

# Wave of Sexual Abuse Allegations For Private Boys' Schools in Britain

By **STEPHEN CASTLE**

LONDON — Prompted by publicity surrounding recent child abuse scandals involving well-known figures, dozens of British men are breaking decades of silence about molestation they say they suffered as boys at expensive private schools, forcing the schools to confront allegations that in the past might have been hushed up, ignored or treated derisively.

In one instance involving Aldwickbury School, which educates boys ages 4 to 13, a former student, who requested anonymity because of the intimate details of the case, said he suffered profound feelings of confusion and guilt after being abused by a teacher in the 1970s. He said the teacher molested him regularly during English lessons over a period of two years.

With the teacher dead, and in the absence of an apology from the school, the former student brought a civil case against Aldwickbury, which was settled with a payment.

Getting the school to face up to what happened more than three decades ago was, the former student said, like “knocking my head against a brick wall.”

Vernon Hales, the current headmaster at Aldwickbury — in Harpenden, about 30 miles north of London — said in a statement that the school had reported the allegations, which do not relate to any current staff members or pupils, to the relevant authorities and been told that no further action would be taken.

“All child abuse is horrendous and to be deplored,” Mr. Hales said. “We extend our deepest sympathy to the victims of abuse, and even when the cases are historic, this does not lessen the anguish that they feel.” He added that the school “takes child protection extremely seriously.”

The former Aldwickbury student is one of dozens of people who have come forward, driven in part by the public scandal surrounding Jimmy Savile, a television presenter who, after his

death, was revealed to have been a serial sex abuser. The Savile case prompted a wide-ranging criminal inquiry that led to charges against other prominent people, adding to the attention being paid to abuse cases from years or decades ago.

Last month, a former headmaster of Caldicott, a school in Buckinghamshire attended by Nick Clegg, the deputy prime minister, was jailed for past child abuse offenses. The former headmaster, Roland Peter Wright, now 83, was convicted of abusing students 8 to 13 from 1959 to 1970.

“Boys craved your attention and strove for your praise,” Judge Johannah Cutts said as she sentenced Mr. Wright to eight years in jail. “From those, you picked out boys for your in-

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## *Breaking decades of silence after recent high-profile scandals.*

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dividual sexual attentions.”

Mr. Clegg said last year that he had been unaware of the abuse but was appalled.

Other schools facing compensation claims include Ashdown House, which has educated, among others, the queen's nephew, Viscount Linley, and the mayor of London, Boris Johnson.

Most of these claims are directed at Britain's preparatory schools, which typically admit children 4 to 13, with students living at the school starting at 7 or 8. Fees can be substantial, but in a country where private schooling is often seen as a key to success, many parents pay up in an effort to prepare pupils for entry to famous establishments for older children, like Eton College, Harrow School and Winchester College (known in Britain as public schools despite being private and expensive).

Britain's fee-paying schools have a track record of brutality. These days, most have shed the

strictness and austerity of previous eras, but many upper-class Britons remember childhoods of cold showers, inedible food and relentless corporal punishment.

The very nature of boarding schools — closed environments in which teachers can wield enormous power — can make them attractive to child abusers. But in previous decades, parents were often reluctant to challenge teachers' authority, said Alan Collins, principal lawyer at Slater & Gordon, which represented the former Aldwickbury student. He has 30 to 40 more cases pending against schools across the country.

“You had deference and the attitude that ‘this sort of thing happens,’” Mr. Collins said, adding that when teachers were discovered abusing pupils, they tended to be moved on quietly to avoid public embarrassment and damage to the school's reputation.

“Sexual abuse is a taboo subject,” Mr. Collins said. “People do not want to talk about it for the obvious reason that it's really gruesome, and in this country there has been a tendency or a temptation to sweep it under the carpet.”

The cases he is pursuing took place all over the country and ranged “from inappropriate touching to very intrusive penetration and everything in between,” he said.

Mr. Collins added that the victims had suffered significantly. “Child abuse has the potential to affect a person's functioning, the ability to form and sustain relationships; it can affect the ability to hold down a job,” he said, noting that some of his clients in their 40s had held 30 positions because “they just can't settle in a job.”

Because of constraints set by their insurers, schools are often reluctant to issue apologies that could expose them to further legal action.

But the victim in the Aldwickbury case believes it is time for his old school to confront the past. “They need, for their own sakes, to come out about this,” he said.