

What The Good Schools Guide says

Head of prep

Since 2013, Harry FitzHerbert. Born in Dublin he grew up in Devon and was educated at St Peter's in Exmouth and then Blundells, Tiverton before studying English with drama and music at the University of Nottingham. Back to St Peter's to undertake the graduate teacher training programme, he then taught at Markham College Lima, returning again to St Peter's for five years as housemaster and then deputy head at Boundary Oak School in Hampshire.

Mr FitzHerbert is determined that every child should be well known by the school so they can, 'Flourish, be inspired and be independent.' He told us, 'Hard work is normalised here, it's in our culture but it's also a nice calm environment where everyone is friends.' That's certainly the impression we got on our visit. Mental health and well-being are taken seriously, the head meets with all pupils on the playground and in assemblies, as well as teaching Spanish. There is a school nurse and of course the small class sizes (maximum 24) give teachers the chance to concentrate on pupils' individual needs. 'We focus on our Christian ethos and values. Kindness is vital, it's a happy place and they come bouncing in each day.' Head has had two children through the school. He's a keen swimmer and tennis player and introduced tennis to Birkenhead with a grant from the Lawn Tennis Association.

Entrance

Up to year one children come for a short play and learn session where teachers assess how well they think the child will fit in, whether they meet age related expectations and their engagement with peers. For years 2 to 6, there is a taster day where teachers look at the pupils' attitude to learning, including written assessments in English and maths. The head told us, 'We are not a hothouse but the prep school is definitely academically selective.' The expectation is that pupils will progress to the senior school and increasingly the school hopes that the majority of senior pupils will have come through prep.

Exit

The majority (80 per cent plus) of prep school pupils will progress to the senior school. There is no entrance test but assessment and attitude to learning data are reviewed by senior staff to ensure suitability. A few leave for local grammar schools for financial reasons and very occasionally school will have supportive conversations with those it thinks may not thrive in seniors. Around a dozen each year sit the eleven plus exams for other schools, eight of nine will go but some then return to Birkenhead.

Our view

Class sizes are a maximum of 24 and we saw several with fewer, but it looked to us that numbers will increase to that maximum over the next few years. While there is not a teaching assistant in every class teachers aim to know pupils well enough to meet their individual needs. The head told us, 'We don't just meet their needs, we expand their potential.'

Prep is divided into infants and juniors. Infants are reception to year 2 where the curriculum aims to 'enrich and explore' through the basics, of course, but with nature studies, forest school and sign language as add ons. We watched a great year 1 lesson where every child seemed fully engaged in a literacy exercise using adjectives to write about space. The year 6 pupils who showed us round were part of a reading buddies scheme supporting reception pupils to develop their skills and we could see strong relationships between younger and older pupils. The infant area is a separate part of the campus in between the junior and senior schools. It is part purpose-built and part is in the old school house, with lovely airy classrooms, super play space including a pirate ship and outdoor classroom. They have their own hall, library and allotment, all great facilities.

Languages run from reception through to year six. All pupils study French and Spanish. In years 5 and 6 these are taught by senior school staff. Science is taught in the specialist science room and the lunchtime science club is supported by sixth formers. Pupils are also invited to special science events in the senior school such as Big Bang for year 5s. Classrooms are arranged very formally with traditional up and over desks all in straight lines. We were particularly struck by the mature understanding of year 5 in their history lesson on human sacrifices in the Aztec empire. One pupil told us, 'I really love the academics, especially history, you feel so immersed in the period, I really enjoyed being a chimney sweep in Victorian England.' In a year 6 lesson pupils were reading some of their own, exceptionally good, creative writing with superb expression. Reception through to year 4 complete the nature explorers programme working through a series of awards based on outdoor activities. There is a future skills programme for years 3 to 6 where pupils are taught problem solving, philosophical enquiry and leadership skills. The school also offers a series of half termly lectures, usually delivered by alumnae, on topics such as the film industry, and developments in technology. All this adds to the rounded package at Birkenhead, as one member of staff put it, 'You see warmth, eye contact and heads up as they grow into confident, self assured young people.'

There is a specialist art and design technology teacher using the prep school's own art room up to year 5. From year 6 pupils are taught DT in the senior school. Music is a very important part of the curriculum with specialist teaching from reception onwards and year group singing lessons which means that each year is effectively a choir. Two-thirds of the school have instrumental lessons, 25 per cent are in the prep orchestra and from year 5 pupils can join the Birkenhead chapel choir which sings for assemblies and for evensong on Sundays. Parents told us that the school, 'Develops the children's confidence and ability to speak and perform in public'. There is a strong tradition of drama which has a timetabled lesson in years 5 and 6. All the infants take part in the Christmas production while from year 3 every form presents assemblies and their own mini productions which parents are invited to. Year 6 do an end of year musical in the baronial prep hall and were busy rehearsing Peter Pan as we visited. Around 40 plus pupils take LAMDA examinations each year. These children raved

about their music and drama, 'I just love being on the stage here.'

The head told us, 'Every teacher runs a club, we expect that.' Quite a claim and workload as there are over 50 clubs on offer through the year ranging from judo, gymnastics and dance to creative writing, science, construction and chess. All pupils in juniors take part in a residential. Years 2 and 3 spend one night in Barnstondale, year 4 at Condoover Hall, year 5 to Patterdale and year 6 to Shropshire. As we visited pupils were busily getting the bike ability awards in the playground.

Sports are important but by no-means obligatory and the non-sporty child will definitely feel at home. As well as having its own gym the school benefits from all the senior school facilities a step away including netball courts and the beautiful cricket pitch and athletics facilities. A short walk away at the McAllester site there are rugby and football pitches plus an all-weather hockey/lacrosse pitch. Lots of fixtures during the week and at weekends so plenty of chance to play for the school from year 3 upwards.

Pastoral care is taken seriously. The first port of call is the form teacher of course but the school also has the services of the school nurse and the chaplain. There are groups for mindfulness and nurture and lots of support for younger pupils from students in the sixth form. The SENCO oversees provision for both prep and the seniors with assistants for each section. The primary focus for SEN is training teaching staff to deliver quality first teaching. Teaching assistants are generally only available for those pupils who come with additional local authority funding. Parents said, 'We could not have had better support for our child with SEN, they bent over backwards to help make things work and to make him feel included and at home.' Quite a few children join Birkenhead from the state system and comment on how quickly they feel at home, 'The teachers really helped me to make new friends.' Parents told us, 'Every teacher seems to know the children by name.'

There's a very smart uniform, blazers covered in achievement badges, and worn well. However there were complaints from pupils and parents about the cost of uniforms, especially the addition of a summer uniform and hats. Parents did say there is an excellent second hand uniform shop run by the PTA. Boys must wear shorts up to year 5 and are only allowed trousers in year 6. There are clearly good behaviour systems which the children explained to us. Prep school pupils eat in the whole school dining hall and told us, 'The food is delicious although the dining room can be a bit busy and chaotic.' We certainly enjoyed our lunch. Intolerances and different dietary requirements well provided for.

The juniors are housed in the rather splendid neo-gothic Birkenhead School building from the late nineteenth century with the addition of a more modern teaching block. The beautiful arts and crafts school chapel is close by and it all sits on one side of the idyllic cricket pitch and adjacent to the senior school. It is the picture perfect English independent school. As a parent said, 'I was blown away by the campus, it's just lovely.'

Parents are very enthusiastic about Birkenhead prep, 'When I came to look round I thought, I want my children to be like that in five or six years time; we haven't been disappointed.' All those we spoke to praised the school's communication, not just about their own child's progress but about the significant changes and restructuring that have taken place. Mostly local families but some travel from as far as North Wales and across the Wirral on school

buses which parents pay for and a free bus from Liverpool from September 2026.

Money matters

Means tested bursaries are available from year 2 on. No scholarships.

The last word

There is something a little bit magical about Birkenhead Prep. Happy, confident and well spoken children, super keen and enthusiastic staff, a beautiful environment, great sports opportunities, a real sense that music and the arts matter. This is a lovely school successfully navigating its way through the choppy waters of the current educational environment with a great deal to like.