

# THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE

## The Good Schools Guide

### Helping you make confident choices for your child's education

Navigating the world of education can be challenging, but you don't have to do it alone. We visit the best schools, interrogate the heads, speak to pupils and parents and challenge the marketing hype. The result? Impartial, straight-talking and thoroughly researched school reviews, for which we are famous.

We can help you choose the right school for your child. Click [here](#)

### What makes The Good Schools Guide unique?

**Each school in The Guide is selected on merit alone. Schools cannot pay to be included and have no influence over what we write. We always tell the truth.**

When we heard back in March that Charlotte Phillips was intending to visit us with the potential to write about the school for inclusion in The Good School's Guide we were delighted to know we would be getting recognition for all that we do. She requested a selection of parents to informally interview and spoke to a whole raft of pupils and staff during her day long visit to us on site. After copious amounts of notes made, she has produced the following report which will be shortly on The Good School's Guide website for all enquiring parents to access.



**Kingswood House School 56 West Hill, Epsom KT19 8LG**

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**Number of pupils:**

**253: 226 boys, 27 girls aged 4-16**

### ***The Headmaster***

Since 2017, Mr Duncan Murphy. His first solus headship after a five-year stint as head of the prep department at Claremont Fan Court School. Before this, posts of increasing seniority at other well-regarded Surrey preps – Cranleigh followed by Parkside and St Andrew's Woking.

With several senior schools adding years 7 and 8 entrance, plus the impact of the pandemic, Mr Murphy already had a few extra plates to spin. Throw in (false) rumours of the school's imminent closure and a planning application (turned down after furious protests by locals) and you have to admire his breezy stoicism in describing this as 'an exhilarating challenge at a most exacting time.'

He - and the school - have come through this in fighting form. The school, which now goes to 16, has carved out a distinctive niche as academically focussed but inclusive, a place where children can succeed and flourish, courtesy of top notch learning support and pastoral care.

So far, it's all going swimmingly, with finances secure, numbers up, GCSE results notable for adding value and parents absolutely thrilled. Going co-ed (now around 30 girls) is 'the best thing we've done.'

Though he no longer teaches, he's enmeshed in the life of the school, turning up to events but standing aside so others can shine. 'Doesn't make a big show and take over,' says one. Listens and gives parents space to say how they feel without being rushed. 'You don't feel your time is up,' say parents.

His regular video blog gets decent audience figures compared with other heads – who routinely score zero views. Parents, who praise the topical content, confess that 'Mention in Dispatches' naming star pupils of the week is the clincher. (We enjoyed the GSG namecheck after our visit).

Pupils – always welcome to talk to him, even has low level door handle to aid access - didn't always see a lot of him (some parents echoed this – unusual in such a small school) but thought he led a mean assembly ('interactive') and would always check on how children were if he felt they looked unhappy.

A two-desk head (the larger used for formal moments, like distribution of good work stickers), he has prints by his favourite artists (Lowry and Turner) on the walls and assorted (cheerful) clutter elsewhere – a bear on a chair, sample uniforms on stands (though 'I'm very tidy,' he stresses).

In theory doesn't work weekends - 'This isn't a lifestyle but a job,' - though 'Christmas Day is the only day I don't check my emails.'

While he's successfully renegotiated the lease, the closure rumours have resulted in a fall in admissions in the youngest years, so stabilising numbers is a priority. He'd also like to build a sports hall and is aware of (though won't be drawn on) the fervent wish by many parents to add a sixth form.

A keen sportsman, he winds down by coaching teams at his son's school, playing football for a local club and running.

*'When I walk away, it will be when the school is in a really strong position,'* he told us. Well, he must feel that he's half-way there as he's stepping into a *'more strategic role'* – still involved with the school. The new head joining from early 2024, is Mr Matthew Bryan who joins from Longacre Prep School, where he is the head. Until he joins, Mr Liam Clarke, assistant head at Kingswood House, is the interim head from September 2023.

### **Results**

In 2022, 35 per cent of GCSEs were at grades 9-7.

### **History and Ethos**

Founded in 1899, Kingswood House School moved to its current pleasant site close to central Epsom in 1920. Since then its swapped boarding for day (1960s), added a senior department (2015) and become fully co-ed (2021).

Bar the occasional scuff mark - inevitable when school shoes and white skirting boards collide – the site is clean and tidy and though the acreage is modest (this is no landed country prep), it's more than adequate for the school numbers, especially in summer and autumn term when (mud levels permitting) pupils spill onto the decent-sized playing field at break augmented by covered play area for younger prep pupils and an adventure playground for all.

Buildings span the decades, from 1970s finest to attractive contemporary low rise classroom blocks (look out for the bricks carved with leavers' names, including alumni Richard Rogers, Quentin Crisp and Nicholas Witchell),

Have retained and repurposed where possible, with the former cricket pavilion used for DT, for example. Though some of the spaces are on the compact side (main library has just room for a single, slightly prim sofa), it's all well organised, with many classrooms sensibly partitioned so classes and year groups can be combined.

While it will never be the first choice of parents motivated principally by stellar academic results or dinner party bragging rights, it has carved out a niche as a truly inclusive school where pupils (often crushed by previous educational experiences) can blossom, start to love school and do well.

Did the absence of lush facilities and rolling acres matter to parents? Not remotely. The school feels *'Homely...like an extension of your home,'* says one. *'I sometimes think that the quiriness of the building adds to the nurturing of the child.'*

### **SEN and Therapy**

Knock-out support. Whether or not you have a neurodivergent child (and 60 per cent do) parents are blown away by the level of inclusion.

There's *'An ethos of respect and acceptance,'* says the school, with support timetabled and staff increasingly open about their own challenges. For children who were previously *'told they were stupid,'* this can be a revelation and, as anxiety levels diminish, so can support requirements. One parent talked of their child,

*'Going from struggling to really coping,'* in core subjects within first year at the school – an impressive rate of acceleration.

While the SEND team looks beyond the reports during the initial assessment, pupils must be able to achieve good GCSE passes, with appropriate accommodations. So it may not be the right school longer term for anyone who struggles to access the curriculum and where there is a widening gap with peers. *'We would have a conversation with the parents and will always support with finding an alternative placement,'* says the team. Will help to identify special schools and signpost to legal advice when not forthcoming from the local authority. *'Parents go on a journey and we walk alongside them'.*

Of the 35 pupils with EHCPs – huge number for a mainstream school - only a tiny number require one-to-one in class support (occasionally happens if specified in an EHCP, otherwise very much the exception because of the small size of classrooms and classes).

Can support pupils with SpLD, speech and language difficulties (though wouldn't be able to support a pre-verbal child), high functioning autism (where children are academically able but struggle with social communication and may have associated learning difficulties), very mild PDA and mild physical difficulty. Since the pandemic, school is seeing an increase in pupils with anxiety, and ADHD (diagnoses are on the increase, especially in girls). Trialling therapy dog – can be particularly helpful where pupils are facing loss or bereavement.

Extensive resources, from clued up TAs - *'Very good at seeing where someone needs help,'* - to therapists – three speech and language, two occupational therapists – self-employed but work on set days each week so always somebody in school. Literacy and maths tutors support children one to one or in small groups.

Support delivered either in main building study centre, with OT sessions in the separate Hub - a compact wooden cabin in the grounds. We watched a relaxed, chatty pupil working on fine motor skills to *'make my hands stronger,'* with therapeutic *'cool and wavy'* music playing in the background.

Chill out room at break time, with child-led board and card games offering an antidote to the hustle and bustle of the playground. There's close liaison, formal and informal, with teaching staff, extending to invitations, pinned up in the staff loos, to SEN drop-in sessions about EHCP requirements and quality first teaching strategies.

Compliments from parents come thick and fast. *'So supportive.'* *'To have it all in one place is a godsend.'* *'Unbelievably reassuring, I walk away knowing my child is safe and happy and learning.'*

### **Entrance**

School makes initial decision when child has a learning difference by reviewing specialist reports/EHCP – but non-refundable registration fee has to be paid first. Assessment for every year group via taster morning and informal assessment (maths and literacy) by SEND team on one-to-one basis. May offer a place (sometimes on a trial basis) conditional on accepting recommended support (at extra cost). Can enter at any point during the year if there is a place. Feeder schools include range of state and independent schools, mostly local.

### **Exit**

Very rare that a pupil would be asked to leave but when it happens, it's usually for behavioural reasons, though never until all attempts to help are exhausted – and the head always tries to place them elsewhere. Prep leavers in 2022 to independents (including Box Hill, St Paul's, Frensham Heights, Reed's, Whitgift, Epsom College) and state schools (St Cecelia's, Cobham Free School). Post 16, vast majority to state sixth forms (Esher College most popular in 2022, also Brooklands, Woking, Kingston). Others to independents (included Claremont Fan Court, Box Hill, Seaford College, Slindon in 2022). Most then go into higher education (includes place at Cambridge – for which the school claims at least some credit). The rest into

work/apprenticeships which can be a bracing experience after the sheltered environment here (not unknown for school to help with informal coaching to ease the transition).

### ***Teaching and Learning***

For prep pupils, core subjects plus art, French, music, DT as well as touch typing. Lower prep also enjoy forest school (complete with hot chocolate and welly walks). GCSEs, covered over three years, are chosen in Year 8 (eight or nine subjects for most). Unusually, encourage dyslexic pupils to keep going with a modern foreign language - can be beneficial - dropping for extra literacy support if needed.

The goal is to build independent learners, achieved through a combination of technology (Chromebooks for older pupils); responsibility (pupils missing homework deadlines will be asked what happened and what they'd do differently next time), lesson length (most 50 mins long - enough to ensure that everyone is on board with a topic before moving on) and small classes (maximum 18, average 12, with one teacher to every 9.4 pupils). Year and form groups are sometimes combined and there's flexible setting, based on ability and support requirements (learning support team closely involved in the process). Over 40 pupils speak English as an additional language (though most are bilingual) and are supported in class (iPads with Google translate).

Pupils praise teachers who *'just care,'* says one. *'If you feel scared to answer a question, then get it wrong, they will tell you it's OK.'* *'The only school where teachers just spoke to the child and ignored us,'* says a visiting parent approvingly.

Pupils may not learn to love every subject - *'I can't lie and say I adore everything,'* says one – but it won't be for want of trying, with teachers often going several extra miles to win them over (they can have that pain au choc at breaktime but only if the entire transaction is in French).

*'Every teacher is good at trying to make the subject your favourite,'* says one pupil. One felt that, like some premium educational supplement, staff could *'boost your endurance...and help you get to that dream career you've always wanted.'*

We enjoyed a PSHE class where seven to nine-year olds were evaluating images of potentially dangerous situations and deciding when to involve others. How best should an injured man in a kitchen be assisted? *'You shouldn't help him because [he] looks angry and might hurt you,'* said one. (We rather agreed). In a Year 11 maths algebra lesson, the teacher radiated the air of someone who had genuinely saved the best bit for last as a rare treat. *'Now comes the enjoyable part...'*

### ***Art and Extra-Curricular***

You might have to hunt for displays of pupils' creations round the school (this isn't a show-offy place). Worth it as artwork is high quality and fun - including portraits of faces created by Year 7 pupils using string, crayon and colour wash and newsprint collage, while GCSE DT projects, including a dog kennel and home office unit, both (intentionally) collapsible were similarly inventive.

While there's also plenty of music making - several choirs, one audition only, a flourishing rock band and good range of instrumental lessons (percussion, piano, wind and brass) – the play's very much the (big) thing here.

So inclusive is the approach to annual productions (held in professional theatre at nearby college) that former pupils and ex-teachers join governors and parents to lend a hand. *'With our ski trip, probably the biggest example of the school community coming together,'* says the head.

'Joseph' – a recent endeavour – involved 60 cast members plus backstage crew, drawing in children who would previously have run a mile. *'My first ever production and it felt amazing to be able to be on stage,'* says one. *'Even if it wasn't my rehearsal I came down because I loved feeling part of the community.'*

Parents are delighted. *'Boosted self-esteem – brilliant,'* says one. Keen pupils have now set up their own drama club, creating and performing their own scripts. Others work towards Lamda qualifications which *'...make me a better person,'* says a pupil.

### **Sport**

Sport features regularly on the timetable and isn't *'all hoops and beanbags,'* says a parent. Many children who arrive with mixed feelings about team games learn to tolerate, if not love them. Excellent match teas help, thought a parent, but more important is the sport for all philosophy, ensuring that everyone *'gets a chance to shine [in a match],'* with fixtures for everyone down to D teams (results respectable), while after school practice sessions are open to all.

Grass pitch and two multi surface areas on site, with home fixtures played at local venues close by. Main team sports are football, rugby, hockey, netball, cricket – most boys only though mixed gender and girls' squads increasing all the time.

Won't be for everyone, though, so weekly PE lesson (in hardworking hall, also used for some drama and assemblies) also includes orienteering and climbing, with tennis, fencing and judo among the clubs on offer. Weekly TEAMS sessions – not online meetings but in person activities with a twist - encourage collaboration (e.g. football with blindfolds and verbal instructions).

Comfortably competitive. *'Never pressure on you to win the match or score as many goals as you can [...] they just go along with what you feel comfortable doing,'* says pupil. Sports days are, *'Very inclusive, they all cheer each other on,'* and prizes go to tryers as well as winners, say parents.

### **Wellbeing**

Highly effective, close liaison between pastoral care and the academic teams, child's wellbeing at the heart of everything that goes on here. *'Go above and beyond [and] quite innovative,'* says a parent. As neurodiversity can add an extra layer of complexity to friendships, there are sessions on understanding emotions and how to get and keep a friend. *'Very sensitively managed,'* says parent.

Focus is on building *'that core of self-esteem,'* says Mr Murphy – useful armour for almost any situation, from choosing friends wisely to being accountable for your actions.

Popular ELSA is *'a wonderful addition to the school,'* say staff and parents. Runs formal sessions with individual children (mailbox in the hall for younger children, years nine upwards can email her direct) and available three breaktimes a week for informal conversations. *'If they're able to say "I'm struggling," that's 90 per cent of my job done,'* she says. Like the rest of the team, liaises with staff, professionals and parents – sets up pupil wellbeing passports with details of interventions. *'All the necessary people who need to be informed always are,'* say a parent.

Don't shy away from difficult topics. First school to invite Jeremy Indika, victim of child abuse in to speak to staff and pupils (with appropriate support in place). Run wellbeing, mental health and integrity weeks as well as initiatives on e.g. racism or physical disability.

The big change - introduction of girls through the school – had been well handled said pupils. Boys, still the overwhelming majority - were canvassed for views beforehand. *'[We] got a really big input ...I don't think it would have changed anything but it was good to be asked,'* said one.

Any remaining jitters were quickly calmed. *'[Girls joining] changed the school for the better, made it more inclusive, easier to express your feelings,'* says a boy.

Girls join forces – friendship groups span different year groups – but found boys' attitudes a pleasant surprise. *'I thought [they] would act different but I have actually made good friends with them,'* says one girl. Uniform is sensible and flexible so pupils can opt for version that works for them. Only request from parents was to abandon all-white sports kit – hard to clean and potentially nerve-wracking for girls on their periods.

No girls' houses so far, though two of the four (all currently named after famous men) will celebrate women instead. *'(First I've heard of this,'* says pupil, when it's raised). Otherwise, house rivalry is mostly friendly, though *'Younger pupils can get a bit heated,'* agreed their seniors. Events span fundraising, sports and a popular mixed-age treasure hunt round the grounds with maths-based clues, with a trip to Chessington World of Adventures for the house scoring top house points.

Bar school lunches, universally felt by pupils to need an overhaul with some dishes *'more geared to adults and teachers than aimed at kids,'* (possibly true – this reviewer thoroughly enjoyed the 'salty potatoes' that were singled out for criticism) pupils had almost no complaints. Relationships with teachers felt to be exceptionally good. *'I'll be quite emotional at the leavers' church service,'* says one senior pupil. *'[You'd] usually want to be as far away from the teachers as possible, here, I will miss them more than the pupils.'*

### ***Pupils and Parents***

Many families who span a range of cultures, are first time private education buyers who don't begrudge a penny of the fees, even when it involves a struggle.

Relationships with other families and the school are, *'incredibly warm,'* says a parent. Yes, there's the odd family with a big sense of entitlement, (in the minority), and active parents' group, at one point felt by some parents to be slightly cliquey, is now welcoming and inclusive with events ranging from a summer ball to curry and quiz nights. The highlight is a whole family skiing trip (75 went on the last one).

Delightful pupils are pleased to be here and beautifully mannered (standing for visitors, unprompted). One of the lessons they learn here is that *'If you're kind and generous to someone, it's not a sign of weakness,'* says Mr Murphy.

### ***Money matters***

School uses six per cent of income to fund bursaries. Will consider for prospective and existing pupils experiencing financial hardship and has supported several Ukranian pupils with full bursaries. May be used to top up scholarships (academic or all-rounder, usually years 7 and 9, offering up to 30 per cent fee discount). Sibling discount. Where instant help needed, not unknown to have a *'Staff whip round [in a case of] real hardship...because that's the kind of school we are,'* says the bursar.

### ***The Final Word...***

Traditional in feel, mainstream in approach. A place where – if they can be supported - bright, neurodiverse children who want to learn can flourish and parents gladly make sacrifices to pay the fees.