

Good Schools Guide – Review of Godstowe 2019

Since September 2017, Sophie Green (40s). Warm, serene and so glamorous that we wondered if she was off to the opera after our visit. Previously head of Herries School in Cookham. She has also been director of studies at St George's Windsor Castle, where she prepared pupils for scholarships and was involved in the demanding boarding life of the choristers. She is an ISI inspector.

Ask anyone, pupil or parent, to describe her and we'd put money on them using the word 'calm.' 'I like the fact that she was in no rush to make a big show of making a difference when she joined – she just calmly gets on with doing a great job,' one parent told us. 'She's quietly spoken but make no mistake - everything she says is calmly and carefully considered and usually spot on,' said another. Admired for being a good role model to the girls, regularly using examples of strong females from history in her (very well received) speeches. 'And she's a real listener,' one parent enthused, telling how some families grumbled about parking – 'so she spent two mornings from 7.30am in the car park and then made the necessary changes.' Pupils like her 'emphasis on wellbeing' and that 'she's always reasonable and never raises her voice.' But, most of all, they love her black lab, 'Meg the celeb', as she is affectionately known, who – when not being walked by pupils – lies peacefully in the head's elegant study.

Lives on site with her two teenage sons. Enjoys dog walking, reading, meeting friends and travelling.

Entrance

Despite Godstowe's popularity, school is adamant that it will remain 'first come first served', non-selective. Entry to pre-prep The Lodge (boys and girls) at 3+; most girls move up to the prep (100 per cent the year we visited), with a third class opened up for newcomers in year 3. Other main entry points are years 5 and 7 but girls join all the way through from a variety of local prep and state schools (space permitting) and boarders (who can join from year 3 onwards) from further afield. Boarding can be full time or flexible with many day girls choosing to try it in years 7 and 8 as a taster for senior school.

Exit

Not a specific feeder, with girls heading off to a range of senior schools notably Wycombe Abbey, Cheltenham Ladies', Queen Anne's and Downe House; others to eg St George's Ascot, Rugby, Wellington, Stowe, Haileybury, Tudor Hall, Oundle, Uppingham, Pipers Corner, St Edward's, Bradfield, Millfield, Headington, Heathfield and Marlborough. A handful leave for local grammars at 11.

Our view

England's first girls' boarding prep school and Enid Blyton's inspiration (though not the only contender) for Malory Towers, purpose built in 1900. The grounds make excellent use of a hilly, if a little blustery, site overlooking High Wycombe, with the original pretty Virginia creeper-clad buildings now housing years 3 to 8, plus The Lodge and nursery buildings. The few boys in pre-prep, mostly siblings, move on at the age of 7.

The airy atrium style reception building (buzzing at pick-up and drop-off times – ‘we want parents to really feel at home here’) is a more modern addition to the more rustic Victorian buildings and has a gallery-like atmosphere, setting the tone for the rather artsy feel of the whole school. It also gives a flavour of the wholesomeness that abounds, from the display cabinet of ceramic teapots (year 6) to the fresh-faced girls beaming from the ‘Godstowe in Iceland’ photobooks on the large oak coffee table. As if on cue when we arrived, a teacher practically skipped through reception humming a song from *Beauty and the Beast*; another walked through with a box of pompoms; and the girls actually curtsied when introduced to us.

We found Godstowe to be jolly hockey sticks without the plums in mouths. That’s not to say all the girls are from well-heeled backgrounds, but that they have the boisterous enthusiasm and excitement with very traditional (some might say old-fashioned) manners while remaining thoroughly grounded. Definitely not a school placing importance on hushed tones, girls dash about chatting noisily (we even heard screams of exhilaration in the nursery playground) and when you ask them what a Godstowe girl is, they practically sing in unison, ‘well-mannered, happy and successful.’ Not that girls here are taught to follow the crowd – far from it, they’re encouraged to value their uniqueness and to find the thing(s) they’re good at.

Non-selective it may be, but success is in the air here. Minority (about 15 per cent) peel off at 11 to local schools (parents have to ‘opt in’ to 11+), but unlike many prep schools in the area which hothouse pupils for the sought-after Bucks grammars, this is a true 3-13 establishment, feeding its post-CE alumni into a heady mix of top day and boarding indies, many with scholarships. Which are pretty abundant, by the way, with the current record for one year standing at 54, to 20 different schools. School puts this down to ‘commitment and dedication of staff, who provide quality teaching and know the girls really well’ and is proud not to share the pushy reputation of some of its competition.

French is taught from reception, Latin from year 6 (plus Latin and Spanish as options from year 7) in creatively themed classrooms. Classes in pre-prep school ‘subtly’ streamed, with a maximum class size of 18. Formal setting in maths from year 3 and in all academic subjects from year 6. Girls stay in form rooms for lessons in years 3 and 4, after which they start to move around the school for individual subjects. We saw as many girls learning on their feet and interactively as we did staring at talking teachers. Science particularly exciting, say girls – ‘especially when you get your Bunsen burner licence in year 5.’

General acceptance that everyone learns differently and SEN is all in a day’s work rather than marginalised. Two dedicated SEN staff in place and an excellent EAL programme that we saw in action – mostly for those boarders from the Far East and Spain, with girls’ needs assessed upon entry to the school and timetabled to meet their specific requirements. ‘My daughter has dyslexia and it’s been a complete non-issue getting her the support she needs,’ one parent told us.

Creative pursuits are well catered for, with a dedicated sewing room in DT where girls knock up skirts and dresses for the year 7 and 8 fashion show (‘the highlight of the year,’ said one pupil). Large, bright and airy art room a joy to visit – we saw girls getting messy and smiling from ear to ear as they worked, with every nook and cranny (along with much of the rest of the school) displaying arts and crafts in just about every form you can think of, from glazed sweet packets and shoes to life-size papier-mâché humans that wouldn’t look out of

place in a GCSE exhibition. Head of art considered something of a legend and her specialisation of 3D work is welcomed. Food technology centre opened in 2017 by Mary Berry.

Some 300 girls learn musical instruments and practise daily in bright, well-equipped studios. Parents say the standard is 'incredible.' 'It is not unusual for me to give out certificates for grade 8 with distinction in assemblies and we have two pupils currently working towards a diploma too,' says head. All pupils are encouraged to participate from the age of 3 in regular recitals and choir is compulsory in years 3 to 6. JK Theatre is used for music concerts, as well as plentiful drama productions.

Sports – for which there's plenty of outside space, plus £2m sports hall - includes the usual suspects (netball and lacrosse) taking centre pitch, all to a high competitive standard. Athletics and rounders are also on offer, as are ballet, gymnastics and dance, and new pool will doubtless put swimming back high on the agenda. 'It's a bit gendered,' criticised one parent, although cricket and indoor football are available as school after school clubs. Some parents feel the A and B teams are a bit exclusive.

Parents say boarding is 'exemplary.' 'It's an extremely caring, nurturing and organised environment – you know they'll get all their prep and music practice done and you also know they'll have fun,' said one parent, while another told us, 'They make me feel very much part of the school even though I'm hardly there.' Boarding facilities homely, albeit in need of a lick of paint in places, with dorms (sleeping between four and eight), cosy common rooms and homely kitchens. All have their own large gardens with plenty of outdoor equipment. Newly appointed head of boarding and housemistresses are non-teaching staff, leaving them free to focus on girls' pastoral care. Good mix of full, weekly and flexi-boarders, with strong international mix – some 40 per cent from overseas. Weekend activities keep boarders busy, many of which take place off-site (bowling, skating, theatre, cinema etc). 'I found it hard when I arrived as I missed home, but everyone was so lovely that it was soon ok,' one pupil told us.

The mobile phone arms race was stopped by the clever acquisition of 100 bog standard phones (yes, these do still exist) into which girls can insert their own SIM cards to call home. Thursdays are 'no go gadget' evenings in the boarding houses to further encourage those old-fashioned skills, reading, conversation and game playing. Girls say the best thing about Godstowe is 'everyone is happy all the time' – future careers in PR await. Food considered 'great' but uniforms (well, the cloaks anyway) are a sticking point for some parents as 'it's so impractical in the winter' (head says it's on her list).

For day girls, early drop-off plus breakfast (7.30am) and late pick-up plus supper (7pm) is available for day girls at low cost and the 'enrichment curriculum' (that's after school clubs in old money) offers up to 50 options. These range from the traditional sports, LAMDA and wind band to Mandarin, politics and yoga, with up to 100 girls staying for these. Post CE, year 8s are given a lifestyle crash course to prepare them for a less cosseted existence. Includes classes in self-defence, internet safety and relationships, charitable works, trips out and visiting lecturers. Overall behaviour very good, with LOFT (loss of free time – again, in old money that's detentions) for misdemeanours – 'very rare,' say girls.

Families hail from a 20-mile radius for day girls, with minibuses servicing three routes. Friends of Godstowe (FoG) organises the usual fairs, cake sales and coffee mornings etc, though one parent felt 'there's less of a community than I've experienced at other preps'.

This is a school with energy, where girls are lively to the point of effervescent and focused but not pressured. A passion for creativity is also bred into the core of this traditional school and latent talent is drawn out of those who didn't even know they had it.