A SUBJECT FOR CHOICE

Disillusion with State education is one factor which is attracting more and more pupils each year into the independent sector, as Pat Ashworth has been discovering.



Private study – an emphasis on self-discipline and hard work.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY COURTESY OF OLD SWINFORD HOSPITAL.

1985 has got to rank as the worst year ever for education in this country and it is not just the pessimists who predict that the State schools will take a long time to recover from the bitterness of the teachers' pay dispute. But the steady trickle — liable to become a flood — of parents opting out of the State system is not a direct result of the pay dispute. It is a symptom of growing unease about the erosion of traditional standards of education, discipline and morality, particularly in the comprehensive schools, and about increasing political interference in education at local government level.

Most of all it is about lack of choice. Such has been the pressure for uniformity in education that the right of parents to choose their child's school has become a nonsense where schools of only one kind exist. The parents now opting for the freedom of choice offered by the independent sector are no longer predominantly the wealthy or those with a background of private education. An increasing majority were themselves grammar-school educated, and view with alarm the current lack of emphasis on self-discipline and hard work, and the low expectations particularly of bright children. And in large, mixed ability classes, with politically acceptable ratios of the bright, the average and the remedial, who can be the winner?

Although there are many schools in the independent sector which are unashamedly elitist in accepting children only of high academic ability — and these continue to rank amongst the top schools in the country — there is an even greater number of schools where academic success is not primarily the looked-for achievement. They aim at fostering whatever talent a child might have, whether sporting, musical or social, and the shyer child has the chance to flourish where he or she might be swallowed up in the impersonality of a large school. Individual needs can be better met in what are generally smaller classes, and individual problems highlighted earlier. Overall, however, it is attitudes to learning and methods of teaching which have gradually widened the gap between the state and private sectors and where the private sector is now scoring highly.

For a rigorous study of the basics has not generally been fashionable over the last decade. It has not for example been considered necessary — or even possible given the range of ability — to do more than tinker with English grammar, spelling and punctuation; and likewise, the emphasis in other teaching has been on what is instant and fun. Consequently, a whole generation of children has left school having learned little work discipline. This is not to say that the diet of pupils in independent schools is in any way stodgy or archaic: simply that a basic respect for solid learning underlies the most modern of teaching methods.

For modern most of these schools now are. In the mid-Fifties and early Sixties when new school building was at its height, the resources of many smaller independent schools made poor showing. Science laboratory provision was often rudimentary, and facilities for sport, music and the arts limited: it was something that parents had to weigh against the impressive new grammar, technical and secondary modern

trades), made them literate and sent them to be masters of industry. They still have strong links with industry, and industrialists come directly to the school to fill vacancies — experience having shown these boys to have the right attitude to work. Although Old Swinford has its proportion of high fliers, boys are considered not primarily on academic merit, but on a range of other things — educating 'the whole man' being very much the philosophy.

They like to take boys from as wide a range geographically and socially as possible. Some of the boarders are from Service families: others are weekly boarders, living comparatively close to school; the rest come from all parts of the British Isles. There are day boys too — and much demand locally for houses within the day boy catchment area. We were shown round the school by three Sixth Form boarders with very different educational backgrounds, including one boy who had transferred from a comprehensive school to board at 13, and one who had experienced the rigours of a spartan boarding school of the old regime — since closed down. Over two and a half million pounds has been spent over the last few years on improving the school's facilities, and fine new boarding houses, new dining hall, squash courts and new music block



Modern facilities cater for every kind of sport.

stand proudly against buildings on this 7½ acre site which dates from 1667. A fine Design and Technology department testifies to the importance given to this side of education — and a modern shooting range is an excellent asset for the Combined Cadet Force which flourishes at the school. The school sanatorium is as well equipped as a small hospital, with three wards and a doctor's consulting room and surgery.

Sixth form boys have the privilege of small, cosy study-bedrooms: the rest are housed in bright, comfortable, carpeted dormitories, with first-year boys being

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Independent HMC Day School

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Saturday, 25th January, 1986 for:—
1. Scholarship on Academic Merit
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3. Fee-Paying places

PREPARATORY SCHOOL — 7—11 years
8-year-old:—Saturday, 1st February, 1986
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Application Form and Propectus from:
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Preparatory School — Telephone 789411

CLOSING DATE:—MONDAY, 20th JANUARY, 1986
Sixth Form Entry. Enquiries to the Deputy Headmaster.

DAGFA HOUSE SCHOOL

Broadgate, Beeston, Nottingham
Telephone: 254100

Principal and Headmistress:
Mrs. M. Henson, B.Sc. (Hons) Dip. Ed. Member I.S.A. and I.S.I.S.

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Situated on the western edge of University Park, enjoying easy access from all areas of city and county and set in pleasant wooded gardens. Mixed nursery class from 2½ —4 years with its own area, prepares children for Kindergarten and Lower School which takes Boys and Girls from 5—11+. Upper School takes girls from 11—16 and there is a growing mixed Sixth Form offering a wider 'A' level curriculum. Entry is by interview pre-11 and by interview and entrance examination at 11 for Upper School.

A wide curriculum offers a complete range of subjects to 'O' level, all taught by fully trained and experienced teachers and at upper levels by graduate specialists. An outward and forward-looking school, it encourages participation in the wider world through work experience after 'O' level and through foreign travel. Regular career and interest talks take place along with an increasing number of Field Work Trips, including Nature and Sporting Activities. A flourishing P.T.A. offers involvement and friendship; competitive sports are encouraged and individual needs catered for in a happy environment where small classes ensure individual attention.

Examination takes place on 28th February, 1986, for entry in September 1986, and early application is advised.

For further details contact the Principal, Mrs. M. Henson, at the school.

resident in a reception house, where a year spent together in homely surroundings, bridges the gulf between home and school. There are snooker tables and television and games rooms in each House, and the boys we talked to thoroughly enjoyed boarding — there are always friends to be with, so that they never get bored, and all the school facilities like the gym are available out of school hours. In each House too are communal study-rooms for doing Prep: a regulation time being set aside each evening for supervised work.

What was particularly noticeable around the school was a friendly atmosphere. Cheerful choruses of "Afternoon, Sir!" as the headmaster crossed the courtyard; a boy knocking at his study door to report the awarding of a distinction for outstanding work — three of these and you can win £5, awarded out of the Foundation's funds. Good manners and a natural courtesy seemed to be the order of the day, and the enthusiasm of the staff was evident in the vast number of out-of-school activities on offer — including Adventure Week at the end of the summer term, where as many of the 480 boys as possible are encouraged to take part in out-of-doors activities away from school. Many of the masters live in: the rest have houses around the school's perimeter. Old Swinford is very much a community, but with its traditions very much geared to life and links outside, far from being the cloistered environment that once typified the boys' boarding school.

Parents wishing to find out more about independent schools can visit the next ISIS exhibition, which takes place in the Clarendon Suite of the Masonic Building, Hagley Road, Birmingham, on the 15th and 16th of January from 11 a.m. – 9.30 p.m. Seventy schools will be represented.

Strong musical traditions.



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Independent Day School

Ages 5—18

SENIOR SCHOOL—entry at *11 and 16

Sound academic education to 'O' and 'A' Level and Oxbridge entrance.

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** Closing date for entries 13th January, 1986.*

JUNIOR SCHOOL—entry at 5 and 7

Open Afternoon

Thursday, 23rd January, 1986 from 2—3 p.m.

Closing date for applications:

7+ 17th January, 1986 : 5+ 31st January, 1986

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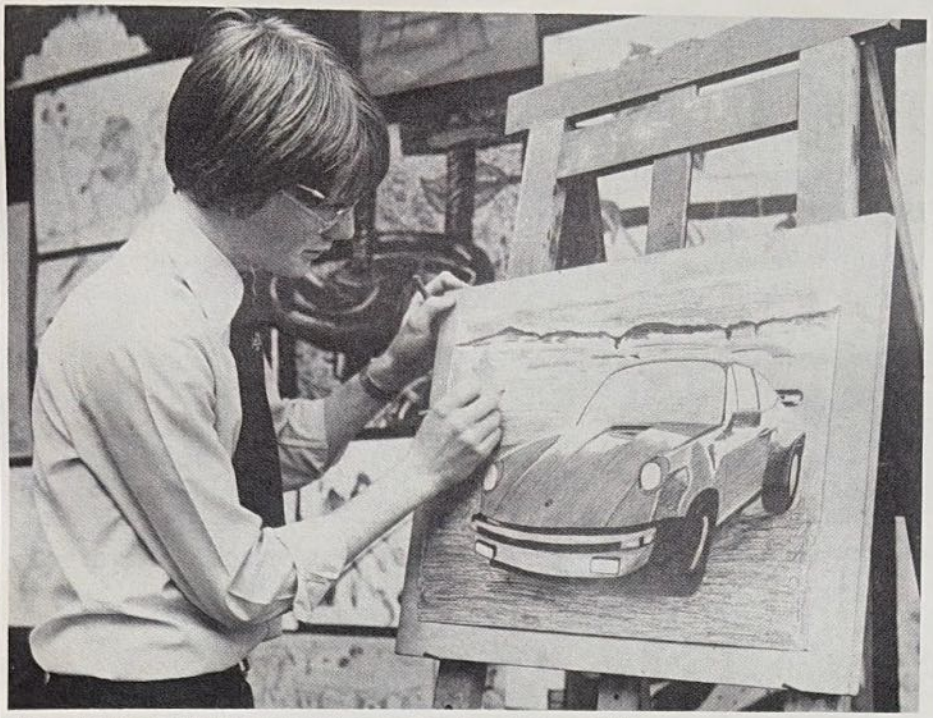
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schools, often sharing superb resources on campus sites. It has been a priority in many independent schools over the last decade to equip with the most up-to-date facilities, particularly in science provision and in computer, craft and design technology, whilst the State schools have suffered an appalling decline in resources — a grievance which has been given far too little prominence in the current dispute.

Much of the elitist image of the independent school has gone, with social changes in Britain reflected in the much wider social and racial mix in all schools. Parents are choosing private schools not for their snob value but for their educational value: and fees, in a growing number of cases, are met by the salary of the working mother. Government assisted places continue to be keenly competed for, and many schools are able from their endowments to offer bursaries, ensuring that lack of wealth does not prohibit a child from the education that will suit his needs.

A boarding school with a difference — Old Swinford Hospital

We visited a school which prides itself on retaining the best aspects of the grammar school with the best traditions of the English boarding school. Old Swinford Hospital School at Stourbridge in the West Midlands, is a particularly good example of what, for want of a better expression, could be called non-elitism in the independent sector. This boys' school was founded in 1667 by Thomas Foley, who bequeathed it to his sons — descendants of whom, amazingly, are still ex-officio members of a group of trustees who administer Thomas's very generous endowments. It is Voluntary Aided — so tuition fees are paid by the local authority, and the Department of Education and Science give financial assistance towards new buildings — but the Foundation has a large income that is used for many exhibitions and bursaries. This is surely the best of both worlds. Many boys who would not otherwise have had the opportunities offered by a boarding school, have the chance, regardless of family income, of a privileged education, and the headmaster, Chris Potter, is proud to boast that you are as likely to find the son of a bus driver here as of an Old Etonian.

That runs true to the traditions of Old Swinford. In the beginning, the school drew boys from the labouring classes (one only from each family, in different

The boarding school environment – much more homely than in the past.

