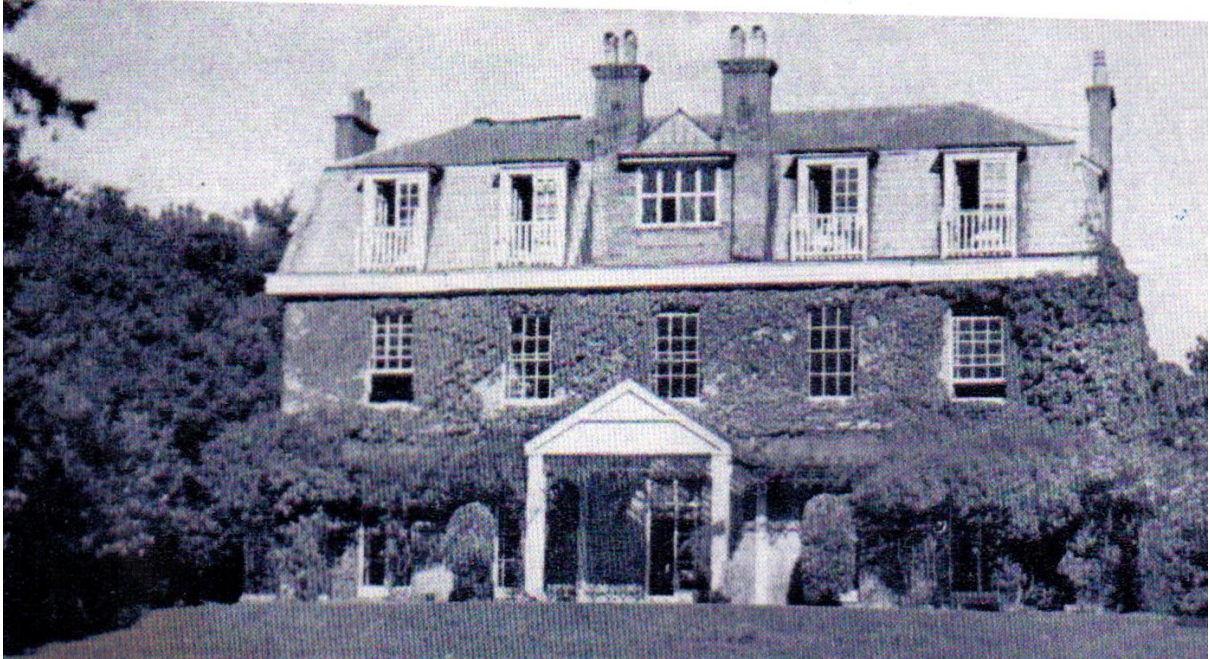


MADELEY COURT

Hemingford Grey

Family House, Nursing Home and Boys' Prep School



by Sarah Power

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Introduction

Some years ago, a Mr Tom Bekers contacted me in my capacity as Chairman of the Hemingfords' Local History Society (HEMLOCS) for information about his aunt, Miss Marguerite Selby, who had lived in Hemingford Grey at some time.

The following pages are a tribute to a kind and generous lady who ran a nursing home in Madeley Court and who, on the outbreak of the Second World War, gave the house to a boys' prep school facing evacuation from Kent, in return for a minimal rent.

The major part of my research focused on the life of the School during its years in Hemingford, based largely on ***A PRIVILEGED BOYHOOD, GLIMPSES OF LIFE AT A MONASTIC PREPARATORY BOARDING SCHOOL DURING WARTIME***, written by Michel Ware who was a pupil here throughout the period. Published by Cranley House Publishing, 64 Cranley Gardens, London N10 3AJ. ISBN 0 9528106 2 X.

Village resident, HEMLOCS member and past pupil of the School, Tim Keane, very kindly contributed the photographs.

Map and diagrams produced by the Old Augustinians Society: oldaugustinians.org.uk

I stress that this is no formal document and should not be treated as such. I have, however, thoroughly enjoyed the exercise and hope any readers will gain pleasure from a small part of our village history eighty years ago.

Sarah Power
January 2020

Family House and Nursing Home

In his book, *Historic Hemingford Grey*, published on 25 July 1946, Philip GM Dickinson FSA FRGS, County Archivist of Huntingdonshire, described Madeley Court as a large and ostentatious house of the mid-nineteenth century. It was once the property of Reid Adams, first Mayor of St Ives, and later of General Brook. The book was published by WH Smith & Son Limited of Huntingdon and the entire proceeds of its sale at 3s 6d per copy were devoted to the restoration of the church bells and the upkeep of the playing fields.

Reid Adams was Mayor of St Ives from 1874 – 1875. He was the son of a Wisbech man and ran a wholesale grocery business somewhere on the north side of The Broadway. He married a Miss Dimmock from Cambridge but there were no children. He appears in the 1861 St Ives Census, also in 1871. He is listed in Trade Directories for 1877 and 1885 as living in Hemingford Grey, but the house name is not given. He died in August 1889 at the age of 58.

There is reference to Mrs Brook of Madeley Court in the *Huntingdonshire Contemporary Biographies 1912*. An obituary in the newspaper cuttings album for Hemingford Grey at the Norris Museum, dated 8 October 1904, describes Major-General Richard Crundel Brook as a 'gentleman highly esteemed on all sides.' He was born on 18 November 1839 and served in New Zealand 1863 – 1864. He reached the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in 1881 and that of Colonel in 1885 and was placed on the retired list in January 1887 with the rank of Major General. He served with Colonel Linton of The Park, Hemingford Abbots for twenty-five years. He married twice and left a widow and one son.¹ Mrs Brook laid the Foundation Stone of the Reading Room on 1 June 1898.

In the 1930s the house was run by a Miss Marguerite Selby as a private nursing home for elderly Catholic clergy suffering from various forms of mental illness. One of her patients was Father Richard of the Abbey of St Augustine in Ramsgate. In 1939 Miss Selby moved to Kent with her last patient and learning that the Abbey School was facing compulsory evacuation, generously offered the use of Madeley Court to the boys of the Prep School at a minimal rent to rescue the school from threat of closure.

The house and grounds, stood on the north side of Church Street, bounded by Meadow Lane on the east and Love's Lane on the west, stretching to Diss Cottage where they joined. The roof of the house was a sort of double-sloped Second Empire or Mansard Roof, common in France but rare in England, although River House at the end of the High Street, is similar. The garden façade was particularly attractive, the rooms well-proportioned, even stately. The traditional picture of the house however is misleading because the front of the house is to the left and you are looking at the side of the house and what looks like a front entrance is in fact a little porch leading out from French windows in one of the main reception rooms, south-facing to make the most of the sun. The entrance to the grounds was in Church Street close to the brick wall and Love's Lane. The drive swept round to the right, then back on itself round to the front in a big curve.

¹ Information for both men from the Norris Museum, Info@NorrisMuseum.org.uk Microfilm copy of the local newspaper is available at the Huntingdon Library. Huntingdonshire Archives has a record of the Monumental Inscriptions for Hemingford Grey Church and Cemetery.

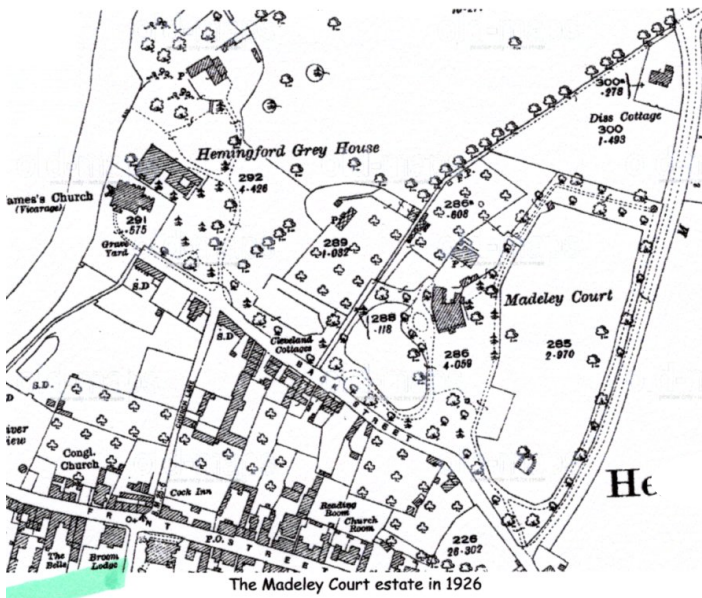
Boys' Prep School

The School arrived in late September 1939, sixty boys, some as young as six or seven, plus various monks and lay staff. They faced a huge task in turning a family home into a school, bearing in mind that it had been empty for a while. The stable block became classrooms, common room and tuck shop, where the boys could spend their sixpence a week pocket money, though with sweet rationing in force there was not a lot they could buy. The main house became dormitories, small ones for five or six boys on the first floor, then one long room with perhaps fifteen to twenty beds at the top of the house where the youngest slept. There was a fireplace in the corner of this room with stained glass windows in alcoves on either side. The entrance hall downstairs was very grand with a wide cantilevered spiral staircase sweeping upwards. The Headmaster's study was at the end. Rooms on the right facing the garden became staff rooms and the boys' refectory. The staff sitting-room contained a radio on which some of the boys were allowed to listen to the Royal Wedding in 1947. Outside in the grounds, an unheated brick structure was built for boys' lavatories, a low prefab for extra classrooms and a woodwork room and a simple wooden plasterboard chapel was attached to the side of the house. Floor to ceiling bookshelves were built on the stable block landing for a library. Older boys and lay staff slept in St John's House, now Rosenthal², opposite Apex Corner. Visiting parents could stay at Grey Hall, then a hotel, further along the High Street.

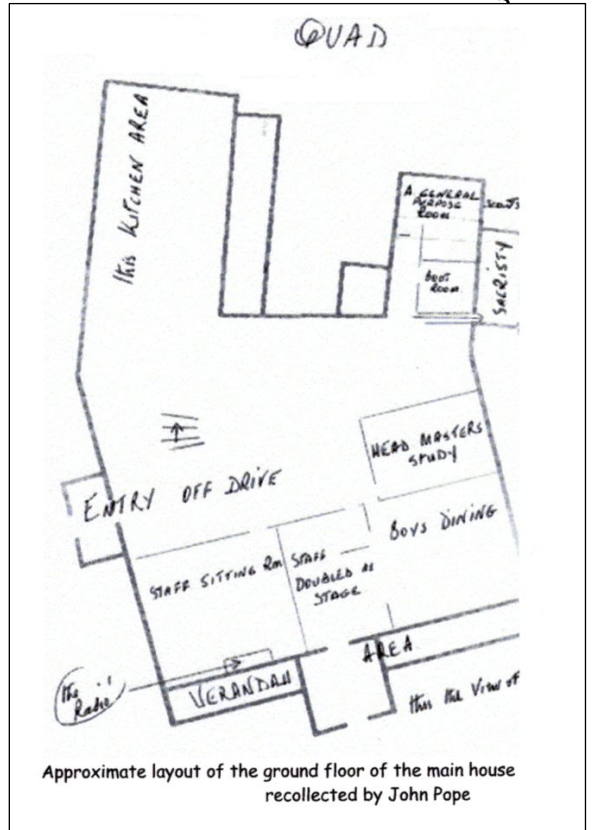
The grounds were extensive, sufficient to allow two fields, and included a large number of trees, including one very tall cedar tree which looked like 'a giant if very sparse Christmas tree', limes and pines and a huge, closely leafed dark holm oak. In one of the woods by the home field there was a small rounded building, once a summer house now dilapidated, with the floor an entire circular mosaic of closely packed bones, knuckle end up. The boys were much disappointed to discover they were probably sheep bones and not human! In what had once been a Victorian walled garden, there were two spreading apple trees bearing particularly sweet and juicy apples, a challenge to the boys, especially as the garden was out of bounds. They soon found a way, however, of climbing out of a classroom window! One particularly adventurous character thought he would try a more direct route by climbing along the top of the wall. Unfortunately he failed to realise that he would be in full view against the skyline. Needless to say he was caught and beaten, bare-bottom beating being the standard punishment of the day.

School life was according to the Benedictine Rule and very spartan. The day started with a cold wash, then Mass, then breakfast followed by PE outside, rain, shine or snow. Then lessons, Angelus, more lessons, Rosary, lunch, sport and other activities, Compline and supper, silent with book reading. One shallow, cool bath a week, shared and strictly to a rota. King George had his bath marked with a five-inch plimsoll line and it is unlikely the boys would have been allowed more. Ears were examined thoroughly every morning.

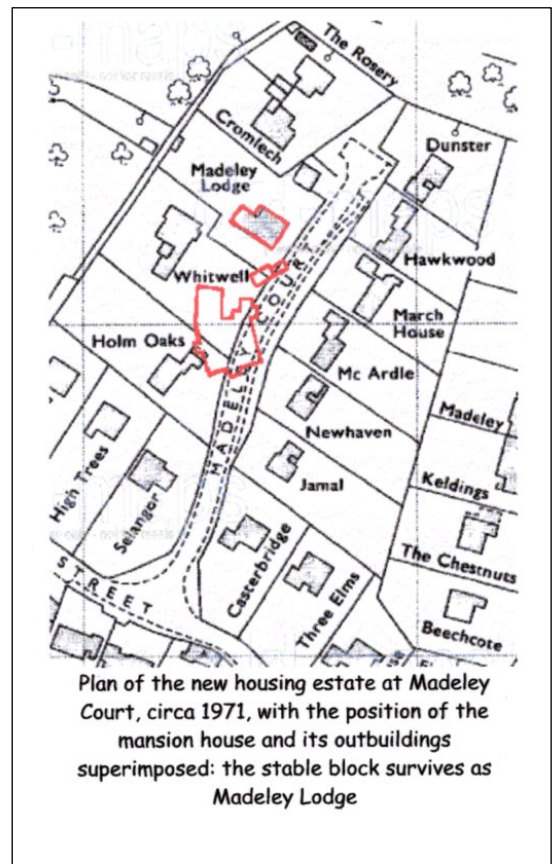
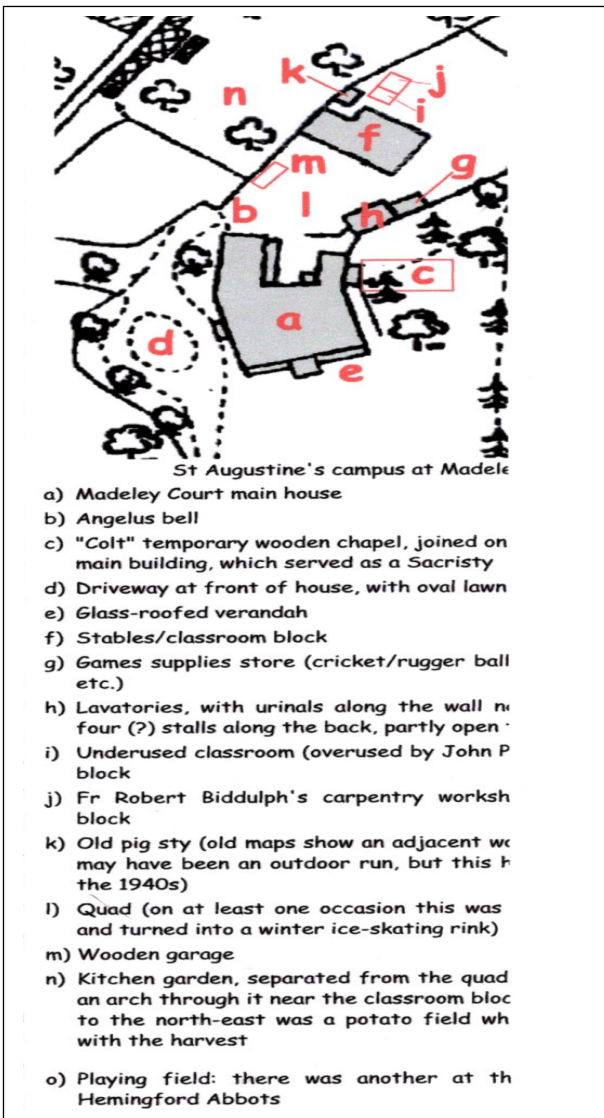
² Described by Philip Dickenson as a gaunt, three-storeyed yellow brickhouse, tall in proportion to its width, with a graceful pillared portico flanked by very large windows and a fine cedar tree in the front garden giving an air of distinction to this part of the village. The house was once occupied by John Gifford, a well-known brewer and farmer.



The Madeley Court estate in 1926

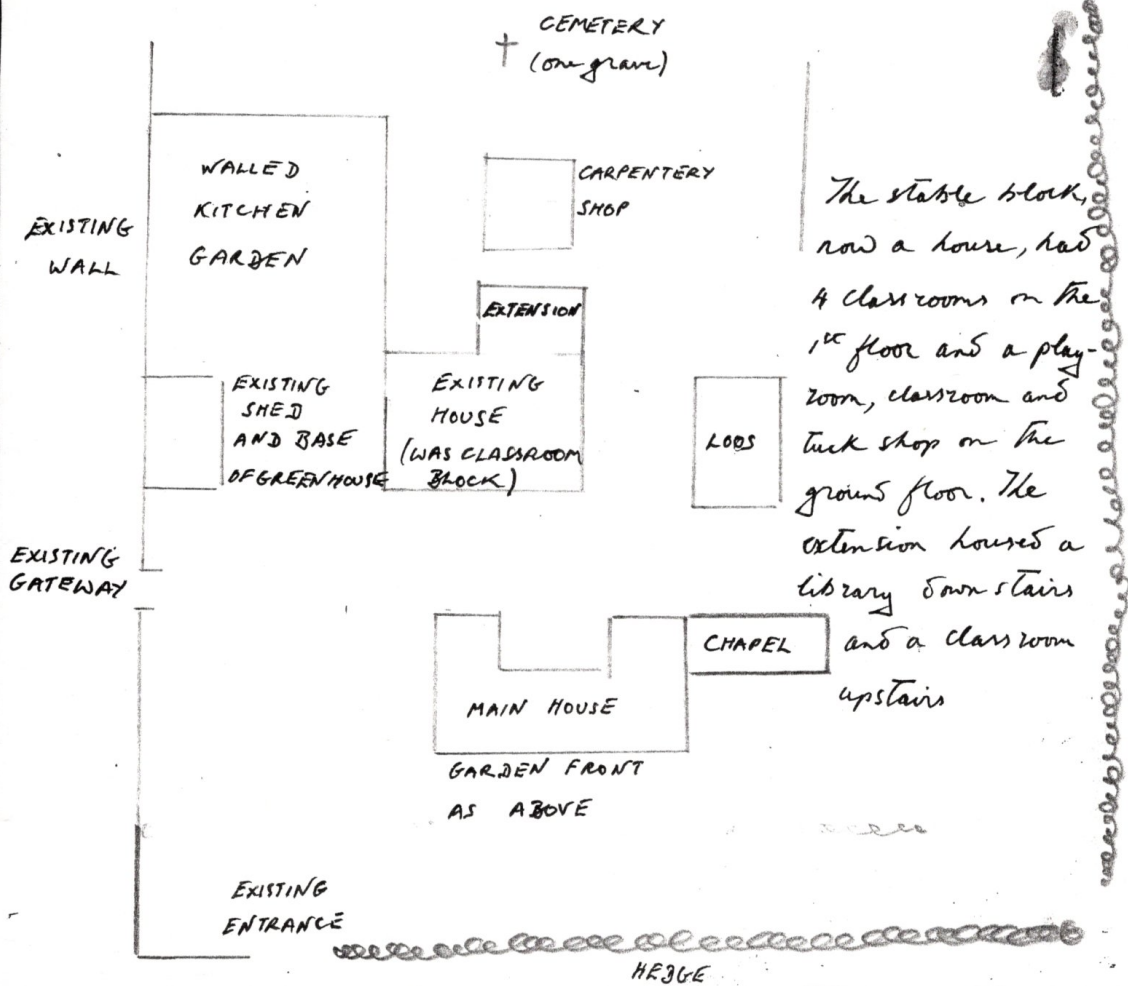


Approximate layout of the ground floor of the main house recollected by John Pope





MADELEY COURT



Sunday best included stiff, high-necked Eton collars, fixed to the shirt by studs back and front, very difficult for little fingers to fasten. Food was plain and minimal. Macaroni cheese seems to have figured large on the menu, but was obviously not popular, vast amounts of it being found decomposing in a water tank outside the back door. Other nasties were put in envelopes and stuffed down the back of a disused fireplace at the end of the refectory. Potatoes were grown along the drive. No mechanical diggers, just lots of little boys to pick them up. Milk was delivered by the Ashmore family every day, one wearing a brown coat reminiscent of Ronnie Barker in *Open All Hours*.

Academic results were excellent, despite the difficulty of finding good teachers, lay staff generally being elderly and not required for the war effort or perhaps young and medically unfit for military service. No science was taught at all. Films were shown in the Common Room, with the projector housed in the classroom next door and two holes drilled through the wall, one for the film to shine through, the other for the projectionist to see what was going on. The school bell was hung in one of the trees but had to be replaced by an electric bell in May 1940 after an edict that no bells were to be rung in war time. A senior boy was given the responsibility of ringing the bell at the appropriate time, quite a privilege as the bell was in the main house, near the boiler and where the best lavatories were to be found. Another privilege was taking the post to the Post Office³ each day.

Sport too was excellent, St Augustine's teams feared by all their opponents. Rugger or hockey in the winter, cricket in the summer, and boxing compulsory. Father William was in charge of the cricket pitch and a stickler for getting it as smooth as possible. He concocted a mixture of water and cow pats which, if rolled on the wicket correctly, worked to perfection. There was a second pitch on a sloping piece of ground. This meant transporting vast amounts of soil from one side to the other to make the pitch even. At the same time, boys in the village were digging trenches on the meadow. The rugby field was on the site of our present-day Priors Road. Boys marched there in crocodile file, passing a corner where old thatched houses gave directly on to the road. There was a swivel catch on one of the windows⁴ which the boys had great fun twirling as they went by. The catch was still there in 1997 when an old boy visited the village. The field was rented from a local farmer who saw no reason to remove his geese. The boys quite enjoyed shooing the geese out of the way, less happy to slide in a tackle and end face down in a pile of green slime. Swimming took place on the sandbanks on the meadow. Floods were obviously a problem and past pupils remember planks being stacked down Meadow Lane in case of emergency. Trains still ran along the railway line. On feast days the boys were allowed to hire boats from the local Boat House and row up to the Frying Pan for swimming and picnics.

At one stage, Father Ambrose, second only to the Headmaster in influence and power, decided to create a lawn to prettify a far corner of the playground against one of the walls of the kitchen garden where a walnut tree already stood. Boys spent weeks digging, levelling, raking and seeding. Brown earth sprouted green, but not for long. Walnut trees give off a fine oily spray from their leaves at certain times of the year and young grass does not like it. It was however, a noble endeavour and time consuming for a good many boys.

³ Now 45A High Street, then a shop and Post Office combined.

⁴ The Anchor, corner of Church Street and Church Lane.

Other activities included a choir, Scouts and Scout Camps, pilgrimages and an annual Christmas Pudding stir organised by Father Thomas, known familiarly as Friar Tuck! Some boys had to stay at school over the holiday. The monks would put presents in pillow-cases at the end of their beds and try to make it as home-like a celebration as possible. In May 1945, the boys were given three days holiday to celebrate the end of hostilities in Europe and spent VE Day itself 'messing about on the river' before going back to listen to Churchill's broadcast at 3.00pm. They lit a bonfire later and went to bed listening to the sound of dancing and music in the High Street.



Certain areas of the grounds were out of bounds and everywhere outside the grounds was out of bounds. But if you chose your time carefully and had faith in the fact that if you froze you were unlikely to be spotted, all things were possible. Knowing the monks would be in Chapel on Sunday mornings, boys regularly stole out to the nearby telephone box⁵ to phone parents reverse charge and were rarely caught. One boy taught himself to climb on the roof of the stable block using window sills and the tops of open windows as footholds and then charged other boys the princely sum of sixpence for the privilege of his knowledge. Being a shrewd businessman however, he only told them the way up, charging them a further sixpence for telling them the way to get down.

There was a craze for catapults at one stage, lead pellets being found much more fun than stones, the lead being sneaked off the roof near a dormer window in the stable block. When that was exhausted the boys resorted to a piece of dead wire outside a dormitory window, and having exhausted that, moved on to another piece of wire which unfortunately was the main telephone wire and the School was cut off from the world.

The relationship between the School and the village was not close. Not that the boys were stand-offish, merely that they were not allowed into the village on their own and were always wary that if they did sneak out, some well-meaning villager would report them. Occasionally scuffles between pupils and village boys broke out along the boundary down Meadow Lane but they didn't last long. The occasions that did bring school and village together however, were the school plays. In July 1941 they put on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, all parts taken by the boys. Music included *Incidental Music to a Midsummer Night's Dream* by

⁵ Removed in 1994 amid considerable controversy and media attention between BT, village residents and the Parish Council. The then Prime Minister, John Major, a one time resident of the village, was also involved. For full story see www.huntspost.co.uk.

Mendelssohn, *Overture Mignon* by Ambrose Thomas, *Trumpet and Organ Voluntary* by Purcell, *Solemn Melody* by Salford Davies and *Water Music* by Handel, the highlight being the wedding procession coming out through the French windows to a fanfare of trumpets, while small boys dressed as elves ran round the grass shoos the rabbits away. Many years later a local resident remembered the production clearly, particularly the scene with Titania and the ass's head and music that he now knows was *The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba*. It must have been some production and it is worth remembering that even the oldest actors would have been no more than twelve years old. The part of Puck was played by Charles Hodgson who made his name later on the London Stage. Edmund Purdom was at the school at the time but not in the play.

There was one air raid, or perhaps more correct to say the air raid siren sounded. This was not expected as the school had moved to Hemingford to escape the bombs. The boys were herded down from the dormitories in their pyjamas and perched on the floor, mostly in the Headmaster's Study. There was no air raid shelter and it was unlikely that any part of the old house could withstand a bomb. The ground floor was deemed safer than the upper floor merely because there was less distance to fall. The all-clear sounded after a comparatively short time. No-one ever quite knew if it had been a false alarm or somebody practising.

The School moved back to Ramsgate in 1958, after nineteen years, possibly one of the longest evacuations in history. The site was sold to a developer and the house, with the exception of the stable block, was pulled down.

Memories of Hemingford 1955



Back row, l. to r.: Robin Gundry, ? Wetz, Anthony Bussy, Michael Crowley, ?, James Hill, Kevin Moloney.
Front row, l. to r.: Richard Lynch, Frank Aung, Guy Sheridan, ?, ?.





Fr Edward's speech. Prize Day 1955



Gaudeamus nos alumni, studiosi filii, sedes Augustiniensis, patrii collegii,
under the precarious baton of 'Dom Tom', Fr Thomas Rigby



Back row, l. to r.: Peter Beglan, Tim Keane, Frank Aung, Michael Twohig, Paul Graham, Richard Tennent, James Hill.
Front row, l. to r.: Harold Metson, ?, ?, ?, ?.

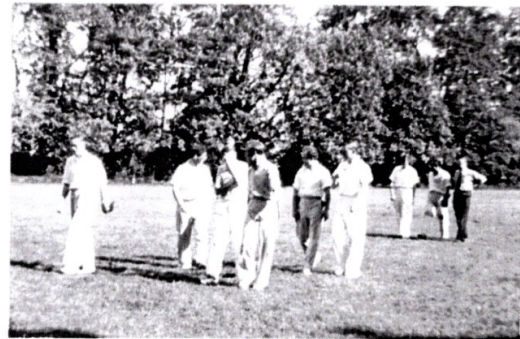


Harold Metson, Richard Lynch, John Illott, Peter Moore, Peter Beglan, James Hill



Above: Fr Edward 'takes the strain', while Fr Patrick Whelan prepares to encourage the staff tug o' war team. And yes, the penultimate figure is Fr Bernard...

Right: Brian Peers leads the O.A. cricket team off the field.



Back row, l. to r.: Guy Sheridan, Jeremy Rittener, Kevin Moloney, Michael Crowley, Richard Leggatt, Robin Gundry, ? Harris.
Front row, l. to r.: Michael Baron, Peter Beglan, Tim Keane, ? Wetz, ? Redmond, Anthony Bussy, Richard Barran.



Joe Blaney



Fr Thomas Rigby