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THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE

RGS Prep, Guildford

Transcript of the 2021 review of RGS Prep which is currently published in The Good Schools Guide:

Our view

A school that is very good at producing bright, focused, musical, happy and well-mannered boys. Parents and boys appreciate the well-established Values and Learning Habits promoted through the school to encourage things like perseverance, independence, reflection and empathy. 'It's what drives out teaching and produces well-mannered boys,' says the head, though he is refining the 22 values to fall under six headings.

The move to year 6 exit has been handled smoothly with teachers now fully focused on teaching to 11+ level, though it's not universally popular with parents: 'At first I thought it was no big deal – now I think it's sad that boys cannot stay "younger for longer" with two more years at prep school,' reflected one.

A common thread in parents' comments is that the school really 'gets' boys, and structures its approach accordingly, with short, focused lessons and lots of breaks to let off steam. Setting for maths from year 5, and there's a scholarship group for English, maths, sport, music, drama and art, plus a gifted and talented register. The head plans to expand the scope of this register under a new head of inspire, so that it looks beyond traditional academic excellence to areas such as archaeology, cookery, coding etc, fostered through a new enrichment week in the trinity term

Boys are well prepared for year 6 tests with specialist VR and NVR practice (and a school subscription to the Atom practice platform) but parents support the school's claim that such tests do not become too big a deal – 'It's just the norm, they make it very every day.'

The style is fairly traditional – most of the classrooms are organised with desks in rows, although the atmosphere is lively within. Boys are taught from the age of 8 in a proper science lab and the DT department – which has some cutting-edge kit – is another favourite area. 'The boys often come home full of chatter about a lesson or activity during their day,' said a parent.

Children study three languages from year 5 – French, Spanish and Latin – although occasionally boys with dyslexia, or who are struggling, drop Latin. Dyslexia — grasping

literacy, phonics and spelling — tops the tables in the learning support department as the thing they see most, for which work is done with the Read Write Inc literacy programme. There is no charge for LS help and further LS support from RGS is anticipated as the school becomes RGS Prep.

New head has ambitious and compelling plans to develop wellbeing from Sept 2021, being acutely conscious of the mental health crisis amongst young men in particular. 'I don't want a one-size fits all, bought-in package,' he says. 'I want it to be really directed and considered. I am deeply concerned by what has happened [to children] in lockdown. We need mental health first-aid trained teachers and I'd like to create a hub that can offer expertise to other local schools.' The retiring head of pastoral will be replaced with a head of wellbeing and the head's vision is for a proactive department that offers things like friendship support networks, support sessions for any child facing a bereavement or other challenges at home etc.

The school already runs Lego play therapy sessions etc for boys who wish to work on social skills, 'but we're not as full of bright, socially awkward boys who are good at music as people think,' says head. 'There's a club and a friend for everyone here.'

He is also eager to revive shared activities with GHS and Tormead girls' schools very close by — particularly useful as the spotlight falls again onto girl/boy relations and mutual respect — as soon as Covid allows.

From year 5, all teaching is by subject specialists, and exams are introduced. There's a study skills programme in year 6 that helps with organising, revision techniques and more: 'We spend a lot of time teaching them how to learn, and getting them ready for the mental and emotional side of life and exams.'

The school is easily accessed from the A3 with no winding country lanes to negotiate — the corollary to this is that it doesn't have the easy parking and rolling fields of preps deeper in the country (so no Forest School or on-site swimming pool). Hence the parent gripes tend to be over compact sports facilities and nightmare parking, exacerbated by two other independent schools in close proximity. The school does its best to ease this with a one-hour window for morning drop off between 7.30 and 8.30am, a breakfast club for early arrivals, and children of all ages may stay until 6.30pm. 'You will turn up and find 50 boys quietly doing their prep, I've always been impressed by that,' said one mother.

The pre-prep department is based in another Edwardian house in a parallel road. It has attractive play areas, including an outdoor classroom called Boyzone. This has its own bird hide, wooden staged seating for drama, and playground toys. The main playground has wooden trains and boats to play in, a covered cave area, and a planting area for the popular gardening club. The pre-prep has its own dining room and everyone from reception up is expected to clear their own plates.

Lessons show high levels of engagement – ‘We are learning to use a ruler, follow instructions, and make predictions,’ one year 1 maths student told us solemnly.

Parents rave about the teaching. ‘They work them hard but do it well. There's fun as well.’ In fact, an otherwise glowing 2019 ISI report commented that the school could develop ‘the variety of challenge work to an even greater extent for the most able’.

The pre-prep curriculum includes French from reception and swimming from year 1. The school provides 18 choristers for Guildford Cathedral (boys are invited to join at age 7 in year 3 and receive a bursary which reduces their fees). Hence the sub-organist from the cathedral works with and talent spots from the year 2 chamber choir.

As is usual in a chorister school, that musical commitment filters down. There are 100 boys in the school choir, 60 in the chamber choir and the carol service includes pieces in Latin, French and Spanish. A hefty 70 per cent learns an instrument. The school runs its own string scheme in year 3 which enables every child to try three string instruments in small groups, in rotation, which encourages take-up though the oboe is also popular currently. An imminent change is the integration of rock music into Year 6 music lessons now too — ‘We do so much that is traditional and formal; it will be a chance to let their hair down,’ says the head.

‘We win more than we lose,’ says the school about its sport, but it is not elitist — ‘Having a go is avidly encouraged, and B/C/D teams get plenty of matches,’ say parents. There are some Saturday tournaments and overseas sports tours — the last one a football tour to Milan. After-school club sport (including things like yoga) will now be run by external provider Sport 4 Kids to inject fresh ideas and energy and free up some time for core staff.

There are around 50 extracurricular clubs — ‘perfect for boys,’ according to parents. Favourites include an Airfix club, coding, and speedy runners. We were intrigued by castle club, in which boys both study and build models of their favourite designs.

The pupil intake is ‘more diverse than Guildford,’ according to the head but — in partnership with RGS — the schools have recently had their marketing material, recruitment methods etc independently reviewed with diversity in mind: ‘We’re doing well but not resting on our laurels.’

A lot of dual income parents in leading professions feature among the parent body, who are largely local and sociable, helping to eg organise a school fair each term, plus the usual quiz nights and parents’ suppers. Parents also report commendable interaction between the boys and their local community, litter picking or giving concerts (live or online) with local care homes etc.

Head

Since September 2020, Toby Freeman-Day (30s), formerly deputy head at Guildford High Junior and previously a housemaster at Eaton House School. Prior to that, he was a class teacher at Northmead Junior School.

The son of a teacher ('My father is a lifer — he's taught for 40 years in Guildford'), he is also a Guildford man through and through. Educated at a local state school he was able to scrutinise the reputation for RGS and its feeders first-hand by taking part in RGS-run masterclasses for state schools on Saturdays. 'They were excellent, engaging, lessons like I'd never had in my state school. I found it all friendly and open.'

Developed a taste for teaching while helping at his dad's school, so did a PGCE after reading archeology and history at Southampton. Taking up his headship mid-pandemic obviously posed challenges, but he is making up for lost time by doing as many lunch, break and door duties as possible — and he teaches PSHE: 'It's really important to know the boys at that seminal time.'

Has big shoes to fill (his much-loved predecessor having left to set up RGS Dubai) but made a positive first impression with parents who find him 'personable, likeable' and appreciate his grasp of the school's treasured values system.

Energetic and warm, he has clearly thought deeply about what he wants to do next with this already successful school (more of which later). On a personal level, he plans to learn the trumpet alongside boys in the school and 'make it clear that you can be a lifelong learner, a beginner at any age. I'm not musical at all but it strikes me as an instrument that can bridge the gap between classical and cool.'

Lives off-site with wife Frankie and their two young children. Enjoys playing or following rugby, as well as hiking, biking and kayaking. As with so many of the prep heads in boys' schools, there is a big kid in him still, a great grounding for working with the real thing.

Entrance

Focus on the key entry points (nursery, reception and year 3) to give yourself the best chance of a place. The school is currently full with a waiting list, so otherwise you have to rely on someone leaving. Good news is that the school has added a fourth form to year 3 as part of its move to a year 6 finish (previously year 8).

The school is selective — roughly 70 per cent of leavers go on to the Royal Grammar School (RGS) Guildford, one of the top performing boys' schools in the country. Yet it also feels as if the new head is eager to avoid type-casting. Parents visit if they know they have a bright child, but also agree 'there clearly is a range of ability' and Mr Freeman-Day stresses 'you don't need to be top five per cent to come here'. He says one of his biggest challenges is the 'don't even bother sitting the entrance exam belief' if your son isn't top of his class. Instead, he says he's looking for 'engaged and engaging boys, wanting to learn. We can work wonders with that.'

For nursery and Shell (the school's name for reception), selection involves a boy coming in for an hour as part of a little group. The school will look at how he responds to a set of tasks, and his social skills. For entry into year 3 boys come for a familiarisation afternoon of sport, music, team building and social activities, followed by academic tests at a later date.

Exit

Strap in for the long haul financially as it's rare for a boy to go on to a state school. With the last year 8 pupils having now left, pupils are more focused than ever on RGS as the destination of choice — the leavers form up to one fifth of the pupil cohort. Pupils typically apply to three secondary schools, however, and there is no shortage of choice around here with Reed's School, Reigate Grammar, St George's Weybridge and St John's Leatherhead, Hampton etc also nearby. But even a scholarship offer at one of these rarely trounces the offer of a place at RGS.

Money matters

Bursaries are available up to 100 per cent from 7+. The school is assiduous about keeping these confidential. Nobody besides the head and the financial director know who is on a bursary: 'We promise there will be nothing over the compulsory extras; everything is very transparent.' Costs for summer term residentials and extras are split across the year to help parents budget.

The last word

'I feel my son will leave with a great learning ethic – he will have that now for life,' said one happy parent. 'They certainly challenge the mind and make learning fun,' reckoned another. Space constraints may prevent some popular trimmings like Forest School, but you will be hard pushed to find a bad word spoken about the all-round care and education delivered here. There is no danger of an able child being under stretched but more middle-of-the-road children thrive here too. 'It really hits the nail on the head – there is nothing more I could want in a prep school,' attested one parent, and you can't get better feedback than that.