

BRITISH CULTURE & SOCIETY II

The British Public School

In England and Wales, a public school is an older, student selective and expensive fee-paying [independent secondary school](#) which caters primarily for children aged between 13 and 18. Traditionally, public schools were all-male [boarding schools](#), although most now allow day pupils, and many have become either partially or fully co-educational. Scotland, having had a state-funded education system for roughly 300 years prior to England, uses the term in the different sense known in the rest of the English-speaking world, as a school administered by the local government to serve the children of that area.

Public schools emerged from [charity schools](#) established to educate poor scholars, the term "public" being used to indicate that access to them was not restricted on the basis of religion, occupation, or home location, and that they were subject to public management or control in contrast to private schools which were run for the personal profit of the proprietors.

Public schools have had a strong association with the [ruling classes](#). Historically they educated the sons of the English upper and [upper-middle classes](#). In particular, the sons of officers and senior administrators of the [British Empire](#) were educated in England while their parents were on overseas postings. In 2010, over half of [Cabinet Ministers](#) had been educated at public schools; by contrast, however, most prime ministers since 1964 were educated at [state schools](#). In 2014, annual fees at [Eton College](#) were more than £33,000 for boarders, although around 20% of pupils there receive financial support through a range of bursaries and scholarships.

History -Origins

Until the late medieval period most schools were controlled by the church and had specific entrance criteria; others were restricted to the sons of members of guilds, trades or [livery companies](#). The need for professional trades in an increasingly secularised society required schools for the sons of the gentry that were independent from ecclesiastical authority and open to all. From the 16th

century onward, boys' boarding schools were founded or endowed for public use. Traditionally, most of these public schools were all boys and full [boarding](#). Separate [Preparatory schools](#) (or "Prep schools") for younger boys developed from the 1830s, with entry to the senior schools becoming limited to boys of at least 12 or 13 years old. The first of these was [Windlesham House School](#), established with support from [Thomas Arnold](#), headmaster of Rugby School. The [Public Schools Act 1868](#) regulated and reformed these public schools, for which is provided the first legal definition, being schools which were open to the paying public from anywhere in the country, as opposed to, for example, a local school only open to local residents, or a religious school open only to members of a certain church.



1960s–present

The 1960s were a time of considerable social change, and also of student activism. [Civil unrest in France in May 1968](#), which started with student strikes, quickly escalated to the point that [President Charles De Gaulle](#) fled the country. In the UK students protested outside the [US Embassy](#) against the [Vietnam War](#) and staged sit-ins at the [London School of Economics](#) and elsewhere. The 1968 film *if....*, which satirised the worst elements of English public school life, and culminated in scenes of armed insurrection, won the [Palme d'Or](#) at the [1969 Cannes Film Festival](#). These actions were felt in British public schools; the new

headmaster at [Oundle School](#) noted that "student protests and intellectual ferment were challenging the status quo". These challenges coincided with the mid-1970s recession and moves by the Labour government to separate more clearly the independent and state sectors

Many boarding schools started admitting day pupils for the first time, and others abolished boarding completely. Some started accepting girls in the [sixth form](#), while others became fully [co-educational](#). The system of [fagging](#), whereby younger pupils were required to act as personal servants to the most senior boys, was phased out during the 1970s and 1980s. [Corporal punishment](#), which was outlawed in state schools in 1986, had been abandoned in most public schools by the time it was formally banned in independent schools in 1999 for England and Wales. When the direct grant was abolished in 1975, all schools within the scheme became fully independent. At the same time, local authorities were ordered to cease funding places at independent schools, which accounted for over 25% of places at 56 schools, and over half at 22 of them. In addition, between 1975 and 1983 various local authorities withdrew funding from 11 [voluntary-aided](#) grammar schools, which became independent schools and full members of the HMC. The loss of state-funded places at all of these schools, coinciding with the recession, put them under severe financial strain, and many became co-educational to survive. The direct grant was partially revived between 1981 and 1997 in the [Assisted Places Scheme](#), which provided support for 80,000 pupils attending private schools.

The majority of public schools are affiliated with, or were established by, a Christian denomination, principally the [Church of England](#), but in some cases the [Roman Catholic](#) and Methodist churches; or else identify themselves as "non-denominational Christian".

Associations with the Ruling Class

Up to World War II, the role of public schools in preparing pupils for the gentlemanly elite meant that such education, particularly in its [classical](#) focus and social mannerism, became a mark of the [ruling class](#). For three hundred years, the officers and senior administrators of the [British Empire](#) usually sent their sons back home to boarding schools for education as gentlemen, often for uninterrupted periods of a year or more at a time



In this 2009 photo, British Prime Minister [David Cameron](#) (left) & Deputy Prime Minister [Nick Clegg](#) (centre right) both attended English public schools.

The 19th-century public school ethos promoted ideas of service to Crown and Empire, understood by the broader public in familiar sentiments such as "it's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game" and "the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton". Many ex-pupils, like those from other schools, had, and still have, a nostalgic affection for their old schools and a public school tie and "[old boy network](#)" of former pupils could be useful in a career.

The English public school model influenced the 19th-century development of Scottish private schools, but a tradition of the gentry sharing primary education with their tenants kept Scotland comparatively egalitarian.

Acceptance of social elitism was reduced by the two [world wars](#), but despite portrayals of the products of public schools as "silly asses" and "[toffs](#)", the old "system" at its most pervasive continued well into the 1960s. Postwar [social change](#) has however gradually been reflected across Britain's educational system, while at the same time fears of problems with state education have pushed some parents who can afford the fees or whose pupils qualify for bursaries or scholarships towards public schools and other schools in the independent sector. In 2009 typical fees were up to £30,000 per annum for boarders.

As of 2015 the **Prime Minister** and **leader** of the **Conservative Party** (**David Cameron: Eton**) and **Chancellor of the Exchequer** (**George Osborne: St Paul's**) were both educated at Clarendon schools. While the outgoing Conservative Prime Minister in 1964 (Douglas-Home) had been educated at **Eton College** and the incoming Labour Prime Minister in 1997 (Blair) had been at **Fettes College**, all six British Prime Ministers in office between 1964 and 1997 and 2007 to 2010 were educated at state schools (**Wilson, Heath, Thatcher** and **Major** at **grammar schools** and **Callaghan** and **Brown** at other state secondary schools). Prime Minister from 2016, **Theresa May's** secondary school education also was primarily a state school.



Vocabulary Check

Write the English meaning for the following words taken from the text:

- a) cater for _____
- b) restricted _____
- c) proprietors _____
- d) secularised _____
- e) escalated _____
- f) satirised _____
- g) culminated _____
- h) insurrection _____
- i) strain _____
- j) co-educational _____
- k) corporal punishment _____

- l) banned _____
- m) strain _____
- n) ethos _____
- o) pervasive _____
- p) nostalgic _____
- q) egalitarian _____
- r) pervasive _____

Comprehension Questions

Write the answer to the following questions in your own words with a sentence:

- 1) How did 'public schools' begin?

- 2) After the medieval period, what factor pushed the development of these schools?

- 3) After the social changes of the 1960s, what did the UK government try to do?

- 4) What 3 changes occurred in public schools as a result ?

- 5) In 1970s, what did many local governments stop doing?

- 6) As a result, what were many public schools forced to do?

7) What other significant change occurred in public (independent) schools at the end of the 20th century?

8) Before World War II, what was the role of public schools?

9) How were public schools important to The British Empire?

10) Why do some parents choose to pay for private education?
