

# Millfield Prep The Good Schools Guide Review

THE  
GOOD  
SCHOOLS  
GUIDE



**MILLFIELD**  
PREP SCHOOL



# What The Good Schools Guide says:

## It would be hard to find a child who would not enjoy Millfield Prep

### HEADMISTRESS

Since 2010, Shirley Shayler MEd BSc PGCE (early 50s). Born and raised in Northern Ireland and grammar school educated, Mrs Shayler took her first degree in biology at Stirling University, returning to Northern Ireland for her PGCE. Since then, her career has remained in England, though she has never quite lost the cadences of her upbringing – and why should she? A spell at Millfield Senior teaching biology, coaching hockey and being a houseparent has come full circle, with her return there after a deputy headship at Taunton School and a headship of Stonar. The fact that her departure was greeted with such dismay is testimony to the respect and affection in which she is evidently held at Millfield Prep: everyone we spoke to remarked upon her approachability, her visibility and that she knows everyone by name. But she's no soft touch: 'strict' and 'professional' we were told, and her speeches were described as inspirational.

To us, her experience was evident and reassuring, as was her warmth, her perceptiveness, and her sense of style: there's generally a place for a discreet split in a pencil skirt and an elegant up-do. It would be understandable to become complacent somewhere like Millfield Prep, but Mrs Shayler is something of a visionary – she designed the unusual and beautiful pavilion which incorporates an imaginative space for theatre in the round – and has a long list of things she would want to do at the school: a place one might have thought had everything. As for her achievements to date, she is pleased to have joined up the pastoral care with academic and sporting matters: "they can be disjointed," she says, "but the pastoral tutor groups ensure that no child is over-committed [something which would be easy at Millfield], and that the children get the best out of it". Married to Gary, who teaches biology at the senior school, she has one daughter currently on her gap year – plus her horse and four dogs. "I just about have time to cook a Sunday roast in term time," she says, but the family go in for action holidays skiing, sailing and scuba-diving.





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## ENTRANCE

Essentially non-selective, though "we do have an academic and behavioural benchmark," the head points out. The school professes to be looking for 'well-motivated boys and girls with [...] interests that stretch beyond the academic curriculum'. Hopefuls are interviewed and assessed – the latter a computer-based verbal and non-verbal reasoning test. Children needing or likely to need extra support at the school meet the head of learning support for their assessment. Admissions into the pre-prep from 2 and the prep from 7, but the largest intake is into year 7; applications are considered into any year group at any time, space permitting. One mother was full of praise for the welcome her son had received into year 6. Scholarships to 15 per cent of fees (but often honorary) for academic, sporting and musical prowess and, unusually, in chess, plus all rounders, and headmistress' scholarships to a generous 50 per cent for outstanding ability or talent.

## EXIT

Mostly to the senior school, where transfer is automatic barring the blotting of any copy books, but the prep is quite open to the idea of children going elsewhere at year 9.



## Our view

This really is a school which has pretty well everything for pretty well everybody with the means to pay for it. Academically, the range is very broad indeed: we loved the Latin class for better linguists who were busy bringing a dead language back to life by speaking it, but the sensitive and encouraging teaching in the tiny physics class of just five to whom this subject evidently didn't come easy was inspiring too. From the off, students are set for maths and English; languages follow in year 7. Most subjects are taught by a group tutor (sic) until year 6; after this all subjects are taught by specialists. Classes are small, and the curriculum extensive, enquiry-based and global in outlook. Parents feel that the "lingering reputation of the school as being not very academic," as one put it, and therefore not somewhere where a very bright child would thrive, is misplaced, a misconception which is also being put straight by the senior school.

Chess lessons with the resident grandmaster are compulsory in years 3 and 4, and students are encouraged to take part in national competitions, such as Salters Festival of Chemistry (winners in 2017). Learning is studied as an end in itself through the Thoughtful Learner programme, which sets its adherents up for life. Technology is not quite as embedded as it is at the senior school, but from year 7, students are expected to have their own iPad. Millfield generally is known for its SEN provision, notably specialist dyslexia support, and is the reason why some parents choose the school. A busy learning development centre staffed by one part-time and five full-time members of staff delivers multi-sensory programmes to address many, if not all, aspects of dyslexia, such as processing and organisational difficulties. The centre is so integral to the school that students attend extra lessons with no stigma attached to it whatsoever. "He just goes – he doesn't care," said one mother of her son.

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Outside the classroom, there's everything a young person could possibly want to do – and then some: many parents, in some cases egged on by their young, decide on the school for the range of sports alone. The facilities, coaching and degree to which timetables can be tweaked for the sporting elite are exceptional for a prep school; some children come in order to be fully supported in the pursuit of their talents. All are, however, encouraged to try a variety, and all represent the school at some point in something. Particular recent successes include girls' hockey (at the time of writing, the girls U13 are IAPS champions), golf, fencing and triathlon, in which the school boasts a junior world champion. Pitches, courts, nets abound, plus a 25m pool, nine hole golf course, stables and an outdoor arena, where a solitary rider on a palomino cantered circles in the dusk as we concluded our visit. The school's wonderful setting, nestled under Glastonbury Tor, means a limit on artificial lighting.

About the sole limit on what a child could achieve in art is that child's own talent: from the artist in residence, to the 3D lasercutter, to the area dedicated to the sculpting of stone – it's all here for the taking. Clubs thrive alongside timetabled art, plenty of space to show it all off and a prominent place for Picture of the Week in the dining room. Imaginative collaborations take place with the music department on occasion, such as Painting Sound and Woven Sound. No shortage of ambition on the drama front, either. Everyone is encouraged to get involved and there are productions for individual year groups; recent shows include Beauty and the Beast (where three of the principle male roles were played by girls) and The Highwayman.

Music is outstanding. The number and scope of ensembles would not disgrace a senior school and musicians benefit from what's laid on in school (we liked the sound of brunch masterclasses in piano and strings) and from workshops elsewhere from eminent vocal performers such as the Gesualdo Six. But it is perhaps the fact that every child is encouraged to perform which produces such a varied crop of confident and accomplished singers, fiddlers, trumpeters and so on, plus those who just do it for fun. The highlight of our visit was the tea and music concert, in which children of all ages played and sang short pieces. From breathy flutes to hesitant pianists to a talented young singer who could make Adele look to her laurels – all were brave enough to strut their stuff in front of parents and staff and receive warm applause. And we haven't even mentioned the array of cake...

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As for life at Millfield generally, we found more than satisfied customers and very few gripes. "Unlike the senior school, everyone knows each other at the prep," one mother told us. "My son's friends are lovely, grounded, thoroughly good people," added another. The global friendships formed and the school's skill in dealing with friendships gone wrong get the thumbs up. The nurturing environment – not so cosy that children are not gently pushed beyond familiar pastimes – also meets with parental approval: "He's tried cookery and public speaking, and has grown in confidence so much that now he volunteers for things at school," one happy parent reported.

The group tutor is the go-to person for day students and has the overview of their lives at school; for boarders, it's houseparents. Very little boarding until year 6, then numbers pick up in years 7 and 8, until about 60 per cent finish their prep school careers as boarders. High praise for boarding, including some rather rueful in tone: "You don't need to board – we live five miles away!" one mother told her children, but board they do, "because they love it". Another told us that her child was hard to get hold of, as he was so busy and "within five minutes, he's saying Bye!" International parents kept fully in the picture; in fact everyone we encountered spoke highly of communication in general, and the full page email from each subject teacher for those parents unable to make parents' evenings much appreciated.

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Accommodation varies in style and character. Boys' houses tend to be older and more scattered; recently one girls' house was relocated to be next to the other, both purpose built. We found them warm, homely and welcoming, with cosy dorms and kitchens for those all-important snacks. All mobile devices have to be handed in at night. It would be hard to find a child who would not enjoy Millfield Prep, though the head did concede that they have to be organised – it's a huge site with a lot on. "Might not suit an agoraphobic either," she added wryly. At the request of students, the uniform has recently been rejigged to include culottes for anyone who wishes to wear them. Checked shirts for every day, white for best, ties for all; sports kit in Millfield colours of navy, scarlet and green branded within in an inch of its life.

Millfield Prep is less daunting and more nurturing than its size might suggest, and previous (mis)conceptions of it being somewhere for sporty rich children with a bit of schooling thrown in are inaccurate: "Parents looking at their children doing nothing but sport will be disappointed. We are a school!" the head was at pains to point out. But there's no ducking the immensely privileged environment – it's all there for the taking for the very fortunate children who go there.



## CONTACT

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