



Photos from Portsmouth Priory and St. George's

Father Diman and some of "his" boys at Portsmouth Priory in the 40's. Picture by Edward Thayer Munroe.

THE THREE-FOLD LEGACY OF FATHER DIMAN

BY GEOFFREY SPRANGER

HIGH on hills overlooking the western and southern shores of Aquidneck Island tower two chapel spires. Above the East Passage of Narragansett Bay midway between the naval installation to the south and Mount Hope Bridge to the north stands the slim modern steeple of the Portsmouth Priory School Chapel. Dominating the hill between Easton's and Second Beaches on the south end of the island is the imposing Gothic tower of the St. George's School Chapel.

It is for good reason that these two structures are the dominant landmarks of these two schools, for on both campuses they are the center of daily life.

Both of these schools have many characteristics in common. Foremost among these is that each is a church-orientated college preparatory boarding school of the highest quality with student bodies of just over 200 boys, mostly boarders and largely in the upper four grades, termed "forms" in the English tradition. Graduates of both schools enter top colleges with large delegations at the Ivy League and comparable schools.

In organization and curriculum Portsmouth Priory is modeled after the English Benedictine schools such as Downside and Ampleforth. St. George's, in turn, reflects the traditions of the English public schools. Thus, both schools manifest many of the qualities and traditions that mark the popular concept of the "prep" school.

Nevertheless, the stereotype of the boys' "prep" school, the centers of fastidious status described by F. Scott Fitzgerald in the '20s, has undergone a perceptible change. Both St. George's and Portsmouth Priory actively seek scholarship funds and worthy candidates. St. George's, until the 1940s primarily a school for boys from New England and Philadelphia, now has students in numbers from the West Coast, the Mid-west, and the Mountain States. Priory, intended from its founding in 1926 to be less "exclusive" than St. George's had become, has students from South America, Central America, and Europe. In both schools academic standards are far more important than social or economic backgrounds and the caliber of the student as well as the

intellectual competition is as keen as in any schools in the country.

The real difference between St. George's and Portsmouth Priory lies in their relationship to their churches. St. George's since its founding in 1896 has had a close relationship with the Episcopal Church and cherishes its tradition as a "church school." The Bishop of the Rhode Island Diocese, the Right Reverend John Seville Higgins, is the President of its Board of Trustees and the charter granted by the General Assembly of the State of Rhode Island in 1907 specifies the role of the school is "the promotion of religion and morality, in conformity with the doctrines of the Protestant Episcopal Church."

In contrast, Portsmouth Priory School belongs to the English Congregation of the Order of St. Benedict with its tradition of Benedictine educational techniques. Stressing this association is the presence in the midst of the School of a monastic community of Benedictine Monks in whose hands rest most of the administrative duties of the School under the Prior, The Very Reverend Dom Aelred Graham, S.T.L. The headmaster, The Reverend Dom T. Leo van Winkle, is also a member of the Order, as are several department heads, the athletic director, and all the dormitory masters.

In both schools the religious aims are vital concerns. The whole communities attend daily chapel, morning and evening prayers at the Priory and evening chapel at St. George's. On Sunday, both schools have morning and evening services.

Religious education is also an important part of the curriculum. At Priory the five year course is called Christian Doctrine and stresses both appreciation and knowledge of Catholic Dogma and moral teachings. Church history is treated as a part of the regular history courses. At St. George's, on the other hand, the stress in the lower forms is on scriptural understanding, and for seniors there are courses in ethics, philosophy, and the relationship between biblical faith and modern literature.

In the curricula of the two schools there are notable differences that suggest a note of irony in the architecture of the two chapels. Priory with its slim modern spire places much importance on the classics, again a reflection of the Benedictine tradition. The students at Priory are required to master Latin and the school offers five years of the language plus a pair of introductory courses. Moreover, many boys are encouraged to study Greek with intensive reading of Greek classical writings. In contrast, the students at St. George's may study Latin but usually concentrate on the modern foreign languages and take such electives as art and music courses which encourage individual creative efforts.

To a large extent the differences in the academic emphasis and indeed in the daily lives of the student bodies are a product of the faculties of the two schools. St.



Baseball is important at St. George's.

George's holds strongly to the concept of "the school family," a term that suggests the close relationship not only between the boys and their teachers but between the boys and the family life of the faculty. Most of the masters' homes have an open door and late afternoon teas are virtually daily highlights of campus sociability.

The faculty of St. George's, led by its forty-three year old Headmaster, Archer Harman, is young and aggressive. About the school there is an air of vitality and total involvement by this young group as they work with students in class, coach sports, advise activities, and live in dormitories. The problems—and the satisfactions—of the school occupy most of their attention.

Innovation and experimentation are constantly discussed. The result has been a three-year-old spring program using college teaching techniques for seniors. Day long seminars with noted national authorities take place each year and frequently a new course is offered which makes use of a master's particular interests or background and supplements the traditional core curriculum.

The faculty of the Portsmouth Priory School is somewhat different. With the close association with the monastery, more than half of the faculty are Benedictine Monks. There is a warm rapport and mutual respect between these men and the boys they teach, but it is a more mature, settled faculty than that of St. George's and more formality between student and teacher.

The most remarkable fact of all about these two famous schools is the founder they share in common, John Byron Diman. He founded St. George's in a small cottage in Newport in 1896. Then, having established St. George's as a thriving school atop its present hill in



Far from St. George's Gothic Chapel tower is the slim modern spire of Portsmouth Priory's house of worship emphasizing the difference in the two schools.

Middletown, he saw the need for vocational education and gave the City of Fall River \$2,500 to undertake the training of boys in the manual arts. This was the beginning of what is now the famous Diman Vocational School and a model for present-day centers for industrial training. Finally, after undergoing conversion to the Roman Catholic faith, Father Diman sought to found a school that would offer the best possible education to boys of Roman Catholic background. The result is Portsmouth Priory School.

John Diman was born in Massachusetts on May 24, 1863, the son of the Reverend J. Lewis Diman, a Congregational minister, and the grandson of Governor Byron Diman, who in his youth was a Bristol whaler, and was Governor of Rhode Island in 1846-47. When his father became a professor of history at Brown University, John Diman began his long association with Rhode Island. He graduated from Brown and then from the Episcopal Theological Seminary and became an

Episcopal deacon although he was never ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church.

His first charge was the quaint wayside chapel now known as the Parish of St. Columba in Middletown. From there he went to Providence to teach, an experience that led him to devote the rest of his life to secondary education.

In his first year with the "Diman School" there were four boys in a small cottage on Catherine Street in Newport. The next year he was forced to move to larger quarters in a villa near the western end of Easton's Beach. By 1901, with the help of prominent Middletown residents, he acquired the magnificent tract of hilltop meadow-land where St. George's now stands, a site with a wide sweep of the sea, beaches, and rocky woods spread before it. The first building, Old School, now contains administrative offices, the school's Common Room and, upstairs, a number of dormitory rooms and faculty apartments including the headmaster's.



St. George's reflects the traditions of the English public schools.

John Diman, with the help of his sister, Miss Emily Diman, was a dynamic and effective leader as St. George's steadily increased its facilities and student body. Strangely enough, however, as St. George's grew in size and prestige, John Diman looked back wistfully to his original dream, a school where boys even of modest means could get the best education possible. St. George's had become popular as a boarding school for the elite, many of whom lived summers in the magnificent homes in the Newport area.

This concern of John Diman for equal educational opportunity in part explains his gift in 1912 to Fall River. The fact that the sons of the mill workers seldom rose above their fathers' stations, and that supervisory employes continued to be brought from abroad, struck him as tragic. He founded an industrial training school in the hope that it would aid Fall River youth to qualify

for better opportunities and would help the mill owners by training more qualified future employes. The facilities he founded were later incorporated into the public school system and became one of the earliest and most successful programs of public vocational education. Today the Diman Vocational School of Fall River has a national reputation and is currently planning a multi-million dollar program of development and is to be operated on a regional basis.

During this time John Diman was also undergoing a period of intense religious introspection as he felt the attraction of the Roman Catholic Church. Following a trip West and an appendectomy in 1915, Mr. Diman presented the Trustees of St. George's his resignation as headmaster and left for Europe to work with the Red Cross during the war.

He attended seminary in Rome and returned to Amer-

ica for ordination in 1921 and a post as a school chaplain and parish priest. In 1924 Father Diman joined the Order of St. Benedict at its headquarters in Scotland.

With his experience as an educator, the Order asked him to organize a school on some land it had acquired in America. Coincidentally this land was on Aquidneck Island virtually midway between St. George's and Fall River. Father Diman returned to found a third superb school, an accomplishment that secures him a position with such other noted New England private school educators as Peabody of Groton, Coit of St. Paul's, and Boyden of Deerfield.

Father Diman was Prior of the Portsmouth Priory until 1940 and headmaster of its school until 1942, when at the age of 79 he retired to the quieter life of teaching and Procurator of the monastery. He died March 17, 1949.

Now, although clinging to the traditions upon which each was founded by this remarkable man, St. George's and Portsmouth Priory continue to grow and develop. Both schools have built new gymnasiums, a reflection of the belief that athletics no less than academics are a chief concern of the modern school. Three years ago St. George's erected a new science building and ground will soon be broken for a new 50,000 volume library, symbolically attached, like the classroom building, to the chapel.

Portsmouth Priory has recently undertaken an ex-

tensive building program. Architect Pietro Belluschi designed the Priory Church and the new auditorium and science building just completed, as well as the Monastery and Stillman Dining Hall. A new administration building and infirmary are now under construction. These additions too are the product of Belluschi in the same modern style.

As seen from afar, St. George's, surrounded by broad meadows, reminds one of a small English cathedral town. The impressive profile of the four-spired Gothic tower rises amid the cluster of brick structures of English architecture. This image is further reinforced as late in the afternoon the chapel bell peals across the fields, calling the community to evening prayer.

Nine miles north, tucked amid tall elms, lie the simple white frame and dark modern buildings of Portsmouth Priory in the seclusion of a monastic community. Black robed Monks hurry across the campus side by side with young boys in madras jackets, the same books tucked under the arms of both. In the white gazebo overlooking the panorama of Narragansett Bay another priest sits in quiet meditation.

The difference between these two schools is textural: St. George's cosmopolitan and secular, Priory reflective and unpretentious. Both, however, are doing a splendid job of giving boys from all walks of life a thorough academic and spiritual education and thus fulfilling the dream of their common founder.

Sailing is all but a required subject at both schools. This is part of Priory's fleet.

