



BIRKENHEAD
SCHOOL
THE PREP

Birkenhead School

What The Good Schools Guide says

Head of prep

Since 2013, Harry FitzHerbert (early 50s), previously head at King's College School, Madrid, and before that deputy head of Boundary Oak School, Hampshire. Has also taught at a British international school in Lima. No surprise, then, that he kicked off his tenure here by expanding modern languages provision, with Spanish, French and Mandarin now firmly entrenched in the curriculum. More recently, has focused on Future Skills, an enrichment programme involving STEM, mindfulness, wellbeing, diversity, nature, creative arts etc (years 1 and 2) and leadership, problem solving, philosophical enquiry, independent study, general knowledge etc (years 3-6). Is also busy enhancing the outside space for Early Years so teachers 'can better connect nature to the curriculum'.

Our impression was that he seemed more comfortable discussing facts and figures than sharing anecdotes, though he must have many as he teaches Spanish to year 3s ('a lovely opportunity as I get to know them all as they move into juniors'), does playground duty, hosts assemblies and reads stories in pre-prep. And to be fair, we do ask a lot of questions – 'more thorough than ISI inspectors!' he quipped. 'You see him around a lot,' said a pupil, with several describing him as 'kind' and 'funny'. Parents say he's 'personable' and 'engaging', with one telling us that her 7-year-old had 'no qualms knocking on his door – always a good sign.' 'One of the nicest guys you'll meet,' enthused one.

Married to Jo, an art teacher at the school; they have a son heading off to university and a daughter at the University of Birmingham. As for hobbies, it's tennis, tennis and more tennis – and what luck for the school as he's recently introduced an LTA programme so all pupils now get a go at the sport.

Entrance

Between 30 and 35 pupils join at reception, many moving up from nursery (aged 3 months to 3 years) and pre-prep (3–4-year-olds). Pupils join at all points thereafter, including during the academic year. By the end of year 6, numbers are in the 60s. Up to year 2, entry is via a 'play and learn visit' where teachers observe reading, word recognition, pencil grip, shape sorting skills etc. From year 2, tests in English, maths and reading as part of a wider taster day, where teachers 'get to know the child'. Academically selective, then, though school says also looks for good attitude to learning, 'so if there was an applicant not quite on par academically but who was a really keen learner, we may still take them.' Applicants with SEN meet the SENCo to make sure school can meet needs.

Exit

Around 90 per cent move up to senior school. Rest mainly to local grammars or schools out of areas due to families relocating. A review of all pupils at the end of year 5 shines a light on any that might not cope with the academic rigour of senior school, though this is rare.

Our view

Strikes that tricky balance of being a seamless part of the whole school yet very much its own entity - a win-win for parents, the vast majority of whom choose the prep with an eye on the long haul but hanker after a nurturing start. Facilities-wise, the prep certainly holds its own, taking up a considerable chunk of the 20 buildings of various ages which surround the central school field where – on the hot summer's day we visited – the youngsters were a sight to behold in their cricket whites. Other pupils were immersed in planting, using the semi-covered outdoor classroom and enjoying the adventure play equipment and scooter trail. Outdoors areas clearly utilised to the max – in fact, we also spotted outside chess and Duplo, not to mention school guinea pigs. 'The

willow den is my favourite spot,' confided one of our year 6 guides – 'we helped plant it, then it sprouted hair!'

Despite being academically selective, the focus is firmly on the happiness of the child. 'There is a lovely feel, I love going there – and my kids need dragging away at the end of the day!' said a parent. The little ones get cuddles and picked up and the older ones are encouraged to keep their sense of fun. 'It's a place where children can be children,' summed up a mother. 'When there was snow, they stopped lessons for a snowball fight.'

Classrooms and corridors are awash with purposeful displays on eg superstar work, Whodunnit booklets, NHS heroes and minibeasts. A vast and beautiful Monet's Garden display stopped us in our tracks, as did a London-themed exhibition complete with postcards, flags and models of Big Ben, London Bridge etc. Even the ceilings are not immune – one had pupils' butterflies hanging down. With such vibrant surroundings, lessons have a lot to live up to – and they do. From year 6s reading with year 2s (a weekly event, apparently) to an animated year 5 history lesson on marriage (where we learned the origin of the term 'tying the knot!'). 'The history teacher is all about show-and-tell – he stood up on the desk pretending to be in the trenches once,' one of our guides grinned. Year 3s were creating imaginative Roald Dahl leaflets ('Charlie and the Chocolate Factory is my favourite, what's yours?' asked a pupil, looking up wide-eyed from her desk) and year 5s – as part of their Beyond the Curriculum programme – were preparing to be travel agents, with different groups representing different countries. 'Children all get "tickets" and we have to persuade them to choose our country – we dress up in that country's theme and bring in snacks like hummus and olives for Greece,' explained a boy.

Academically there's no slacking, but hothouse territory this is not. 'My child joined from a state primary and it took a good six months to get used to the workload, but they did it without overwhelming him,' said a parent. Good breadth of subjects includes computing (from year 1), outdoor learning (years 1 and 2), drama (from year 5), classics (year 6) and cookery (year 6). Specialist teaching in art, music, PE and games and if a teacher has a flair for a particular subject – like that history teacher we saw – they get first dibs on teaching it across the board. Some teachers come over from seniors – 'helps with the transition,' explains head. Links between subjects are common, eg Great Fire of London covered in history and also art; similarly, English texts can spill over into drama lessons. Setting only in maths (from year 1). Big push on handwriting, as evidenced by year 4s writing thank-you letters to a recent trip provider – proudly in pen as pupils are expected to have gained their pen licence by then. Prep has its own computer room but no library, using seniors' instead. Eureka extension programme challenges all, with Eureka Plus for the most able.

At just six per cent, the proportion of SEN pupils is below the national average and, unusually, there are no one-to-ones unless you have an EHCP (currently two pupils); the alternative is TAs providing group interventions and extra help in class. The small class sizes are enough to help those with milder needs, says school. A parent says, 'provision is better than it used to be – a few years ago I had to fight for everything.' Both our tour guides raved about the support they'd received. Part-time SENCo (two days a week) – she teaches the other three days.

As with the senior school, very musical. On curriculum from the off, with specialist teaching from year 3 when they read music, play the recorder and keyboard, as well as compose. These littluns certainly get their vocal cords into gear - every year group sings like a choir! Senior chapel choir available too for year 5s upwards, who sing every Sunday at evensong. Two-thirds learn an instrument – we passed a piano lesson in the hall, although it was the cosy little den packed with ready-to-strum guitars that caught our eye. A 70-strong orchestra, plus ensembles.

Drama recently added to the curriculum for year 5s and 6s, and LAMDA popular. Reception to year 2 do a Christmas play and summer concert including sketches; years 3-5 perform 'mini-musicals' in class assemblies; and year 6 do a full-on musical production – and we really mean full-on, having seen rehearsals of Hoodwinked, where children don't hold back in their performances. The backdrop was professionally painted and there was an accompanying band, with proper lighting and sound. 'Very polished, absolutely incredible,' said a parent.

Art everywhere you look – a joy to see. Dedicated art studio with store cupboard packed to the brim with resources. Graffiti art, sunset-themed T-shirts, pyramid paintings, African masks etc, plus plenty of clay work.

Lunchtime and after-school clubs get their own brochure – over 50 at last count, with all teachers expected to run one. Quiz club, comic book making, athletics, Samba band, summer games, environmental club etc. All the pupils we spoke to belonged to at least one, and many dip in and out of homework club. School has a long history in scouting – they can start as young as 4. Every year group goes on at least one educationally-linked day trip a year, with residential from year 3. We liked the sound of the 'very realistic' gorilla coming in to talk about jungle and deforestation issues – pupils get to do greenscreen work as part of the workshop.

Lots of sport, with own and senior facilities. Shared sports hall and school field. Climbing wall popular. But could

we have stepped back into a 1960s time warp, we wondered, as we looked around the prep gym? Main sports are cricket, football and rugby for boys and netball and rounders for the girls; both do athletics and cross-country. Some parents and pupils say it's all 'a bit gendered' but school says it's on a journey, now with some mixed and girls' cricket and 'we think we have enough interest for girls' football.'

Reflects the area ethnically – mainly white, with some diversity. Parents are friendly, 'with inevitable cliques'. An equal gender split among the children, and great to see so many male teachers. Children are friendly, chatty and open. They know who to talk to if they get upset – form teacher, chaplain or Nurse Debs – and the head is proud of the new post-pandemic pastoral lead role. A few pupils expressed concern about some 'teasing' and 'recent bullying' though added that 'the school does all it can' and 'overall it's a kind school'. 'It's just that bullies can be very good at hiding it,' said one astutely. Food gets mixed views, and some parents feel there could be more focus on table manners. Behaviour well managed - the thought of being sent to the deputy head on a Friday lunchtime is 'enough to put the wind up them,' says head half-joking (we think!). Barely ever reaches a point of needing to see the head himself.

Plenty of links with seniors who come in to do academic mentoring, run the odd club and help with curriculum extension eg by creating challenge cards in maths. 'The older ones are great role models,' felt one parent. And it does no harm on the politeness front either – 'Bye, have a lovely day!' said one tinytot chirpily as we left.

The last word

A caring, happy and traditional school that does a magnificent job of preparing children for the senior school. 'You get the complete package,' said one parent, 'what's not to like?'