



PHOTO: ANDREW CROWLEY

Hanford

Tree-climbing, ponies and apple blossom...

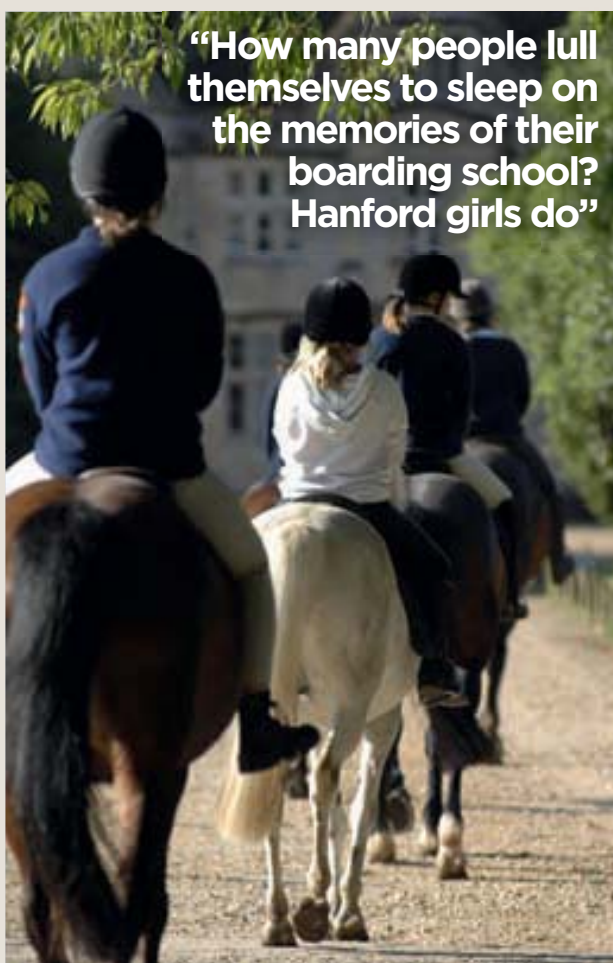
Author **Santa Montefiore** remembers her halcyon days at Hanford, a boarding girl's prep school in Dorset's rolling hills, where ponies and plays dominated the curriculum

Some of the happiest memories I have are of my years at Hanford, a little girls' boarding prep school in Dorset where I spent my terms between the ages of eight and twelve. I remember walking down the path to the netball court, my favourite sport then, smelling the wild onion in the grass. We'd pick it and use it for pies in our camps in the avenue of chestnut trees, called Chestnut Village. I'd pick elderflower berries, too, in the September term, and apple blossom in spring.

I remember the excitement of being chosen to go riding across Ham and Hod hills in the early morning before breakfast. One of the 'galloping matrons' who looked after us at night and the ponies by day, would tap my shoulder and wake me, whispering the name of my pony in my ear. It was usually 'Tic-tac', a rather slow grey mare, but I loved rising with the sun and running down to the old stable block in my jodhpurs.

I remember the Box Garden where four girls who were very good were given the privilege of sleeping the entire summer term in a stone shed that didn't have a front wall. I was always in a 'dorm' where we'd chat after lights out and share forbidden sweets. The house is an old Jacobean mansion with a grey stone chapel and picturesque stable block. Beside the chapel is a giant cedar tree, in my day we climbed every branch, which had names like Cubby Hole and Cruisies. Now, due to health and safety, they've cut down the best ones.

Mr Sharp, the eccentric headmaster who taught maths with his Jack Russell on his lap, wrote the school play which was performed in



the summer by every girl in the school beneath another enormous cedar tree at the bottom of the lawn. The costumes were wonderful and he always included the ponies and dogs. We didn't do much studying that term as we concentrated on rehearsals.

I remember swimming where we'd change on the lawn and run up and down with our towels flapping behind us to get dry. They can't do that now. And the loos didn't have doors on them. There was no point. We were all very immodest, as children should be.

I remember, with great fondness, Mr Pole, my English teacher whom we called Mr P. He read a lot of PG Wodehouse out loud and encouraged my essay writing, which was the only thing I did well besides sport.

Of course I missed my home and my parents; the first morning back was always hard, waking up in the uncomfortable bed. But there was "chain-he" to play on the lawn at sunset, "cops and robbers" before bed, pies to be made out of blossom and daisies and dogs to look after while Mr Sharp tested us on our times tables...

Above all, Hanford allowed me to be creative and to be a child. It fired my imagination and gave me the space to develop in my own unique way, without forcing me to fit into a box. How many people lull themselves to sleep on the memories of their boarding school? Hanford girls do. 🌸

*Santa Montefiore's latest novel, **The Affair**, is published on 18 February by Hodder & Stoughton, £17.99*