

THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE

St Paul's Cathedral School Review
February 2024

Our View

Tucked away beside St Paul's, this pint-sized school packs a phenomenal punch. Its location and 'exceptional ethos' give pupils 'a strong sense of being rooted in a community', agree parents. The cathedral is used for all sorts of lessons, from maths to art. 'They do so much in the cathedral that they don't even mention it now', marvel parents, who love attending assemblies and concerts there. Modern, functional school buildings, carefully designed to complement their august neighbour, and so discreet that passers-by are often puzzled by hearing children playing. The wood-panelled, multi-purpose hall is adorned with honours boards dating back to the 1880s. Masses of pupil artwork enlivens somewhat spartan corridors, with busy displays and cosy reading corners in the large, bright pre-prep classrooms. Outside space is limited but cleverly designed; a fabulous split-level playground presided over by a ship-shaped climbing frame, with benches and quiet corners for those who need time out, plus the Astroturf 'yard' used for break and PE.

Parents say that 'teachers go above and beyond in terms of individual attention and innovation'. Not a hothouse: 'there's a joy to learning' and 'children can go at their own speed'. In reception, it's 'pupil-led learning'; a request for space travel saw the classroom transformed into a giant rocket. There's also weekly forest school in the cathedral grounds. International Primary Curriculum for years 1 – 4 encourages questioning and debate. 11+/13+ prep from year 5 alongside a broad curriculum including French and Latin, plus Greek in years 7 and 8. A fascinating 'micro-climate project' explored how weather affects the school, concluding 'the tower would be the best place for a picnic'. History 'is particularly fun'; pupils loved a recent mock trial of Charles I led by a barrister parent. Science too: our guides gleefully described dissecting a heart in year 6 ('really squidgy arteries') and an inventive 'crime scene' forensics workshop. English is 'wonderfully varied'; apparently Frankenstein is also up for trial soon.

School is 'really on it' with advice about senior schools, guiding parents 'every step of the way'. Pupils are well prepared —and not too stressed — for 11+/13+ assessments, with lots of interview practice.

Learning support generally in class, with focussed small group and one-to-one sessions in the 'hub', a cheerful space with aids including a Lego 'learning pit' and a purple-haired 'fairy head'. Specialist team of three including SENCo (herself a musician) supports both classroom differentiation and early identification of additional needs. About two per year group on the register, mainly fairly mild dyslexia, OCD, ASC.

Pastorally superb, founded in 'really strong, secure relationships' with 'very accessible' staff who know their pupils extremely well and care deeply; 'mental health is a thread running all through school'. There are 'wish and worry' boxes dotted around and always someone to talk to, including the chaplain. Building resilience and confidence is key, with a 'real emphasis on kindness and respect', say parents. Phones are locked away during the day, allowing plenty of time for good old-fashioned play. Delicious food in the gorgeous light dining room was accompanied by a spontaneous chorus of Happy Birthday for one child. Pupils say that 'everyone's really friendly'; Year 2s buddy with reception pupils, older ones help year 4s with their times tables.

Not surprisingly, 'music is the bedrock of school life' and we heard glimmers of music in the background wherever we went. All pupils from year 1 are in at least one choir and the 'amazing' music director 'gets them all playing, even if it's only banging a drum'. Concerts are 'out of this world', going from chamber music one minute to Star Wars the next, with ensemble opportunities for every age and stage. Pupils play for hospital patients, entertain livery company dinners and busk for charity in Paternoster Square. Percussion ensemble gave us an enthusiastic rendition of Chariots of Fire and chamber choir were practising a gorgeous four-part harmony for the forthcoming Ash Wednesday service. About 80 per cent learn an instrument at school (choristers must do two) and parents can sit in on music lessons to help with practice back home.

Spectacular art on display, including some alarmingly lifelike masks of Boris Johnson; pupils say the art department 'really encourages our creativity and helps us learn'. Drama teacher was 'a real star during lockdown, dressing up as a pirate to lead online sessions', and

reception's nativity play is held in the cathedral crypt. Everyone participates in the annual recitation competition, LAMDA's popular and year 7 production eagerly anticipated. Clubs mainly before or after school, including art acrylics, crochet and history films. Music-tech club had even the tiredest tinies composing tunes on iPads. Plenty of trips, including year 8 residential in Snowdonia; school 'tries hard to make trips not too expensive'.

Sport is 'quite a big deal', and there are plenty of fixtures especially in years 4-6; 'they do pretty well for such a small school', say parents, though some would like more competitive opportunities for the less sporty. One year group is offsite each morning, doing football and netball at Finsbury Leisure Centre, hockey in Wapping and cricket at the 'state-of-the-art' City sport centre. Tag rugby also on offer in year 5, dance up to year 4 and swimming in year 2.

Pupils are delightful, self-possessed and well-behaved yet with an obvious sense of fun, regaling us with tales of Pierre the shrimp's latest antics in the fish tank. Parents love that 'they are still allowed to be children here'; pupils nonetheless have an air of maturity, perhaps due to regular interaction with cathedral staff and visitors, and parents report that SPCS alumni tend to be 'the ones who put their hands up and get involved' at senior school. Choristers blend in seamlessly with their peers within school; there's no sense of hierarchy or 'being precious'. 'There's a place for everyone', we heard.

Parents are 'all very normal' and 'not flashy', largely from nearby areas such as Islington, Stoke Newington, Southwark. Mostly dual-income families and lots of dads doing drop-off. Fairly international – 'whatever I'm teaching in geography, there'll be a child who knows about it', said one teacher. Plenty of City folk, but also musicians, architects and lawyers, all very supportive of school's annual careers day. Holidays can be a challenge, often out of sync with other schools due to choristers' commitments, but head is looking at ways to make things easier.

Head

Since September 2023, Judith Fremont-Barnes, previously head of Milton Abbey School in Dorset. English language and literature degree at Christ Church, Oxford, before embarking on a career in schools and colleges across all age ranges, including James Allen's Girls' School, Radley College and More House School. She also lectured in Japan at Kobe Kaisei College for Women and Kobe University. Her first headship was at Duke of Kent School. She has a master's in education and a special interest in pupil wellbeing.

Mrs Fremont-Barnes is excited about the cathedral's commitment to creating a fully coed choral foundation: 'there's not a hint of snobbishness about the difference between boys' and girls' voices', and the announcement about girl choristers was met with spontaneous cheers from their male counterparts. School and cathedral form a close community; she sits on the cathedral's executive leadership team and a 'girls' voices' project board chaired by the Dean, ensuring that every aspect of the transition is well thought-through.

Head is adamant that SPCS is not just about getting children into their next school but preparation for adult life, asking her charges to reflect on 'who you are and how you present that to the world'. Determined to ensure a thoroughly inclusive community, she's keen to involve pupils in sourcing more diverse books for the excellent library. Hymn books too are due a modern upgrade from the 'tatty old Hymns Ancient and Modern', and a new 'graffiti wall' will celebrate all the diverse languages spoken by pupils. Work with anti-racism charity Kick It Out is also planned, plus getting more involved in the cathedral's music outreach programme.

Her initial focus is getting to know the school, with some gentle sprucing up: 'we definitely need some gardening', she says; 'I'd love us to grow all our own veg'. Parents agree head is very warm, friendly and interested in their feedback, very visible at the school gate, services and other events. Early verdict is that 'she has really embraced the school ethos and will get things done'. Her cosy study is full of interesting nuggets: glossy hardbacks on cathedrals and art,

colourful pupil paintings of fish and a whole wall of bookshelves stuffed with favourite picture books. Literature is her passion; she's enjoying 'getting back into Trollope', inspired by her new milieu.

Married to Gregory, a military historian, with two grown-up sons and a border terrier Ruby who was holding court on the sofa to an admiring audience peering in from the playground.

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.

Choristers, about six per year, may be admitted from 7+, up to year 5. They are auditioned by the cathedral's director of music, who looks for 'quality of voice' and potential musical ability rather than formal training. Choristers also need to be 'academically on top of things'. School started taking day girl choristers in 2023. All boy choristers board and girls will follow suit in 2025 after boarding facilities have been expanded and funds raised for scholarships, providing an equal offer for girl and boy choristers.

Exit

Wide array of destinations, at both 11+ and 13+: City of London (girls and boys), Dulwich College, Forest, Queen's College, Francis Holland, North Bridge House, South Hampstead, UCS, Wetherby and Westminster. Just under half the year 6 cohort leave at 11+ for London day schools. Those who stay on go to a range of schools, mainly boarding: King's Canterbury a favourite. Head already having positive conversations with London day schools about places for girl choristers at 13+. Excellent track record of music/choral (over 40 per cent of year 8) as well as academic and drama scholarships.

Boarding

Former choristers often find that ‘there’s never been another community like this’; luckily there are regular reunions and a free pass to the cathedral for life. It’s pretty full-on, with rehearsals before and after school plus a cathedral service every day except ‘dumb’ Thursdays, three on Sundays. Slipping into the crypt at 8.00am, we found choristers and probationers already hard at work rehearsing with remarkable focus given the early hour. Choristers have huge respect for their ‘utterly gifted’ musical director, and parents say it’s mutual – he treats his charges as the young professionals they are, with great kindness.

The immaculate boarding house (named for the late bursar, who masterminded its build) feels rather like a boutique hotel, with wide corridors, soothing colours and sparkling bathrooms. Currently home to up to 36 boy choristers. There’s a ‘very cool’ games room with pool, air hockey, table footie and a popular old-style Pac-Man machine, plus a homely common room with squishy sofas, books and board games. ‘Sports do take a back seat’ but choristers join other clubs with their peers on Thursdays. Parents can visit regularly, help with prep or join for tea, and there’s home leave for five hours on a Saturday and from Sunday night to Monday morning if distance allows, with fun weekend excursions for those who can’t get home.

Choristers very clear on who to talk to if they have any issues, including an ‘independent listener’, and a cathedral chaperone is always present at rehearsals. Two live-in nurses are on hand for nocturnal nosebleeds and homesickness alike.

Our guides were bright-eyed and chatty, enthusing about all aspects of boarding life. They proudly showed us the smart, well-ordered six-bed dorms, each with colourful velvet armchairs, airport-standard windows against City noise and a panic button should they need to raise the alarm in the night. Dorms are mixed up termly (‘good if someone snores’). There’s a 10-minute slot every evening for phoning home (seniors also get 20-30 minutes ‘tech time’) and 20 minutes’ reading before lights out. Boarding ‘helps manage the stress’ of their busy timetables and teachers are ‘understanding if occasionally you need extra time for homework’.

Money matters

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

Last Word

Not just for songbirds, this 'joyful place' will transform even the most unmusical child into a happy, intellectually-rounded and musically-attuned individual. Parents wistfully wish it went up to 18. 'It feels like a village school in the middle of the City', said one; 'we can't believe our luck in finding it.'