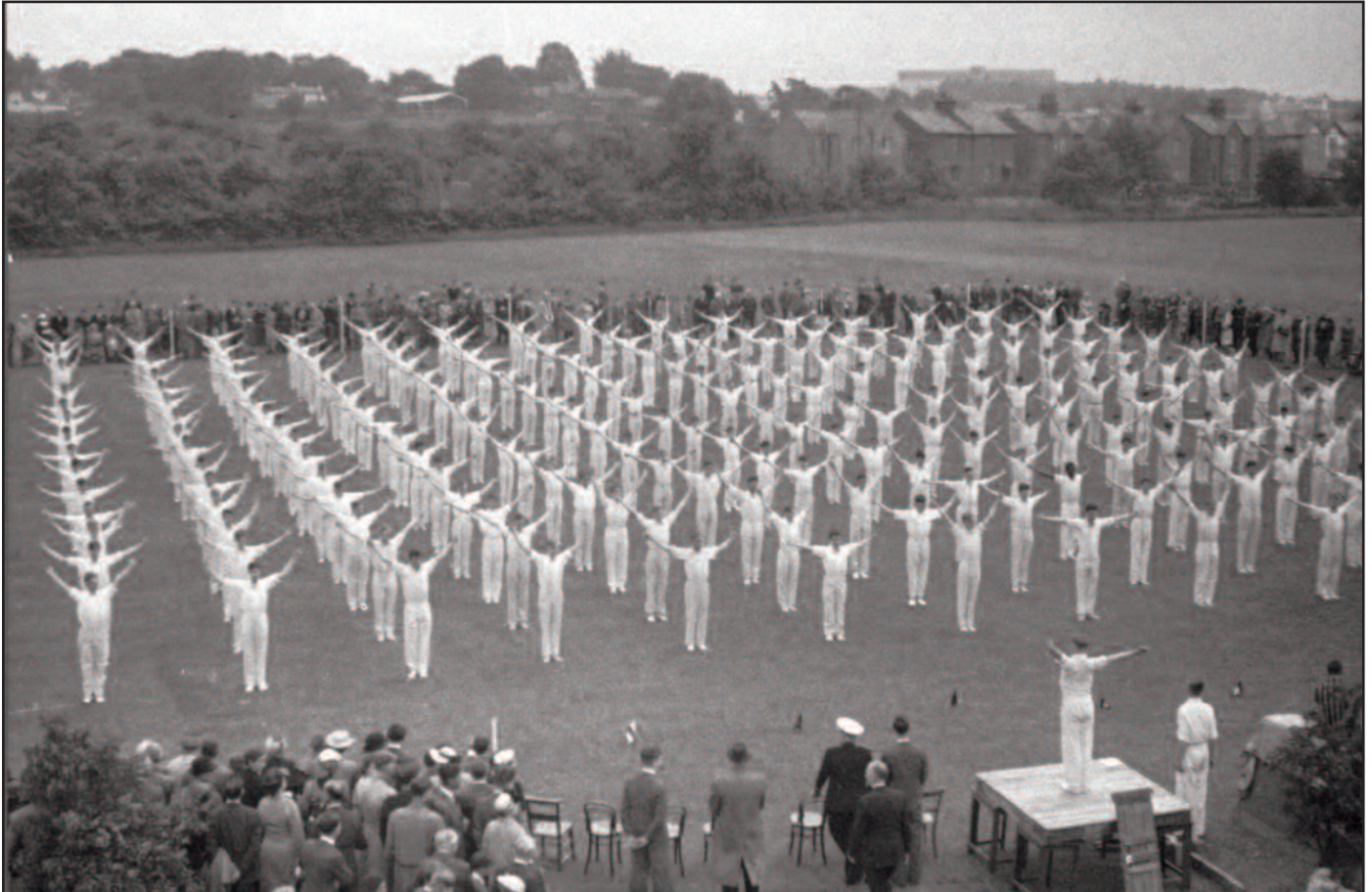


The Mass PT Display, Founder's Day 1955 – OE Nigel Jennings fills in the background

This article is adapted from a letter Nigel Jennings (Fayrer 1949-55) sent to Alan Scadding, Epsom College Archivist, in answer to the Archive Picture Challenge that Alan had set in the 2011 OE magazine.



In the 2011 *OE magazine* Archive Picture Challenge, Alan Scadding was absolutely correct in so confidently surmising “that this was more than the usual Founder's Day display but on what other occasion could it have been?” For this was Saturday June 11, 1955 – the Founder's Day in Centenary Year. This photograph must have been taken from the flat roof of what was formerly the ward on the first floor of the Eastern wing of the Sanatorium (Fayrer since 1965). As can be counted, the mammoth squad, 15 x 15 broad and deep, comprised 225 well-trained boys – not so far short of a half of the College's pupil

population in those days, plus the leader and his deputy out front. Distinguished from the traditional Founder's Day Gym Display this impressive event was presented as ‘the Mass PT Display’.

A brief idea of the nature of the Gym Display can be found in the centre pages of *The Epsomian* of September 1962 (Vol. XCII No.3). The issue was devoted primarily to the retirement of Henry Franklin after his illustrious Headmastership of 22 years. The top left photo shows a flying somersault; on the right, an impressive tableau, and beneath a foursome performing synchronised chair exercises ►

watched by their instructor, Sgt.-Major John Hancock, the School Sergeant (more about him later).

Concentrating on this magnificent photograph of the Mass PT Display (now deservedly framed in gold) the Principal Guest of Founder's Day can be seen amidships, with Henry Franklin close behind him: Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fraser of North Cape GCB, KBE, DCL had earlier addressed those gathered in Big School before presenting the prizes. He had retired from service in 1951, having been First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff since 1948. He had served with distinction during the War. As Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet between 1943 and 1944, he was in charge of Russian Convoys.

His hour of glory had come on Christmas Eve 1943 when, in command aboard his flagship *Duke of York*, he pursued the German battle-cruiser *Scharnhorst*, which had emerged from Alten Fjord with five destroyers to attack the Russian Convoy some 50 miles south of Bear Island.

After two unsuccessful attacks on the convoy, with daylight gone, *Duke of York* pursued *Scharnhorst* using radar. Having closed at speed at 4.50pm *Duke of York* opened fire at 12,000 yards. Bruce Fraser also dispatched four destroyers in pursuit. Soon after 7pm *Scharnhorst*, having already sustained several hits, turned to fight off the destroyers. This enabled *Duke of York* to close more rapidly to within about 10,000 yards where she reopened fire with overwhelming effect. The Admiral then sent in his destroyers to sink the crippled enemy ship. Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser, as he then was, was later congratulated personally by Winston Churchill for having removed the last main

scourge of the Russian Convoys.

Returning now to this historic photograph, this must surely have been the only occasion in its history up till then when the College staged anything of this magnitude. To the left of the Admiral of the Fleet and the Headmaster stands either a security man who was travelling with Lord Fraser or his chauffeur (maybe the man in the trilby was fulfilling both roles). To the left of this man stands George W. Patterson, the Prae. Sum. The Prae. Schol., Nicholas P. de Morgan, is standing just to the right of Lord Fraser. The vaulting-horse used in the Gym Display can be seen on the right edge of the picture, partially obscured by a bush, and the springboard (used with the horse) is leaning against the rear of the display leader's dais.

Alan, you suggested that this huge display was on the old 'Downs Shop' field. I believe there is still a grassy area behind the full width of the Old Sanatorium (now Fayrer), and beyond, some way to the west, that lies within the College grounds. A map of pre-1971 vintage suggests that this Centenary Year display area remains College property. One sure method of establishing this one way or another would be to stand on that flat roof of the former ward on the first floor of the Eastern wing and discover what hedgerow or fencing now crosses that distant beeline to the back of the recently new racecourse Grandstand (which, though smaller, was built on the same site as its more commanding predecessor).

As an aside here, there is, or certainly was for many years, a shop on the corner of either Treadwell Road or Beech Road (off Burgh Heath Road) which originally must have provided the name for that ▶

rather narrow stretch of College territory known as 'Downs Shop'. There must have been a small gate for pedestrians leading out to the Burgh Heath Road, enabling members of the Common Room and their families, and doubtless staff from the Sanatorium, to make brisker shopping trips than the ones to the Fir Tree shops beyond the Drift Bridge. Certainly boarders were never allowed to use that route to the Burgh Heath Road shop. They were permitted to visit the Fir Tree shopping parade beyond the Drift Bridge when free to do so; but we always needed a signed 'town leave' from our Housemaster to journey into Epsom itself .

Turning back now to the Mass PT Display and ascertaining who had inspired this challenging enterprise for the Centenary Founder's Day. Robert Stoughton-Harris had joined the Common Room as a young married master in 1950 and lived adjacently to the school at 123 Albert Road. While taking part in running rugby and cricket sides in his earlier years he was never involved in gymnastics. Since his arrival in September 1949 as the new School Sergeant Sergeant-Major S.J. Hancock, late of the Army Physical Training Corps, had been placed in charge of both school boxing and school gymnastics. While there was also a Master-in-Charge of boxing who took no part in the regular training sessions during the winter terms, there was no Master-in-Charge of Gym. Each Founder's Day from 1950 John Hancock, with his great expertise in this field, trained and produced a high standard Gym Display, which after lunch opened the afternoon's proceedings for parents, guests and other visitors alike as a centrepiece outdoor spectacular.

In 1954, I became Secretary of Gym.

I was de facto the captain, but in those quaint times, not being at least a House Prefect, I was not entitled to hold the sports status of captain. Having been elevated to House Prefect in Fayrer by Maxwell Phair in September 1954, I became Captain of Gymnastics. Fayrer, by the way, then had its day rooms in the 'Fayrer Gym', as it was called, just behind the Newsom Building, which had originally been built, I believe, as a gymnasium for the Lower School of old. Fayrer had its three dormitories and large changing-room in Newsom, and shared the communal dining-hall, showers, bathrooms and wash-basin facilities with Holman.

I also became Captain of Boxing, so I got to know John Hancock very well indeed.

It was, however, the forthcoming visit in Centenary Year by the College Patron, Her Majesty The Queen, which was set for Friday, May 13, that brought about further changes. The CCF's most senior Company Sergeant-Major Keith Young, the Head of Wilson, was in command of the Guard of Honour that first greeted The Queen on her arrival. He had to be promoted to the thitherto unknown rank in the CCF of Under-Officer in order to fulfil the required protocol and thus be enabled to be presented to Her Majesty and Prince Philip, as did his Deputy C.S.M., P.R.H. Thompson. Also, the Gym Team scheduled to put on a display for the Royal Visitors on the Main Lawn above the Chapel had to have a Master-in-Charge who immediately after the Display would first be presented by the Headmaster before himself in turn presenting both Sgt.-Major Hancock and myself to The Queen and Prince Philip.

So Robert Stoughton-Harris appeared in the School Gymnasium bedecked in long white flannels and the rest for the first ▶

training session of the Michaelmas Term 1954; and we saw him thus attired at frequent intervals thereafter. Not one to be involved in half-measures, Mr Stoughton-Harris also instituted for the following Summer Term a vastly improved Inter-House Gym Competition, much raised in sports status and involving larger house teams. The school, also hearing at the start of that Michaelmas Term of the planned 'Mass PT Display' and that Mr Stoughton-Harris would be in charge of that, was led to understand that this dramatic and somewhat daunting undertaking was the brainchild of Robert himself. To this day I believe that understanding to be wholly correct – indeed, looking back, I cannot imagine any other member of the Common Room, any member of the Council even, or the Headmaster having been at all likely to have dreamt up such a bold proposal.

Although I was not privy to them there must have been a number of strong reasons why this 'Mass PT Display' could not be performed during The Royal Visit. Prime among those was the simple fact that the College could not spare almost half its population as Her Majesty was going to be shown just about every facet of its vast array of activities, starting with a Guard of Honour from the CCF and followed by demonstrations in the Science Departments, the Art and Woodwork Classes, a campsite by the Scouts... you can imagine the rest. Furthermore, May 13 was far too early in the Summer Term for such a PT group to be honed to perfection. So Founder's Day that Centenary Year it was to be.

During morning break-time, together with a subsequent small bottle of milk, alfresco PT squads by Houses were the regular routine. Thus early preparations for the

massive June 11 event were laid.

Doubtless the calcium etc. in the milk then did its work to strengthen the bones and sinews of each boy destined for the high ground at the Sanatorium end of Downs Shop!

Virtually alongside the strenuous preparations for The Royal Visit right at the beginning of the Summer Term, all the smaller squads amalgamated on Chapel Pitch into a huge phalanx on regular occasions. I was only briefly involved to start with as my Founder's Day commitment would be with the Gym Team's Display. I can well recall a sunny mid-morning session on Chapel Pitch with Alan Parker in charge. As a Major who had already been the CCF's Commanding Officer, as well as an officer in Monty's 21st Army Group in Normandy from D-Day, Alan was able to produce a carry of voice that could well have rendered megaphones obsolete. That was the initial get-together of all the much smaller House squads before the eventual 225-plus reserves were selected and the real hard work began.

There was in fact a sequel to all this effort and later triumph when, in July, a film crew arrived to do the outdoor shoots for Pinnacle's film *Escapade*, whose principal actors were John Mills, Alastair Sim, Yvonne Mitchell and Jeremy Spencer. Borrowing from Halliwell's Film Guide (Second Edition) the story is thus encapsulated: "Parents row with a Headmaster when their three sons steal an aeroplane, but all is well when it turns out that they are on a peace mission. Whimsical comedy drama with a rather foolish point; the cast however can hardly fail to provide entertaining moments." The weather was perfect and, with the GCE exams over, the College was in relaxed ►

mode, merely feathering its engines 'till the end of term. The worried parents (John Mills and Yvonne Mitchell) had to be seen arriving in their car to meet the Headmaster (Alastair Sim who already had a better remembered role in the St. Trinian's films as Miss Fritton) and sort out the mess.

To give the appearance of a busy school in progress, at one point the director, Philip Leacock, wanted the car to be seen driving past an active PT squad as it hurried towards the Headmaster's study. The road leading down from Chapel Drive to the Cricket Pavilion was used. As Gym Captain I was employed to raise a sizeable squad from the original ranks of the Mass PT Display and be seen leading them as the

car passed in front of us. Thus, at last, though not exactly following in Stewart Granger's footsteps, did I achieve a sort of stardom! For there we all were on the sloping turf, with the Chapel behind us, performing astride-jumps with arm-raises in the same coordinated fashion that had pleased the Admiral of the Fleet a month earlier. There are other views of the College in the film too.

Released in 1955, *Escapade*, a black and white film, was produced by Daniel Angel and lasts a mere 87 minutes. It has been shown on television, though not for quite some years.

A DVD of the film has been donated to the College Archive.
