



ST HUGH'S SCHOOL

A GSG School



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Our View

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 necessity. Academic performance very sound. Outstandingly good special needs support, 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 sports hall, as well as a barn recently converted into a modern theatre. 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, annually updated, which is circulated to all parents - ask for a copy. Recent improvements include a new all-weather pitch, two ICT suites, outdoor education area and brand new nursery.

Young enthusiastic staff balanced by a core of older experienced teachers - a successful mix. This sense of staff continuity is perhaps one reason why 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; 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 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 its imaginative personal development and leadership programme over the final four years, culminating in a week long camp.

Music and drama are strong, especially music - three-quarters play at least one instrument. This small school boasts four choirs, a brass ensemble, string and guitar groups, as well as a large orchestra. Most children take part in a play each year, seen as an integral part of the school experience. Unusually, no annual magazine - instead lively half-termly newsletters called 'The St Hugh's News', full of fascinating information.

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 £25 a night this is excellent value. Many of the final year board most weeknights, even if they are going on to a day school. The boarding experience is obviously great fun (NB the food here is rather special - all locally sourced ingredients). Since our visit, we are told, the dorms and washrooms have all recently been refurbished, providing attractive, comfortable accommodation.

St Hugh's offers a humane, smallish, cosy school option for Thames Valley parents who are uncomfortable with the often smart, pressurised alternatives. Produces unpretentious, relaxed, confident young people.

Head

Since 2006, Mr Andrew Nott BA (forties). Married to Sarah, who copes with a multitude of tasks including managing the superb website. Family of five ranging from a delightfully lively five 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 Mr Nott 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, appointed at the relatively young age of thirty four. School has had only six heads in just over 100 years.

Open, accessible and charming, the head also has a very clear understanding of the market and the place St Hugh's has in it. He values the school's remarkable stability and is building 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.

Mr Nott has a pleasantly relaxed approach to the pupils - 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 soirees in his house aid this objective. We were particularly impressed by the informal and friendly relationships we saw everywhere. It was lovely to see gaggles of happy children engaged in friendly banter with relaxed staff.

Entrance

Interview and, where appropriate, a simple assessment. 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, Rugby, Abingdon and St Edward's. The school has produced a few Winchester scholarships too. 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 Oundle, but the majority move on to senior schools within a 25 mile radius. 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.