



A safe haven & support
for all former boarders

Boarding School Concern June 2026



Dear

Welcome to our latest newsletter. We are very pleased that so many of you are keen to return to our conference this coming November; it is the key event in our calendar and we hope to better the standard every year. The links are below if

you would like to register.

In June's newsletter, we discuss some recent news articles and welcome a guest post from Helena Thomas on relationships. Helena will be speaking at November's conference.

Please take care in the heat,

BSC

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Conference is now booking

As detailed in our last mailout, this year's conference is now available to book. It will be held on **7 November 2026** at the **Royal College of Nursing**, Cavendish Square, London W1.



Details about our new venue [here](#).

Details of the programme [here](#).

To register and pay, [please click here](#).

Bookings are coming in steadily. This year, booking includes selecting afternoon activities and groups are starting to fill up.

As with previous conferences, if you feel that financial issues are preventing you from booking, please get in touch via the registration form. If you wish, like many generous attendees, to donate to our 'Pay It Forward' scheme to help others meet the costs of attending the conference, you can also do so via the same registration form.

Rapid change in boarding school landscape continues

In recent months, the changes to UK boarding school, in terms of falling pupil numbers and widespread co-educational adaptations have gathered pace.



The number of international students attending UK boarding schools has sharply declined by roughly 10% in a single year, as [reported by The Times](#) this month driven by a combination of tighter visa restrictions, rising immigration health surcharges, and the newly introduced VAT on private school fees. According to the

Independent Schools Council's annual census, this drop has already cost the independent education sector tens of millions of pounds in lost revenue.

This comes on top of news of yet another independent school, Malvern St. James, deciding [to close](#) at the end of this school year, and reports that Harrow School is to [create a formal partnership with a all-girls school](#), with other schools [announcing similar arrangements](#).

This led The Times to announce '[Are boarding schools for boys facing extinction?](#)' in June [paywalled article].

It seems clear that the landscape of British independent education is changing fundamentally, driven by sweeping financial and political pressures, and the sector may look increasingly different in a very short time.

Celebrities speak out over boarding school – with mixed messages



An article in *The Irish Times* at the beginning of June 2026 spoke to a number of well-known Irish former boarders, including **Adam Clayton**, the bass player from U2, who boarded from the age of 8, first at Castle Park, a private preparatory boarding school for boys in Dalkey, and then from the age of 13 in St Columba's College in Rathfarnham, south Dublin.

"My parents thought the boarding school system would be a good idea without understanding the type of child I was. A lot of the other boys there were children of doctors, farmers and clergy – the Irish establishment at the time – and I felt very isolated as an eight-year-old," Clayton says.

He recalls being miserable returning to school after a day at home on Sundays: *"I had no real understanding of why I was incarcerated*

in this antiquated place, with no access to phones, less than one hour from home."

*When asked if he would consider sending his children to boarding school, he pauses. "I'd say categorically that I wouldn't send children to boarding school before they are 12 or 13," he says. "My firm belief is that children are not old enough to be separated from their parents at an earlier age. **Being separated from the age of eight was the beginning of a trauma for me.** You are thrust into a situation that you don't know who your allies are."*

While he prefers state education, Clayton believes boarding school can be useful for children of parents who spend a significant amount of time away from home. "Boarding school can give stability to children whose parents are on the move a lot. I'm wary of the elitism that comes with boarding schools but it's an incredible opportunity and now boarding schools offer control over phone use and screen time." He says this is a huge benefit. "I think a lot of children, and my own children included, would rather be on their phones than practising music or playing sports."

Clayton eventually left St Columba's and went to a comprehensive day school – where he would meet his future bandmates.

Like a great number of ex-boarders and parents, he had mixed and contradictory feelings about his time at school and how he felt about children attending boarding school in the 21st century. Indeed, Clayton would eventually buy a country estate next door to one of his former schools.

His story is another illustration that adult relationships with boarding school system may be complex, and – as parents – pragmatic. It is one of the paradoxical aspects of a boarding school legacy, and one which we hope to explore further.

(The full, paywalled article is [here](#).)

Two Histories, One Relationship

As an organisation, we are 'concerned' with boarding – it's in our name. Continuing our series of short essays exploring principal

concerns in relation to boarding, **Helena Thomas** here touches on the sensitive subject of intimate relationships.



Two Histories, One Relationship

what they don't put in the prospectus

Much has been written about the long-term impact of children growing up in an emotionally deprived environment, particularly when this is compounded by being sent away to boarding school. For many former boarders, the cost is not always obvious at first. It may emerge most clearly later within intimate relationships, where old defences can become difficult to sustain, and where both partners can find themselves struggling to understand what is happening between them.

A partner may fall in love with someone who seems capable, warm, sociable and emotionally present. What they may not yet see is that these qualities can sit alongside a carefully developed protective self: one built over many years to keep vulnerability out of view. In the early stages of a relationship, that protective self may hold firm. Over time, however, intimacy asks for something deeper: and the strain of maintaining the mask of being the capable, strong, dependable one can begin to show.

When this happens, the partner may begin to feel increasingly sensitive to the emotional distance and to fear that the person they chose is no longer the person they are living with. They may feel shut out and deprioritised, noticing changes in warmth and availability while being left to guess what is wrong. Their own history may make this especially difficult, as expectations of physical affection, emotional safety and reciprocity begin to give way to distance and uncertainty.

For the ex-boarder, this moment can be especially difficult: they may have grown up in an environment in which taking responsibility for hurting someone made them unnecessarily feel vulnerable to attack. Having learned early in life to guard against exposure, dependency and emotional need, they may become highly vigilant when closeness and intimacy begin to feel risky. Greater emotional openness may be experienced not as safety, but as threat. At the

same time, they may fear that if they show more of their true self, they will be rejected, judged or found wanting – all of which must be hidden at all costs. Faced with that dilemma, they may react with anger, withdrawal, deflection or avoidance. These responses can protect them from vulnerability, but they often leave their partner feeling shut out and pushed away.

It is often at this point that the partner begins to feel confused, hurt and deeply alone. They may try harder to connect with the person they once experienced as open and engaged, who can now seem distant, defensive or unreachable. In therapy, partners sometimes ask in despair, "Where have they gone?" They may say, "I know they are a lovely person. I can still see that person is there with other people, so why are they not like that with me?" What they are often encountering is not a lack of feeling, but a protective pattern that becomes most active where intimacy matters most. They may find themselves over-explaining; seeking reassurance repeatedly; or silencing themselves to avoid conflict. By this point, moments of intimacy, such as holding hands or feeling emotionally close, may have become rare – as closeness can trigger the ex-boarder's instinct for self-protection.

By this stage, partners may already have read widely about what is known as boarding school syndrome. They may also hope that if the ex-boarder begins therapy and reconnects with a more authentic sense of self, the relationship will improve. The ex-boarder, meanwhile, may arrive in therapy feeling accused, resentful or misunderstood, saying, "I'm here because my partner sent me. They think I'm the problem, and I don't know what I'm supposed to do. Why am I not enough?" This can make the beginning of therapy particularly delicate. While there may indeed be painful early experiences for the ex-boarder to explore, it is equally important to recognise that the partner brings their own experiences, sensitivities and relational habits. The difficulties between them are rarely created by one person alone.

Partners themselves may feel so disoriented that they begin to doubt their own perceptions and even their own sanity. They may have tried reassurance; patience; kindness; protest; pursuit; or self-silencing – yet still feel unable to make sense of what has gone wrong. Over time, loss of self and confusion can give way to frustration, hurt and anger, leading to increasingly urgent demands

that the ex-boarder change because nothing else seems to work. Therapy can help the ex-boarder understand how childhood has shaped their adaptations and expectations in relationships; help the partner reflect on their own self-doubts and responses; and enable both to examine how their experiences may be shaping the patterns between them.

This account amounts to a description of the relational dynamic in which many couples become stuck. For change to be possible, each person needs help to reflect on what belongs to them: their assumptions and expectations; their defences; their ways of reacting when emotional challenges arise; and the meanings they make of closeness and conflict. Therapy is not simply about becoming more accommodating, being kinder, or deciding who is right: it is about helping both partners step back from blame, communicate more honestly, and take greater responsibility for how their learned ways of responding to difficulty affect the relationship.

Seen in this light, therapy is not a search for the guilty party. It is a process of understanding how two histories meet in one relationship, and how greater honesty, responsibility and emotional awareness can create the possibility of a different way of being together.

And finally...

Please remember that you can always [**contact us**](#) if you're in need, whether it be emotional distress or just for signposting. We will always answer promptly and in confidence.

This message comes with the very best wishes of all at [**Boarding School Concern**](#): Caroline, Charlotte, John, Mike, Paul, Sam and Tim

Boarding School Concern

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All our directors give their time as volunteers, without remuneration.

Any income, whether from events, sale of books or donations, is used for the sole purpose of staging our annual conference, providing individual bursaries for therapy and participation, or providing financial support to organisations or endeavours that share our aims and objectives.

Therapy and Counselling: BSConcern believes that therapy and counselling should be delivered only by those who are members of professional bodies such as UKCP and BACP. We suggest working with counsellors and psychotherapists who have had specialist training in work with former boarders, e.g. [UMOT training run by Nick Duffell](#).

Research: From time to time, BSConcern publicises details of opportunities to take part in boarding research. This is done in good faith, but we are unable to attest to the quality, ethics or aims of any research programme.

Please proceed only if it feels right for you.

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