

Where boys can be boys

*Rob Morse, headmaster at Aysgarth School,
on the benefits of boarding*

WORDS BY JO HAYWOOD

WHEN the Reverend Clement Hales founded Aysgarth School in 1877, he created a place where boys had the freedom to be boys; learning to swim in the river, understanding the ways of birds, otters and foxes, and wearing a splinter of oak in their buttonhole to remind them of the school motto, 'Ex quercu non ex salice' ('of oak not of willow').

That sense of freedom – freedom to think, learn, explore and express – remains strong today among the 160 or so pupils at the north's only all-boys boarding prep.

'We are all boys together,' said headmaster Rob Morse. 'And we're together all the time, which means we can invest fully in all the pupils, making them the best boys they can be, and giving them a solid foundation on which to build the rest of their lives.'

Rob and his wife Lottie take their role as term-time 'parents' to their charges – 140 boarders, 20 day pupils and 65 co-ed pre-preppers – very seriously indeed. But this doesn't mean the days at Aysgarth aren't packed with fun.

'We try to ensure that there's something to look forward to every day,' said Rob. 'The breadth of opportunities and the time to enjoy them that boarding provides is a great advantage. We want every boy to be confident and comfortable in their own skin, and a large part of our job is to find ways of unlocking that confidence, whether it's through academic subjects, music, sport, drama – whatever their individual passion happens to be.'

Rob and Lottie are aided in their mission by a dedicated, caring team of teaching and support staff.

'Our teachers are all specialists in their field and are passionate about their subjects,' said Rob. 'The pupils pick up on that passion. Children of this age are an absolute delight. They are sponge-like and want to learn, which makes teaching them a joy.'

The days are long at Aysgarth, starting

at 7am and rattling along through chapel, classroom studies, games, music, creative arts and outdoor adventures until the boys fall exhausted but happy into bed at lights out.

'From the moment they wake up, there's something to do,' said Rob. 'We believe that if the boys are enjoying themselves, they work harder. It's a simple equation but it works and they flourish as a result.'

'My wife and I chose to come to Aysgarth because it's traditional and because the boys are encouraged to be themselves; to have fun, be adventurous and practical, but also to be kind and modest and thoughtful. We spend all day, every day



Lessons in fun and adventure are part of every school day at Aysgarth



Boys will be boys - even if they're in their Sunday best

with them and I can honestly say that the boys themselves are our greatest asset.'

Aysgarth is a feeder prep for some of the top schools in the country – Eton, Harrow, Radley, Stowe, Ampleforth, Fettes, Sedbergh – but it's not a one-size-fits-all academic hothouse. Every boy is stretched and encouraged to make the most of his talents, but each is also allowed – spurred on even – to follow his own path and strive to achieve his own dream.

'We give every boy the time, space and encouragement they need to be who they truly are,' said Rob. 'We're a broad church. Some of our pupils are academically gifted while others need a bit of help. Our aim is to enable each boy to make the most of their individual talents, whatever they may be.'

The boys have a host of extracurricular activities to choose from so that they're never more than a couple of hours away from fun. The school has its own swimming pool, sports hall, theatre, music rooms, art studios, outdoor pitches and 70 or so acres for the boys to explore on their mountain bikes, but it also caters for more specialist interests like Ferreting Club and Meat Appreciation

Society (for ardent barbecue fans).

'Our traditional ethos means the boys can enjoy their childhood for a bit longer,' said Rob. 'We want these wonderful, confident boys to grow up to become good men. But there's no rush.'

Before coming to Aysgarth 18 months ago, Rob was headmaster at Perrott Hill, a co-ed boarding prep with 220 pupils in Somerset. So, why did he choose to bring his family – wife Lottie and children Daisy and Harry – to a smaller school in North Yorkshire?

'It's all about the boys,' he said. 'This is undoubtedly a beautiful part of the world, and the school itself has an enviable reputation, but it was when we came for our second viewing and got to meet the boys themselves that we knew this was the place for us.'

'They make the school what it is. These delightful, inquisitive, caring boys ensure that there is nowhere – absolutely nowhere – quite like Aysgarth.' ♦

To find out more about Aysgarth School in Newton-le-Willows, near Bedale, call 01677 450240 or visit aysgarthschool.com