



CAMILLA
CAVENDISH

A millionaire who sued his old prep school over sexual abuse had no interest in compensation

One sunny afternoon in April 2012, a 45-year-old millionaire entrepreneur took a taxi through the gates of the prep school where he had been sexually abused by his English teacher.

It was the first time Nicholas Gibson had travelled through those gates for 32 years. He had never told anyone about the abuse. He found it so difficult to break his silence that he had been rehearsing for days what he would say to the current headmaster.

The school was Aldwickbury, a boys' prep on a grand country estate in Harpenden, Hertfordshire. Last week, its insurers awarded Gibson damages of £10,000, and all legal costs, in a civil action.

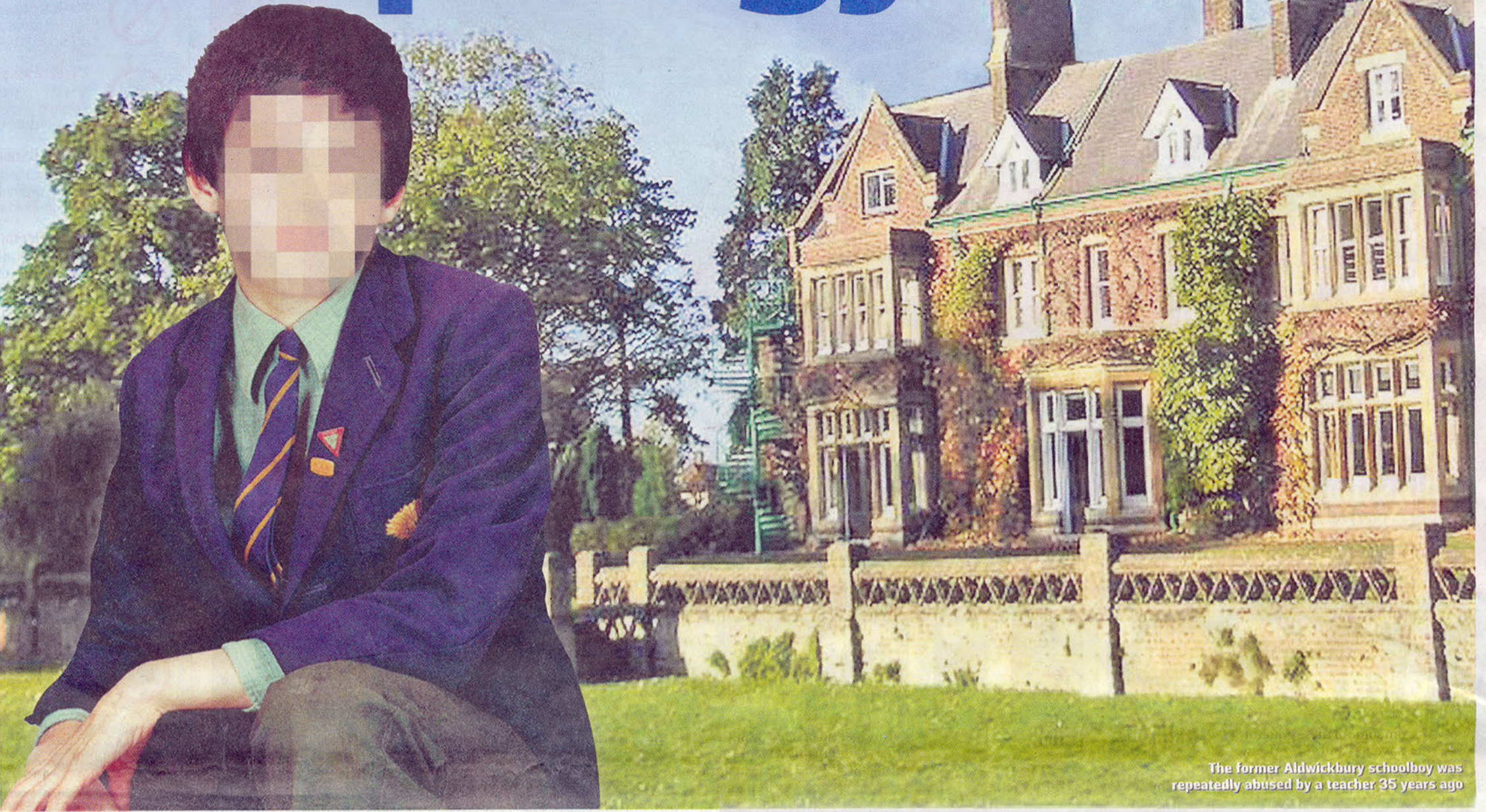
But he didn't want the money: he wanted an apology, which he still hasn't been given.

"The Catholic Church and the BBC have opened up [about historic abuse]," Gibson said. "Prep schools are in a state of denial."

Aldwickbury is the latest of more than 20 schools that are facing compensation claims following the Jimmy Savile scandal. Its alumni include the lyricist Sir Tim Rice. Other schools in the spotlight have educated establishment figures such as Boris Johnson, Nick Clegg and the actor Damian Lewis.

Gibson decided to take action while he was undergoing therapy after breaking up with a girlfriend (he has never married).

All I wanted was an apology



The former Aldwickbury schoolboy was repeatedly abused by a teacher 35 years ago

"The more I looked into my own story, the more I began to think that I needed some acknowledgement of what had happened to me," he said.

"I wanted to know if there had been other victims, who might have suffered worse than me and need help. I also thought, this guy could still be teaching, or working with kids."

Gibson is not easily daunted. He is an articulate,

successful businessman who was educated at Oxford University — where I first met him in 1987 — and went on to become a BBC journalist and a spokesman for the European Commission. He built a media business that he sold in 2010.

Nevertheless, he was terrified at the prospect of walking back into the school: "The idea of going to the new head and telling him grisly

details of my first sexual experiences was frightening."

FOR two years, when he was 10 and 11, Gibson was taught English by a man called Mulcahy Brown. At least once a week, in a class of 20 boys, Brown would perch on his desk.

"He would come and stand close to me: I think he was keeping an eye on the door. He would offer me a sweet. He

would put his hand down his trousers and start masturbating. Then he would put his hand down my trousers and stroke my penis."

Like many victims of this kind of abuse, Gibson was confused by his emotions. He knew the behaviour was wrong, but also felt that he was somehow to blame.

"It's ingrained in you that it's your fault, because you have this feeling that you are special, you are chosen. I remember Mr Brown sitting on the desks of others, and feeling jealous that he hadn't chosen me."

Even if he had thought of telling his parents, which he says he didn't, Gibson was left in no doubt of the consequences. One day, Brown pounced on another boy, kicking and punching him.

"He was screaming, 'Don't you ever snitch on me to your parents again', and I remember thinking, 'I'm glad he's not hitting me'."

Gibson is careful not to over-dramatise. "It wasn't rape. What happened to me is by no means the worst form of abuse. But it's very serious at that impressionable age."

All these feelings — that it could have been worse, that he was somehow responsible, but that he had to speak out — combined in Gibson's mind as he went up the long drive to meet Vernon Hales, current head of Aldwickbury School. He went there "in a spirit of co-operation".

He was glad that Hales listened sympathetically. But when he asked whether Brown was still teaching, or even still alive, the head said he could not help because of data protection issues.

Frustrated, Gibson tried to track down his old teacher himself. He discovered that a man with the same name had died — but without knowing his date of birth, he could not be sure it was the same person. He also knew that some child molesters change their names.

When the envelope arrived from the national records office, Gibson found himself unable to touch it for two weeks. "I wasn't sure if I wanted it to be him or not."

After a fortnight, he forced himself to open the letter. "I said to myself, 'You're 45, this was 35 years ago, you applied for this certificate: read it'. When I did, it was clear it was him. It listed his profession as teacher — retired. And then I knew that I hadn't wanted

him to be dead. It gave me no sense of closure whatsoever."

Gibson calculates that there could be as many as 30 other victims. He told the school that Brown had died, and offered to help them to contact other possible victims.

He suggested the school put something on its website stressing that although the events were long over, the school was keen to be transparent and to offer counselling. At a meeting in October, the school governors seemed receptive. But in December, Gibson received what he called "a very legal letter" from the chairman of governors.

The letter expressed deep sympathy for Gibson. It said the school had taken advice from solicitors, a forensic psychiatrist and the local authority. All three, it said, were "emphatic in advising against any attempt by the school to contact old boys. The school was advised that to follow that course of action would involve risk and that other old boys may not appreciate the intrusion of the school reminding them of any abuse which they may have suffered."

Gibson felt exasperated. "I think my anger was delayed. I began to suspect they were not acting properly. It was never about the money; nor was it ever about getting back at the school which gave me, in many ways, a wonderful education. It was about transparency. I don't hold them responsible for what happened to me, but I do hold them responsible for their reaction."

After nine months of shuttling between England and his home in Brussels, he felt he had no choice but to turn to the law. In February 2013, he went to the police who, he says, were marvellous. Crucially, they told him that another person had made an allegation against Brown. This "was a liberation. For the first

time in 30 years, I realised that maybe it wasn't my fault."

THERE was no one to prosecute, since Brown had died. So Gibson pursued a civil action and the school has settled.

"The lawyer called and told me we'd won. But I didn't have any sense of feeling I had won, I guess because there are no winners here. I didn't really want damages. What I wanted was for the school to acknowledge, apologise and reach out to others. And it would be a stronger school for doing so."

Why can Aldwickbury not take up this challenge?

"We have expressed our sympathy emphatically," said Hales. "Any acts of that type are horrendous. We were never trying to hide anything. But you have to be very careful what you say in all circumstances. We reported the matter to the authorities but didn't write to the old boys, after taking advice."

Hales is right that schools have to be careful what they say. With some facing possible bankruptcy as the number of cases rises, apologising to victims who do not seek compensation should be attractive. But to issue an apology would open a legal can of worms.

"If a school apologised", said Alan Collins, of the law

firm Slater & Gordon, "its insurers could say that this sets a precedent. It is often the insurers who are settling, not the schools, which have to be careful." A school that apologises without the support of its insurers could invalidate its policy.

The result is that victims have only two choices: to stay silent or to trudge through the courts. While Gibson does not want to let institutions off the hook, he thinks there should be an alternative channel for people like him, who seek only truth and reconciliation.

"What motivates the vast majority of victims of historical sexual abuse," he said, "is not financial compensation, but acknowledgment. Rather than get that, they are so often faced with obfuscation from the institutions they challenge, leaders hiding behind insurance companies who so often call the shots, and the principles of current child protection policies being ignored for cases of historical abuse."

On his radio show last month, Nick Clegg said transparency was society's best defence against abuse. The deputy prime minister praised the courage of Ian McFadyen, his former classmate at Caldicott prep school, whose allegations led to the recent conviction of teacher Roland Wright.

Such courage "not only brings perpetrators to justice", Clegg said, "but it also brings it out into the open in a way where it has previously lurked in the shadows."

McFadyen is now lobbying for "mandatory reporting", which would make it a criminal offence for any teacher not to report suspected abuse to the police. Ministers fear — rightly, in my view — that this could blight innocent lives. But there should be an avenue for institutions to be transparent, rather than defensive.

Gibson has found it very hard to speak about his experiences. But he does not regret it. "If people like me keep quiet", he said, "we will not know if other people suffered far, far more."

He hopes to use the damages he won to help provide counselling for other victims of historic abuse at prep schools. That, at least, is something positive.

Nicholas Gibson is not his real name. All other biographical details are correct.

Time, says the minister, to ethnically cleanse your house, Camilla Cavendish, page 21

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THE LAWYER TOLD ME WE HAD WON. BUT THERE ARE NO WINNERS HERE



Nick Clegg, circled, at Caldicott school, where his classmate Ian McFadyen, on Clegg's right, was abused by a teacher