

## Wartime letter discovered under Sussex school dorm links to OF

*The unearthing of a letter from 1939 at Sompting Abbotts' Preparatory School, Worthing, has connected an Australian man to his British family during WW2. The letter belonged to an Old Framlinghamian and pupil at the Suffolk school during the war.*

*The school has traced its owner across continents to Australia and revealed details about his family's past unknown to him. The letter has fascinated the pupils of the school today and will now be placed on display and used as a 'real' teaching resource, with a special relevance to them as it was written to a fellow pupil so many years ago. The following is the full story kindly provided by Sompting Abbotts' Preparatory School.*

Hand-written in fountain pen, the four-page letter lay undetected beneath the wooden floorboards of a former dormitory for almost 80 years until a workman doing repairs at the school spotted it recently.

The well-thumbed yellowing note, dated 22 November 1939, is addressed to a boy called 'Jim'. He was a boarder at Sompting Abbotts Preparatory School during World War II and later a pupil at Framlingham College, Suffolk. Affectionately and poignantly written by Jim's mother, the letter is a vivid description of her first experiences of the aggressions of war.

Jim's parents were then living on the naval base of Harwich where his father was probably naval personnel. In her letter, Jim's mother tells him how she rushed to help British crewmen "covered in black oil and shivering cold" rescued from the sea after the destroyer HMS Gipsy was hit by a mine on 21 November 1939 (see picture). She recounts how she dressed two freezing young sailors using "a pair of your shoes and a Sompting Abbotts' flannel shirt and your old flannel coat. It was a tight fit but better than nothing".



The long descriptive letter ends on a warm note: "Well darling, I look forward so much to hearing how the play progresses. I bet you all enjoy doing it. Heaps of love from Daddy. From your loving Mother PS Hope you got the skates safely. I sent them from the flat."

How the letter came to be beneath the floor planks is unclear. Perhaps young Jim stored it under his bed and it slipped through a crack. Perhaps it was forgotten when he and his fellow pupils were hurriedly evacuated from Sompting Abbotts in 1940 following the Surrender of France when the school building was requisitioned by the British Army.

Now, the school, intrigued by the letter's discovery, has succeeded in tracking down the identity of Jim across continents to Australia. Staff recruited the help of researchers from both the UK and Tasmania.

No surname for 'Jim' was included on the letter but Sussex historian Margaret Sear of [Lancing History Group](#) was able to use the street address to determine that Jim was Donald James Macbride, born in

Richmond, London, in 1926, son to Colin and Ivy Macbride. She also ascertained that the entire family, including Jim's older brother David (born 1924 and also a Sompting Abbotts' pupil) had later emigrated to Australia in 1948.

There the trail ran cold. So the school contacted historian Betty Pilgrim of Tasmanian Family History Research. She discovered that sadly, Jim had died in 2003, aged 76, in Hobart, Tasmania, and that his wife Pat had passed away the following year. But she had some good news. Jim had a living relative: his son Craig, based in Melbourne.

"It was a wonderful surprise to learn of the letter's existence," said Craig Macbride, 53, an IT specialist living in Melbourne. The letter is a palpable connection to his family's history he knew little about.

"It was a bit of dogged detective work by the school to find me," he said, adding that the colourful letter from his grandmother to his father had given him a fascinating glimpse into his family's past life in the UK.

Craig said that his dad, Jim, had continued his senior school education at Framlingham College, Suffolk, after Sompting Abbotts Prep School. He had remained at Framlingham College until 1943, and was known for his shooting prowess at school, where he was in the Shooting VIII for three years. He then signed up to serve his country aged 18, serving as a Lieutenant in the Royal Engineers in the Middle East, before moving to Australia in 1948 with his family.

Aged 22, Jim joined the Royal Australian Engineers. From 1950 to the early 1980s, he served his adopted country and finally retired as a Colonel and Chief Engineer. In 1977, he received the Queen Elizabeth II Silver Jubilee Medal, awarded to individuals deemed to have made a significant contribution to their fellow citizens or community.

Framlingham published his [obituary](#) in 2003, commending his continued contributions to the Overseas Bag of the Old Framlinghamian Magazine and his founding of the school's regular Melbourne Supper for Old Framlinghamians. (this is a picture of the sundial the Melbourne OFs presented to the College in March 1983 with the MacBride brothers names on it)



Craig said that Jim had been "formed by his traditional British schooling".

"He was a disciplined and hardworking man – very 'old school' – who encouraged me to do my best in life," he said. "'If a job's worth

doing, it's worth doing well,' he would say. He didn't speak much about his life as a child during the war in England. I think he wanted to forget it, much as I was interested in it. He did sometimes talk about air raid shelters and the panic of getting to them."

Craig was aware, he said, that Britain was a pretty miserable place after the end of WW2. Rationing would still have been underway. "I knew my grandparents left for Australia to give my dad a better life," he said. "But I didn't know much about what their wartime experiences in Britain were like."

The Macbrides were among thousands of 'Pommies' who chose to escape British austerity after WW2. Many took advantage of the £10 Assisted Passage Scheme funded by the British and Australian governments.

So what will happen to the original letter now? Craig has agreed that Sompting Abbotts Preparatory School should put on display so that its story can be shared with the pupils of today.

Sompting Abbotts Headmaster Stuart Douch said: "We're so happy that the story of the mysterious letter has an ending. It has really captured the children's imagination and stimulated their interest in this important period of British history."



He added: "This letter to a former boarder is an illuminating insight for today's pupils into WW2, which they all study as part of the History curriculum in Year 6. The letter will be a wonderful teaching resource, made all the more relevant to them as Jim attended Sompting Abbotts too."

Sompting Abbotts Preparatory School, housed in a Neo-Gothic building dating from 1856, was founded in 1921 – three years after the 1914-1918 Great War. It was a thriving boys' boarding school from 1921 until 1939 and the outbreak of WW2 when the surrender of France in 1940 forced the school's temporary closure until 1946.

The pupils were evacuated to Wales and the British Army requisitioned the house and grounds. The school became co-educational in 1998. It ceased to take boarders in 2008. Today Sompting Abbotts Preparatory School is a West Sussex independent day school for girls and boys aged 2 – 13.

Below, you can read the original letter to Jim:

*4, St. Helen's Green, Harwich, Essex.*

*November 22nd, 1939*

*Dearest Jim,*

*Many thanks for your nice interesting letter. I bet you all enjoyed the lecture on deep-sea diving.*

*I would love to be able to see the play, darling. I bet you will make a nice girl. I always said you ought to have been my daughter! Is it fun rehearsing?*

*I went to London on Monday and returned Tuesday about 6 o'clock. When I got back there was a message waiting for me from Mrs. Watson since 2 o'clock, asking me to go to the quay and help her take all the old clothes I could spare, as the Terakuni Maru (a ship Uncle Charles has travelled on) has been mined and sunk just off this shore and they were bringing in the survivors.*

*Of course I rushed off at once but was too late. They had all been given food and hot drinks and dry clothes and had gone up to London.*

*We sat down for an evening chat with the Watsons. At 9.15, there were two most terrible explosions. One of our own destroyers struck a mine only about 100 yards from the harbour. They brought in about 140 survivors and Daddy and I stayed all night and helped. We gave them hot tea and soup and biscuits. They were practically naked, just wrapped round in old blankets or any old thing and covered in black oil and shivering cold.*

*The destroyer HMS Gipsy hit by a mine on 21 November 1939, whose rescued sailors Jim's mother helped to clothe with Jim's outgrown Sompting Abbots' school uniform. Photo: Imperial War Museum We put them in dry clothes but we had only got women's clothes for them except two young lads I helped into some clothes of yours and David's. One has got a pair of your shoes and a Sompting Abbots' flannel shirt and your old flannel coat. It was a tight fit but better than nothing.*

*Some were badly injured and 25 have gone down with the ship. It was a terrible thing and my heart ached for those poor men. They were so brave; they joked and laughed at one another because they looked so funny in women's clothes. The state they arrived in was pitiful and their poor bare feet were blue with cold. We only had a few pairs of shoes to give out so most had to remain bare footed. There were about four doctors working on those that were badly smashed up.*

*During this past week about 500 survivors from sunk vessels have been brought in to Harwich and given clothes, drinks, food, care and attention; not a bad effort. The clothes question is the most difficult. I have written to several friends and asked them to send us all the old clothes that they can spare so that we have a good store of warm dry things in case of emergency.*

*Well darling, I look forward so much to hearing how the play progresses. I bet you all enjoy doing it.*

*Heaps of love from Daddy. From your loving Mother*

*PS Hope you got the skates safely. I sent them from the flat.*

Below are some photos provided by Sompting Abbots Preparatory School

The letter uncovered beneath the dormitory floorboards at Sompting Abbots when work was being done

4. St. Helen's Green.  
Harwich  
Essex.  
Nov. 22<sup>nd</sup>

Dearest Jim.  
Many thanks  
for your nice interesting letter.  
I bet you all enjoyed the  
lecture on Sep 20<sup>th</sup> during  
I would love to be able  
to see the play darling.  
I bet you will make a  
nice gift. I always said  
you ought to have been my  
daughter!!!!  
Is it Jim rehearsing?

1930s picture of former Sompting Abbotts' pupil Jim (right) with his brother David in their Sompting Abbotts' school uniforms on a trip to London Zoo.



Archive picture of staff and pupils at Sompting Abbots in the 1930s. Jim is likely to be one of the older pupils pictured



Sompting Abbotts' pupils display the letter that was hidden for almost 80 years. Principal Mrs Patricia Sinclair (left) and Headmaster Mr Stuart Douch

