

What The Good Schools Guide says

Principal

Principal since 2016, Paul Vicars, educated at Epsom College followed by degree in geography from the University of St Andrews. After a first career in accountancy he did his PGCE the University of Exeter followed by 15 years working at Shrewsbury School where he rose to be deputy head pastoral. He demonstrates a great balance between commitment to academic rigour, a determination to grow the co-curricular side of the school and ensuring the welfare of pupils is well catered for. An excellent communicator, parents and staff repeatedly told us they felt they understood the strategic direction the school is going in and were well consulted when important and difficult decisions were being made. At the time of our visit the school was embarking on ambitious plans for expansion of the Birkenhead brand into the international market which has led Mr Vicars to move into the CEO role. He says of his school, 'It's a happy family based community that drives academic excellence but keeps it on a par with the breadth of the co-curricular offer.' On the basis of our visit we certainly agree. With three children at Birkenhead and his wife working in the senior school it's definitely a family affair for Mr Vicars. In his spare time, of which we suspect he has very little, he enjoys time with his family and hopes someday to play more golf.

Since 2026, head of seniors is Tom Whitworth. Mr Whitworth is from Whitley Bay and has a degree in geography from the University of Liverpool and PGCE from Newcastle University. His first teaching post was at Queens Park High School in Chester. From there he moved to Bede Academy, Northumberland as head of geography and senior teacher, pastoral. Then to be assistant head teacher at the Marches School, Oswestry and finally to Birkenhead as deputy head, academic in 2017. He has become head of seniors at an interesting point in the school's development. Following some significant restructuring the school is now settling down to a more cost-efficient staffing structure, a slight increase in class sizes and a slight reduction in the breadth of curriculum offer. All of this, while challenging, seems to have left a tremendous sense of security and loyalty amongst the staff and parents and Tom Whitworth's appointment has been welcomed. He is popular and seen as a safe pair of hands to steer the school as it navigates its way into possible bigger developments of a Birkenhead group overseas. He knows the school and its pupils inside out and has clearly played a significant role in ensuring the curriculum meets the needs of pupils. Mr Whitworth has a deep love of cricket as an umpire and coach and still plays for the local cricket club to maintain his links in the community. At the time of our visit his daughter was in the prep school.

Entrance

Admission to year 7 includes attendance at an assessment day with a test and interview with the head plus references from current school. Historically the school does admit pupils to other years with a dozen or so often joining in year 9. School has capped admissions at 72 (three forms of 24) and is now taking the majority of its year 7 from the prep school. There is a waiting list and we anticipate that for those who haven't been through prep it will become increasingly competitive to get a place in the senior school. Prep school pupils' assessments and suitability for seniors are reviewed before a place is offered but almost all do move on.

For the sixth form there is a minimum entry requirement of six grade sixes at GCSE with sevens in the subjects to be studied at A level. However, head of seniors told us that, 'There is flexibility for those students who are part of the furniture here, who might not quite make the grade but who we know we can get through.' This flexibility was borne out in our discussions with parents.

Exit

Quite a big chunk of pupils (most recently just under half) depart post-GCSEs - school's view is that there is a strong, free and very broad offer from the local college and of course the many state grammar schools. There is also an influx of new pupils at this stage. Almost all sixth form leavers head for university. In 2025, 60 per cent to Russell Group with one to Cambridge for modern and medieval languages, one to medicine, one to dentistry and one degree apprenticeship.

Latest results

In 2025, 45 per cent 7-9 at GCSE; 27 per cent A*/A at A level (61 per cent A*/B).

Teaching and learning

The curriculum is unashamedly academic throughout. While the school prides itself on achievements in the sciences there is no sense that the arts are neglected, the offer feels well rounded. Despite recent changes, class sizes are never more than 24 in key stage three. Languages are very much a continuation of the prep school offer where French and Spanish are taught by senior school staff. After year 9 all are advised to continue with a language, about 75 per cent do so with ten per cent dual linguists. No Latin or classics. General science is taught by senior staff in senior labs to pupils in years 5 and 6 and this continues through until year 9 when separate sciences are introduced for about half the cohort, the remainder continuing with dual award science to GCSE. No food technology or textiles but design technology is one of the most popular subjects at GCSE and has excellent facilities. Pupils also do a beyond the curriculum course in years 7 and 8 which includes financial awareness and the rather splendid etiquette training which sees pupils taking a formal lunch with senior staff in a separate dining room with all the trappings of posh dinner party. We saw some interesting lessons with well engaged pupils. In history pupils were engaged in project work on post World War Two migration to the UK.

The school takes a pragmatic view on the use of IT. They recognise its critical place within the curriculum in preparation for future life and there is a bring your own device policy in

place, however mobiles are handed in at the beginning of the day and not used for learning. Computing is offered at GCSE. The library is modern and reasonably well equipped but did seem very small for a school of this size.

Sixth form

While a higher than expected percentage of pupils leave at the end of year 11 to seek wider curriculum opportunities and no fees within the state system, there are also a lot of newcomers in the sixth form drawn by, 'Small class sizes, better relationships with your peers and the fact that here studying is cool and you don't look silly if you want to work hard.' The curriculum is solely A level with no current plans for anything vocational. It is demand led within reason with good provision in traditional academic subjects. Spanish and French are both available. Further maths and sciences are popular with chemistry having the best results at A level. Product design and electronics are both offered and several students have achieved degree apprenticeships with the prestigious Dyson Institute. There is no computing post 16. A small number (around five per cent) take EPQ and a core futures lesson which will prepare for life beyond school in areas such as presentation and research skills. There is an advanced tutorial group for those looking at Oxbridge applications as well as medicine, veterinary science and engineering. Plenty of opportunities for sixth formers to take on responsibilities including running clubs and assemblies in the prep school and being trained mental health first aid responders. Prefects wear their splendid gowns, known as wings, with pride.

There is a reasonably rigorous entry requirement but this is flexible for home grown pupils. The school wants to see potential and hard work and is prepared to support those who may not quite make the grade at GCSE or who don't fulfil their potential in year 12. The very good A level results attest to the success of this supportive approach.

The sixth form has a modern airy common room which also serves as a study space and snack bar. Lockers are available at a cost of £20 a year. There is lots of additional help through the futures support lessons and the weekly Nicholls guest lectures.

Learning support and SEN

A parent of a boy with SEN told us that her son believes he is 'Living the dream.' SEN support came in for the highest praise. The SENCo works across both senior and prep schools and is well supported by a team of teaching assistants. Typically the school supports pupils with autism, ADHD and dyslexia. Access to upper floors would be limited for pupils with mobility issues, however the school could adapt timetables as much as is realistic.

The arts and extracurricular

Drama is a recent and very popular addition to the GCSE offer and pupils can opt to study it in year 9. Some parents commented that they would like to see better performance facilities but acknowledged that the standard of drama and productions is so good that, while nice to have, a bespoke theatre probably wouldn't make that much difference. There are two big shows a year, one in November for year 9 upwards and one in March for the whole school. A huge commitment for a school of this size and all credit that it is done while maintaining high

academic outcomes and a broad co-curricular programme. When we spoke to pupils time and again they came back to how the shows, 'Bring the school together and take us out of our comfort zone in a good way.' We were also struck by the number of pupils and parents who spoke of the way Birkenhead helps pupils to increase their confidence in public speaking, through drama, debating competitions and reading in assemblies.

Although public exams meant that the art department was out of bounds for our visit there was great art by pupils displayed around the school and the website shows some very impressive work.

Music is thriving. One pupil told us, 'The music department is a second home to me.' There are lovely well equipped teaching spaces and musicals are a special part of the community here. Footloose was the talk of the school when we visited. Many music groups but chief amongst them is the chapel choir which performs in assemblies and at evensong on Sundays. It's quite a commitment but pupils from years 5 through to the sixth form take part enthusiastically and we saw a lovely sopranos and altos rehearsal as well as hearing them sing in assembly. Around 20 per cent of seniors have instrumental tuition.

Trips in every year group, for instance to Belgium, France and Italy as well as a drama trip to New York. All the clubs you could ask for from traditional school sports to Minecraft, choirs, brass and strings ensembles, a rock band, horticultural society, young alpha, lego, vinyl club, scouts and touch typing. DofE is offered from year 10 with around 50 at bronze and 12 at gold each year. Clubs include exam support and academic extension.

Sport

Sport for all is the mantra here. Even pupils who are not fired up by traditional team sports have the opportunity to set up clubs for their own particular interests. The curriculum offers lacrosse (school was a national finalist, finishing in the top four in 2025), netball and hockey for girls with rugby, hockey and cricket for boys. All of year 7 must play in one team or another while the average in other years is around 75 per cent and 60 per cent the sixth form. This is pretty impressive engagement from pupils. Sports tours each year to countries such as South Africa, Sri Lanka, the Netherlands and ski trips to France.

Cricket is an integral part of Birkenhead life. A superb pitch at the very heart of the school campus, picture-book pavilion, great coaching and tremendous enthusiasm from both boys and girls. The school employs four cover supervisors each with a sports coaching expertise in hockey, netball, rugby and cricket. The cricket coaches have very impressive national and international backgrounds.

Facilities include a great four-court sports hall, squash court and the largest and most sophisticated school climbing wall we have seen, plus fantastic playing fields a five-minute walk away. All-in-all there's good sporting provision, although the tennis courts have seen better days and there is no swimming pool.

Ethos and heritage

Birkenhead school was founded as an all-boys schools in 1860. Girls joined the sixth form in 2000 and the school became fully co-educational in 2008. While there is still a majority of boys (53 per cent) school feels very much co-educational, inclusive and there is no sense of any kind of macho, testosterone fuelled legacy. The campus is idyllic, a mixture of gracious nineteenth century villas, the original neo-gothic school buildings, a gorgeous arts and crafts chapel and some sympathetic modern additions all surrounding the verdant cricket pitch and set in immaculately maintained grounds. If you were to imagine the perfect English public school setting, this would be it. Notable alumni include; former first sea lord, Sir Philip Jones, Amazon vice president ,John Bounphry, former director general of the BBC and CEO of the Royal Opera Tony Hall and co-founder of the Independent newspaper Andreas Whittam Smith. The school has also welcomed Vanessa Baxter, one of the first female alumni, as head of science.

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

The majority of parents as well as students told us, 'There is no disruption at all.' Pupils were clear that poor behaviour is quickly dealt with, their learning is rarely if ever disturbed by others and that bullying is not tolerated. Plenty of investment in staff for pastoral care, including a school nurse, and with an emphasis on support for learning as well as mental health and well-being. This is a school where pupils are well known by all staff not just those with pastoral responsibility. The parent of a newly arrived pupil told us, 'They took her under their wing, nurtured her, she's a different child.' Each section of the school has its own spacious common room close to the pastoral staff, although we did feel the year 7 and 8 space was a little dingy. We received some very positive feedback from students about inclusivity; LGBTQ+ students are well supported and parents with neuro-diverse children told us, 'They go above and beyond to make sensible adaptations.'

School lunch for all up to year 11 is compulsory and included in fees. There is a lovely traditional dining room with great salad bar and custom made sandwiches as well as hot food. Pupils from each year group are designated as allergy champions and there is a member of the catering team with a responsibility for managing food allergies and intolerances. Pupils simply said, 'School dinners? We love them.' When inevitable complaints about the standard of food come in, parents are invited to lunch with the principal and this seems to resolve the issues straight away. Uniform is extremely smart and worn well throughout the school.

Pupils and parents

Interestingly over 30 staff have their own children at the school, around 50 in total, including the principal, head of seniors, head of prep and most importantly the marketing manager. We couldn't find a parent with a bad word to say about Birkenhead. It's the only all-through independent on the Wirral but there's strong competition from several very good state grammar schools. Parents continue to opt in to this school because of, 'The academic challenge without hot-housing, great extra-curricular offer and the genuine sense of a family working together.' Lots of middle class professionals (a lot are alumni), many making big sacrifices to afford what they see as a great start for their children. We spoke to a number of parents who had moved their children from other local schools to Birkenhead. Parents told us, 'Everyone listens, my children have flourished in a way they didn't in their old schools.'

‘They took her under their wing, nurtured her and joining in year 10 her achievement soared and she came out with all nines.’ Free buses now come from over the water in Liverpool and from as far as Chester where a pick up at the rugby club has drawn in rugby players. Numerous other bus routes (paid for by parents) from around the Wirral make the school a very accessible option.

Money matters

Small number of academic and music scholarships awarded each year on entry into the senior school which carry a one-off reduction in fees for that year. Plans are in place to extend the scholarship provision, including at year 9 entry and into the sixth form for September 2027 entry. Means tested bursaries for approximately 70 pupils across the school.

The last word

Birkenhead School ticked a great number of our boxes: academic challenge, great extra-curricular offer, sensitive and well-balanced pastoral care, informed and communicative leadership, aesthetically lovely, smart, interested and engaged pupils with no sense of entitlement and very supportive staff. All in all a great place to learn and grow as a person. What more could you ask for?