

What The Good Schools Guide says

Headmaster

Since 2016, Simon Larter-Evans (50s). Eclectic career to date: trained at Rambert and became principal dancer with Janet Smith & Dancers then, via commercial management, to teaching. Prior to SPCS, head of boarding and head of English at The Yehudi Menuhin School. Parents value his accessibility: 'If there's anything simmering, tell me, call me,' he says. 'Charismatic', 'practical' and 'empathetic' are some of the universally positive comments we heard. 'He is credited with creating the 'warm, family atmosphere' conveyed, among other things, through interactive assemblies and his Friday letter. The letter covers thoughts on everything from tutoring (ok, if you have to, but let's work together) to internet safety (devices handed in on arrival). 'I don't mind being wrong', he says with disarming humility, 'but we all need to try things out, make mistakes, and have the discipline to learn from them'. On the day of our visit, he exchanged funny faces with giggling children darting in and out of view at his study window, and sorted out a friendship issue in the playground. The array of funny hats on his bookshelf suggests a penchant for dressing up but, more seriously, he feels 'a burden of responsibility' to help the children understand their role as global citizens. The prep school experience, as he sees it, is preparation for life itself. 'The anxiety of the next school pervades. The destination is core to what parents are buying, but this must not distract from what it is to be a child'.

Simon and his wife, Dawn, a managing director at Accenture, live above the shop. Along with their lively Airedale terrier, Parker, they escape to the country most weekends. In addition to studying for a master's in coaching and practising the trumpet, he enjoys photography (his black and white photographs line the walls of the music corridor), cooking and cycling. He and Dawn recently cycled 1000 miles from Land's End to John O'Groats to raise funds for food banks.

Entrance

Early registration essential. Eighty children assessed informally (enthusiasm, curiosity, social interaction) for 34 places at 4+. Around 12 places available for 7+ entry: pupils are selected through a range of activities, both academic and interactive. Further openings at 11+ after assessment in maths and English. Priority given to siblings.

Boy choristers, about 6 per year, may be admitted as boarders from 7+, up to year 5. They are auditioned by Andrew Carwood, director of music at St Paul's Cathedral, who looks for 'quality of voice' and potential musical ability rather than formal training. Choristers need to be 'academically on top of things' to be able to cope with the demands of the schedule.

Exit

Wide array of destinations, at both 11+ and 13+: City of London (girls and boys), Forest, Queen's College, Francis Holland, North Bridge House Canonbury, UCS and Westminster; many academic and specialist scholarships offered. Just under half the year 6 cohort leave at 11+ for London day schools. Those who stay on go to a range of schools, including boarding schools: King's Canterbury a favourite. Excellent track record of music/choral scholarships alongside other awards.

Our view

Although the Great West Door of St Paul's Cathedral is just a stone's throw away, there is no grand entrance to the school. Children arrive unassumingly (no blazers for discretion) on foot, on scooters and on the back of bikes. On the morning of our visit, strains of 'In the bleak Midwinter' greeted us from the hall below. Nothing bleak about this impressive Chamber Choir rehearsal though (four-part harmony); a reminder of the nearly 900-year-old choral tradition of the school. In 1123, eight boys in need of alms were given a home and education in return for singing in the cathedral. The original school was destroyed in the Great Fire of London and, after a number of reincarnations, the current brutalist building has been home to the school since the 1960s. Non-chorister day boys arrived in the 1980s, the pre-prep opened in 1998, and the school has been fully co-ed since 2002.

Numbers have now grown to 260+. Any fear that the governing body (seven lay and five Chapter members, chaired by the Dean) might be a tad austere is quickly allayed. 'They are permissive in the very best way', says the head, allowing the school to use the cathedral, affectionately known as the school chapel, as a focal point and a valuable teaching resource – art, maths, history, classics: 'you can try to decipher the Latin inscriptions in assembly if your mind wanders', says one thoughtful child. 'You really feel as though you are part of something special'. How many children have the privilege, in weekly school assembly, of gazing up at mosaics in the quire? Simon Larter-Evans came on board in time to oversee an ambitious £8million building project. Echoing the architecture of the cathedral, it has created an exciting multi-level playground, a larger dining room and an ICT suite, the latter to be used as outreach in the City. A very fine new boarding house has been built 'in harmony with St Augustine's tower'. The history of the ancient site was brought to the fore when skeletons, exhumed under the former nave of St Augustine's church, were blessed and re-interred. 'Thankfully no Roman mosaic floor was discovered' said the relieved bursar.

Former alumni - Simon Russell Beale, Charles Groves, Walter de la Mare to name a few - are testimony to the arts being central here. Alongside the outstanding individual music teaching (350 scheduled music lessons a week), there are six choirs (160 children sing), two orchestras and 10 ensembles. We watched a lively rendition of a cha-cha-cha from the percussion ensemble, complete with conga drums and cow bell. Some parents who expressed initial quiet concern about the emphasis on music are won over by their offspring's enthusiasm. 'They just want to join in the fun, and they soon realise that it brings its own rewards', enthused one. Against the background of outstanding musical talent, 'everyone is encouraged to have a go, music is celebrated at all levels.' Dance and drama are timetabled from the get-go. We watched 8-year-olds perform an energetic street dance and an elegant 17th century Scottish reel. The cross-curricular, theme-based International Primary Curriculum is taught from reception to year 4. Specialist teaching in academic subjects begins from year 5 when Latin is added to the mix; Greek and Spanish from year 7. The head is keen to stress that, even in this 'unashamedly academic' school, 'exams are the outcome rather than the goal'.

Pupils mention teachers who are 'kind' and 'available'. They 'don't just teach, they make learning enjoyable' and 'involve everybody'. They also enthuse about the science lab, as much for the mobile fume cupboard (an unlikely gift from the PTA) as for the resident leopard gecko. Mudlarking on the banks of the Thames is a less obvious prep school discipline, until you see a teenage boy beam at the discovery of 'disposable clay pipes with beautiful engraving'. One scientific experiment tested the river water 'which was incredibly clean, even with the mini eels!' said an excited child. One of many parents who gained an insight into the classroom in lockdown agreed that 'even with the bells and whistles stripped away, the teaching was phenomenal'. There is a refreshing absence of setting; instead, 'positive mixed ability groups' to keep the curriculum broad. SEN issues are, we hear, picked up quickly 'with a light touch' and followed through by one of two learning support teachers. Standardised CAT results analysed and tracked from year 2. In the older years English and maths is 'destination based'. Parents like the absence of hot-housing', preferring the 'strong push to inspire and learn'.

'The whole child is looked after from the minute he is greeted on the door' one mother tells us; 'bumpy moments are addressed quickly'. Older pupils can book a slot with the school chaplain if they need someone to talk to. Vertical tutor groups help familiarity across different age groups. We liked the idea of a 'bus stop' in the playground where children can stand if they feel a bit lonely and somebody picks them up. The library may not be flash but is a much-loved hub: the librarian keeps a basket with strands of wool on her desk 'for a bit of quiet knitting or crochet'. 'Nostalgia with substance,' as one mother said. Good behaviour is rewarded with positive house points and, occasionally, the converse applies 'for minor misdemeanours'.

Outdoor space is indisputably limited, but not a limiting factor when it comes to sport. 'No kids complain about the lack of space generally', according to one father, surprised at his son's acceptance of the rabbit-warren of narrow corridors and the lack of playing fields.

Understandable pride from popular head of PE in fielding competitive teams from year 3 in football, cricket and netball against much bigger, single-sex prep schools. Coram's Fields, Finsbury Leisure Centre and Archbishop's Park are used for games lessons, although this does involve travel. A fencing coach has an enthusiastic following, as does the new head of girls' PE 'to give girls' sport a boost'. There is a laudable ambition to broaden sport in the community. Parents, mostly dual-income, live predominantly in Barbican, Islington or East London and appreciate new 8am – 6pm wraparound care. 'A lovely parent body with an international feel', 'friendly and inclusive'. 'We drop off our children on the way to work, and then bump into each other in the Temple', says one enthusiastic dad. That's not to say that it's only lawyers and bankers; arts, media and medicine are well represented, and all, it seems, liberally-minded, 'the sort of parents who encourage their children to ask questions'.

Boarders

The new boarding house is home to up to 36 boy choristers. The 17th century spire of St Augustine Watling Street forms part of the wall of the comfortable common room. It is homey and tasteful, equipped with pool, air hockey, table footie and a popular old-style Pac-Man machine. Not that there's a lot of downtime. On top of the normal school week, there is 21 hours' singing: two rehearsals and a cathedral service every day apart from 'Dumb' Thursday, and three services on a Sunday. Boys are allowed to go home for five hours on a Saturday and from Sunday night to Monday morning if distance allows. We had the honour of being shown in through the back door of the cathedral where there was a formidably energetic rehearsal of Britten songs before school. Bright treble voices resounded around the crypt, limbs and sinews moving with rhythmic intensity. Nothing short of a professional training, which, as one chorister parent said, sets up these boys for life. The boys themselves are bright-eyed and chatty, enthusing about the simple pleasures of jam sandwiches (by special request) and the 'almost' full English breakfast (bar the black pudding) on a Saturday. They proudly show us the smart, well-ordered six-bed dorms, each with air filtration unit, airport-standard windows against City noise and a panic button should they need to raise the alarm in the night. There is a sense of each boy and every member of staff (three at any one time, including a resident nurse and a first aider) being there for each other. In lockdown, they missed playing football with 'loads of brothers.' Routine is, perforce, strict: after singing there's instrument practice, a 10-minute slot for phoning home, shower, the News, and 20 minutes' reading before lights out. 'We encourage them to brush their teeth with all the singing and smiling they have to do'. One boy, with prescience, says 'I think I'll be bored for the rest of my life after this'.

Money matters

A few means-tested bursaries to children in year 3 and above, and sometimes to newcomers in year 7. Choristers' school fees are covered by the cathedral; boarding costs by their parents or the Chorister Trust

The last word

Brutalist 1960s architecture belies the warm, caring atmosphere within. Friendly and family-focused. Dog-eared Latin texts, battered cello cases and well-thumbed hymn books (Ancient and Modern, of course) sit alongside the sparkling new boarding house and playground. 'We've won the golden ticket to a non-London school in the middle of the City', says a happy parent. Indeed, the celestial dome glistens up above and is an ever-present reminder of this exciting location.