

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Your 16-page guide to private education

Room to grow

Boarding schools hone academic, social and sporting skills – no wonder their intake has risen, says **Helena Pozniak**



When headmistress Sally Anne Huang's teenage son asked to go to a boarding school 10 minutes down the road, she could hardly refuse. "He wanted to board at Tonbridge School [in Kent] to play rugby, do his art and spend time with his friends," says Huang, formerly housemistress at Roedean School, Brighton, and now head of the independent day and boarding school Kent

College Pembury in Tunbridge Wells. "I would have been a hypocrite to refuse him, and sometimes it's the parent who has to make the sacrifice."

In the past, famously unhappy boarders, from Prince Charles to Rupert Everett, helped fuel an image of Britain's schools as harsh, unfriendly places; and indeed, decades ago, many were. "I used to think boarding

schools were somewhere you sent your seven-year-old if you didn't love them," says Huang. Her first term as a teacher convinced her otherwise. Prefects no longer punish, shower blocks are deluxe affairs, the food is good and plentiful and parents are welcomed with open arms.

"The boarding house is where the heart of the school lies," she adds.

For the first time in years, the number of children going to boarding school in the UK has risen, according to the 2014 Independent Schools Council (ISC) report, and schools believe this is largely due to an increase in dual-income families. While the overall number of boarders is up one per cent, the number of UK children boarding has risen by 4.6 per cent. Of the

68,000 boarders in the UK, 29,600 are aged 16 and over while fewer than 150 seven-year-olds are boarders; it's something teenagers grow into, believes Huang.

With fees as high as £30,000 a year, full-time boarding is beyond the reach of many, so schools have introduced weekly and ad hoc flexible boarding, responding to parents' qualms at the

expense and the prospect of waving their children off for weeks – although this doesn't really happen any more, points out Hilary Moriarty, former director of the Boarding Schools' Association (BSA), as parents usually live less than 90 minutes away from their children's school and many pop in frequently.

CONTINUED OVERLEAF

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INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS BOARDING

The Daily Telegraph

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Editor Kate Rigby
Commissioning editor Laura Jane MacBeth
Design Genevieve Hancock
Picture editor James Bowman
Sub-editor Ana Vrkljan

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"These schools fulfil a modern need for working parents," she says. "As an alternative to relying on a patchwork of childcare, they provide good wrap-around care with structure. You know your child is being looked after by professionals."

With a husband in the Navy and her own business to run, Ruth Sparkes, director of public relations agency Empra, uses the flexible boarding facility at Rookwood School in Andover, Hampshire, for her 14-year-old son on the nights when she is working late or obliged to travel.

"I was quite anxious about it at first," she says. "He started there when he was eight, and being an only child he had missed out on sibling relationships. Neither my husband nor I went to private schools so it was all new to us and I needed to be reassured he was being well looked after. He's now very confident. The house mother was just the sort of woman you'd want to leave your child with – strict but good fun."

Sparkes' heart sank, however, when her son requested to board full time. "I'm not selfless enough to do that – I didn't want to miss out on the important parts of him growing up," she adds.

Brochures for boarding school are peppered with references to "happy children", and, believes head of Kent College Pembury, Sally Anne Huang, they do what they say on the tin, give or take a few exceptions. "According to my chaplain, parents are only as happy as their least happy child, and there's certainly no mileage in having miserable boarders," she says.

Rarely mentioned in schools 30 years ago, pastoral care has been utterly transformed and professionalised; the BSA recently ran a seminar in understanding homesickness and offers 59 day courses on boarding, and a university-accredited certificate in boarding education.

"Gone are the days when house prefects 'ran' things and the house master was hardly ever seen on the boys' side," says Gregg Davies, head of Shiplake College at Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire. He recently attended the wedding of one of his former pupils, who is now aged 36.

At its best, he says, boarding nurtures teamwork, independence, leadership, tolerance and respect, and many students really love it.

The social aspect of boarding school is much valued by parents and pupils alike. "I laughed every day," says former boarder Saskia Leuchars, 22, who moved from the state system to board at an all-girls' school when she was 13, and later boarded at a mixed sixth form college. "I'd do it all again if I could. It leads to amazing friendships."

The experience doesn't suit everyone, however, with homesickness being a consideration. "But you



“At its best, boarding nurtures teamwork, independence, leadership, tolerance and respect

become thicker-skinned and better at coping with being teased," says Leuchars. With the benefit of hindsight, she can now appreciate the enforced structure of those days, with quiet times and study hours that enabled her to keep up with substantial volumes of homework. "And teachers were around to help if you got stuck, which made a real difference," she adds. Boarding schools, which pay teachers slightly more than day schools and offer perks such as accommodation, tend to attract high-calibre staff, says Richard Cairns, head of Brighton College,



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* Source: QS World University Rankings 2013.

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Happy days: Rookwood School; below, Taunton School; bottom, Kent College Pembury

Tom Brown's schooldays are (thankfully) history



THEN

- Children were put on trains to spend whole terms away from home with only a mid-term exeat.
- Letters allowed but miserable bits got censored. Large queues formed for the only house phone.
- The housemaster was a figure of fear and matrons were draconian.
- Prefects possessed power to discipline younger pupils, resulting in serious bullying and abuse.
- Lumpy mattresses, large draughty dormitories, cold and distant communal showers.
- Breakfast: porridge; lunch: meat stew, jam roly-poly; supper: sausage and chips, bread and butter, no vegetarian option.
- Attending pupils were mainly from well-to-do British and expat families.

NOW

- Pupils enjoy flexi-boarding, unlimited parental visits and weekends at home.
- Texting, phoning and skypeing are all regular ways of contacting parents.
- All house staff are trained in pastoral care; every school has to provide an "independent listener".
- Hierarchies have been broken down. Prefects are more likely to organise a game of capture the flag.
- Refurbished comfy rooms, en-suite bathrooms, common rooms with sofas and games consoles.
- Breakfast: croissants, cereal, kippers and bacon; lunch: spare ribs with wedges, cheesecake; supper: roast, vegetarian options and a salad bar.
- A third of boarders are non-British. Independent schools have 28pc of pupils from ethnic minorities.

KOBAL COLLECTION

and can accelerate pupils' academic progress. At his school, which also turns out accomplished cricketers, exam results have improved for seven years in a row (29 pupils this year won places at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge) and applications to board have quadrupled in the last four years. Forty-two out of the 113 staff are Oxbridge graduates – and while this is no proof of teaching ability, says Cairns, it is nevertheless an indication of the type of applicants such schools attract.

On any given night, the school runs some 20 clubs and a dozen clinics – one-to-one or small groups to help pupils struggling in any subject. "Boarding is a no-brainer if you want your child to make real progress," adds Cairns.

Besides the pastoral care and academic benefits, independent schools are also renowned for developing a high proportion of the nation's sports men and



women. In this area, boarding schools have the edge over day schools, believes Ian Pollock, director of sport at Repton School in Derbyshire. Top-performing athletes at the school train morning and evening, and the school runs between 10 and 15 teams in any one sport and hosts 11 pitches and a sports complex.

"I've worked in day schools and boarding schools," says Pollock. "Boarders get much more contact time, including after school and at weekends."

As a relatively small school with 660 pupils, Repton punches above its weight. Former England hockey player Martin Jones is on its staff, and four ex-pupils, including Olympic medallist Georgie Twigg, played hockey at the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. Around 100 pupils recently signed up to an elite athletics training programme within the school – the first of its kind in the UK, designed by Olympic sprinter Michael Johnson and run by his organisation.

BSA's former director Hilary Moriarty hopes that when England cricketer and one-time boarder Alastair Cook lays down his bat, he will return to coach in the independent sector that nurtured his talent. "Even

the academic and musically specialist schools are increasingly investing in sports facilities. And they want top teachers and coaches to help their teams achieve sporting excellence," she says.

At Taunton School, Somerset, head Dr John Newton is a great believer in grubby knees and climbing trees. "We build children in a way that parents with busy lives can't," he says. "Our education has the right degree of ruggedness."

Nowadays, with many parents worrying about how much time their children spend at home alone in front of screens, boarding school seems a reasonable, if costly, alternative. Learning to build relationships, get on with studies, organise entertainment and mix with people from different cultures and backgrounds is no bad thing. Interpersonal skills are the holy grail of graduate recruiters. "In 10 years, these are the skills that will serve them well in management," says Ed Bond, housemaster at Haileybury School in Hertfordshire.

He recently welcomed a former Haileybury pupil back to the school to talk about his experiences while serving with the Armed Forces in Afghanistan. Luke Mason received the Conspicuous Gallantry Cross (CGC) for courage under fire in Helmand Province in 2012.

"He found himself in an Afghan village and the most important skills he needed then – relating to other people and building relationships – were those he had learned at boarding school," says Bond.




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