

# Yes, that really IS scruffy Dominic Cummings in a tie

## ...but Boris's rebel aide didn't have a choice at his very posh private school

By **Hugo Daniel**

WITH his crumpled shirts and quilted gilets, Dominic Cummings always cuts a determinedly scruffy figure striding through Downing Street.

But as newly unearthed pictures show, there was once a time when the Prime Minister's shaven-headed svengali sported a neat haircut, blazer and, rather improbably, a carefully knotted tie. But then again, he was still a schoolboy...

Less surprising about his time at the private Durham School between 1985 and 1990 is what fellow pupils made of him. Divisive, argumentative and 'contemptuous' of his peers was the consensus of his contemporaries, as they give the first insight into the early life that shaped the Machiavellian tactician behind Vote Leave and Boris Johnson's Election victory last year.

In part, recall friends, his political outlook was influenced by the 1985 miners' strike. Cummings, now 48, was president of the school debating society and supported Margaret Thatcher. 'Being pro-Thatcher in Durham could be dangerous. You had to be careful who you were talking to,' said one former pupil. 'Tensions were palpable in Durham, which is surrounded by coal mining villages. There was a febrile atmosphere.'

'But he would have an understanding of what people think because, if you live in that part of the world, you can't live in a middle-class bubble.'

Others recalled that his now-infamous lockdown visit to Barnard Castle 'to test his eyesight' was by no means his first. In happier times it was the



**'ALOOF':** Mr Cummings, circled, in school photo and, left, now

scene of an 'outstanding' batting performance for his cricket team against a rival school. 'He had his eye in that day,' joked one of his then team-mates.

To some classmates he was known as 'Feargal' because of his perceived resemblance to Feargal Sharkey, the 1980s pop star. 'Dominic wouldn't have liked it,' said a friend. 'I don't think he appreciated any jokes about himself, he didn't have a self-deprecating humour.'

Gaunt then as now, others nicknamed him 'Skeleton' after He-Man's cartoon nemesis.

Ralph Woodward, who was in the same year as Cummings, said: 'I don't think it would be fair to say he was popular. He could be argumentative and wouldn't back down. He could

be a bit intellectually dismissive of others.'

'I can't think of him having particularly close friends. Certainly he was never part of a gang of mates, other than being on the cricket team. He was never the most jovial of people.'

He said that Cummings, a day boy, enjoyed playing chess, reading Len Deighton spy novels and won the school history prize. He would go on to read history at Oxford. 'I guess he was clever - I don't think he was one of the really big-hitting intellectuals but he was very thoughtful, read a lot, so I sup-

pose he had an intellectual approach,' said Mr Woodward.

Another former pupil, who asked not to be named, described Cummings as 'cat-like' in his indifference to making friends. 'The guy was a bit of a loner, never one of the crowd,' he said. 'I wouldn't say he was particularly remarkable. He was aloof and had that look on his face as if to say, "I know better, I'm tolerating you." That contemptuous look. He had a slight swagger about him.'

Civil servants, Remainders and MPs will know the look.

## Why everyone's talking about... Mermaids

FINALLY, indoor swimming pools will reopen next Saturday, to the delight of parents, fitness buffs and mermaids.

**Excellent... wait, what? Mermaids?**

Yep, there's a growing global community of professional mermaids. Some teach 'mermaiding' - which is swimming with a fake fish tail and is increasingly popular with children despite its difficulty. Other full-time mermaids include models. There's even a British hire-a-mermaid agency. Fun fact: reality star Katie Price's granny used to pose as a topless mermaid in a tank on Hastings Pier - until she was sacked for smoking, destroying the illusion of being underwater.

**So 'mermaiding' isn't as odd as it first seems?**

More extreme are those women who identify as 'mer-people' and fully embrace the lifestyle. Biology graduate Caitlin Nielsen, 35, from Seattle, gave up a proper job five years ago to live as a mermaid. 'I was born with a terrible birth defect - legs,' she complained. In California (where else?) there are mermaid conventions while in London, mer-people meet up to display their outfits and sell their, erm, merm-orabilia.

**What odd fish!**

You might have seen self-styled 'mermaid whisperer' Karen Kay recently on ITV's This Morning. When she claimed she could speak with the creatures in the sea near her Cornwall home, presenter Holly Willoughby struggled to contain her giggles...

**So where does the idea of mermaids come from?**

Half-fish, half-human figures feature in folklore around the world, and were first depicted in Babylonian art 4,000 years ago. Durham Castle has an 11th Century image of a mermaid, and Christopher Columbus spotted three in the Caribbean in 1493. He reported that they were not



**MYSTICAL:** But mermaids are all the rage

as beautiful as he'd been led to believe - which suggests what he actually saw were manatees, the 'sea cows'.

**Has it been a good week to be a professional mermaid?**

Not for 28-year-old Grace Page, from Reading, Berkshire, who was devastated to learn that after reports of a 13th sign of the zodiac, she's no longer the water sign Scorpio. She said: 'It feels like something has been taken away from me. I've always been happy to be a Scorpio. It's a very sensual and sexy sign.'

STEVE BENNETT

# US civil rights hero John Lewis dies

CIVIL rights leader John Lewis was yesterday remembered as 'one of the greatest heroes of American history' after he died at the age of 80 following a battle with pancreatic cancer.

One of the 'big six' activists, he helped galvanise opposition to racial segregation before a long and celebrated political career.

Lewis joined other civil-rights

By **James Heale**

leaders in organising the 1963 March on Washington and spoke to the vast crowd before Martin Luther King's momentous 'I have a dream' speech.

Two years later, Lewis led 600 protesters in the Bloody Sunday march across in Selma, Ala-

bama. He was knocked to the ground and beaten by police. His skull was fractured and televised images of the brutality spurred anti-racism legislation.

Former President Barack Obama led the tributes yesterday, saying: 'He loved his country so much that he risked his life and his blood so that it might live up to its promise. And

through the decades, he not only gave all of himself to the cause of freedom and justice but inspired generations that followed to try to live up to his example.'

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi called him 'one of the greatest heroes of American history'.

Fellow civil-rights leader C. T. Vivian also died on Friday, at the age of 95.