

Picture Series No 104

From the Garton Archive

Lincoln Girls' High School Snapshots 1960-61

July 2021

I am grateful to Gill Wright, who was a pupil at Lincoln Christ's Hospital Girls' High School from 1956 to 1963 for sending me these three charming photographs. I am always delighted to receive photos from former pupils not least because many of them are informal and provide a different dimension to the more formal 'posed' ones typical of most school photographs. The picture below shows a bevy of sixth formers captured in a moment of time relaxing in the school garden.

Left to right at the top are Christine Wright and Joan Melton, and the front row consists of Bridget Staunton, Aileen Bean, Gill Wright, and Barbara Walton.

I wonder who the girl on the left, deprived of her moment of glory, might be?



The second picture, shown above, was taken during a school trip to Hardwick Hall in Nottinghamshire. The three on the back row are Barbara Walton, Gill Wright and Christine Bonnett. At the front are Veronica Wood, Bridget Staunton, Susan Jackson, Aileen Bean and Helena Purek.

The third picture features a group at Clifford's Tower in York in 1961, the culmination of a day's visit to the city, which included the Minster, the Shambles, and the medieval walls. The three at the top, let to right, are Helena Purek, Susan Jackson and Christine Bonnett. The four in the centre are Carole Fovargue, Gill Wright, Veronica Wood, and Barbara Walton, and the girl at the front is Sandra Montgomery.



Susan Jackson was clearly keen on poetry as she had two of her poems published in the 'Original Contributions' section of LHS magazines when she was in the Sixth Form during the early 1960s. Nature was her chosen theme for both poems, and the one I have chosen is called 'Helplessness'.

Grasses:
A flood-green theme, bending, swaying
Regardless of the moon.
Soot-blue tinged,
Blurred by powdered shade,
Accidental;
Swirling, sighing, straining;
Twilight-lemon, sun-beige –
Conflicting lines.
And up again,
Erect, defiant, but
Unworthy foes of the wind.

Susan left LHS in 1962 to train as a teacher at the Kesteven College of Education, Stoke Rochford, which closed down in 1978. Three others from the group also trained as teachers; Christine Bonnett and Helena Purek both attended the City of Sheffield College, and Gill Wright completed her training at the City of Stafford College.

A scrutiny of the LHS magazines of the period revealed the rich and varied nature of the extracurricular activities of the school. York was clearly a popular venue for school trips as Claire Dillamore described in her article following an upper school visit to the city during the summer of 1960. Some of the vivid impressions she recalled were the pleading eyes of the stuffed dog in the Castle Museum, the raucous screech of the peacock in the gardens of St Mary's Abbey, and the blaze of the floodlights attracting the moths in the chill of the evening.

It was Claire's first visit to York and she was keen to make the most of it by visiting all the famed landmarks; the nineteenth century streets with their bow windows, the medieval alley-ways of the 'Shambles', the Minster with its splendour sadly marred by the entanglement of scaffolding on its south-west corner, and the rehearsal for Benjamin's Britten's acclaimed project *Noye's Fludde* involving numbers of schoolchildren and musicians, and a timely reminder of a city prone to flooding!

However, this *touristique* adventure was but a prelude for the main event, the world-renowned *York Cycle of Mystery Plays*. Expectantly assembled in their seats well before the curtain raised at 8pm, the party soon discovered that modern comforts were not provided for that medieval experience! The girls were perched on canvas sheets that wobbled up and down in waves determined by movements further down the row! However, they were distracted from their vantage point high up in their stand by being able to see the back-stage last-minute scurrings of the actors and stagehands. At the appointed hour everything calmed down as a resonant fanfare silenced the chattering audience and all eyes focused on the ruins of St Mary's Abbey and the action taking place before them.

Claire described the Plays, possibly with a little help from the programme notes, as aiming to tell the whole story of the world from a Christian point of view and respecting "the simplicity of treatment of the Middle Ages when the plays were performed by the craft guilds of the city." A simple wooden structure with several different storeys had been erected in front of the arches of the Abbey, used with imagination and ingenuity to suggest the different settings.

Several scenes, colourfully and elegantly described by Claire, stood out in her memory; the fallen angels throwing down their cloaks from the uppermost platform as they were condemned to Hell, the cries of the crowd in rhythm with the strokes of the whip as Jesus was scourged, the poignant silence of the crucifixion scene, the majesty of the Archangel Michael leading Jesus and the souls from Hell to Paradise, and the commanding tones of God the Father on the Last Day. She also recalled the anachronistic sound of a distant whistle (possibly the haunting tone of a Gresley A4 Pacific locomotive on the East Coast Main Line), and the backcloth of a perfect sunset, turning from a clear yellow light during the opening scenes to a mellow red until eventually the darkness of night enveloped both audience and performers,

giving a finality both to the day and to the memorable performance. I found the imagery of Claire's narrative highly evocative of my own memories of York and its treasures.

Other events mentioned in the magazines of that period also caught my eye. Britten featured again in an article called 'Let's Make an Opera', in which Margaret Southard of the Lower Sixth Form gave an account of several months of rehearsing that led to three performances of a play in which a group of children and four grown-up friends decided to write and produce an opera. The production presented several challenges including the need to have two complete sets, the difficulty of how to perform the men's parts, and the challenge of singing Britten's sometimes discordant music with its unfamiliar harmonies and difficult intervals. All challenges were faced and overcome, however, and the production was performed before a packed house which received it with enthusiastic applause. One member of the audience was overheard to say, "You wouldn't have thought an old-fashioned story about a sweep could be so interesting!" It did, of course, pre-date the 1964 film *Mary Poppins*! Despite her apparent musical knowledge and understanding, Margaret went on to King's College, London, to read French.

It is clear from the LHS magazines' School Diaries of the time that music featured prominently in the cultural life of the School during the early 1960s. There were visits to symphony concerts in Nottingham and Sheffield, and members of the Fifth and Sixth Forms attended a recital at Lincoln School by Leon Goossens, arguably the greatest oboist of his generation. During the Spring term of 1962 a party attended a piano recital at the Theatre Royal by the celebrated pianist Peter Katin, known principally for his recitals of Romantic and Impressionist composers such as Chopin and Debussy and his acclaimed performance of *Rach 3** at the Proms in 1958. He also conducted Mozart piano concertos from the keyboard.

There is a sad note to mention, however. The death of Mr Frederick Mountney was recorded in an obituary in the Autumn 1961 edition of the LHS magazine. Mr Mountney served for over thirty years as violin teacher and conductor of the LHS orchestra during that time when he was also Leader of the Lincoln Symphony Orchestra. A colleague, LHS teacher Mary Sugden (See Note below), wrote in her personal tribute that Mr Mountney lost no time in forming a school orchestra when he first arrived at LHS, and shortly afterwards formed a junior orchestra which was valuable for providing continuity and filling the vacancies in the senior ensemble.

Mr Mountney was known for his sympathetic and patient approach, and for broadening the repertoire to include both classical and modern works. Miss Sugden remembered the delight at being able to study and perform works by Vivaldi, Mozart, Elgar, Vaughan-Williams and many other composers. His constant encouragement, inspired by his love of and enthusiasm for the music, seemed to mask the 'disappointing sounds which followed the best efforts of the orchestra' and promoted 'happy perseverance'. He also honoured the School by composing a sinfonietta which he dedicated to the orchestra.

Two former pupils also contributed to the tribute, recalling Mr Mountney's patience, power to inspire, unstinting effort, and the musicianship that he showed during his

own recitals, drawing exquisite music from his violin. Miss Sugden concluded the tribute by stating how privileged the School was to have such a gifted musician as a teacher, and that he would be remembered with gratitude and affection.

Those snapshots sent in by Gill have opened another window into the rich history and traditions of Lincoln Christ's Hospital Girls' High School. It is reassuring to know that, despite the current trend towards devaluing the performing arts - surely the heart and soul of the curriculum - those traditions have been maintained and developed by the drama and music departments at Lincoln Christ's Hospital School since its inception in 1974.

Note

I am indebted to Jane Burgess for contacting her friends, which enabled me to identify Mary Sugden from the initials MTS in the LHS magazine. Sally Jack, Libby Dennis and Lindsay Sutton remembered her piano teaching and Pat Coates has discovered from her research that her full name was Mary Townley Sugden. Pat found out that she was born in 1892, lived in Exchequergate Cottage, Lincoln and died in 1982. Her research has also revealed that Mary Sugden was a remarkable lady with a colourful career and as a result I will be devoting a future article to her.

*Rach 3 is the professional musicians' nickname for Rachmaninov's 3rd Piano Concerto. Both the work and its nickname gained publicity from the film *Shine* based on the tortured life of Australian pianist David Helfgott.

Postscript

Those readers interested in the Medieval York Mystery Plays will find ample details online. Suffice it to say that they are performed regularly in York, having been resurrected in the 20th century, and are based on an original set of forty-eight plays illustrating the history of Christianity from the Creation to the Last Judgement.

The York Mystery Plays are perhaps the most famous cycle, but others are still performed from time to time in Chester, Wakefield and Lincoln. The Lincoln or 'N-Town' plays were re-introduced by my much-loved and respected late colleague Keith Ramsay, who has written up his story of producing the cycle over thirty years (see below). The 'N' stands for the Latin word 'nomen' or 'name' and would have been substituted by the name of the place in which it was performed. Historians believe that the plays were originally located in the East Midlands, and it is likely that they would have been performed in Lincoln.

Keith Ramsay (2008) Lincoln Mystery Plays 1978-2000: a Personal Odyssey, Nerome Books.