

News Saturday interview

'If we'd stayed the same since 1440, Eton would have closed years ago'

The head master known as Trendy Hendy hopes that working with state schools can lead to a brighter future for all, he tells **Nicola Woolcock**

Eton College is the world's most famous school, with its tailored boys, wall game and numerous prime ministers. It is rather less well known for its charitable work. But under a strategy launched yesterday, the Eton brand intends to become known as a charity with a rather successful school attached, rather than vice versa.

Eton is no museum and will not flourish in the future by looking only to the past, the document intones, under the banner Honouring Tradition, Inspiring Change.

Boys are being encouraged to take degree apprenticeships and go into the armed forces as well as elite universities.

Simon Henderson, the head master, says drily: "If we'd stayed the same as we were in 1440, we would have been closed down many moons ago." Inspectors would indeed look askance at a school day running from 5am to 8pm and teaching only prayers and Latin.

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Eton was founded by Henry VI and, contrary to popular belief, has evolved somewhat with the times. Its famous uniform dates from the 19th century, fagging and flogging are understandably no longer tolerated, and families cannot register their children at birth. But the perceived pace of change and direction of travel under Henderson has raised eyebrows in some quarters and mutterings among more traditional Old Etonians.

The school, which appointed a full-time dedicated social action mentor to the boys, has tackled toxic masculinity, teaches empathy, has a feminism society and supports "Eton Pride" and Black History Month. A recent inspection report praised the school for teaching boys to value diversity and holding debates on morality including gender inequality and sexism in 19th-century paintings.

Henderson says the school has to move with the times. But this categorically does not include taking in girls – it remains one of the few traditional boarding schools that remains resolutely single-sex. Its charitable work includes partnerships with state schools and it will imminently learn whether its applications to open three state sixth forms in Oldham, Middlesbrough and Dudley, with Star Academies, have been approved. It has also created online teaching materials and shares these and cutting-edge research freely with state schools.

The strategy describes Eton as a charity for the advancement of

education, rather than as a school with charitable activities on the side.

"It's something that's been implicit but we're deliberately making it more explicit and accelerating various activities in that space. We genuinely see ourselves as an educational foundation that's got a brilliant boys' boarding school at its centre."

Although the college is "at the core of what we do", other initiatives aimed at increasing educational opportunity and social mobility will be "front and centre of our plans for the next few years".

EtonX, its spin-off, creates courses on leadership, study skills, getting into university and entrepreneurship, that are sold to other private schools and those abroad. State schools get free access: more than 50,000 pupils have benefited and this will grow substantially, Henderson claims. Eton looks timeless, on a glorious June day, apart from the planes to and from Heathrow overhead. The immaculate redbrick buildings glow in the sunshine and boys in the instantly recognisable uniforms wander between boarding houses and along the film-set high street. The head master's garden is fittingly picturesque, with roses and birdsong.

Henderson is a genial host, softly and thoughtfully spoken and hardly fomenting revolution. Wearing his traditional white tie and suit, he says: "I'm a history teacher. I'm incredibly proud of history and heritage. Tradition continues to play an important role here, up to a certain point."

"But while the tradition and history of the school might provide the context in which we operate, we can't solely be defined by the past and we want to be a forward-thinking institution that's balancing the best of the old with the best of the new."

"We're trying to honour tradition but also to inspire and drive change."

Of course, there's going to be a debate about where the balance sits and not everyone's going to have the same view."

He denies there was an ideological battle over Eton's future but says: "There are different people that have different views about the areas we should be moving forward with."

Critics have included Will Knowland, a former teacher who was sacked after refusing to remove a video about patriarchy from his YouTube channel, which made controversial claims about rape. He claimed that the school was shutting down free speech.

More recent videos posted by Knowland include claims such as, "Women don't lead, men do", that there are parallels between "fornication" and obesity both being indulgences, that being tired or having a headache are not adequate excuses for a spouse to withhold sex, that people who do not want children should



Simon Henderson says Eton explicitly wants to reframe priorities and focus

not get married or have sex, and that contraception leaves people "lonely and bitter". He was cleared by the Teaching Regulation Agency of professional misconduct.

One Eton master resigned from his role in charge of the perspectives course in protest at the sacking of Knowland, saying teachers with "unorthodox views" feared that they may be next in the firing line. However, many Old Etonians and parents wrote to support the school over the row. Henderson points out that the school is committed to diversity of thought and free speech, hosting visitors with a spectrum of views, some that might upset more sensitive university students. Recent speakers include Tzipi Hotovely, the Israeli ambassador to the UK, its old boy Jacob Rees-Mogg, and Professor Arif Ahmed, the new director of free speech for the Office for Students, along with Dame Jane Goodall, the environmentalist, and Condoleezza Rice, the US secretary of state under George W Bush.

Henderson's relative youth – he is 47 and was appointed at 39 – and modernising approach have supposedly earned him the sobriquet "Trendy Hendy" since his tenure began. Yet the nickname is not so recent, he reveals.

"I was originally labelled Trendy Hendy by the boys when I began my first spell at Eton as a history teacher back in 2001. It was to distinguish

the greater fame of Eton, Winchester is older and Henry VI moved its head, William Waynflete, to be provost of Eton when it was established. Eton's charity work brings it closer to its founding principles: to house and educate 70 poor boys free of charge. Nearly 600 years later, it has an endowment of half a billion pounds and is speaking to philanthropists and backers about growing this further to fund its charitable work.

Its fees of £46,000 put it far beyond the reach of even well-off parents.

However, 112 families pay no fees, up from 30 ten years ago and 90 three years ago. The school will spend nearly £10 million on bursaries this year and almost a quarter of boys receive some financial support.

This issue is more topical than ever with a general election looming and Labour's commitment to remove the tax breaks from private schools (which it estimates will raise £1.6 billion in revenue). Bridget Phillipson, the shadow education secretary, said this week that she wanted state schools to appeal to middle-class parents priced out of private education, by offering more debate, arts, music, drama and sport, as well as high academic standards.

The importance of these activities is also highlighted in Eton's strategy and Henderson says a review of the curriculum could even extend to changing the number of GCSEs taken by the boys (usually 11). "We're looking in particular at ways in which we can embed more academic enrichment that broadens boys' intellectual and cultural horizons. They spend huge amounts of time doing music, drama, sports, outdoor education, clubs and societies in a whole range of different activities. "And that's really fundamental to the school's DNA. That is where a lot of personal development for the boys comes. There's a big focus on trying to share those co-curricular activities wherever we can, particularly with our local partner schools."

Eton was already involved in setting up the state schools Holyport College, in Berkshire, and the London Academy of Excellence, in Stratford, east London. In a matter of weeks, it will discover whether its free school applications to open selective state sixth forms in deprived areas have been successful. Working with Star Academies, which operates mainly in the north of England, the plans have created excitement and have the support of local leaders but also generated criticism from those who fear the sixth forms will cream off the best pupils from local colleges in Oldham, Middlesbrough and Dudley. Henderson leans forward and says such fears are unfounded: "Although the sixth forms are the flagship aspects, it's a much wider-ranging education partnership. "I firmly believe that the way you increase educational opportunity is by getting really high-performing state and independent educational providers to work together. The more positive education you can put into the system, the better it is. "We want to help to increase educational opportunities in those towns and surrounding areas. "All of the towns need an increase in places anyway: that was one of the reasons we chose those three areas. If we can increase the proportion

doing A-levels by working in partnership with the other sixth-form providers, and by raising opportunity and aspiration within the 11-to-16 schools, that's going to be a good thing all round." Aspiration at Eton obviously remains a priority. "The school itself has to remain excellent and provide an outstanding education."

But aspiration and ambition for its leavers no longer follows a seemingly automatic progression to Oxbridge: some state sixth forms in deprived areas – including one that Eton helped to set up – are achieving far higher numbers of Oxford and Cambridge places.

Eton's share has hardly evaporated – about 50 still go each year – but that is half the number of ten years ago. A similar number head to universities in the United States.

An even newer development is Eton preparing boys for degree apprenticeships, as well as vocational qualifications, the world of work and the armed forces. Of Oxbridge entry, he says: "There's no doubt that it's a more competitive environment. Of course, we want our boys to aim high and we're delighted when they get offers from Oxford and Cambridge but there are also a lot of other very good universities in the UK and around the world."

Degree apprenticeship numbers are still small but are "definitely starting to get some momentum. My personal view is that will be a growth area in the next few years. And it's certainly something we are actively making our boys aware of. They need to make informed choices, it won't be right for everybody but having a range of different options is a good thing."

Is he irked by the impact on the school's reputation of political alumni who went from Eton to Oxford?

Henderson remains diplomatic: "My responsibility as head master is to provide the best experience I can for the boys who come here and future generations. There are always going to be, in any school, examples of the way it's portrayed publicly that at times perhaps are not how you choose for it to be portrayed."

He has been in post for eight years, living in idyllic surroundings but facing constant scrutiny and the push and pull of opposing views about the future of the school.

"One of the great joys of working here is you have lots of people associated with it who care passionately about it, have strong opinions and ultimately that provides the scrutiny. It has always evolved. And this is another period of its evolution."

The biggest in its history? "It's a moment when, institutionally, we have to be confident. Put our foot firmly forward. This is certainly a moment where Eton is deliberately and explicitly wanting to, slightly, reframe our priorities and focus. "We should use the platform and the experience and the resources and the expertise and the connections we've got as a force for good, and that's something we fundamentally believe in. We're doing it because we think it's the right thing to do."

Simon Henderson

Quick fire

Succession or The Last of Us? Succession

Windsor knot or white tie? Windsor knot

Rowing or wall game? Rowing (although I can never understand why the wall game hasn't caught on)

Simon Cowell or Simon Callow? Simon Callow

Winchester (alma mater) or Eton (employer)? Eton

Dog walking or gardening? Dog walking (reluctantly)

Dominic West or Damian Lewis? That's not fair – Eddie Redmayne

Shirley Henderson or Ella Henderson? Ella (right)

Tudors or Victorians? Victorians



me from another teacher with the same surname. I always assumed it was ironic, given that at the time my mother was still choosing all my clothes."

He is not an Old Etonian; he was educated at Winchester College, Rishi Sunak's alma mater. Despite