

St Paul's Cathedral School



What The Good Schools Guide says

Headmaster

Since September 2016, Simon Larter-Evans, previously head of boarding, housemaster and head of English at the Yehudi Menuhin School. He studied ballet at the Rambert Academy, then spent four years as principal dancer, performing in the UK and abroad. After 15 years' working in commercial management, publishing and IT industries, he gained a first class degree as a mature student in English literature, drama, theatre and performance from the University of Surrey, and a PGCE from the Institute of Education. He has been a teacher of English and head of year 9 at St Edward's School, Oxford, and a teacher of English and drama at Pangbourne College. He is married to Dawn, a director at KPMG, and they live 'over the shop' in a house within the school.

Friendly and approachable, he has quickly won over the SPCS community. 'He has a great manner with both parents, teachers and staff,' wrote one parent. 'Really lovely!' enthused another. 'Open to new ideas,' was another comment. A general feeling that the school, already good, can only get better with him at the helm. Interests include photography, gardening, cooking, cycling and writing. His study is lined with an erudite collection of books, and he is currently doing a PhD on psychological development in young musicians and dancers.

Entrance

Register early – school is massively oversubscribed. Single form entry of 20 in reception. First list is closed at 70, then reserve list of 40. After that, the school keeps names and addresses but doesn't charge a registration fee. Informal style assessment - number games, drawing pictures, telling stories, etc. Staff look for children who are able and who will get on well within the school. Preference is given to siblings as long as they're able to access the curriculum.

Year 3 entry of a further 12 pupils. School doesn't follow any kind of formal 7+ assessment programme, but children are tested on English and maths 'just to see where they are.' A few join at year 7, as others leave and places become available.

Choristers (boys only) can join at any time, including mid-year, but are unlikely to be accepted after year 5. The school takes around six per year. Auditions are held by Andrew Carwood, director of music at St Paul's Cathedral, who looks for a desire for music, an innate openness of the voice, and the ability to hold a tune.

New buildings planned which will enable two form entry to reception from 2020.

Exit

Diverse destinations, reflecting the intake: St Paul's, Westminster, Forest, City of London Boys' and Girls', Alleyn's, North Bridge House, Portland Place, Queen's College, Channing, Highgate.

Majority of girls leave after year 6 for London day schools. The few who stay on go to mixed schools with a 13+ entry eg City of London Freemen's. Excellent track record of scholarships, both academic and specialist. Choristers do very well, often winning music awards to top senior schools eg Eton, Winchester, King's Canterbury, Uppingham.

Our view

The Choir School dates from around 1123, when eight boys in need of alms were provided with a home and education in return for singing the Cathedral Office. It wasn't a particularly child-friendly place, however, and by the early 19th century the stipend paid for the boys' upkeep was so inadequate that they were usually dismissed to roam the streets once service was over. Victorian philanthropist Maria Hackett, shocked by their predicament, campaigned tirelessly for 60 years to get them something better, and the present school was eventually founded in 1874 in Carter Lane. Threatened with demolition in the 1960s, it moved to its present brutalist modernist site in New Change. Originally for choristers only, it became a day school in the 1980s, and co-ed in the 1990s. The swimming pool that once occupied the basement is now the English department; needs must.

It is, to modern sensibilities, a very ugly building, but it's a truly lovely place to go to school, sheltering under the lofty and awe-inspiring splendour of St Paul's Cathedral, and flanked by St Paul's Cross, with its inscription that recalls 'such scenes of good and evil as make up human affairs'. The original roll of eight pupils has grown to 250, spanning reception to year 8.

Not a school for those seeking flashy facilities. Major building works are planned to start in 2018, which will improve both residential and teaching spaces. For now, however, the building remains a homely rabbit-warren of rooms, many of them low-ceilinged and endearingly scuffed. Pupils allude happily to the 'garden', the school's outdoor space, but it isn't very green, and the school's biggest space isn't that big. On the other hand, weekly assembly is held in the Quire of the cathedral itself, affectionately referred to as 'the school chapel', and how many schools can say that? Tell Out Your Soul was sung full-throatedly by children clustered four to a hymn book – not enough to go round, rather charmingly, in this most august of settings. Worship was friendly and child-centred but still assembly as we used to love it: a good sing, a bit of pi-jaw, a few notices, then off to the strains of the organ. Except that it's the St Paul's Grand Organ, and visiting tourists were agape.

They teach the International Primary Curriculum here; both head and staff like its theme-

based approach. They're certainly doing something right. Everywhere we looked, we saw children who were confident, articulate, comfortable with wider learning. In a year 7 English lesson students had come up with their own scholarly questions about Shakespeare that they wanted to research: 'Did he copy work from Christopher Marlowe?' 'What was the political landscape when he was writing?' 'Who did Shakespeare take inspiration from?' and, bluntly, 'Are any of his plays not considered to be any good?' Year 5 maths lesson invited similarly independent thinking: children worked in pairs to 'mark' each other's (anonymous) mistakes on a recent exam paper, and embraced the task with relish, although the gleeful written comments may not have been quite what the teacher had in mind – 'What do you think you're doing?' 'You haven't put the units in, you idiot!' and, more generously, 'Don't forget to write [sic] the answer.' The only modern language taught is French, but the children also do Latin, and Greek is offered for those who stay on to year 7. Pleasant and well-stocked library is used enthusiastically by the whole school. After a morning on the go teachers are still cordial and full of vim, and the standard of work on display is extremely high – we loved the year 3 postcards from Ariadne to Theseus, complaining about being dumped on a desert island. Science taught in dedicated science lab.

Full time qualified SENCo delivers integrated learning support in lessons, aided by team of assistants. School is able to cater for mild dyslexia, dyspraxia, etc. and doesn't see it as a barrier. At the other end of the spectrum, however, several parents contacted us to express concern about the teaching lacking stretch and challenge for the most able pupils, particularly in the middle years. 'They do differentiate in most lessons but they don't really challenge the most able with extension activities,' wrote one who seemed to speak for several. 'There are several gifted children in both maths and English for whom this is the case, and those parents are quite frustrated.' School strongly contests this. 'Extension materials are available in classrooms, and children are directed to them, or can elect to do them. The puzzle wall outside the maths room contains sums which are fiendishly difficult. But it's true that we are not a hothouse, and we work hard not to make school a misery.'

Sport described as 'very inclusive and energetic' by parents, and boys and girls are equally encouraged to play all sports. Team games are played in nearby Coram Fields and Victoria Park, and the school has its own training playground on site. Swimming down the road in the pool at City of London Boys'.

Drama is 'inspirational, exciting and contemporary,' according to one parent, and recent shows have included Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde performed by the year 8s and A Midsummer Night's Dream by the year 5s. Lots of clubs after school, and trips to all sorts of museums and galleries, both in London and further afield – the year 3 camping trip in Essex was 'the most fun ever,' according to pupils.

However, the stand-out activity, as you'd expect, is music, described by a mother as 'Superb! Very uplifting and of a fantastic standard.' Twenty visiting teachers deliver 450 individual music lessons weekly. Senior and junior orchestra, three choirs and an abundance of ensembles including early music group. Outstanding ABRSM exam results, with merits and distinctions at grade 8 common – all the more remarkable given that no child here is older than 13. Music-making here is inclusive – 'It is the norm to sing in a choir or play instruments,' confirmed one mother - but raised above the ordinary by the choristers, whose musicality pervades the entire school community.

Choristers' cathedral life happens before and after school, but their day school life is the same

as the other children's. 'The school does a fabulous job of keeping the choristers integrated into the wider school,' wrote a grateful mother, 'but also manages to build a close sense of community and support amongst the boys.' For those who can cut it (for senior choristers, autumn term finishes at 4pm on Christmas Day), the musical training is unrivalled. 'I think the whole chorister experience is rather magical and has probably fundamentally changed my son's life and attitude to life for the better,' marvelled a parent. 'It has given him a love of music, a real sense of confidence, calm and an ability to slow down and relax.' 'It's busy, but in the best way, and it's become such a big part of my life,' confirmed a year 7 treble, before delivering a stunning rendition of Take O Take Those Lips Away that left us open-mouthed with admiration.

There are usually around 30 choristers and they all have to board. (They can also be of any faith – the school has no issue with this.) Boarding house is a little sparse, but welcoming: L-shaped common room offers books, board games, DVDs, sofas, a Wii, and the ever-popular Lego and K-Nex. Bedrooms were, we thought, rather cramped by modern standards, with up to eight boys to a room, but new accommodation is planned for 2020. Run by a mix of male and female staff. 'The boarding team are responsive and have endless patience for worried or slightly disorganised parents. The communication is very good and open,' wrote one mother. Parents can visit them in the evenings to help with homework, etc. There's time off on Saturday afternoons and boys can also go home on Sunday night, 'which really helps, because obviously we miss him!' according to a parent.

Behaviour is lively but generally impeccable throughout the school. House points system not unlike Hogwarts, with points won and lost for your house through good or bad behaviour. 'The sanction of removing house points is extraordinarily potent here,' remarked the head, and detentions are rare. Achievement and good behaviour rewarded through commendations, gold certificates, etc.

SPCS families are professionals from all walks of life – 'comfortable, but not super-rich,' according to school, which aims to keep its fees as low as possible. A few bursaries, funded directly out of fee income and limited to children in year 3 and above. The only scholarships available are for choristers, whose education is paid for by the cathedral. Strong international contingent - at least a dozen languages spoken here. A SPCS mother wrote, 'The school tends to attract interesting families from a wide mix of backgrounds.' Alumni include England cricket captain Alastair Cooke, Walter de la Mare, Charles Groves and Simon Russell Beale.

This is a kind, nurturing, but exciting place to learn and to grow up. 'Overall, it is a fantastic school. Caring, and academic without being too pushy,' was one parent's verdict. 'I'm delighted my children have been educated there. It's been a special time in their lives and they've all benefited from it in different ways.'