



MILLFIELD
PREP SCHOOL

The Good Schools Guide review



THE
GOOD
SCHOOLS
GUIDE

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HEADMASTER

Since 2022, Dan Thornburn, previously head of Edgeborough School in Surrey, where he oversaw the school's merger with Charterhouse and helped numbers grow by more than 20 per cent. Educated at Packwood Haugh – his father was in the army so he boarded very happily there – and Wrekin College, where he became head boy. He studied history at the University of Exeter, but admits he spent more time playing rugby than poring over his history books. He had an 'unorthodox route' into teaching – his original ambition was to make rugby his career and he played for Exeter Chiefs seconds. He'd worked at Lockers Park in Hertfordshire during his gap year (he also had stints as a milkman, a bin man and a painter and decorator in his university holidays) so when his rugby hopes were dashed he returned as a trainee teacher, teaching history, English and sport. He later moved to Chafyn Grove, where he was head of IT, taught history and English and was deputy head by his early 30s. He was head of St Petroc's in Bude for three years – 'it was just idyllic' – and then moved to Edgeborough.

With family in Devon and Somerset, he'd always wanted to work in the south west so when the job came up at Millfield Prep he put his hat in the ring –but modestly reckoned he 'wouldn't have a hope'. Millfield thought otherwise and snapped him up, no doubt because of his proven

track record and keen understanding of the school's ethos. The prep, like the senior school, has a formidable reputation for sport but he's determined to show it has far more to offer than its stupendous facilities and top-notch coaching. 'Some parents will say "I am looking for my child to be an Olympic athlete" and we say: "Great, but first and foremost we want them to thrive academically." We are not just one thing. We do so much other stuff that isn't traditional sport. Children are able to extend themselves in all sorts of different ways here.'

By the end of his first year he was within touching distance of having learned every child's name (no mean feat considering there are nearly 500 of them). He doesn't teach these days but does cover lessons, coaches sport when he can and lunches with pupils every day. He works closely with the senior school and meets head Gavin Horgan at least once a week (the prep is three and a half miles from the senior school). His light-filled study in the heart of the school looks across the school site so he waves cheerily at pupils as they pass by. His two angelically-behaved golden retrievers, Humphrey and Parsnip, have made themselves thoroughly at home – everyone jokes that they match the cream décor of his study. A parent described him as 'very jolly, very open and someone who really listens'. Another said he's 'one of life's enthusiasts' and is quick to act on suggestions, such as making sure that signed sports' shirts on display in the sports pavilion represent sportswomen as well as sportsmen. They also appreciate the fact that he got the parents' association in full swing again after the pandemic, his focus on community outreach and his determination to sort out the school's 4G coverage.

His wife Emi is a part-time maths teacher at Wells Cathedral School and they have two children, a son at the prep and a daughter at the senior school. In his spare time he enjoys sport, keeping fit on his rowing machine, playing the piano and country walks.



ENTRANCE

Lightly selective – the school needs to be sure that children can cope with the curriculum. Entry is possible into all year groups and unlike some, the prep will consider entry in January and April as well as September. Applicants need a reference from their current school and are then invited to visit for a taster visit, followed by an interview and assessment. The largest intake is into year 7 and the top years are often full.

EXIT

More than 95 per cent to the senior school. Transfer is automatic as long as children don't blot their copy books. The occasional one or two head to single sex schools from the prep, including Sherborne and Sherborne Girls in recent years.

OUR VIEW

Set in 200 meticulously cared for acres on the edge of Glastonbury, with Glastonbury Tor rising majestically above. The heart of the school is Edgarley Hall, bought by Millfield founder Jack Meyer in 1945 after demand grew for a school for younger pupils. In the old days this imposing Victorian house was home to the boarders (their dining room is now the staff room) but now it's the administrative hub of the school. Even though the site is vast, the classrooms, assembly hall, music school and boarding houses are all next to each other so it's easy for children to navigate. The classrooms are in large purpose-built and superbly equipped blocks, with colour coded subject departments; we loved the climbing wall on the outside wall of the junior building.



Most subjects (apart from DT, ICT, languages, music, drama and PE) are taught by form tutors until year 6 and by specialist teachers after that. Classes are small (between eight and 16) and the curriculum is extensive, enquiry-based and global in outlook (23 nationalities represented at the school, including China, India, Japan, South Africa, Spain and Tanzania). Everybody uses computers from a young age – year 6 pupils use the school's iPads and in years 7 and 8 they're expected to have their own (the school will help if this is an issue). All prep children are in tutor groups and every day starts with group tutor time, assembly or chapel. A parent whose child had progressed to the senior school said the prep had given him 'a fabulous foundation academically'. She'd originally planned



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for him to join in year 7 but he loved it so much when he visited that he started a year early. Another parent said that once she visited the school she didn't look at any others.

Millfield is famous for its SEN provision, notably specialist dyslexia support. The learning development centre, known as the LDC and staffed by four specialist teachers, all of them Mental Health First Aid trained, supports around 30 per cent of the pupils for needs like dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, autism and ADHD – mostly in small groups but sometimes one-to-one. The LDC is bright and welcoming, with lots of posters of famous dyslexics like Richard Branson, Tom Cruise and Whoopi Goldberg. 'Children like coming to the LDC,' said the head of SEN. 'There is no stigma attached.' 'The teachers are very experienced and very up-to-date with the latest research,' said a parent. 'Everything is tailored to the child.' The school also works closely with Made By Dyslexia, a charity founded by Kate Griggs, a Millfield governor and former Millfield pupil.

THE PRE-PREP

Pre-school for children aged 2 to 4, reception, year 1 and year 2, is housed in a converted science block, safe and secure and with its own outdoor space. They all do forest school once a week and when we visited children and staff were busy preparing for Children in Need, eagerly anticipating fun, games, face painting and a Pudsey treasure hunt.

Supporting children's mental health and wellbeing, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic, is the school's number one priority. The prep launched its own wellbeing curriculum in 2021 and children have a 40-minute wellbeing class every week, with pursuits like meditation, yoga, soul food and mindful walks and talks. Each activity links to the school's values of 'be kind, be you, be curious, be challengers and be brilliant'. Who could argue with that? The on-site chaplain has a wellbeing dog, a black Labrador called Sir Nigel, whom the children adore. Assembly three times a week in the assembly hall, including a regular celebration assembly where pupils are rewarded for triumphs big and small, from doing the lighting for a school show to acts of kindness. Parents told us that the prep excels at boosting children's self-esteem and confidence. 'I'm gobsmacked at the level of care and attention and organisation,' said a father. 'Every school should inspire kids and Millfield Prep really does.' High praise too for the way the senior school and prep collaborate – Gavin Horgan ran the tuck van at the prep's Bonfire Night celebrations and invited prep pupils with siblings at the senior school to lunch at his house so everyone could catch up with each other. 'We've found our forever school,' said a parent, who moved to Somerset so her child could be a day pupil at Millfield Prep. 'It's a very happy place.'

Outside the classroom there's everything a young person could possibly want to do. As a year 7 girl put it: 'I cannot think of any other place in the world where I would get to ride my pony, take microscopic photographs of cells, sing with the choir and swim with one of the best swimming clubs in the UK, while enjoying free time in between lessons to play with my friends who come from different parts of the world, like Spain, United States and Nigeria – all in the same day.'

Few prep schools can boast that they sent three ex-pupils – James Guy, Alec Coombes and Rory Gibbs – to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, but Millfield can. The facilities, coaching and degree to which timetables can be tweaked for talented young prep pupils are exceptional and many parents choose it for precisely that reason. However, everyone is encouraged to try a variety of sports and represent the school at something during their time here.



There's almost too much choice, although parents say staff make sure pupils don't over-stretch themselves. Pitches, courts and nets abound and there's also a vast sports hall, nine-hole golf course and an equestrian centre with stabling for 30 ponies. The prep has its own 25-metre, four-lane pool but the ultra-keen can train in the magnificent 50-metre, eight lane pool at the senior school. Not surprisingly, swimming is huge – prep swimmers are coached by a former Olympian and won the IAPS national finals in 2022 for the 35th year in a row. Other notable successes include nine prep pupils representing Great Britain in the European and world championships in biathlon and laser run. The girls' cricket team has won the national indoor title at Lord's twice. Talented swimmers, riders and cricketers at the prep can get up early to hone their sport before school. Parents say staff are brilliant at building children's confidence and self-esteem – a girl who thought she wasn't sporty found herself in the county cricket development team within months of joining the prep. The only quibble we heard was that if you aren't in an A or B sports team there aren't so many fixtures against other schools – 'but it's not for want of trying,' said a parent.

MUSIC

Music is outstanding. Everyone is encouraged to learn an instrument or sing in a choir – and they jump to the challenge. More than half the pupils learn an instrument, 30 per cent learn two and a few play three or four. Gifted and talented musicians can join the Edgarley Ensemble, a scholarship chamber music group for year 8 pupils.



There's a huge array of music on offer in the music school and recital hall – recent events include The Eye Meets the Ear concert, a collaborative art and music event where pupils and parents created art while listening to live music, musical workshops galore, the prep's own mini Glastonbury Festival rock and pop concert and a beatboxing masterclass run by a world champion beatboxing maestro. Recent drama highlights include Moana, Dick Whittington and Beauty and the Beast – some tread the boards while others prefer to do their bit backstage. One pupil was so fascinated by lighting and sound in prep productions that he became production manager for The Lion King's world tour. The art department is a hive of activity, children let their creative imaginations fly here. There's also a fully-equipped



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pottery and an area dedicated to the sculpting of stone and wood.

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and green worn by young and old. Famous names who attended the prep include immunologist and respiratory physician Peter Openshaw, TV doctor Sarah Jarvis, former rugby player Chris Robshaw, writer Sophie Dahl and singer Ella Eyre.

BOARDERS

Around a third of children board. Boarding from year 3 although numbers rise substantially from year 6 – by year 8 more than half the year group board. Four of the five boarding houses – two for girls and three for boys – are a hop, skip and a jump away from the centre of the school. The fifth is a five-minute walk along a footbridge across the road outside. 'The boys feel like they are in their own little hotel,' says the head. The girls' houses are purpose-built while two of the boys' houses are old farmhouses and the third was built in the 1970s. Siblings tend to be in the same house unless they request otherwise and houses are staffed by a resident houseparent and their family, assistant houseparent, liaison tutor, matron, housekeepers and evening helpers. We visited Chestnut, one of the boys' houses, and were impressed to hear that a houseparent had been up until 1.30am washing the boys' laundry after they'd been caught in the rain at the Shepton Mallet carnival the night before.

Cosy dorms of three or four (occasionally six), with pupils bringing their own bedding, blankets and teddies. 'It's really like a family,' a houseparent told us. 'Some of the older ones with younger siblings are like role models. They're really caring.'



Boarders are allowed to bring mobile phones but they are strictly monitored – they can use them between 6.30pm and 8.15pm but the rest of the time the phones are locked in a charging unit. Boarders eat their meals in the school dining room but they can have snacks like toast, cereal and bagels in the boarding house in the evenings, plus tuck shop every Saturday. Plenty to do at weekends, whether it's inflatable fun in the swimming pool or trips to the cinema, ice skating and boarding. 'They're kept really busy,' said a parent. 'There's so much going on that sometimes it's a dilemma about coming home for the weekend,' said another.

Some flexi-boarding – pupils book in for two, three or four nights a week at the start of term. Imaginative touches include a 'wow wall', celebrating pupils' successes and 'the good book', where they get ticks for being helpful or having nice manners. Lots of motivational messages everywhere, like 'manners, politeness and kindness cost nothing', and digital noticeboards to let pupils know what is going on in school. Year 8 boarders are allowed to do their homework in the boarding house but younger ones do it in school, supervised by staff. Work gets signed off in a pupil planner so it's easy to check they're on track.

MONEY MATTERS

Academic, art, music and sports scholarships of up to 10 per cent for entry into years 6, 7 and 8 (internal only for years 6 and 7). A new all-rounder scholarship will be introduced in 2023 for talented year 6, 7 and 8 all-rounders. Means-tested bursaries



(of up to 100 per cent in exceptional circumstances) are available from year 6 up. There's no doubt that some families are exceptionally wealthy but as a parent told us: 'Others are working three jobs to send their kids here'. Another summed it up neatly: 'It's an elite school but it isn't elitist.'

THE LAST WORD:

A big, innovative school that's far less daunting and far more nurturing than its size might suggest. Whatever their passion, there's something here for every child and staff excel at helping them to have a go at new things and discover their talents. It's all refreshingly down-to-earth, caring and friendly – and the seamless transition to the senior school is a bonus.



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