Hello and welcome to this month’s episode of ‘Within the Archives’, where we look at aspects of Eton College life throughout the decades through our archival collections. This month we will be looking at Exams.

Exams have always been a key part of life here at Eton, even from the moment boys apply to attend the College. One of the most important exams here is the Election, where applicants for the King’s Scholarship are examined and selected for the next academic year. Details of the arrangements for the Election can be found in the Statutes of Eton College, showing that these exams have been held since its founding. The Statutes go into detail about who forms the electoral body, who can qualify to apply for the Election and even details how they are to conclude ‘within five days’!

There is not much detail in Statutes themselves on how boys were examined when Eton was first founded, apart from most of the business taking place in Election Hall, and they suggest that they were largely chosen by nomination. However, in one of his letters Sir Henry Wotton details some of the questions asked to one of the applicants in 1637. These were largely questions in Laton such as ‘Quod est tibi nomen?’, ‘Quo anni tempore?’ and ‘Quave villa?’, and were most likely posed in order to make sure the boy qualified the requirement for a good knowledge of Latin. Today, the Election for the King’s Scholarship is done as a written exam instead of an oral examination in front of a Governing Board, and often cover a wide range of subjects rather than just Latin.

Another type of exam here which are more frequent for the boys here are the internal examinations, or Trials as they are often called. These have often been in the form of end of term examinations for the different subjects taught here, and today there is a week dedicated to allowing these exams to take place. In the past, it was often a requirement that you would have to pass these Trials in order to move up to the next year group, or division, which meant that the amount of time boys would attend Eton for could vary immensely. The Trials also started mainly as a way to encourage competition between the boys and to encourage them to push themselves, and in order to assist this goal prizes were awarded to boys who did particularly well in Trials, which would then be recorded in their record in the School Clerk’s Register.

However, despite the intended benefits boys were supposed to experience from the Trials, they still managed to act as a source of anxiety just like exams today! In his diary from the 1860s, Sir Hubert Parry details his constant revision of lines of Thucydides and Virgil for Trials, and by the end of the exam period he comments ‘Now we have almost finished Trials, I am not at all satisfied with my performance, and have some fears for my place in the school.’ In a slightly more upbeat look at the Trials, one article from 1960 even details ways to get through exams without revising, or even how to avoid exams altogether! For example, for Biology practicals they suggest that ‘If you are being asked to dissect a dogfish you can always declare yourself a Jehovah’s Witness and refuse to shed blood—or you can take a delicate swipe at your little finger, shed your own blood, and faint cleverly away.’

Finally, to end this episode, I would like to read the last verse of a poem submitted to the Chronicle in 1932, which I feel captures perfectly the feeling of finally finishing Trials.

Why are we all so incredibly cheerful?   
 Why does a mass of hilarious boys,   
Lately observed to be silent and tearful,   
 Loudly express its immoderate joys?   
 Why is our sadness   
 Enveloped in gladness?   
Why do our grievances suddenly cease?   
 Why have satanic   
 Invasions of panic   
 Yielded to tranquil and heavenly peace?   
 Stranger, the reason is clear, for at last   
 Fate has relented and Trials are past.