

What The Good Schools Guide says

Headmaster

Since 2020, Richard Berlie, aka Richard – this is a first-name-terms school. History at Magdalene Cambridge followed by PGCE then, in the footsteps of his own Catholic education at Salesian College in Battersea, to Wymondham College and Ampleforth (history of art, housemaster and scholars’ tutor). Back to London where he was head of humanities and ran the gifted and talented programme at Emanuel School, and then head of upper school at Dulwich College. A further stint in secondary as vice principal at MPW before settling into ‘the holistic model of education’ which he believes St Anthony’s offers. Parents find his experience in and extensive links with senior schools reassuring. He knows what they are looking for.

Describing himself as ‘methodical and organised’, Mr Berlie teaches enrichment to year 6, asking the big philosophical questions to help them build their own objective moral compass. A practising Roman Catholic, he believes in the ‘unique claims of the Roman Catholic church’, loves the tradition of hymnody – boys learn the ‘great hymns with fine words’ – and the Tudor polyphony of Byrd and Gibbons.

Mr Berlie takes his exercise seriously; he starts the day early with a 5km run and is a keen cyclist, swapping bicycle for motorbike to journey from Battersea to Hampstead. Preferring to leave his well-regarded deputies to manage the parental frenzy on the school gate, he aims to be ‘visible and virtually visible’, never ending the day without responding to parent emails. A tad more traditional than his predecessors, his sausage dogs Oscar and Pepa lend a homeliness to his study. The prints on the walls reflect an interest in the British Empire; he has travelled extensively in India and enjoys cooking South Asian food.

Entrance

Take a tour and register as early as possible. Co-ed nursery opened in September 2023 and is proving very popular. Automatic progression for boys at 4+ into two-form-entry reception. Stay and play assessment for remaining places. A further entry point at 7+, after English, maths and reasoning papers, group assessment and interview. Occasional places might arise higher up the school, and a few places offered to boys ‘showing potential’ into year 7 when two forms are reduced to one after 11+ exodus. Priority given to boys from Catholic families.

Exit

Finding the right school for each boy remains key to school’s ethos and candid chats with parents begin in year 5. UCS, Highgate, City and Mill Hill are popular local options, with Merchant Taylors’ and Haberdashers’ typically offering places to at least half the year group (three academic and four music scholarships in 2023). Westminster, St Paul’s and Wetherby Senior offer places at 13+, along with a wide range of boarding schools (including Eton, Harrow, Bedford, King’s Canterbury, Oundle). Registrars have confidence in St Anthony’s boys, says the head, ‘they know they won’t get a dud’. With the change of focus on 11+,

parents praise the ability to ramp up at the right time: ‘The boys don’t feel they’re scaling Everest.’ Each boy has an individualised master plan, with schedule of exams and assessments and a ‘cheerleading confidence boost’ the day before interviews; ‘my son couldn’t have felt better prepared.’

Our view

Mr Berlie has restructured the curriculum, grouping subjects together, each under a head of faculty, resulting in a coherent framework all the way through. ‘There’s more academic quality and consistency across year groups,’ says one parent; ‘a stronger alignment with what they need to know and how they need to perform,’ says another. Recruiting staff from secondary schools has led to ‘a major uplift in academics without the boys noticing the pressure’. ‘No dumbing down,’ says head. ‘We get the most out of the boys by encouraging them to think deeply, imaginatively, creatively; they can be stretched further than you would think possible.’

Maths and English are stand-out subjects, ‘both sprinkled with magic dust,’ according to a parent. Boys are set from year 3 in maths, and challenged ‘in a way that they love; they can approach any question, and make the right leaps’. We watched a buzzy, brainstorming English lesson. Boys typed contributions into an online platform, available for all to see on the interactive whiteboard. ‘Boys and books are not always natural bedfellows,’ said one parent, dismayed to find her son had ‘slipped back’ into reading ‘silly, puerile books’. Oh dear. Nothing a quick email could not resolve; the teacher accompanied said boy to the library to choose more suitable reading material – boy’s enthusiasm and parent pride restored. Phew! We saw examples of lively creative writing and poetry analysis. One boy told us thoughtfully, ‘There is a really good atmosphere for asking lots of questions’; and another, ‘History teaches us about the past; we can judge it, and learn about the future from that.’ Breadth of learning extends to ethics and philosophy in years 7 and 8, with an emphasis on critical thinking. ‘There is incredible scholarship in the post-11+ years,’ enthuses one parent. ‘The teachers are talented; they make learning challenging and fun.’

Teachers try not to over-scaffold in the classroom, expecting the same of all boys and making them think for themselves. ‘They push us to do the things we think we can’t do,’ said one child, almost surprised at his own success. ‘It’s incredible what children are capable of achieving,’ says a teacher. ‘We like to go one step beyond and row back if necessary.’

One mother enthuses about SEN provision: ‘They are excellent at identifying what some boys find difficult, and giving praise where it’s due.’ Active differentiation in the classroom supports those who need it. ‘Amazing’ special needs teachers offer small-group teaching and one-to-one as necessary and, pre-11+, early morning clinics to fill gaps and boost confidence. TAs on hand in years 1 and 2. Upbeat posters around the school normalise neurodivergence and other learning needs: ‘Bill Gates, did you know he’s dyslexic?’ and ‘Autism didn’t stop Einstein’. An EAL group meets at lunchtime and a club following the French curriculum is valued by boys who speak French at home.

Proximity to central London makes for easy access to interesting places. Parents are pleased to see an increase in relevant trips. ‘Staff only have to ask,’ says head, mentioning Parliament and Supreme Court as recent destinations. Programme of visiting speakers includes Lord Robert Winston, Lord Alton of Liverpool, the Reverend Calvin Robinson, journalist Andrew Pierce, and director of research at the Adam Smith Institute. Debating is one of the most

popular clubs ('hustings on steroids,' says a mother), along with current affairs and critical thinking with the headmaster. Minecraft and Lego, led by tireless teachers, are all-time favourites with younger boys. Chess, coding, jazz band, karate, table tennis and LAMDA, a selection of paid extras from external providers.

Recorder groups, choirs and, of course, rock band, alive and well. One pupil has gone from singing a solo in the Christmas concert to full-time cathedral chorister. New head of music talks of 'reigniting the orchestra'. On the day of our visit, a year 8 music lesson focused on the voice and the way it changes during puberty. An enlightened move, we thought, highlighting the advantage of an all-boy classroom. 'Movement too is important,' says head, who recognises the importance of performing arts in the curriculum, even when performance space is at a premium.

Nor is limited space known to hamper sporting ambition. With regular fixtures against local rivals, 'They punch pretty hard on the sports front,' according to one mother. A football tour in Spain – 'just before the pre-test,' says one boy, with a mixture of incredulity and excitement – is a favourite memory for some boys. 'We played Abu Dhabi and Colombia; it was interesting to see how they prioritised different aspects of the game' – a mature and diplomatic way of explaining a creative interpretation of the rules. Brondesbury cricket club, a 15-minute coach ride from school, has football, rugby and cricket pitches, cricket nets (head of sport, also head of junior house, is a cricket pro), and tennis and squash courts, the latter a perk for older boys. The biggest surprise of all, the 12-metre swimming pool in the compact playground, enjoyed by all ages (water polo and life-saving for older boys), even the 'wild' swimming dash 'twixt changing room and pool in all weathers.

'Virtute adepta' (acquired by virtue), the school motto and that of the founding Patton family, underlines the importance of a strong moral code underpinned by the teachings of the Catholic church. 'I love that they are supported in a universal Catholic sense,' says a parent. Boys are prepared for their First Holy Communion and Holy Mass is celebrated once a term by the school chaplain, Monsignor Phelim, priest of St Mary's, Hampstead. Sacred icons in niches and the mobile altar in the entrance hall are daily reminders of the school's Catholic traditions; weekly assembly with prayers, reflections and hymns reinforces the backbone of philosophical and moral issues woven through the curriculum – imagine the boys processing out to Nimrod, with professional organist pulling out the stops, for the Remembrance Day service. 'The boys are generous and kind,' says the head; fundraising tends to be for Catholic charities: Cardinal Hume centre for the homeless, foodbank of the Sacred Heart parish in Kilburn.

Within this spiritual framework lies an all-enveloping informality and warmth. The new nursery is as welcoming to parents as it is to children, with easy access to outside space, shared with reception – climbing wall, wooden teepee and mud kitchen await. Junior house is described by a parent as 'a little bubble of love'. Boys are encouraged to acknowledge thoughtful gestures on the 'waves of kindness wall': sharing food at lunchtime, lending a pen and, for the boy who lost a tooth, a small envelope for safe keeping. One senior teacher who taught in a tough, inner-city comprehensive is still amazed by the difference: 'It's very peculiar, they are the most courteous, collegiate, polite boys I have come across. They even pay each other compliments!'

Both junior and senior houses are fine examples of Victorian architecture – a nursing home and ambassador's residence respectively: encaustic tiles, fine cornicing, sweeping

balustrades. The organic growth of the school, from a handful of boys in the 1950s to 300 today, makes for an idiosyncratic, not to say chaotic, layout, which adds to the quirky, rather charming character of the place. Main hall is a chalet-style outbuilding, where everything from lunch to dance club is served – hot! Our impression is that boys value each other, as much as the buildings, for their individuality; they appreciate difference as much as achievement. ‘Everyone likes to collect badges,’ says a year 8 boy, clearly chuffed at the number of badges down his lapel. Boys and teachers are on first-name terms, touchingly described by a boy as ‘less like a teacher-student relationship; it’s just us.’ Another, with heavy heart, says he will ‘miss the more open relationship’ when he goes to his next school.

‘Kindness is threaded through the school,’ says a parent. ‘They handle wellbeing very well, but don’t shout about it.’ Indeed, on the day of our visit, we almost walked past the cosy little wellbeing room without a mention. Wellbeing counsellor is available for pupils and staff. Deputy head pastoral, whose own son was a pupil here, is universally appreciated. We are told that teachers know the boys very well and really care. One insightful parent mentioned how ‘they are expert at dealing with the difference between the outside and inside of boys as they grow’. An inclusive warmth welcomes boys of all nationalities and faiths; current Catholic cohort is around 40 per cent.

Money matters

Bursary fund supports current pupils if parents’ financial circumstances change, and scholarships may be offered to boys from less advantaged backgrounds. The GSCT is a major award scholarship for 7+ candidates who have demonstrated exceptional achievement in academics, music or sport.

The last word

‘Not a cookie-cutter school,’ says a parent. Combines charming informality with top-notch teaching. ‘Boys are bright, quirky, lovable rascallions,’ says a parent. Teachers ready to try new things, and boys, too, encouraged to think outside the box. No sharp elbows, just creative, independent minds. Unique, friendly, buzzy vibe.