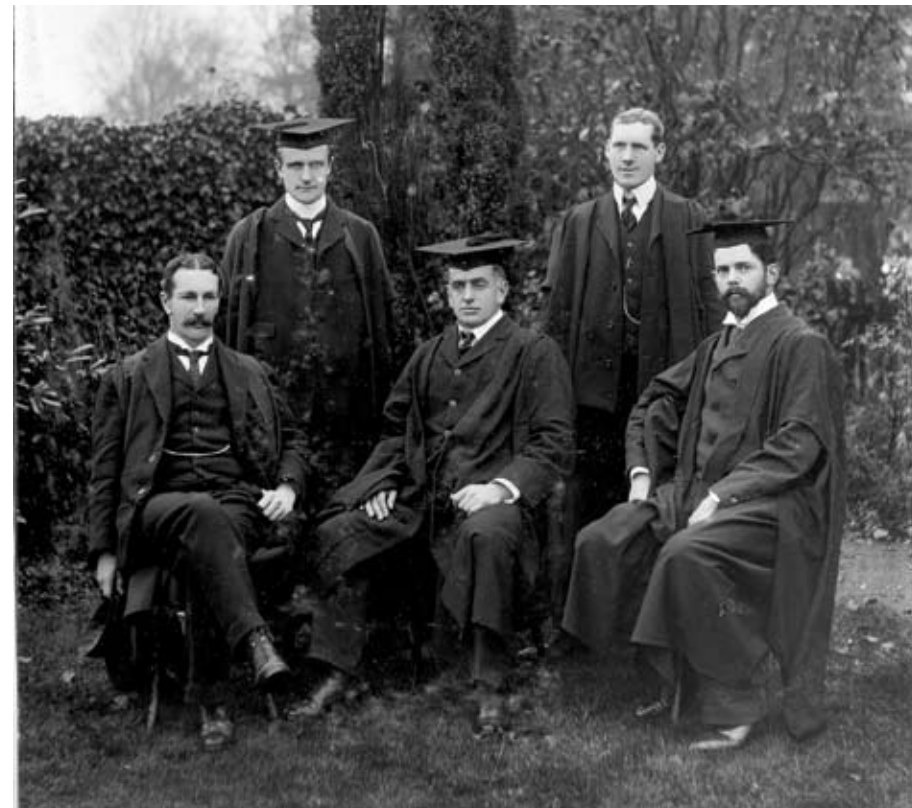


Howson's new School



Headmaster George Howson in 1900

Sir John Gresham had founded his School in 1555 and entrusted it to the care and governance of the Worshipful Company of Fishmongers. By the nineteenth century, it was still very much the local grammar school where merchants and tradesmen educated their sons, but nevertheless managed to send an impressive number of pupils to Cambridge. In 1900 a new headmaster was appointed and the School moved from the site of the Elizabethan manor house in Holt to that it occupies today and building work began for an entirely new, and much larger, establishment.



Howson's staff in 1900

In his letter of application for the post of headmaster, George Howson had outlined his vision for the School.

"There seems like a great need in England of first-class secondary schools giving a purely modern education of the highest quality; based chiefly on linguistic discipline in English, French and German, going to a high point in Mathematics, teaching History, Geography and Literature searchingly, and disciplining every boy in natural sciences – such a type of liberal education being a natural avenue to intellectual interest in modern commerce and industry."



Big School hall, 1903



Photographs of the interior of Howson's from the 1903 prospectus. Left: Study .Centre: Dining Room. Right: Dormitory.



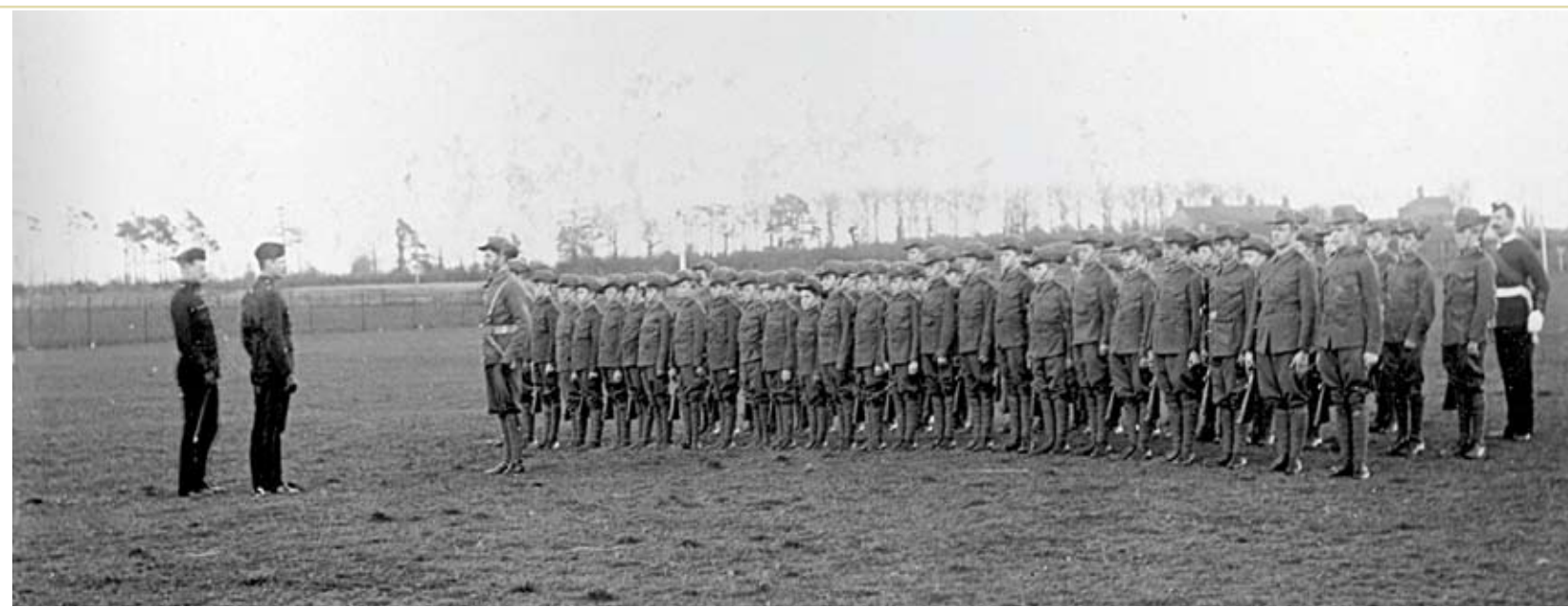
Such a broad-ranging curriculum, which also included music, theatre and the arts, was very rare in public schools in England at the time, the general pattern being the '3 Rs', the classics and plenty of competitive sport. Pupils were encouraged to read widely and to study on their own in the well-stocked library, and to use the modern science labs for their own experiments. Discipline was based on a system of trust or honour and competition on the sports fields limited to inter-house and local matches. Howson's own interests included travel, walking, fishing and photography, and he gave his pupils every opportunity to explore and enjoy the beautiful countryside on their doorstep. Music was also important, with regular concerts given by staff and boys. It was central to the annual Shakespeare play performed in a delightful Theatre-in-the-Woods from 1902.



As You Like It, 1912

The Cadet Corps

When Gresham's was still a Grammar School under the Rev Charles Elton in 1860, forty boys were already practising drill under a rifle sergeant on the fields of Old School House. In the latter part of the century the Fishmongers' Company were generous patrons of 'I' Company of the 3rd Norfolk Rifle Volunteers. The move to the present site saw the Corps being sanctioned by Royal Warrant in 1901 and attached to the Norfolk Regiment. The Gresham magazine reported on the satisfactory work of the Corps in its second term of existence, saying *"there is still, however, great weakness in marching in line,"* adding that this must be rectified. The magazine also reports that the Corps was immediately hampered by red tape. Equipment was soon ready, though, and a Morris Tube range set up, while buglers practised early each morning and signallers in the evening. A band was formed in 1903, and in December that year the Corps boasted seventy members, excluding officers such as Captain Miller and Lieutenant Eccles. Also in that year the first guard of honour took place with Field Marshal Sir Evelyn Wood.



Cadet Corps 1902

Field days and shooting matches soon became commonplace, and by December 1904 numbers had doubled to 120. The shooting VIII competed at Bisley for the first time in 1905 and the Corps attended the Aldershot training camp where the salute was taken by Field Marshal Lord Roberts. In 1906 the Corps was invited to take part in the Royal Review at Sandringham when they were inspected by His Majesty King Edward VII under Captains Miller and Clarke. The 1907 Haldane reforms led to the



Cadet Bugle Band, 1902

formation of officer training corps in public schools and universities, and in October 1908 the Corps changed its name to the junior division of the OTC. In 1907 The Gresham was proud to report great success at the Schools of the Empire shooting competition, when Gresham's came first in Britain and second out of all the Empire schools. In 1909 the OTC was invited to attend the presentation of the colours to the Norfolk Territorial Battalions in Norwich by His Majesty King Edward VII.

A contributor to The Gresham in 1914 highlighted a great need for officers *"who have had even a little training, and the OTC was meant to provide officers"*. He concluded, *"Besides, a Public School does give one a certain amount of training in leadership"*. Membership was taken seriously, with young men receiving their commissions

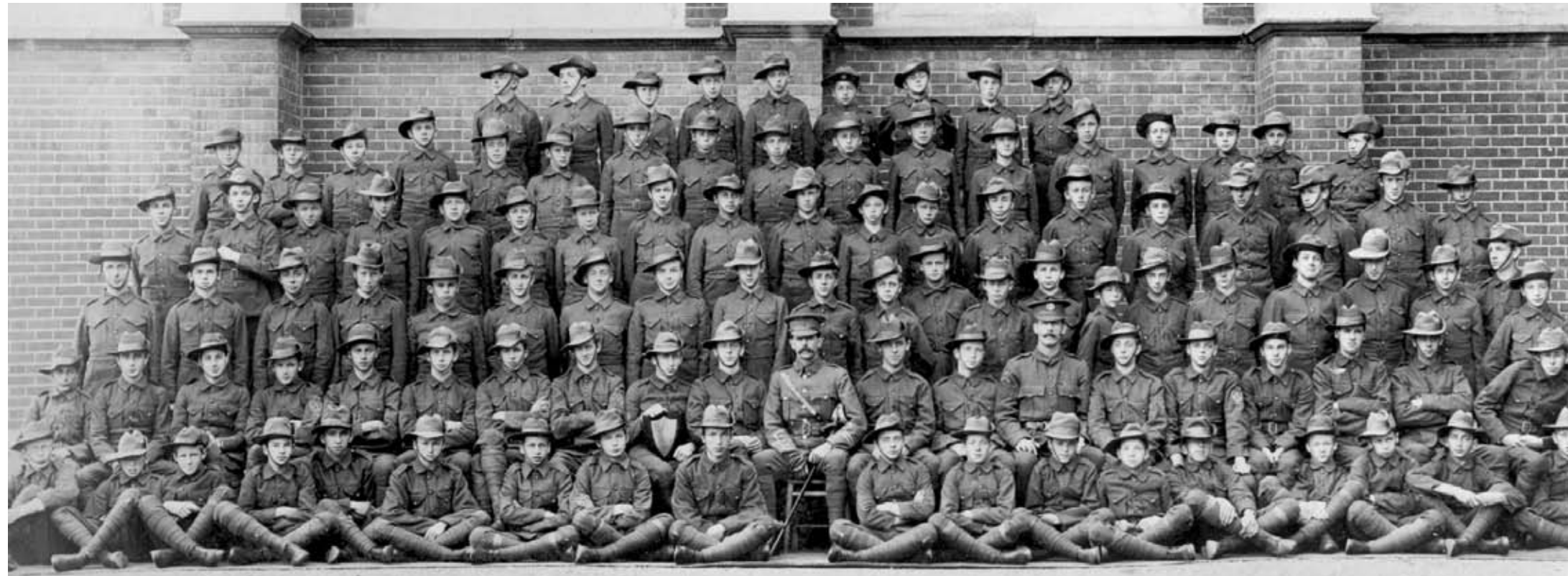


First Aldershot Camp, 1905

and going straight to their regiments from School during the War. Cosmo Duff Gordon and Dawson Atkins both followed this path and died when they were seventeen years old. The public schools were seen as the natural training ground for



Shooting VIII, Bisley 1905



Cadet Corps 1906

officers, and in the first seven months of the War the OTC created over 20,000 commissioned officers. The death toll amongst these young officers who would lead their men into battle was high in comparison with other ranks.

The Chapel

From the early days of his appointment Howson had advocated the building of a chapel to be a focal part of the School at the heart of its ethos. At a meeting in 1908 the Governors promised that a site would be made available as soon as £2,500 was raised towards the building.

Gresham Magazine December 16th 1911 *"The past term must ever be marked in the annals of school history, for we are proud to be able to say that at last the £2,500 required to obtain the site for a school chapel has been reached."*



Laying the Foundation Stone, 1912.

A funding appeal was launched as part of the 350th anniversary in 1912, and on Saturday 8th June the foundation stone was laid with much ceremony by Sir Edward Busk, Chairman of Governors & Prime Warden of



Building work, December 1914

The Bishop of Thetford proposed the health of the Chapel and advised the architects to make it *"as stately and as beautiful and as dignified as they possibly could. They must make it the finest thing in the place, for it was for God and God should have the finest thing possible."* Dr Acland replied to the toast, saying *"This is a day of deep thankfulness, and of bright hopes for the future."* He asked those present to give generously for, *"We are building this chapel in faith that as years go by, many happy memories of school days will centre around it"*. Sir Edward tapped the stone at all four corners and declared it 'well and truly laid'.

The work was entrusted to architects John Simpson, an associate of Chatfield Clarke who had designed Big School, and Maxwell Ayrton who later went on to design Wembley Stadium and the British



Empire Exhibition of 1924. The builders, Bowmans of Stamford, used Portland stone, local flints and the best English oak. Finances were tight and the foundation stone stood alone for some time before Howson was able to turn the key in the door on 23rd January 1916 before a crowd of assembled pupils, staff and clergy. By this time the Chapel had become a memorial to the fallen OGs and would later see the addition of a carved screen, oak stalls and stained glass 'Peace' window.

Ben Nicholson Woodlands 1909



The artist who pioneered abstract art in Britain and had close links with Picasso and others in the European avant-garde. He came to international prominence with his famous 'white reliefs' of the 1930s and maintained a lifelong interest in the traditions of landscape and still life. Ben Nicholson suffered from asthma all his life but had played successfully for the 1st XI cricket team. He was removed from School due to ill health but his younger brothers both stayed the course, however Tony is one of the WWI fallen who are listed on the memorial in the Chapel.