

The Good Schools Review of Birkdale Prep School

Head

Since 2009, Mr Christopher Burch BA PGCE (early forties) previously deputy head of Great Walstead Prep. His wife, Pip, is the school librarian and a pre-prep teaching assistant. They have four sons, two currently in the prep and two now at the senior school. Parents appreciate the whole family involvement. He is a committed and active Christian and fully supports the faith ethos of the school. Friendly and approachable, popular with parents, he patrols the playground every morning to welcome the boys and to catch or be caught by parents, to 'sort out problems when they are pennies before they become pounds'. Parents were keen to emphasise 'nothing is too small to discuss with him.'

Entrance

No assessment for entry at four. From age six there is an assessment day, they rarely don't offer a place if they have availability. Despite strong Christian ethos there are no religious requirements. A number of Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh boys co-exist with church and non-church boys and participate in all assemblies. Head says their parents like the fact the school 'knows where it stands with faith.'

Exit

Virtually all move up to the senior school, head says around 98 per cent. If a problem is foreseen and the academic senior school deemed to be wrong for an individual child, parents are given plenty of advance warning and support. Of those that leave, some go to boarding school, some into the state sector.

Remarks

A welcoming, traditional, academic prep, unashamedly geared towards boys. 'Lots of exercise, short bursts of concentration and lots of rewards,' according to head. Established in 1904 the school moved in 1988 to its current site overlooking Sheffield's botanical gardens. Clarke House, an extended late Georgian mansion was originally owned by master cutler, John Osborn. Houses named after four of the most prestigious master cutlers from Sheffield's history reflect this connection. Some lovely airy classrooms but others are a bit cramped. Everyone is looking forward to the completion of nearby Belmayne House, where the pre-prep will be housed in style from September 2014, giving much needed breathing space back to the prep.

Fabulous stand-alone science lab. 'Real' science is taught from the beginning, as is French - everything throughout the school is labelled with its French equivalent. Lovely loft art-room, full of colour, and a shelf of working wooden catapults a recent exciting project. The substantial school hall is impressively flexible, switching from breakfast club to assembly hall, to gym to refectory to theatre, a military operation several times a day. Specialist

teaching from age four in French, music, drama, DT and RE. Adding, from year 3, science, history, geography, art and ICT with dedicated classrooms requiring boys to move around the school as necessary, with the right books. Setting in maths, English and science from year 5 with elements for support from year 3. 'The boys are stretched and closely monitored without pressure or stress' said one parent. All boys are screened for SEN and the help, some withdrawn, some in class, is sympathetic and thorough. Parents talk of amazing staff teamwork and a happy working relationship was apparent when we visited. Discipline well maintained with clear rewards and sanctions and behaviour extremely good although relaxed. Reward points are collected for the house, posted on a corridor wall and 'are dished out like confetti,' according to a parent.

The outdoor play area is spacious and boys are encouraged into it as often as possible. No onsite games, however the extensive facilities of the senior school at Castle Dyke, ten minutes away, are fully available. Rugby, cricket and football teams do well in local fixtures and parents of less sporty boys particularly welcome the addition of 'C' teams to give their sons the opportunity to represent their school. Head has worked hard to improve the sport at Birkdale but is keen not to give it 'too high a currency' and encourages the cool games masters to visibly read and talk to the boys about the books they are reading.

Lots of drama, popular with the boys, and music is high on the agenda with around 100 learning a huge variety of instruments. Brass, wind and string groups and guitar ensembles come together in an orchestra and feed into the Sheffield Schools Training Orchestra, hosted by the school. Parents describe the extracurricular clubs, both after school and at lunchtime, as 'outstanding' both in variety and quality. There's something for everybody from Beat Club to Warhammer, to the increasingly popular Mandarin and a well-attended Christian Union. Plenty of day trips and visits. Longer jaunts begin in year 4 with two nights away in nearby Castleton, culminating in the much anticipated leavers week in Normandy. Year 5 boys were wildly enthusiastic about their outward bounds trip to the Lake District.

Headmaster, deputy headmaster and director of music take a fifteen minute hymn practice with all of the prep every Friday morning to run through the hymns scheduled for the following week. Head describes it as a 'special time' and the boys seem to love it too.

Parents represent a healthy cultural mix. Lots of medics and many who make big sacrifices to send their boys. Most fairly local but some travel significant distances, coming from as far as Bakewell and Rotherham. Plenty of social events and parents talk warmly of the strong sense of community within the school. Parking remains a challenge despite best efforts of head to stagger drop-off and pick-up with the extended breakfast and after school care, and negotiate a first-15-minute-free-parking in the surrounding zones. 'It's the Wild West' said one parent and all regaled us with their various strategies to combat it.

Above all, parents emphasise the incredible pastoral care and warm nurturing atmosphere. All concur the communication is exceptional, 'there are a surprising amount of personal

emails beyond the routine information' and the recently added weekly newsletter is particularly welcome, as is the extremely informative website. The atmosphere is warm and fun but it's 'a tight ship' with clear boundaries strictly adhered to.