

...survive boarding school

Ysenda Maxtone Graham recalls the appalling food, cold dorms and stern matrons of her all-girls boarding school in the 1970s — and says it did her a world of good

I was sent to board at Sibton Park Preparatory School in Kent at the age of nine. Every day, we had to line up along a flagstone corridor in our gingham overalls to have our hands checked for cleanliness before proceeding into the junior dining room, where we were made to eat everything on our plate — including the inch-thick slab of fat all the way along the pork chop, and the thick skin on top of the milk in which the Friday fish had been cooked. On Sundays we lined up in our Sunday best, including white gloves and straw boaters, to be “passed” by Matron, before walking to church in a crocodile line. On packing day, if you had lost a sock, you had to search the laundry, all afternoon if necessary, until you found it.

Decades later you can spot us ex-boarding school pupils by our strange symptoms. Deep into adulthood, we still need to eat comforting carbohydrates on Sunday evenings, to counteract the dread in our stomachs that rises at the exact time of day when we used to see our parents’ car disappear down the gravel drive. We still gag at the smell of fish cooking in the morning, especially on a Friday. If we pass a bed with its sheet untucked, we pause to remedy the situation with a neat hospital corner. In an age of bare floorboards, we retain a secret passion for fitted carpets: they symbolise the vividly remembered



difference between cosy, warm home and draughty, splinter-inducing school. We still get unduly excited when a parcel arrives — even if, as is usual these days, it’s just a re-order of Hoover bags from Amazon. Parcels at boarding school were thrilling, evocative of the unattainable riches beyond the gates.

There’s a certain look about an ex-boarder: something about the set of her jaw that makes you know she went to boarding school and

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lived to tell the tale. There’s an inner toughness, a lack of self-pity, a sense that this person has survived the ordeal of merciless teasing, of extended childhood separation from family, and of fortnightly hair washes with the head thrust into the basin. For older alumni, there is sometimes an even starker physical symptom: a crooked, bright-red finger that never recovered from the chilblains contracted while at boarding school during or just after the war. Some would also have crooked noses from lacrosse accidents.

Boarding schools have very gradually been softening, ever since the dreadful days when two of Charlotte Brontë’s sisters died of tuberculosis at the Clergy Daughters’ School in Lancashire, and girls were literally falling like flies after bitter walks back from church to cold supper in the unheated hall. By the mid-20th century, conditions were better — the annual “flu hug”, while felling half the school, was not usually fatal — but it’s still astonishing how girls’ boarding schools carried on being very Victorian in attitude right up to the end of the 1970s.

There were hundreds of these schools, all over the country, run by old ladies or sometimes pairs of old ladies, who were sometimes lesbians and sometimes not, and who wore pearls and cardigans. The real shock, for the new girl, was the difference between what was shown on the prospectus and what the school was really like once you got there.

The prospectus of my school showed a charming photo of girls curled up on the floor in the drawing room by the log fire with the headmistress and the dog. In reality, we hardly saw that drawing room or the log fire or even the dog. For the girls, it was the back door, the back stairs, the back corridors, the lino floors and, if you were lucky, the shivering guinea pig you were allowed to keep in the outdoor menagerie.

I still remember the abrupt change of smell when, during the occasional longed-for power cuts, we were briefly allowed into the “family” part of the house, where we breathed in the sublime scent of pot-pourri and wood smoke.

The difference between prospectus and reality was startling, but similarly misleading



was the way boarding schools were portrayed in children’s books. Many girls, like me, had been inspired by Enid Blyton’s *Malory Towers* and Angela Brazil’s novels — wonderful adventures full of jollity, scrapes, blackberry-picking outings with Mam’zelle, midnight feasts and cocoa parties — and had begged to go to boarding school on the strength of these stories.

They told only part of the truth: dormitories can indeed be hubs of high japes and deep friendships. But the stories never quite did justice to the all-too-real dark side of boarding-school life: the bullying. It’s a matter of luck. You can find

yourself in a group of kind girls who are instinctively pleasant to each other. Or you can find yourself in a group where there is one powerful, nasty girl who warps the morality of everyone else, choosing her favourites and ostracising others, whom it becomes social death to befriend. I remember the utter dejection of the Ostracised Girl at my school, the one whom no one was allowed to like, who spent all afternoon on her own in the riding cloakroom, as lonely as Moaning Myrtle in the Harry Potter stories.

A former pupil at Downe House in the 1950s told me of a terrifying “divorce classroom” at her school.

ALL SMILES Above: *Ysenda Maxtone Graham* dressed for school in 1973, aged 9. Left: *Maxtone Graham’s* old boarding school, Sibton Park

A girl who had fallen out of favour — the first sign would be people no longer laughing at her jokes — would be summoned to classroom 4B, which had two doors. As she came in through one door, all the girls who had been her friends would flounce out through the other. That was it. From that moment, the girl was an outcast.

These days, when parents email their children’s schools to fret about every perceived dip of mood in their beloved offspring, it’s hard to imagine a time when parents weren’t interested in the mundane details of their daughters’ school lives. But in the old days it was no use writing letters home recounting an incident in which such-and-such a girl (or matron or mistress) had been mean, as (a) the letters were usually censored, and (b) parents didn’t want to know. Part of the point of sending your daughter away to school was to toughen her up. When parents rolled up to collect their daughters after weeks of separation, their first words tended to be something like: “Hello, darling. Is it wonderful?” A question requiring the answer: “Yes.” Any quiet murmurings that, er, no, it was not all quite as “homely” and great fun as it had been cracked up to be were swept under the carpet in the joy of brief reunion.

Strangely enough, women do not seem to have been as emotionally hobbled by this kind of experience as their male counterparts. I know plenty of men who shook hands with their fathers to say goodbye on the prep-school steps at the age of seven and have never felt able to express their emotions since.

Girls, cooped up down a gravel drive for months on end, became adept at the art of listening, emoting, teasing, loving, hating, breaking off friendships, making up again, and in the end forming rock-solid friendships that lasted for life. I am amazed at how a typical boarding-school woman in her seventies can summon her five best school friends at a few days’ notice — and there they’ll all be, reverting to girlhood as if still in their old dorm, imitating the gait of one of the more weirdly shaped headmistresses ■

*Ysenda Maxtone Graham is the author of *Terms & Conditions: Life in Girls’ Boarding Schools, 1939-1979* (Slightly Foxed £17.50), published on Tuesday*

IN FOR THE LONG HAUL

70,000

Number of boarding pupils at UK private schools. Down from 110,000 in 1985

SOURCE: BOARDING SCHOOLS’ ASSOCIATION, 2016