

Mr S...
Chair of the Governors
Winchester House School
Brackley
Northants

March 12th, 2021

Dear Mr S...,

I am making contact as an Old Boy of Winchester House School for the first time for many years, and my purpose is to explain why I have scarcely been in touch since I left the school in 1967.

I was pleased recently to see a parent's testimonial on the website which praised the school's 'caring and supportive environment.' However, I was first moved to write this letter some three years ago on reading about a former football apprentice who was sexually abused by his coach and intended to sue the club over it. I do not think any legal action is required in my case, not least because the actual culprits were themselves juveniles, but I wish to place this testimony on record for the school.

To identify me, you can find two entries against my name in the school's honours list (or boards, if they still hang in the corridor opposite what I knew as the headmaster's flat). They are in the years 1967 and 1968, even though I only spent one year at the school, in 1966-67. I went there from a day prep school in Hertfordshire to prepare for a scholarship in my last year, at the age of 12. My father wanted 'a prep school with the same tradition of kind and sympathetic staff' as the other one, which would however also put me 'up against strong competition' (letter to the other school's previous Headmaster, May 25th, 1966).

I had an excellent record at school, being promoted from the reception class after one term in primary school and then twice at the school in Hertfordshire. In the last of those promotions, in 1964 – following the happiest year of my life – I was placed in the top (Common Entrance) form when I was 10 years old; it was also my older brother's class. When he first wrote to Mr Llewellyn, the Headmaster of WHS, on June 10th, 1966, my father also commented: 'He responds well to responsibility: he rapidly became patrol leader in his local scout company and is now one of the pillars of the company in spite of his young age.' (My private schooling and the family's large house and garden did somewhat mark me apart in that group, and I think it is a credit to its leaders that that never led to any friction with other cubs and scouts.). Please also see the attached copy of the postscript to that letter.

In the narrow sense the plan at WHS worked, since I achieved an exhibition from there after some excellent teaching, especially from Mr Llewellyn in Classics (the subject which had made me fail the scholarship at a trial attempt in 1966) and the brilliant Mr Simpson in Maths. Then, in 1968, I won my public school's Sixth scholarship as an internal candidate.

Arriving in Brackley in September 1966 I was 40 miles from home, had not boarded before and – curiously painful, this – was just outside my native county of Buckingham-shire. However, my father had also informed Mr Llewellyn in June that I had 'been unhappy' in that last year at my previous school, although I was 'by nature a happy child.' He wrote of 'one or two' boys who, 'in making [my] life miserable,' were 'slightly undesirable characters' although 'not in a vicious way of course.' (I am not sure about that assessment,

as the same boys had been good friends of mine two years before.) His other letter of May 25th, previously mentioned, stated that I had ‘become a down-trodden little boy’ and had ‘lost [my] former self-confidence.’ Even in the wider Common Entrance group, I was still by far the youngest boy, and some jealousies were taken out on me. My numerous changes of peer group had created a lack of social continuity – a risk factor that was not picked up. However, I cannot remember any boy there, including my brother, being punished or even admonished for their behaviour towards me. As often happens, it seemed to be more a matter of blaming the victim.

And so, at WHS I remember standing after a couple of days at one side of the upper quad (or whatever it was called) with my eyes growing damp from homesickness – no doubt a familiar memory to many who have boarded. A kindhearted boy from the V Form came over and comforted me (unfortunately I cannot remember his name). However, in my own form, the Upper VI, in its classroom in the other building, things were different. After two or three weeks, as I was beginning to fit in with the boys’ habits, the trouble started. Already by half-term, in my father’s words, ‘sometimes they hit him, and sometimes push his desk outside [into the long corridor]; he then has to push it back, before it is discovered outside, to avoid being “thought sneaky”’ (letter to Mr Llewellyn on November 17th). Because of this I had begged him not to take me back after half-term. But he did not want to listen, and took me back.

A few days later, at one of the remedial sessions that Mr Llewellyn gave me, he told me that he understood the issue to be something to do with the order in which I undressed in the dormitory, and he advised me not to do it the same way any more. I found that hard to understand as it seemed to mean that I should not stand up for myself. In that case, I thought, my tormentors would have won, and they would then find fresh excuses to continue doing as they did and more besides. At what point should I then decide that enough was enough and *start* to take a stand? But, I reasoned to myself, Mr Llewellyn had spent most of his 60-plus years in institutions of this sort, so he must know what he was talking about. Besides, I was brought up to listen to authority, especially in the shape of a headmaster. And so, reluctantly, I decided to follow this advice. It was, without any question, the worst mistake of my life.

In Mr Llewellyn’s immediate reply to my father on November 18th, 1966, I read this paragraph:

‘I am very sorry Thomas is having this difficult time but you and I must remember that when we think about him this naturally fills our minds – 75% of his time, he is not conscious of it at all (for instance, in the plunge bath this afternoon, he was quite merry and bright – although I don’t think it is his favourite thing!).’

I have to say that I find that statement, from a leading teacher with nearly a lifetime of experience in boarding schools behind him, to be utterly astonishing. On the contrary, I spent virtually *my whole time* in Brackley longing for the next time I would see my family, even if only for a few hours of daytime leave on a Sunday; while during such periods, including the whole of the Christmas and Easter holidays, I was overwhelmed by the terror of returning to that class. But being in the Second Game for ball sports, the afternoons when we played, changed and took the plunge bath afterwards were like brief oases of relief, since most of the Upper VI were in the First Game.

However, that letter seems to have led my father to believe (as he told me when he next raised the issue with me, *some 30 years later*) that I really did settle in there. On that occasion, when over 40 years old, I had to disillusion him by saying that no, things had ‘got worse, much worse. After a year at that place I knew what it was like to be in prison.’ That was over 20 years ago, but I remember my exact words. But I do not recall Mr

Llewellyn ever trying to seek out my version of events – a difficult task anyway, from a lonely, frightened child who was away from home in an alien environment for the first time.

And what I feared is exactly what happened. Between about November 1966 and May 1967 I endured five sexual assaults as well as two painful and humiliating physical assaults from my form-mates. The physical ones were quite clever because they left no bodily mark. That was roughly one incident of these sorts every third week of termtime. I can remember each of the seven events clearly. All of the sexual assaults were committed on the floor of the Upper VI classroom and the physical ones in the dayroom next to it, with the use of heavily laden tuckboxes and two upturned wooden 'form' benches. There was also the daily, hourly or more frequent verbal abuse, while stuck in that classroom with those boys even in our free time, with nowhere else to go. Some of the words are still ringing in my ears.

Naturally, I thought very seriously about running away. I am certain I would have done so had the railway through Brackley – with a station along the road from the school – not been closed in the Beeching cuts shortly before I arrived there; I would have surreptitiously boarded a train to Aylesbury, and from there taken a slower one on the same line directly to our home station 20 miles further south, hiding in the toilets throughout both legs of the journey as I would have no ticket. In hindsight, and with the benefit of an adult understanding, I think running away was the best thing I could have done.

After one of those events, I remember hurrying anxiously along the long corridor to the toilets, hoping desperately for two things while trying to ensure that the black shoe polish smeared all over my genitalia did not touch my pants or trousers: first, that nobody (and especially no master) would see me in that humiliating state; and that cleaning up the mess would not make me late for the next lesson, for what excuse could I make?

It was not for nearly half a century that it occurred to me I could have gone the *other* way along the corridor to Mr Llewellyn's study and said to him when he opened the door: 'Now look what they've done!' I do not know if that would have been the best thing to do but it was certainly an option; and I could have recovered a little self-respect in doing so. But in a situation like that a child does not even think of such a thing; placing me in that humiliated frame of mind was of course my classmates' purpose. Besides, it would have been 'sneaking.' (My previous headmaster had once warned us against that practice at the school assembly, when I had not even heard the word before: this was another headmasterly edict that I did not understand at the time and still do not.)

It should be noted that – as at the other school – the main perpetrators included some of the most senior and highly respected pupils: not merely prefects and winners of major scholarships in the summer, but captains of the school's greatly prized sports teams and so on. As far as I remember, the head boy, a mild-mannered boy, was *not* involved; on the other hand, he witnessed everything from his desk in the back row by the window but did nothing to stop it. He might of course have made reports on it to Mr Llewellyn or other teachers, but if he ever did so, nothing happened as a result. In the ingrown world of that school, cooped up on a narrow strip of land without even a playground and the outside gates padlocked shut, there was nowhere for me to get away; all that I could manage was to spend the breaks between lessons in the toilets, secure inside a locked cubicle.

Many, many years later it occurred to me that I might have reported the offences to the police – if I could have contrived a way round the locked gates and discovered the police station. But of course a child does not think of such possibilities. I suspect that in those

days the police would have handed me straight back to the school, with a recommendation to the Headmaster that he must sort the problem out. And that might well have been the best thing for them to do, as it would have forced the school at last to attend to it, rather than pretending that nothing was amiss. The same applies if I had run away.

Two psychologists have told me, separately, that it was child sexual abuse. Maybe that is technically true, in the sense that my trials included several sexual assaults, even though those who committed the crimes were of my own age. However, I do not see it as such because their motive was not gratification but humiliation. I recently heard a better analogy in the predicament of people who were subjected to domestic abuse during the coronavirus lockdown. That is how it was to be closeted week in, week out in that Upper VI classroom. Since it was separated from all the other classes and the other boys, who were in the upper quad, it was out of sight of the teachers, who made no attempt ever to monitor the Upper VI or impose any discipline on it. None of them ever once asked me whether things had improved or suggested that if there was any future misbehaviour, I should report it and they would sort it out.

Through the subsequent course of my life, the psychological consequences for me have been an abiding sense of shame (although of course it is the little criminals who should be shameful), difficulty in trusting other people, especially those in authority, and therefore also in making friends or sustaining personal relationships, jobs or careers; and a psychological breakdown in 1974, a failed marriage and several suicide attempts. In the most serious of these, while living in Brussels in November 1994, I was quite possibly within seconds of losing consciousness when I turned off my car's engine, because I decided to see just one more morning.

When people in authority take lightly such victims' predicaments, the result is that those victims turn in on themselves and do not even try to tell anyone about it for several decades, if they ever manage to at all. I told no one for 25 years – not until I was 37 years old. This is a very long letter, but please accept that, since I have kept these events inside myself for 54 years now. It is the most difficult thing I have ever written – as I indicated earlier, it has taken me nearly three years to do it. After those experiences, I have gone through life without any sense that if something goes wrong, I can confidently go to anyone at all for help or support – and least of all, someone in authority. That is not what authorities do; they look after themselves. On the positive side, it left me with a spontaneous sense of sympathy with anyone around the world who is hard done by.

I read this in a newspaper interview with an actor who had a difficult, disrupted childhood:

'He talks a little about subsequent difficulties in establishing relationships of his own: "There was this theme of abandonment in my life, and subsequently you make sure you reject before you get rejected, you put a wall up." He hasn't ruled out marriage and children: "I am looking forward to that phase. I was 16 when this [going to a boarding school in Surrey] happened, I was 52 yesterday.'" (Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje in *The Guardian*, September 8th, 2019.)

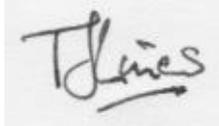
Mr Akinnuoye-Agbaje's own story is rather different from mine but I am familiar with all those feelings.

On September 15th, 1967 Mr Llewellyn wrote to my father, 'We shall remember him with affection.' With my name inscribed twice on its scholarship board to advertise its academic success at the very school after which Winchester House was named, it has benefited doubly from my year's presence there. It irks me that, by contrast, my previous school, which won only one public school honour in the five years I was there, did *not* lay claim to my honours. Maybe some IAPS guideline prevented it from doing so, but I think that, with its comparatively kind and sympathetic staff, it earned the right to.

As far as I am concerned, my young form-mates in that Upper VI were both vicious *and* undesirable: products, I would think, of the school's long heritage as a 'crammer.' However, they were only boys. Much more important is the fact that they were completely uncontrolled by the teaching staff or anyone else – from the Headmaster down.

It is therefore the least I can ask that this testimony is put into the right place in the school's archives, where anyone looking for that year will see what things were like in that era for a pupil such as myself.

Yours faithfully,



Thomas Lines

P.S. I am copying this to my two surviving sisters and brother with their spouses, since they know little or nothing of these events. Besides one brother-in-law, none of them went to boarding schools, and I think that keeping such a secret from them has seriously impeded my relations with them ever since.

Yours sincerely,
Nicholas Lines
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R. N. LINES

PS
When Thomas took the Bucks "11+" two years ago, when he was 9, I understand he came out top in the county. One of the York House masters heard through the grape vine that his marks were the highest ever awarded. So there ought to be something there capable of development. (He has also been junior cross country champion at York House)
NL.
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