



Girls at St Margaret's, Aberdeen, left, had a 100% pass rate in chemistry and physics Highers last year; Merchiston Castle, right, is able to nurture both sides of boys' personalities, according to Alan Hunter, the Edinburgh school's head teacher

The battle of the single sexes

More schools are going coeducational, but there is still strong support for keeping boys and girls apart, writes **Tim Dawson**

Are single-sex schools slowly shuffling off into the history books? It would be easy to draw that conclusion if one considers the historic trend. In the past year Edinburgh Academy has opened its junior school to girls for the first time in its 170-year history. There have been girls in the academy's sixth form for some years, but this move will make the entire school coeducational for the first time. In Aberdeen, too, the trend is evident. Albyn School in the city's west end is currently halfway through a process whereby the lower, or primary school, admitted boys for the first time this term. The school will be fully coeducational by 2013.

And these are scarcely the first. It is more than a quarter of a century since George Heriot's School in Edinburgh welcomed its

first female scholars. Many others have followed suite, including Glenalmond College, Fettes, Kelvinside Academy and George Watson's College. Other independent single-sex schools have closed altogether.

A handful of single-sex schools do endure: for girls; Craigholme in Glasgow, St Margaret's in Aberdeen, Fernhill in Perth, Kilgraston near Perth, Mary Erskine and St Margaret's in Edinburgh and Notre Dame High in Glasgow; and for boys Merchiston Castle and Stewart's Melville in Edinburgh.

For Judith Sischy, the director of the Scottish Council of Independent Schools, the move to coeducation is in part driven by the rest of the Scottish education system.

"There is far less of a tradition of single-sex teaching in Scotland than there is in England," she says. "Whereas, south of the

border, there are areas where most of the state schools are single-sex, that has never been the case here and I think that to an extent independent schools have been adapting to that."

Schools, upon making the change, have talked about adapting to more general changes in society. Edinburgh Academy cited parents with children of both sexes who were put off by any arrangement that makes dropping off at two schools every morning necessary.

Bringing boys and girls together has certainly proved popular at Albyn. It currently has a roll of 640 pupils. Yet despite admitting the largest number of pupils in its 140-year history, it still manages to cap all class sizes at 20.

It is hard, however, to find incontrovertible research evidence to settle the argument over which type of school is best for young people. One study by the Department of Education and Skills in June 2005 found that A-level grades at independent girls' schools were 10% higher than those achieved by girls in comparable independent coeducational schools. Meanwhile a review of research from around the world dating back 50 years by Professor Alan Smithers, of the

University of Buckingham, concluded that there was "no dramatic or consistent advantage for single-sex education".

Nevertheless, Sischy doubts, however, whether many of the remaining single-sex schools will go the way of the national trend. "There is a really strong, redoubtable spirit among the single-sex schools that what they are doing is distinctive, different and successful, and I think they are very unlikely to change that formula."

That is certainly the case at St Margaret's, Aberdeen, which scored an impressive 95% pass rate at Advanced Higher this summer and a 100% pass rate in chemistry and physics Highers. The school's new headmistress, Anne Everest, is convinced the single-sex ethos is a vital ingredient in its success story.

"The unique all-girls environment remains one of the reasons why pupils here are so successful in the full range of subjects," Everest says. "It is this environment that gives them the freedom and opportunity to develop their own interests both in an academic sense and in extracurricular activities. Small class sizes, averaging around 17 in the junior school and 16 in the senior school, not only allow for more focused teaching, they also mean pupils have fuller

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access to sporting, music and IT facilities and individual tuition."

Alan Hunter, head teacher at Merchiston Castle makes a similar argument. "We are able to nurture both sides of boys' personalities: that which wants to play rugby, and that which enjoys singing in a choir." Indeed, Hunter says that in coeducational schools there is a perception of "girls" and "boys" subjects that leads some pupils to feel pressured into not pursuing subjects they might enjoy and be good at, but there is no such problem where the sexes are not mixed.

If nothing else, the dogged resilience of the remaining single-sex schools does significantly add to the range of opportunities open to young people. For those who by dint of location are able to make a choice, the important thing, says Sischy, is to get into the school and really get to grips with what it is like.

"It is remarkable how the ethos of a school can make a difference once you start to look under the surface," Sischy says. "Parents should never be afraid of going to look around several schools, with their children, and go back if they want to find out more. Children react to different stimuli and the strength of the independent sector is that it provides the variety to cater for all needs."