



St Hugh's School

A GSG School



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Pupils: 155 boys, 116 girls. 55 flexi/weekly board, the rest day. **Ages:** 4-13.

Religion: C of E. **Fees:** Day £2,420 to £4,110. Weekly boarding £4,615 to 4,925.

Head:

Since 2006, Mr Andrew Nott BA (forties). Married to Sarah who copes with a multitude of tasks including managing the superb and easy to navigate website. Family of five ranging from a delightfully lively one year old up to teenagers. Fascinating background – both are children of the vicarage, and the head's father was the Bishop of Norwich. At the start of his career the head worked for the Church Commissioners. Since entering teaching at St Andrew's Eastbourne he has advanced rapidly up the career ladder, St Hugh's being his second headship. He was previously head at Davenies School, where he was appointed at the relatively young age of thirty four. Follows the much loved and long serving Derek Cannon, who retired in 2006 after over twenty years at the helm (school has had only six heads in just over 100 years).

In style open, accessible and charming, the head also has a very clear understanding of the market and the place St Hugh's has in it. No doubt there will be changes, but he values highly the remarkable stability the school has possessed for many years and is determined to build on the successes of his predecessor without altering this fundamentally very successful mix. Parents seem pleased that he has tidied up the admin and improved communication between home and school. He has nevertheless managed an extraordinarily seamless succession and has successfully reassured both staff and parents.

The head has a pleasantly relaxed approach to the pupils: this is clearly part of the St Hugh's tradition which remains alive and well. He wants to listen and his introduction of a School Council, and regular boarder soirées in his house, aid this objective. We were particularly impressed by the informal and friendly relationships we saw everywhere. As we walked around the school it was lovely to see gaggles of happy children engaged in friendly banter with relaxed staff

Entrance:

Interview and where appropriate a simple assessment. Slightly oversubscribed, and becoming yet more popular: don't wait to the last minute, you may be disappointed!

Exit:

You will not find hoards of children on lists for Eton, and Wycombe Abbey, but plenty of respectable scholarships to places like Marlborough, Cheltenham, Radley,

Abingdon and St Edwards. The school has produced a few Winchester scholarships too. It is clear that able children are well catered for, but in the context of a well rounded positive school experience. Leavers go to a wide range of schools as far away as Malvern, Rugby, and Uppingham, but the majority move on to senior schools within a 25 mile radius. Children with special needs, NB usually dyslexia, are often directed to Cokethorpe and Shiplake. Virtually all the children, girls as well as boys, stay until they are thirteen. It gives the school a genuine co-ed feel and reflects the well-founded confidence of the parents.

Remarks:

Not a hothouse, and in this respect perhaps an atypical example of the Thames Valley prep school type. Not selective, mainly by design rather than need. Academic performance very sound. Outstandingly good special needs provision which is provided as part of the general fee (unusual). Wide catchment area for a predominantly day school, children come from as far away as Chipping Norton, Abingdon and Cirencester. Parents mainly local professionals and business people with a fair smattering of London refugees.

Sprawling seventeenth century mansion with lots of attractive outhouses, surrounded by over 40 acres of playing fields and woods. Children are allowed a great deal of freedom to explore the grounds. This is an ideal child-centred environment, Just William would have loved being here and, as Richmal Crompton's nephew was at St Hugh's, perhaps he was! Open, unsophisticated naturally well-mannered children who are clearly blissfully happy. One parent remarks that in six years her child has never not wanted to go to school. Pastoral care is a strong feature, aided by the division into three sections: pre prep, middle school and upper school. Each section has their own suite of classrooms surrounding a small central hall, giving the pupils a real sense of group cohesion. Bullying is rare, and a huge focus is put upon the individual care of each child. No one gets lost here!

Some lovely facilities including a delightfully quirky art area located in the recently renovated orangery and a huge and well used sportshall. The pre-prep area is especially charming, magnificent colourful displays of the children's work, all surrounded by beautiful gardens and extensive woods. The head has produced a realistic Development Plan which has been circulated to all parents – ask for a copy.

Young enthusiastic staff are balanced by a core of older experienced teachers, which seems to provide a successful mix. This sense of staff continuity is perhaps one reason that the school has a slightly old-fashioned feel about it. The excellent staff/pupil ratio, allows for an extensive range of activities and clubs after 4.30pm . A significant number of the children stay for these activities; some of the older day-children also remain for supper and prep: NB all included in the fee. This arrangement offers great flexibility for working parents and is an important attraction. Saturday school remains for the final three years, the younger children benefit from a five day week.

Sport is taken very seriously with a philosophy of sport for all. It is quite difficult for a child to avoid being in a team and there is a team photograph for all. Extensive and well maintained sports fields; every child in the middle and upper schools plays some sport every day. This helps school's aim of producing self-reliant children, further

fostered by the school's imaginative 'Take Footsteps' programme of personal development over the final four years cumulating with a week long camp.

Music and drama are strong, especially music where three-quarters of the entire prep school student body play at least one instrument. This small school can boast a choir, a brass ensemble, string group, guitar group as well as an orchestra. Most children take part in a play each year, this is seen as an integral part of the school experience. Unusually there is no annual magazine, the school produces instead lively half-termly newsletters called the 'St Hugh's News'. These are full of fascinating information about the progress of a wide range of school activities. In this Autumn term the under nines Soccer Team won every match: promise for the future! These publications are beautifully presented and full of loads of colour photos. They also give more immediacy to particular achievements, perhaps more valued than a yearly production by the pupils as a result.

The school gave up offering full boarding six years ago. It now has 55 places for weekly and more usually flexi-boarding. Most nights the boarding house is full. At £30 a night this is excellent value. Most of the final year (12 to 13 years) board most weeknights even if they are going on to a day school. Whilst the boarding experience is obviously great fun (NB the food here is rather special- all locally sourced ingredients) the dorms themselves are a bit shabby and feel too institutionalised; together with some of the common room areas they need sprucing up a bit (now in hand).

St Hugh's offers a humane, smallish, cosy school option to Thames Valley parents who are uncomfortable with the often smart, pressurised alternatives. This school succeeds in producing unpretentious, relaxed, confident, young people. In doing so it personifies what is best in the prep school tradition and under its dynamic new head will, without doubt, become a rising star.