

What The Good Schools Guide says

Head

Since September 2023, Cathy Elliott, previously pastoral deputy head and then senior deputy head at St Mary's Ascot. Educated at Tonbridge Grammar School for Girls, she 'has a highly academic background': English at Oxford, PGCE at Cambridge and a master's in national and international literatures in English at University of London. First teaching post in English and drama at Sevenoaks before moving to Tonbridge to teach English and take charge of charities. Next up, Brighton College as part-time English teacher and houseparent of boys' boarding house. On to Radley to teach English and thence to Headington School in Oxford as pastoral director of sixth form, before St Mary's Ascot for seven years. Two 'almost-grown-up' children.

Wasting no time on her arrival, she organised 'meet the head' coffee morning and parents' evenings ('with wine and canapés') together with the year tutors to outline the year ahead. 'She's at every match and every concert,' said a parent. We saw her joining two excited younger girls at lunch. 'You should have seen their faces when she first started doing this,' said a member of staff, 'now they all wave to invite her over.' Teachers, too, value her caring approach. 'She's a very positive person, very kind. Everybody's on board.' Music to the ears of any leader. Staff keen too, telling us she's 'a great team leader.'

Sitting in her large, panelled, light, bright office, she oozes compassion and confidence. 'We're the most diverse of the GDST schools and have a wider ability range than some of our competitor schools,' she told us, 'I want it to be a "no-brainer" for local families with daughters.' Committed to all-girls education ('probably as a result of three undergraduate years in a male-dominated college'), she talks with conviction of the need for her pupils to 'learn and feel the values of what other people bring', of the need 'to create a sense of shared values.' 'They belong to a family, to the school.'

Joined Amnesty International at age 14, and spent her gap year teaching in Kathmandu and Nepal. Instrumental in organising charitable events of every nature throughout her career, she continues to foster this. Two girls had just been given permission to spend a day helping out at the Calais migrant camps. 'I want authentic girls,' she says. 'AI can certainly solve problems, but it cannot be human. We'll always need those human skills but I would hate the girls to be naïve about the demands of work and families.' She adds, 'Of course, I want to build on value-added on every child during every lesson but I also want to instil leadership with service and humility.' She means it.

Entrance

Entry at 11+ via ISEB test but school takes a 'holistic view', looking in greater depth than comparable schools at the child's potential. This involves a group activity and a creative writing task. About 40 per cent from sister prep school, 10 minutes away, and around 60 per cent from external local primary and prep schools. A small number join at 13+ via school's own exams.

At 16+, hopefuls sit entrance exams and need seven grade 6s or above at GCSE, including English and maths, and grade 7s in their chosen A level subjects. Typically, about half a dozen arrive in year 12.

Exit

Vast majority (over 80 per cent and growing) stay for the sixth form, not least because of the attractive sixth form centre. Most head to Russell Group universities. Bristol, Leeds, Newcastle and Manchester 'our top hits'. Two to Oxbridge in 2024. Some to apprenticeships (engineering popular) and some overseas – most recently to University of Florida on a rowing scholarship.

Latest results

In 2024, 61 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 46 per cent A*/A at A level (72 per cent A*-B).

Teaching and learning

Large classrooms with small classes (average 24, max of 26). Setting only in maths – and even that is quite loose. Good on MFL - begins in year 7 with French, Mandarin and Latin too. Spanish is added in year 8, when girls choose two out of the four. In very exceptional circumstances, they can choose just one. We were impressed by the fluency of the girls in a year 7 Mandarin class who appeared already to have mastered the art of basic sentences. We also loved the co-curricular content the RE lesson which focused on the root meaning of 'omni' and its derivations in a biblical setting. Well-equipped science labs play host to keen researchers, most of whom take separate sciences at GCSE, with a few opting for the combined version. Sociology, business and engineering also now available – the first GDST school to pioneer the latter. DT popular – and there are great plans afoot for the workroom, in which we saw some enthralling 3D printing and lamp designing. IT suite boasts a pristinely new podcast booth. Languages particularly popular and successful.

At A level, 25 subjects to choose from, with economics, geography, biology, maths and psychology leading in the popularity stakes, the last also leading in the results, along with art, PE and RE. Most take three subjects and around a third do an EPQ.

A salient feature of the school is the alternate Monday afternoon of **Kinza**, meaning 'hidden treasure' in Arabic. From over 30 options, girls in years 7-10 choose from an exciting menu of enriching activities. Taught for the main part in-house, the list is the result of the staff's own passions and range from 'international friendships: connecting through crochet' to 'tap dance via wig making', and from 'robotics' to 'connecting with nature via lifestyle finance'. All bar about three at no extra cost. At the same time, year 11 are out on community programmes, in nurseries and care homes, whilst the sixth formers help run some of the courses for the younger: leadership with service and humility in action.

Originally built as a grammar school, premises are light and spacious, classrooms are airy and girls move around sensibly and purposefully. Even a spontaneous rendition of happy birthday in the entrance hall was lively but contained. Our delight was matched only by the surprise of the birthday girl. Parents talk highly of the dedication of the staff – 'they push, but gently, and they know their stuff.' Pupils, too, particularly the older ones, spoke of being able to discuss 'anything' with their teachers. Younger ones emphasised the teachers' 'fairness'.

Learning support and SEN

School's inclusive policy is demonstrated in its personalised support for the 22 per cent on the SEN register, mostly with dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD and autism – plus an additional 17 per cent of pupils with additional learning needs, be they more fleeting or ongoing. This is overseen by the head of learning support and two 'higher level' TAs (one an ELSA), who cover everything from revision and organisational skills to supporting hearing and visually impaired children. Discreet Braille signs on key doors. At the time of our visit, two EHCPs. From one-to-one boosters to group interventions, the team is dedicated to supporting the girls towards progress and success 'within the school'. 'Our SEN students achieve broadly in line with the rest of their cohorts – and sometimes even above' says school. 'We are selective but we're adaptive and responsive.' Team assesses all newcomers in year 7 and liaises with class teachers to anchor support in the classroom. No charge for in-house help. 'Isn't the saying, "this is a family, not a factory?" That's what we are.' The parents we spoke to agreed.

The arts and extracurricular

Music central to school life, with around half having individual instrumental lessons. Opportunities to play, sing and partake abound, with lots of choirs and orchestras to join and concerts galore. Recent highlights include performances at both Garsington and Covent Garden together with Evensong at Queen's College, Oxford and Southwark Cathedral. Very popular is the annual jazz concert. We heard some loud drumming from one corner. 'Drums are really popular at the moment,' mentioned one of our guides, 'but there are loads of opportunities to take up anything you want, and lots of girls stage informal concerts'.

Drama also very popular, culminating in the much-anticipated sixth form play, as series of pieces devised and performed by pupils and willing members of staff. 'It's the best way to finish,' enthused one, 'it just brings everybody together.' Whole school productions every year in school's own theatre with opportunities for all to become involved in the likes of School of Rock or Little Shop of Horrors. 'I really found myself in drama,' announced one girl, 'I was really really shy before.'

Spectacular art. From the accomplished pieces hanging in the head's office to the lino cuts and fabric work we witnessed in the making, the standard was impressive in the extreme. 'We're looking at William Morris at the moment, and Hope Gangloff,' said the teacher. Well, that would certainly explain the breadth and variety of the pupils' work which is justifiably and inspiringly on show everywhere throughout the school. Clubs abound, woven into the Kinza programme, and trips, sporting and educational, are a plenty.

Sport

School sits near Tooting Commons in its own extensive verdant space. Own sports hall, own dance studio, own fitness centre, own Astro, own tennis courts – impressive for London. Sport for all, major ones being football, hockey, netball, athletics, cricket, rowing and gymnastics. Notably stellar results in gymnastics and netball. School is true to its belief in running a wide variety of teams reflecting all abilities. 'They've got to have the chance – otherwise you don't know their potential.' One girl who described herself as 'really sporty' said the sports here were 'amazing'. Number of fixtures and results are indeed just that.

Ethos and heritage

Started in 1887 as Brixton Hill High School for Girls - one of the earliest GDST schools. Became Streatham Hill High School and moved to current former boys' Battersea Grammar School in 1993.

Recent developments include new entrance and atrium (we never did find out if there were fish in the small pond), together with a newly refurbished IT suite. Award-winning, capacious and comfortable fanned dining room where we ate a delicious hot lunch, from an appealing and varied menu. Give-away grand piano hidden in a corner behind the salad bar signalled its more varied use as a concert hall and evening reception area. Sixth formers housed in new addition to top floor of main building, complete with own study centre ('open until 6 o'clock and they're thinking of opening it over the Easter holidays for us to revise'), café, small class-cum-tutorial rooms, own science lab and spectacular views over the London skyline. 'You feel special but also still part of the school,' told us one satisfied sixth former. Main building sits in loads of outdoor space, with various, interconnecting new accretions. This makes for deep-rooted old-fashioned grammar school feel coupled with brand new additions, catering for life in twenty first century.

Traditional house structure, each named after inspiring women, including three alumnae whose photos (along with others) adorn the hall walls. 'I really want to develop the alumnae network,' says head. 'There's so much talent there.' Leadership roles, including head girl, deputies and prefects galore, reinforce healthy competition and foster pastoral care. 'There's lots of interaction between the older girls and the younger ones,' confirmed a sixth former. School anchored in neighbourhood. 'It's a very local school,' said a teacher. 'We've just opened this garden which we planted together with the residents of this street,' she said pointing down the road. Parents agree, saying school reflects the local community. 'It's a diverse, interesting and energised school but it's also a family school,' said one. 'Every girl is known.'

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

Pastoral care universally praised by parents and girls. 'You always know where to go - and you can go to anybody.' Deputy head (pastoral) takes the lead, supported by heads of year, heads of house, tutors, school counsellor and school nurse. Much interaction between years too, with older girls frequently involved in running clubs, presenting assemblies or coaching sports. We attended a riveting assembly on Walt Disney, presented by two year 13s, and learned much from our 'magical journey through creativity, imagination and technical innovation'. We had no doubt the younger girls had too.

Excellent communication with parents - noticed even by the pupils (maybe a little too much for their liking!). Thorough and ever-evolving PHSCE programme. 'We tackle issues head-on. You can't pretend the nuclear family is mummy, daddy and two children anymore. We talk about sexuality and transgender.' The girls we spoke to certainly spoke openly: 'I love the strong female role models but the school really celebrates diversity.' 'We had an assembly on diabetes the other day which, of course, you can't see.'

Girls content with balance between work and play. 'I honestly think they don't want us to burn out. I know everyone says it but it's true here.' The girls we spoke to plainly felt inspired to work hard and get the grades but not at the expense of their mental health and enjoying themselves. 'The atmosphere here is lovely,' a new sixth former mused. Sensible, straightforward uniform. Does the length of skirts issue arise? 'Yes, it's the ever-on-going question but we deal with it as an issue in the real world. They need to know.'

New reward system well received. 'You get positive or negative points and, if you earn enough positive ones, you can choose a treat.' From a ride in the lift to a fresh croissant, the incentives are real and effective. Negatives ones lead to lunchtime detentions or - worse but rare - after-school ones. 'It's getting serious at that stage,' said a girl. Around one to two in-school

exclusions a year and ‘yes, I have had to exclude a pupil,’ said head. Not oppressively disciplinarian, school’s prevailing approach is restorative. ‘They need to think and put it right. We’re trying to teach them about living in the real world, not about petty rules.’ ‘There’s not often really really serious trouble,’ confirmed one girl.

The 100-strong school council feel ‘teachers listen to us and take our ideas on board.’ One pupil mentioned the cheer leading she did outside school. ‘Let’s do it in school - do you have a contact number?’ came the response. On-going conversations about race, ethnicity and diversity. ‘We are proudly secular and multi-faith, it comes back to shared values.’

Pupils and parents

Local it may be, and many girls walk, bike or scoot to school but, to relieve the inevitable congestion in a residential area, school runs nine bus routes to local catchment areas, advertising the school’s well-loved motto: towards wisdom unafraid. ‘I simply love the motto,’ beams head, ‘every part of it.’ School also works closely with Transport for London to encourage use of public transport. Parents, mainly dual income professionals from doctors to musicians, are hearty supporters and organise loads of events, including the highly appreciated summer fair. ‘There’s no one type here – it’s very inclusive.’ The day we visited, the older girls were being treated to a ‘futures and aspirations’ talk by a mother who is a partner at KPMG. The list of speakers that term was dazzling. ‘We hold lots of parent lectures, and we’re hoping to roll out more cultural events for them, too.’

Money matters

Fees at the lower end of London senior schools and GDST is generous on the bursary and scholarship fronts. All are automatically considered for an academic scholarship on entry into year 7. Specialist scholars, in either art, drama, music or sports ‘have a moral responsibility to be good role models’ - service and humility again. Awarded at 11+ or 16+, they bring fee remission of anything from five to 30 per cent, higher end going to those showing both academic and specialist talent. Seven per cent of pupils hold bursaries, ranging from 30 percent upwards, with around four per cent in receipt of a fully funded bursary.

The last word

This school is buzzing. Everywhere, we sensed empowerment, initiative, kindness and enterprise. The girls were extremely keen to discuss and inform, and all unfailingly polite, opening doors, letting others through. Comfortably and effortlessly affable. The notion of compassionate accountability is no empty rhetoric. These girls embody it and this school is all dressed up with everywhere to go.