

SATURDAY INTERVIEW

Simon Henderson: ‘This crisis is much harder on the poor . . . Eton must step up’

The head master is determined to stop vulnerable pupils falling behind and shed the school’s elitist image, he tells Alice Thomson

[Alice Thomson](#)

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Simon Henderson has opened Eton, which charges £42,500 a year, to children of key workers
TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER RICHARD POHLE

The tailcoats, striped trousers and starched white collars have disappeared from Eton’s corridors. Instead local children run past Henry VI’s chapel clutching finger-prints and scooter past the playing fields where Boris Johnson once honed his tackling skills at the wall game. Emergency workers are staying in the boarding houses and paramedics, firemen and nurses have taken over the hastily tidied boys’ rooms. “They are slightly surprised by how modest the rooms are,” Simon Henderson, the head master, says. The laundry is helping the NHS with vast piles of washing and in the design studios teachers are making face shields on 3D printers for the nearby Royal Berkshire Hospital.

The 400-acre Eton College, where fees are £42,500 a year, is seen as a bastion of unchecked privilege. But the alma mater of 20 former prime ministers, the present Archbishop of Canterbury, princes, actors and even fictional characters from James Bond to Captain Hook has been transformed by the coronavirus. As soon as the pupils were sent back to their homes around the globe, local primary school children [took their places](#) and the facilities were opened to key workers so that they could self-isolate away from their families.

Mr Henderson wants to challenge the notion that Eton is a byword for elitism, which has given rise to “Abolish Eton” campaigners determined to close it down. “Years from now, when historians look back at the events of 2020, they are likely to identify Covid-19 as the trigger for profound change. It may well precipitate rapid social and economic transformation similar to that which followed two world wars,” he says.



Children from all backgrounds are spending their school days in the historic surroundings of Eton
TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER RICHARD POHLE

“The unfairness will become transparent, as it was in the Blitz when it was noted that houses in Belgravia were empty while the East End suffered. Coronavirus hasn’t been a great leveller, it’s much harder if you are poor.”

When the pandemic has run its course, he worries that private schools like Eton will be castigated as even more privileged and out of touch. “It’s likely there will be a period of fractious politics, but I also hope we will have realised that what we really value as a society is compassion, community and civic responsibility. Many of those who work in the lowest-paid roles are in fact the key to our survival and these people who have been undervalued for so long have shown astonishing dedication when we have needed them the most. That can’t just be forgotten.”

He thinks it would be morally wrong for the super-rich and wealthy institutions to focus only on themselves when the country may have sunk into a deep recession. “Every institution will be judged by what they did during the pandemic. That’s particularly true in education where there’s no doubt that inequality is widening, with the most vulnerable children suffering the most,” he says.

“Most private school pupils will not see any significant lasting harm from this crisis and their academic trajectory will continue but that is not the case for many children from less advantaged and more vulnerable backgrounds, whose progress will flatline or regress if they haven’t been in school for many months, are living in cramped homes and don’t have access to computers.”

He worries that the gap could widen until it’s impossible to close. “I think schools such as Eton need to step up and play their part in making sure that doesn’t happen.”

So Eton, he says, has decided that over the next five years [it will spend £100 million](#) to help to redress the balance and support less advantaged children. The money will come from Eton’s own charitable endowment and fundraising. It is aiming to increase meanstested fully funded bursaries for boys from disadvantaged backgrounds and children in care from 90 to 140 and to open up permanently its online learning. During the crisis 1,600 state schools have already taken up Eton’s offer to use the school’s free digital study courses through EtonX. It now has 115,000 pupils registered from all over the country with access to the same lessons as Etonians. “We want to develop new courses. This will include academic courses to supplement and enhance what people are learning at school, future skills courses on themes such as resilience, creative solving problems, public speaking, CV writing and critical thinking.”

Eton will also help to set up to several more government-funded sixth-form colleges in the Midlands and the north, along the lines of the London Academy of Excellence, which it co-sponsors with other private schools and where 37 pupils received offers from Oxbridge this year. It already has partnerships with local state schools “but we want to create a much wider national network with as many as 50 schools and youth clubs, particularly in disadvantaged areas”, Mr Henderson says. Partners will be able to access the Eton virtual curriculum free of charge, which the school developed for its own pupils during the lockdown, and it will also run residential summer schools.



“Killing good schools will not make others better”

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER RICHARD POHLE

Eton, however, really does seem more disliked than the other private schools. He finds it impossible to answer why. “The school has been around for nearly 600 years and I’d like to think it can pass its experience on in a way which benefits young people,” he eventually replies.

He is not an Old Etonian, unlike the prime minister, but a Wykehamist, like some of Jeremy Corbyn’s aides. His wife, Ali, worked as a civil servant at No 10 for both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. He has also taught at the state school down the road, Windsor Boys’. He was horrified by Jacob Rees-Mogg, an Old Etonian, lounging on the front benches of the House of Commons, but he says he has rarely found former pupils arrogant and entitled.

The coronavirus crisis, he believes, has shown how crucial all schools are to communities and how important it is to give all teachers more credit. “Schools are a critical lifeline to young people in terms of pastoral support. This lockdown has reinforced that we don’t want children just to learn facts and figures. They need to have emotional intelligence and hobbies to help develop empathy, resilience and the ability to cope with setbacks.”



A lesson is held in the debating chamber at Eton
TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER RICHARD POHLE

Mr Henderson hopes education will become less about exams and more about character. “We need to get away from league-table and exam-obsessed education and back to a more rounded idea of education. How happy and successful you are in work and relationships doesn’t depend on getting straight A*s. I always tell our pupils it’s about so much more: creativity, teamwork, innovation, kindness, gratitude.”

Rote learning, he thinks, will come to be seen as less relevant. “Covid has shown us that you need people who can think out of the box, and can collaborate and adapt, suddenly start work on a new vaccine, or a ventilator, or look at novel ways to work in testing circumstances.”

There is a 15th-century painting uncovered in Eton a few years ago, he says, that depicts a teacher sitting with his pupils. Above it is a quote in Latin from Quintilian, a Roman scholar who lived in the first century AD, saying: “The excellence of the teacher is to identify differences in talent.” Mr Henderson says: “That is the basis of a liberal education and I think we have lost some of that along the way.”

The government needs to trust teachers to set the curriculum and draw out the talents of each child, he argues. “If teacher-assessed grades are broadly considered to have worked then we should look

again at our national exams and see if they are really necessary. I'm not saying we must abolish GCSEs, but the Department for Education should look at whether they are necessary in the 21st century."

He will not consider modernising the uniform when the pupils return. "It works, it's distinctive and it's a physical connection to our past. The boys are proud of it, as well as the quirky games and language." Nor, he suspects, will Eton be admitting girls soon, although he has two daughters of his own. "That's a debate for another day."

His own four young children are not being drilled every day under lockdown — "that would be too testing for all of us". Instead they are laying the table, cleaning and practising a new skill. "One's learning the trumpet."

He believes the pandemic must precipitate change for the better and one way is for the wealthier private schools to help. "I don't think people after this crisis want everything to go back to 'normal' and it shouldn't — we can't pretend to forget what we are now living through. I think Eton will be here in 50 years whatever we do," he says. "But I feel the right thing now is to share our wealth, resources and expertise. It's the right example to set our boys."

Simon Henderson

Curriculum vitae

Born 1976

Education: Winchester College; bachelor's and PGCE in history at Oxford University Career Taught history at Windsor Boys' School, then at Eton from 2001, where he became head of history. Deputy head (academic) of Sherborne School from 2009. Appointed head of Bradfield College two years later. Became Eton's youngest ever head master in 2015, aged 39. The same year became a governor of Holyport College and the London Academy of Excellence. During the coronavirus pandemic, he offered state pupils free access to Eton's online learning platform, EtonX, and accommodation to key workers.

Family: Married to Ali Henderson, a former adviser to Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Four young children.

Quickfire

Teams? Zoom

Nature or nurture? Nurture

Gardening or DIY? A disaster at both. Building dens in the garden?

Field game or wall game? Field game, but there's a reason neither caught on beyond Eton

Eton mess or sticky toffee pudding? Sticky toffee pudding — sorry!

George Orwell or Thomas Gray? George Orwell

Windsor or Eton? Windsor and Eton

Hilary Mantel or Robert Harris? Robert Harris

Tolstoy or Proust? Tolstoy — takes me back to my Russian A level days

Wimbledon or Wembley? Wembley, to watch QPR in the Cup Final

Competition or creativity? Creativity