

What The Good Schools Guide says

Head

Since 2017, David Bradbury, 50, BSc MSc PGCE (all from Keele) plus an MA in education from the Open University. A Yorkshireman who came to teaching by accident but is not regretting it over 25 years later. He describes his time teaching in Bangkok as 'an incredible experience of living and working in a wholly different culture' and once back in the UK, rose through the teaching ranks to be assistant head at Alleyne's High School and deputy head of South Hampstead High before speedily saying yes to the headship of Portland Place.

On meeting him, it was easy to understand why he had told us that he 'immediately felt at home here' because he fits both comfortably and confidently into his role, answering all our questions in a relaxed, straightforward way. He came here as the third head in as many terms (never a great starting point for this job), believing that this was a school with 'huge potential and some of the most interesting students I have ever worked with' and parents say that he is someone they can always talk to: 'I really like him, firm but fair, I could chat to him about anything.'

Entrance

The natural entry point is in year 7 but there is one form entry at year 6, designed for parents who do not want to put their children through 11+ or have recently moved to London and don't want a double move. Whilst prepared to accept a wider range of ability than a large number of senior schools in London, they require baseline testing and an interview and say that they place great importance on references/recommendations from entrants' previous schools.

Exit

Students continue their education at eg CATS Canterbury, Brampton College, Wycliffe College, Ashbourne College, DLD College London, Albemarle and Marianopolis College in Canada.

Latest results

In 2020, 46 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 95 per cent 9-4 in both maths and English. At A level, 38 per cent A*/A (72 per cent A*-B). In 2019 (the last year when exams took place) 27 per cent 9-7 at GCSE.

Teaching and learning

More than one of the parents we spoke to felt that the school's image of an also-ran, compared to some of the fiercely competitive academic alternatives, was unfair. One stated, 'Every parent feels that their child deserves to get the best results that they can and this is what the school delivers.' The head confirms this opinion by remarking with total conviction, 'What we do is get the best academic outcome for that particular student.' However, they take a wider range of abilities than is usual in private London schools and concentrate on value added (in the top 15 per cent nationally for the last three years) rather than just the starry results achieved by the academic high-flyers.

Small classes are commonplace and all are capped at 16. When we looked in on lessons the pupil count was often in single figures. Some setting in maths in year 6, apparently a particularly bright bunch this year, with science and English added in year 7. Teachers came in for high praise from a parent: 'some of the lessons sound fantastic and they carry a theme across the entire curriculum'.

We were particularly impressed by the Strive Programme, an initiative leading to extremely well-designed and appealing brochures packed with clear, imaginative ideas on how to expand your knowledge outside the classroom. This was definitely the work of a dedicated teaching staff and the ones that we met laughed at the idea that they might leave when the sixth form closes in 2020. DB has changed the faculty structure for a clearer model that parents seem contented with

and all the teachers were sparky and positive: 'I just love it here, I'm not going anywhere.'

A big push to increase IT with iPads on the way for all in years 6-9, a homework app and an aim to achieve Apple Distinguished School status. All take core GCSEs and double science (a few take triple) but the creative arts, along with business, computer science and media, tend to feature in the top five choices, unsurprising given the creative remit of the school. Not as many takers for languages as the school would like but the head of faculty is hoping that new extracurricular clubs for Arabic, Japanese, Mandarin and Russian will pique the interest of potential candidates, and a fifth of students are already involved.

Results show that students make tremendous progress from their starting points.

Learning support and SEN

They enrol a larger proportion of students identified with SEND than many independent schools, mainly mild to moderate problems (dyslexia or similar), but who still need to be able to operate in a mainstream environment. Having said that, the SEND team has four members and they also have a dedicated EAL teacher for support when students first join. Learning Lab (timetabled) is there to provide help, but one parent told us that the attitude was 'it's almost a badge of honour to have challenges, but it's not true that children are held back if they don't.'

The arts and extracurricular

'Art is brilliant at PP, he's loving it,' enthused a parent, and we felt very at home in the art department at the top of the stairs. Articulate teachers were imaginatively combining learning technique - 'we don't want them to realise that's what they're doing at the start' - with a non-tramline approach to the story of art evolution, and making full use of some of the world's greatest museums and galleries nearly next door. There is also a new design space in the basement, enthusiastically praised - by both the girls, at work on sewing machines, and their teacher - as a great improvement on the previous poky spaces.

Great efforts to get everyone on board musically and they now offer Symphonfree to all year 7 pupils, supplying them with a free musical instrument and lessons for a year. There are choirs, some needing auditions, and they can rustle up almost any form of musical group, barring a full orchestra, for their concerts at RADA studios.

Rehearsals for Bugsy Malone were in full swing all over the school and the excitement was palpable, with about a third of the school involved either on stage, behind it or in the orchestra pit. Few opportunities to bring the surrounding cultural riches into the curriculum are wasted and there are regular outings to the Globe and Unicorn Theatre, as well as visits to BAFTA, the Met Film School, Wigmore Hall and the Royal Opera House.

Pupils are encouraged to join clubs that take place before, during and after school, and they try to offer the options usually only available in larger set-ups. For instance, they have gone ahead with DofE awards despite only the minimum number signing up, where other schools might have made excuses.

Sport

For a school whose outside space would seem cramped for a cat, and whose numbers mean that putting teams together for the myriad sporting activities available is sometimes a struggle, they do remarkably well at sport, with students succeeding at both county and national level in athletics, women's football, baseball and netball, as well as one boy qualifying for junior Wimbledon. Some form of sport happens four times a week including swimming up to year 10, the only slight moan expressed by a parent: 'They work really hard at offering sport but it is a bit of a pain that they can spend half the lesson in the bus on the way to Queen's Park.'

Ethos and heritage

A new kid on the block compared to more established rivals, it is part of the 20-strong Alpha Plus group. This affiliation means that after the closure of the sixth form families can remain inside the group by sending their offspring to Alpha's sixth form college, DLD, now housed in a brand new building.

Portland Place itself is a stately dowager calmly parading in this elegant bit of town between the charms of Regent's Park and the fumes of the West End, watched over by embassies and professional institutions. The opposite of purpose-built and not the smartest in decorative terms, even a bit scruffy, the school operates out of three buildings. Inside the imposing house fronting onto Portland Place, an elegant library on the ground floor is topped by classrooms and attics, now given over to music, whilst the rest of the school operates out of two locations in the parallel street.

This is not an ideal layout but will be improved once they have replaced the sixth form classrooms in Great Portland Street with a canteen and a multifunctional performance area. A new studio for graphics, photography, film and media has already been finished and the lack of outside areas for letting off steam will continue to be more than compensated for by the number of stairs.

We found that parents were taking a pragmatic attitude to the closure of the sixth form, their remarks ranging from 'it's a shame but unsurprising given the small numbers' to 'it would have been so easy to take the soft option, now I'll have to work harder at the next stage'. But it is definitely not undermining their confidence in the school, which is proactively encouraging students to look at every possible option open to them and not railroading them down the A levels route.

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

Always known for the close relationship between staff and pupils, its slightly informal atmosphere compared to some London schools feels comfortable rather than chaotic. With 20 per cent of pupils being bilingual and a sensitive attitude to teenagers, this can never be a conveyor belt school, and the impression that they really dig down to understand each child is unmistakable.

As in all London schools, the spectre of drug use is ever present. The school adopts a zero-tolerance policy to drugs and enforces an uncrossable red-line policy of expelling anyone who brings drugs into the school. The head was admirably open and honest about the potential problem; it would be naive to ignore the reality that drugs are readily available and indeed, in his first year in charge, he had to handle a situation in which two students were implicated in drug use (not on school premises). He made the point that they always do their best to find a way to support teenagers with problems, and one parent's verdict was 'it is a particularly safe atmosphere... they provide a rock, it seems to come naturally.'

External speakers talk to both parents and children on internet safety, citizenship and the current dangers for children growing up in a global city, and the school seems to be fully aware of the need to communicate with families. 'It is an easy school to deal with.'

Pupils and parents

The head classifies the school as a 'London school' not a 'local school', despite one pupil living practically next door, but most of the pupils come from north and west London with an increasing number from Hackney and Shoreditch and the odd one from much farther afield. There are several tube stations within easy reach so travelling from almost any part of London is fairly hassle free.

Parents tend to be professionals in law, finance, creatives, media and business owners with a fair number of working mums and a healthy mix of old hands in the private sector and first timers. As in all London schools, students are drawn from all over the world and PP has a fair number of pupils who do not have two parents born in this country. On average, 12-15 per cent of families

in each year are in London for a temporary stay, although they tend to be on multi-year postings.

Several of the children have come here after unsatisfactory experiences at other schools, with happy results, one parent telling us that her son 'jumps out of bed to go to school' now and the unpressurised environment leads to a lot of noticeably unstressed teenagers.

Money matters

As part of the Alpha Plus group, they have the back-up of a well-resourced operation as well as benefiting from the economies of scale, and there appears to be a detailed plan to make improvements to the school spaces. Eleven scholarships are available at year 7 entry: one discretionary academic and the remainder for music, drama, art and sport.

The last word

A lot of trendy, 'on message', pedagogic phrases are bandied about whenever we visit schools but, in this case, we were entirely convinced that Portland Place really does try to understand each individual pupil and help them find the best possible outcome for their abilities and skills. This is a place that genuinely seems to resist academic snobbery when it comes to guiding their charges onto the next step and parents back their attitude up with enthusiasm.