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Advertising Helena Compton; hcompton@spectator.co.uk. Supplied free with 6 September 2025 issue of *The Spectator*
The Spectator (1828) Ltd, 22 Old Queen Street, London SW1H 9HP: 020 7961 0200

Line of duty

Sir Nicholas Coleridge on his first year as Provost of Eton

YSENDA MAXTONE GRAHAM

The historic graffiti at Eton College, chiselled into its stone walls, wooden panelling and ancient oak desks, serves as a reminder to any Etonian that he's merely the latest in a long line of boys stretching back to 1440 who have passed through the school and occasionally bent the rules. Two names chiselled together into a wall of the Cloisters are 'H. COLERIDGE' and 'E. COLERIDGE'.

'Not me!' says Sir Nicholas Coleridge, Eton's 43rd Provost, when I visit him on the last day of the summer term, 'or any of my sons. They're dated 1817, luckily, so we can't be blamed.'

On being given his initial tour of the 15th-century Provost's Lodging last year by Caroline Waldegrave, wife of his predecessor, Lord Waldegrave, Coleridge experienced that same sensation – of being merely the latest in a long line. 'Caroline took us up to a little-visited bathroom on the top floor, and said, "Oh look! That's Martin Charteris's bathmat! I've been meaning to throw it away for the last 15 years but never got round to it."' (Charteris was the 39th Provost, starting in 1978.)

The day of my visit happened to be the last day of Coleridge's first year in the job. He and his wife, Georgia, were about to vacate their temporary accommodation, the Vice-Provost's Lodging, and move into the Provost's Lodging which has been refurbished. 'It was last rewired in 1950 and last replumbed in 1870. Things have been accumulating in its rooms since 1440. It's a labyrinthine house of great beauty. We feel extremely lucky.'

You really would want Coleridge as the figurehead of your institution. Fizzing with positivity and enjoyment, he's an enhancer of success at any institution he chairs, as well as promoter of its profile, raiser of its funds and guardian of its soul. Condé Nast International (of which he was president) and the V&A (of which he was chairman) basked in the Coleridge effect, and he's still chair of Historic Royal Palaces. Now – having been shortlisted, interviewed seven times, selected and endorsed with signatures of the Prime Minister and the King – he's bringing his chairman's gifts to his alma mater.

The Provost's role is 'Executive Chairman', Coleridge explains, and Chairman of the Governors ('the Fellows') – but unlike most chairmen of governors, 'who might visit a school 15 times a year', Eton's Provost is expected to live on site full-time during term-time, which he's more than happy to do: 'I find it incredibly inspiring and energising to be surrounded by young people.'

'The imposition of VAT has been a very damaging thing for education. It's pernicious'

What does the job involve? 'A great many meetings, on a huge variety of things. One minute we're talking about the heritage collections here, then it's finance meetings, audit committee meetings and board meetings. I have weekly meetings with the headmaster and the Vice Provost, and the Deputy Headmaster. We meet in a beautiful room, the Election Chamber.'

In a gown? 'Yes! That was one of the things that took a bit of getting used to: what to wear for different occasions. I have a crib sheet. A surplice in chapel on Saints Days and Foundation days. Sometimes a gown on its own, sometimes a gown with hood, and sometimes a surplice with hood. There's a great deal of processing in and out of halls and chapel.'

I asked him for three examples of how the school has changed since he was here in the first half of the 1970s. 'Physically it's almost identical,' he says. 'There are the same 25 boarding houses, but each one is in better condition. There's the most extraordinarily luxurious indoor pool that in no way resembles the unheated outdoor pool where my contemporaries and I passed our swimming tests. The school is much more international than it was in my day, when I think there were two maharajahs, one African boy (a great friend of mine) and 24 from Scotland who got special leave to go up the previous evening at half-term. Out of the 1,350 pupils we have today, 325 have overseas addresses, of which the USA is the largest contingent, followed by China, India, Africa, France, Italy and Germany. The international mix reflects the working world these boys are going to be going into.

'Another thing: in my day, you could learn Latin, Greek and French. Now you have a choice of 12 languages. You can do computer sciences – a very popular subject. Georgia and I have sat in on some divisions [lessons], and we've loved it. We've sat in on history, computer sciences, history of art... Georgia wants to sit in on a maths lesson, but I'm a bit nervous, as the last time I was in a maths lesson at this school was when I was 15 and about to do my maths O-level. Although I can read a balance sheet.'

The place is utterly seductive. Coleridge says: 'The beauty of the architecture seeps into your soul.' Any parent of a bright 11-year-old would long for him to go to such a school. The standard of music is 'so high that you could be sitting in Carnegie Hall', Coleridge says. 'We currently have a superb pianist, Ryan Wang, who won the BBC Young Musician award last year. The school choir is superb. I go to chapel four times a week, sometimes five. And the plays! In a typical 12-week term, Georgia and I go to about 14 plays. The school play this year was *The Revenger's Tragedy*. I've paid good money at the Almeida to see no better.'

Yes, but – how can any normal, middle-class parent afford the fees, which have risen to £63,000 a year since the imposition of VAT? 'The first thing I'm going to say,' he says, 'is that the imposition of VAT has been a very damaging thing for education. We're the only country in the entire world that taxes education. It's pernicious. There's no upside to it whatsoever. It has already driven 11,000 children whose parents used to pay for their education into the state sector and no plans have been made for that, of any kind. What are we doing? Well, we've been pleased to help 100 parents with the VAT. The Board of Fellows here felt instinctively that if a boy was already in the school, it would be the most awful thing if this new tax on learning meant that he had to leave.' But he admits they can't carry on helping in this way for ever.

Three hundred boys, he tells me, are on some kind of bursary, ranging from 'partial' to '110 per cent', i.e. covering uniform and extras. 'Eton has more bursaries than any other school of its kind in the country.'

Is there any chance of a bursary for families from the 'squeezed middle'? 'Eton does have a few bursaries,' Coleridge replies, 'endowed by generous alumni, for the "squeezed middle" as they're sometimes called. They're means-tested, but intended mostly for Old Etonian families who can pay part of the fees but not all, and need a top-up. I wish we had more of these.'

'There are 40 boys going to American universities... let's hope President Trump lets them in'

How has the social engineering by Oxbridge colleges, virtue-signalling as they hike their state-school quotas, affected Eton, I ask. (Oxbridge entrances from Eton halved from 99 in 2014 to 51 in 2024.) 'Social engineering happens everywhere you look these days,' Coleridge replies. 'But Eton has 60 boys going to Oxbridge this year – the highest for five years. And there are 40 going to American universities. Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Brown, some on scholarships... let's hope President Trump lets them in. He'll be staying up the road soon.' (Coleridge points towards Windsor Castle beyond the trees.)

I mention an essay by Julian Barnes, published earlier this year, in which the author lists the banning measures he'd take if he ran what he calls 'The Benign Republic of Barnes'. They include 'a 50-year ban on any Old Etonian becoming prime minister, and a 25-year ban on one becoming a cabinet minister'. How does Coleridge deal with that instinctive, post-Boris Johnson anti-Etonian feeling? 'You know, Eton has to live with that stereotype. And I don't think there's anything that anyone can say or do that's going to change that. Obviously not every single OE is arrogance-free, but I speak as I find. And I think most Etonian stereotypes are way wide of the mark. Since I've been here, I can say completely honestly that I have not seen a trace of arrogance from any boy. The characteristics of an Etonian, as I see it, are: friendly, chatty, well-informed, good-mannered, independent-minded and fun. Eton boys are usually quite confident, which is emphatically not the same as being show-offy.'

How often is he asked whether Eton plans to take girls? 'All the time,' he says. 'And no human soul has ever dared to ask the headmistress of an all-girls school when she's going to start taking boys. My answer is: never say never. We have two or three boys applying for every place here, so I can't see the need for it yet. But we'll see how it pans out in the future.'

After our chat, and a delicious summer lunch prepared by Georgia in the kitchen, Coleridge dashes up to London to visit a possible generous donor to the college; and his visit is entirely successful.

ALAMY

Good innings

The joy of school cricket

PATRICK KIDD

Few presidents can claim such an immediate success. At the end of June, I became president of my school's alumni association and then, just five days later, the First XI won their first match at the annual Royal Grammar Schools' Cricket Festival since 2017.

A coincidence? Well, obviously. But I'd like to think that Colchester's youth drew confidence from me having a net at the school field on Old Colcestrians' Day and getting hit on the bonce by the first ball I faced from the sixtysomething head of Year 12. If this is how poorly the alumni play, they will have thought, we can't be all that bad.

I was never any good at cricket, much as I loved it. One presidential duty was to unveil a plaque on a new scoreboard. I observed that a plaque should also be placed on the field at square leg where a momentous event happened in 1994: I held a catch. It wasn't even for our school. Wolverhampton Grammar were one short so our cricket master loaned his worst player. Colchester's skipper hit the ball in the air to the one place on the ground he could be certain it would be safe – straight at me – and miraculously it stuck.

Returning to the school field 30 years after I left brought a wave of nostalgia. The place hadn't changed a bit. The wooden benches, pegs and showers in the 1930s pavilion are just the same; the photos of forebears on the wall barely faded. Even Pete the groundsman was still there, though he had finally retired after 49 years of service.

What has changed is the amount of cricket played in state schools like ours. Members of the unbeaten 1975 First XI recalled, at a reunion, a season when they played 28 fixtures. This year, the school had just four, plus the week-long festival against five other royal grammars. The matches we had in the 1990s against local private schools – Felsted, Framlingham, Forest, to name just the Fs – have all been dropped.

Part of it is cost: travel and equipment are areas where bursars can trim their budgets – and independent schools are eight times more likely to have grass pitches. Time is also a problem. Cricket does not suit an hour-long PE lesson for 30 mixed-ability children. And the hours given to PE in state schools fell by 13 per cent from 2011 to 2021.

Only three of the England XI that started this summer's Test series against India were state-educated, but the England and Wales Cricket Board has a five-year strategy to boost their number by funding training for teachers and equipment. The MCC Foundation has also created hubs at 77 independent schools where they share facilities with state schools. Next year there will be a new Under-15s tournament for state school boys and girls, with a final at Lord's – a riposte to the charge of elitism over the ground continuing to host Eton vs Harrow, as it has since 1805. And perhaps the tide is turning: Barton Peveril (not a West Indies fast bowler but a sixth-form college in Hampshire) became the first state school to reach the girls' national final this year, where they lost to Rugby, who also won the boys' competition.

A plaque should be placed on the field at square leg where I once held a catch in 1994

Of course, the state and independent sectors have never quite played on the same field, even when their matches were competitive. Colchester's glory boys of 1975 were led by Mike McEvoy, later my cricket master, who was selected for Young England Cricketers and described in *Wisden* as 'the best organised batsman' of his cohort. Yet there was no mention of Colchester RGS's results in the 54 pages of schools' cricket that year. That all went to independent schools.

In 2008, *Wisden* introduced a prize for schools cricketer of the year. The first three winners – Jonny Bairstow (St Peter's, York), James Taylor (Shrewsbury) and Jos Buttler (King's, Taunton) – went on to England's Test side, as has Jacob Bethell (Rugby, 2022). Only one so far was at a state school: Teddie Casterton (High Wycombe RGS, 2018). There is a delight in flicking through old *Wisdens* to spot future stars as children. In the school averages for 2016, for instance, you will find Ollie Pope (Cranleigh), Zak Crawley (Tonbridge) and Harry Brook (Sedbergh), all currently in the England XI, though they were beaten to the top prize by the subsequently unheralded A.J. Woodland (St Edward's, Oxford). Yet we must not assume that everyone who plays cricket at an independent school comes from money. Many internationals, including Bairstow, Buttler, Brook and the great Joe Root (Worksop College), had a cricket scholarship. In giving them this opportunity, the schools worked as a kind of national academy. The challenge is to discover this raw talent early and find the means to send them to the places that can nurture it.

In the 2021 *Wisden*, Robert Winder unearthed early reports of future heroes. We have the 13-year-old Colin Cowdrey bringing cheer to Tonbridge in 1946 by making 119 at Lord's; the astonishing bowling figures in 1984 of Mike Atherton (Manchester Grammar) and Nasser Hussain (Forest School), two future England captains who became much better known for batting; and Imran Khan, who played for Pakistan while at Worcester RGS, being outshone in the national school averages by the famously slow-scoring Chris Tavaré (Sevenoaks). What a privilege it must have been to spot these titans before they started to shave.

The joy of school cricket is summed up best in that feature by Bob Barber, who holds the record for the highest score by an England batsman on the first day of an Ashes Test. In 1953, Barber achieved the double for Ruthin School of 1,000 runs and 100 wickets. Recalling those days, he said: 'It was happy cricket, that was the thing. I strongly believe that if you want people to play well they've got to be happy. I don't remember any stress. That big green field at Ruthin – it's always sunny when you're young, isn't it?' And shouldn't that be the goal of all schools: to give their pupils sunny memories?

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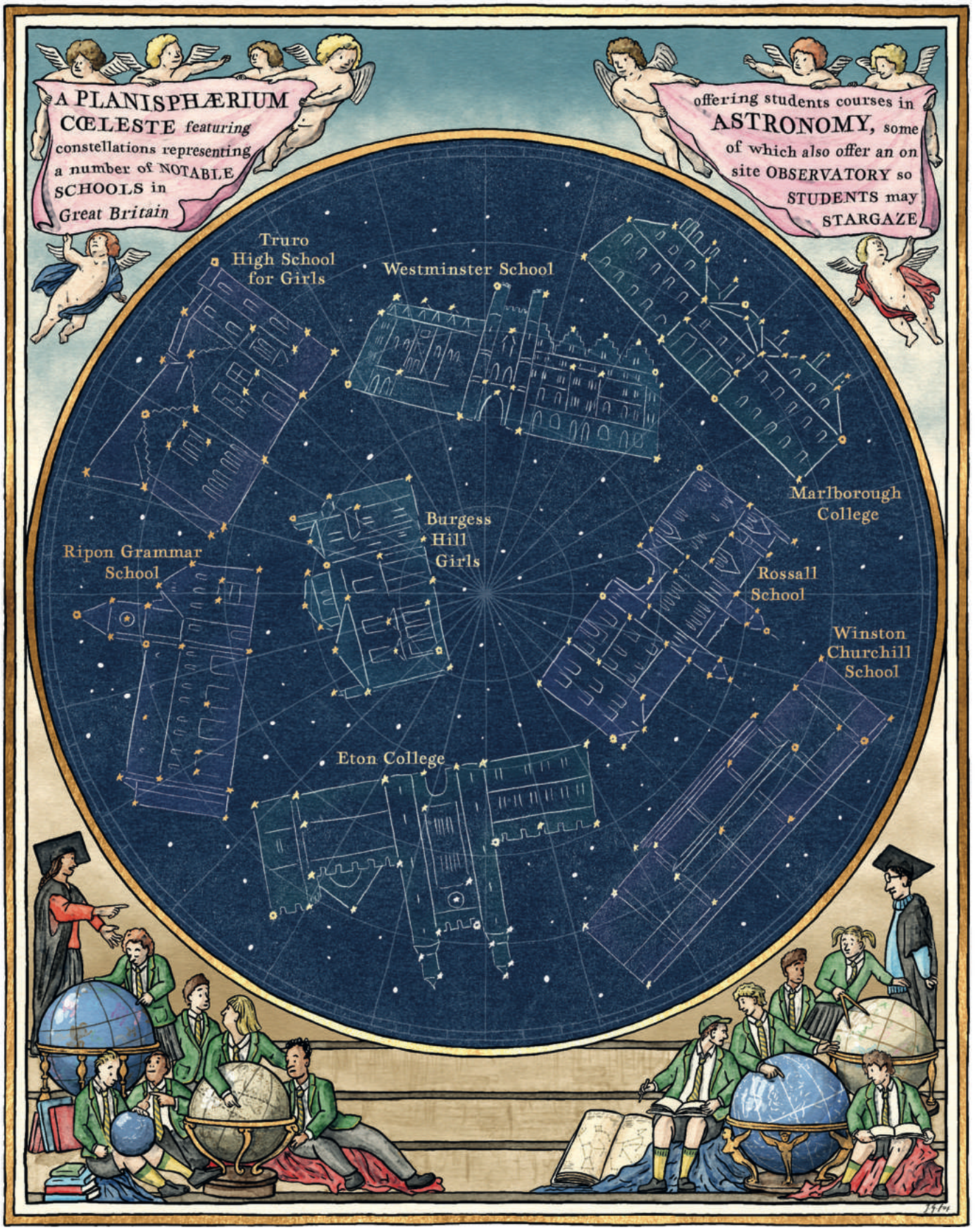
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Star pupils

Aiming high with Marlborough's astronomy students

LARA PRENDERGAST

As I trudge up to Marlborough's observatory, near the top of the playing fields, I'm transported back to my time as a pupil here. I studied astronomy for GCSE, which meant spending many evenings at the observatory, gazing at the night sky.

The Blackett Observatory, which houses a superb Cooke 10in refractor telescope, celebrates its 90th anniversary this month. I've been invited back by my tutor Jonathan Genton, former head of science and teacher of the GCSE astronomy course, and Gavin James, director of the observatory, who oversees the astronomy programme. 'Everybody should study astronomy,' says James. 'It's the original science.'

The reality, of course, is that the subject remains niche, with only a handful of schools across the country offering GCSE astronomy. These include Westminster School, Ripon Grammar School in North Yorkshire, Rossall School in Lancashire, Burgess Hill Girls in West Sussex, Truro High School for Girls in Cornwall and the Winston Churchill School in Surrey, the first state school in Britain with a permanent on-site planetarium. Eton College has an observatory but does not yet offer GCSE astronomy to its pupils. 'They've got a Cooke instrument, but ours is significantly larger,' says James.

Marlborough College's pupils are fortunate to have, on the school's grounds, a particularly fine telescope known as the Barclay Equatorial. Built in 1860 by Thomas Cooke & Sons of York, it was one of the largest refractors of its time. Originally housed in Leyton and then at the Radcliffe Observatory, Oxford, the telescope was relocated in 1935 to Marlborough, thanks in large part to the efforts of Sir Basil Blackett, a former pupil who led a fundraising campaign to house the telescope on the playing fields.

Jonathan Genton arrived at Marlborough in 1987. He set about encouraging the school to consider restoring the observatory and its telescope, which had by then fallen into disrepair. 'There is some evidence to suggest a few pupils back then were diligent in doing real astronomy,' says James. But by all accounts, the observatory was mainly used by pupils hoping to go unobserved. Some would even stay the night, 'bringing pots of custard with them'. To put an end to this sort of behaviour, the observatory's windows were filled in with beautiful brickwork showing the phases of the moon, marking the beginning of a new era.

'We had an *annus mirabilis* in 1997, when comet Hale-Bopp appeared in the sky,' Genton explains. 'It was such an obvious attraction that I suddenly became popular. Everybody said, "I want to see this". One of the visitors was the boss himself. I couldn't help but say, "Isn't the telescope good? But if only this thing was back at its best, it would be even more amazing." "You're on the list," he replied – and the restoration project had been approved, at least in principle.'

Some pupils would even stay the night in the observatory, 'bringing pots of custard with them'

Around the same time, Charles Barclay was appointed head of physics. 'He knew a lot about telescopes and had a degree in astronomy, so he became the internal project manager. We contacted a guy called Norman Walker, who had done some work for Sir Patrick Moore on his Cooke telescope,' says Genton. Marlborough's telescope was not only restored but computerised, which has made the process of observing far easier. 'As far as we know, this is the oldest computerised telescope on the planet.'

Much of the GCSE astronomy course involves aided and unaided observations, which is why the school's telescope – the largest in active use at any British school – is such an asset. Pupils are allowed to visit the observatory in the evening, so long as they are back in their houses by 10 p.m. 'If there's an exceptional event, sometimes they are given special dispensation to stay out longer,' says Genton. If the weather is clement, a Messier Marathon might be arranged – an attempt to spot all 110 Messier objects (star clusters, nebulae and galaxies) in a single night, as catalogued by the 18th-century French astronomer and comet hunter Charles Messier.

The GCSE course 'has a reputation for being tough', says James, and popularity waxes and wanes annually, with between ten and 30 pupils taking the exam. 'The subject is certainly not for those who shy away from deep questions or large numbers,' he adds. It brings together astrophysics, history, philosophy and observation techniques.

'It's a fascinating course,' says James. 'It's not just "what's the name of that star in that constellation", but a much broader look at how we know what we know – from Stonehenge to the Greeks, to Johannes Kepler and the modern astronomers. We start on Earth, learning how to observe and how mapping and coordinate systems work. Philosophy then comes in when we begin looking further into the universe. We reach the moon, the solar system, the sun, the stars, the Milky Way, other galaxies, the universe and the Big Bang. "Where's it all going to end?" we ask.'

The GCSE in astronomy is also a relatively popular choice for 'post school' pupils, as James puts it. Indeed, he sat the GCSE in 2019, and 'thankfully scored a 9' (the highest score). 'I was lucky in being affiliated to Marlborough College, so sitting the exam at that centre was easy. There are various institutions that offer the course and exam to non-school pupils; Dark Sky Wales run a course, and you can sit the exam in Bristol. The Royal Astronomical Society promotes various courses and The Royal Observatory Greenwich offers all sorts of support for the course, but doesn't run a specific one itself. The only word of advice for potential students is that the GCSE is not for the faint-hearted and is wonderfully challenging.'

A subject like astronomy is evolving rapidly and the curriculum often slightly lags. 'There are times when I put an asterisk next to a particular part that I'm teaching and say, "This is what I must tell you. But current data is suggesting perhaps something different could be the case",' says James.

GAVIN JAMES

The Blackett Observatory at Marlborough College

'Cosmology – the study of the origin and development of the universe – is developing particularly fast, thanks in large part to the images being received from the James Webb Space Telescope.'

Perhaps the most memorable part of the entire course – and certainly the most time-consuming – is the moon map pupils must produce, a large, hand-drawn study of the moon's topography. I remember it taking weeks to complete. In the observatory, there is one particularly beautiful example framed on the wall, drawn by a girl who later went on to read maths at Oxford. 'It's a very fine example,' says Genton. 'Indeed, it is so good that when Sir Patrick Moore turned up at the observatory, he was shown the map and exclaimed, "That's better than mine."' This was quite the compliment, because, as Genton points out, Sir Patrick's maps were used by Nasa in their preparations for the Apollo Moon landings.

No A-level in astronomy exists, but the GCSE provides a comprehensive grounding. Any pupils wishing to continue their study of the subject are encouraged to join the school's Astronomy and Astrophysics Society, known as the Radcliffe Society. 'It is for the pupils, so they drive it themselves,' says Genton. 'If they want to do something at the observatory, they have access through the Society.' Recent astronomy projects have focused on planetary missions, space tourism and rocketry. One pupil even determined the mass of Jupiter by observing its moons.

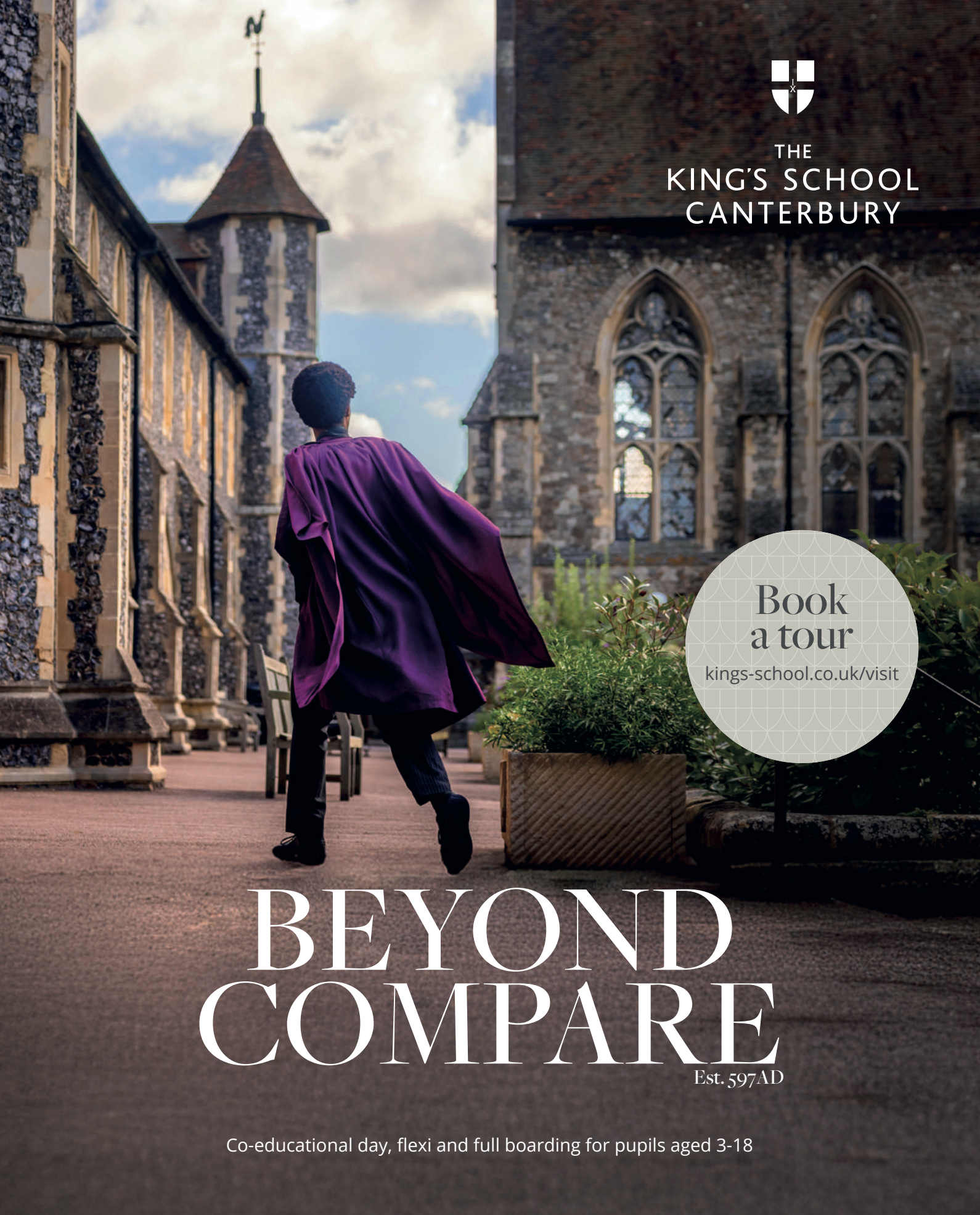
Those wishing to study astronomy further at a more academic level may undertake an EPQ – Extended Project Qualification – which allows students to research a topic of their choice, earning Ucas points in the process.

One pupil pursued astrophotography for their EPQ and was particularly well supported, given that James is also a talented astrophotographer. Prior to joining the school, he ran a business as a horse-racing photographer and his website features an intriguing mix of subjects: crop circles in Wiltshire, Jeremy Clarkson at Newbury and the outer reaches of our galaxy. Astrophotography is now his primary focus, and he teaches students how to take photos through the telescope. 'They get some pretty stunning shots on their iPhones,' he says.

For students yearning to look beyond their screens, though, space offers that escape – a frontier that reminds us of something greater than ourselves. On the school's astronomy website, there is a neat summation of what the subject offers: 'We all share under one common sky. Cultural stories and interpretations are considered with an awareness of the negative impact of modern short-term views and our materialistic society.' High-profile (and, one might argue, materialistic) figures such as Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk have nevertheless also captured young imaginations, with their ambitious plans to revolutionise space travel and colonise Mars. Musk's work through SpaceX has made space exploration feel more tangible, though when I mention his name, both Genton and James look slightly perturbed. 'His spaceship development is impressive,' says Genton, but as both men point out, Musk's satellites can be a hindrance for astronomers hoping for a clear picture of the night sky. 'They can obscure the view of the universe,' says James.

Some of Marlborough's astronomy pupils have set their sights on careers related to space. One former pupil now works for OneWeb, a leading satellite company focused on space-based connectivity. 'He came back and gave an excellent talk about satellites – the good, the bad and the ugly,' says Genton. A current pupil studying astronomy would like to go one step further. 'She's desperate to become an astronaut,' says James, 'and she has a plan. We will do all we can to facilitate that.'

Nobody could say these astronomers aren't being encouraged to aim high.



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The Oxbridge files

Oxford and Cambridge have released figures showing how many offers they gave to pupils in the 2024 Ucas application cycle. We have combined the figures in this table. It shows how well state schools – grammars, sixth-form colleges and others – compete with independent schools. Of the 80 schools, 30 are independent (one more than last year), 25 are grammars or partially selective (four fewer), 21 are sixth forms or further education colleges (four more) and four are comprehensives or academies (one fewer).

Schools are ranked by the number of offers received, then by their offer-to-application ratio.

	School	Type	Applied	Offers
1	Westminster School	Independent	179	**96**
2	Queen Elizabeth's School, Barnet	Grammar	127	**62**
3	Hills Road Sixth Form College	Sixth-form college	245	**62**
4	Harris Westminster Sixth Form	Sixth-form college	146	**57**
5	Peter Symonds College	Sixth-form college	222	**54**
6	Brampton Manor Academy	Sixth-form college	297	**54**
7	Brighton Hove and Sussex Sixth Form College	Sixth-form college	184	**53**
8	Eton College	Independent	162	**51**
9	St Paul's Girls' School	Independent	88	**48**
10	St Paul's School, London	Independent	127	**46**
11	Pate's Grammar School	Grammar	96	**42**
12	The Perse School	Independent	112	**41**
13	Woodhouse College, Finchley	Sixth-form college	143	**41**
14	King's College School	Independent	150	**41**
15	Tiffin School	Grammar	156	**41**
16	Magdalen College School, Oxford	Independent	110	**36**
17	Winchester College	Independent	116	**34**
18	King Edward VI Grammar School, Chelmsford	Grammar	67	**32**
19	London Academy of Excellence	Sixth-form college	89	**32**
20	Henrietta Barnett School	Grammar	74	**31**
21	City of London School	Independent	86	**31**
22	Dame Alice Owen's School	Partially selective	80	**30**
23	Royal Grammar School Guildford	Independent	66	**29**
24	Latymer Upper School	Independent	84	**29**
25	King's College London Mathematics School	Sixth-form college	63	**28**
26	Greenhead College, Huddersfield	Sixth-form college	144	**28**
27	The Sixth Form College Farnborough	Sixth-form college	113	**27**
28	Sevenoaks School	Independent	113	**27**
29	Brighton College	Independent	79	**26**
30	Manchester Grammar School	Independent	84	**26**
31	The Latymer School	Grammar	91	**26**
32	St Olave's and St Saviour's Grammar School	Grammar	94	**26**
33	Dr Challoner's Grammar School	Grammar	80	**25**
34	Exeter College, Hele Road Centre	Sixth-form college	65	**24**
35	Loreto College, Manchester	Sixth-form college	67	**24**
36	Tonbridge School	Independent	80	**24**
37	Highgate School	Independent	87	**24**
38	King Edward VI College, Stourbridge	Sixth-form college	87	**24**
39	King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Boys	Grammar	59	**23**
40	University College School	Independent	65	**23**
41	Hampton School	Independent	77	**23**
42	Wellington College, Crowthorne	Independent	63	**22**
43	Wilson's School	Grammar	99	**22**
44	Barton Peveril College	Sixth-form college	103	**22**
45	Hereford Sixth Form College	Sixth-form college	57	**21**
46	City of London School for Girls	Independent	62	**21**
47	London Academy of Excellence Tottenham	Sixth-form college	79	**21**
48	The Skinners' School	Grammar	36	**19**
49	Colyton Grammar School	Grammar	45	**19**
50	Alleyn's School, Dulwich	Independent	65	**19**
51	North London Collegiate School	Independent	65	**19**
52	The Tiffin Girls School	Grammar	76	**19**
53	Newham Collegiate Sixth Form	Sixth-form college	130	**19**
54	Mossbourne Community Academy	State	49	**18**
55	The Cherwell School	State	50	**18**
56	Oundle School	Independent	52	**18**
57	Reading School	Grammar	73	**18**
58	Wycombe Abbey School, High Wycombe	Independent	71	**18**
59	Sutton Grammar School	Grammar	72	**18**
60	Haberdashers' Boys' School	Independent	76	**18**
61	Kendrick School	Grammar	41	**17**
62	South Hampstead High School	Independent	47	**17**
63	The Blue Coat School, Liverpool	Grammar	48	**17**
64	Camden School for Girls	State	54	**17**
65	Beauchamp City Sixth Form	Sixth-form college	55	**17**
66	King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Girls	Grammar	56	**17**
67	Colchester Royal Grammar School	Grammar	81	**17**
68	Dulwich College	Independent	80	**17**
69	The National Mathematics and Science College	Independent	33	**16**
70	Putney High School	Independent	44	**16**
71	Altrincham Grammar School for Girls	Grammar	49	**16**
72	Altrincham Grammar School for Boys	Grammar	55	**16**
73	The London Oratory School	State	56	**16**
74	Wallington High School For Girls	Grammar	55	**16**
75	Winstanley College	Sixth-form college	97	**16**
76	James Allens Girls School	Independent	38	**15**
77	Nonsuch High School for Girls	Grammar	50	**15**
78	Truro and Penwith College	FE College	51	**15**
79	Godalming College	Sixth-form college	68	**15**
80	The Judd School, Tonbridge	Grammar	73	**15**

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Love knots

The beauty of school ties

WILLIAM ATKINSON

JOHN BROADLEY

In the street across the road from my third-year Christ Church room, sat a pub called The Bear. It marketed itself as Oxford's oldest inn – as so many of the city's hostelries do – but it is most famous for its tie collection. More than 4,500 are on display, enclosed in cases around the walls. The collection began in 1952, when the landlord offered half a pint to anyone who would let him snip off a tie end. To qualify, the ties had to indicate membership of some institution: a club, college, regiment, sports team or school. Over the decades, a cornucopia of colours, stripes and logos has been collected. Inspector Morse once enlisted the landlord's help in identifying one.

The collection is now listed and cannot be altered or added to. I'm rather glad. Half a pint of Hophead wouldn't have been worth ruining the only tie I could have offered: my old school one.

The school tie is a wonderful thing: a symbol of educational patriotism and of the smartness of the average British pupil compared with mufti-wearing international counterparts. From the grandest public school to the lowliest comp, ties are the essential part of any uniform.

School uniforms date back to the 16th century, when the children attending the school of Christ's Hospital were given smart blue cloaks and yellow stockings. School ties didn't emerge until the 1800s. Appropriately, their origins are connected to intra-Oxbridge rivalry. The I Zingari cricket club, formed by a group of Cambridge students, created the first sporting colours in 1845. Cravats – in particular in college colours – were soon adopted by rowing teams. In 1880, the rowing club of Oxford's Exeter College invented the first sporting tie by removing the ribbon hat bands from their straw boaters and tying them around their necks.

Around the same time, regimental ties became popular, featuring different colours and widths of stripes to indicate affiliation – the martial successor to flags once hoisted on the battlefield. The twin examples spurred their adoption by schools across the land. By the 1920s, the stiff Eton collars worn by some boys in imitation of their educational superiors had been replaced by the increasingly ubiquitous ties.

Ties – and school uniforms more broadly – are enjoying something of a renaissance in Britain. A recent study suggested there had been a 40 per cent increase in the 2010s in the number of schools requiring pupils to dress more formally, defined as blazers and ties. Ties are worn at 85 per cent of academies and 20 per cent of primary schools (although, disappointingly, more than half of schools are thought to choose clip-on ones).

Of course, the enforced formality of the school tie means abusing it can double as a symbol of teenage rebellion. In programmes about modern school life, such as *Waterloo Road* or *The Inbetweeners*, the looseness of a character's neckwear doubles as an indicator of that character's issues with authority.

The virtue of a tie is its versatility. It can not only be a signifier of a particular institution, but also a reward within one. Ties for being in the First XI. Ties for music prizes. Ties for running History Soc. Some of these may be more glamorous than others, but in the status-orientated world of the teenager, a tie is an outward sign of personal achievement and distinction.

In my time as a pupil at Merchant Taylors', I was proud to acquire a whole variety of ties. My hopelessness on the sports field and stage was compensated for by the neckwear prizes provided for acts of house devotion. But my favourite school tie is the one I was given upon leaving: a gorgeous gold, magenta and black number that has often adorned my neck over the years.

If the 'old school tie' is supposed to act as a privileged pathway to personal advancement, wearing mine has been of little help. In my time, I've been mistaken as a member of half a dozen different regiments or clubs, but never as an OMT. Even when I briefly returned to my alma mater to dabble in teaching, the colours elicited few quivers of recognition from the boys and a little derision from my colleagues.

Perhaps it was because wearing the tie indicated a pride I had never really had. My time as a pupil had actually been quite miserable. Parading the colours must have seemed insincere – an over-eager attempt to make amends for past agonies. But even if I hadn't loved the school, I adored the tie. My unhappiness was a valuable sign that I'd gritted my teeth and survived my seven years.

In short, the old school tie embodies everything a school should be, from the formal pursuit of academic success to the spirited camaraderie of a cohort of pupils locked in a common endeavour.

It should be coveted, protected and displayed. But most importantly, it should be *worn*.


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Ready for boarding

How the sector reinvented itself

ELEANOR DOUGHTY

JOHN BROADLEY

Early in his time at Eton College, 13-year-old William Waldegrave, the school's future provost, was struggling to sleep. He told his dame, and she in turn told the housemaster, John 'A.J.' Marsden. The former commando in charge of the boys told Waldegrave that if it happened again, he should knock on his door. A few nights later, the boy did as he was told. Marsden had a solution – they would go for a run, to Bray, seven miles from Eton. Waldegrave slept better that night.

Tales of public schools past are legion – some better than fiction, and plenty that have inspired it. Others are less appealing, more appalling. In recent years, memoirs depicting the misery of former boarders' experiences at school have told tales of neglect and criminality. And yet, despite increased economic pressures, boarding numbers remain buoyant: according to the Independent Schools Council, there are 63,035 boarders nationwide, only a modest reduction from the 68,255 of 20 years prior. What is it about the boarding school? How has a sector for which *Tom Brown's Schooldays* has apparently long prevailed as a set text survived?

The conclusion I reached, having conducted a comprehensive study of the upper class's relationship with public schools for my book *Heirs and Graces*, is that far from becoming stagnant, the whole boarding sector has professionalised. No stone has been left unturned by school leaders – and rightly so. These changes can be seen in any aspect of school life that you care to consider. For a start, admissions have been overhauled. Eton housemasters in the 1980s were tasked with assessing which infant boys mewling in their parents' arms were suitable for entry 13 years hence. Today, more enlightened admissions systems are in place – and thank goodness: when Barnaby Lenon began as headmaster of Harrow School in 1999, he found that, with no centralised admissions system, boys would turn up at school for the first time without anyone really knowing they were coming.

Out have gone the Old Etonians who return immediately after university to serve for 50 years

During his career, the two chief antagonists of the classic boarding misery memoir – corporal punishment and fagging – have been abolished too. And the schools in which they took place are in other ways unrecognisable. Since 1971, five of the seven original boys' public schools – as defined by the Public Schools Act 1868 – have become at least partly co-educational. The introduction of girls, and in general a more grown-up approach, has seen the disappearance of 'boy government', an idea so previously prized that, while giving evidence to the Clarendon

Commission in 1864, Harrow headmaster Henry Butler described how 'no great school could long live in a healthy state without it'.

Today's system is 'much more of a collective effort from adults', says John Moule, warden – headmaster – of Radley College. 'Boys are still a part of it but there's much less hierarchy.'

Talking of adults, there are just many more of them – and they are (usually) more conventional. Out have gone the Old Etonians who return immediately after university to their old school, ready to serve for the next 50 years. Nor is it possible to ascend the ranks of a school without much experience.

In 1956, the Eton housemaster Michael Birley became headmaster of Eastbourne College, where he introduced girls, with only eight years' teaching under his belt. Such a career path was still in evidence in 2000, when the classicist Stephen Spurr left his Eton boarding house for the headship of Clifton College.

Today, that 'well-trodden path', as Alastair Chirnside, warden of St Edward's School, Oxford, puts it, has been diverted towards professional development and a range of opportunities within senior leadership. Chirnside started as a boy at Eton in 1989 and, after a career as a fund manager, returned to his old school to teach classics in 2004 and became a housemaster, before moving to Harrow in 2016 to become director of studies and then its deputy head, taking over at 'Teddies' in 2021. 'Schools have become much more complicated to run,' he says. 'I run Teddies much better than if I hadn't been director of studies and the senior deputy at Harrow.'

'If you had lino on the floor now you'd be called Dickensian, but it was normal back then'

If the loss of 'boy government' has made schools more emotionally palatable, they are now also more comfortable too. The dormitories of Enid Blyton fame have largely been swept away in favour of multi-million-pound refurbishment jobs. At Roedean School in East Sussex, a £9 million renovation in 2015 transformed boarding houses from those with bathrooms split into cubicles by plastic sheets to those with Ercol chairs and William Morris wallpaper in the common areas. Facilities have expanded, partly because of demand but also because the school was in a so-called 'arms race', in which Brighton College took part when its £55 million sports and science centre opened in 2020.

But home comforts are all relative. Simon Barber, headmaster of Ludgrove School – the last all-boys, all-boarding prep school in the country – remembers how 'we used to love putting our towels on the lino and surfing down the corridor. If you had lino on the floor now you'd be called Dickensian, but it was normal then'.

Similar levels of perfect acceptability could be found in girls' schools too. 'Our old girls from the 1970s and 1980s talk with fondness about there being ice on the inside of the windows,' says Emma McKendrick, headmistress of Downe House School, near Newbury. Musing over Barber's lino memories, she adds: 'Those boys didn't mind lino at school probably because there weren't plush carpets at home – it reflected the time.'

As all schools should. Independent schools have long had to acquiesce to their market and today that means better pastoral care, tighter regulation and a more inclusive culture. 'Rather than treating boys and girls as a group, it's much more about the individual,' says Moule. And children's success is measured differently. A KC with two children away at school remembers how at their prep school: 'The housemaster told me that to be recognised in the school hierarchy, the children had to exhibit kindness. I remember thinking, "Christ, that's 180 degrees from my own experience at school." It's all significantly child-centred now.'

With the focus on the child, parents and schools are better aligned. Lenon was at Eton for 12 years before he moved to Harrow, and in that time he didn't meet a single parent. 'They were regarded as a nuisance,' he says. 'Now they are regarded as partners. That's a big change – working with parents, enjoying their company, and parents being more involved in the life of their children.'

There are, however, limits, as Moule observes, particularly with 'first-time buyers', who 'have to be guided as to what boarding is about. You don't want parents who are on the phone every day demanding to know every aspect of things. We want a partnership with parents'. And while Ludgrove may be all-boarding, it is no longer boarding every single day: the changing world is reflected in its 'one in, one out' weekend pattern.

In school, the *loco parentis* role has evolved too. When Chirnside was a boy at Eton in the early 1990s, while the houses had ceased to be run by senior boys, there were few staff around on the corridors. 'We have four resident members of staff in our houses at Teddies now,' he says. And the relationships are of a higher quality, too.

'Parents were regarded as a nuisance. Now they are regarded as partners'

'If you're there a lot you can speak to the children and get to know them. When I ran my house at Eton I would aim to speak to every child three or four times a day. You don't need to have a heart-to-heart with them every day, but you do need to check in with every child regularly, even if it's on the door on the way out, or a conversation in the corridor at lunchtime.'

Heads past and present sing the praises of boarding. Lenon, while cognisant of the financial challenges, nevertheless notes that running a boarding school is like running 'a whole bank of hotels – at Eton, 25 hotels, at Harrow, 12. Having medical facilities open 24/7 – that's not like a hotel, that's way beyond a hotel.'

The parents I surveyed on the merits of boarding today observed many such changes, and were genuinely happy with their children's educations.

'For parents, there's a very strong sense of, "I don't want my children to go through what I went through",'said one. 'You no longer just get sent as I did, to the same house and the same school as your father. You actively go out and visit schools – and schools can't afford not to be chosen.' Moule, who has been at Radley for 11 years, finds that school selection today is vibes-based. 'Parents are much more savvy about schools,' he says. 'It's all much more thoughtful now.'

'It's time to consider your options.'

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Lads' army

In defence of the Combined Cadet Force

GUS CARTER

What could be more fun for a 14-year-old boy than messing about in the woods with a gun? My school's Combined Cadet Force offered precisely that, marching us through the Brecon Beacons and organising mock skirmishes with SA80 rifles (albeit using blanks). When we weren't trying to shoot each other, we were fighting over OS maps and compasses, trying to find which bit of woodland we were supposed to be sleeping in. One group found a dead body on the side of a Welsh mountain. Another spent an evening drinking vodka and smoking cigarettes with a strange man in a caravan. At some point in the small hours, he got a little too handsy and they all ran back to their bivvies. I was hugely envious when they told us this as we ate powdered eggs, cooked in a mess tin over burning hexamine tablets.

CCF is a staple for a certain kind of school, the kind that takes both discipline and fun seriously. Normally the schools hire a retired non-commissioned officer to come in one day a week and bark orders at teenagers, making sure they've polished their boots or encouraging them to muck about with serious military kit. I remember one summer evening when an anti-submarine Sea King helicopter landed in the school grounds. From my bedroom window I could see some kind of attaché in a spiffy white hat hopping out, saluting our proctor and marching off towards the main mansion house. I ran down to join a gaggle of boys inspecting this vast machine and the pilot showed us the cockpit with its array of switches, lights and cables.

But last year Labour cut funding to 230 state schools that paid for CCF staff. These people weren't getting very much anyway, about £75 a day to maintain armouries and organise weekend trips, and the savings amount to only around £1.1 million a year.

It doesn't seem like there's much of a strategy here. Firstly, because it goes against the stated aims of the Ministry of Defence's integrated defence review, which argued for a 30 per cent growth in the number of cadets by 2030. If Britain is going to rearm and meet our Nato commitments, we're going to need to encourage people to enlist. What better way to achieve that than offering teenagers a bit of army lite? Yet cadet headcount is down slightly since the cut.

If Britain is going to rearm and meet our Nato commitments, we're going to need to encourage people to enlist

There are other reasons why this is a bad decision. CCF tends to be something private schools are more keen on than the state sector. Of the cadet forces across the country, 221 are in private schools while 268 are in state schools. Yet only 6 per cent of British children go private. A Labour government, supposedly keen on promoting opportunities for the many rather than the few, has instead cut the most obvious route of entry into the military. Perhaps it doesn't sit well with Labour's pacifist tradition. But children who go through CCF are four times more likely to end up as officers and tend to spend an average of six years longer in the service. Why stop a route to a good, stable career?

'Oi, cheat! Download your own ChatGPT essay!'

Cadets can do wonders for a certain kind of child. A recent report by the University of Northampton tells the story of Jamie, a Year Ten pupil in Northern Ireland. Jamie has ADHD and learning difficulties and had been excluded from sports and other extracurricular activities because of his behaviour. CCF was different, though. 'He quickly understood the rules,' explains the report. 'He gets no preferential treatment [and] is not treated as a kid with a label in the CCF.' The staff gave him boundaries and encouraged him, just like they did any other normal cadet, and he has now passed his weapons handling test. 'This is the first test he has ever passed.' The effect in school has been noticeable. Teachers explained that he now behaves well, stands still, listens and follows instructions.

Jamie is not alone. Some 78 per cent of headteachers say CCF improves the behaviour of students. Another school in Northern Ireland brought in a policy where children facing exclusion were told they could stay in school if they signed up for a month of CCF. One in four of the students stayed in education as a result. Given that exclusion often leads to poor employment and sometimes even prison, that £75 per school per day saving seems like a false economy.

Labour argues that much of the CCF funding remains and in November announced a review into cadets. No deadline was given for when it will finally report and little has been heard of the review since. It seems when a policy area confounds Labour, they tend to bury it in procedure. Which is a shame really, because CCF is good for recruitment and good for children like Jamie, too.

ALAMY

Shock of the old

Long live eccentric school traditions

ANASTASIA BRODER

On every Shrove Tuesday since at least 1753, boys at Westminster School have gathered in the hall for a mad scramble over a pancake. The Pancake Greaze (pictured) is a cherished tradition that sees one pupil crowned the winner for grabbing the biggest portion, which the cook tosses into the centre of the hall from a height of 15ft, as the rest of the school cheers on. The champion is awarded a golden coin by the Dean of Westminster, accompanied by the headmaster and sometimes royal visitors. The more unsavoury part of the tradition – nominally beating the cook with Latin primers if he fails to get the pancake over the iron bar three times – has been abandoned. There have been other modern updates. In keeping with our health-and-safety conscious times, the pancake tussle now takes place over gym mats.

Peculiar traditions, customs and rules are a staple of Britain's public schools. Typically, the older the school, the more eccentric the traditions. My school, Bromsgrove, which was founded in 1553, had an ancient rule allowing the head boy to keep a goat on the school green. Why? I haven't the foggiest. And perhaps neither does the school administration, who did not respond to my enquiring emails. The rule was not exercised during my time there, but a head boy did make use of his historic privilege as recently as 2012, evidenced by a picture on social media of him, the headmaster and the goat.

Some traditions are more serious. They have the purpose of honouring cultural heritage and nurturing a sense of community. In Winchester College, for instance, the annual Illumina Ceremony commemorates the demolition of a wall that separated Scholars (boys who lived in the College) and Commoners (who lived outside it), restricting integration between the groups. Just like in 1862, the year the wall came down, today's Wykehamists place lit candles in the niches of the surrounding walls and build a bonfire to celebrate unity. The pictures from the ceremony – of boys in long black capes holding slender white candles – are magical. Perhaps words like old-fashioned, bizarre or cult-y come to mind. And there's no denying there is a weirdness to the idea of students wrestling each other for a handful of an oversized pancake. But such practices serve a valuable and increasingly important purpose. They fulfil the need to feel part of something bigger.

In Uppingham School's folklore, to get a snow day, the snow must be measured against the head boy's knee (I wonder if the length of lower legs was ever a factor in appointment decisions). It's silly. But it gives people a point of commonality. It's something that sets your community apart from others, making it yours.

Traditions are shortcuts to connection, and no demographic is in such dire need of it as hormonal, angsty and unmoored teenagers. Traditions also socialise individuals into a collective values system. They help make sense of what your community hopes you will become and what it expects from you. The perfect example is Eton's 'leggit' practice which is, by Eton standards, a relatively new custom. When the boys want to protest unpopular decisions from the school authorities, they gather en masse on Eton High Street around the Burning Bush, an ornate Victorian lamppost designed by the architect Henry Woodyer. At the cry of 'leggit!' from a ringleader, the boys disperse, charging down the street at full pelt and roaring as loudly as possible. The school does not approve of leggits, but can do little to stop them. 'From my memory, the school's official line is that leggits are dangerous,' one Old Etonian tells me. 'And, actually, when I was there in the early 2000s, one F-Blocker [boy in his first year] broke his nose. The word was he ran into the Burning Bush, but I think that a mischievous rumour.'

The last large-scale leggit was a few years ago when the boys challenged the closure of the beagle kennel. Would a bunch of teenage boys have organised themselves into a political pressure group over scent hounds in the absence of the tradition? I am not so sure.

Some traditions seem too absurd to be true. Indeed, sometimes they are. I could have sworn that at Bromsgrove we had another rule which stated that if the head boy and head girl got married after graduation, our school would buy them a house. I could find nothing in the archives that confirms this and none of my schoolmates remembers anything about it, so it could be a complete figment of my imagination. But I hope that I'm right. Nowadays, young people need to make use of any opportunity to get on the property ladder.

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CONFESSIONS OF A SCHOOL MUM

Hidden talents

FLORA WATKINS

What do tech bros and pushy parents have in common? They're both fond of citing Samuel Beckett's most famous quote: 'Fail again. Fail better.' For parents, the line is invariably deployed when their 'gifted' child has underwhelmed at a crucial juncture.

Let's park the inconvenient fact that Beckett's line has nothing to do with self-help. Just go with it and nod sympathetically while inwardly enjoying their elaborate contortions in an attempt to save face.

Perhaps my favourite example is a Putney mum (we'll call her Polly) whose son played tennis with my friend's children a few years ago. Her boy's failure to get into Cambridge ('It wouldn't have been the right place for him anyway, so we're pretty relieved!') has proved to be a gift that continues giving.

For Polly, her son's failure (sorry, minor setback... sorry, learning opportunity) has prompted such a rethink and reappraisal of her values that she has quit her old job and set herself up as a life coach. Now, if you're having a bad day you can pull up one of her motivational (some might call them hysterical) Instagram reels, sit back and enjoy her Duchess of Sussex-style affirmations such as: 'Did you know that you are actually your biggest fan?'; 'You are the only person who knows how brilliant you actually are!'; 'Write all your achievements down, write your letter of reference on why you are awesome – to the world!'.

Poor Polly. But, more importantly, poor son. I don't have a current status update for him but imagine that whichever Russell Group university he got into, he's surely medicated for anxiety.

There are a lot of Pollys around. We've all met them at the school gates and PTA fundraisers, or had the misfortune to be seated next to them at a dinner party. They make the mistake of bigging up their children, feeling secure that, having been tutored in every subject to within an inch of their lives, they'll cruise into Oxford or win a King's Scholarship to Eton.

When it doesn't happen, the humble-brag social media posts dry up while Polly hunkers down to plot a new strategy. Usually, this involves ringing round the crammers or £250-an-hour super-tutors. It's an overused word these days, but the reasons for resorting to such measures are legendary. My favourite: 'He didn't get the A-levels he needed for university because it was the first year they let girls into the sixth form. They spent all their time shagging!' Surely the more likely reason is that he didn't do enough work – or perhaps he just wasn't as bright as you thought? Or perhaps he isn't cut out for the university you'd envisaged for him?

Whichever Russell Group university Polly's son got into, he's surely medicated for anxiety

Chatting to a woman at a drinks party once, I asked what her eldest son, who'd come back to live at home, was doing. 'He's a tree surgeon,' she said, in obvious discomfort. I happen to think there's something rather noble and wonderful about being an arborist. His arty West Country boarding school, she added, by way of explanation, 'was too free'.

Another mother justified throwing £50,000 at a crammer for retakes because 'We haven't spent all this money for him to become an estate agent'. Pity the poor offspring of the Pollys. Children and young people do have to find the level at which they're happy working and existing. Martin Amis got into Oxford with an exhibition after his stepmother sent him to a crammer. But many teenagers today will find themselves in one because they haven't met their parents' expectations. If they actually want to re-take their A-levels, then why not let them do it under their own steam at the local further education college?

I've always sought to underplay my own kids' achievements, believing it better to allow them to shine in their own time. I'm not claiming parenting-guru status here – this attitude was kind of forced on me, as my children were always the last to walk among my NCT group. (This in itself is pertinent, as Pollys start early, agitating over whose child is first to crawl/talk/play a Bach Partita.)

One tiresome mother at my sons' old primary school in London had her daughter – let's call her Jocasta – playing Suzuki violin pretty much once she was able to sit unaided. My most recent sighting of Jocasta was on a TikTok video forwarded by one of my mates, crowd-surfing at a festival, heavily inked and pierced. Baroque music binned, apparently for good, in exchange for heavy metal.

Which brings me back to Beckett. He's not the easiest to interpret, but I feel we can say for sure that his intended message with 'Fail again. Fail better' was a bit darker than 'retrain as a life coach' or 'don't settle for becoming a Foxton's estate agent'.

If you're still tempted to quote Beckett at your hapless children, be aware of the phrase (another wilful misquote) that best echoes the bleakness and despair of his work: 'My soul drowned in vomit.' Leave the poor things alone.

Call to action

How schools are dealing with the smartphone menace

LARA BROWN

JOHN BROADLEY

No development has shaken up the cloistered and carefully controlled world of English boarding school life quite as much as the invention of the smartphone. Traditionally, schoolboys might write home once a week. Perhaps they might be able to smuggle in a dirty magazine or other contraband, but for the most part boarders on school grounds were safely tucked away. Today, thanks to smartphones, children are sent to school with access to pornography, internet chatrooms and easy contact with their parents.

Should boarding school children be permitted to phone home each night? What horrors might a group of 13-year-olds get up to in a dorm if left unattended with internet access? Can parental controls be trusted, or are our teenagers savvy enough to outwit them? What about Educational Technology – 'Ed Tech' for short? Is handing out Chrome Books and iPads to pupils the mark of a school at the cutting edge of learning, or naivete destined to disrupt lessons, not to mention sleep?

What horrors might a group of 13-year-olds get up to in a dorm if left unattended with internet access?

The approach an independent school takes to these questions will shape the type of education a child receives. There is no consensus between schools on phones, and head teachers vary dramatically on how they're approaching digital encroachment. For some it's an opportunity to grant pupils independence; for others, it's the biggest challenge facing modern education.

Eton has just implemented a new policy in which F Block boys (the youngest group, aged 13 to 14) are given a 'brick' Nokia phone, which is only capable of making and receiving calls. It has absolutely no internet access. All boys who joined the school this year were asked not to bring a smartphone with them. Every boy is, however, given an iPad for use only in lessons and for

homework. The school says that the policy is an attempt 'to balance the benefits and challenges that technology brings to schools'.

Jennifer Power, co-founder of the website Smartphone Free Schools Rating, tells me that she's inundated with requests from parents for information about how different schools navigate the online world. The site awards a gold, silver or bronze badge to schools based on their phone policy (gold is for smartphones banned on site, silver is for locking them up and bronze is for a simple ban on use). The website has, she says, exploded in popularity in the past year.

As more research papers are published about the harms of smartphones on developing minds, Power tells me that 'we'll see a big uptick in phone bans at the start of September'. Independent schools, she argues, are 'able to implement policy much more quickly and thoroughly' than state schools, giving them the upper hand in this area. Further, despite the fact the Department for Education published guidance on mobile phones in schools last year, encouraging schools to, at the minimum, ban use of phones on the premises, Power has noticed that many head teachers are looking to Britain's leading public schools as examples of how they should manage phones, rather than the government.

Some schools have come up with creative solutions. St Paul's Boys' School, for instance, gives all fourth-form pupils a magnetic Yondr pouch for their phones. The

Pupils have turned to board games such as Scrabble to fill their lunchtimes, rather than Snapchat

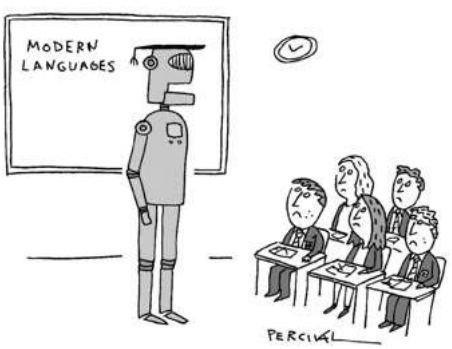
pouches can only be unlocked when tapped against a special station at the end of the school day – using tech not unlike the tagging system on clothes in department stores. This solution allows the boys to phone home in the event of an emergency, with the help of a teacher to unlock their pouch, but it saves a poor member of staff from the responsibility of collecting hundreds of iPhones every morning.

New technology, however, comes with new challenges. Some teachers report that children are coming up with increasingly innovative ways round the pouches: from handing over a 'dummy' phone for lock up to hacking the magnetic closure system. Despite this, Yondr has had huge commercial success selling its wares to schools and has expended significant lobbying efforts

'So, what do you need to know?'

trying to convince legislators in the United States to make schools go phone-free. In May, the former schools minister, Nick Gibb, Tory MP for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton, was appointed as a consultant at the company. Queenswood, Surbiton High, John Lyons and City of London School for Girls all use Yondr pouches throughout the day, while St Swithun's in Winchester only permits boarders to remove their phones from their Yondr pouches for an allocated period in the evening.

Of course, there remain schools that take a more libertarian approach. Westminster School allows pupils to carry smartphones on their person and permits full use in boarding houses at the end the school day. Harrow shares a similarly relaxed policy but does take phones away from boys in the lower school overnight, with more flexibility for sixth formers providing they prove they can be trusted. The headmistress of Benenden in Kent believes that 'as a boarding school, it wouldn't be appropriate for us to ban phones outright, because they're a vital communication tool', but the school restricts phone time to just 30 minutes in the evening for Year Sevens,



'Today we'll be learning Python.'

with access gradually increasing as the girls get older. One anti-smartphone campaigner told me that boarding schools with a higher proportion of international students tend to take a more relaxed approach to phone policy, prompted by the desire from overseas parents to stay in touch with their children.

Richard Cairns, headteacher of Brighton College, has taken one of the most hardline stances against mobile phones. The school went phone-free as early as 2017, and since then pupils have turned to board games such as Scrabble and Cluedo to fill their lunchtimes, rather than Snapchat and selfies. The numbers of books taken out of the library increased and classroom disruption fell.

The research bears out the benefits of a hard ban. The *Times* recently found that schools with smartphone-free policies

More than eight in ten parents wish that their child's school would ban smartphones

have seen a drop in suspensions, detentions and bullying, while the thinktank Policy Exchange has demonstrated that children attending schools with an effective ban achieved GCSE results that were graded higher when compared with children at schools with laxer policies. In his book *Anxious Generations*, the American social psychologist Jonathan Haidt blamed smartphones for a decline in the mental health of teenagers, particularly girls.

As for day schools, the case for smartphone bans is clear cut. More than eight in ten parents wish that their child's school would ban smartphones. Sir Martyn Oliver, Ofsted's chief inspector, is with them, recently joining the call for the government to act. Two parents, Will Orr-Ewing and Pete Montgomery, feel so strongly about the issue that they are threatening the government with a judicial review if a statutory ban on smartphone use in schools is not brought in.

There is no doubt that smartphones are creating a new set of problems for housemasters and matrons. But once the Pandora's box has been opened, can it ever be truly closed? Many parents now expect regular WhatsApp updates from their children during term time. Would it ever be possible to return to the weekly letter home? Even the headteachers with the most radical policies on phone usage all permit pupils to use a phone in some form, even if it's just through limited screen time or a Nokia brick.

Survival tactics

Independent schools are fighting back

JO THOMSON

Ever since the sudden and cruel imposition of VAT on independent school fees at the start of the year, much of the media focus has been on the number of school closures. The first to go have been prep schools and schools in rural areas far from London and the south-east. Trust me, this is really only the beginning.

Only a very small number of independent schools will be completely immune from the current financial pressures and – in the next couple of years – that will start to become increasingly obvious. While many might not close, there will be more mergers and acquisitions, and a scramble for schools to enjoy the benefits and protections of being part of a larger group. Several of those groups will be owned by overseas investors, excited to get their hands on a slice of British education that, to date, has widely been considered a globally prestigious product.

So what has the day-to-day impact of all this been for our schools so far? Well, you don't have to look too closely to see evidence of belt-tightening as schools attempt to make savings rather than pass on the financial burden to already cash-strapped parents. Hefty fee increases are no longer an option for most schools. Instead, heads, governors and bursars have scrutinised their fixed costs. Staff salaries tend to be the largest outgoing and so that's the natural place for cuts.

It's easy to spot the telltale signs – small classes being merged, departing teachers not being replaced and niche (and sometimes not-so-niche) subjects being dropped. Modern foreign languages and Classics have been early victims. In some schools, boarding houses have been mothballed as numbers drop, building and refurbishment programmes have been put on hold, academic and support staff recruitment have stalled, and internal budgets are being closely monitored, if not frozen completely.

'Nice-to-haves' have had to be cast aside to ensure the essentials can be covered. These days, the Teachers' Pension Scheme, long held to be an essential, falls into the 'nice-to-have' category. This erosion of pay and conditions is, in turn, leading to a slow but steady exodus of teachers from independent schools. Thirty years ago, a job in the independent sector was guaranteed to be more highly remunerated than the state sector. These days, independent sector salaries can barely keep pace with their state school counterparts. This makes it harder to recruit great teachers, in particular those who are willing to give up their evenings and weekends for boarding and extra-curricular duties.

In many ways, though, the mergers and acquisitions and the closer scrutiny of budgets is not a bad thing. Parents may well feel that it's about time charitable schools were overseen by more business-minded groups who can ensure that their hard-earned fees are being spent wisely.

Savvy parents have always known a reduction in those shiny buildings won't matter that much in the end

After all, many independent schools have been operating in a protected bubble for far too long. It's hard to imagine any other sector where unpaid volunteers would be relied upon to oversee organisations with several million-pound turnovers at a meeting once every three months. And heads, still mostly teachers who have risen through the ranks with barely any business training or experience, have had to master the skills of being a CEO quickly. Similarly, finding governors with the time, calibre, skills and experience, not to mention the courage, to throw themselves into the firing line is unsurprisingly becoming ever more challenging.

'Is our son part of the elite yet?'

A year ago, I wrote an open letter to Keir Starmer outlining my fears about the potential impact of VAT on fees. I wrote about the loss of jobs and subsequent damage to local communities. Those predictions are already coming true. Whatever your views on independent education, there are no obvious winners in this scenario. State schools have not yet benefited in any noticeable way from the income raised from VAT and will feel the pressure – particularly as many children with additional needs trickle back into the system this month. Likewise, as independent schools are forced to look ever more inward, bursaries, scholarships and community outreach programmes will diminish.

What about the future? Well, the independent sector will survive as it always has done. The larger, well-endowed schools will thrive and the smaller prep and senior schools that have acted quickly will form groups and find economies of scale.

Schools might not have the wealth of resources they had before. But, as savvy parents have always known, a reduction in those shiny buildings won't matter that much in the end. They rarely make any tangible difference to pupil outcomes: enthusiastic, energetic and motivated teachers do. It is, and always has been, about the school staff and their ability to know, care for and invest time in every single pupil. That's what made parents choose the independent sector in the first place and that's what makes an independent education a privilege. I hope that independent school leaders and governors can hang on to those principles.

In the meantime, as the start of a new academic year approaches, heads, bursars and governors are still in the eye of the storm, waiting to find out what the full scale of the damage will be.

Jo Thomson is head of Clayesmore School.

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Vivat, floreat et crescat

We should cherish the Latin motto

HARRY MOUNT

In the strange, arcane world of school mottoes, it's fitting that the most famous one of all belongs to a fictional school. *Draco dormiens nunquam titillandus* – 'Never tickle a sleeping dragon' – is the motto of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. J.K. Rowling brilliantly realised that children aren't put off by boarding schools and the ancient rituals that go with them. They're gripped by these peculiar places, their roots twisting back through the mists of time. And no school custom is as ancient or beguiling as the Latin motto.

My motto, at Westminster School, was *Dat deus incrementum* – 'God gives the increase'. It is a motto so attractive that it's used by eight distinguished institutions, including Tonbridge School and the Worshipful Company of Fruiterers, who are surely interested in growth of a different kind.

Eton's motto is rather more straightforward: *Floreat Etona* – 'May Eton flourish'. Still, for all its simplicity, it uses a nice subjunctive to give the connotation of wanting something to happen. The greatest girls' school of all, St Trinian's, ripped off Eton's motto in the sublime Ronald Searle cartoons: *Floreat St Trinian's*.

In the 1954 film *The Belles of St Trinian's*, the school had an even better motto: *In flagrante delicto* – 'In blazing offence' or, colloquially, 'Caught in the act'. The St Trinian's school song in the film reveals a second call to arms: 'Let our motto be broadcast: "Get your blow in first!" She who draws the sword last always comes off worst.'

Harrow is so flash that it has two Latin mottoes: *Stet fortuna domus* – 'May the fortune of the House stand'; and *Donorum dei dispensatio fidelis* – 'The faithful dispensation of the gifts of God'.

Not all school mottoes are in Latin. One of the most famous – 'Manners Makyth Man' – belongs to Winchester School. It's thought that the school's founder, William of Wykeham, came up with the expression and added it to his coat of arms. It's also the motto of his other foundation, New College, Oxford – the first college not to have a Latin motto. Come to think of it, I know some pretty rude products of both Winchester and New College. But mottoes can only ever be noble aspirations for the crooked timber of public-school humanity, rather than firm promises.

Not all schools have mottoes, however distinguished. The King's School, Canterbury – the oldest school in the world, founded in AD 597 – doesn't have one. Thomas Field, the school's headmaster from 1886 to 1897, tried to introduce one – *Age dum agis* (roughly 'Do while you're doing') – but it faded away in the early 20th century. Too arriviste, clearly. And also not very good.

Not long after King's, Canterbury was founded, schools began to appreciate how a Latin motto added a dose of intellect and class to their reputations. And so King's School, Rochester – the second-oldest school in the world, founded in AD 604 – came up with the admirably direct *Disce aut discede* ('Learn or push off').

Latin, because it's so ancient, never dates, unlike sentiments in modish English

Part of the pleasure of mottoes is that they don't always quite fit with the ethos of a school. Rugby, which is more famous for muscles than Christianity, has a surprisingly holy motto – *Orando laborando* ('By praying and working') – with a pleasing use of the gerund. Some mottoes are rather more appropriate. Millfield in Somerset, which is renowned for its sportiness rather than its bookishness, has *Molire molendo* – 'Achieve by grinding'. It's also a nice bit of wordplay. A mill – as in Millfield – grinds corn.

Latin is such a concise language, crammed with multiple meanings, that mottoes allow for multiple interpretations. Christ's College, Finchley, an academy school in north London, has the motto *Usque proficiens*. The school proudly translates it as 'Advance all the way'. A satirically minded schoolboy might prefer 'Just proficient'.

Still, give me Latin any day rather than the dull, flat, English mottoes of modern schools. Michaela Community School, set up by educational pioneer Katharine Birbalsingh, is devoted to teaching at the highest level. Surely the school could have come up with something more sophisticated than the dreary 'Work Hard, Be Kind'. The great thing about Latin is that it takes dull expressions like this and gives them a pleasing, ancient sheen. How much finer *Labor et benignitas* sounds – and it isn't blighted by a comma splice.

And Latin, because it's so ancient, never dates, unlike sentiments in modish English. Still, you must be careful when it comes to updating Latin grace. I've recently been to two colleges, in Oxford and Cambridge, where they are still saying grace to the old Regina rather than the new Rex.

Mottoes don't have to be in Latin. Any ancient language injects magic. The Godolphin and Latymer School in west London has a Cornish motto, *Francha leale toge* – 'Free and loyal art thou'. It chimes with the school's crest, starring a double-headed white eagle – or, in Cornish, a godolphin.

Schools know the innate value of Latin mottoes. They wouldn't be as stupid as Arsenal Football Club, who crazily ditched their Latin motto a few years ago. In 1949, Arsenal started stitching *Victoria concordia crescit* on their strip. No, it doesn't mean 'Posh Spice flies Concorde', but 'Victory grows out of harmony'. Idiotically, the club dropped the motto from their crest in 2002. Then, in 2011, for their 125th anniversary, they came up with the banal new motto: 'Forward.' Since adopting an English motto, Arsenal have never won the Premiership.

Schools know better. The only way forwards is backwards. *Vivat* the Latin motto.

Harry Mount's Et Tu, Brute? The Best Latin Lines Ever *is out now.*

Elstree School

An Elstree childhood

A beacon in today's independent school sector, Elstree is a thriving Prep School renowned for academic excellence and outstanding co-curricular opportunities.

Set in 150 acres of idyllic West Berkshire countryside, Elstree is also home to childhood fun and adventure. The school nurtures a strong belief in 'children remaining children' for as long as they can.

The school aims high for pupils and is proud of both outstanding Common Entrance results and an excellent Scholarship record. Pupils go on to top UK senior schools including Bradfield, Downe House, Eton, Marlborough, Radley, Wellington and Winchester.

With a tremendous spirit of 'giving things a go', Elstree places emphasis on nurturing unique talents and fulfilling individual potential. Sporting and co-curricular opportunities are second to none; the grounds include woodland, lakes, parkland and arguably some of the finest sports pitches in Berkshire; an idyllic setting for outdoor fun and camaraderie with friends.

Elstree takes great pride in the character of its pupils; the boys and girls are recognised for their positive approach to hard work, their kindness to others and an upbeat curiosity and confidence that enables them to make the most of opportunities – and crucially, see the fun in life.

With independence, good organisation skills and positive decision-making all hallmark traits of Elstree boarders, boarding is in high demand. Families from London enjoy seeing their children flourish in the countryside, and many local families take up the option for flexi-boarding; they know their children will thrive when they move on to senior school.

In today's world, there are sadly few schools that will remain truly independent. Elstree can look forward with confidence. Buoyant pupil numbers, exceptional staff and a loyal and supportive parent body ensure that this school will continue to provide a first-rate education and childhood opportunities that are second to none.

www.elstreeschool.org.uk

Snapshots of four notable schools

LANCING COLLEGE, WEST SUSSEX

Lancing is a public boarding school for children aged 13 to 18 in West Sussex. Set within the South Downs National Park, it offers an open-air theatre, a state-of-the-art music school, an equestrian centre and even the tallest school chapel in the world. As impressive as its facilities, though, are its alumni: Evelyn Waugh, Sir David Hare and Lord (Stephen) Green to name but a few. Nowadays, many students at the college – where fees start from £12,602 – come from its sister preparatory schools in Hove and Worthing. Also arriving this month is a new headteacher, Dr Scott Crawford, who will replace Dominic Oliver after 11 years. Dr Crawford, who was previously deputy headteacher at Magdalen College School in Oxford, says he is 'thrilled to join a school that embraces both tradition and modernity'.

MICHAELA COMMUNITY SCHOOL, LONDON

Even parents who live outside Michaela's catchment area in Wembley, north-west London, will have likely heard about its reputation as the 'strictest school in Britain'. Established in a converted office block in 2014, its co-founder and headmistress Katharine Birbalsingh (pictured) has prided herself on enforcing discipline and tradition over the past 11 years. And it seems to have paid off. The free school's last Progress 8 score, a government measure comparing schools' pupil performance at GCSE to the national average, ranked Michaela as the best school in the UK. More than a third of its pupils secured the equivalent of an A or A* in at least five GCSE subjects this summer, while 82 per cent of school-leavers have gone on to elite Russell Group universities in previous years.

REPTON SCHOOL, DERBYSHIRE

There remains a sense of 16th-century majesty about Repton, which was founded in 1557 as the dying wish of knight and MP Sir John Port. There are 12 tennis courts, a historic cricket pavilion and an indoor swimming pool that was used as a training ground for Olympic gold medallist Adam Peaty. Fans of the lesser-played Eton Fives are also in luck: there's a refurbished court devoted to the handball game. Little wonder, then, that over the past five centuries famous faces have flocked to the school, unfazed by the term fees, which start from £13,555. Old Reptonians include Christopher Isherwood, Jeremy Clarkson and Roald Dahl, whose time at the school sampling new Cadbury chocolate inspired his classic children's book, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

GLENALMOND COLLEGE, PERTH

At the gateway to the Scottish Highlands in Perth and Kinross sits Glenalmond College, a co-educational school for pupils aged 12 to 18. Founded by four-time prime minister W.E. Gladstone in 1847, the school now offers day and boarding to 350 students, with term fees starting from £6,830. Its location gives students the perfect opportunities to explore mountains, lochs and forests as part of a renowned programme of outdoor education. They also have access to the Moncrieff Centre, a licensed sixth-form club where pupils can attend three formal balls each year. Herself an intrepid explorer who recently hiked the Annapurna Circuit in Nepal, the school's principal Lucy Elphinstone says Glenalmond provides a 'genuinely creative curriculum', both 'for the academic child [and] the entrepreneurial dyslexic'.

SCHOOL DAYS

World apart

PHILIP WOMACK

Sometimes, when I'm chatting about childhood, at some point it will become clear I went to a boarding school from the age of nine. Reactions can be comical. 'You poor thing!' an interlocutor might gasp, gripping my forearm, no doubt picturing cold showers and cruelty. I've always responded with bemusement, since my experience largely featured comfort and crumpets.

I loved my prep school – Dorset House in West Sussex. It was a world in itself, enclosed and beguiling. In some ways it was unchanging, such as the graffitied Latin primers which were the same our grandparents had used. Yet it could be surprisingly forward-looking, as when it made a satellite link-up to a school in America, many years before the internet. The school's ethos, in fact, encapsulated a fine balance between tradition and momentum.

The start of term was always exciting. We would visit a grand shop in London for the uniform, shirts and shorts, which appeared, gorgeously folded, from wooden drawers. Then there was packing, which seemed to take at least a day, the house occupied with bustle. My parents would take a picture of me standing by my battered, inherited trunk at the start of term. I'm only slightly taller than it in the first picture; by the end, I tower over it, still wearing the same tweed jacket, though my long arms now snugly fit the sleeves.

We weren't torn from the bosoms of our loving families; far from it. The school was about a 20-minute drive away from our house in rural Sussex. It wasn't particularly famous, but, being founded in the late 18th century, it ranked among the oldest in the country. Parental involvement was high: there was always a play needing a lion's head made from an old blanket or a fun run or jumble sale. In those glorious pre-mobile days, we called home with BT Chargecards and wrote letters. Parents (including mine) would visit their sons every Wednesday for walks and a chat. School finished for the week on Saturday mornings after church and so cassocks and old hymn books will forever remind me of the drive home.

Despite the school occupying a manor house and sitting in between two genuine castles, there was a distinct lack of ghosts, which I never got over. That didn't mean it had no atmosphere. One night, the manor was struck by lightning and all the fire alarms went off. It was the early hours, during an apocalyptic downpour, and we all had to run up the drive in our dressing gowns and slippers. Sitting in the darkened classrooms, lightning flashing and thunder roiling: that was better than any wailing phantom.

Despite the school sitting in between two genuine castles, there was a distinct lack of ghosts

The school was made up of 100 boys and a couple of dozen staff members, all dedicated and lively. Our headmaster was civilised and thoughtful and gave us Yeats to read. We were challenged, intellectually speaking. In my top year, aged 12, in our stone classroom by the courtyard, we swotted up on the gerund and the Synoptic Gospels.

The school had its idiosyncrasies. If you were lucky, you could be made Duck Monitor. This meant collecting a bucket of slop from the kitchens and, as the mist rose up in the early morning light, doling it out to the happy, splashing ducks. Even better was Cocoa Monitor, on winter afternoons, with the dark drawing in. Though it felt like we lived in a timeslip, we weren't entirely untouched by popular culture. We had a couple of CDs in the barn: Queen, and, oddly enough, Nirvana. The irony of a hundred boys in corduroys, the sons of solicitors and farmers, head-banging to those bands' nihilistic songs was lost on me then. Otherwise, the outside world hardly figured. When there was sparkling frost on the ground and we were preparing for the carol concert, you could almost imagine that nothing had changed for centuries.

Boarding prep schools are more than simply education factories. They are, at first, enormous families, from headteacher to kitchen and grounds staff, from hulking prefect to teensiest pre-prepper. They also fully extend into their local communities. My teachers would take part in the village amateur dramatics society, and the school had a close connection with the church. A school like mine is a living organism, deeply embedded into the local fabric. Tear it out and it will leave deep scars.

The Napoleonic Wars didn't close my prep. Nor did the Industrial Revolution, the first and second world wars, the financial crisis or the pandemic. But will it, and many others like it, withstand Bridget Phillipson, Rachel Reeves and Sir Keir Starmer? These politicians, despite their good intentions, dislike eccentricity; they dislike competition; they cannot stand tradition. They hate what they did not have and they want no one else to have it. What kind of an ideology is that?

Schools have always been inventive and innovative: they'll have to be more so. And I hope that children will sit by the banks of that river, learn their Latin, eat crumpets and dream of knights galloping between castles, for decades more to come.

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