



## Royal Grammar School, Guildford

*Transcript of the 2013 review of the RGS which is currently published in **The Good Schools Guide**:*

### **Our View**

One of Surrey's most highly regarded and sought after schools. Cutting edge and working hard to keep its top spot as the best school for boys in the area. It's an environment where boys spark off each other and learn at a fast pace, so it's not for a worrier or a 'scraper-in'. A school for bright boys, who don't have to have been overly prepped or privately educated at primary level.

### **Headmaster**

Since 2007, Dr Jon Cox BSc PhD (forties). Educated at St Mary's College, Southampton, then studied physiology and bio-chemistry at Southampton University. Postgrad course at Royal College of Music (French horn is his instrument) and toyed with becoming a professional musician before deciding on a career in teaching. Joined Whitgift School in Croydon as a biology teacher in 1992 and stayed for 14 years, rising through the ranks to become deputy head before his appointment to the RGS in 2005 as headmaster in waiting.

Hasn't frightened the horses with wholesale changes to what was already a very successful operation, but neither has he rested on the school's considerable laurels. He began with a long 'to-do' list, which he still runs today. 'Every time I cross off a job done, I add something new to the bottom. It's just like a house, something always needs doing,' he says, brandishing another long list of 40+ points he's jotted down to mention during our interview. It covers all sorts – everything from academic innovations, creation of new staff roles, building programmes, community links; the list literally goes on – he's a man on a mission.

Affable, down to earth, buzzing, you sense his delight at having what he calls 'the best job in the country – fantastic boys, inspirational staff, parents on side and appreciative'.

RGS is very much his show and he's great at managing parents – they don't run this school. 'He's very much in control and you don't get the impression he would welcome a waste of his time,' said one mother. 'But equally he's approachable and I wouldn't hesitate to speak to him if necessary.' 'He's very at ease in his role and really cares about the school,' said another. 'A fabulous figurehead for RGS,' agreed a third. 'I've heard him talk to prospective and current parents many times and he's a good speaker, witty and easy to listen to, he handles all that side of things very well'.

Pupils like and respect him - 'he's a nice guy' and 'smart' they say - and seems to know what they are about; writes a comment on every boy's report. 'He never talks down to them,' said one parent.

While absolutely mindful of his school's many strengths, not least its academic prowess, Dr Cox says he takes most pride in the fact that RGS is 'a wonderful community. Mostly you'll ask your son if he has had a good day, not for details about his maths test,' he says. 'There's a great, supportive atmosphere here that really enriches the boys in all aspects of their lives'.

With his own son having recently joined the school, he understands the anxiety parents feel around the admissions process. 'I was out of school when my son did his test and interview, but it was

agony nevertheless, so I do empathise with parents. I know that for lots of them, it's this school or a state school.'

He's working hard to overcome the school's elitist tag and dispel two main myths about RGS – that it's a hothouse and not for the sporty; 'Neither are remotely true,' he says. 'I want people to recognise that we are a school for bright children, irrespective of their backgrounds'. To this end the school entertains children from local primary schools every Monday to do Tudor project work (buildings reflect school's Tudor origins and Dr Cox's office includes a Chained Library) and runs Saturday master classes and a summer school. Service to the local community is a big theme at RGS.

He is married with three children, still plays the French horn and is a keen amateur magician. Also a governor of a school in Watford.

### **Academic Matters**

Outstanding in all respects and very much the academic school for boys in the area. RGS features in top 10 or 20 of league tables of all variety. Pupils are selected from the top ability band, working far above the national average. Maths and science very popular and two-thirds take maths a year early. Maths is also the most popular option at A and AS level, followed by physics, economics and chemistry. Pre-U offered in chemistry and the school has great success with this subject – at the 2012 Chemistry Olympiad RGS achieved five gold, 10 silver and seven bronze awards. English and humanities give equally good accounts of themselves – around a third of A and AS students continue with English literature to A level. Modern languages (French or Spanish from 11+ or German at 13+) compulsory to GCSE. Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Japanese also available. Latin a popular option and Greek also on offer. Positively dizzying success in exams overall – in 2013 93.6 per cent of grades at GCSE were A\*/A while at A level 80.4 per cent of grades were A\*/A.

Dr Cox has conducted an enormous push on teaching and learning, including lowering the pupil/staff ratio. We've heard nothing but huge parental praise for 'exceptionally good' teaching staff. 'Teaching is inspirational – absolutely no dead wood,' they say. The boys are encouraged to be self-motivated, independent learners, and the lessons are intensive and conducted at a brisk pace. It's cool to be bright at the RGS and the boys set themselves high standards as they jostle for position. 'My son was surprised to find himself towards the bottom of the class having been top dog at his old school,' said one parent. 'I really wouldn't coach a boy to come here as it would be no fun if you were struggling', said another, more seasoned parent. 'These boys are a competitive bunch and frankly anything less than an A\* is a disaster for them. But that's really not because it's a hothouse – it isn't - it's simply that they do so well on their own abilities'.

It's a can-do culture – the school talks of 'strengths' and 'development areas' rather than 'weaknesses'. Extra work on offer to help anyone falling behind. 'I know they keep a watch on grades and are absolutely on top of everything,' said one mother whose son had slipped a little. 'He got all the help he needed to get back on track'.

On average two to three homework assignments an evening of around 30 minutes each – 'nothing too onerous,' parents feel. Support available for the handful of boys with a learning difficulty or disability.

### **Games, Options, the Arts**

A broad and balanced offering. Popular option choices include RE (for which read philosophy and ethics) and design and technology (a pupil proudly showed us a 3D laser cutter). No PE or drama taken at GCSE (though a handful take theatre studies at AS and Dr Cox is now promoting drama lower down the school). Not huge numbers doing art either, but what there is is remarkably good and again 100 per cent A\*/A grade work.

Most sport is off site at Bradstone Brook, the school's 20-acre playing field and pavilion a few miles away. School rails against its reputation for being less sporty than some of its heavyweight public

school neighbours in the area and can in fact hold its own. Rugby, hockey and cricket on offer, but football is lacking. 'Such a shame good footballers cannot represent the school,' moaned one miffed mother. But lots do play at break on the Astroturf and Dr Cox points out that, 'We do run football very successfully in the sixth form with A to D teams'. Shooting range is popular. Facilities not whizzy - no swimming pool for example, so boys troop down to the local Spectrum swimming pool (a bit down market for some!) and to Guildford Lido for the annual gala. 'Actually the boys love getting off site for this,' said a mother. 'It's only 10 minutes away and the walk warms them up – plus they get to run past Guildford High (School for Girls)!'

Music now has the space it deserves – a fab new music centre, including a recording studio and rehearsal space.

There's an extensive timetabled programme of extracurricular activities, known as Period 8, which includes all sorts of clubs and societies, house competitions in an array of sports, plays and musical performances, CCF, DoE and even a scout group. It's a school where things happen, lots going on, often until about 7pm.

### **Background and Atmosphere**

Historically a grammar school and still a grammar school at heart. The school was founded in 1509 under the will of Robert Becketingham, and became 'Royal' in 1552 by charter of King Edward VI. Was run as a state school for 30 years after the war, but returned to the independent sector in 1977 rather than become non-selective. Charming tall, white 450 year old building on one side of Guildford High Street (includes Chained Library and various public rooms) while on the other side of the street the school buildings date mostly from the 20th century, although pleasing facades mean there's no horrid 60s look to them. The site is a little cramped, but fortunately RGS boys have manners and respect, otherwise it could be mayhem. Pupils are respectful of staff, hold doors open for each other and parents say they relish knowing where the boundaries are and settle into what is expected of them. 'The school understands them, how they learn and gets through to them in a way that switches them on and makes them responsible for their own studies,' said one parent. 'They really play to their strengths.'

### **Pastoral Care and Discipline**

Although a non-denominational school, its ethos is firmly based on sound Christian principles. Parents describe the school as very supportive. Senior staff operate a pastoral data base and a 'care list' of boys to keep a special eye on. Parents feel their sons form good relationships with each other and across the year groups. 'They bond really well', one parent told us. 'And it's a joy to see'.

Dr Cox claims to have improved the behaviour of many a 'scallywag' – 'I'll give them some responsibility, that generally turns them around'. In the grand scheme of things any bad behaviour is of the mild variety. These are regular boys, school appears very on top of things and is quick to clamp down on anything untoward with the occasional incident of the argy bargy variety firmly and quickly stamped on. Nothing serious enough to warrant exclusion in the last few years. A benevolent atmosphere, with no hint of a heavy hand. 'I think we do a good job of selecting them in first place and sussing out their attitude to work', said Dr Cox, who for all his bonhomie, is no soft touch – 'They really don't want to come to me for a telling off,' he acknowledges. 'But I think they know I am basically on their side. These are impressionable young men, finding their feet in the world. I see our job as being to correct their behaviour. I'd rather they made their mistakes here, before going off into the world'.

### **Pupils and Parents**

School's town centre, close-to-station, location means it attracts families from some distance away, involving a few quite complicated train journeys. Some parents are really discerning (there are plenty of good independent schools in the area, although no other single sex boys' day schools). For

others RGS is their only independent option and if their sons don't pass the exam, they will stay in the state system.

Latest parental survey attests to parents being happy with their choice. 'There's a pretty good mix of boys here, with the extremes probably drawn to the centre by the camaraderie and sense of "we are grammar school boys with a shared identity",' said a long-standing parent. 'No outlandish types among boys or parents' - although some quite quirky, dare we say eccentric, boys find a happy home at RGS. Generally a nice broad spectrum of society, all bright, but a mix quite reflective of life generally. 'The longer he's there the more I am happy,' a parent told us. 'The school seems to have had a very insidious effect that has turned him into a lovely young man. They're not swotty and snobby, but a down-to-earth, nice group of lads'. Boys we came across were very courteous, not super smart, just regular teenage types, but seemed friendly and happy as they milled around.

Parents pleased that they don't have to crack the whip at home; it seems that the school sorts their sons out to be completely self-sufficient. 'These boys are the real thing from an academic point of view - they are not arrogant and don't grow up believing the world owes them a living,' says Dr Cox.

### **Entrance**

Tough - has one of the highest academic hurdles in Surrey. On average there are 350-400 applications from boys from almost 100 local schools for 140 places. All sit exams in English, maths and verbal reasoning plus an interview 'We're looking for potential,' school says. Advice from everyone we spoke to is 'don't coach, other than a little exam practice'. 'You'd be miserable here if you'd just scraped in,' summed up one parent, speaking for many. 'Even a bright boy who was absolutely top dog at his old school might well find himself 25th in the class here'.

By and large the school is happy that they get admissions 'spot on'. Dr Cox can only recall one or two boys who subsequently couldn't cope with the academic rigour of the place. At age 11 the majority come from the state sector, reflecting the relationships built up with local schools. Then at 13+ another 45/50 boys join from prep schools, with Lanesborough the major feeder school, sending around 30 boys a year.

Don't expect red carpet treatment when you visit. 'Everyone is very nice and it's well-organised, but they don't have to try very hard', one mother said. 'We visited other schools where we got more special treatment because they really need to fight to get families to choose them - RGS are in a strong position because they don't have local competition.' Dr Cox sees all prospective parents himself - can be 20 or so a week -and unsurprisingly he has a great conversion rate. NB After an interregnum of a couple of years when no sports scholarships were awarded, RGS is introducing scholarships for sport from September 2014.

### **Exit**

Almost all to their first choice of university. Thirty-one boys to Oxbridge in 2013. Many to Imperial and Durham (which can be harder, Dr Cox points out) and the rest as you would expect to other Russell Group heavyweights including notably Exeter, Nottingham, Bristol, Bath and Warwick.

### **Money Matters**

Lower than average fees, with the school working to keep them low. Appeals to parents who don't have the funds for more expensive schools. 'Proper' bursaries include money for uniform, sports kit and books, 'There's no point otherwise,' says Dr Cox. A few years ago RGS could not give bursary money away, but now there's a good take up following the establishment of better links with other schools.