

Prefects: a 'Bossy Lot'

From the Garton Archive at Lincoln Christ's Hospital School

Occasional Paper No 24

by

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Lincoln School Prefects 1944-45

Back row left to right: J R Millar J S Pennington Walter Patton Phil Thody

Front row left to right: Charles Peacock Graham Reedman (School Captain) P J Cosyns

SCHOOL PREFECTS: A 'BOSSY LOT'

PREFECTS IN MOTION

Prefects are a "bossy" lot,
Who all together meet and plot,
To put in Saturday's D.T.
Young innocents like you and me.

A Prefect who shall nameless be,
Delights in giving out the "three,"
In library, hall or on the bus,
We think he makes an awful fuss.

The other day my friend and I,
Caught a prefect's "beady" eye,
Though friend and I were out of school,
The "Pre" applied the golden rule.

We should not brand them all the same,
For a certain one, I do not blame
Although he does his job with pride
He often sees the funny side.

by PRS

This poem, published in the 'Original Contributions' section of *The Lincolnian* magazine in the March 1961 edition, captures the role of prefects in the early 1960s in an amusing, yet insightful way. Prefects were charged with the awesome responsibility of supporting the masters in their attempts to control potentially rowdy and troublesome younger boys. At their disposal was the threat of 'DT', which was the acronym used for 'detention'. At that time it appears that DT was on a Saturday, and anyone receiving '3 stars' (reference to the "three" in the poem above) from a prefect or prefects within the space of one week would find himself deprived of his leisure time for a couple of hours or so.

We have a number of Lincoln School Prefects' Detention Books in the Garton Archive. In 1942-43, when Charles Garton was a prefect (he later became School Captain), typical offences were recorded as; persistent rowdiness in break; making himself a perpetual nuisance; walking to school capless; throwing chalk; indolence; 'puerility'; disorderly conduct; and using obscene language. Two of my favourites are; 'lowering my dignity'; and 'inferring that my head was of abnormal proportions'! One pupil was given a 'star' for gross insolence and pugnacious disobedience! Years later I played cricket with Frank for the Old Lincolnians! Neville Marriner (now Sir Neville) was given lines and a detention for persistent 'foolery' in the library and cheek after repeated warnings! Apparently he was a regular offender!

The photograph below shows the traditional seven prefects in 1943. On the back row from left to right are S F Newey, John G Fleming, Charles Garton and A E Mawer. Seated in the front are G B Deighton, Mike Freeman (School Captain), and P H Robinson. The intrusive 'ghostly' figure appearing in the window at the back has not been identified! Perhaps he felt aggrieved at not being made a prefect!



Other forms of punishment included 'lines' such as 'I must not be rude to a prefect', written out a number of times depending on the severity of the crime and the prefect's degree of sadism! Copying out chunks of Latin verse was another form of punishment favoured by both prefects and masters. Clearly some prefects were more tolerant and forgiving than others, as implied by the last verse of the poem. That certainly confirms my own memories of prefects in the 1950s, when prefects' detention was on a Wednesday afternoon, and only two 'stars' would result in a spell of DT. It may be that Headmaster Patrick W Martin changed the system following his arrival at Lincoln School in 1957. In order to accommodate the rising number of pupils on roll, he also increased the number of prefects from the traditional seven to eleven in 1959, and placed the 'Prep' building in the hands of six 'sub-prefects' (*The Lincolnian*, March 1959, page 2). David 'Dusty' Miller's memory seems to be better than mine. He writes:

'I don't seem to have too many memories of prefects. I thought prefects' detention was on a Wednesday afternoon until Mr Martin scrapped Saturday morning school. Were both prefects' and masters' detention on Sat morning? I thought prefects' DT worked like masters' DT— if you got two separate stars in one week they were carried over for a second week (only) and it was three stars to be put in DT, after which the stars were obliterated. A single star was dropped at the end of each week. Of course for a major misdemeanour you could get 2 or even three stars for a single offence! I vaguely remember taking at least one prefects' DT when I was a prefect. The interesting bit was coming up with an idea to keep the little brats gainfully employed for two hours – writing lines was pointless, but if one thought up a good essay title it was fun reading the essays afterwards. Some detainees used to try and say they'd finished their essay to get away early and had to be told to write more until two hours were up. I remember that in our first year in the prep building we had a distinct advantage of being able to keep a lookout for any prefects, or indeed the master for the next lesson, when they had to stride across from the main building before they could get within earshot or sight of the classroom. Certainly the prefects were expected to side with the lower forms when the

traditional snowball fight between the 6th forms and the lower forms took place between the two fields.'

The first mention of Prefects in *The Lincolnian* is in the January 1913 edition on page 2 under 'School Notes';

The old institution of prefects has been revived. Crawley, Shillaker, Robey and Mansell were publicly appointed by the Headmaster on the first day of term. Their arduous duties have entailed the need of increased nourishment, hence the institution of prefects' teas.

I am making the assumption here that the 'old institution' referred to the practice of appointing prefects elsewhere, and not necessarily to Lincoln Grammar School as it was then called, but we have no records to support this assumption. Crawley was Captain of the School and also of Football. According to the School Notes his lucky half-penny had not failed him yet and it was hoped that he would not squander it before the cricket season! The names 'Robey' and 'Mansell' are of course famous Lincoln names. The School Officers' names appeared for the first time in *The Lincolnian* in the July 1916 edition, and continued to be published thereafter. Prefects were named as V J Dunstan, R Hall, A M Knill (House Prefect), R E M Coombes, N M Baron and T A Joy. Curiously the School Captain was not named. There were 123 boys on the School roll that year.

A prefects' system at Lincoln Girls' High School (LHS) dates back to the early days of the School. The first School Magazine was published in Christmas 1898, when the Editorial Committee included ex-officio prefects; E Burchby (secretary), M Beaumont (sub-editor) and M Hoole. However the first full listing of prefects occurs in the December 1945 edition of the School Magazine. There were as many as 20 prefects, including the Head Girl, and 20 sub-prefects. By the summer of 1950 the number of prefects had reduced to 9 with 18 sub-prefects. By the Spring of 1951 the office of sub-prefect had been discontinued because Miss Cleave, the Headmistress, believed that everyone in the Sixth form should have a chance of serving the School and gaining status. Thus the duties of the former sub-prefects were taken over by the Sixth form as a whole. By the start of the autumn term in 1966 all upper Sixth girls were given the authority of prefects by the new Headmistress Miss Maureen Leahy.

Mary Lucas (nee West) recalls that, unlike the prefects at Lincoln School who had real power over pupils, their counterparts at LHS did not. In fact she was hardly aware of them until she joined the sixth form. She remembers that they sometimes supervised the 'prep' sessions held in the last period of the afternoon in order that 'country girls' could leave early for buses.

To become a prefect at LHS, girls would be made sub-prefects in the lower sixth, and then elevated to full prefect status in the upper sixth assuming they had proved themselves worthy of the title. One (occasionally two) was chosen by the staff to be Head Girl for a year, often from the third year sixth form. In daily prayers during the whole school assembly, the prefects sat apart from the rest of the School in a small gallery room with a balcony overlooking the hall. They had their own common room

next to the staff room, and wore a shield-shaped metal badge on their blazers to indicate their status.



Ruth Miller (nee Montgomery), who was Head Girl in 1960-61, can remember various administrative and organisational roles which her Deputy Claire Dillamore and she were expected to carry out, including duties such as thanking the Speaker on Speech Days. She also remembers appreciating the facility of the Prefects' Room and the laughs they had in there. Like Mary, however, she cannot recall being expected to hand out any punishments. Her memory, which she admits may be seen through rose-coloured spectacles, is that one word from a prefect and the pupils did as they were told! The photograph below shows the prefects at LHS in 1955.



The group above includes Heather Smith (Head Girl), Jill Ainley (Deputy), Eleanor Cooke, Barbara Forrest, Margaret Kemshall, Alice Mann, Hazel Middleton, Ann Scoffin, Auriel Stevenson, Ann Stobo, Rosemary Storey and Elizabeth Wilson.

Prefects, where they existed, at secondary modern schools had a somewhat less formal role as they were 15 rather than 17-18 years old. However there were prefects at St Giles Secondary Girls' School (later Myle Cross). Norma 'Biddie' Richardson, who was Head Girl, described their roles to me.

The Head Girl and Prefects were allowed to use the staff entrance to school, and they had the authority to give 'lines' for inappropriate behaviour, such as running down the corridors. It was the Head Girl's responsibility to press the bell in the Headmistress's room to indicate the breaks between lessons, and she was also required to give 'Three cheers for His Worship The Mayor' when he or she visited the School to give the traditional day's holiday for the Mayor's birthday. Norma also informed me that a friend of hers remembered that there were library prefects.



St Giles Secondary Girls' School Tie, with Head Girl's badge 1960s

By contrast, however, none of my contacts at the St Giles Secondary Boys' School can remember there being prefects, but memory is not always reliable, and if anyone can, do please let me know.

Elsewhere the use of prefects in boys' public and grammar schools was quite widespread. The term was derived from the Latin word *Praefectus*, which was the formal title given to many, fairly low to high-ranking, military or civil officials in the Roman Empire and who enjoyed some limited authority in their prefecture. In the context of schools, a prefect was a pupil who has also been given limited authority over other pupils in the school in order to establish and maintain high standards of discipline.

In many British independent schools and some remaining grammar schools prefects, normally appointed from sixth forms and led by the School Captain, or Head Boy/Girl, wield considerable power and authority over younger pupils. Typically they are responsible for discipline outside the classroom before school and during break and lunch times. Prior to the 1960s prefects in some boys' schools were still allowed to administer corporal punishment including the use of a cane.

One example of how the system operates in a school is described on the website for Keswick School where prefects continue to play a vital role in its organisation, assisting and supporting both staff and pupils. Their website informs us that the school currently has a team of around 65 prefects split between the three different types of role; Form Prefects, Departmental Prefects and Corridor Prefects, all of whom are led by a team of nine coordinating Prefects. Each member of the team is assigned individual responsibilities to take care of on a daily basis. Prefects also organise fundraising events throughout the year, from school discos to talent contests and non-uniform days. All forms in the lower school have at least two Form Prefects attached to them. Prefects visit their forms twice a week to assist the Form Heads and to support the younger pupils. The prefects also organise fun activities in the form periods for the pupils to take part in; for example, a weekly quiz. Departmental Prefects assist teaching staff in their lessons through supporting pupils and offering help with work. Each prefect is assigned to a department for an hour a week. Most of this time is spent in lessons but also outside the classroom, helping to prepare notice boards and other displays. Corridor Prefects help during break and lunch time by supervising the canteen corridor and queues. Overall, the Prefects' Team plays a vitally important role in the life of Keswick School and invests considerable effort in to making the School's systems run smoothly and efficiently.

Of course, in an independent boarding school, one would expect the role of prefects to involve wider duties than mere control, since such schools need to provide entertainment for their charges outside the formal school day.

J K Rowling in her Harry Potter novels mirrors the role of school prefects. A prefect at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a student who has been given extra authority and responsibilities by the Head of House, or Headmaster or Headmistress. One male and one female student are chosen from each house in their fifth year to act as prefects, and would continue to be prefects in their sixth and seventh years until they left school. Thus, there are approximately six prefects per house, and twenty-four prefects in the whole school at one time.

Returning to reality, The Buckswood School website sets the tone for those students who are placed in authority over others. They are reminded that those who are promoted to positions of authority can best assert that authority by example. They are also urged to consider the aphorism: all power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely. A person in a position of authority can best assert that authority by example. To win respect, one must earn respect and persons in authority cannot have 'off' days as far as behaviour is concerned.

Prefects at Buckswood are expected to be fair at all times, not to vary their standards, nor to have favourites or enemies, and not to allow personal prejudices to interfere with the administration of justice. They should not make threats which they are unable to carry out and should never find themselves in a position where it would be impossible for members of staff to support them.

This was not always the case however. (Mitchell (1976) reports that the Headmaster of the Perse School in Cambridge had to put a stop to the administration of corporal punishment by prefects as there had been cases of undue brutality. Such brutality by senior pupils was graphically captured in Thomas Hughes' novel *Tom Brown's*

Schooldays and in particular by the infamous bully, Flashman who engaged in behaviour of a particularly sadistic variety to Tom and other younger boys.

Stephen Fry, in his highly amusing autobiography (Fry, 1997) recalls his experience of prefects when he was a pupil at Uppingham School. Prefects were known there as 'praeposters' or 'pollies' for short. He describes the dreaded 'fag test'; an initiation rite involving a written test on the School House; their names and personalities. Anyone failing the test was subject to a 'flogging' from the House captain. The 'fagging' system, in which prefects had a kind of 'batman' who attended to their every need, was being run down at Uppingham but 'fags', or first year pupils, still ran errands for the 'pollies', although toast-making, shoe-shining, drudgery, slavery or worse had been largely abandoned. I recall the threat of being subjected to a rather tasteless toilet ritual when I became a 'fag' at Lincoln School in 1952, but mercifully it failed to materialise.

Far away from the hallowed halls of the public schools, Kenny Dalglish, in an article in a football magazine described a kind of 'fagging' at Liverpool Football Club where the young apprentices were required to clean the boots of the senior professionals in the famous and equally hallowed Anfield 'Boot Room'!

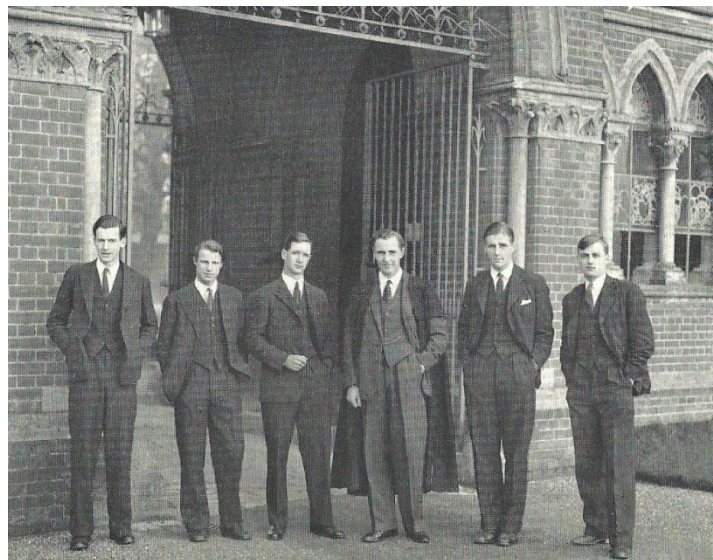
Surprisingly few histories of schools make reference to prefects, although there is no doubt that most of them had a prefectorial system in one guise or another. One exception is the History of Wellington College (Newson, 1959) which contains many references to its prefects. When the School was founded in 1859, Albert, Prince Consort is described by Newsome as its Founder. The first Headmaster, E W Benson, used Rugby as his model and established a prefectorial system. The history of the system at Wellington College illustrates the controversy surrounding their role in schools, and in particular their authority to use the cane and other forms of punishment, sometimes to pupils of their own age or older. In Newsome's excellent history of the College, this tension is exemplified by the frank exchange of views between Prince Albert and the first Headmaster, Edward White Benson.

The Prince had definite ideas on discipline and attempted to impress his views on Benson. He found the custom of 'fagging', and the use of caning by prefects and under-masters to be barbarous and degrading. In an exchange of correspondence between Benson and the Prince's Private Secretary, the Headmaster defended the 'limited and watched' use of the cane as being 'quickly over, breeding no spite and spoiling no temper'. He pointed out that caning by masters and prefects had been adopted so that 'flogging' might be excluded! Benson used the term 'reciprocal benefits' as a euphemism for 'fagging' which clearly did not impress the Prince or his private Secretary. Following discussions with the Governors, the prince reluctantly gave way and allowed Benson the right to manage the discipline of the School without interference, but in the full knowledge of the views of the Prince.

Strongly influenced by Thomas Arnold, Headmaster of Rugby, Benson was keen to establish a prefectorial system from the moment that the College opened. He gave power to the prefects gradually, and watched them with some anxiety. He appointed them not from the athletically gifted members of the School, but from the intellectual elite, and this presented more of a challenge to their authority. Newsome reports that it was not easy for a young boy, albeit wearing a top hat and provided with a stick to

carry, to establish authority with boys who were older and physically more powerful. The prefects' log book in the mid-80s shows the 'gallery of delicious rogues' who were brought to heel for such crimes as having stolen eatable from a fruiterer, entering a public house and bringing discredit of the College by becoming intoxicated, and the 'prevalent use of pistols and other small fire arms in the School'!

Benson's successor at Wellington was the Revd E C Wickham, and under his headmastership it is reported that discipline went smoothly, and the prefects 'excelled themselves in tact and loyalty'. Wickham had a different style from Benson. He chose his men and trusted them, with the result that prefects in his later years were reported to be of high calibre. In the conclusion to the history of the College, however, Newsome is critical of a disciplinary system that '...tended to make every misdemeanour a sin and every sin a disease best cured by the hard application of a cane', and that adolescents should be brought up with '...a fair amount of discomfort and pain'. The issue of 'Spare the rod and spoil the child' has already been given an airing in Occasional Paper No 7 from the Garton Archive, but the point of this case study is to illustrate the fact that corporal punishment both by masters and prefects was a controversial issue in the 19th century even in those schools of power, privilege and enshrined traditions.



Prefects at Dulwich College with Headmaster R P Longden in 1937

With the comprehensive movement in full swing in the 1970s, the traditional prefectorial system was discontinued in most state schools other than a handful of remaining grammar schools. The very size of the schools, and the diversity of their intakes, rendered it impossible for prefects to maintain respect and authority in a rapidly changing world. This was certainly the case at Lincoln Christ's Hospital School when it was founded in 1974, when the role of prefects was one of many old established traditions that were no longer thought to be appropriate.

Even at such a prestigious public school as Dulwich, the winds of change were apparent. Hodges (1981), in her interesting 'living history' of the College, describes the 'great wind of liberalism' that had swept through the boarding house system. The College's *Alleynian* magazine in 1966 contained an article describing the fact that a

pupil could be quite severely punished for walking through a door in front of a prefect, or even having one's jacket undone. Prefects had to be addressed with the utmost deference. Certainly in the 1950s at Lincoln School a prefect would frequently prescribe detention for a pupil for being insolent, not wearing a cap, or infringing the school uniform in some other blatantly challenging manner. Only a few years later at Dulwich, the prefects had been swept away altogether in the two senior houses. The system must have continued in some form, however, as Hodges summarises the development of the role of prefects in the 1980s by describing a scheme that came into operation whereby volunteers among the prefects were allocated to each of the lower forms to organise games, prevent bullying and provide someone to whom the boys could talk as they might not to a master. Hodges points out that the prefect system, strong in the fifties was weakened in the sixties mirroring what was taking place in the world at large. Qualities of leadership were no longer as prized as they once were, and authority in all its guises was more open to challenge. This in effect rendered the position of prefects in the traditional sense untenable.

Although not labelled prefects, the current system at LCHS of placing sixth formers in a mentoring role is remarkably similar to that described at Dulwich College. As indicated above, the prefectorial system employed at the Girls' High School and Lincoln School was discontinued in 1974 when LCHS was formed as a comprehensive school. In its place senior pupils are now used for the purpose of mentoring the younger pupils, helping them with the work, their attitude and motivation, and any behavioural problems they may wish to discuss with a pupil rather than a teacher.

A system of 'school ambassadors' is also operated, and is similar in some ways to the former prefects' duties. They meet parents on open evenings, conduct tours of the School and generally support the teaching staff. Senior students also contribute in other ways such as 'School Council' meetings, staff briefings and assemblies. The option to re-introduce prefects is on the agenda from time to time, but would be difficult to operate because of the size of the School and the diverse needs and abilities of its pupils. Headmaster Dr Andy Wright prefers this flexible approach rather than the more formal structure of a prefects' system. He is not opposed to such a system, but believes that the one they have in place is superior, and better suited to LCHS.

To conclude, the name 'prefects', with its somewhat sinister overtones, may have all but disappeared from state schools, but the role of senior pupils in acting as ambassadors for schools and role-models for the younger pupils is most certainly alive and healthy at many institutions, including Lincoln Christ's Hospital School.

Sources

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Hodges, Sheila (1981) God's Gift: a Living History of Dulwich College. Heinemann

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Various editions of *The Lincolnian* Magazine and the Magazine of LHS

A selection of Prefects' Detention Books from Lincoln School

Memories from former pupils including Mary Lucas (nee West), David 'Dusty' Miller
Ruth Miller (nee Montgomery) and Linda and Norma Richardson

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About the Author

Peter Harrod is Archive Assistant and a Foundation Governor at LCHS. He reached the dizzy heights of Sub-Prefect at Lincoln School in 1958-59.