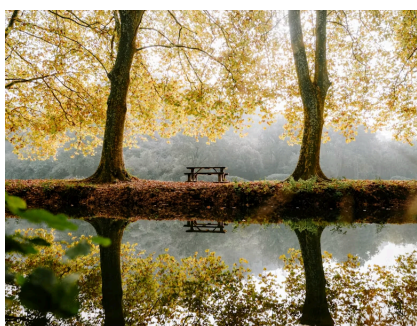




A safe haven & support  
for all former boarders

# *Boarding School Concern Autumn 2026*



Dear

For some ex-boarders, a subtle feeling of disquiet becomes apparent at this time of year, when the cycle of educational terms begins once again.

The coming of autumn reminds many of us of the time of year when we were due to return to boarding school after the long summer holidays. Even when life has long moved on, the body remembers the rupture of leaving home, reawakening an old sense of dread or grief before the conscious mind can catch up.

For some, as Remembrance Sunday approaches, the season can also stir memories of the militaristic undercurrents in many boarding educations, the echo of an imperial past becoming part of the legacy – alongside a quiet, enduring solidarity in having survived it together.

At BSConcern, we know these feelings well, and if you are experiencing them, we sympathise. We understand, and if you feel down now or at any time, do please [contact us](#) and we will help.

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## Conference 2026

Bookings are coming in fast for this year's conference on **7 November 2026** at the **Royal College of Nursing**, Cavendish Square, London W1, with over 100 delegates now confirmed as attending.



We have a particularly eminent line-up this year:

**Nick Duffell**, the 'father' of the Boarding School Survivors movement will be talking about the strategic survival personality as seen in the thriller series *The Night Manager*, and reflecting on the character of the former boarders who its stars. He gives us a taste of his talk [below](#).

**Helena Thomas**, a psychotherapist specialising in ex-boarder relationships, will talk about life for the non-boarder in relationship with a former boarder. See [below](#) for a response to her article in the June newsletter.

**Rachel Godfrey & John Shirley** from **Out of Bounds** will talk on creative writing for therapeutic purposes, and run a workshop in the afternoon.

There will also be discussion groups, dance, poetry, sculpture and more.

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

Details of the programme [here](#).

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

Booking includes selecting afternoon activities, and some groups are now full. The earlier you book, the greater the chance of being able to join your first choice of group. After the conference, there will be a social at a nearby pub; a chance to carry on talking to people in an informal setting.

### **Bridging the Gap**

If you feel that financial issues are preventing you from booking, please get in touch via the registration form.

The conference fee does not cover the cost of staging the conference, but we want to keep it affordable for most people. If you can afford to add some extra to the fee to help bridge the gap and allow others to attend who could otherwise not, we would be very grateful.

If you would like to donate to help someone attend, there is an option to do so on the registration form. All such donations will be used to provide a helping hand, with any surplus separately retained for next year.

## **The Strategic Survival Personality**

**Nick Duffell** offers a taster of his upcoming talk at Conference 2026.



What has always fascinated me most about

boarding schools isn't just what happens to children at the time, indefensible as it is, but what it does to us once we grow up. When you're packed off at a tender age and told it's a tremendous privilege that will make a man of you – 'the making of them', indeed – it creates a peculiar split inside. On the surface, you learn to look confident and capable, while underneath you might be an absolute mess of anxiety. Over the years in my workshops, I've come to call this mask the "strategic survival personality", the defence mechanism built to endure school, but one that leaves adults stuck merely surviving rather than actually living.

Back in the nineties, when I first started writing about all this, the therapy world largely treated me like a crank. I spent a lot of time wondering if I was just making it up, so I kept looking around for something that mirrored what I was seeing. Where I found it wasn't in textbooks, but in the novels of John le Carré. Having been through the public school mill and the secret service himself, le Carré understood better than anyone how these men tick. He showed how naturally secretive they were; they can lead double lives, hide their feelings, and convince themselves that anyone they get close to will eventually betray them, just as they felt betrayed when their parents left them behind at school.

I was lucky enough to correspond with le Carré for a while, and he even kindly wrote an endorsement for my book. But it was an odd sort of exchange. He was quite shy about dissecting his own work, likely worried that poking around too much in what drove him might dry up his creative well. When I had a particularly rough patch and wrote asking if we could meet for some support, the shutters came down instantly. He told me to back off and never write again. It was painful, but looking back, he was acting out the very thing he wrote about: an establishment man who needed connection, yet who bolted the moment things got too close to real emotion.

The recent BBC adaptation of le Carré's *The Night Manager* is a brilliant illustration of this survival persona, not least because it stars two Old Etonians, Hugh Laurie and Tom Hiddleston. In fact, it's uncanny how many top British actors went to public schools. When you think about

it, acting requires you to slip into different identities at will, precisely what a child has to learn to do to get through term time.

My talk, I hope will give us an entertaining, recognisable way into our own stories. It's one thing to talk about psychology in the abstract, but quite another to see our shared habits right there in front of us. By spotting how the survival personality operates, we can start the real work of dismantling it, dropping the armour, and finally moving from survival mode into proper living.



## Married to a Boarding School Survivor

In our [June 2026 newsletter](#), we printed Helena Thomas's essay *Two Histories, One Relationship* about boarder/non-boarder relationships.

A reader got in touch with us with a heartfelt response, which we have included in full below.

### Intimacy and the Boarding School Survivor

*by Fay Drewny\**

*It is a truth universally acknowledged  
that a loving wife in possession of  
an unreformed boarding school survivor  
must be in want of a husband.*

My husband James\* is a former boarder and I am not. Helena Thomas's essay *Two Histories, One Relationship* rang many bells for me. It didn't hit me like a thunderbolt because James has done a lot of work on his boarding school survival, I have worked alongside him, and we have had couples' therapy. Nonetheless, my present level of understanding has come only after many years.

I come from a close family, eldest of three girls growing up in a loving family, none of us boarding. It was a sheltered childhood, and I didn't leave home until I enrolled on a post-graduate teaching course after attending music college. I was homesick, and there were parallels with going away to boarding school. It was then that I encountered James, who was intelligent, charming, funny, self-deprecating and, above all, *interesting*. Meeting him with his university friends was like entering a new world. My education had been skills-based, not academic, and I loved the questioning and debate.

As our relationship developed, I became aware that there was a lot of heartache behind the persona James presented to the world. At this early stage, I interpreted it as a deprivation of love. I was full of love and wanted so much to fill the gap. Thinking that accepting my love would heal his pain, I pressed on and, in due course, we were married. It took years to learn that it is not possible to change other people, but that you can help them to change themselves.

Five years in, James and I were living in a lovely house with a new baby and a toddler. I was lucky enough not to have to work, my time taken up with the children and running the house. James spent long hours running his small business to keep us fed and a roof over our heads. So far, so normal: so far, so happy.

The house was mortgaged and also used to guarantee loans to the business, so there was no question that he had to work those long hours – 11 hours a day in the week and Saturday mornings as well. It occurred to me only years later that this suited his strategic survival personality. Anything more than minimal domestic contact threatened that subtle aloofness that protected him from loving feelings that he didn't understand and was frightened to embrace.

There was a key moment that started to shift things – our elder son aged four standing on the doorstep, proud and excited in his new non-boarding prep-school uniform on his first day. James was poleaxed, and he didn't know why. It took careful and patient discussion between us to unearth the memory of his own start at boarding school aged eight.

Fortuitously, there was an article in the newspaper that weekend about Nick Duffell's men's work (not specifically in relation to boarding) and mention of psychotherapists specialising in boarding at a London clinic. He agreed to attend, and, thankfully found the perfect therapist who he stayed with for nine years. He went on to do Nick Duffell's Boarding School Survivors workshops and similar group work with his therapist.

With the children at school and later at university, the sale of the business and a more secure financial footing, time became more available for longed-for intimacy in our relationship: the lack was no more excusable by pressure of other commitments. I began to realise that this was not going to happen: my thoughtful and caring husband, notwithstanding his therapy, remained emotionally unavailable. I felt hurt, inadequate, lonely and frustrated; and I began to wonder if we had a future together.

Not prepared to give up easily, I suggested that we enrol on Nick Duffell's and Helena Løvendal's *Dancing in the Dark* workshops to explore the reasons for resistance to intimacy – his and possibly mine – and James agreed. Among many insights, we learned the mantra that "vulnerability is the gateway to intimacy", and that fear of vulnerability was the matter to address.

Naturally for him it was his early boarding experience that had locked away the vulnerable child inside him, still starved of intimacy and terrified of exposure. For me came the realisation that I too had some resistance to intimacy. On deep reflection, I came to appreciate that my apparently blissful childhood had not been so perfect.

My father had been thoughtful and caring, but he had not demonstrated intimacy. As a child, I was even moved to ask him one evening if he loved me, which hurt him deeply. He worked hard in his owner-managed business, played rugby and went to the pub – a lot. We were on edge when he arrived home of an evening, not knowing what to expect – jolly and generous, taking us out to dinner unplanned, or tetchy and cross. The drink made him voluble, and I began to resent that an apparently meaningful conversation in the evening would be erased by the morning: to him, it simply had not taken place.

My mother ran a tight ship at home, often on very limited funds. While she cared for us faultlessly and with love, I realised that there had been no significant depth to our relationship: any attempt to dig deep was rebuffed with an off-hand remark. She had not reached down to her hidden child, and she was unable to reach down to us. My parents were war-time children, and with that came an unhealthy dose of stiff upper lip. It dawned on me only quite recently, years after they died, that they also were boarding school survivors.

My father was an undiagnosed dyslexic, sent to prep school where he failed academically and was repeatedly in trouble. He hated boarding, and I have a letter from him to his father at the time saying, "I will punch you when I get home" [for sending me away]. My mother's parents quarrelled a great deal: and she was relieved to be away from them while boarding, her defences already established. A model of guardedness was presented to me by both my parents, and both gave me cause to adopt it. I have learned that when identifying defensiveness in another, we should always look for the same in ourselves.

Where are James and I today? We have just celebrated our 40<sup>th</sup> (Ruby) wedding anniversary, and we have reached a state of companionship and loving care for each other. James owns his difficulty with intimacy, and I now understand that and accept that it may never appear, albeit that the window is still open. We have weathered some fierce storms; we have had some great times together with more to come; and we delight in our children and grandchildren. At this stage of life, perhaps that's enough.

*\* names have been changed for anonymity*

## Six-Month Creative Writing Journey for Women

Format: **online, closed women-only group**

Dates: **Wednesday, 16 September 2026 to Wednesday, 31 March 2027** (1 session per fortnight; optional sessions may be offered in alternate weeks)

Times: **18.30 – 20.30**

Cost: **£900** (monthly instalments and concessions available)

*N.B. This group has already started, but it may still be possible to join.*

A carefully facilitated six-month online course for women exploring how boarding school and separation may continue to shape identity, belonging, relationships and voice. **Lucy Windridge-Floris** and **Susan McQuaker** bring together their combined experience and training in Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes, Narrative Bibliotherapy and Dramatherapy, to offer a course which explores experiences through writing, metaphor, role and embodied practice.

The work unfolds through regular facilitated sessions and optional writing invitations between meetings. The emphasis is on continuity, reflection, and returning to the work over time, rather than intensity or production. There is no expectation to produce finished pieces or to share writing publicly.

### **What Participants Often Notice**

- Insight – increased emotional awareness
- Agency – clearer boundaries
- Homecoming – a greater sense of belonging
- Expression – renewed confidence in creative voice
- Body of work – a growing collection of writing
- Subtle but lasting shifts over time

Rather than quick results, the course supports changes that develop steadily through practice, reflection and care.

**Lucy Windridge-Floris** is an ex-boarder, writer, educator and creative writing practitioner with more than 30 years' experience across education, healthcare and therapeutic settings. She holds a PhD in Creative Writing and Critical Practice, an MSc in Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes, postgraduate training in dramatherapy as well as formal training in Narrative Bibliotherapy and Trauma Counselling.

**Susan McQuaker** is a psychotherapist, HCPC and BADth registered dramatherapist (requiring supervision), EMDR practitioner, clinical supervisor and trainer in developmental trauma. She has a particular interest in school-related experiences and their continuing impact, alongside extensive experience supporting people affected by trauma, autism, ADHD, anxiety, bereavement and loss.

Full details [here](#).

*Please note BSConcern's policy of not endorsing any particular therapy or therapist - see footer.*

## **Boarding School Survivors Circle Autumn 2026**

Many former boarders developed remarkable strengths in order to survive early separation and institutional life. While these adaptations often served us well, they can continue to influence relationships, identity, emotional wellbeing and the way we move through the world today.

This **12-week online psychotherapy-informed group** offers a confidential, professionally facilitated space to explore these experiences alongside others who understand. The group is open to **adults of all genders**, whether their memories of boarding school feel largely positive, deeply painful or somewhere in between.

**Starts:** Thursday 18 September 2026

**Time:** Thursdays, 4.00pm – 5.30pm

**Duration:** 12 weekly sessions

**Location:** Online (Google Meet)

**Maximum participants:** 8

**Investment:** £300

*N.B. This group has already started, but it may still be possible to join.*

The group is facilitated by **Alexander Gray**, a UKCP Registered Integrative Transpersonal Psychotherapist, ex-boarder (Lambrook &

Harrow), with specialist postgraduate training in psychotherapy with ex-boarders. Alexander works with children, adolescents and adults, bringing a lifespan perspective to understanding how early experiences continue to shape our lives.

For more information, visit:

<https://www.gardenofeadontherapy.com/boarding-school-circles>

To arrange a free discovery call or enquire about joining:

[gardenofeadon@gmail.com](mailto:gardenofeadon@gmail.com)

*Please note BSConcern's policy of not endorsing any particular therapy or therapist – see footer.*

## Research Participation Opportunity

*Natalie Wharton writes...*

My research explores the impact of attending boarding school. As a former boarder myself, I am passionate about ensuring that this population's experiences are heard and represented. This work builds on my previously published research, which I was pleased and flattered to see [featured on your website](#).

For my doctoral research, I will be exploring the experiences of UK former boarders who have lost a parent. Participant involvement is especially important to me. Before recruiting for the main study, I would also like to recruit a small number of former boarders to help develop the interview questions.

If you'd like to be involved in the development opportunity and/or the main research study, please **look out for a further announcement in a future newsletter**.

*Please note that BSConcern is unable to attest to the quality, ethics or aims of any research programme - see footer.*

## New Survivor Research Hub

The **Merchiston Castle School - Survivor Research Hub** exists as a library, research hub, and news source on historic abuse at the school, through the eyes of former pupils, media coverage, documents, and ongoing legal cases.

Key features: Private Forum for former pupils and a secure evidence upload function.

[merchiston.nigelparry.org](http://merchiston.nigelparry.org)

## 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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