

The Good Schools Guide Review of Portland Place School, London, W1B 1NJ

Our View

It's smart, relaxed, modern and very London. Not a hothouse but not a dossing place for slouches either. A place for engaged, lively normal kids – privileged, yes but Sloanes, no. Find it before your friends do.

Headmaster

Since 1996, when school opened, Mr Richard Walker BSc PGCE CChem FRSA (mid-fifties). Previously head of chemistry at St Paul's Girls' School, then principal of Abbey College (also owned by Alpha Plus group, formerly DLD Group, which owns Portland Place and around fifteen other schools – PP being the only secondary school in its portfolio). Bluff, breezy, voluble and genial, after thirteen years in post the popular Mr Walker has lost none of his enthusiasm, bonhomie and zest for the future. He is grateful to leave the financial and legal sides of running a school to the Alpha Plus head office and concentrates on the education – in its broadest sense – he provides for his charges. Parents enthuse – 'he's extremely accessible...there's nothing he won't do...he knows all their names... he really seems to enjoy the kids....' There's an appreciation of his open-minded and relaxed approach. As a parent told us, he's 'a compassionate man but not of the awful PC ilk' – witness the clear pastoral system – 'on which we stand or fall' and the truly collaborative feel around the place. 1996 was a different era – even a Richard Walker might find starting a school in the second decade of this millennium a tall order. But that was then; his was clearly an inspired appointment and this most unlikely of schools – given its location and premises – is thriving. Reputedly a Wagner buff, there's not much of the Alberich about him but Mr Walker assuredly is guardian to a bit of a goldmine.

Academic Matters

Avowedly and proudly mixed ability and piles on the value added – 'we're top of the MidYIS GCSE tables,' boasts Mr Walker. Small classes – an average of 18 in years 7-9 – and we saw several smaller ones – and of 15 in years 10 and 11. Smaller still in the sixth. GCSE options include business, computing, sport studies and media – along with the trad subjects although no Latin or Greek and modern lang uptake is less than enthusiastic though all take at least one. Reasons for this include, probably, the sizeable number of mild dyslexics in the school and the high proportion of those for whom a natural second lang would not be the French, Italian and Spanish on offer. 'We have 50-odd languages spoken at home.' Mr Walker determined to persevere with the langs but it's clearly a bit of a crusade. Likewise with RI – very low uptake. At GCSE, 75 per cent get A*-C, 44 per cent A*/B. Some subjects achieve 100 per cent A*-C – these include the sciences, music, art and media. The value added shows at A level where the results are more impressive, most being in the B-D bracket with a decent sprinkling of As. And this after a fair number departed after GCSEs – a trend now on the wane.

Library manned by full-time librarian and it's a nice place to sit and read. Lots of fiction and it's used for competitions, book club and being quiet. As an academic resource it is risible – (school prefers 'needs developing' and reminds us that the individual heads of depts keep library resources in their offices). Good IT suites, good resources for the popular media and film options. Most teachers spoken of warmly – a few clearly less than adept at dealing with livelier pupils. 'My son finds it hard to concentrate in classes where the teacher isn't good at controlling the more wayward elements,' we heard. However, most pupils laud the friendliness and helpfulness of their teachers.

Everyone setted for everything though exigencies of the three sites and timetabling lead to some anomalies eg geog whizz might find himself in the lowest set because his English

needs extra support. However, parents approve – 'a child can work his way up – or be dropped down – they are very flexible,' we were told. School takes a lot of children with mild dyslexia but, apart from general support from the class teacher, no other help is available and there is a staunch policy of no withdrawals from classes (except once weekly for children who have EAL). No screening on admission. However, SENCo oversees general provision and monitoring; 80-90 children perceived as having some kind of LDD (learning disability or difficulty), some have IEPs. Most with more than the mildest difficulties seek support outside school. Inside school, the attitude is healthy – 'I'm not treated as if dyslexia is a crime – unlike at my last school,' we were told. Two of the three buildings have lifts but school will be helpful if someone breaks a leg and move lessons to the ground floor.

Games, Options, the Arts

Everyone told us, 'sport is huge' and we were taken round by a 17-year-old semi-professional footballer! Virtually no facilities on site – a tiny gym and small hall. They are bused or they walk everywhere – mostly to Regent's Park, where there are pitches and courts of all kinds and the results and achievements – given the conditions – are impressive. Football and netball tour of Barbados in 2009, swimming teams win competitions, masses of medals in cross country and local honours in athletics and team sports. Pervasive pride in school sports – helped, no doubt, by classy Olympians on staff. However, most really keen sportsmen and women do their serious sport outside school, we were told – no real alternative. Sport now compulsory to year 12 – (year 12 expected to do one afternoon a week minimum – netball or football). Music and drama similarly 'massive'. Music means, mostly, pop and jazz – a few violinists and woodwinders amongst the jazz pianists, guitarists, drummers and bassists who predominate but music taken seriously in general. Wholehearted, whole school major productions annually – Grease, My Fair Lady, Oliver and Bugsy are recent offerings – not onsite – school has no suitable space, though there is a good drama studio – but in local theatres eg the Cockpit. Also lots of year group plays in which most get involved – and not all are musicals.

Art in the lower school is lively and inventive – we enjoyed aboriginal-style models made of wood and paint along with African puppets and a wonderful mobile fashioned from a clapped-out broom. Art uptake in senior school is small – facilities limited though there is a textiles room and school excels in photography. DT similarly energetic – resistant materials, pewter casting, CAD and CAM, though all in rather small and poky rooms in basement. Lots of imaginative extra-curricular stuff – esp for the sixth. We like the daylong compulsory cookery course and the two-day self-defence course. Trips galore – we have seldom seen such a full programme. Much use made of London's galleries, museums, exhibitions but also of the nearby wider world and the opportunities it offers for field, sporting and other educational exercises – here and abroad.

Background and Atmosphere

Robert Adam – did he but know it! – designed two schools in the UK – Stowe and this one. Portland Place – the road – is a broad, straight thoroughfare in the heart of Regency London – two minutes from Oxford Circus to the south, two minutes to Regent's Park to the north. The road is lined by august embassies – China, Kenya, Poland, Portugal – and the HQs of Royal and learned institutions – architects, physicists, radiologists, anaesthetists. The main school building – Portland Place – identifies itself with a modest brass plate and is elegantly splendid. It is rare for us to compliment a school on its décor but it is a pleasure to do so in this case. Super real blue carpet up and down the stairs – not just on the ground floor for show as elsewhere – magnificent ceilings, cornices, columns, capitals and fireplaces – nowhere more so than in the old ballroom, rescued by Mr Walker from its carapace of false ceiling and fluorescent tubes and very much in use. All in tip-top nick. This building houses the lower years, the hall used for gym and dance, and the top floors – formerly the servants' quarters – accommodate music and languages.

A second building in Great Portland Street five mins away – houses the upper years and has a breathtaking eyeball-to-eyeball of the Post Office Tower – seemingly within grabbing

distance. Harford House – also in Great Portland Street and with a façade resembling that of a corporate HQ – is home to art, drama and science. It's a logistical nightmare – five or seven storeys to be up and down all day, three buildings – and the whole has to be timetabled, supervised and navigated. We suppose everyone to be very fit! Head yearns openly – 'my aim is to have a two-site school. PP will be a prep school from year 4 and we'd have a second building for everything and everyone else – including one room which would house the entire school. It's got to happen.' Apparently, it's high on the agenda for the management. Look out! PP already punches above its weight – we predict the school becoming bigger and more prominent within five years max.

No school kitchen – pupils import packed lunches or order in from local café which delivers dozens of panini etc in little brown carriers. Years 10, 11 and the sixth hang out in the many cafes in or around Gt Portland Street and just love the privilege of this kind of freedom.

Pastoral Care and Discipline

Good use of sixth form mentors for years 7 and 8 – really fosters inter-age group understanding and friendships, especially helpful in so small a school. Solidly structured pastoral care hierarchy picks up and deals with probs but a pervasive sense of everyone looking out for everyone else. People seem to know each other's little brothers and sisters here. Parents praise the home-school communications and especially the termly parents' evenings. 'The teachers are mostly young and energetic,' enthused a parent 'and you really get to know them.'

Pupils and Parents

Far more boys than girls – simply because there are so many girls' schools and co-ed schools in London than boys' schools. (Money there for the making by anyone who feels like starting a boys' school in central London!) Mixed as befits its location. Trad, moneyed independent education veterans, alongside newbies and newcomers from here, there and everywhere blended with those who couldn't get in to the 'academic' schools and for whom PP has been a jolly lucky find. From, now, the whole urban sprawl – no longer just the north and west but around 30 per cent from east and south too. Mostly UK born and based but also from pretty much the rest of the globe, solar system and beyond in a great undivided family. Brains? – yes, though common denominator more palpably pleasure, pride and enthusiasm for the place.

Entrance

Now an intake into year 6 – partly to steal a march on the competition and partly to meet the needs of those who dread the 11+ circus and will do anything to avoid it. Wise move. 'Informal tests' in English and maths and a chat with the head and deputy. 12 into year 6 in 2009. Year 7 has 50 places for whom 120 + apply – a 25 per cent increase 2008/9. Tests in English and maths and a chat with the head. Some places higher up – same format plus additional test in science. 15 come in at year 9. A few join at year 12 – on flexible terms. They come, at 11, from large no of schs – state and indie. Mostly from north, north-west.

Exit

30 per cent have left after GCSE hitherto but the last two years have seen more stayers. Interesting range of post-A level destinations – music at The RA, interior design, fashion and animal management at the newer unis but also physics at Bristol, politics at Nottingham and a couple to good US colleges. Certainly no typical end product.

Money Matters

Five schols for 11+ entry – academic, music, drama, sports, art. All worth 50 per cent of fees. Pretty good for so new a school.