



BOARDING SCHOOL SURVIVORS – SUPPORT NEWSLETTER
APRIL 2023

Dear Supporters and Friends – Happy Easter greetings to you all!

A variety of symbolic reminders tell us that Easter is with us and Spring too is really showing us that it has arrived... and, as always, it feels extraordinarily welcome.

Spring feels more than usually welcome this year as, for most of us, the winter was made to feel bleaker than usual with perpetual thoughts of thermostats and reducing the warmth of our houses, ahead of particularly nasty fuel bills that then came our way.

For now, all that can be forgotten! So many trees are covered in blossom, the daffodils are bursting into action and colour, while the weeping willows are at their beautiful best with their long drooping pale green branches.

This was the time of year we used to go home for the Easter Holidays.

Boarding Schools are now comparatively warm, but many of us had to endure the long unheated bitterly cold winter months after the Christmas holidays, when chilblains flourished and dormitories, with their ice-cold beds, were dreaded.

It always felt the worst and the longest term of the year because it had absolutely no redeeming features. Perhaps it still does for present boarders. The Autumn term had Christmas and the Summer term had swimming, but all this term had to offer was cold misery.

And then we went home for Easter...

I don't think I can be alone with those memories and feelings of stepping into Spring with intense joy and relief. Today is a perfectly beautiful day. Maybe, perhaps some of those past feelings of warmth and happiness are staying with us as we welcome Spring each year.

BSS-Support Conference 2023

We have already had several enquiries about the next conference and this is now booked.

Boarding School Survivors - Support Conference

Saturday 11th November 2023
at
The Wesley Hotel and Conference Centre
81-103 Euston Street, London NW1 2EZ

We will send details and reminders nearer the time.

Booking for the conference will be from 1st September 2023.

"My Story"

We have had a few people writing to us recently saying they would like to tell the story of their boarding school days. We should be very pleased to see your story if you would like to write and add to the collection.

We have decided that our website would be a very good place to make a collection of these stories so that they are available to all those interested.

The story:

- should be a maximum of about 1,000 words;
- should not mention the school by name; and
- will be edited and accepted by us in discussion with you.

Please send your submission to info@bss-support.org.uk.

The following story is one we received recently and gave us the idea of making a collection:

My Story 1

I don't suppose that this writing is in any way exceptional, and I know that very many people have suffered far more horrific things than have I. Having faced serious illness and a major operation during the past two years it somehow caused many long-buried traumas to burst up to the surface, forcing me to look my past in the eyes and, in my late fifties, haunting me and terrifying me again. Everything I describe here happened between fifty and forty years ago and recently I have made a complaint to the police about it. I have also written a book in an effort both to achieve some kind of catharsis and to raise money for charity, but my pain seems only to be getting worse and this makes me feel ashamed. I hope that by knowing that someone, somewhere knows what happened to me I can achieve peace from my reincarnated torment.

I was sent to prep school at the age of eight. For the first two years I was a day boy, but the days were long – from eight thirty to six o'clock every day including Saturdays. Being small and young for my age, I was bullied relentlessly by older boys and by some of my peers. Worse, I, together with probably every other boy in the school, was subjected to 'mild' sexual abuse by the Latin master, who was also Deputy Headmaster. He supervised showers after games every day except Tuesdays, which were his 'half day'. After we'd showered, he would rub and squeeze our genitals *"To make sure you've dried yourself properly"*.

After two years I began to board. We were not allowed to go home at all except for holidays, in the interests of 'not getting the boys upset.' The bullying subsided as I grew older but the abuse did not. As I matured physically so the abuse became worse.

At thirteen I was sent to public school as a boarder: the school only accepted boarders. Once again, being small for my age and gentle – timid

even – by nature, I was bullied relentlessly and in much more brutal ways. Out of taught lesson times the school was entirely run and supervised by senior boys, who were free to punish us in any way that they felt suitable, including beatings. Very soon, in an effort to deflect bullying from themselves, many of my peers began to bully me too. I lived in terror constantly, night and day. I had nobody to talk to or turn to, and no possibility of respite. I was locked in dark cupboards for long periods of time, locked in a trunk, held under water, and was a general whipping dog for anyone who felt fed up with life.

That school broke my heart and my soul, and caused me to be unable to trust anyone ever again. I feel to this day, as a successful professional, inadequate, frightened of people, always on the lookout for the next punch.

For the past year or so I have been suffering all that pain and hurt again repeatedly, disturbing my sleep, haunting me by day and making me feel terrified again.

Thank you for being there to listen.

My Story 2

Canadian author Andrew Kavchak writes:

Westminster School: Reflections of a Boarder

When I was a child in the 1960s, my father was a professor of philosophy in Montreal, Canada. During his first sabbatical, he met another professor of philosophy at another university who was a graduate of Westminster School in London. My father's new friend told him if he wanted me to get a good education he should send me to Westminster. If I did well, he told my parents, getting into Oxford or Cambridge would be no problem. He had done it himself a decade earlier. My parents bought into the idea – lock, stock, and barrel. As a six-year-old, I had no idea what my parents were conspiring to do with me.

By the time my father had his second sabbatical, my parents were divorced and I went with my father to London. He did his philosophy research while I prepared with a tutor for the gruelling two-and-a-half-day-long Westminster entrance exam. I bombed. My father sent me to a 'cramming school'. The preparation was excellent. I succeeded on my second attempt and the Housemaster of Busby's was willing to accept me. In September 1976, I left my parents in Canada and flew to London. I was just shy of my fourteenth birthday.

Being a Canadian boarder at Westminster was like being in another world. The daily routine was unlike anything I had ever imagined. Before classes, the whole school would walk through the medieval cloisters and attend a service in Westminster Abbey. After classes, our 'free time' was taken up by extracurricular activities. Supper was in a medieval refectory during which I was required to assume the role of 'toast fag' in scheduled shifts with the other new boys in my dorm. Prep time was from 7.15 to 9.00 pm. Lights out at 10.00 pm. For sports, I rowed on the Thames. We had school six days a week. On Saturdays, after school the boarders would go home for the 'weekend' and return Sunday night. Only a small minority stayed over the weekend. I was one of them. Throughout the school year, I only saw my parents at Christmas.

At first, I looked forward to getting settled in and integrating myself with my fellow housemates and classmates. However, it did not take me long before some sort of change happened in me that was unsettling. I did not understand it at the time, and I was unsure of what to do about it. I increasingly felt that I had been abandoned in a foreign orphanage. The separation from my parents contributed to an increasing sense of alienation from them and everyone else. I tried to enjoy whatever free time I had, and I attended concerts by the Rolling Stones, Peter Frampton, and Pink Floyd. I started to smoke cigarettes, drank in pubs, and had my first exposure to cannabis.

Notwithstanding the excitement of being in London without parental supervision, I became increasingly despondent and depressed. While I portrayed a confident exterior and sought to give the impression that I was mature and 'cool', on the inside I increasingly suffered from anxiety and insecurity. My deteriorating mental health manifested itself in a

downward spiral in my studies and corresponding marks. I found it extremely difficult to concentrate for any length of time on any school material and increasingly lost interest. None of my teachers was inspiring or motivating. I held my own in French class, but every other subject was a source of frustration and my marks tanked. Towards the end of the year, I wrote to my mother that the teachers were nice to me, but none of them cared and my Housemaster never enquired about my well-being beyond a superficial "*How are you?*" in the hallway which generated the inevitable "*Fine, thanks*" response.

When I returned home in July 1977, I begged my father not to send me back as I assumed that I would have to repeat a year. My wish was granted. My expedition to Westminster was a failure, and I felt like one on my return. My relationship with my parents never got back on track. For decades afterward, I seemed to struggle with the enduring legacy of that experience.

When the Canadian government established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2008 to study the impact that 'residential schools' had had on Canada's indigenous population, the media consistently reported horrifying stories of abuse and trauma. I was prompted to re-examine my experience at Westminster and its impact on my life. In the process of researching the history of Westminster School and English 'Public Schools', I came across the works of Nick Duffell and Dr Joy Schaverien and their discussions of Strategic Survivor Personality and Boarding School Syndrome. How grateful I am to those two authors for helping me to understand who I am! I also researched the field of 'writing therapy' and subsequently endeavoured to write an autobiographical account of my experience at Westminster and its impact on my life. To describe the writing process as a cathartic experience would be an understatement.

Westminster School: Reflections of a Boarder is available as an [e-book](#) and [paperback](#) from Amazon's websites. Students of Boarding School Syndrome should find the story an interesting case study. The book contains a foreword by my best friend at the school and an afterword by a former classmate who subsequently became the school 'Captain'. The book contains 25 pages of bibliographic references, including many that are annotated.

Andrew Kavchak
Ottawa, Canada.

Some Thoughts on Co-Ed Schools

Margaret Laughton writes:

In the feedback after the conference, one person said they wanted to hear more about women's experiences at school and asked "*What are co-ed schools like now?*"

The following is a summary of some work I did around the topic about five years ago. I make no claims that all schools are the same, or that the very small number of girls I found to speak to leads to any firm conclusions – but I found it of interest I and hope you may too.

I had very long conversations with six girls from four different schools. Five had been boarders since the age of 13 at co-ed boarding schools, and one had moved from an all-girls day school into the sixth form of a high-achieving boys' grammar school.

Having been to a single-sex school myself, and knowing all the negative aspects of being isolated from boys and unable to grow up in a balanced and 'normal' way, I have come away with many feelings, amongst which are disappointment, anger, despair at the system and real concern about the attitudes that both sexes are left with.

I will start with the general:

I was told this of one boarding school: "*The school is absolutely run by the boys*". The expansion of this comment was that the boys and girls had absolutely different treatment and rules imposed by the school. On a simple level, the girls were 'locked into' their Houses by 9.30 pm every night and could look out of their windows and see the boys playing football and walking around until up to 11.00 pm.

Much of the rule-breaking was treated quite differently, and the boys always got away with a comment from the masters of "*Boys will be boys*" while the girls were punished for the same incident. One girl was in a room smoking with another girl and four boys and the Deputy Head came in. He shouted at, and punished, the girls with detentions and walked out ignoring the fact the boys were smoking too. The lists could go on...

On Saturday nights there were special 'treats' and the boys always had great things planned for them while the girls would always get pizza. The boys' houses were of course run by men and the girls' by women, and so for many things the blame has to be placed very firmly with those people. But the Head and Deputy Head were both men who supported the existing regimes and I feel they have to take the ultimate responsibility for all that went on in that school.

The men ruled the school, and in the jungle of boarding school life, the boys ruled the jungle. They had the power and authority handed to them from these men who also gave them many examples that they were superior and could dominate and rule the girls – and many did so.

Moving away from the general and onto gender related behaviour:

Straightforward bullying was rife in the classrooms. This was usually based around boys versus girls, and group bullying existed. One girl I talked to was called 'stupid' by most of the boys in her class from the moment she started at school and for the next four years. She had a dyslexia-type problem but was bright and very able. This name-calling was heard by many, if not all, the teachers as the boys shouted at her in class "*Put your hand down, stupid*" every time she tried to answer a question: and not once was it commented on or stopped by any master.

The boys got the message that they had the right to do this, that they were superior and that this activity was perfectly acceptable. The girls were unsupported in their misery.

Sexual activity was rampant. It occurred in the school, in bedrooms, behind sheds, anywhere private that inventive teenagers could find. But,

while some of the girls obviously chose to be involved, the boys remained dominant.

In all the schools, all girls were given ratings for how pretty they were and for their breast size – or both. I was told by one girl that any girl could not walk anywhere at any time without a passing boy rating her *"Four"*, *"Two"*, *"Eight"*, *"Average"*. She said: *"No one ever got a ten"*.

This says it all to me. These ratings were given by boys who, at a guess, must have considered that they had a 'ten' rating themselves and were in a position to, and had the absolute right to, judge the girls. It did of course have a devastating effect on one 13-year-old girl who was universally rated as 'One'. She said: *"It was worst at mealtimes when you had to carry a tray so could not hide your breasts"*. This was not the only public humiliation. The rating was also used about sex, and, if the girl was damaged and had some bleeding, she would then be called 'Bloody Mary'. She would be called this in front of everyone: *"Literally all the school knew"*, until the boys moved on to humiliate some other girl in the same way. Did the staff never listen?

The boys first had sex with those they called 'the sluts'. Presumably they were the girls who were as interested in experimentation as the boys. After some time, these girls were dropped as they were considered 'slags' and 'soiled goods'. The girls who had been standing back, and had until then told the boys to *"Get lost"* and not been involved in any sexual activity (*"Everyone knew exactly who had or had not been"*), had the boys thinking that they now could win a 'trophy'.

Although this can be considered a 'normal' action, I was told there was always a big age discrepancy in these couples. The boys who had been through the 'sluts' were now 17 or 18 and into 'full-on sex' with the 'good' girls who were 14 or 15 and who were groomed, flattered and consented. This actually amounts to sexual abuse: again surely something the staff could and should have made sure was understood by the pupils in their care.

I am appalled at the messages this gives to both girls and boys. I find two aspects particularly worrying: first, the controlling attitudes that the boys

are encouraged to develop; and secondly that the girls let these things happen to them. I have found in recent discussions with young adults that these attitudes come up many, many times as they move into adulthood; and it is not just one boy behaving like this, but many of them. This is why I find the attitudes taught and allowed by the staff to the pupils at this school is so serious. The boys' conditioning can stay with them as really serious adult controlling behaviour. As for the girls, somewhere along the way their self-confidence has been so damaged that they are very unsure of their true worth, are too eager to please, and submit to whatever is demanded of them just to stay in a relationship.

I have quoted one school in detail, but girls who had been to the other boarding schools said similar things. All girls were 'rated' it seems, and some rules were made by the staff to favour the boys. One school which had been all boys had a large grass quadrangle: the boys walked across it but the girls were forbidden to. Boys were allowed out but girls were not. The attitude appeared to be that 'girls have to be looked after; boys need independence'.

Of school activities, *all* said that the boys received more attention in class – especially in maths, the sciences and economics which were considered more as subjects for boys. They also all said that the masters spent more time with the boys in all subjects and were more helpful to them. In sport: "*Boys get all the time, kudos, acclamation*", and the rugby and cricket teams became the stars of the school. Girls' sport was either negligible or very much second class – with no acclamation or stardom.

I feel that these schools' attitudes actively harm both boys and girls. Some schools may do better, but from knowing some of the products of other public schools, these schools are not alone. From talking to young adults at university, some non-boarders say that they find the boarders all the same, just like each other and still behaving as they did at school – forming a hierarchy to work in their favour, continuing to bully, claiming entitlement and treating young women and men who went to day schools as inferior beings who should comply with their actions and rules.

I find it very depressing to write this. On the one hand, I so feel for, and understand, why these young men behave as they do, stuck as they were in a system over which they had no control. On the other hand, I so dislike

the way they perpetuate what they have learned. Some of these patterns are being slowly eroded, but it is difficult to see when they will disappear for good.

On the question of what co-ed schools are like now, I cannot say – except that being at some mixed schools clearly does not, in itself, solve problems of inequality. I would like to think that mixed schools are very much the better way to grow up and have easy relationships in adulthood, but also I feel that, in some instances, girls would learn a much better sense of their 'self', their abilities and their innate worth in all-girl schools.

Notices

Feedback from the BSS-Support Conference November 2022

We had a very good response to our request for feedback after the last conference, with many more people responding to the online version than we have had before.

Our many thanks go to everyone who took part and to Mike for setting it up and to Paul for analysing your replies.

As we move towards the next conference, we will take seriously all of what was said. We cannot however promise to be able to meet all of your ideas and requests as we do have the restrictions of costs, personnel and time.

Research Projects

We welcome research projects from students interested in boarding school issues, as it is a good way of 'spreading the word'. Zoe Jackson has written to us about her research. If you are willing to take part please, contact Zoe directly (details below):

"I am doing a PhD in Psychotherapy at the University of Exeter. For my course, I have to do a research project and I am interested in the long-term effects of attending boarding school at a young age.

My research is being conducted so that additional developments can be made into how boarding school experiences affect individuals in their lives. This might include how staff can implement more supportive strategies and mediate a more thoughtful and sustaining environment.

I am looking for men (18+) who attended a British boarding school as a full-boarder at an early age (up to the age of 11) and who have experienced a talking therapy at least once.

This would involve a one-hour interview which would be audio recorded, at a convenient location for the participant. I would be willing to travel to meet any participants or accommodate an online or telephone interview if this is the preference. The questions are aimed at finding out more about the boarding school experience. What was traumatic; what went well; what would have made a difference; what the separation was like. It is also about relationships now and if you think your boarding experiences have an effect on these relationships.

I will use pseudonyms for each participant and change any identifiable pieces of information to ensure confidentiality. I will also remove the name of the boarding schools and only record information which is relevant for my research aims and objectives. The participants are of course able to withdraw at any time throughout the project."

Zoe Jackson

+44 7946 058793

zj265@exeter.ac.uk

Poetry

Since the conference, we have been asked if the poetry collection we displayed there is going to be published. We have spoken about this in the past but it would take content, time and money.

As a start, if you are interested in this please send your poems to us to add to the collection. We will also consider having the collection on our website so you all can have access.

Please write your thoughts to us about this! info@bss-support.org.uk