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'I'm not surprised if some alumni leave Eton off their CV. There is a stigma'



Nicholas Coleridge, 67, photographed at Eton by Tom Jackson with James Bush and Tobi Bamisaye, two of the senior pupils

Nicholas Coleridge, the former glossy magazine boss, has returned to his old school – this time as provost. So what's the future for this institution that has educated 20 out of 58 of our prime ministers and where parents will pay £63,000 a year to send their sons (after Labour's VAT plan)? Interview by Alice Thomson

Most schools greet their new chair of governors with a cup of staffroom coffee and maybe a biscuit after they have hung a lanyard round their neck. But not Eton. The incoming provost arrives clad in a gown and marches up to the gates of the cobbled courtyard clutching a heraldic hammer to bang on the locked door in a tradition that goes back to 1440. Inside wait 1,360 pupils, staff, bishops and the King's representative, according to Sir Nicholas Coleridge, who was recently installed as provost.

"A voice shouts out, 'Who goeth there?'" he explains to me. To which he replied, "Tis I, ye provost designate of Kyng's College of Our Ladye of Eton beside ye Thames," Coleridge's voice booms out. "By whose authority arriveth you?" they asked me. 'By that of the King and I hold his scroll.'" Then the doors swung open, and the former boss of Vogue, Tatler, Vanity Fair and GQ was escorted up the steps of Henry VI's College Chapel to great fanfare.

"All the boys sang *Jerusalem* and I swore all kinds of undertakings, including that if I was removed from my role, I wouldn't run off with any of the paintings or chattels," Coleridge says, laughing at the thought that he might nick its precious first folio of Shakespeare.

Yes, Eton College is a 21st-century school but it's still rooted nearly 600 years ago – even the graffiti dates back centuries. Coleridge points out one of his rebellious ancestors who has carved his surname into a stone wall. The teachers are called beaks, the terms are halves, lessons are divs, the prefects are in Pop (a nickname for the Eton Society) "and we call elevenses [the snack at break] 'chambers'," says Coleridge who attended the school in the Seventies, following with his brothers in the footsteps of his grandfathers, father and uncle.

"I am the 43rd Provost." It's like being the 47th President of the United States, I suggest. "Eton is older than America by several hundred years but in the old days provosts were appointed for life, so there are fewer of us," Coleridge replies. "In another school I would be called head of the governors; there are ten fellows [governors]."

As provost, Coleridge will receive all sorts of perks as well as £130,000 a year. He must live at the school during term time, although his temporary accommodation isn't a Portakabin but a large flat full of plumped-up sofas and antique prints that looks out over the famous playing fields and a Henry Moore sculpture. He can have lamb stew, mashed potato and crème brûlée with the boys for lunch – "But I must be careful about my weight," he says. "And there is a good wine cellar, but I have no interest in wine." His favoured

drink while director of Condé Nast Britain and president of Condé Nast International for 30 years, was a bull shot: "Consommé with vodka."

In the corridor there are portraits of Princes William and Harry and myriad other famous old boys.

"Sadly, I can't move into the Provost's Lodge next door for a year while they renovate. It's a little too ancient – the wiring and plumbing are antiquated, there is asbestos and round pin plugs. The walls here are so thick the wi-fi is always going down, but I'm not complaining," says Coleridge who is obviously already well ensconced, his feet stretched out next to an ottoman, wearing an electric blue suit with a fluorescent green handkerchief that harks back to his days as chairman of the British Fashion Council.

The provost is responsible for the school's financial health but it has accrued more than £539 million in funds, so that doesn't sound onerous when other schools are desperately scrabbling for whiteboards and footballs. He has only recently stepped down after successfully chairing the Victoria and Albert Museum; he's adept with a balance sheet and a persuasive fundraiser.

What else will he need to be able to do? "I choose the head master and jolly things along." In other ways, he's like a minor royal, attending schools plays and concerts, cutting ribbons. "There are a lot of meet and greets. The number of people who come here to speak is astounding, about 250 a year – ministers, authors, historians, CEOs."

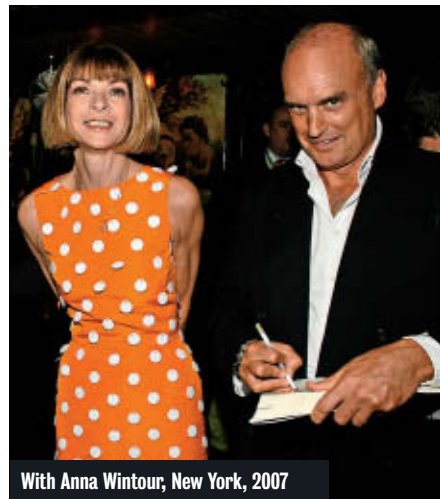
Most schools could never attract a tenth of these well-connected speakers. This perhaps will be Coleridge's biggest challenge – while promoting the brand of one of the most famous schools in the world and enthusing the boys and parents about its myriad advantages, he needs to ensure that Eton doesn't look like a bastion of unchecked privilege and a byword for elitism.

But it's easy to see why Coleridge was chosen by the fellows – he manages to sound quietly confident about his alma mater, without seeming aloof or arrogant or becoming defensive or apologetic. "The boys here are intensely lucky," he agrees, "that people want to come and speak. This school has two great advantages. First, our location close to London means it's not too difficult to reach, and second, there is always great curiosity about what Eton is like. I loved it when I was a pupil here. We had Elton John arriving in a gold Rolls-Royce, and Monty Python."

He's right, people are fascinated by the place, even if many view it as everything that is wrong about the class system in Britain. Eton, of all the public schools, is seen as the ultimate toff destination. It's partly the uniform – those tails, the pinstriped trousers and waistcoat – but



Coleridge with the King and the Princess Royal at the Braemar Gathering last year



With Anna Wintour, New York, 2007

the boys don't seem to mind being dressed in Victorian garb. "We've considered changing it twice and to a lot of people's surprise they want to keep the uniform. It's very hard-wearing; families pass it down from one son to another and it keeps the local tailors in business." They also still have their own pack of beagles. "The school isn't banning them, though I have a feeling our incoming government may not embrace the future of trail hunting."

But much about the school has been transformed, Coleridge explains. "When I came in the Seventies, it was a time of transition for Eton. Fagging was coming to an end; we didn't have to make toast for the older years or stoke the coal fires. We weren't beaten. A lot of boys had cool rooms that wouldn't be permitted today because of fire regulations – they covered their walls in tinfoil and Bowie posters."

They were still allowed to drink beer at 11am in the morning. "We would go to our school pub – called Tap – in a Georgian house on the high street and have a pint or two of Carling at chambers between lessons and you could get bridge rolls with eggs. Now, alcohol between lessons wouldn't be allowed and the food is burgers."

So was he one of the edgy cool ones, drinking and smoking weed in



'VAT is a mistake. We have had 100 parents say they are going to find it very difficult'

the attic? Was he elected to Pop where he could wear a coloured waistcoat (Boris Johnson was, David Cameron wasn't)? He doesn't quite answer the question. "I was interested in the theatre and journalism and I liked debating. I wasn't a great games player. I didn't play the wall game; I played the field game for a couple of years. I went to Windsor with friends for the odd Chinese meal." But Eton, he says, did shape his career. "The things I was doing here outside the classroom made such a difference to my life without me knowing about it. It was where I discovered journalism, writing for *The Eton Chronicle* with Craig Brown and debating with Charles Moore. We're still colleagues and friends."

It's hard to understand the extraordinary bond between old boys. Few other schools are as tight-knit and tribal – Coleridge once wrote, "Their networks are as deep and pervasive as Japanese knotweed." He pauses. "It's true they stick together. But I have worked in professions in publishing and magazines where there weren't a large number of Old Etonians: at Condé Nast, 930 of the 1,000 people in the office were women. I absolutely loved it."

Coleridge has no concerns about single-sex schools. "There are only three

remaining boys-only public schools, Eton, Harrow and Radley; there are nineteen all-girls boarding schools. My daughter went to Cheltenham Ladies' College – she wouldn't want us taking all their girls. But at Eton we are still heavily oversubscribed. I personally never found it at all difficult when I was here to socialise with girls during the holidays."

So what does he think makes an Etonian in the 21st century? "They are much more diverse. The school still has the feeling of a traditional British heritage brand, but it has an international twist," says the man who clearly spent a lot of time with advertising executives on the magazines he oversaw. "We have about 150 pupils from overseas, but it's predominantly still British boys and they're from all sorts of families and backgrounds. Two hundred and sixty-five boys have a bursary and in the sixth form we have the Orwell scholars, named after George Orwell, who was here."

The alumni however, he admits, don't like too much change. "Many are still very engaged and hold strong views; the postbag is never dull. What they have in common is that a lot think the school was at its zenith in their final summer term where in their mind it was always sunny. But they are wrong. Most changes here have made it better. A century from now, the school will probably be at its best."

There are some detractors who would be thrilled if the school was abolished years before then, Coleridge admits, though he won't be drawn into a discussion about whether the likes of Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg have been good ambassadors for the place. "There is a stigma around the school, mostly from people who haven't visited. I don't think it is at all surprising if some alumni applying for a job leave Eton off their CV. But I've met a lot of boys in the past few weeks and I am yet to see a trace of entitlement and arrogance. I find the boys to be very courteous, curious, charming and confident in an understated way." He adds, "I haven't spotted any boy expressing strongly right-wing, sexist or racist views."

It is astonishing that one school has produced 20 of our 58 prime ministers. Is that a problem when there are 4,172 secondary schools? "It does seem a disproportionately large number but there again, they were all voted for. I don't think anyone quite knows whatever it is in the water that has made quite a lot of boys interested in politics. We've also had archbishops and many actors – it's difficult to understand why so many become successful. For a boarding school there is a lot of freedom and independence here, which perhaps forges initiative and resilience."

Coleridge initially failed to get into Eton, he says, and his embarrassed prep

school headmaster took to his bed, but the young Nick persevered and obviously loved his time at the school so much, he sent his three boys. Does he hope his grandchildren will attend? "Our three sons were very happy here, but they will have to work very hard. It's a huge strain – my wife and I had four children going through independent schools... Any more and we'd have needed a people carrier... I was paying for them out of earned income, so I have great sympathy for parents doing that. The addition of VAT is going to make things quite challenging."

Ah yes, the new 20 per cent VAT hike on private school fees. Is the school now embroiled in a class war with the new Labour government? "I am very against VAT. I think it's a grave mistake and has been carelessly planned. A large number of boys and girls who go to independent schools have special educational needs that the state system can't cope with. Equally there seems to be no preparation to make provision for those children being forced to leave the independent system."

At Eton, where the fees will from January be an eye-watering £63,000 a year, post-tax, the school has offered to step in to prevent any pupil being forced to leave because of the hike. "For some parents, it's not such an issue, but it's been very salutary to be reminded that for many families they are laboriously stitching together the money to fund the school fees – they're taking out a second mortgage; grandparents are helping; they don't take holidays. It's a massive struggle. We have had almost 100 letters from parents saying they are going to find it very difficult. We are going to be able to help about 60."

Coleridge hasn't met the new education secretary, Bridget Phillipson, but would like to explain to her that he believes the idea that education is a luxury product is a bad premise. "Ever since medieval England, the idea of educating people was a noble pursuit. This school was started by Henry VI to educate 70 poor scholars free of charge," he says. The school had also laid out plans to open free selective sixth-form colleges in Dudley, Oldham and Middlesbrough, in partnership with the academy trust Star Academies, but these have now been put on hold by the government. "They are in cities where the number of children who get into top universities is low. It would be very sad if they didn't go ahead."

Does he think the government would like to get rid of all public schools? "It's bizarre if they do, because the appetite for boarding from overseas students has never been higher. Here Eton may be denounced – abroad it is seen as a brilliant school. My entire working life has been about promoting great British brands. In my Condé Nast ➔

days, any tiny thing that happened at Vogue involving a supermodel or a dog was a natural for the papers. The V&A was the same – if a visitor slipped on a piece of lettuce, it was news. I am also chair of the Historic Royal Palaces and if a raven falls ill, it gets press attention. Eton, I've realised, is similar: it is both flattering and a reflection of its status and also irksome, because things that happen elsewhere are sensationalised here."

Like banning smartphones, for example. "Exactly. All schools are considering it. Other heads must find it infuriating that we get the attention as though we are leading the way. We have banned them for younger pupils. It has had a very profound difference. I was hearing from some masters and they said after supper their houses are now full of new boys playing table tennis, darts, pool and chatting – before there was a trend for boys to just disappear into their rooms and stare at their phones."

Coleridge already seems to have won over Old Etonians, parents and boys with his enthusiasm for the new role and his entertaining anecdotes. Between leaving Eton at 18 and returning at 67, he has adeptly run several big institutions. But he follows 46 male, pale provosts. Could Eton have chosen a female chairwoman of governors? "I am sure there will be a woman one day as there will one day by a woman president of the US."

In some ways Coleridge is quite a traditional choice. The current head master, Simon Henderson, who is on leave on medical grounds, is called Trendy Hendy by a few for his determination to modernise the school. "I think woke is the wrong word; he's updated the school. We expect him to come back at the beginning of the next half." They clearly get on. "I do notice that it is hard now to be a head of a school – there are so many pressures, with parents and social media and exams and the responsibilities for safeguarding."

Coleridge himself was abused at his old prep school, Ashdown, in East Grinstead, where he once said the teachers were "incompetents, bullies, recovering prisoners of war and borderline paedos". His sexual abuse at the hands of a prep school French teacher was given less than a paragraph in his autobiography, *The Glossy Years: Magazines, Museums and Selective Memories*. "While holding me up to retrieve a toboggan from the overhead trapdoor, [he] nonchalantly slipped his fingers inside my gym shorts," he writes. But the author doesn't like dwelling on any dark moments; he prefers to keep forging ahead, he says. "I don't think I see myself as a victim. The world is very different now. We have two full-time safeguarding officers and if there is even a whisper of something,

'I am yet to see a trace of entitlement and arrogance. The boys are charming'

it's the school's responsibility to instantly report to the police."

He prefers to see himself as lucky. His father was the chairman of Lloyd's of London while his mother ensured "complete order, comfort and certainty" reigned in the family home and cushions were in place. They had nannies and Silver Cross prams. "I grew up in an upper-middle-class English family. My father worked very hard, my mother was at home and my two brothers and I are still very close, so I am fortunate."

As president of Condé Nast, he oversaw 140 titles in 27 markets, employing 4,000 staff and ate 560 lunches at Le Caprice, almost always ordering the same meal. But he's self-effacing about his early years, insisting he was "firmly categorised as thick" and put in the "dimwits" stream at his prep school, and at Eton where his classmates in the bottom set were "inbred scions of Norfolk and Leicestershire gentry". Now the boys are far cleverer, he suggests.

Like Bertie Wooster, he jokes, he became adept at scripture, and managed to wangle his way into Trinity College, Cambridge, to read theology, where he embarked on a strenuous "itinerary of urgent time-wasting", although this included acting with Nick Hytner and Griff Rhys Jones. After slipping a disc while travelling in Yazd, Iran, he was not well enough to sit his finals and received an aegrotat degree.

But from his teenage years at charity balls where "the cream of the nation's posh teen talent congregated for a mass groping session", he became an astute chronicler of the British social scene, and was soon employed to parody it, after coming up with the title "Saturday Night Belvoir" (pronounced beaver) for Tatler to illustrate an account of the 18th birthday party thrown for the Duke of Rutland's daughter.

His autobiography is less about the luxurious hotels, premieres and first-class travel and more about the extraordinary array of people he befriended. Coleridge certainly has a gift for bumping into the great and good. When he had a bachelor flat, his cleaner was Rupert Everett. There was lunch with a tactile Diana, Princess of Wales – "Her suit has something of the Aeroflot air stewardess about it" – which culminates in her asking Nicholas if her breasts are too small. "They look perfect to me," he wrote.

He appeared more embarrassed by an incident with Paul Dacre, then editor of

the Daily Mail, at Glyndeboune where Coleridge had forgotten his braces and his trousers fell down in front of everyone. While he is now most proud that he took on Mohamed Al Fayed in a £100 million lawsuit against Vanity Fair that was eventually settled in the steam room of the Bath & Racquets Club.

Famous names drift in and out of his life and his conversation with astonishing regularity. His goddaughter is Cara Delevingne. His younger brother's friend George Osborne was always cadging lifts off him. In Calcutta, Hugh Grant and Elizabeth Hurley sat down opposite him when he was travelling with his wife, Georgia, and in Turkey, Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell "rolled up at the next table". He has now been married to Georgia for 30 years. At weekends they return to Wolverton Hall, a Queen Anne mansion in Worcestershire, which sleeps 28.

There have been some minor blips along the way. He got jailed as a suspected spy while making an investigative documentary in Sri Lanka – "I'm not sure the boys here know about that yet" – and during the pandemic, he came close to dying of Covid in intensive care in hospital. But everything now is an amusing story. I suspect he prefers to make light of life, or he is just preternaturally optimistic.

"I feel very fortunate in my life and now this new job, it is a privilege. It's one third surreal, one third hard work and one third enormous fun. We all get given a hand and we all get one or two breaks." Does he think he has benefited more from luck or privilege? "I think hard work. I didn't inherit anything."

Except that in *The Glossy Years*, he mentions that a spiritual guru once came to their house and told Coleridge he had been Admiral Horatio Nelson in another life. He laughs, mildly horrified at this recollection. "Of course I'm not. Georgia, my wife, who is very spiritual, is interested in all those things. She had a weekend about past-life regression, but even she had an appalled look on her face when the guru suggested I was the admiral."

He doesn't see ghosts, but he does have the same recurring dream. "It's about going around India in a converted red double-decker bus. I will do it, but not for a bit," he says. "In my war against old age, I feel I must keep working. It's a great mistake for people in their mid-fifties to quit and move to north Norfolk or something. I still wake up before 6am and send a flurry of emails. If you had told the 15-year-old me that I would one day return to Eton as provost, I would have been entirely disbelieving and considered it a weird idea. But having returned, I feel fired up and inspired by the journey ahead." ■