

Grenham House School Story

Grenham House School was originally started in Minnis Bay in 1901 under the name of "The Bay School". It was housed in two of the large houses in the long terrace in Minnis Road. The numbers at that date were 24 and 26 and initially the school was under the ownership of Mr Bernard Vincent Charles Ransome M.A. Oxon. In 1904 Mr Henry Eto Eyre Jeston M.A. Oxon. joined him as joint owner.

Not long after his arrival in Birchington, a report appeared in the Parish Magazine of July 1907, which stated that "Mr Jeston, ably assisted by his sister", put on a Concert in the Drill Hall behind the Public Hall (now the Cornerstone Church). "The boys at the Bay School and other ladies and gentlemen gave an excellent Concert at 8pm, which was hugely enjoyed by a good sized audience." The occasion was a large fundraising day organised by All Saints Church parishioners. This was a new venture for them and they were greatly encouraged by the support from the joint headmaster of this newly formed local private school. The bazaar raised £105, of which £2 2s 9d came from "Mr Jeston's Concert".

The school remained at the Bay until 1910, when a new school began to be built for them in ten acres of land near the station, on the north side of the railway. The land was bought from St John's College Cambridge, which owned much of the land around the village (and still owns some today). At the time of purchase the land was open farmland, with only a footpath leading past it to the top of St Mildred's Avenue. The footpath remained for many years and was only made into a road in the early 1950s. The path was known locally as "the Tar Path". The tender for the building of the school was taken up by Mr D. Dyke of Westgate at a cost of £3,860.

The new premises were opened in 1911, and entered under Ransome's name only initially. It appears under Lyell Road at this date as Grenham Road did not exist until 1920. The road was named after the school and the school was named after the bay. The bay itself was only created by sea erosion towards the end of the 1860s - until then it was relatively straight across that section of the cliffs. Where the name 'Grenham' came from has yet to be discovered.

Henry Jeston is listed in the Old Comrades Members Register as a Lieutenant of the 3rd Voluntary Battalion of the Buffs from 1915 -1919. It would appear that Bernard Ransome remained in charge of the overall running of the school during this period, but Henry Jeston was probably serving locally, rather than in France. He was already 38 when war began in 1914. After the war, however, Henry Jeston played a major role in getting the new premises for the United Services Club built in Station Road and he was elected as their first President in 1924. To commemorate this event a large photograph of him was commissioned and the Club still holds it to this day. The Club had originally been formed as the "Old Comrades Club" at the end of 1919 and was fully functional by March 1920, when the War Memorial was dedicated in Birchington Square. At this date they were meeting in the Powell Arms or the Drill Hall (now the Middle Birchington Club) each week.

By 1924 Bernard Ransome was a J.P. and living on the premises of the school. Henry Jeston was living with his wife and young son Denys Henry Eyre, at 5 Beach Avenue, which acted not only as his home, but also as a dormitory for the younger boys at the school for a time. Henry Jeston was one of the earliest members of the Incorporated Association of Preparatory Schools, being elected in 1906. By 1928 he, too, had joined to the Bench as a J.P. His son later recalled a humorous story concerning one of his father's cases. A young pilot and photographer flew very low over Birchington in about 1934 taking photos of the more interesting buildings. They then sold the one of Grenham House School to Henry Jeston who was delighted with the excellent image, which his son still had. Shortly after this, when Henry was Chairman of the Bench, the young pilot was brought before him for "flying dangerously low over a populated area". Needless to say, the young man got a small 'token' fine and a mild reprimand - "Well - what else could I do, having bought one of his photos?" he ruefully asked his colleagues afterwards!

Henry Jeston's only child, Denys, was born at Birchington in 1919 and spent his early years at Fleet House School Westgate. He then went to Sherborne Abbey College, Dorset and Merton College, Oxford, before spending some time at Sandhurst. At the outbreak of the 2nd World War he joined the East Kent Regiment (the Buffs). He

was posted abroad in 1941 and fought with the Eighth Army in the Desert against Rommel, until he was captured nine months later.

Henry Jeston evacuated Grenham House School to Swanage in 1940 and later to Derbyshire. The R.A.F. used his old school as the base for sending propaganda balloons over to Occupied Europe, when the air currents were favourable. After Denys's capture, he was listed as "Missing, presumed killed" and his grief-stricken father closed the school for two years. He saw no reason to continue the school when his only son and heir was not going to be able to take it over. Bernard Ransome had died on the 25th January 1940, which meant that Henry Jeston was by then the soul owner of the establishment.

During his time as a POW, Denys made many daring escape attempts, tunnelling and escaping through gaps in the camp fencing, but he was always recaptured. In 1945 he was released from a POW camp in Brunswick, Germany. On returning to England, the War Office gave him the job of de-requisitioning properties in East Kent, including Grenham House. But a year later he left for Cairo as an Embarkation Officer, and there he met up with Jack Lidgate, eight years his senior.

Jack was already well known to the Jeston family. He had joined the school in 1935 teaching "everything apart from French", but specializing in mathematics. Jack had joined the army in 1940 and served with the Nigerian Regiment in Nigeria and also in the Middle East. Both men returned to Birchington in 1946 to find the complete contents of the school stacked ceiling-high in the school chapel. Henry Jeston was by then in his late 60s and welcomed his son into a partnership, which was to last for eight years. In 1947 Denys followed in his father's footsteps by being elected onto the Incorporated Association of Preparatory Schools served on their Council for 7 years. During that time, he also represented the Kent district of preparatory school headmasters and was active in this almost until he retired. Jack Lidgate was elected onto the I.A.P.S. in 1960.

Henry Jeston died on the 17th February 1953, aged 77 and Denys then took over the running of the school. Soon after Henry Jeston's

death, the Rev. Maurice Granville Sharp, Vicar of Birchington & Acol, wrote this in the parish magazine of April 1953:

"The passing of Henry Eyre Jeston"

"No edition of our magazine would in any sense be complete without a word about the loss of our old and deeply respected citizen of our village.

The name of Henry Jeston has been associated with Education for many years now. The boys, present and past, owe much to the wisdom and love he has always shown as the 'beloved Headmaster of Grenham House School'. His activities have, however, but merely begun here, for he took an active part in the affairs of the village, having served on the old Parish Council (closed down by the Borough of Margate, when they 'took over' Birchington and Westgate in 1935), the Board of Guardians (for Hill House Workhouse), a Justice of the Peace, Presidents of the Cheerful Sparrows and the Cricket Club, and a host of other activities as well. In a very real sense, this man, like his fellow educationalist Albert Hodges of Woodford House School, was a part of Birchington.

Above all, however, he was a Christian, and one who believed in God, and lived his life in the service of others. It was because of this that he exercised the great influence he did. He was a true friend to all and not least to the one who is writing these words."

[There follows a few lines on comments made by an Old Boy and a friend, concluding with a reference to Pilgrim in 'Pilgrim's Progress'. The article concludes with the following words -]

"Our love and sympathy go out to Mrs Jeston and Denys. May God comfort and help them."

As a memorial to Henry Jeston and to Bernard Ransome, the School Chapel was improved with the addition of a raised chancel set in a small apse. The service commemorating this event was attended by Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, on the 11th December 1954.

Soon after Denys took over the entire running of the school, he was joined by Jack Lidgate and they managed the family-run establishment for another 28 years. In about 1965 a twelve page prospectus was printed. Each sheet had a half page photo of different parts of the school, some showing the boys at their various activities. It had been started as a Preparatory School and continued as such until it eventually closed. One ex-pupil's abiding memory of his time there, between the ages of 8 and 13, is that all the boys had to go swimming in the sea every Sunday of the year. "The last one in got punished - really 'fun' Sundays!", was his wry comment.

On February 22nd 1959, a service was held in the School Chapel, taken by the Bishop of Dover, who dedicated the new memorial windows. The money for these windows appears to have been raised by the Old Boys of the school.

Denys Jeston married his first wife Eve after his return from the Second World War. She shared his life at Grenham House School and entered into its workings with zest. She acted as a 'House Mother' and part-time Matron, along with full-time people, including Staff Nurse Meg Stringer in the late 1960s and early 1970s. She died very suddenly in the early 1970s, much to the devastation of Denys and all at the School.

Denys soldiered on alone for a short while, until he met up with Mary Barkley, a Headteacher of Leeland School, Walmer, Deal. Her parents had died by this date. They married on 12th April 1977 and had many happy years together, with Mary sharing some of the burdens of managing the School with Denys, just as Eve had done.

The school limited its total number to 100 boys and class sizes averaged 16. This was "to enable the staff to give each pupil the maximum attention". The members of staff were all specialists who were responsible for their given subjects throughout the school. Although most of the boys were boarders, there were always a few day boys who lived locally. The school curriculum included Mathematics, English, French, Science, Latin, Scripture, Geography and History. Hobbies of various kinds were actively encouraged and additional classes were given in Art, Music, Judo and Carpentry. There was also a school Cub Pack and a limited number of the older boys joined the local Scout Troop. Boys in the senior forms were instructed in Shooting and took part in the Preparatory Schools Rifle Association's termly competitions.

A laboratory was built during this period of expansion, along with a new library. On a wall in this room a portrait of Denys Jeston was displayed. This painting is now in the Birchington Heritage Trust Museum. The classrooms were all on the ground floor with the assembly hall and dormitories up above. A heated swimming pool was built and later enclosed with a roof. There was a hard tennis

court and the 8 acres of playing fields provided venues for Association and Rugby football in the Christmas term, Hockey during the Easter term and Cricket, Swimming and Tennis in the summer.

As with so many schools from this era, both state and private, the boys were divided into "Houses", which all competed with one another in almost every sphere of school life. The four Houses at Grenham were Wellington, Nelson, Haig and Beatty.

During Denys's time, "Sheltwood", a house opposite the school in Grenham Road, was bought to serve in the same capacity as number 5 Beach Avenue had done in his father's time. Jack Lidgate and his wife moved in to this property and Mrs Lidgate acted as house-mother to the youngest boys when they first arrived at the school.

In 1961, the Old Boys of the school raised the money to present two beautiful wrought-iron gates in memory of Old Boys who had died during the Second World War. The gates were still there in 1984 when the school was finally closed.

In 1981, Denys Jeston sold Grenham House School to Mr Basil John and at the leaving ceremony, when he and Jack Lidgate retired, Denys stated hopefully that he was sure it would go from strength to strength. His departure ended 80 years of family ownership of a school that had an excellent name both in Thanet and much further afield. Sadly, Mr John, previously headmaster of a preparatory school in Bishop Stortford, had seen the greater financial potential in the ten acres of land at Grenham House School, rather than in its educational value.

Within three years of buying it, Mr John closed the school and sold the land to developers. The site of the old gateway can still be seen in the high wall round Homebirch House, which now occupies the site and abuts Grenham Road. The gates were sold to an unknown buyer by the developers, without them realising their poignant significance. To their credit, they had replicas made, which now stand at the rear of the site. It was rumoured at the time that the land went for £400,000, but how true this was is not known.

By 1987 Homebirch House, built by McCarthy & Stone, was providing apartments for retired people. The playing fields are now occupied by Hunting Gate, a large development of detached houses and bungalows. The once well-used cricket pitch and playing fields, home to many school matches and also the local Birchington Cricket Club, and many a church and village fete, have disappeared under bricks and mortar for ever. One of the house owners has perpetuated some of those old associations by naming his new home "Out Of Bounds", as it stands in the far North West corner of the old playing fields.