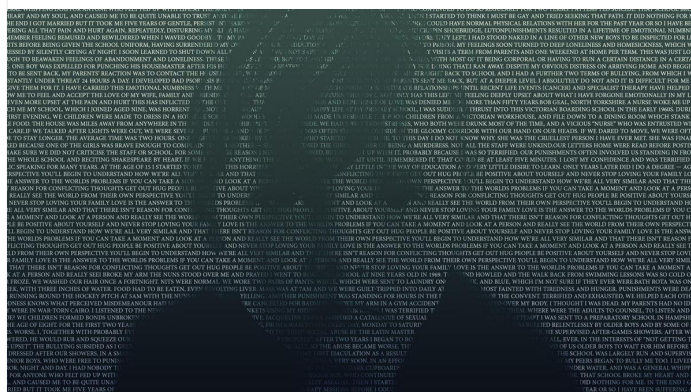




# The painful truth behind British boarding schools, by 1,000 Sunday Times readers

Earlier this year the author Louis de Bernières wrote about his time at boarding school in *The Sunday Times*. The response from readers — many speaking about their experiences for the first time — was overwhelming. Here is what you told us



Excerpts from readers' stories make up the image of a young boy at boarding school

ILLUSTRATION: TONY BELL

Anna Hollingsworth, Charlotte Seager and Ryan Watts

Saturday December 04 2021, 6.00pm, *The Sunday Times*

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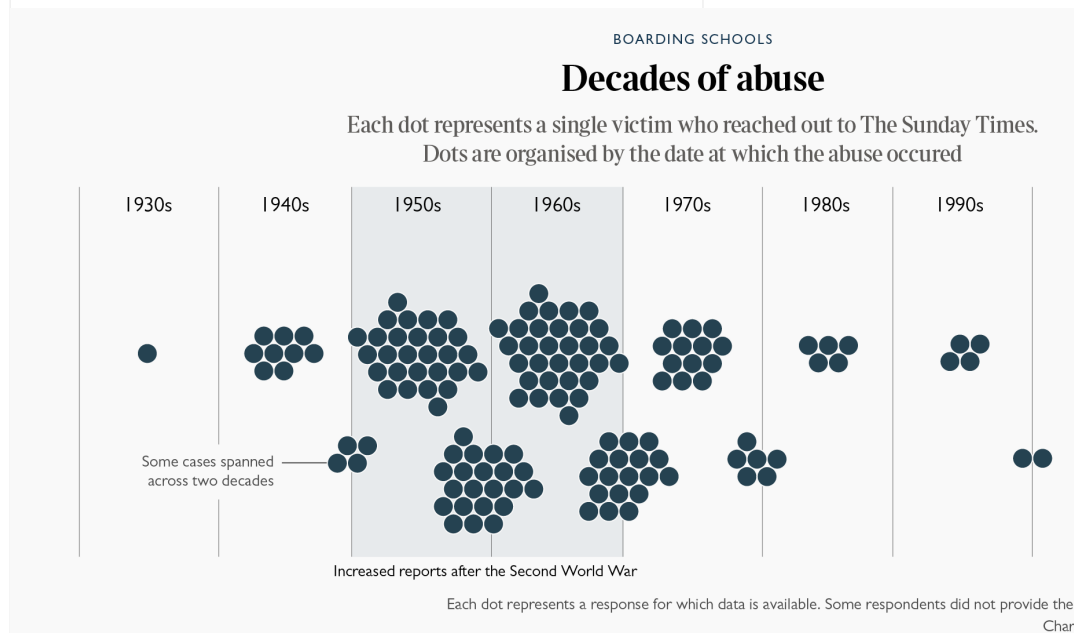


In April this year Louis de Bernières [wrote a piece for News Review](#) about his time at the boys' boarding school Grenham House in the 1960s. His painful account described the beatings, molestations and chilblains of his miserable five years at the establishment. The following day there were dozens of stories in our [readers@sunday-times.co.uk](mailto:readers@sunday-times.co.uk) inbox. Within a week, we had several hundred. Taken together with data collected by the journalist Alex Renton and ITN researchers, just under 1,000 people have shared their experiences at the time of writing, spanning around 500 schools.

More shocking than the number of responses was what our

readers were telling us. While some wanted to highlight the positives of their education, more often than not readers recounted beatings, sexual abuse and emotional turmoil, just like de Bernières. The former pupils ranged in age from twentysomethings to over-80s; some had been to school in the 1930s, others in 2010s.

Of the accounts we received, 54 per cent describe physical abuse, 27 per cent mention sexual abuse and 18 per cent emotional abuse. Only 19 per cent told of a positive experience at boarding school.



Of course, we couldn't tell everyone's story in detail — that would make a brick of a book. Instead, we've highlighted a selection with audio recordings, allowing readers to recount their experience in their own voice, and used graphics to illustrate the scale of boarding school abuse over the past century.

We want to sincerely thank everyone who got in touch, particularly those who were speaking of their experience for the first time: you are not alone. Here is what you told us.

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**Robert**, 40, went to a boarding school for children in the 1990s, aged 10, after he was expelled from his day school. At first, everything seemed like paradise; the school was set in a large country house, surrounded by beautiful countryside, and the boys would be woken up to classical music. On Thursdays, a guest speaker would come and address the boys, followed by a candle-lit dinner where the older boys — aged 12 or 13 — would be offered wine.

“It should’ve been a major red flag but it seemed very grown up at the time,” Robert says now.

The best experience for him, however, was a sense of being the favourite of a senior teacher. He could get away with the sort of misbehaviour — vandalism, bullying, theft — that other pupils would have been expelled for. He was made a monitor in his first or second term, ahead of boys who had been at the school for years.

The grooming began early on. There were one-on-one wine tastings in the teacher’s study and private sexual jokes. As Robert continued to push boundaries, this offered an excuse for him to be called up frequently to the teacher’s apartment.

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“I would have private time up there with him when clearly he was in various stages of undress.”

Robert believes he was targeted because of his vulnerability. He had been molested by a family member before, he was withdrawn and found it hard to make friends; later on he was diagnosed as autistic.

Towards the end of his time at the school, Robert and another boy, both 13 then, were invited on a trip to France with the teacher. During that trip, he was raped by the teacher.

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“Probably one of the hardest parts is that there were definitely some teachers who suspected. There was one who outright said in front of the entire class when I was messing around and causing trouble, we all know what’s going on, we all know why you’re untouchable.

“Since then I’ve always had the sense if they knew or suspected and did nothing, it was because they thought at some level that I deserved it.”

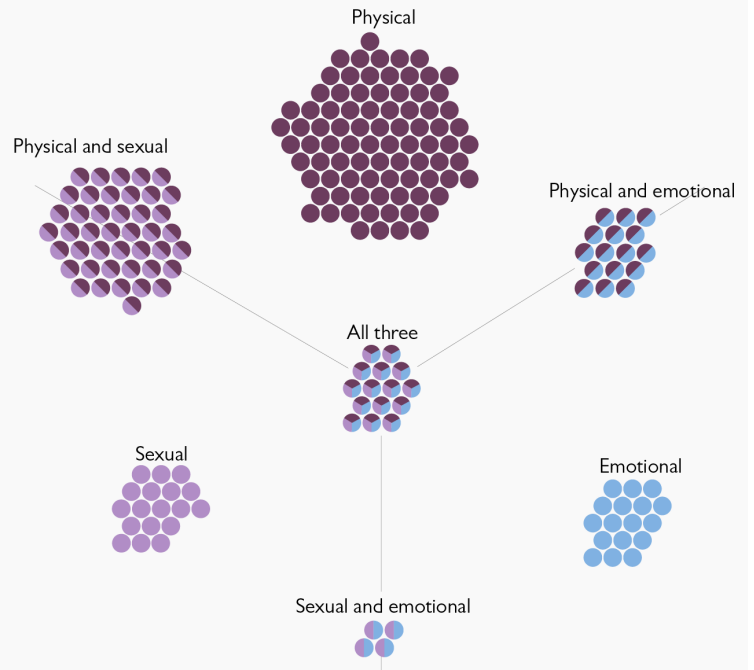
The teacher still has a role in the governance of the school and access to pupils.

Robert said: “One of the things one feels really helpless about is that it’s been about 28 years since this happened: that’s 28 years’ worth of boys passing through the school, a school that has a paedophile who has access to it. I always ask myself whether I’ve done enough.”

Grooming, sexual humiliation and wandering hands appear in dozens of the accounts shared with us. Until recently, however, the abuse was rarely spoken about. **Lyndon Savage**, 69, was sent to boarding school in the mid-1960s, aged 13. He discovered only years later, after talking to other former pupils, that sexual abuse had been rife there. At the time nothing was done.

## Type of abuse

Each dot represents a single victim who reached out to The Sunday Times.  
Dots are organised by the type of abuse reported



Each dot represents a response for which data is available. Some responses may be missing.

“Nobody talked about it, obviously; you didn’t. It only came out years and years later.”

Some of the pupils there had been to the same preparatory school. “Sexual abuse was rife there too. There was a continuous history of sexual abuse from primary school to middle school and up.”

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**Thomas**, 29, was abused by a fellow pupil. He started boarding in 2002, aged nine; four years later he moved from his prep school to a boarding secondary school.

“It was a boy in my year group at the same boarding house as me. It was in my second year [year 10] then, and we’d moved from dorms to twin rooms. I think I’d been playing a computer game or something in my room, and at some point he asked to see my penis. Which I found a bit strange, but there was sort of nothing sort of suspicious or threatening about him or anything. So I quickly showed him. I don’t think there was much of a reaction – we just sort of quietly went, “That was a bit weird.”

reaction — we just sort of quietly went, 'That was a bit weird.'

Things escalated some weeks later when the boy repeated the request.

“That time it felt a bit more uncomfortable, but again I didn’t feel threatened; just sort of unsure. I showed him, and then he started asking to touch it and I said no. He touched it anyway. I remember constantly verbalising that I wasn’t comfortable with it and I wanted it to stop, and he didn’t.

“Then he asked if he could put it in his mouth. I was able to say no more firmly and pulled up my pyjamas, I think, or jeans.”

At this point they were spotted by another boy. Thomas rushed out to tell the other boys in his year group what had happened so that he would not be blamed for anything. However, he was met with laughter, and the story soon spread throughout the school; he would be reminded of the incident constantly. The bullying died down after Thomas got into a serious accident just

before he turned 17. Some former pupils, however, would still bring it up in the years after they’d left the school.

“Until I was 17 I never admitted to anyone or myself that I was bullied, so no one was ever able to help me, which was as much my fault as anyone else’s,” he says now. “You can’t help someone who doesn’t want to be helped, in my experience.”

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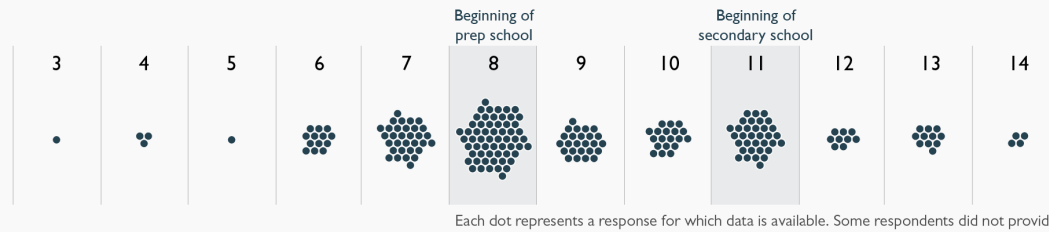
He does not know whether the teachers heard about what was happening, but “I imagine, because it was spoken about so frequently and casually, they may have suspected something. I think I didn’t make it easy for myself because I wouldn’t admit anything. At the point when I would’ve admitted it, after that accident, the bullying had stopped. From a slightly older-fashioned teacher’s perspective, if they weren’t seeing it any more, then clearly the problem had solved itself.”

There was very little sex education and even fewer mentions of consent.

“I remember being told that condoms are a good thing and a bit of basic anatomy, but that was about it. There was no classes on consent or virtually anything like that. I do not remember being told at any point while growing up that if you’re being intimate with anyone and they say no, you need to stop. I mean, people are meant to figure that out.”

## How old were the victims?

Each dot represents a single victim who reached out to The Sunday Times.  
Dots are organised by how old the victims were at the time they were first abused



Physical punishments are a recurrent feature of the stories: the former boarders tell of daily beatings, cheek-pinching and being hit with weapons ranging from tennis shoes to “a two-pronged tawse”.

During Savage’s time at boarding school, caning was a common punishment. It was done by the housemasters and senior pupils.

“You were given six strokes usually — never more and rarely fewer.”

Beatings would follow various rule infringements.

“I remember being thrown into a swimming pool by my PE teacher because I couldn’t learn to swim. In the end he had to jump in and fetch me out because I was drowning,” Savage says. “That was his idea of teaching someone to swim.”

For Thomas the violence took a different form. “People generally didn’t get beaten up explicitly, like you’d see in a film.”

Rather, the older boys would invent games that would involve someone getting hurt.

“They would get someone from my year group to run down the corridor between the rooms at one of the strongest rugby players in their group so that he could practise his tackling. They would get tackled into the wall or the radiator. The floor was concrete with a thin carpet on top. Or you’d have to run from one room on one side of the corridor to another room on the other side of the corridor while having tennis balls hit or thrown at you.

“Occasionally they’d bring us into the corridor and have us squatting against the wall in a sort of stress position, just for their own entertainment. Quite a few boys were told to put Deep Heat or tiger balm on their testicles.”

Not all abuse took physical forms. A strong vein of emotional and psychological cruelty permeates the stories.

A culture of fagging was common. Savage describes how at his school senior pupils — 17-year-olds — could mete out punishments “pretty much as they chose”. If a younger boy was

on fagging duty, they would have to wait around in the corridor in case anyone wanted anything. The tasks included fetching tea, going out to the tuck shop and sitting on the lavatory seat for half an hour to warm it up.

“You basically had to go and do what they asked you to do,” Savage says. “If you didn’t do it, some of them would make your life unbearable and give you even more duties.”

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Thomas's story

Thomas's school had recently started accepting girls into all years when he started there. What ensued was a culture of toxic masculinity. Older boys would punish younger ones for sitting with girls in the cafeteria.

“If you were caught sitting with girls by older boys in your house, they’d make you write pages of lines or shake bottles of milk until they turned to butter.”

In his first year Thomas was made to attack a girl.

“They told me to go and slap a girl in my year on the bum as hard as I could. They said that I’d get beaten up or punished if I didn’t. It was very public. I did what they told me to do and she instantly started crying. No one at that point even found it funny. You would think that maybe the boys who told me to do it would be off laughing at the side, but I don’t think they were at all.”

There was no intervention from staff. “I don’t know if that was deliberate or not. I find it hard to say.”

It was not only pupils who contributed to an atmosphere of fear and neglect. **Catherine** started at a boarding school run by nuns aged 11 in 1966 and stayed there until 1972. There was a constant culture of blame.

“We had very thick stockings with suspender belts as little girls. We had to handwash them at night and put them on cold radiators to dry, and even if you wrung them out in a towel, they were still drippy. There were terrible floods in Bangladesh. One nun told us that our dripping stockings were causing the floods.

“Saying it now sounds ludicrous, but when you’re a child, you know these are people in authority over you. It’s upsetting.”

She came from a family of eight children, and several of her sisters were at the school too; theirs was a military family, and



the army contributed to the fees.

“We were chatting one day, and one nun said, ‘You children of all children shouldn’t be talking on the corridor. You’re charity children — you shouldn’t really be here.’ That was incredibly upsetting, because as a child you’re very vulnerable to all this and you take what they say as truth.”

**Amanda Bolger**, 58, boarded in the 1970s. At her school one of the housemistresses would punish the children for messing around and not going to bed by making them scrub stone steps and mop floors at ten o’clock at night.

“It was very regimented and very strict. Everything was done by bells, so you woke up to a bell and you went down for breakfast to a bell.

“When you’re a boarder, you can’t get away from it — there’s no relief.”

Sometimes Bolger would become so unhappy that she would pretend to be ill and go to see the nurse on duty in the school’s sickbay. However, after a few times the nurse told her to go away.

“I didn’t have anything physically wrong with me but I was depressed. It was different in the 1970s because you weren’t allowed to have mental health issues then, or they weren’t recognised, so you just had to get on with it.”

More often than not, years at boarding school and the different forms of abuse left lifelong marks on these former pupils.

“I find it quite hard to settle anywhere,” Thomas says. “I’ve travelled a lot and I now work in TV on location, which is a lot of travel, and that suits me. I don’t like the idea of being stuck in one place.”

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Catherine’s story

**Catherine** carried a sense of guilt with her for years.

“I came from a Catholic family of eight. My father was an army officer: think Captain von Trapp. Home was strict, and school was very strict. My older sisters were told that French kissing was a mortal sin.

“Of the eight of us, six girls and two boys, none is a Catholic. And I think for all of us boarding school was a negative

experience to different degrees. It destroyed that religion for us.”

Bolger says she will never forget being bullied. “I just remember feeling really miserable. When we were driving to school after the holidays, I felt completely sick. When you’re young you carry those feelings and experiences with you. I’ve got better over the years, but there’s something about you hiding at the back, the back of the classroom, keeping really quiet so that you’re not noticed and picked on.”

“When you do something like that to a child at that age, you’re essentially rewiring their brain,” Robert says.

After the rapes by his teacher, he self-harmed for nearly a decade, took drugs and developed alcoholism and crippling anxiety. He has problems forming and maintaining relationships. He has lately found support in his girlfriend, who is a psychologist and has explained the effects abuse can have.

About three years ago he gave evidence to the independent inquiry on child sexual abuse, which was “very harrowing, very cathartic”.

But, he adds, “just speaking about things doesn’t really fix things. I see this as a sort of lifelong condition, in terms of quality of life. It’s not great.”

Thousands of people are living with the scars of their time at boarding school, and many of the perpetrators have escaped repercussions. But, as the silence is broken, more and more former pupils are finding their voice. Savage is one of them: “It’s never too late to face your demons; never too late to put things right that you think were wrongs.”

*Additional reporting by Alex Renton*

*If you attended a boarding school and want to share your experience, please add to our reporting by sharing your stories with us. Get in touch by using the form below, or email [readers@sunday-times.co.uk](mailto:readers@sunday-times.co.uk) with “boarding school” in the subject line.*

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