

# THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE

## What The Good Schools Guide says

### Head

Since January 2023, Helen Loach, previously deputy head since 2018. 'I live 10 minutes down the road - it's perfect, I absolutely love it,' she says. A Shrewsbury High GDST old girl, she studied education and music at Homerton College, Cambridge and started her career teaching children of travelling families before becoming housemistress to the choristers at King's College, Cambridge. Thence to Cheltenham College as head of academic (upper school) before moving into maintained sector at Highnam CofE School, Gloucestershire. Back into independent sector at Norwich School and, from there, to the White House School as head of year 6 and deputy head.

Parents approve, telling us she's 'always at the gate', 'such fun', 'has some great ideas' and 'is putting the school on the map'. 'She doesn't mince her words but does it so kindly,' said one; another that she 'works brilliantly with the senior school'. Staff call her 'a real inspiration', 'really encouraging'. 'She trusts us.' One said, 'She never stops working but always has time for you.' Pupils speak of her 'fairness' and we witnessed countless eager little people waving at her or desperate to show her their work. Opinion fairly unanimous, then.

Speaks with brisk, efficient conviction, infused with a warm smile and an open interest. Her office reflects this: a colourful, professional room where bright cushions and comfortable sofas sit alongside a two-screen computer, serried ranks of books and a large table, with a tiny kitchen cupboard where she happily made us coffee. Here, she told us that her vision is to improve academic rigour and build resilience - to make the place 'more desirable', but 'not at the cost of our nurturing approach'. 'My three EHCP pupils need adaptive teaching but so does everybody. I want to create bespoke models, individually tailored for every need.'

Teaches year 6 maths ('I couldn't not teach') but, 'no, I don't have time to pick up my violin any more - not for the moment'. Married to a lawyer with two daughters (one previously and one still at the school), she does manage to keep up her running. 'That's my thing now', she says, casually mentioning recent half marathons and leading weekly running club. No wonder she looks so youthful.

### Entrance

Academically non-selective with sibling priority. Entry into nursery from 3+ (September, January or April) and into reception at 4+ following 'early explorers' visit with parents where initial early skills, language development and social interaction are observed. Nursery and reception fused, children loosely grouped depending on development but 'it's school-based, not a playgroup'. Next point of entry at 7+. Written assessments in maths and English in November, together with team-building activity. Offers in December, acceptance in February. Always open to enquiries about occasional places. 'Demographics change. Birth rates go up

and down. Some years are smaller, others have waiting lists.' Two forms can become three in year 6.

## Exit

Almost without exception to senior school. Automatic but all sit 11-plus. 'Occasionally, we do have concerns about a girl's suitability. We start the discussion early, supporting parents to find the right destination.' Unambiguously confirmed by one mother: 'It was difficult but the school was so right. My daughter wouldn't have enjoyed the senior school at all. She's much better off where she is.' Other GDST senior schools favourably inclined in the event of a geographical move

## Our view

Located on the original site of the senior school, school occupies a supremely light and spacious building. Nursery, reception and years 1 and 2 housed in separate, equally spacious quarters, with own playground full of climbing frames, sandpits and tricycles. Rows of Wellington boots corroborated promotion of resilience. 'We never don't go out,' said a teacher. The blustery gale blowing on our visit had certainly not deterred small outdoor tricyclists.

Main school is typical maze of corridors but school benefits from excellent natural light which floods in from wrap-around windows on every floor. Cheerful, coloured glass prevents too much dazzle on a sunny day. Furniture is functional and brightly coloured, often in school colours of green and purple. Walls are festooned with art work and notices, with striking 3D depiction of the Fire of London. Science lab is neat and uncluttered thanks to a capacious adjoining prep room. Differing class sizes, from 18 to 24, more than comfortably accommodated. Top floors have spectacular views of the London skyline. Who needs the London Eye when you have this? Good, practical use of views made by art department, itself housed in vast room which is (again) bathed in natural light and brimming with materials of every sort.

Specialist teaching in art, music, PE and French from nursery, together with Spanish and Mandarin 'as we have the skill sets'. Science added from year 4 and Latin in year 5. Setting in year 6 in English and maths, with 'flexible grouping' from year 3. 'It all depends on the topic - a girl might be way ahead in multiplication but really struggling with shapes.' School hot on a 'creative curriculum'. 'We don't just look at the Victorians, we look at what was going on in the world. It's so relevant to our children and reflects our diversity.'

Innovations abound. New phonics system introduced across the board, plus assessment and monitoring system so that 'we can track each girl from nursery to year 6'. Reporting to parents much improved. One father spoke of 'the partnership' he felt existed between parents and school. 'They really foster that, they want to work with you.' Tutoring? 'We can't stop it,' says school, 'so let's manage it together.' Teachers' dedication recognised even by the children. 'They really help you - definitely.' 'They're very kind and make everything fair.' Tellingly, one spoke of how teachers 'help to minimise stress - they let you work at your own pace. We did mindful meditation during exam prep'. Another told us, 'We just went to the library and relaxed.' Enticing indeed, especially with the newly refurbished, library - a bright, exciting, cosy place, littered with pods and comfortable perches, together with paper trees and leaves. One child mentioned not 'going there much' with her class, but was swiftly contradicted by another. 'It depends on the teacher,' seemed to be the consensus.

Teaching inspired and entertaining. In year 6 science, dissection of a sheep's heart produced

gory delight and histrionic squeamishness. Carefully managed and well-planned, the lesson certainly successfully imparted the function of a heart. Similarly, year 4, learning about teeth, enjoyed a vivid clip on chewing and biting, speaking of their own experiments using apple slices. Year 1 joyfully sang their phonic sounds whilst year 2 warmed up their bodies in music before taking to their recorders with 'kissy lips'. Enthralling stuff. The girls in year 6 English struck us with the rich variety of their vocabulary. Homework is 'sensible', we heard, and certainly drew fewer complaints than the norm on our visits.

Full-time SENCo supports the 20 per cent on the SEN register, needs varying from autism to dyslexia, along with ADHD, dyscalculia and deafness. Lift serves whole building, so the majority of the school is wheelchair accessible too. Speech and language therapist in twice a week, as is OT specialist, both funded by parents or local authority. Three EHCPs when we visited. 'They don't like labelling,' said one mother, which she approved of. 'My daughter would hate that. They work in groups and so it feels completely normal.' No formal EAL provision: 'we haven't had to, we work on immersion'.

Counsellor in residence twice a week 'but you can talk to your teacher any time'. Full-time nurse works in close collaboration. Pupils feel included through Tuesdays' pupil voice. 'The tuck lines are too long and by the time you get your tuck, it's the end of break,' said one, demonstrating that these pupils are happy to speak their mind. 'But I love the clock in the lunch hall which we asked for.'

Almost half have instrumental lessons. Flute, piano, violin and clarinet most popular. Fully-equipped music room heaving with all things musical. Regular concerts and musical assemblies, head herself setting weekly music-related challenges. Recorders for all in year 2, violins for all in year 3. Inclusivity in action. Termly year group concerts include those not learning an instrument, and frequent lunchtime recitals for parents. Chamber choir and sing up group cater for more vocally talented with annual carol services at All Saints, Tooting. Performing arts space ideal for rehearsals but school's own hall (traditional vast affair with green velvet curtains and wooden award boards) boasts fully equipped stage. Drama integral part of English until year 3 with climactic performances in years 4 and 6, recent productions including *Pirates of the Curry Bean* and *Dragon Days*. 'Everybody comes together, helping with props and sets.'

Sport a source of great pride. 'It's the thing I love best,' said one pupil. School's own marked playground accommodates most regular activities (netball in autumn, hockey in spring, cricket in summer). Also contains secret garden, pods and climbing frame though maybe not for long, with a teacher telling us, 'We're working on it, we've got plans'. Enhancing use made of nearby senior school's facilities. Swimming in alternate years, burgeoning football, impressive running (inspired by head) and extremely popular gymnastics – perhaps unsurprisingly. School's gym is one of the largest we have ever seen. Inclusive approach too – almost every fixture involves teams A-D teams and often the whole year group – as was the case with the year 3s when we visited.

Clubs wide-ranging. Old stalwarts (cooking, running, etc) but list ever-changing, as dictated by staff interests, adding extra zing. At ukelele club, we savoured concentrated strumming by girls seated cross-legged on what looked like rubber rings. Environmental and social awareness activities rewarded with the bestowment of eco school award, following projects on recycling crisp packets and disposing of batteries.

School makes full use of its location with frequent outings to likes of Hampton Court, the Polka Theatre, and London Museum – 'they've got a wonderful exhibition linked to Black History Month.' Residential trips from year 4, culminating in Burgundy for year 6.

Staggered lunch resulted in notably calm experience. Wonderful waft of baking greeted us, as pizza bases were vigorously rolled out. Posters remind the girls about good table manners and how to eat mindfully – all adhered to as they tucked into said pizza, served with an array of fresh salads and vegetables.

‘We’re one of the most diverse schools in the GDST and we celebrate that,’ said a teacher. Pupils too talk proudly of the ‘equality here’, telling us about Culture Day (national costumes and food) - and we saw evidence of a deep awareness of Black History Month. We sensed meaningful practice of mutual understanding and respect.

We were struck by girls’ respectful, straightforward politeness. Opening doors was a natural act, not a contrived gesture. Characterised by uniform too – a practical, no frills, tartan pinafore or skirt with light purple shirt and graphite cardigan. Most are local, with extensive school bus networks for those who cannot walk, scoot and bike in. Families grounded and unflashy, aspirational but not after the big names of neighbours JAGS and Alleyn’s ‘although I want it to rank equally,’ says head. ‘They make an informed choice to send their girls here: it doesn’t come naturally, as it might elsewhere.’ Supportive too. On the stormy day we visited, one father offered to come and talk to the girls about two earthquakes he had lived through.

### Money matters

Fees marginally less than comparable schools nearby. Eligibility for scholarships and bursaries through GDST starts in senior schools.

### The last word

An authentic, down-to-earth school, producing level-headed civically-minded girls. ‘It’s sporty and it’s booky but it’s a mixture of everything really, because we do work hard too.’ Music to the head’s ears.