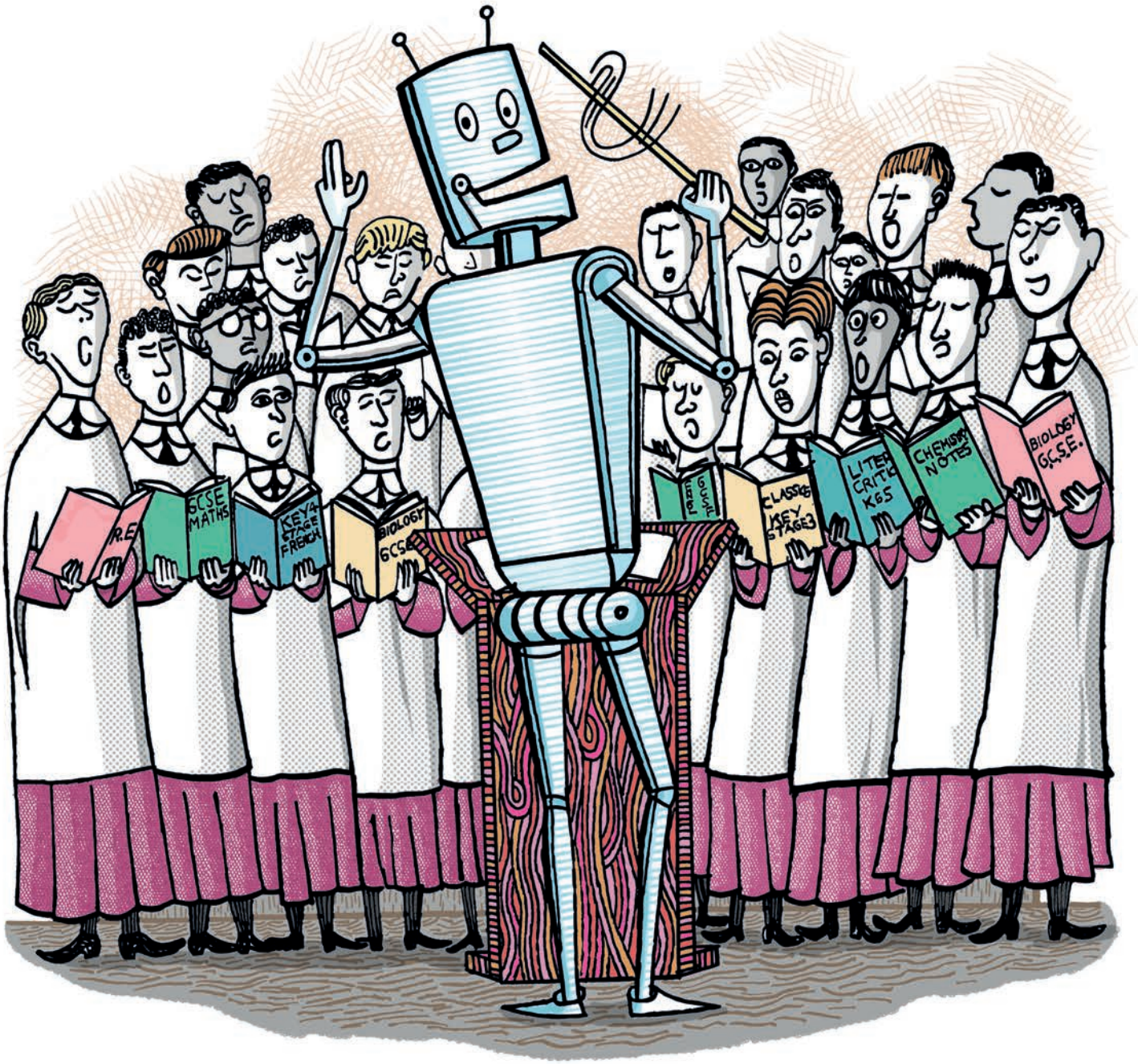
SPECTATOR SCHOOLS

SPRING 2026



I WAS A GIRL AT ETON
MAGGIE FERGUSSON

DON'T GIVE UP ON TEXTBOOKS
SOPHIE WINKLEMAN

THE BEAUTY OF SCHOOL CHAPELS
FERGUS BUTLER-GALLIE

ST. EDWARD'S
OXFORD

LANDLINES
INSTEAD OF MOBILES

OVER 100 SPORTS & ACTIVITIES
OXFORD, CAMBRIDGE, IVY LEAGUE
100 ACRES OF OUTDOOR SPACE

A NEW PARTNERSHIP WITH CHELSEA FOOTBALL CLUB

Find out more about the school's robust mobile phone policy which has seen landlines re-installed in boarding houses

stedwardsoxford.org

WEEKLY & FULL BOARDING | DAY | A LEVEL & IB | CO-EDUCATIONAL | 13 – 18

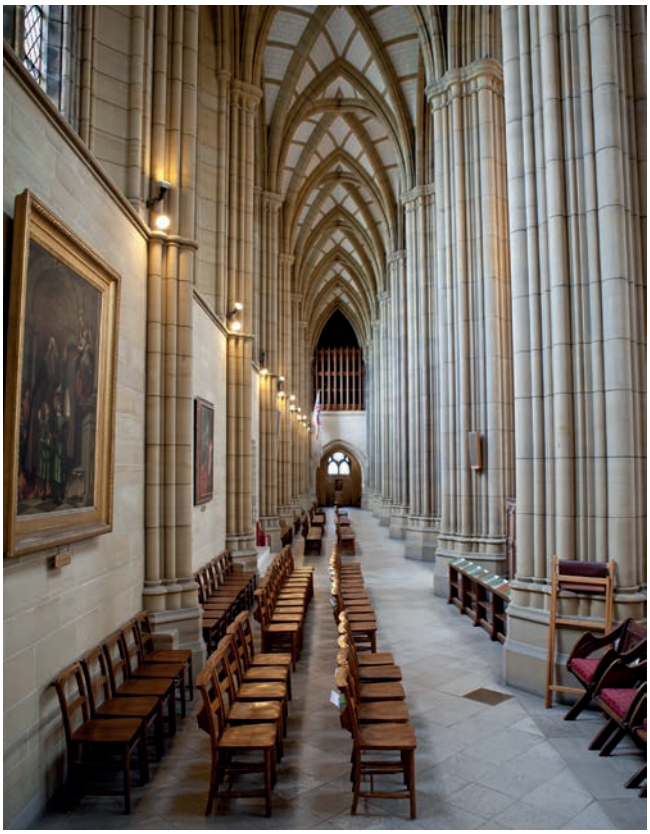
CONTENTS

www.spectator.com/schools
Cover John Broadley **Illustrations** John Broadley **Cartoons** Nick Newman, K.J. Lamb
Editor William Moore **Production editor** Emma Byrne **Designer** Cate Warde **Sub-editors** Alex Glover, Deborah Maby
Advertising Helena Compton; hcompton@spectator.co.uk. Supplied free with 14 March 2026 issue of *The Spectator*
The Spectator (1828) Ltd, 22 Old Queen Street, London SW1H 9HP: 020 7961 0200

Sacred spaces

You can judge a public school by how it cares for its chapel

FERGUS BUTLER-GALLIE



Lancing School's magnificent chapel

I can still just about recall the exact angle of rotation required of the metal hymn-book casings in the Tonbridge School chapel to produce a piercing scraping sound – perfect for putting any preacher off his stride. God, as St Paul tells us, is not mocked, and as I ascended the pulpit when I returned 12 years later as the school's assistant chaplain, I heard the old familiar scrape once more, now deployed to distract me.

In many ways it was comforting. Generations of pupils praying and singing in the same space and inevitably learning the same techniques to distract or annoy. They are teenagers after all.

A school chapel has a much quicker turnover of worshippers than a church, yet it provides a link to past generations who sat in the same pews and stared at the same carving or glass while singing the same hymns. In the five years we were there, my Tonbridge contemporaries and I spent more time in chapel than we did in any individual classroom or dormitory. It became, almost inadvertently, the central experience of our time there, the place which we can most clearly remember as the years away from the school pass by.

Tonbridge nearly lost its chapel altogether. The school outgrew its original early 19th-century building and so built a great Edwardian barn. That burned down in the 1980s and plans were afoot to replace it with a steel and glass behemoth constructed on a lesser-used cricket pitch. Fortunately, a restoration was favoured instead, and – squeaky metal casings aside – is considered a triumph.

Public school chapels are so often architectural gems, masterpieces that stand alongside some of the nation's finest buildings. Lancing's is often mistaken for a cathedral by baffled tourists who cannot imagine that such a magnificent building could have been set aside for a bunch of 13- to 18-year-olds.

Chapel was the central experience of our school years, the place we remember most clearly

The oldest school chapels are ecclesiastical buildings themselves – King's Canterbury pupils worship in England's Mother Church; Westminster pupils in the Abbey. Invariably schools with medieval origins were so enmeshed in the life of the Church that they had no need for separate places of worship. There is a notable exception. Eton's chapel is essentially the reason the school exists. Henry VI, desiring a stream of prayers for his soul, wanted to make it the longest church in Europe, with a piece of the Crown of Thorns inside. He even secured from the papacy the right – unique in England – to grant indulgences on the Feast of the Assumption. With lofty aims like these for the school's worship, the education of the boys was merely a secondary matter.

Of course not every public school has an architectural gem of a chapel. Places such as Berkhamsted, Epsom and Worksop, which are hardly on the lips of the international set, still have at their hearts a solid red-brick testament to education as a vocation and to the enrichment of the lives of others as being pleasing to God.

These solid Victorian buildings perhaps do a better job of conveying the purpose of the chapel in the life of the school, which is, ironically, to ground it. Schools can tend towards overdramatising trivial matters –

The choir at Tonbridge School, which nearly lost its chapel altogether

the stress of missed prep or the agony of not being selected for the 1st XV – and so chapels are a good reminder that there are more important things going on.

Chapels are also one of the more accessible aspects of institutions which by their very nature are exclusive: they are often the only parts of public schools open to the public. The town of Tonbridge, a Low Church bastion within the diocese of Rochester, provided a steady flow of attendees with more exotic religious tastes to the school's evensongs and holy communions, it having been a stronghold of High Church sympathies since it rebelled against Dr Knox, its headmaster in the Napoleonic Wars, for being too much of a free-thinking Whig.

These magnificent buildings are under threat. There is a fear that a generation of weaker headmasters are likely to bow to the desires of helicopter parents who want their little darlings home on Sunday nights rather than spending them singing 'All People That on Earth Do Dwell'. The dominance of international markets for public schools also causes problems. As we have seen in Oxbridge, if the managerial caste can find an excuse for turning something distinct and beautiful into the meaningless void of a 'multifaith space' then they will.

Schools are chasing parents who see education not as a good in itself but as a luxury product like any other

Public schools are no longer close to their founding principles, as medieval houses of piety and learning, or as Tudor monastery replacements, or as Victorian factories for the values that made Britain. Instead, they resemble physical embodiments of LinkedIn, obsessing over outreach and numbers, focusing on 'networking' and the building of 'leadership structures'. They are greedier too, chasing parents who see the education they provide not as a good in itself but as a luxury product like any other. Their chapels might still stand at the centre of their physical landscapes, but it is hard to see how they will continue to have a role in such institutions, speaking as they do of the increasingly alien concepts of beauty, truth and love.

A surefire test of a public school's worth is whether it treasures its chapel. Those that still do should be commended and celebrated. It was in chapel that I learned patience, the virtue of service, how to listen, and where the first seeds were sown of a faith and a vocation which has been the great joy of my life. No multi-faith assembly or careers seminar or lecture on 'values' would or could achieve the same.

'This is Miss Stapleforth, in charge of the pupils' predicted grades.'

The Revd Fergus Butler-Gallie is a priest and writer. His latest book, Twelve Churches: An unlikely history of the buildings that made Christianity, *is out now.*

Eton dress

My time as a girl at the world's most famous boys' school

MAGGIE FERGUSSON

The godson of a friend of mine started at Eton last Michaelmas, and she recently told me how wonderfully it was suiting him. He's a boy who has suffered from some academic and behavioural challenges, but very quickly these seem to have been ironed out. That school really knows its onions, my friend said.

Of course I was pleased for the boy; but my reaction was mixed. Good old Eton, I thought, working its magic again. But why is this magic available to so few – for the most part, only those able to raise fees just shy of £65,000 per year – and none of them girls?

Well, not quite none. You might think my reaction somewhat ungrateful if I tell you that I was briefly a girl at Eton, and that it changed my life.

Forty-plus years ago, sixth-formers who wanted to try for Oxford or Cambridge were required to stay on after A-levels for a 'seventh term', and work towards a daunting entrance exam. Most posh Berkshire girls' schools weren't equipped to prepare girls in this way and so, for a few years from the late 1970s, they were dispatched to Eton instead.

It was, even for the toughest of us, a baptism of fire. My older sister was in one of the first batches of girls, and Eton wasn't prepared for them at all. There were, for example, no girls' loos. Far too embarrassed to articulate this problem, my sister and her convent friends spent much of their time walking over the bridge into Windsor, to visit the ladies' at the Theatre Royal.

Three years later, when I arrived, there was a loo. But there were still challenges. We had, for example, to learn a whole new language. Lessons were 'divs' and for each 'div' we were 'up to' a different 'beak' (master), referred to by his initials. For European history I was 'up to' JSBP, a housemaster. He was an outstanding teacher and a sweet man, rather smitten, I thought, with the Heathfield girl who also joined his divs.

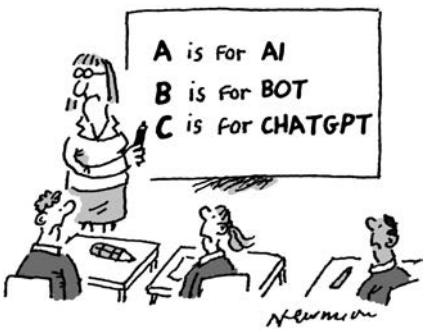
Not surprising: she was beautiful. In letters sent out during the summer holidays, we girls had been asked to dress in a way that was 'decorous but unobtrusive'. Some, like the girl who came in each day by motorbike, usually in a mini-kilt, managed this nicely. But for me, one of a big family entirely dependent on hand-me-downs, it was hopeless. I was obtrusively indecorous and acutely conscious of it.

Even the most ordinary Etonians, meanwhile, looked glamorous in their tailcoats. By the time they reached 'A Block', most were wearing 'stick ups' and many were in 'Pop' waistcoats. During divs one of them, now a distinguished architect, used to tip back precariously on his chair so the sides of his tailcoat fell open, revealing an expanse of crimson gorgeousness. But perhaps the most classy was the boy who later ended up with a five-year prison sentence. He'd arrive late for divs, unshaven and exhausted-looking, wearing a white silk scarf. Had he spent the night in Tramp?

'Perhaps it is the peculiar fault of the boys to pretend to knowledge in fields where they have none at all'

'Perhaps it is the peculiar fault of Etonians to pretend to knowledge in fields where they have none at all,' one beak wrote in my report. 'Maggie was the complete opposite.' None of us girls could believe the confidence of the boys – 'I think I'll get an award, sir. Don't you?'

Through most divs I stooped over an exercise book, scribbling, hoping to look zoned-out. The beaks weren't fooled: 'In discussions in school Maggie doodled compulsively, with the abstract expression of someone listening intently.' It was one of the most impressive things about an Eton education that there was nowhere to hide. Rather than write an essay after a div on a particular topic, as we'd been used to doing at our girls' school, we'd be given a question and sent off to cobble together an answer. This was decades before the internet, of course, so I spent hours and hours in the Eton library (am I right in remembering it was pink?) and came to love it.



Each of us, meantime, had a private tutor, whom we saw once a week for an hour, on our own. My tutor had asked me to read *Middlemarch* over the summer, and at our first session he asked whether I'd enjoyed it. I responded with full convent gush: 'I thought it was AMAZING!' He stared at me, and asked: 'Why?' We sat in painful silence for what felt like a good while. Eventually, he rescued me: 'Might it simply be that Dorothea is a wonderful woman?' It was a revelation to me that it passed muster to respond to a great work of literature so simply. It has stood me in good stead all the decades since.

After I left Eton, I did sometimes wonder how much more boldly I might have entered the adult world if I'd had that education for five years rather than one term (a 'half'). Then one evening I was invited to a dinner at the Garrick, in honour of the *Middlemarch* beak. I braced myself to square up again to this formidable intellect. But when it came to my turn to sit next to him, he didn't seem to want to talk about George Eliot, or to revisit 'the loss of faith in Victorian Britain', on which I'd toiled in a long and turgid essay.

Instead, he told me how much he was loving his rural retirement, what pleasure it gave him to help children at the local state primary with their reading, the joy he got from his orchard, the prospects for the quince harvest and the delights of growing rhubarb. When I broke into his reverie to ask about Eton, to which he'd devoted pretty much his whole working life, and how he felt about it now, he paused, then admitted he thought of the old place with mixed feelings. And so do I.

The SENSE *of* BALANCE

ROUNDED • GROUNDED • UNBOUNDED •
SINCE 1557
PORTA VACAT CULPA

SUPPORTING JUNIOR BOARDERS AWARD
Winner
BSA SUPPORTING EXCELLENCE AWARDS 2023
bsa

SHORTLIST 2025
INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS OF THE YEAR AWARDS
IN ASSOCIATION WITH schoolblazer

SINCE 1557
PORTA VACAT CULPA

Attend an Open Day or
arrange a personal tour
01283 559200
admissions@repton.org.uk

REPTON
SCHOOL

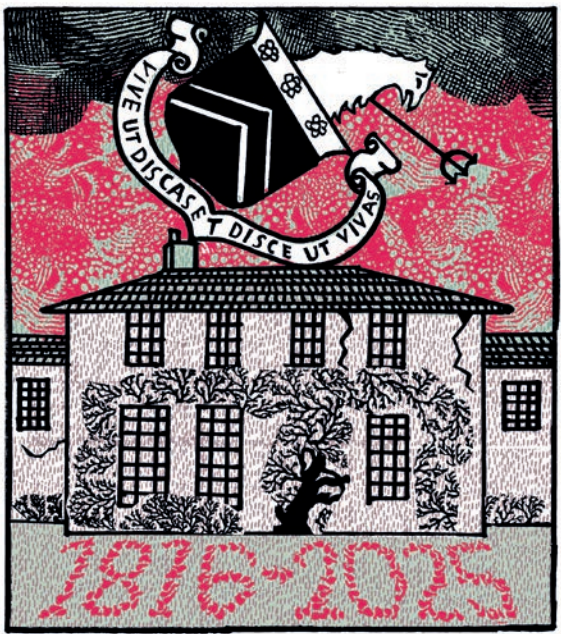
A perfectly balanced
education in the heart
of England
repton.org.uk

Co-educational | 3 - 18 | Boarding and Day

Prep down

An elegy to a family-run school

ARABELLA BYRNE



Woodcote House, an all-boys' independent preparatory school of 76 pupils, closed its doors for the last time on 4 July last year. Asked by the editor to write an elegy for the school, I set about making enquiries. Many ran cold. The website had been shut down. Requests to friends who lived in Surrey fizzled out. Not a year after the closure of the 150-year-old institution, all that remained were digital embers: a sad Instagram post in which former parents and friends of the institution mourned its loss; an online *Telegraph* article detailing the headmaster's final letter to parents in which he cited the 'buffeting headwinds' and a 'drop in pupil numbers' of the independent school sector in the aftermath of Labour's VAT raid.

According to Plato, Atlantis, that 'great and wonderful empire', sank in a single day and night. Britain's private schools may be sinking at a marginally slower rate, but soon we may struggle to find their remains at all. In the rout of independent schools since Labour's policy, small private schools (many of them faith-oriented and non-selective) have emerged as some of the greatest casualties. Among them are Maidwell Hall in Northamptonshire (the alma mater of Earl Spencer, notoriously described in his memoir *A Very Private School*) and Our Lady's Abingdon, a Catholic school in Oxfordshire. According to Schoolsmith, a market comparison site for the independent sector, prep-school closures averaged 19 a year between 2014 and 2024. Last year, 45 prep schools closed – more than twice the historic average.

Saddened but not surprised by these numbers as a prep-school mother myself, I nearly gave up on writing about Woodcote. If 45 prep schools had closed in the past 12 months, my chances of locating its last headmaster, Oliver Paterson, seemed slim. The larger narrative would win out; the details would be squashed. But this would be to underestimate the Paterson family, who have been at the helm of Woodcote House since 1931. On a wet February morning, Nicholas Paterson – a previous headmaster and the father of Oliver – rang me. He would, he said, be delighted to talk.

Woodcote was first and foremost 'a family business', he began. Few prep schools (bar perhaps Ludgrove and Sunningdale, which also lay claim to father-son headmaster duos) can boast the kind of intergenerational leadership that Woodcote did. After the school was acquired by Douglas Paterson in 1931, the headmastership passed from Douglas to his son Mark in 1958. In 1985, Nicholas became co-headmaster with his father until 1989, and occupied the position on his own until 2009. Subsequently Nicholas's twin brother David took up the mantle, before passing the title to Nicholas's son, Oliver, until the school's closure.

Such extraordinary levels of familial devotion to preserve what Nicholas terms the 'unique model' of the school are hard to replicate. In the current climate of prep-school mergers led by, inter alia, the Radley Group, schools will likely become homogenised: efficient feeders to certain senior schools rather than standalone institutions of unique import. 'I fear the Orwellian hoovering-up of the sector,' Paterson says.

Woodcote, on the other hand, provided a preparatory education true to the movement's 18th-century definition: pastoral, rural, generational. Class sizes were small (never more than 12), with a holistic approach to character development and happiness. Sport – the pride of the prep-school model – was encouraged and delighted in. No more so perhaps than when Gary Lineker, former England football captain and a Woodcote parent, appeared on the sidelines to watch his sons play. So, too, music. Woodcote's most famous alumnus, Roger Hodgson of Supertramp fame, recalls being allowed to practise the guitar in a teacher's study, among other musical endeavours – 'It was probably my stint as head of the school choir which helped develop my vocal chops,' he has said.

In the end, pragmatism won out. 'The numbers had been sliding for two to three years,' Nicholas says, explaining that although parents formed a committee to save the school, it quickly emerged that this would not be enough.

All that remains is for the Patersons to decide what the former school might become next. The grounds themselves are not unfamiliar with the shifting sands of history. Woodcote was able to expand significantly on the back of a bonus from the wartime government for 'staying put' during the Blitz, and would later take in Holocaust refugees. Having survived Nazi aggression, the Patersons could have been forgiven for thinking they would survive Rachel Reeves. Sadly, this was not to be.

Boys 11-18 *Moor Park* *www.mtsn.org.uk*

MERCHANT TAYLORS'
School

Handmade, *for you.*

Merchant Taylors' is renowned for its outstanding academic education. Our mission is to truly know each pupil. We support them in exploring world-class opportunities, helping them discover and develop their unique talents.

Open Morning 27 September 2025

Visit our website to book your place and find out more

Greek tragedy

The decline and fall of classics teaching

HARRY MOUNT

Ancient Greek, once central to a western European education, is on life support. Last summer, 206 pupils sat an A-level in ancient Greek. Of those, only a handful were state-educated.

So it's farewell to the language taught in our schools since the 16th century. Farewell to the language of the New Testament; the language Roman nobles revered and the emperors spoke. Julius Caesar's last words weren't 'Et tu, Brute?' They were '*Kai su, teknon*?' – 'You too, my child?'

As A.N. Wilson recently wrote: 'Someone once said that all western philosophy is just footnotes to Plato. All western literature is just footnotes to Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Homer.'

With the death of Greek in schools, so too it is dying in universities, with reading in the original language replaced by English translations. As one retired Oxbridge don put it to me: 'The subject is becoming more like classical studies every day – an ancient equivalent of English literature.'

Of the 13 state schools that teach A-level Greek, most are grammar schools. Less than half are comprehensives. So the rigorous study of ancient Greek is almost entirely confined to selective schools – and the soft bigotry of low expectations strikes again. If you aren't lucky enough to have rich parents, able to send you to private school, or if you don't get into a grammar school, it's almost impossible for you to study classical languages at the highest level at university.

Yes, Oxford and Cambridge admirably try to narrow the gap by teaching Latin and Greek to undergraduates who haven't studied the languages at school. But how can they ever hope to close it? When I started classics at Oxford in 1989, I'd already done eight years, with long terms and long daily hours, of Latin and seven years of Greek at North Bridge House prep school and Westminster School. No one is going to catch up in the three or four years of a classics degree, for just 24 weeks a year, with only two hour-long tutorials a week.

Greek is hard to learn. You have to deal with a new script and alien terms, like the

optative and the dual. So you need intensely rigorous Greek lessons early on at school to get anywhere with it. Instead, there has been a real decline in linguistic teaching in schools for 40 years.

That retired Oxbridge don says: 'The Cambridge Latin Course – essentially teaching Latin like a modern language – was the start of the rot in schools, as far as rigour and solid learning of language go.

'As for Greek in schools, Maurice Balme did his best with his course, Athenaze, which tried to provide a good reader, underpinned by solid learning of language. But far too much water has been poured into the wine in the past 40 years and dons are (privately) tearing their hair out. Oxford – and every other university – now admits candidates they would have dismissed a generation ago.

You end up with a diluted Greek GCSE that insults the intelligence of the handful of pupils who sit it

'Pupils who haven't done Greek can't catch up with the private school students, despite the evidence that these privileged few are only too ready to slide down to the general level and happily treat their experience as classical studies rather than classics.'

I'm all for classical civilisation – it's a wonderful subject. But it is a very different subject to classics and a full understanding of the languages. Well, it used to be. Now full-fat classics is morphing into classical civilisation, and few teachers and dons are prepared to acknowledge what schools are losing.

Along the way, Greek GCSE has been tragically dumbed down, with increasingly banal questions. That's part of a failed bid to make the subject more accessible. So you end up with a diluted exam that insults the intelligence of the handful of pupils who sit it.

As a part-time Latin and Greek tutor, I've witnessed the catastrophic decline. One of my pupils – bright, yes, but with only two years' Latin – got 97 per cent in his GCSE. The Emperor Augustus wouldn't have got 97 per cent in the old Latin O-levels.

In the early 1950s, translation from English to Greek – the gold standard – was compulsory. Now you don't have to do it at all. Most teachers and dons have been quietly accepting all this. Desperate for pupils to study any form of classics, they're prepared to sacrifice the full-fat version on the altar of classics-lite.

In 2015, Camden School for Girls, one of the last comprehensives offering Greek A-level, was on the verge of dropping it because its brilliant Greek teacher was retiring.

I wrote an article for the *Telegraph* about this, mourning what would indeed soon come to pass: the high-minded, mind-expanding beauties of Greek would be confined to public and grammar schools. The gap between comprehensive and selective education would yawn wider and wider, and difficulty would continue to be replaced by easiness.

Still, the classicists kept on drinking the Kool-Aid. One undergraduate at King's College London called me an 'antediluvian ape'. A teacher at Durham Sixth Form Centre predicted my next book would be 'bowel-achingly derivative'.

My old tutor, Professor Edith Hall, blasted me for being a 'classical Luddite… bedded

down deep in the British Classics Establishment… I thought I had taught Mr Mount to ratiocinate in Homer classes I ran long ago at Magdalen College, Oxford.' She attacked me again in the *Guardian*, saying I was insulting 'the entire community of state-sector classicists and anyone who ever reads an ancient author in translation'.

No, I wasn't. I was just mourning the demise of the greatest language of all in comprehensives. Thank God, Greek at Camden survived and lives on to this day – no thanks to the classics-lite brigade.

The dons fiddled while Rome – and Athens – burned. Meanwhile, thousands of bright, state-educated children, who could have lapped up the joys – and brain-crunching complexities – of Greek and Latin, are being deprived of the pleasure.

One of my Latin pupils – a nine-year-old girl at a north London state school – was brilliant at absorbing some of those delicious complexities, such as the passive, the participle and the deponent. She went on to excel at Camden School for Girls.

But she was lucky enough to have a mother who could pay for private tuition – and to live near one of the last few comprehensives in the country that taught Latin and Greek A-level. Without those two rare strokes of luck, she would never have been able to study classics at its highest level.

And so the death spiral of ancient Greek continues. As the proper study of classics at university is increasingly restricted to private schools and grammar schools, so the subject will inevitably be attacked for being 'exclusive'. It will be increasingly marginalised.

In 1925, Virginia Woolf wrote a lovely essay, 'On Not Knowing Greek'. Of course, the clever old Bloomsbury bluestocking *did* know Greek. Her essay was really about not knowing the Greeks – and how to appreciate their brilliance through their language:

> 'Every ounce of fat has been pared off [Greek], leaving the flesh firm. Then, spare and bare as it is, no language can move more quickly, dancing, shaking, all alive, but controlled. So clear, so hard, so intense, that to speak plainly yet fittingly without blurring the outline or clouding the depths, Greek is the only expression. It is useless, then, to read Greek in translations.'

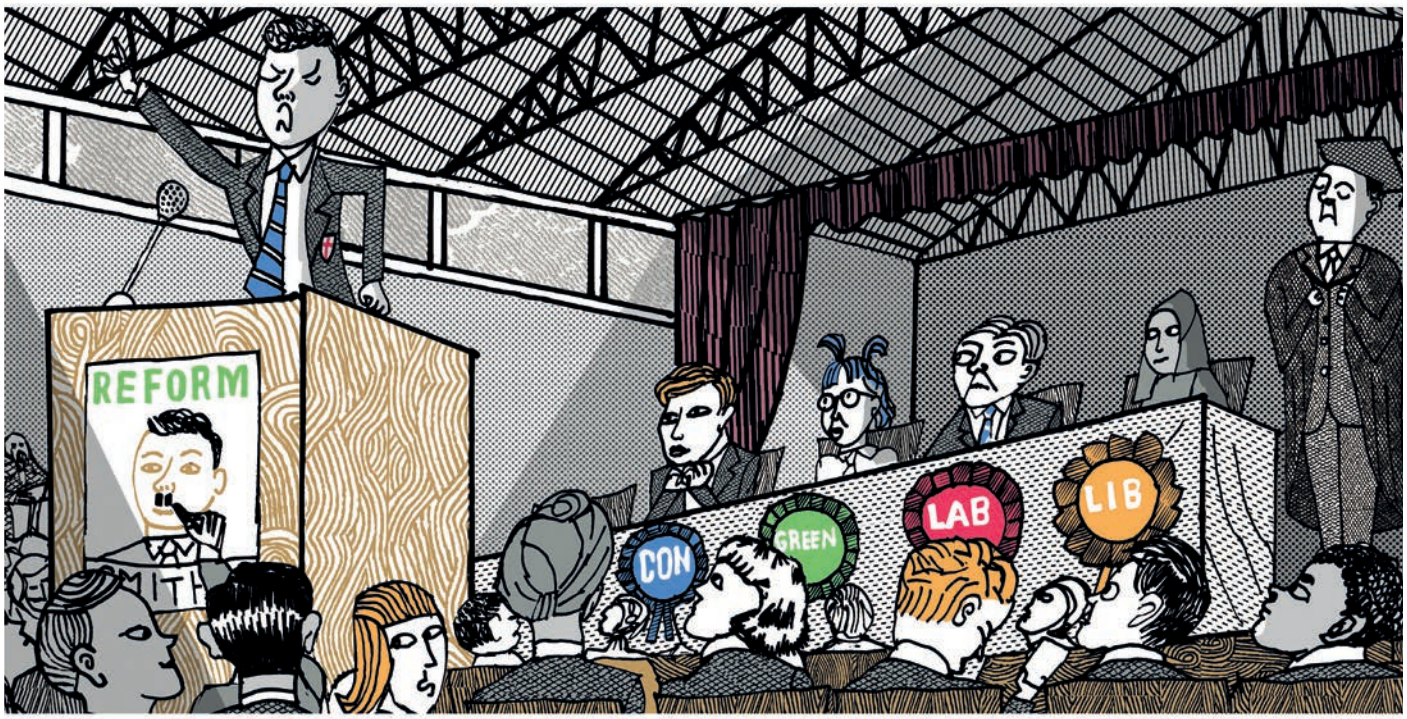
How horrified Woolf would be to discover that, 101 years after her essay, Britain has become a country that really does not know Greek any more.

Harry Mount's Odyssey – Ancient Greece in the Footsteps of Odysseus *is out now.*

Just the ticket

Mock elections are invaluable

RUPERT HAWKSLEY



The 2005 election campaign was brutal. All the major parties succumbed to infighting, the hustings were hostile and the drip-drip of poisonous briefings reached a nadir when a Ukip candidate was compared to Hitler. One special adviser was found crying in the loos. More than two decades may have passed, but the Sherborne School mock election certainly left its mark on those who witnessed it first-hand.

I remember it well. In fact, I was that tearful special adviser. I was working for the Labour party (sadly not endorsed by Tony Blair) and during one hustings managed to persuade the crowd to walk away when the Ukip candidate – a close friend of mine in the same boarding house – stood up to speak. I stayed back to watch him deliver his carefully crafted speech to an empty courtyard. The remorse was immediate – and too much for my 15-year-old self to bear. But my God it was all good fun, and we learnt more about politics in that frantic week than we ever could have done in the classroom.

Lesson one: there are consequences to practising the dark arts. Stay clear if you haven't got the stomach for it.

Lesson two: politics is about personalities as much as policies. 'We realised we needed influential backers,' one school friend who supported the Green party recalls. 'So we got the 1st XV onside by offering them free curry – alongside pristine ice caps and decarbonisation, obviously.'

Lesson one: there are consequences to practising the dark arts. Stay clear if you haven't got the stomach for it

Mock elections, I'm delighted to discover, remain a central part of the syllabus at many schools. There is simply no better way to teach pupils about democracy. A mock election encourages young people to debate; to grapple with complex policy and present it in a palatable way; to engage with divergent views; to experiment with public speaking; and, finally, to experience the privilege of voting at the ballot box (even if it is in the chemistry lab).

With the Labour government reducing the voting age to 16, these mock elections have never been more important – a consequence-free dry-run for youngsters whose real votes in the next general election will be crucial.

Fortunately, things have calmed down a bit since my time at school. Jack Reilly, head of politics at Highgate School in north London, says he is alert to 'students being antagonistic towards each other. We try to steer them away from that and explain that this is a chance to discuss policy, to become more informed about the parties.' My cheeks burn a little when he adds that 'it's not about trying to put down other candidates'.

Today's mock elections seem to be less about party politics and skulduggery and more about the democratic process. A thought experiment, not a popularity con-

test. Sherborne School for Girls held one in 2024. Five teams were assigned to represent five political parties. The teams were led by a Year 12 pupil, who stood as the candidate, and a younger pupil who acted as the team's researcher. 'I really wanted the girls to think about what the different parties were offering the electorate,' says Kristina Young, who teaches politics at the Dorset school. 'To get used to listening to different views and voting depending on what they had learned, thereby developing their own political opinions.'

Kate Crawford, then a Year 12 pupil who took part in the election, and now studying economic policymaking at university, adds: 'Being assigned to a political party that wasn't fully consistent with my own views stretched me to consider different perspectives and broaden my understanding of multi-dimensional political issues.' Another pupil, Wizzy Wordsworth, who is also going to study politics at university, agrees: 'It was a unique opportunity to really immerse myself in a party I didn't necessarily support, to try to understand their policies and why they would be beneficial.'

Mock elections bring politics to life for pupils. If teachers commit to recreating the theatre of a real election, the sense of occasion is infectious. 'The night before the election, we held a leaders' debate where each candidate was put through his paces by the pupil version of David Dimbleby in a packed assembly hall,' remembers Rob Le Poidevin, assistant head and politics teacher at Sherborne School for Boys. 'It was great to see the enthusiasm it generated.' At Highgate School, they had paper ballots – different colours for each year group, so voting trends could be analysed – and pupils doing the count to recreate the sense of urgency and anticipation of polling day. Wordsworth remembers 'a real buzz as everyone [at Sherborne School for Girls] went to cast their votes at the polling station'.

'I'm bunking off from home school.'

I was struck during our 2005 election by friends who had shown no interest in politics suddenly throwing themselves into the campaign. It was all we talked about that week. 'I don't know the younger groups that well, I don't know how much they talk about politics,' says Reilly. 'But once there's a school election going on, I get people from those years approaching me and asking questions.'

This is invaluable at a time when young people's political views are increasingly shaped by social media. Reilly noticed during the most recent school election in 2024 that pupils whose politics are influenced by 'videos they're seeing on TikTok… and are a bit skewed in one direction or another' were engaging in real-life debate with their peers. 'Those discussions open up,' he says.

These mock elections can have a lasting impact, too. I learnt a hard lesson that spring day in the loos of the gymnasium, but one Year 10 pupil at Sherborne Girls says that she was so invigorated by the mock election that she is 'now studying politics for A-level, as I found myself wanting to know more and expanding my insight on the news and global issues'. Westminster and the front bench await.

Big picture

History of art is shamefully overlooked

MATTHEW WILSON

I may be biased because I teach it, but history of art A-level often feels like the greatest, yet most dismally undervalued, subject in the curriculum. It explores history's most innovative thinkers, enhances visual literacy, teaches history through the prism of creativity and emotion, sharpens critical thinking, and fosters empathy and open-mindedness. Yet it languishes as a minority character in the pantheon of school subjects. It has always been chronically underappreciated by students, teachers, school heads and governments. I worry that its disparagement tells us something rather depressing about our own cultural values and even our sense of what education is for.

Just to scotch a popular misconception from the outset – history of art is not a 'soft' subject. Its demands are not dissimilar to those of English literature: it teaches the skills of analysis, interpretation, research and logical argumentation. But history of art tends not to be on most people's radar as a curriculum subject. Around 35,000 students took English literature A-level last year, compared with 838 for history of art.

What's going on? How have we become a nation that values Shakespeare, Milton and Austen so much more than Hogarth, Turner and Hepworth? This prejudice in our education system is crazy, particularly since our country is home to some of the world's greatest artworks, and has its own rich, radical and hugely inventive tradition in the visual arts. By overlooking our artistic heritage and cultural achievements we are neglecting and undervaluing the very areas in which we are a world leader.

A recent study by the Association for Art History throws the demise of A-level history of art into sharp relief. Over the past 15 years, the number of schools offering it has dropped by 34 per cent. You can't study it at all in Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland. And because state schools tend to lack the funding to support it, it's now taught mainly in independent schools.

All this only partially explains why history of art isn't given the esteem it is due as a subject. Unfortunately, there's the misapprehension that it's an easy option, lacking the practical application and skills of its STEM siblings. It's also tarnished with associations with wealth and privilege. In the news, fine art is often only ever reported in connection with insane prices achieved by artworks at auction, and history of art as an academic subject is usually only mentioned in reference to celebrity poshos like Eddie Redmayne, Loyd Grossman and the Princess of Wales, all of whom studied it at university.

How have we become a nation that values Shakespeare and Austen more than Hogarth and Turner?

This is a maddening delusion. In history of art A-level, we study architecture and public sculpture as well as painting. This means that students understand the historical resonances of their local, free-to-access parish church or memorials as well as in major international monuments such as Angkor Wat or the Parthenon.

Many of Britain's greatest museums (such as the National Gallery of Scotland, V&A, the various Tate galleries and the British Museum) offer free entry. Far from being an exclusive and snobby subject, history of art is radically egalitarian. It may cultivate aesthetic pleasure, but its core skills are far more practical.

Key among them is the discipline of close looking and visual literacy, which is intrinsic to the subject and vital for many skilled professions. Whenever I have the opportunity, I enjoy telling people about the American art historian Amy Herman in this context, who has used artwork analysis to sharpen the observational abilities of members of the NYPD, FBI, Interpol and the military and intelligence communities.

There is hope on the horizon for the

beleaguered subject. A brilliant organisation called Art History Link-Up offers courses to students who wouldn't otherwise have access to it. Earlier this year, the Courtauld Institute of Art is also announcing its intention to work alongside educational and philanthropic partners to make history of art more accessible as a subject at school level.

Is it worth the fight? I believe so. History of art, like every humanities subject, is essentially an exploration of how to live. It offers students a multitude of opinions about how to discriminate beauty, honesty and decency from cruelty, nihilism and barbarism. And in history of art, the scope of these opinions is enormous, encompassing the time span between the palaeolithic period and the present day. We can't access the music, religions or stories shared among our ancestors from 10,000 years ago, but we can look at their visual art.

We live in a time when our cultural habits, access to information and even our desires are defined not by other people, but by algorithms. And as the element of human contact is gradually being drained out of these interactions, surely the role of the humanities should be even more central to the education of the young. Only the humanities can explain and augment the experience of being human, to show us its fallibilities and delights, its agonies and glories, to remind us that this experience can – should – be honourable, worthwhile and beautiful. Now is the time to rally around the humanities, to make them more prominent in the curriculum, to spread and popularise them, especially the history of art – relentlessly underappreciated and overlooked as it is.

Matthew Wilson is the head of history of art at Benenden School in Kent.

HOLLAND PARK GATE
LODHA

Designed for *Family Life*

Preferred by Parents

Holland Park Gate by Lodha is Kensington's favourite family development, preferred by parents for its proximity to many of London's top schools as well as Holland Park's 54 green acres. Enjoy a joyful, balanced and fulfilling family life with additional household amenities including:

- Kids' club for fun & education
- Dedicated house car for school runs
- Weekly school uniform laundry services
- Partnership with leading educational consultancy

scan to explore:
@lodha_uk
hollandparkgate.com

Paper chase

Textbooks will always beat screens

SOPHIE WINKLEMAN AND DAVID JAMES

Is the page finally beginning to turn on children and screens? It certainly looks like it. For the first time since the advent of social media, we are seeing a burgeoning alliance across all political divides to protect children from digital harm. In 2024 Jonathan Haidt delivered an urgent manifesto for change in *The Anxious Generation,* and at the beginning of this year Australia responded with a ban on social media for under-16s. Now even Britain, which is usually drawn to inquiries over decisions, seems like it might act. Good. Liberalism doesn't work in the arena of addictive substances.

However, the war on classroom screentime has yet to be properly waged, let alone won. Schools have embraced online learning with an almost evangelical fervour, urged on by billion-dollar businesses and bedazzled education secretaries.

Overwhelmingly the lure of 'one-to-one devices' has gripped schools and, in a blitz of blue light, children across the country are gazing distractedly at screens instead of their teachers' faces and their books.

Pupils often go unmonitored online as the teacher attempts to keep the class 'on task'. Flitting ceaselessly between a proliferation of tabs – some educational, some not – a lot of swiping and scrolling take place. But learning? Not so much. Research has shown that students learning online spend as much as 39 minutes out of every hour off task.

The principal casualty of the digitalisation of education is the textbook. Leading publishers such as Pearson have moved online, ruthlessly killing off these reliable anchors of learning. Textbooks, damned by tech zealots as 'analogue', are slandered as boring compared with online resources, which offer video clips, audio, 3D modelling and other seductive 21st-century 'essentials'.

We would beg to differ. For 'boring', substitute calming, reputable and blessedly undistracting. Pearson owns Edexcel, one of the biggest examination boards and currently spearheading the transition to online GCSEs and A-levels. Pearson should take a long hard look at its own educational principles.

Of course moving everything online makes things much cheaper, but schools have a duty to hold such powerful businesses to account. Pearson et al have a moral duty to research the impact of transferring education online. So much is lost in the process.

John Jerrim, a UCL-based educational researcher, conducted an experiment where 3,000 pupils took PISA tests in maths, science and reading. Over three months, half the group did all their work on paper and half on a computer. At the end, the paper-based group scored 20 points higher than the one working on screens – the equivalent of half a year's extra schooling.

Nearly 100 per cent of ten-year-olds in Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan are issued with standardised textbooks in core subjects, compared with 10 per cent here. These countries, unsurprisingly, all vastly outperform us in these subjects, according to the most recent Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study.

The tools given to children should be as simple and clear as possible so that they uncover the beauty of a subject

Sadly, British schools often have no choice but to buy digital resources because publishers like Pearson have killed off the textbooks they once printed. Such a policy is a sunk-cost fallacy. The real cost – to our children's ability to concentrate and learn – is immeasurable. A healthy, thoughtful, productive society is not a realistic expectation if children are not learning properly.

In contrast to a screenful of apps, PowerPoints and gamified platforms, a chunky textbook provides a stable source of information. A linear repository for knowledge, it offers a tactile sanctuary for prolonged study. Online alternatives, designed for bite-sized consumption, cannot compete with the textbook's ability to serve as a distraction-free companion to a pupil's intellectual growth.

Textbooks also beat screens in that they don't damage eyesight, disrupt hormones, delay sleep, trigger headaches, affect spinal formation and exacerbate symptoms of ADHD and autism, as screens do. That's quite a long list of harms for a medium which is less effective for learning than its forerunner.

Textbooks are deliberately condemned by many in the ed tech industry as 'inert', 'primitive', and 'outdated', but the reality is very different. Leaving aside that they are less prone to crashing or running out of battery, they are far easier to navigate than multiple apps, enable longer and calmer periods of focus, help develop essential skills (such as notetaking) and, because pupils read from a physical page, are far more conducive to delivering knowledge that sticks.

If you talk to many teenage pupils, whether they are studying Latin or chemistry, psychology or economics, those who have an excellent, well-edited textbook prefer it to endless handouts, links and websites. They fully acknowledge that the latter methodology fragments their learning, and impairs how they access and decipher knowledge.

In education, the tools given to children should be as simple and clear as possible so that they uncover the beauty of a subject without unwanted distractions.

Sadly, the medium has become the subject. Screens have their (limited) place in this process of discovery, but too often they are a barrier; a backlit, noisy, crowded space designed for distraction, not absorption. In comparison, a textbook offers a quiet, authoritative voice that promotes sequential, linear learning.

If we wish for children to master the complexities of a subject, we must first grant them the simplicity of a medium that knows when to be silent. Ultimately, the textbook provides the one crucial thing the digital world cannot: a finite horizon, within which a child can find the peace to think.

Technology education? Of course! Education technology? An oxymoron that needs to be exposed. Bring back the textbook.

An inspiring place to flourish

for girls and boys ages 3-18







Ibstock Place

CO-EDUCATIONAL DAY SCHOOL

London, SW15 5PY

www.ibstockplaceschool.co.uk

Code breaker

The rise of the Oxbridge AI admissions cheat

KRISTINA MURKETT

'This is the future, my wife says./ We are already there, and it's the same/ as the present.' So begins Ciaran O'Driscoll's poem 'Please Hold', about a husband talking to a telephone robot and becoming ever more frustrated at the mind-numbing automation of modern-day life. There's a lot of 'Your call is important to us' and *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* and 'We appreciate your patience', until eventually the speaker resigns himself to the fate of growing old while on hold.

This same reluctant acquiescence can be seen with AI: this is the future, and we are already there. Except instead of asking us to hold, it's always asking us how it can help, how it can further infiltrate our lives.

AI has already transformed how students learn and schools evaluate. Yet our universities continue to bury their heads in the sand. There has been lots of talk (though not much action) about how AI is undermining the validity of undergraduates' work and grades. Less has been said about how students are using it to get into university in the first place.

AI is being used at every step of the application process. Personal statements are no longer created on a computer but by a computer. For many teenagers the temptation to 'collaborate' with ChatGPT is simply too great. Why labour for weeks over how to express the formative influence of your school debating society when a bot can spit out a draft for you in seconds?

Students are also increasingly using AI to cheat in Oxbridge admissions interviews conducted online. I know tutors who have seen students minimise their screens suspiciously; take dubious pauses before providing an answer they did not previously know (and even mispronouncing it); or hesitate and close windows before agreeing to share their screen. ChatGPT can now listen to an interview and provide answers in real time.

The problem is that this cheating is often impossible to prove. Online interviews, introduced during Covid as a supposedly temporary measure, are a terrible idea. Oxford interviews all its undergraduate applicants online, and Cambridge the vast majority.

The move was partly to eliminate the risk of unconscious bias on behalf of the interviewer – yet if we take this argument to its logical extreme, the best option would be to conduct interviews via WhatsApp messages, so that accent, appearance or any other class signifier can be removed from the equation.

In reality, the decision was probably made so that colleges could avoid the inconvenience and cost of actually having to deal with applicants. I expect there are many academics, administrators and office-bound bureaucrats congratulating themselves on doing away with the expense of travel rebates and free food and accommodation.

I have no doubt there are plenty of students who are terrified by the prospect of having to do their Oxbridge interview from home. I'm also sure there are many who feel they are missing out on a valuable experience: walking the medieval quads and chatting to other academically minded young people. If having interviews online was meant to reduce the burden for applicants, it doesn't much appear to have succeeded: their numbers are down slightly since 2021.

ChatGPT can now listen to your online interview and provide answers in real time

Not only are the interviews obviously deficient but other elements of the application process have suffered, too. Since Oxbridge tutors have less and less information with which to make their decisions, it's no surprise when analysis of academic credentials gives way to considerations about a student's socioeconomic circumstances.

Take English, for example. Oxford tutors no longer look at AS-level grades, but must rely on predicted A-level grades (which are often as reliable as horoscopes – and I say that as a secondary school teacher). The Ucas personal statement has been simplified into three separate questions, with less opportunity for students to demonstrate style or flair. Oxford has also suspended the Elat (English Literature Aptitude Test) – arguably the fairest part of the assessment since students cannot really prep for it. In 2023 the university disastrously tried to move the Elat online, but the software sent schools the wrong questions and failed to record their answers properly. Much as in 'Please hold', once again technology obstructs more than it facilitates.

Some people may argue AI is in fact a democratising force. After all, many privileged students have always had help writing personal statements, whether through pushy parents or private tutors – now AI means that all pupils can access some form of support.

Nathaniel McCullagh, director of Simply Learning Tuition, argues that ChatGPT is different because it has no personal or professional responsibility: 'For private tutoring, it's not a case of put money in, get a personal statement out. Tutors will help you (often through a long-term mentoring relationship), but they are not going to do it for you: unlike AI, they are not going to misrepresent anything you've done or haven't done. A student using AI to write their personal statement is completely cheating themselves of that feeling of having achieved something: and the more they use it, the more they lose that sense of accountability. Plagiarism becomes normalised and accepted, students miss out on that sense of accomplishment and universities lower their standards accordingly.'

If Oxford and Cambridge want to retain their elite reputations they must accept that the AI genie is out of the bottle and vast numbers of students are already using technology to cheat on their applications.

We need to re-evaluate the whole admissions process, starting by bringing back in-person interviews and designing student statements so they are genuinely personal rather than simply plagiarised. After all, the future is already here.

Fine print

The ruthless world of school magazines

MINOO DINSHAW

In my mind, there was always a sense of hubris in the air of our tucked-away offices at the *Chronicle*, Eton's main student magazine. As in many other domains of our school's life, we idly assumed ours was the first, as well as the only really consequential, example of a public-school magazine.

The early 2000s, when I was a boy there, were a particularly suitable time in which to indulge in such a view; we were all acutely aware of the rise of Boris Johnson.

The record for first school magazine does belong to Eton, but it is in fact for a much earlier and odder production, puckishly called the *Microcosm*, which ran for 40 issues in 1786-7, published as a book the next year. It claimed to be the work of a single hand: 'Gregory Griffin'. Behind this avatar lurked one future political titan, George Canning; a couple of notable literary eccentrics, John Hookham Frere and Capel Lofft; and a squadron of those gentlemanly, poetic Latinists whose grip upon the public's imagination appears quite sadly to have faltered. A microcosm both does and does not sum up how Eton sees itself: the world at its most worldly in miniature; but also more entire, whole and perfect, and really a great deal more important.

If you were devoid of athletic, dramatic or musical talent, editing the Chronicle was the obvious crown

When the *Chronicle* eventually appeared in 1863, Eton did not lead but follow. By that time there was a professionalising fashion for magazines in schools across the country, extending from Sherborne's the *Shirburnian* (1859), devised as an 'outlet for the school's wit', to Charterhouse's *Greyhound*. Could girls and Scots be far behind? The Edinburgh Ladies' College, later Mary Erskine, struck a blow for both with *Our Magazine* in 1877. Journalism, derided by Anthony Trollope in 1868 as 'the lowest business by which an educated man and a gentleman could earn his bread', was becoming an almost respectable vocation.

By my own teenagehood, if you knew yourself to be fond of writing, while also devoid of athletic, dramatic or musical talent, editing the *Chronicle* was the obvious crown to pursue. You started in an approved

and official fashion on the *Junior Chronicle*, strictly overseen by a variety of interested schoolmasters. The spiking of, say, an implied criticism of a worthy school play or of a sub-Borisian attempt at political commentary was a fate to be feared.

I recall garnering most approval for a sincere but hardly substantial puff-piece about the Edinburgh Book Festival, which, as the son of a Scottish novelist, I attended every summer, and whose kind, child-humouring organisers were very willing to supply me with profuse inside information. I would have learned the lesson that contacts counted above all, had I, then or later, been willing to do so.

For the would-be wild at heart there was another outlet called the *Ephemeral*, which had evolved out of a custom of 'ephemerals', fleeting single-issue magazines at Eton, gently mocked by J.M. Barrie. Barrie makes James, later Captain, Hook editor of the *Chronicle* 'for a brief period (resigning over some item obscurely connected with half a crown)', then contributing to an ephemeral piece entitled 'A Dissertation upon Roast Pig'. It is a master's unjust suppression of this article, Barrie suggests, that in part drives young Hook to terrorise the seas. Throughout the years of piracy, Hook remained a faithful subscriber to the *Chronicle* and after his death in the jaws of the crocodile, hundreds of copies of it, 'much thumb-marked', were found littering his bunk.

By my time at school, the *Ephemeral* was just another magazine, the closest we had to an edgy, underground answer to the *Chronicle*. It was as such not really my scene, and I remember it largely as a display of pretty clever boys trying their hardest to seem silly; though its description of the ancient Scottish universities, in advice to school-leavers, as 'love palaces' has unaccountably stayed with me.

The spiking of a sub-Borisian attempt at political commentary was a fate to be feared

Marlborough's equivalent to ephemerals plural or singular is the *Heretick*, started in 1924 by John Betjeman (motto: 'Upon Philistia will I triumph') and patchily revived since. My most talented friend actually deserted Radley for Marlborough largely in order to write for it. Its famed former editors include the comedian Jack Whitehall (who also drew cartoons for it) and *The Spectator*'s own Lara Prendergast.

I always had my eye on another Eton magazine called the *Arts Review*. It was a sort of intermediate stage, edited by boys grown beyond the *Junior Chronicle* but not yet eligible for the *Chron* itself. Its identity was protean but civilised. Jokes were involved, but they did not dominate as at the *Ephemeral*. The master in charge had the role of a hands-off proprietor rather than the *Junior Chronicle*'s de facto Paul Dacre-style editor (another piquant aspect of Eton in the early Noughties was that the school was full of actual Dacres, though they wisely preferred acting to journalism).

You could make of the *Arts Review* what you would, it seemed, and my *Junior Chronicle* colleagues had a very clear idea – they would take it over and essentially turn it into an Etonian *Guardian*. I was relaxed about this; I just wanted to write a lot and build up a profile that would enable my climb to the *Chron*. I liked editing work but regarded layout as ICT drone stuff far below the salt. I was astonished and wounded – in a way that I have both in jest and reality never let go – when my bright clique secretly replaced me. It was another obvious lesson to refuse to learn.

CLAYESMORE

SIGN UP HERE

OPEN DAYS

MAY 9 | SEPTEMBER 19

Private Tours Available Between Dates. Contact Us Today

BELONG • BELIEVE • BECOME

Personalised Learning Built Into Every Lesson

A Community Where Students Belong and Thrive

Every Child Empowered to Succeed Their Way

01747 812122 | **clayesmore.com** | Iwerne Minster, Blandford Forum, DT11 8LL

Private prejudices

How to beat Oxbridge's positive discrimination

LARA BROWN

As university admissions have become increasingly obsessed with equal outcomes, many parents fear a kind of reverse discrimination. They worry that a Ucas form bearing the name of an independent school may be bad news for an Oxbridge application. There's evidence to suggest they're right. Private-school pupils who transfer to state education after their GCSEs are up to a third more likely to be admitted to Cambridge. Children who remained at private school for A-levels had an acceptance rate of 19 per cent, compared with 25 per cent for those who moved to a grammar school or state sixth form college.

Given the assumed prejudice against private school applicants, a recent move by one Cambridge college has surprised many. After decades of commitment to various diversity and equality schemes, fellows at Trinity Hall approved a 'targeted recruitment' strategy to encourage applications from some of the best independent schools in England.

Marcus Tomalin, Trinity Hall's director of admissions, argued that when it comes to certain subjects, such as languages, music and classics, 'the best students from such schools arrive at Cambridge with expertise and interests that align well with the intellectual demands'. It approached 50 schools, including St Paul's Girls, Eton and Winchester.

These are courses which have always seen higher rates of applications and admissions from independent schools. In 2021, Oxford noted that 18.8 per cent of independent applications were for their five least popular subjects (classics, music, modern languages, chemistry and English) compared with 13 per cent of state applications. Classics admitted just 36 per cent of students from state schools between 2018 and 2020, while modern languages took just over half.

The reason Trinity Hall might want to target private schools is because certain subjects invariably rely on specialist teaching at a secondary level. If the college wishes to climb the Cambridge rankings, it helps to have pupils who have studied Latin or French, for example, to a high standard. While Trinity Hall made headlines, its strategy is far from the only example of a close relationship between an independent school and an Oxbridge college. Consider Westminster School, which secured 96 Oxbridge offers for 2025, the most in the country. Its students tell me the school has Oxbridge alumni in almost every department. They take mock admissions tests and have practice interviews marked by those who attended their target college (and who may even know people there). The school is regarded as the best in the country at preparing students for Oxbridge admissions.

It has a close historic relationship with Christ Church, Oxford and Trinity College, Cambridge, dating back to funds set aside in 1561 by Elizabeth I. Until 2018, the master of Trinity College was automatically a governor of Westminster. Between 2018 and 2020, 22 Westminster students received offers to study at Trinity College (more successful applications to one than most schools get to both Oxford and Cambridge). Perhaps surprisingly, given the college's extensive outreach work, Trinity College has a financial award reserved for students from Westminster, dating back to a 1690 fund. Meanwhile at Eton, which in 2024 won 51 Oxbridge offers, the board of governors until last year had to have at least one fellow from both an Oxford and Cambridge college.

Students take mock admissions tests and have interviews marked by those who attended their target college

There are, however, programmes to encourage less privileged young people to apply. St John's College, Oxford runs an 'Inspire Programme' to encourage pupils 'to be confident in making well-founded applications to a top university like Oxford'. Participation is limited to those from non-selective state schools in the college's 'linked regions'. Even if their students are not eligible, England's top independent schools provide external advisers. In 2019, Dr James Bedford, director of Lumina at Harrow School, supported the programme. Harrow hosts mentoring workshops for young people from deprived backgrounds to help them get into Oxbridge. In 2024, it sent six students to Oxford and five to Cambridge.

Is the tide turning? At Oxford the proportion of independent school admissions has increased slightly since 2020 (its lowest point in recent years) to 33.8 per cent in 2024. At Cambridge, the corresponding figure grew to 29 per cent.

Trinity Hall justified its 'targeted recruitment' strategy on the basis of fears about 'reverse discrimination' against privately educated pupils. Since the public outcry over the case of Laura Spence in 2000 – when a girl from a state comprehensive in Tyneside with five As predicted at A-level was denied a place to study medicine from Magdalen College, Oxford – there has been huge pressure on top universities to take fewer students from fee-paying schools.

There has been widespread speculation that Durham, which now sits above Oxford and Cambridge in some university rankings, has benefited from the trend, by refusing to discriminate against clever candidates from independent schools. In 2024, 39.1 per cent of its students were from fee-paying schools, the highest of any mainstream university.

When many Oxbridge colleges make noises about diversity schemes, well-informed private school pupils are more likely to apply to those colleges that stick to a meritocratic interview process. The best independent schools have worked hard to develop informal links with both universities. They hire teachers, headmasters and governors who attended or worked at a college. They develop mock interview schemes and host summer schools taught by Oxbridge academics (both former and current).

As parents work to shield their children from a biased system, it is the schools that are best at fostering these relationships which will prove the most desirable.


Lancing College
Senior School & Sixth Form
Be inspired
Be brilliant
Be you
CONTACT US TO BOOK A VISIT
LANCINGCOLLEGE.CO.UK
13–18 YEARS, CO-EDUCATIONAL BOARDING AND DAY SCHOOL

CONFESSIONS OF A SCHOOL MUM

Screen Grinch and proud

FLORA WATKINS

He's 12 next month, my eldest son, but he's rejected the 'movie night' party I've suggested, and he doesn't want any of his new friends from senior school to come for a sleepover. And I know why. Our television is a modest one, not the size of one of the screens flanking the main stage at Glastonbury.

I recently went to pick up my son, who was at a new friend's house. They were playing *Mario Kart* on a screen that took up about half a wall of the living room. Neither looked up when his mum let me in, so I stood in front of them. 'Hello? Hel-LO?' 'It's so hard when they're on screens, isn't it?' exclaimed the other mum, as her son manoeuvred Luigi around Brain Rot circuit on Bilge Island with slack-jawed expertise. When I said to his friend that he'd have to come to us next time, my son looked rueful and said, apologetically: 'Yeah, no gaming at ours. My mum's a Screen Grinch.' I don't think the friend responded.

No, I can't offer your child the tweenage equivalent of a crack pipe when they come over. But we have table tennis, trees to climb, dogs to play with, a makeshift football field. On wet days, there's table football, a house made for hide-and-seek, a drum kit, record player, stacks of records and board games and hundreds of back issues of the *Beano*. If that isn't enough, I can put on a film for them, a full-length feature film, and make popcorn.

But it isn't enough and, worse, I think it's increasingly an embarrassment for my son.

I think of it as the Great Screen Divide, but actually, so many parents have succumbed to what they say is the inevitable ('The world's changed, hasn't it!'). It's not so much a divide as a tiny rump of renegades and rebels holding out against the odds.

My son would claim that he's deprived. On a cross-Channel ferry trip to see the Normandy beaches, he was the only child who wasn't plugged in to a smartphone or tablet. During the four-hour crossing we played backgammon, looked at maps to plan our itinerary, read our age-appropriate D-Day books (Dominic Sandbrook's *Adventures in Time* for him, Antony Beevor for me). We walked about on deck enjoying the feel of the sun on our faces and the wind in our hair.

I say this not out of smugness, but horror. Presumably most of our fellow passengers were educated people and yet they had abandoned their kids to gawp gormlessly at screens while they did likewise.

Hold your nerve. Be proud that yours are the only kids on the train playing Uno

It isn't easy being a Screen Grinch; my kids would far rather have a smartphone than all of the above. At home we've blocked YouTube from every TV and device after realising they were using it to consume vast amounts of AI-generated slop. Roblox is banned. They're allowed to do a little Minecraft or coding as a reward, but the withdrawal symptoms are so bad that I avoid this as much as possible. Years ago, as an incentive, I told my eldest I'd buy him a games console when he got his Grade 3 French horn. That time is perilously close and I'm trying to persuade him to choose a puppy or an air pistol instead – so far, with no luck.

If, like me, you're weakened by the constant running battles at home and with schools over the ubiquity of screens, take heart from the work of Jonathan Haidt and Dr Jared Cooney Horvath. They have backed our instinctive unease with robust scientific evidence. Read Haidt's *The Anxious Generation*, on how smartphones are rewiring our children's brains to the detriment of their mental health. Read Horvath's *The Digital Delusion* which blows up the claims of ed tech that it improves children's learning. Buy copies for your friends and give them to headteachers and governors who've introduced the joyless reading app, Sparx, set homework on iPads or are wavering about instituting smartphone bans at school.

I've bought Horvath's book for my daughter's primary school, after the local authority supplied her with a new iPad and some apps 'that might help her'. She is six years old, has cerebral palsy and is on the 99th percentile for ADHD. She won't be using the iPad. Just imagine if the local authority (which we are taking to court over its refusal to cough up for the meaningful Send support she is entitled to by law) had spent the cost of that iPad on human help for her to access the curriculum.

There are signs the tide may at last be turning. In the trailer for the new *Toy Story* film, Rex the Dinosaur exclaims 'Extinction, not again!' as his young owner, Bonnie, unwraps a villainous, frog-shaped tablet called Lilypad, which rapidly absorbs all her focus while she discards her old playthings. 'What are you, some old man's toy?' Lilypad sneers at Woody.

So hold your nerve. Be proud that yours are the only kids on the train playing Uno, the only toddlers colouring in the café. Buy them guitars, not games consoles, buy them books, flip phones and vinyl. Be proud to be a low-tech parent. Stand up and say: 'Hi, my name is X. And I am a Screen Grinch.'


THE
KING'S SCHOOL
CANTERBURY
BEYOND
COMPARE
Est. 597AD
Open Mornings
Nursery & Pre-Prep: Friday 8 May
Junior School: Saturday 9 May
Senior School: Saturday 16 May
Co-educational, day, flexi and full boarding for pupils aged 3-18
Book Now
kings-school.co.uk/
visit-kings

Key change

The conductor Ralph Allwood on why music matters for children

YSENDA MAXTONE GRAHAM

Ralph Allwood at the Old Royal Naval College in Greenwich, where he directs its Trinity Laban Choir

Here's some life advice Ralph Allwood gives to the teenagers who attend his week-long residential Rodolfus Choral Courses, held all through the summer at various schools and colleges across the country. Some of the singers are being pressured by their parents to take just maths and sciences, or other lucrative career-oriented subjects, for A-level or at university, and to give up music.

'Right,' he says, as the teenagers assemble for a final rehearsal, 'this is how you decide what you're going to do next. Get advice from everyone you can: from your teachers, your parents, the universities, that aunt who wants you to do a sensible subject. Say thank you, then go into your own room and close the door. There, make up your own mind about what *you* want to do.'

If Allwood hadn't done exactly that with the university authorities when he was a 'determined 19-year-old', he would not have lived the life he has. And it has been, and continues to be, a richly fulfilling and musically generous life. After being head of music at Pangbourne College and then Uppingham, he was precentor and director of music at Eton for 26 years. Now aged 75 and by no means retired ('Retired is a silly word'), he directs a handful of top choirs, including the Old Royal Naval College Trinity Laban Choir in Greenwich, south London, and runs the Pimlico Musical Foundation, which he founded ten years ago: an organisation that brings choral singing into the weekly lives of state primary school children in Pimlico.

'By the skin of my teeth I managed to do A-level music at my grammar school, Tiffin, along with maths and physics. I started reading maths and physics at Durham. A music don spotted some talent when he saw my exposition of a Mozart violin sonata, and asked: "Would you like to change to Honours Music?"'

His parents were supportive of the plan, but his father's engineer colleague said: 'Head him off!' Having taken both sets of advice, Allwood went into his room, decided to take the music path, and 'from that moment I've been consistently happy'.

I visited him in the elegant flat in Pimlico he shares with his husband, the interior designer Alastair Davey. The drawing-room is a book-lined haven, with music open on the grand piano and a ladder to reach the highest bookshelves.

A strong 'please don't give up music' ethos was and is prevalent at Eton. 'If a boy said, "Oh, sir, I've got GCSEs and want to give up choir", all 24 housemasters I knew

would say to that boy: "What do you enjoy doing?" And the boy would say choir. And the housemaster would say: "Well, carry on doing choir."' Allwood mentions what he sees as 'this idiocy about getting teenagers to do certain so-called "sensible" subjects. Far fewer people are doing music as a result.'

A study was recently carried out by Simon Toyne, director of the David Ross Education Trust, which brings music to 14,500 children at 34 state schools across the East Midlands. The study showed, Allwood tells me, that teenagers who carried on with co-curricular music achieved two grades higher across their GCSEs than their school average.

'You don't just add up the number of hours you spend on an academic subject and get a better mark the more hours you spend,' says Allwood. 'The brain doesn't work like that. It compounds things in a different way. If you're inspired and elated by the music you've found time to sing or play in your busy school day, you'll actually do better in the exams.'

'If you're inspired by the music you've found time for in your busy school day, you'll do better in exams'

Through more than half a century of running music departments, teaching music and directing choirs, Allwood, a man sparkling with enthusiasm, has gained wisdom useful to adults as well as to young people. First, if you're directing a children's choir, don't abide by the comfort-zone theory that goes: 'We try to do the kind of music they're already used to.'

'No!' Allwood says. 'Give them the best music you can. This is what education is: leading children out of and beyond what they're already used to.' It's amazing, he tells me: 'If you introduce children to the Byrd five-part Mass, or a great anthem by Herbert Howells, not only can they sing it, but they love it.'

That's how the music bug takes hold and changes lives: children being introduced to masterpieces of the classical repertoire and having their minds opened up to a whole new musical plane. What Allwood has achieved in Pimlico, he feels, could be rolled out across Britain. All you need is a cluster of schools quite close together, and some adults to be teacher-singers.

'When I first came to live here in 2011, I went into the local state primary schools, and found that not a single one did any singing. So I got in touch with the vicar of St Gabriel's

'It's a rough area.'

Church, the excellent Fr Owen Higgs, and said "I've got an idea for a choral foundation scheme for state-school pupils in Pimlico."'

Ten years later, the Pimlico Musical Foundation is well established, with an evensong choir for the keenest and most talented children – they sing choral evensong on Wednesday evenings in St Gabriel's – and a non-auditioned children's choir for concerts. 'The heads and deputy heads of the schools love it. Trusts, foundations and individuals help to fund it, and we now want to endow the foundation so it can go on for ever.'

Just one parent, out of hundreds over the decade, has said: 'But we're Muslim, and this is a Christian church.' Apart from that one voice, Allwood says: 'No one has ever said, "Why are you doing this Christian music with Muslim children in a Christian church?" The music itself is so good, and the children respond to it so enthusiastically, that this is never an issue.'

I first heard Allwood's name when I made a friend at university in 1981 who was in a state of elation and inspiration after attending one of his summer choral courses and said what a superb choir director he was. That was his second-ever Uppingham Choral Course. The courses have now been going for 45 years, morphing to the Eton Choral Courses and then to the Rodolfus Choral Courses. There are now four or five senior courses and two junior ones each year, plus some choral weekends for adults.

Each summer, one of the senior course evensongs is broadcast live on Radio 3. There have now been 250 courses: formative weeks for thousands of young people, which have kicked off lifelong musical crazes as well as friendships. 'For some of them, when the courses are held at Oxbridge colleges,' Allwood tells me, 'this might be the first time they've ever visited Oxford or Cambridge, and they think, "Ooh, I'd like to come and study here…"'

And it all started because young Allwood, as a schoolmaster at Uppingham in 1980, saw the long school summer holidays looming without any music in them, and wanted to rectify that.

I asked him about musical talent, and how much pressure parents should or shouldn't put on their child who might be unwilling to practise. 'There are different parts of the brain,' he tells me, 'for loving music and for being good at music. Thus, you might have a child who's brilliant at it but doesn't want to do it. And you might have one who is extremely keen on it but not very good at it. Every now and then you get a child who's strong in both parts.'

However much you long for your child to be a high musical achiever at his or her instrument of choice, he tells me, the drive needs to come chiefly from the child. And he's taught some stand-out boys over the years, who have had both the talent and the enthusiasm. It was thanks to a chance encounter with a film director called Stephen Walker, whom Allwood happened to sit next to on a plane to Princeton, that the unforgettable Channel 4 documentary *A Boy Called Alex* was made in 2008, about the remarkable Etonian Alex Stobbs, who was determined to fulfil his dream of conducting a notoriously demanding choral work by Bach, in spite of suffering from cystic fibrosis, which required deliveries of car-bootloads of medication.

This was Eton at its enlightened best. 'Aged 16, Alex came to me and said: "Sir, I'd like to conduct the Bach Magnificat." I told him I could suggest so many pieces that would be easier but he said: "No, I want to do the Magnificat." So I said: "Do – but you've got to organise it yourself." And he did.'

The film took us through the lead-up and rehearsals, with Allwood helping him to prepare the piece for conducting. Then almost at the last minute, Stobbs was laid up in hospital, deeply frustrated by his lungs failing to work. He recovered enough in time to conduct the concert, which was a triumph. He went on to be a professional music teacher and composer.

'If you introduce children to the Byrd five-part Mass, or a great anthem by Herbert Howells, they love it'

That's just one highlight of an impressive career for Allwood. 'I've always loved watching good lessons,' he tells me. And he's still learning, both from other high-calibre teachers, and from the children and teenagers he directs, whose teasing banter he finds delightful and infectious.

SHERBORNE SCHOOLS GROUP

BUILDING THE FUTURE, GROUNDED IN THE PAST

Sherborne, Turing, AI and character

While Sherborne Schools have thrived in our honey-coloured buildings for 1,300 years, we have always felt slightly ahead of the curve, happily steering away from any short-term, educational fads. We have educated tens of thousands of forward-thinking pupils, from actors, generals and musicians, to scientists, business leaders and global figures, male and female.

But we are especially proud this year to be celebrating the 100th anniversary of the arrival at Sherborne of Alan Turing, who, thanks to his pioneering work in computing, did as much as anyone to influence the world in which we live. To honour him and to further Sherborne Schools Group's reputation as a first mover in education, we are launching an initiative in Turing's name to nurture the next generation of technologists. Rather than be scared of artificial intelligence, or AI, we aim to embrace its potential for improving lives. We want to provide an education in AI not just to every pupil in Sherborne Schools but also for residents of the town, local businesses and people well beyond Dorset, teaching its power, limitations and pitfalls.

We are building an AI-powered 'Turing tutor' to help us all to learn better and faster, tailoring our education to our idiosyncratic knowledge and set of skills. It will provide a step change in how we learn and how well we learn, helping to keep us engaged and develop our learning at the pace which is ideal for us. No AI engine, though, will ever replicate the human side of education, nor do away with the importance of a good teacher. The 'Turing tutor' will work alongside our schools' focus on Character Education, with its wraparound pastoral care and impressive co-curricular education.

Not many schools can claim to have a former cathedral as their chapel. Our ancient buildings will always be special, but they will never be allowed to become fusty. We are creating new spaces and refashioning old ones: think robotics labs, media suites and breakout pods. We are also creating innovation spaces where pupils can nurture ideas, be free to imagine the future and learn from the experience of others. We want pupils to pitch ideas for businesses, with seed capital available to help them realise and grow their enterprises. All pupils will be taught a grounding in entrepreneurship, finance and commerce, and those that are up for the challenge can leave Sherborne having gained invaluable experience setting up their own real-life business.

In collaboration with the town's Alan Turing Focus Group, we are launching an annual tech conference this September, and there are also plans for an immersive visitor attraction, a full-time university presence and a business incubator in the centre of the town. A century after Alan Turing first sat in a maths class at Sherborne, his legacy will continue to influence and enrich all those who study here or even just visit us for the day.

To find out more about Sherborne Schools Group, visit **www.sherborneschools.group**

Church disservice

My beloved choral music is in peril

PHILIP WOMACK

You'd be hard pressed to find a more continuous strand in British culture than the chorister. They've been warbling in Westminster Abbey since the 1380s. Every national occasion is marked by choirs, the choristers dazzling in their splendidly anachronistic ruffs and robes, present at moments of collective joy or sadness. Funerals, memorial services, royal weddings, carols from King's College, Cambridge. They are ornaments to our culture.

Oodles of composers, musicians and singers, professional or not, have, over hundreds of years, stood in the choir stalls at dawn, at midnight, and lifted their voices to the vaulting roofs. Some of the most beautiful music in the canon was written for choirs: Gregorian chants, Thomas Tallis. I challenge anyone to listen to Edgar Bainton's 'And I saw a New Heaven', or Jonathan Dove's 'Seek Him that Maketh the Seven Stars', and not be moved. Early on during lockdown, I drove to the silent shops and John Tavener's 'The Lamb' came on the radio. Such was its emotional impact, I had to pull over.

Choristers are symbols of excellence. The singers are trained in an exemplary manner: the discipline needed for a crack choir to rise early, sing at several services, and stay up till late if needed is extraordinary.

Yet choirs are under threat, from a number of quarters. At parish level, church choirs have been diminishing for years. Processions of choristers were not an unusual sight when I was growing up in the 1980s. Even small village churches had full choirs, with any boy whose voice had not yet broken dragged in to make up the numbers, even if he couldn't sing. But dropping church attendance led to depleted choirs. Now many church choirs, if they exist at all, are made up of retirees, who deserve applause for their dedication. But who will follow them?

At the same time, choir schools are closing, the most recent being Exeter Cathedral School. You can point the finger at VAT on school fees, a philistine lack of interest in this supposedly elitist occupation, or a combination of both. If choir schools close, then we lose the pipeline of choristers into the universities, cathedral choirs and beyond, and that matters.

Singing in a choir is one of the most transcendent things a child can do. I know, as for most of my school life I was a choirboy. At my day prep school, our choir composed of piping trebles and embryonic sopranos, we were robed in red and sang 'If I Had a Hammer'.

At my boys' boarding prep, we wore blue robes and white surplices. Different coloured ribbons round our necks indicated seniority (the cause of much envy, if you weren't leader of the choir). The church was nestled into the side of the school, and we sang there every Saturday, things like Mozart and Rutter. We also got paid for singing at weddings and in care homes: anything from £1 to £3. The heaven of those three gold coins, ready to be spent on extra tuck. And after choir trips, there was always a stop at the fish and chip shop. Thirty cod and chips, ordered beforehand by phone, greedily devoured by happy, hungry boys.

When my voice broke in my final year of prep school, I was exiled to handing out the hymn books

Every year at our carol service in Arundel, with the frost sparkling and the candles glowing, the voice of the soloist in 'Once in Royal David's City' was enough to make the most hardened or atheistical parent rub away a tear.

When, in my final year of prep school, my voice broke, I was exiled to the job of handing out the hymn books. Devastating. Fortunately, at Lancing College I could use my newly minted tenor voice. The school had a stonkingly good choir under the leadership of the director of music, Neil Cox (himself an accomplished composer). We sported heavy purple robes which smelled of incense and, I imagine, had probably not been changed for decades. There, our repertoire ranged widely. Arvo Part wrote his haunting 'Triodion' for the school's 175th anniversary, and faxed in his corrections. When he conducted us in his own music, we were partaking in something entirely new, yet rooted in ancient music.

We sang in all sorts of places: with massed choirs in the Albert Hall; and in Westminster Abbey itself, where 30 years later the Westminster scholars would welcome the new King Charles with their teenaged voices.

I remember an Australian school choir came to visit. We Lancingers, overcoated and serious, sang 'Cantique de Jean Racine'. The Aussies, T-shirted and laughing, sang 'Waltzing Matilda' (or something like it). Undeterred, our choirmaster shoved us all together and conducted us in a massive round of 'London's Burning'. It was joyful.

Once a singer, always a singer. Now I sing tenor in a handful of choirs, in churches and elsewhere, and often meet ex-choristers and choral exhibitioners and scholars from the universities, as well as semi-professionals and pros. Though we don't robe up for services (which I miss), I enjoy the thrill of sight-reading new music at speed, and of learning new and challenging repertoire.

All the training I received over the years has not gone amiss: to listen to the conductor, to your fellow singers, to the organist. You are not a single person, but part of a many-throated organism. While applauding excellence in individuals, choirs are also democratic. Even the most prima donna-ish bass or soprano melts into the rest. Choirs take on a life of their own. I am always astonished when, after what feels like about ten minutes' slightly shaky rehearsal, we sing the anthems and masses all but flawlessly.

The government should be doing all it can to protect our ancient and vital choral tradition. Instead, it seems to revel in the closure of storied, beloved places, and in the waning away of something unique, unmatched in any country in the world. It has taken centuries to build up our choral tradition. It may only take four years to destroy it.

THE

ROGER SCRUTON

OIKOS

SUNDEY HILL SUMMER SCHOOLS

> A magical week of erudition, conviviality and intense friendship. It could only be formed so quickly and deeply in the musical atmosphere you have managed to create.

Scrutopia Summer School

Tues 21st July - Mon 27th July 2026

The Scrutopia Summer School founded by Roger Scruton offers a unique philosophical retreat, with a rich programme of lectures, tours, music, and conversation over dinner.

Participants are drawn from a number of countries and many age groups who join together for university-level seminars, a taste of college life, and the chance to explore the Cotswolds and its hidden gems.

Our distinguished faculty of lecturers will address the theme:

Civilisation: *What does it mean to be civilised?*

Which will provide an opportunity to consider our valuable heritage as well the changing world we live in. We are grateful to Sir Anthony Seldon for agreeing to be our Special Guest Speaker at our gala dinner.

Hosted at The Royal Agricultural University, Cirencester and Sundey Hill Farm, where Roger lived and worked for 30 years.

APPLY AT WWW.ROGERSCRUTON.COM

Email: abbi@rogerscruton.com | Tel: 01666 510 327

Snapshots of four notable schools

HURTWOOD HOUSE, SURREY

Set in the Surrey Hills, Hurtwood House is England's only independent boarding school exclusively for sixth-formers. Renowned for its performing arts, the school's annual Christmas musical is no ordinary affair. The ten-night production is staged with a full West End orchestra and professional directors, choreographers and lighting designers. It is no surprise that alumni include Emily Blunt and Hans Zimmer. Hurtwood can also boast a high level of academic achievement: last year 54 per cent of A-level results were graded A*-A. Fees for boarders start at £22,405 a term and prospective pupils are interviewed by the headmaster and his wife, setting the tone for a familial community in which there is no uniform, staff are addressed by their first names and students receive weekly grades to monitor their progress.

MILLFIELD, SOMERSET

It is hard to imagine a school more synonymous with sport than Millfield. Old Millfieldians have competed at every Olympic Games since 1956, possibly thanks to the school's approach to sport, putting it on a par with academic achievement and pastoral wellbeing. Students have access to indoor cricket and golf centres, an indoor riding arena, fencing salle, Olympic-size swimming pool and numerous playing fields. Access to such a vast array of facilities is no doubt part of the reason why 36 pupils in the Upper Sixth were offered a US university scholarship in 2024. Fees for boarding start at £12,770 a term, with many students coming from their pre-prep and prep school, which takes children from two to 13 years old. Notably alumni include Formula One driver Lando Norris, who first began kart racing as a pupil at Millfield.

RON DEARING UTC, HULL

Named after the civil servant and education reformer Lord Dearing, Ron Dearing is a technical college in Hull. The school specialises in science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics. Students aged 14-18 complete projects designed by the school's business partners alongside studying for traditional qualifications. Through a constantly evolving curriculum and initial support provided to all its graduates, Ron Dearing has fostered an environment in which 40 per cent of students go on to apprenticeships, 50 per cent go to university and 10 per cent either start up their own businesses or take up employment. Alumni have gone on to degree apprenticeships at Rolls-Royce and BAE Systems, Oxbridge, the London Fashion Academy and, this year, one sixth-former has a place to study ceramics at Central Saint Martins.

BRIGHTON COLLEGE, BRIGHTON AND HOVE

Established in 1845, Brighton College is a co-ed boarding school recently awarded UK Boarding School of the Year. The school takes pride in its life skills programme, including presentation skills, cooking and AI. Its facilities include a 400-seat theatre, music and performance spaces, university-standard laboratories and a 25-metre pool. Pupils at the college – where fees start at £17,659 a term for weekly boarders – have consistently achieved some of the strongest results of those at any co-educational school in the country. This year, 85 per cent of A-levels were scored at A*-A, while roughly a third of applicants were offered Oxbridge places. The headmaster, Steve Marshall-Taylor, says he finds it 'a privilege to live and work alongside so many engaged, inquisitive and enthusiastic girls and boys'.

SCHOOL DAYS

Burning ambition

LLOYD EVANS

Every boy longs to see his school burn down and for me the dream came true twice. In February 1977, I was walking to Sunday Mass when I spotted a cluster of teachers at the school gates. The old Victorian hall had caught fire overnight and collapsed. I couldn't believe it. This was my personal *Towering Inferno* and I'd missed the whole thing. In my mind's eye I could see it all: the leaping flames, the burning joists, the black columns of ash rising over south London, and the thunderous roar as the roof crashed to the ground.

Nothing was left but a few pathetic wisps of smoke rising from a pile of charred beams. The teachers were standing around looking shocked and miserable – as if mourning the death of a pet rabbit. Why so glum? The school had to close for a few days while the governors worked out how to run the place without an assembly hall or a dining area.

The funereal posturings of the staff convinced me that teachers were a tribe of alien control-freaks who took no delight in ordinary human pleasures. But I kept my rancour to myself. Officially, I was a model pupil. I liked sitting in class and reading about Greek mythology and the structure of molecules and the demise of the Holy Roman Empire. I enjoyed the intellectual puzzles set for us by the priests and their colleagues. But privately I resented the school and regarded it as a prison. I was forced to show up there each day by the adults whose authority I lacked the means to defy. Any assault on the fabric of the school brought me closer to freedom.

There was no rush to replace the hall. This was the 1970s and most people in Britain expected to be atomised by nuclear missiles at any moment so it seemed eccentric to rebuild a school in the middle of a Soviet target zone. But the authorities eventually commissioned an architect who specialised in cheap materials, banal colour schemes and ugly orthopaedic angles.

He lacked any aesthetic sense. Perhaps he lacked eyesight too. The squat red-brick structure he created, with its oblong windows and grey metal roof, looked like a safety deposit box. The building work dragged on for nearly two years and the debris of the old hall lay undisturbed beside the main entrance. The rotting timbers reeked like smoked herring and the stench worked its way into the classrooms. It enveloped your clothes and shoved its fingers down your throat. Everyone smelled like an old fish shop.

Every boy longs to see his school burn down and for me the dream came true twice

On the last day of term in 1980, I was idling in the sixth-form library when a new fire broke out. A set of four classrooms beside the gym went up in flames. I raced down the stairs and joined a throng of boys surging out of the playground to watch the drama. The blaze was magnificent and unstoppably powerful. A spiralling sheet of flame swept across the doomed structures. The timbers howled as they burned. I could feel the dangerous heat on my cheeks. No work of art could ever match the raging beauty of the destructive monster. This was nature. This was the universal force asserting itself over the pipsqueak schemes of man. And it was pure entertainment without any physical risk or moral component.

The young arsonist had struck at lunchtime when the classrooms stood empty and no lives were in jeopardy. The head prefect arrived with his minions and started bossing everyone around. 'Get back,' he yelled. 'All of you. Move away from the fire.' His orders were ignored. He called on me to support his sad attempt to deprive the younger boys of their fun. And I obeyed, in a way. I moved among the crowd and called out helpfully: 'Please don't stare at the burning classrooms. Wimbledon College is on fire. But gloating and celebrations are forbidden. Avert your gaze from this distressing sight and return to your harmless pleasures in the playground.'

When the fire engines arrived, the uniformed men in their bulky tunics shooed us all away. The arsonist had scored a notable triumph. Four classrooms and 200 desks and chairs had been reduced to cold grey ashes. I saw the fire as a personal vindication. The gulag had risen up against the regime and shown that we too had a measure of power. The identity of the arsonist, known to everyone in the school, never reached the authorities. That made me proud.

Later that autumn, the new hall was unveiled. By this time I was in the upper-sixth and I'd joined the school magazine's editorial team. A front cover was needed. I suggested a night-time shoot featuring all the co-editors emptying jerry cans of petrol over the horrible new hall. My plan was to ask Felipe, the Portuguese janitor, to pose centre-stage with a lighted taper.

The editors liked this mischievous idea. The authorities didn't. They asked for an alternative. So we set up a stunt at Wimbledon station and photographed a pair of homeless buskers (played by Vince Brooks and me) being hauled off the concourse by a uniformed inspector. It was lame compared with my original plan. So I lost. And the nasty hall is still there. For now.

YES, IT'S A CRYING SHAME...

...that she left it too late to apply for Hurtwood House, because it's simply the best for acting, dancing, singing, filmmaking and art - **"A utopia for creative minds"** - as the Good Schools Guide says.

And crucially, this exciting school is equally successful academically. In fact, it's statistically one of the top co-ed boarding schools in the UK.

So, if you're looking for an exciting and rewarding change of school at 16 - don't leave it too late.

HURTWOOD HOUSE

T: 01483 279000 E: info@hurtwood.net

hurtwoodhouse.com

Hurstpierpoint College

Open Morning

Saturday 9 May

See our pupils inspired and engaged. Meet our teachers, explore our theatre and swimming pool, and discover how we nurture every child's joy and potential.

13+ and 16+ entry