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House-parent is convicted of sex assaults on boys

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A HOUSE-PARENT at a school for deaf children was found guilty at the Old Bailey yesterday of sexually abusing 11 boys over a seven-year period.

Graham Gilford, 30, who worked at the Oak Lodge School for the deaf in Wandsworth, south London, was convicted, with unanimous verdicts, of 17 charges of indecently assaulting 11 boys, aged between 10 and 15. He was found not guilty of attempting to bugger a 12-year-old boy, and indecently assaulting a boy of 11. He will be sentenced by Judge Stephen Mitchell QC today.

Gilford, who was in charge of the boarding pupils at the school, denied all the charges. He claimed that the boys supported "deaf power" and had "ganged up" against him as he was a strict disciplinarian.

"There are some deaf people who are against hearing people. You could say its like black power in the 1960s," he said.

He did admit, however, to "teasing and tweaking the shorts of the boys" but described it as "all part of hostel life".

The case, coming after the conviction at Leicester Crown Court of Frank Beck for sexually abusing children in his care, again highlights the vulnerability of children in homes and boarding schools.

Hidden behind screens and speaking in sign language through an interpreter, a total of 13 boys described their experiences. One, who was sexually abused by Gilford at the age of 12, said: "It was always the same. I often had stomach aches and went to the medical room to lie down. Graham said he would make my tummy better, he rubbed it and then his hand would move down. He was like a teacher to me. It was a school and I thought that was what I had to do."

Peter Ader, for the prosecution, said Gilford's method was to contrive an opportunity to be alone with a boy, then start some form of horseplay or make an excuse to remove the boy's clothing before sexually assaulting him. "He abused his position of power."

Gilford assaulted his first victim in 1982. The boy was hungry so Gilford invited him into a storeroom and made him some toast. He then locked the door and abused the boy, Mr Ader said.

The boys remained silent for seven years as they were too embarrassed and frightened of Gilford. Mr Ader said: "Not only was he much bigger and stronger but he was in a position of authority within the school and was a special constable in the Metropolitan Police and thus in a position of authority in society."

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But in September 1989 nine of the boys complained to Peter Merryfield, the headmaster. Gilford was immediately suspended on full pay.

Mr Merryfield said that most of the boys needed counselling and that they were encouraged to draw pictures of Gilford, which they then burnt on a bonfire. When they were asked what punishment Gilford should receive they said: "Hang him and cut him up."

Gilford joined the school in 1980 as a handyman. He was promoted to a house-parent in 1986 after learning sign language and impressing the authorities. "He was clearly well thought of by the authorities and they had no reason to suspect what was going on," Mr Ader said.

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