



What The **Good Schools** Guide says

Reviewed in 2018



PATRON
HM THE QUEEN

LVS

Ascot

A Co-educational Day & Boarding School
for young people aged 4 - 18



Headmistress



Since 2010, Christine Cunniffe BA MMus MBA. After university, had close brush with the law (professionally speaking, that is), securing postgraduate traineeship with Slough-based legal practice only to succumb to alternative role as pianist to fashionistas and

London high society (think white baby grands and late nights in plush hotels). Four years later, she put aside renewed yearnings for law when husband-to-be pointed out years of study ahead and tried her hand at teaching instead. Loved it from the off, going straight in as head of music, first at a Stevenage school, then St Bernard's, a selective co-ed grammar school in Slough. Joined LVS Ascot as ambitious director of music in 2003 (school, which had no choir when she arrived, was performing Vivaldi's Gloria at Eton College Chapel just two terms later).

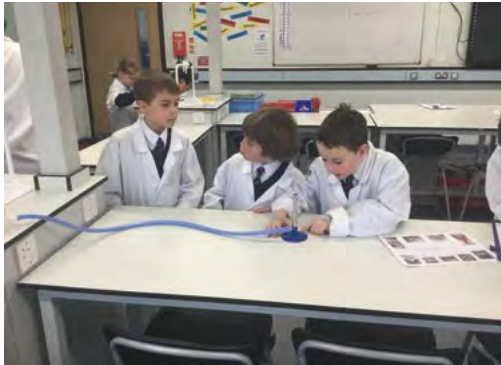
Personable, laid-back and quietly assured, she has an unusual (if not unprecedented) openness for a head, which she feels sends useful message to pupils. 'If I have self-doubt, I admit it - children are going to face problems in life, so why pretend it doesn't happen?' Lives on site with her husband and youngest child, who attends the school (the two older ones have now left for uni) - all three regularly feature in conversations. 'I am very honest about my experiences of parenting; I want parents to know I understand I know what they're going through.'

She's clearly nailed it, with parents describing her as 'empathetic' and 'understanding'. All parents are given her email address and she doesn't shy away from criticism ('I don't want people to tell me what they think I want to hear, but to be forthright' - they are). Runs the parent staff choir, 'which is tremendously good fun and a good way to encourage bonding.' 'There's no superiority about her - she doesn't swoop in with the, "I'm the principal" look,' one parent told us, while others point to her strategic prowess: 'She knows her stuff and is very strong on where she wants the school to go.' Pupils keen - juniors practically hugged her when they saw her - but some seniors told us they rarely see her except at assemblies. Doesn't have time to teach, she says, but does step in when needed. Is something of a TV celeb in the headteacher world, regularly appearing on programmes such as ITV's This Morning to debate topics ranging from back to school stress to whether there should be homework in the holidays ('yes, definitely - a little each day is no bad thing').



Academic matters

Non-selective, but no easy ride - 'we think like a grammar school and that means knowing when to put the pressure on and turn it off to get the best results.' Expect multiple retakes, for example, if your child gets lower than their predicted grades in their mocks. But it's no hothouse, say parents - 'children generally reach their potential happily and the school seems to know the best way to respond to each child.'



Mission in junior school is to ensure that no child is left to languish in educational no man's land; regular meetings picking out those 'falling below or zooming ahead'. Favourite subjects among pupils include literacy (popular library-based reading scheme, which carries on into main school, tests comprehension rather than merely rewarding headlong dash for the last page) and science in year 6 - where, joy of joys, 'you get to light the Bunsen burner'.



There's a pick and mix approach to national curriculum - used or modified where it works, ditched if it doesn't - and everything is seasoned with welcome dash of carpe diem flexibility so teachers can go off piste if it's deemed appropriate. Subject specialist teachers in most subjects from year 5. Setting in maths and English from year 3 and science from year 7. Class sizes average at 13- 15, with a maximum of 20.



Children's progress is well ahead of national averages and exam results are good for a non-selective school, let alone for one so large. In 2017, 30 per cent A*-A/9-7 at GCSE. Nine or 10 the norm, selected from around 20 subjects - no Latin or classics, but there is law, psychology, PE and media/business studies - and RS recently changed to philosophy. Wide range of BTechs are popular - 'We are big fans of different routes to suit different children and universities are more open to different combinations now.' Everyone has to take at least two sciences, but languages (students choose two from French, Spanish and German from year 7) are not - 'I learned with my own children that if they're not passionate about languages, it can be a horrible battle getting them through a languages GCSE,' says head.

Around 65 per cent stay on to sixth form - more than in the past, no doubt partly due to jazzy new sixth-form block with swish study areas that top businesses would be proud of and 30 wide-ranging courses, including law and psychology. In 2017, 48 per cent A*-B and 16 per cent A*/A grades.



Scholars programme run by vice principal for the gifted and talented. Those with SEN on the rise - 'as long as they only need a maximum of one hour of additional help each week in addition to in-classroom support, that's fine; any more than that and they'd struggle to keep up with the curriculum,' says head. 'The school doesn't pretend they have all the answers, but they're willing to try new things and are incredibly open,' said one parent with a child with more complex problems.

Games, options, the arts

School's sports philosophy is that there's something for everyone – 'we are not all about boys' rugby and girls' netball; in fact a popular sport at the moment is boys' hockey, great for boys who are less keen on contact sports,' says head. Team sports are favoured, though, and compulsory for all, including sixth formers – 'what we want is for them to leave here with a love of sport for life, not give up on those who aren't the very best.' Inevitably, there are moans and groans – 'you do see kids who stand on the side with their arms crossed, but most are keen,' one parent told us.

Cracking facilities including two games halls, the larger with climbing wall and cricket nets, the smaller with cushioned floor for happier landings in judo and high impact sports. Enticing heated pool is well used, offering all-ability training at 6.30am three times a week, while thumping pop music makes well-equipped fitness suite even more inviting for youngsters. Elite golf academy for sixth formers, which combines coaching at a nearby club with a BTec in sports science. Plenty of wins against other schools in rugby, football, netball and hockey; school also competes in athletics and swimming. But B teams invested in as much as A teams – favoured by most parents but felt by some to handicap the single-minded; although everyone agrees school is very supportive of those who pursue sporting achievements outside school.

Drama a joy, with every parent we spoke to praising the slick performances – 'it's lovely to see the ones who get stuck into lighting or directing praised just as much as the performers,' said one. Plenty of signs of artistic talent and spacious studios to work in. Music (as you might expect, given the head's background), is strong, with three choirs, numerous ensembles including rock school and jazz band, and around a third of pupils learning instruments, some to diploma standard. Whizzy music tech studio adored by students, a couple of whom were enjoying a working lunch in the recording studio when we visited.







Boarders

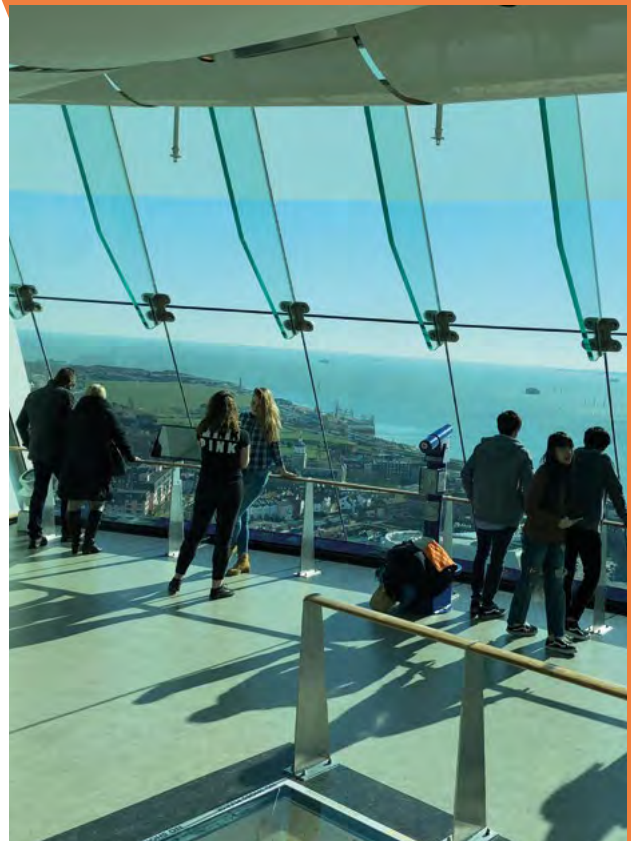
The existing four boarding houses (three junior and middle houses for boys and girls and a co-ed sixth form house) and three day houses are soon to be combined into six houses for all - 'good for integration,' says head. They are homely, yet practical, with plenty of leather seating and welcoming photos in the spacious communal areas, while the comfy carpeted dorms sleep between one and five. 'I came to England two years ago and settled so much quicker than I thought - they make it so easy,' one student told us.

Experienced boarding house staff are experts at sidestepping homesickness when it does crop up ('you usually get one or two a year in each house and it generally takes a couple of weeks to crack it,' says one) and are enthusiastic, friendly and forward-looking (one recently introduced the digital Reach system that means staff and parents can keep tabs on students at all times). Keeping idle hands (and brains) busy is the priority, with a steady but not relentless stream of activities. After school, it's free time from 4pm-5.50pm (usually a club or, for year 9s up, going into Ascot), then dinner, prep and finally an hour more free time before winding down for bed at 9.30pm. Weekend minibuses, booked by the hour, swap returning sports teams for boarders off on assorted excursions (shopping, cinema, bowling, walking in Windsor Great Park, go karting and paintballing all popular, with some trips further afield to eg Portsmouth) with departures and arrivals as precisely coordinated as flight control at Heathrow.

'House prefects, and a grading system, help the mornings run like clockwork,' says staff member - get up, make bed, duvets back, bung your laundry in the box (yes, you really do get fresh laundry each day), windows open, then breakfast. Laminated sheets stating 'This dorm is too untidy to be cleaned,' spotted in pile on the side, are mercifully rarely needed, say staff.

Dorm changes take place once a term - 'You write down who you want to share a room with and then the boarding house staff try to work it all out,' said one student. 'Polite reminders in the common rooms for international students to speak in English - a world map on the wall reveals the vast breadth of countries they all come from. In fact, the large international contingent helps explain why most boarders are full time, but increasingly flexible options are available - and day pupils can also cross to other side by signing up for occasional one-off boarding sessions.' 'Out of the nearly 200 boarders, around 120 are here any one weekend,' one housemaster told us.

'If you want the manor house boarding experience, this isn't for you, but people need to see past the buildings to see the phenomenal time they have here,' one parent told us. 'In my son's boarding house, they have such a great mix of international students, kids from brewery trade, from the military and families who are just minted - and in true LVS style, they keep them all completely equal!'





Background and atmosphere

Site was formerly home to Heatherdown, an ultra-traditional prep school for chaps and David Cameron's pre-Eton alma mater, with own miniature steam railway. It was demolished in 1982 after Licensed Trade Charity (LTC) - which was founded 200 years ago to support drinks trade employees and now runs school - made such an advantageous sale of previous premises in Slough to well-known supermarket chain that could fund construction of what prospectus claims is the 'most modern boarding school in the UK'.

And although the thoughtful layout of 80s red-brick buildings may no longer be the cutting edge of school design, it still manages to look surprisingly contemporary and the fundamentals still apply, noticeably the way space-intensive subjects like performing arts get the room they need in central location rather than being consigned to outer reaches of site, while related subjects are housed together making navigation a breeze. The whole place has a small university campus feel, with a rolling refurb programme ensuring facilities stay up-to-the-minute. Next on the agenda is redoing the dining hall (where food is 'very good and varied,' according to students) to include

bifold doors onto extra eating space outside. Outside, there's 25 acres of grounds with oodles of sports grounds and rustic bridge spanning small but perfectly formed lake.

Junior school is vibrant and colourful, with good-sized infants' play area with buddy bench (hardly used, though, say pupils, because nobody gets lonely) and lots of sturdy wooden equipment to climb and balance on. Year 3s and up enjoy scaled up versions in adjoining area, separated by unmarked but universally recognised boundary line. Reception also has smart outdoor classroom and cheerful playhouse, starting point for innumerable let's pretend games.

Atmosphere throughout is surprisingly laid-back, despite the hard work - no mean feat. Youngsters are encouraged to ask questions and thought processes, and lesson bell abolished after it broke five years ago, ending mid-sentence rush for the door and making teachers so happy that was never reintroduced.

School houses, originally named after major drinks brands such as Guinness and Carlsberg, were in process of changing when we visited - 'It was a nice link to LTC, but would you call houses after cigarettes? Anyway, some of the breweries don't exist anymore anyway,' explains head.

Added flexibility with extended day, including meal and the run of learning resource centre, popular with working parents.

Pastoral care, well-being and discipline

Highly regarded pastoral focus is a tutor group system, with same teacher responsible for child's well-being throughout school career. 'I've been blown away by the quality of individual care,' said one parent, while another points to the way 'they had out so many awards in assemblies – and it's not just the predictably clever ones.' Students say reformed Horrid Henrires stand as much chance as card-carrying Perfect Peters of getting their day in the sun.

Head's own experiences make her sympathetic to late developers. 'I experienced problems at about 13 and it's made me passionate about not giving up on a child until we have exhausted all areas.' She believes some children 'need to test boundaries, but they also know the security of knowing those boundaries don't shift.' Usual hierarchy of detentions, Saturday morning ones being the worst – and if that doesn't do the trick, the student is sent home and brought back in only on contract. 'I don't think twice about asking students to leave for anything such as misuse of social media or bringing alcohol on site, where a second chance is not warranted, although I've only ever had to do it three or four times,' says head.

School brings dogs in two or three times a year for random drugs checks, but nothing has ever been found – 'the kids actually love it when they see the dogs,' laughs head. Zero tolerance to bullying – 'I was bullied as a child and take a very firm line. Thankfully, the students are real heroes when it comes to reporting any unkindness.' Asked if they knew of anyone with eating disorders or who had self-harmed or been bullied, one student said, 'I personally don't know of anyone, but I'm not stupid enough to think that means it doesn't happen because it can happen anywhere' - suggests it's not just the staff that lack complacency. Students said they'd like to see more consistency among teachers, with regards to sanctions – 'you do get much stricter teachers than others,' said one.





Pupils and parents

A friendly, un-showy and straightforward bunch, pupils are thoughtful rather than introspective, articulate but not glib, and fond of school without the kind of gushing that makes us suspicious. Start of term, said one, 'feels like you're going home rather than just going back.' Families have historically covered socially and economically broad spectrum from royalty to socially deprived, although there's been a noticeable shift towards more 4x4s lately, suggesting greater affluence.

Catchment area extends 15-20 mile radius or so to Reading in west and Maidenhead up north, compass points ably covered by seven school bus routes (some oversubscribed, so worth

checking). That said, families from London fringes and deepest Berks and Bucks are on the rise. These 'locals' form large proportion of the clientele and, while job mobility means some degree of coming and going each year, there's not as much as you might suppose. Some expat families, mainly in Forces, and there's a fast-growing international component.

Entrance

Most children arrive at junior school in reception (single form to year 2) or year 3 (two forms to year 5). At 11+ majority from school's own junior department with assorted state and private schools supplying the rest. Around 35 places become available at sixth-form; students will need GCSE grade B/6 or better in chosen subjects though vocational courses such as ICT and sport also available for those of a more practical mindset.



Exit

Ninety per cent to university, with courses ranging from the solidly academic – economics, business and engineering currently popular - to the more vocational, including sports coaching and journalism. Remainder enter a variety of apprenticeship schemes and jobs. Massive breadth of 35 universities, with largest numbers currently to Bournemouth University and Oxford Brookes University. Roughly a quarter to Russell Group; one to Oxford in 2017.

Money matters

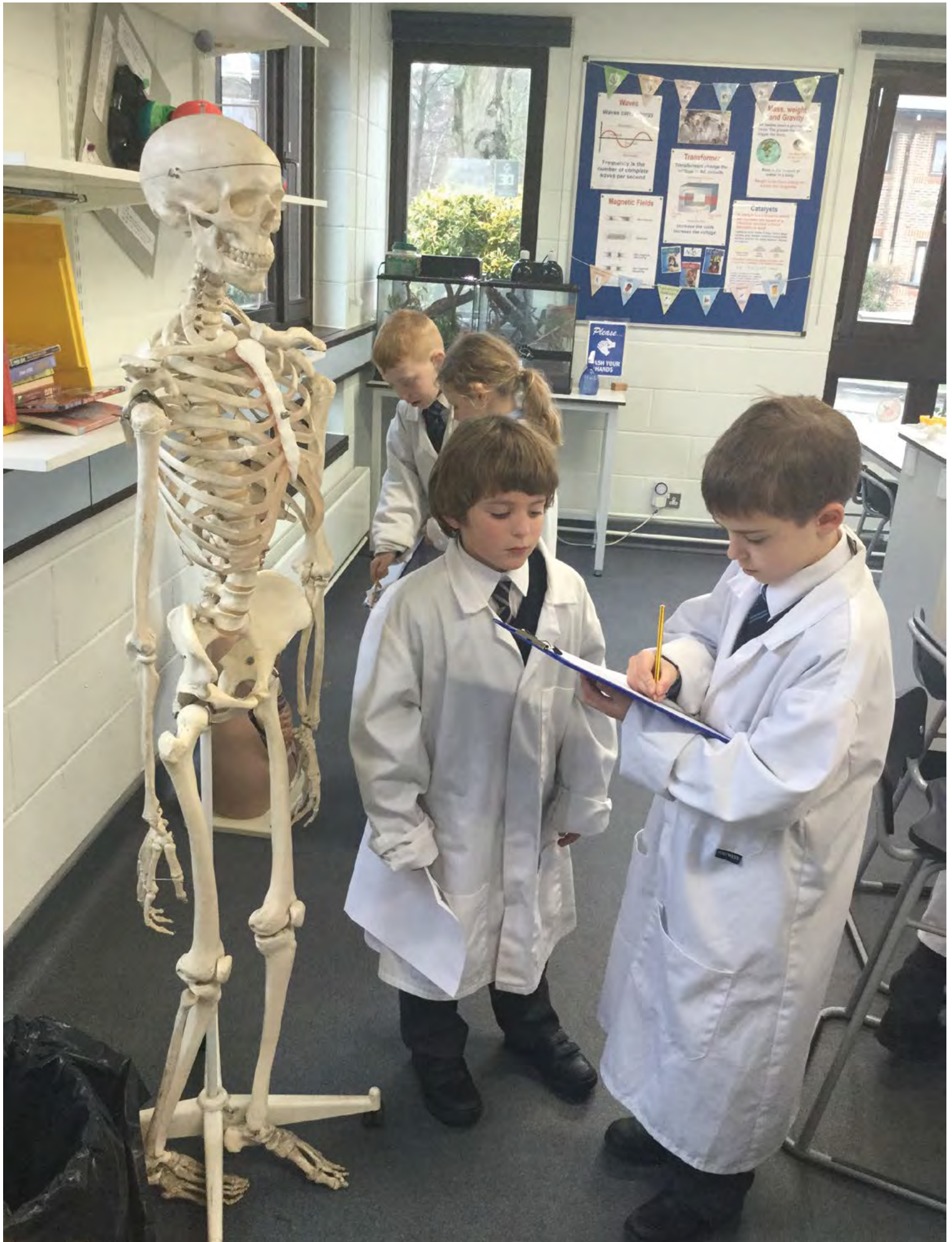
Ten per cent discount for siblings (only third child onwards, but discount applies even if first or second subsequently leave), 15 per cent off for MOD and diplomatic service employees, including five per cent early payment discount and a 20 per cent reduction for anyone who has worked in the licensed drinks trade for five years or more.

Scholarships – academic, music, art, drama and sport - all worth up to 50 per cent off fees. School tries to keep budgeting simple with many senior school clubs and activities included in the fees - rowing, riding, sailing and ballet plus individual instrumental lessons and one-to-one language or learning support are the main extras. Means headline fees are just that, with minimum of extras, although brace yourself for the big school trips to the likes of South Africa and Brazil - but again head tries to keep these to a minimum and plans them at least a year ahead so you can dust off your piggy bank.



Our view

Families are attracted to the all-through co-education in this well-equipped, welcoming and unpretentious school. We particularly like the university campus style, modern layout and the fact that non-selectivity is seen as the starting point for success rather than a justification for its absence. The strong results prove it works.



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