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New abuse report at notorious school investigated



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Generations of young boys were abused at Berrow Wood School

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BBC News, West Midlands

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A new police investigation is under way into a school where generations of children were abused, after a fresh report was made against more than a dozen members of staff.

Nine former teachers and workers from Berrow Wood School have been convicted of physically and sexually abusing pupils between 1968 and 1991.

Hundreds of boys, many with troubled backgrounds, were sent to the reform school on the border of Worcestershire and Gloucestershire by local authorities across England.

West Mercia Police confirmed it was looking into a new report of abuse, which the BBC understands concerns at least 14 former members of staff.

Set up in 1966 for "maladjusted" boys, children would be sent to Berrow Wood in the hope of receiving an education.

Instead, many were beaten and sexually abused by the men they had been entrusted to.

The boys would also not be referred to by name but by their laundry number, which many have told the BBC they still remember today.

The most recent members of staff to be jailed were **Keith Figes and Maurice Lambell in 2023**, for what a judge described as a "campaign of rape against children".

At the time, detectives told the BBC many former teachers and leaders of the school were dead.

But it is understood several of the people named in the latest report to police are still alive.

'The island of lost boys'



CHRIS BROSINAN

Chris Brosnan wearing Berrow Wood day clothes on an outing to the Three Counties Show in Malvern in 1981

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Chris Brosnan describes being "sentenced" to Berrow Wood School in 1978.

He was dyslexic and neurodivergent - although this was not diagnosed - and he struggled with mainstream school.

Buckinghamshire County Council's social services took him more than 125 miles to Berrow Wood, a Tudor manor house in the village of Pendock.

The isolated school was surrounded by fields with the nearest town, Tewkesbury, eight miles away.

Mr Brosnan was given the number 22 and any hopes of a happy time in the countryside faded when he witnessed other pupils being sexually and physically abused.

"The level of PTSD that was implanted first came from seeing how other boys were treated and I knew the treatment would come my way," he said.

"It was the island of lost boys - I'm now 59 and I only just resonate to that analogy."



CHRIS BROSAN

| Chris Brosnan wants answers about what happened to him

The abuse he suffered daily at Berrow Wood has had a lasting effect on Mr Brosnan, who is known as "Bear" by his friends.

After leaving the school at 16, he ran away to London because his home life was still unstable.

He ended up in prostitution for survival, sleeping in the toilets at Waterloo Station for safety.

"I had nowhere to live. I used to try and sleep at a client's house and that would be after beatings and being drugged."

Mr Brosnan's life took another turn when, through a love of indigenous music, he met disgraced entertainer Rolf Harris and later became his band's promoter.

Harris viewed him as his "adopted son", but the friendship soured when Mr Brosnan began to notice his behaviour towards women and girls.

The once popular TV personality **was jailed for nearly six years in 2014** for indecent assaults against four girls and died in 2023.



CHRIS BROSINAN

| Mr Brosnan played in Rolf Harris's band at Glastonbury Festival

Decades later and now living 3,000 miles overseas, Mr Brosnan is still haunted by his experience at Berrow Wood and, like many other former pupils, wants answers.

"No-one has ever listened to me and I need some accountability from the government," he said.

"I'm still traumatised by it at 59 years of age, I still carry the abuse somewhere in my subconscious.

"I needed someone to listen to me, I needed someone to say that it wasn't OK."

An 'insult' to abuse survivors

Mr Brosnan is working with abuse lawyer Peter Garsden, who gave evidence during the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA).

The inquiry, which lasted seven years and heard testimonies from hundreds of victims, recommended a redress scheme for survivors to seek compensation. However, it is feared that may never come to fruition.

The government published in April it was "not currently taking forward any further steps" with the scheme due to the "current fiscal environment" and "huge challenges" due to the scope of child abuse.

Mr Garsden, who is also working with Keith Levell, another survivor of Berrow Wood School, described it as an "insult".

A Home Office spokesperson told the BBC it was "committed to take a range of action against the recommendations" from IICSA.

"We are also driving forward a raft of wider measures to stop child sexual abuse from happening in the first place," they added.



| Wayne Rudge was sent to Berrow Wood by social services in Wolverhampton

Among ex-pupils looking for answers is Wayne Rudge, who was known by the number 25.

He was sent to Berrow Wood aged 12 by social services in Wolverhampton in 1983.

During the two years he was there, he witnessed horrific beatings and abuse of pupils.

He also remembers head teacher Ron Morris, who he described as "sadistic", pinning him up against a wall, throttling him until he was breathless.

Mr Rudge, who still lives in Wolverhampton, said the impact of his school days had left him angry and wary of authority.

A difficult life

"I'll never be one of those people who owns their own house, or a new car because I just can't deal with everything, with work and authority," he told the BBC.

"I just want to be in a place on my own, left alone," Mr Rudge said.

"I've been to prison and I'd rather go there than to boarding school."

Mr Rudge said the beatings at school had taught him to fight his way out of any situation.

He killed a man in a fight when he was 18 and was jailed for two-and-a-half-years after being convicted of manslaughter on the grounds of provocation.

"I regret it every day," said Mr Rudge. "It runs through my mind and it shouldn't have happened."



OTHER

| Headmaster Ron Morris, who is now dead, was described as a "sadist"

Ron Morris and Alan Gorton, who owned the school, were jailed alongside housemaster Philip Gray, for ABH, common assault and cruelty in the early 1990s.

Gorton was handed a 12-month sentence, Morris was sentenced to eight months and Gray was given six months.

Three others - David Laughton, Peter Larner and Peter Gorton - received community sentences after being convicted of assaulting pupils.



| David said he gave evidence in court against six former staff members

David, not his real name, had a lengthy battle with drug addiction after the school but is now recovered.

He gave evidence at the Wolverhampton Crown Court after the school was shut down in 1991.

In local authority care from the age of eight, he was sent to Berrow Wood when he was 11.

"The first week was OK, then things started to change rapidly," said David, who is also from Wolverhampton.

"We're talking about being stripped off in the rain in my pyjamas, [beaten] black and blue, broken nose and missing teeth," he said.

"They were giving out beatings daily - well, for me anyway, because I was unruly."

No apologies

Like Mr Rudge, he has never had an apology or an explanation as to why he was sent there by the local authority.

"I want to know why they sent us there, why the school wasn't closed down sooner, why there wasn't any aftercare," he said.

"We were put there, forgot about and left to our own devices when we came out," Mr Rudge added.

City of Wolverhampton Council said it was looking into historic records, but was unable to provide a comment at this time.

Jilly Jordan, Buckinghamshire Council's deputy cabinet member for education & children's services, said it was unable to comment on specific cases but it was committed to "ensuring that the wellbeing and safety of all children and young people is a top priority".

"These horrific, historic experiences shared by the children at Berrow Wood School serve as a powerful reminder of the need to continually review and strengthen safeguarding practices to ensure that any concerns raised are addressed in a timely and appropriate way."

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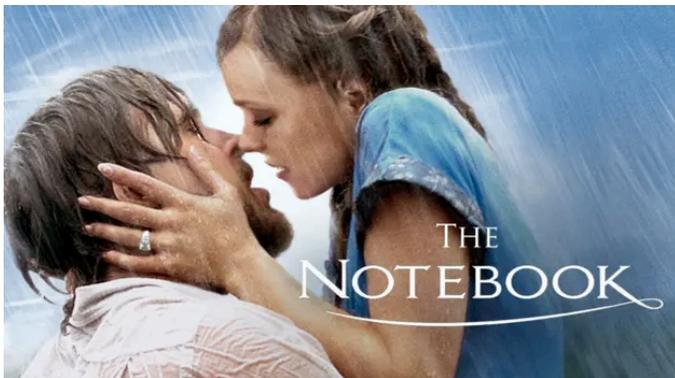
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