

THE  
GOOD  
SCHOOLS  
GUIDE

**"We'd be surprised if many girls didn't reach their full academic potential here..."**

# The Good Schools Guide's view of Notre Dame

The content of this document is the unedited, unabridged Good Schools Guide report, in their words.



NOTRE  
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# Head Teachers

■ Since 2013, Anna King MEd MA PGCE FRGS, previously deputy head of the senior school and before that, a teacher in middle management at St George's, Ascot. A Cambridge geography graduate and Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, she has 20 years' experience of secondary education. She has also written for Oxford University Press secondary geography publications department. Teaches some geography and history to year 7s 'as it's a good way to get to know the girls' and pupils clearly relish the fact that she knows most of them by name, although girls further up the school told us they 'don't see her that much except for assemblies and sometimes in the corridor.' Noticeably youthful and fresh in her attitude, she has brought about significant change to the school and is much liked by parents and pupils alike. 'It's a different place - much more focused and academic, with a far bigger sixth form, and facilities have dramatically improved too,' summed up one pupil. Lives in west London with her husband and two teenage daughters.

"It's a different place - much more focused and academic."

Head of prep since 2013 is Merinda D'Aprano, BEd and masters in education management; has been a senior leader at Notre Dame for 22 years, during which time she's written and published her own book, *The Essential Guide to Your Prep School Journey*. Mildly eccentric, and proud of it, she also knows her brood of children by name and regularly acts as cover teacher. 'She is no-nonsense and "on it," but funny and friendly at the same time,' said one pupil. 'She never talks down to us, which I like,' reported another, while several parents told us 'she tells you how it is,' which they report as 'refreshing.' She is a writer, composer, musician (including being a dab hand at the Irish drums), choral singer and enthusiastic gardener, cook and beer-maker.



**Anna King**  
Senior Headmistress



**Merinda D'Aprano**  
Prep Headteacher

# School Background & Atmosphere



■ Opened on its current 25 acre site just outside Cobham in 1937, where it is set in attractive parkland by the banks of the River Mole, with the hum of the motorway in the distance. School buildings comprise the magnificent Georgian Burwood House, with a maze of modern buildings running off it. All is tidy, well-maintained and resourced with plenty of space. An air of calm pervades.

School is part of the Company of Mary our Lady, a worldwide educational foundation and the oldest recognised order for teaching girls in the world. It was founded in Bordeaux in 1607 and current pupils, staff and governors still pilgrimage there today. The vision of the order's founder, Saint Jeanne de Lestonnac, is embodied in the school's mission statement, and the school has lots of 'special places' including the chapel, which can take the whole prep or senior school, and the La Mothe prayer garden - you will be in no doubt that your daughter is at a Catholic school. The prep motto is 'love, learn, flourish' and the girls are involved in pastoral projects which encourage their personal development.

All starts with 80 children, including boys, in the nursery, which has been cleverly refurbished to be bright, colourful and welcoming. Parents particularly like the wrap-around care on offer - Early Birds and Owls breakfast and tea clubs can provide care from 8.15am to 5.30pm. Like the whole school - the rest of which, after year 2, is girls only - it has dazzling facilities (including colourful and spacious library, music room, science lab and ballet hall, while classrooms are all nice and light) and the children look busy and content. Outside the prep, there are planters for young gardening enthusiasts, adventure playground and treehouse, where lessons are sometimes taught as part of the emphasis on outdoor learning. In seniors, it's the learning resources and sixth

form study centre (complete with sixth form parking out the front) that stand out - a shame that more students don't stay on to take advantage of it. 'I think the sixth form is amazing - they get so many opportunities and the careers advice is second-to-none,' one parent told us. School says average size of sixth form fluctuates, but is expected to be around 70 across both years.

While the dining room used to be seen as separating the prep from the senior school, much effort has gone into making it feel as if the two schools are joined by the dining room. Prep girls we spoke to certainly feel part of the big picture here, drawing on all the school's facilities and enjoying interaction with older girls, making the transition at 11 relatively stress-free. The whole school - in its slightly out-of-the-way location - feels safe, away from it all. And even though a significant percentage of families are not actually Catholic, they sign up for the school as if they were - accepting that the belief system is very much part of the set-up here. Girls told us they join in with the morning and evening prayer and grace before meals, attend masses four times a year, study theology and undertake days of reflection. 'Pupils and staff come back to work with a fresh mind. Young people don't generally have enough proper quiet time.' We can vouch for the fact that food is good. Good job really as it's obligatory to have it until year 9. 'It's all part of our focus on building a sense of community among the girls,' says the head.



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# Academic Matters

■ Lessons are pacy but not pushy, and that goes for the prep too, where class sizes are usually 15-20, but occasionally peak at 23. The prep humanities curriculum has been overhauled to fit the so-called TASK model (Thinking and discerning; Active participation; Skills for learning; and Knowledge with understanding). 'We have high expectations of the quality of work here,' says school - these girls really won't get away with simply printing out internet 'research' they have not really read or understood. Teachers are careful to ensure no girl leaves a class without having grasped the topic, say pupils. 'There's lot of holding up of hands in lessons,' one explained. Prep pupils have specialist teachers in Spanish, IT, sport, music, drama, Latin and food, and there is a challenge coordinator for the prep. IT embedded throughout. Hefty amounts of homework - praised by parents, although some pupils feel 'there's just too much of it.' Pupils love the cross-curricular approach - 'For example we're learning about World War II in history and just did World War II landscapes in art.'

Spanish from nursery. 'Not only is it an easier language than many, but we have a number of Spanish schools in our federation, so pupils Skype and make penpals with some - there's a genuinely international focus from early on,' says school. Latin from year 6, French and German from year 7. Plus some extra-

curricular language options at various points, including ancient and modern Greek and Italian.

Around 50 of the prep school children speak a second language, with some trilingual - school sees this as an asset. Two staff (one for prep, one for senior) lead SEN, with a team of specialist tutors, providing one-to-one extra lessons if required (nothing extra in class). But while the school was once seen a top choice for struggling children, numbers of SEN have gone down and mild dyslexia and dyspraxia is about as severe as it gets now. 'We need the girls to be able to cope with the curriculum,' says school. School is wheelchair friendly in all but a fraction of the facilities, but this was not being taken up by anyone when we visited.

In year 7 the girls are taught in three groups (class sizes around 20-22), apart from maths where they are set in four groups, and English, languages, art and humanities where they are in four mixed ability groups. Then from year 8 they are set in maths, science, English and languages. They can take up to 11 GCSEs; most take 10. At GCSE 51 per cent A\*/A grades in 2016. Theology is compulsory and most pass with A\*-A grades. Other strong subjects include art, maths, English lit, geography (for which the department has won awards) and history. Drama is increasingly popular and Latin is an option but only a handful takes it. At A level, 35 per cent A\*/A grades and 71 per cent A\*/B in 2016. Of the 26 subjects on offer (for which girls can choose any combination), most are traditional, with some less common offerings including history of art, Latin and classical civilisation. Maths, psychology, English, biology, geography and history among the most popular and successful.

"We have high expectations of the quality of work here."



# Games, Options, the Arts



■ Lucky prep and senior pupils get full use of school sports facilities, which include a new floodlit all-weather hockey pitch and four netball courts; 25m indoor heated pool; full-size sports hall; and 25 acres of grounds (they recently acquired 7.5 acres over the lane). All the usual contenders, including hockey, netball, rounders, swimming (compulsory up until year 9) and cross-country, with girls often competing both internally (house competitions) and at country and regional level. Plenty of teams (A, B, C, D and E for netball and hockey) and indeed of silverware to prove their prowess. School ski trip is hugely oversubscribed. Football, gymnastics, badminton are among other sports on offer.

Drama facilities have a wow-factor, notably the 370 seat Elizabethan-style theatre, which is nonagon shaped (best for acoustics so picks up even the tiniest voice from a nervous performer). Parents have come to expect polished productions (of which there are many - recent examples including Daisy Pulls It Off and Oklahoma) from Notre Dame and over a third of girls take external LAMDA exams. Music also big here - 80 per cent do extracurricular lessons in the prep school, and over 30 per cent in seniors. In prep, there are two choirs, fledglings strings, flying strings, concert band and music maestros (for gifted musicians). At senior level, there are another two choirs, chamber orchestra, string ensemble, concert band and a new rock band. Merits and distinctions abound.

Standout GCSE results in art and design, with all students gaining A\* for fifth year running. Their work, which is displayed around the school, includes mosaics, sculpture and paintings - all of a spectacular level.

Clubs aplenty - over 50 a week in the prep alone and many more in seniors. Ukulele, sprinting and Chatterbooks (junior book club)

popular in prep, and there's even a scissors club for little ones. At senior level, coding and creative writing get big numbers, plus all the music, drama and sports clubs. Lots of 'oohs' and 'ahhs' among pupils and parents when you mention the trips, of which there is a long list including day visits to all the usual suspects, plus camping on the field for year 4s, PGL week for year 5s upwards, and language exchanges, history and art trips to various countries.

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## Pastoral Care, Well-Being & Discipline



■ Pastoral care definitely not an add-on here. 'I've lost count of the number of parents who say, "My child has never had an unhappy day here"; one parent told us, and every parent we spoke to, bar none, used the word 'nurturing' when describing the school. Gospel values are at its core – 'respect, honesty, forgiveness, kindness, patience,' says school. Lots of peer mentoring and 'big sister' schemes, while praise and reminders about 'desirable behaviour' are drip fed by staff. 'No child is invisible here,' one parent told us. No school counsellor, but there is a school nurse and chaplain. Parents



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and pupils told us girls are supportive of each other ('lots of high fives and wows when friends do well in something,' said one) and it's not a big or intense place. 'I think it's probably a combination of all this that means bullying never seems to be an issue,' said one parent, although sensibly, the heads won't go as far as saying it doesn't exist.

Discipline is not a word you're likely to hear.

'We are less about punishment and more about expectations,' explains head. 'Girls are keen and want to do well and if they make a mistake, we take the time to work out what went wrong – sometimes that might mean talking it through, sometimes it might mean a warning and sometimes it might mean a detention.' Girls concur that reward schemes are more of a priority than sanctions, except when it comes to uniform. 'And we do have a warning system for things like talking in class and forgetting homework – if you get five, it's a detention, which is seen as pretty shameful!' Meanwhile, in prep, the head says the worst you'll get is a hard stare 'and I haven't had to give anyone one of those in at least two years.' Drugs, alcohol, smoking? 'Oh gosh, no,' winced the head.

Tradition of pupils helping with a pilgrimage for sick people to Lourdes and sixth formers working in a local home for the elderly and contributing to a project for disadvantaged students in Albania or Spain.

## Pupils & Parents

A supportive bunch of largely local professional and business families, including a scattering of celebrities among the parents and actress Ruth Wilson and hairdresser Sacha Mascolo-Tarback among the old girls. Parents' association, Friends of Notre Dame, is busy and well supported, organising plenty of events – all the usual from quiz nights to golf days.

Neat and tidy uniform is worn by polite pupils (business wear for sixth formers) who take manners very seriously, holding doors open for each other, no pushing or charging about. But they're reassuringly vocal, with no shortage of chit-chat, although one parent told us alpha females might struggle here.

As the school is tucked away at the end of a long narrow lane, access is by car or school coach only. Rapped knuckles for parents attempting to drop their daughters off to take a walk or cycle up to school – deemed unsafe. Last coach now leaves at 6:10pm to cater for those attending after-school clubs.



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## Entrance & Exit



**Entrance:** Juniors from 2+ (early years) 4+ (reception) and 7+ (prep). Occasional places at other times – worth asking. The children attend an observation/assessment day at the school before offers are made – 'We look for a competent grasp of basic skills at a level appropriate to their age,' says school. 'Not ruthless, but working with parents to help them make the right choice.'

At 11, entrance assessment in English, maths and non-verbal reasoning. School says it is looking for talents that already exist that they can foster. Fifty per cent of places go to girls moving up from the prep school. The rest from all over, including St Paul's, Thames Ditton; Holy Cross, Kingston; Ursuline Prep, Wimbledon; and The Study, Wimbledon. A handful of girls join at sixth form, where there are approximately 70 girls in total across the two years – criteria for them (and for existing pupils) is at least a B in any subject they want to study at A level (and an A in some subjects, including maths). Dedicated to Catholic faith, but welcomes those from other faiths or none provided they are 'sympathetic' to the school's ethos.

"...working with parents to help them make the right choice."



**Exit:** The majority of prep school girls (80 to 85 per cent) stay for the seamless transition to the senior school – far more than there used to be. But it's not automatic – girls retain their place through assessment of their progress during years 4 and 5. Those wishing to apply for an academic scholarship are still required to sit the entrance exam. Around half stay on to sixth form, with the other half leaving to do vocational courses or academic subjects the school doesn't run, board or (most popular) attend a co-ed school. At 18+ most to first choice universities, over 80 per cent to Russell Group, with popular options including Durham, Leeds and Southampton, while many study sciences, psychology, English, history, law and art. Usually one or two to Oxbridge (one in 2016 – medicine). School says university admission tutors report back that the quality of the students' personal and school statements is frequently the deciding factor for choosing a Notre Dame student.

"At 18+ most to first choice universities, over 80 per cent to Russell Group."

## Our View

"We'd be surprised if many girls didn't reach their full academic potential here – and many come away with a love and decent skill set in at least one of the arts too. It's a school that feels small and this, together with the Catholic influence, gives a sense of being quite protected from the outside world – a pull to some parents, but may put off others. Girls are busy, focused and happy."

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## Bursaries & Scholarships

**Bursaries throughout and scholarships for year 7, year 9 and the sixth form. Remember to include extras when budgeting – trips and coaches, in particular, said one parent.**

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