



BIRKENHEAD
SCHOOL
SENIORS

Birkenhead School

What The Good Schools Guide says

Headmaster

Since 2016, Paul Vicars MA PGCE (40s). A schoolmaster (15-year stint at Shrewsbury School including deputy head) and an accountant (four years at Ernst & Young). Studied geography at St Andrews. Parents approve: 'A nice guy.' 'Very supportive when you need it.' 'Good team around him.' Appreciated for having three children at the school – means he gets immediate, daily insight into how the school is performing from the pupil and parent side too. Attends as many sporting events as he can, and not averse to flipping burgers at school BBQs – 'gives me an opportunity to chat to the parents as much as anything.'

Enthusiastic and fast talking, he is even faster at noticing – as he did when we ate lunch with him in the dining room – untucked shirts from quite a distance. Presumably quite an enviable headmasterly skill in a trad school. Woe betide you if you're playing ball in the wrong area too, said a pupil. 'You wouldn't exactly call him laid-back,' said one, 'but he's very fair and nice.'

Teaches Beyond the Curriculum, the school's all-singing-all-dancing enrichment programme, to year 7s and 8s – 'means I get to meet all incoming pupils.' Pupils say they see him about most days, and we noticed how many he addressed by name; ditto for the staff – and that goes for caterers and cleaners too, not just teachers. 'If I'm having a bad day, I always take myself off to converse with kids and staff – they always pick you up,' he told us.

Married to Vikki, who teaches history at the school, as well as being part of the Futures team. An easy-peasy walking commute of just four minutes from their home. Has recently dusted off his golf clubs – 'I'm intent on playing more in the years ahead, I used to play a huge amount pre-kids.' The school is always reminding students about the importance of balance, he points out – 'We need to practise what we preach,' he said with just a hint of wryness in his smile.

Entrance

School has grown by over 20 per cent in recent years, moving from three to four form entry at year 7. With over 90 per cent of pupils moving up from the prep (assessed internally at the end of year 5), that leaves around 30 places up for grabs for newcomers. Academically selective, but not as much as the local grammars. CAT4 papers in VR, NVR, quantitative reasoning and spatial ability, plus school references, reports and an interview. 'I want to see some fizz and personality, and if there's a bit of a quirky academic profile or dip I do quite like to take a punt,' says head, 'although we say no if we think they'll struggle.' Pupils come from a mixture of local primaries and preps – more state than private.

Some join at sixth form (usually eight or nine, fewer since Covid) when candidates need 6s across the board, and 7s in subjects to be studied. Some leeway for existing students to stay on if they don't hit these grades but whose attitude is good and they contribute to the school in other ways, eg sport, music, drama.

Exit

Around a quarter depart post-GCSEs, usually to local grammars or the very good local sixth form college. Vast majority of sixth formers to university (right across the country), 60 per cent to Russell Group. Three to Oxbridge in 2021, and six medics. Massive breadth of courses – one mother whose son went into film production told us, 'It wasn't something the school had dealt with before but they went out of their way to support him including finding people in the industry.' Degree apprenticeships on the rise, recently to eg BBC, Microsoft and local companies - 'We make sure we get them back to be flagbearers,' says head.

Latest results

In 2021, 65 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 61 per cent A*/A at A level (82 per cent A*-B). In 2019 (the last year when exams took place), 55 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 49 per cent A*/A (71 per cent A*-B).

Teaching and learning

Value added is the name of the game, so pupils almost always do better than expected. 'Teachers go above and beyond,' lauded one of our sixth form guides when asked about the best bits of the school, and pupils lower down the school agree. 'Good teaching, clinics, extra work, one-to-ones – they really make sure you get whatever you need,' said one. 'Oh yes, they get the best out of them,' agreed a parent. One mother told us the main reason she chose the school was to 'stretch our children more' and she hasn't been disappointed as 'the teachers listen and care and both the class sizes and extra support allow for tailored learning.'

Gladiators were the focal point of a Latin class we sat in on (secutor! hoplomachus! retiarius! thraex!), colourful printouts and use of tech keeping things lively. In a physics lesson, pupils were analysing a picture of a scorching summer's day – 'Who gets hottest out of the cricketers, those dressed head-to-toe in black, those with lots of facial hair and the others?' posed the teacher to a captivated, chin-scratching audience, while in a neighbouring lab young chemists were thinking hard about the best way to measure foam in a test tube. 'Have a chat in pairs for 10 mins then let's reconvene,' we kept hearing – pupils here regularly collaborate and bounce ideas off each other.

It's all part of the independent learning that's encouraged throughout, with a strong ethos of personal and academic motivation supported by oodles of enrichment. The emphasis is to find your niche then achieve as well as you can. It is the norm to read around subjects, be up on current affairs and make links between eg humanities and the arts, science and DT. Extracurricular programmes galore. Beyond the Curriculum covers cookery, dance, mindfulness, yoga, researching, debating, critical thinking, mental health and even etiquette (culminating in a five-course meal with head and other staff in which they have to RSVP and then remember their soup spoon from their sorbet spoon etc – sounds terrifying, but head assures us it's fun). Future Skills involves critical thinking, aptitude testing, research and presentation skills.

Pupils take an average of 10 GCSEs which includes (with rare exceptions) a MFL (French and Spanish both taught from year 7, with the option to drop one in year 9). Latin, from year 7, also gets decent take-up at GCSE. Setting in maths and science from year 8.

At sixth form, all start off with four A levels, with around half dropping to three – 'I think it's brilliant because I wanted to do RE then realised I hated it,' said one student, although she added rather more woefully, 'I don't think they should make you wait until Christmas to drop it.' EPQ available. No BTECs. Special Oxbridge and medics applications programmes on offer, and the Nicholls Lecture Series (every Friday) invites alumni and other guest speakers to address sixth formers on a variety of topics. There are also work experience opportunities.

Learning support and SEN

Currently 70 on the SEN register, of whom 35 receive one-to-one support (including four EHCPs). Mainly dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, ADHD and autism. Asked if they're doing anything innovative around SEN, head simply said, 'No,' though later added, 'We do a good job supporting those that present with mild SEN needs.' Something to bear in mind, perhaps, when many schools are embracing neurodiversity in imaginative ways. Still, parents and pupils seem content with what's on offer, not least thanks to small class sizes (24 max) which allows for differentiated learning. 'They've definitely improved over time and there's more support than there was, as well as help with things like extra time in exams, although I rather resent having to pay extra for the one-to-ones,' said one parent, while a student with dyslexia - and another with ADHD - told us the study skills sessions they'd had were 'invaluable'.

The arts and extracurricular

Creative talent is nurtured – hasn't always been the case, according to longer-standing parents who say it used to be 'all about the academics'. Music is particularly intrinsic to the school, with pupils of all abilities playing in the school's wide range of bands, choirs and orchestras. 'They cover it all – the highbrow music events right through to band nights, there's definitely something for everyone,' said a parent. The 40-strong chapel choir sings evensong every Sunday in the chapel (a different repertoire each week), as well as performing across the diocese. Instrumental tuition available for most instruments, plus singing.

Drama on the up. 'If you'd have asked me a year ago, I'd have said drama was a downside,' admitted a mother,

'but at last they've brought in drama GCSE!' Head says aim is to bring in theatre studies at A level – watch this space. 'Very polished productions,' say parents - notably the recent 15-month-delayed (because of Covid) *Les Mis* which performed a whopping nine times, with some students who'd already left by the time it finally hit the stage, returning to act in it. *Grease* was another recent hit – easy to see why, having seen the YouTube video. Years 7, 8 and 9 also do their own production, recently *Joseph*.

The posters and banners for these productions reveal close collaborative ties with the art department, which itself is flourishing. Studios are flooded with natural light and the art teachers radiate dedication. Even at GCSE level, pupils are encouraged to go their own way, to follow the artists they admire and really express themselves. Likewise with mediums - pottery, textiles, plastics and printmaking all popular. Several A level pupils were going off in art-related directions during the summer we visited, including fashion, interior design and jewellery making. Super DT areas, where a younger class was immersed in making pencil cases. Electronics, product design and VR opportunities all feature.

No CCF, but popular DofE – our sixth form guides enthused about their recent experience of going for gold. Vast number of clubs and societies, with several citing these opportunities as a key benefit of the school – 'There's so much on offer beyond the classroom,' summed up one. Chess, science, sports, debating etc. Mentoring and leadership opportunities are getting a push. Good range of residential trips, though they could be spread more evenly across the departments, according to some parents. Both our sixth form guides had upcoming trips – one to Canada, another to South Africa (both sports tours).

Sport

Literally centre stage, with the manicured field located smack bang in the middle of all the school buildings that surround it. Makes for a picturesque scene, especially on the day we visited when youngsters sported their cricket whites. 'It's lovely to see when you look out of a window or walk from one lesson to another,' agreed a student. Cricket, rugby and hockey are the mainstays for the boys, while girls do netball, lacrosse and hockey. 'A bit gendered,' grumble some parents and pupils but school is mindful and plans are underway for a girls' cricket team. Last time we visited there were also complaints that sport seemed male-dominated, and that's certainly not the case now - 'In fact, I've told the boys they need to catch up!' quipped head. Girls' netball and lacrosse currently riding the wave – 'It cost me a lot in pizza,' laughed the head, who had agreed to buy the U14 team pizza on their return from their final.

Sports hall includes modern gym where even the youngest pupils get specialist weight training via some clever lightweight ones so they avoid injury when it comes to the real deal. Climbing wall very popular. A short walk across a quiet road takes you to more playing fields, plus all-weather tennis courts, rugby, junior cricket and football pitches.

Ethos and heritage

The only co-ed selective school for miles around, the school was founded in 1860 but on its present site in the leafy suburb of Oxton since 1871, the prep joining later in 1883. Further additions and developments over the next 100 years mean the campus now consists of over 20 buildings of various ages spanning architectural styles from aesthetic to functional. Enclosed on all four sides by lines of mature trees, it feels surprisingly secluded given its location in a very residential area. More traditional highlights include the chapel and wooden pavilion, while the uber-modern sixth form common room and café is a fabulous grey and white space where we saw pupils eating, chatting and working. Science labs rather less modern but very well resourced and home to creatures including hermit crabs and stick insects. Whizzy new library will replace current 'badly designed' one in 2022. Some areas could do with a lick of paint – and the year 9 and 10 common room is very tired – but overall these pupils can surely want for nothing (except perhaps a swimming pool, though nobody said so). Food attracts some grumbles (as is so often the case) but we had no complaints.

Transition for newcomers is 'a breeze', according to parents – helped by years 7 and 8 occupying the same building, gently easing them into senior life. One girl who joined in year 7 said she settled in 'very easily', while those moving up from prep are already familiar with the setting and some of the teachers.

Birkenhead went co-ed in 2008 and is now 60:40 boys:girls. Uniform is black blazers and red and black striped ties for all, plus kilt for girls – and there's short shrift for those who roll them up (not much evidence of this on our visit, it has to be said). For sixth formers, it's dark and smart and – unlike lower years – a bit of jewellery and hair down are allowed. Lapel badges denote house membership or positions of responsibility. Atmosphere is inquisitive and industrious. Christianity is a big part of the tradition, with the chapel open to the wider community for Sunday services.

Famous former pupils include Frank Hope-Jones (creator of the Greenwich time pips), Tony Hall (Lord Hall of Birkenhead, former director-general of the BBC), Admiral Sir Philip Jones (former First Sea Lord) and Sir Andreas Whittam Smith (founder of The Independent).

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

Success here is not measured by academic achievement alone but also in other activities. The result for most is feeling busy and happy, 'finding our thing,' as one put it. All pupils meet with their form tutors twice a day – this is also the first point of contact for parents, whether to discuss personal or academic issues. No school counsellor but there is a school chaplain and school nurse, and all year 7s are assigned a sixth form mentor who meets them for a weekly lunch meeting and maintains contact via email. PHSE gets its own focus days (when the normal curriculum is suspended) in addition to weekly sessions. Sensitive types catered for – 'I've got one of those and he fitted in straightaway,' said a parent. Everyone's invited issues are not shied away from, and students told us it's no big deal to be eg trans or gay here – although there's no LGBTQ+ society.

School takes the view that if you sweat the small stuff, you minimise the risk of big stuff happening. Seems to do the trick, bar one or two year groups that school feels need 'bit of a tighter leash' post-lockdown (parents agree). Some inevitable grumbles from pupils who question how wearing small studs in their ears can really matter, or why they have to hand mobiles in rather than keeping them in their bags, but the parents are fully on board – 'They're good at keeping things in check, just the way I like it,' said one; 'Turns out well-mannered, polite children,' commented another. Poor behaviour and conduct lead to verbal reprimands and negative entries in record books – pupils talk about the latter like a criminal record! We were impressed by the 12-week rehab programme for bullying, though pupils feel there's 'not enough prevention'. Around five temporary exclusions a year but no permanent ones in recent years – 'We don't let it get to that.'

Pupils and parents

Pupils are polite, articulate, chatty and confident, though some more quietly so than others – not in a bad way, rather endearing actually. Ethnic diversity reflects the area – mainly white, with a little diversity. More of a mixture socio-economically – everything from footballers to those scrimping and saving to pay the fees, or on bursaries. Lots of medics, and some Old Birkonians (there's an active ex-pupils' association) send their own offspring here. Parents by and large a friendly bunch, though inevitably less sociable than at the prep. 'There's always someone to ask, "What's this about?"' said one. Mostly Wirral families although Liverpool, Chester and north Wales are also in the school address book. Five school bus routes now available. School comms could be more efficient – 'information often comes in quite late,' said a parent.

Money matters

Around 75 pupils currently on bursaries, with approximately 35 of them receiving at least 75 per cent of fees. Mindful of the local area, the Birkenhead School Foundation Trust is aiming for even greater accessibility. Academic and music scholarships available at 11, worth up to 20 per cent of fees. Access scholarships available at 16 for those not existing students who have not had an independent education to date, worth up to 25 per cent of fees but frequently topped up by bursaries.

The last word

Birkenhead is riding high. A bustling, traditional and community-driven school with happy, diligent pupils and a growing focus on extracurricular. Super campus and excellent rapport with teachers too. First rate and first choice not only for local families but increasingly those from further afield. Best suited to motivated types, prepared to toe the line.