

A **WORLD** OF POSSIBILITY

From woodland classrooms to specialist teaching and the wider Stonyhurst estate, St Mary's Hall Pre-Prep gives young children the freedom to explore, question and discover what they love

For children taking their first steps into school life, the foundations matter. Stonyhurst St Mary's Hall (SMH) Pre-Prep is a place where childhood is cherished, curiosity is nurtured and young minds are encouraged to discover what they love.

As Charina Hartley takes on the role of Head of Pre-Prep, she brings with her 14 years of experience teaching at Stonyhurst.

For Charina, the essence of Pre-Prep is about giving children the confidence and opportunity to explore: "Our Pre-Prep is all about introducing children to the many and varied opportunities available, helping them to discover what they love," she says. "Children are encouraged to question, investigate, develop independence and build confidence."

The Cygnets (Pre-School) and Swans (Reception) work closely with the older children at SMH, helping to create a united school community.

Small class sizes of 20 or less mean teachers and support staff can get to know every child as an individual, while a bespoke curriculum provides a broad foundation in phonics, early reading, numeracy, languages, technology and the creative arts.

Even the youngest pupils benefit from specialist teaching and have access to the wider Stonyhurst campus. This includes



the collections in the Stonyhurst Museum, as well as the archives and libraries that bring history to life, allowing the younger children at SMH to experience this extraordinary resource.

The breadth of opportunity extends outdoors, too. Set within the extensive Stonyhurst estate, SMH Pre-Prep has access to woodland classrooms, gardens, nature areas and extensive sports facilities.

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"My passion is the outdoors – if we can take teaching outside, that's what we do," says Charina. "I think being in nature, in the fresh air, is an intrinsic part of learning. Children are calmer – outdoor learning gives them freedom."

A new outdoor play area, inspired by the famous Tolkien Trail, has recently been developed to encourage imaginative outdoor play. Tolkien's connections with Stonyhurst are also being woven into the curriculum, giving pupils the opportunity to learn about the author and his links to the area as they explore.

The importance of this approach was highlighted in Stonyhurst's ISI inspection earlier this year, which recognised the co-curricular provision as a Significant Strength. Inspectors noted that the programme 'promotes pupils' wellbeing particularly effectively' and makes a 'major contribution' to children's emotional, social, creative and physical development.

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For younger pupils, that means opportunities ranging from swimming, judo, gymnastics and tennis to yoga, ballet, musical theatre and craft. Weekly swimming lessons take place in the indoor pool, while pupils also have access to the tennis dome and extensive sports facilities across the wider campus.

The result is a genuinely holistic education – and one that fits around family life. Pupil numbers at St Mary's Hall have grown by 40 per cent over the past two years, reflecting its appeal to families looking for a nurturing yet flexible school experience.



"With that growth comes exciting opportunities," says Charina. "SMH provides great value for families. We open at 8am and at the end of the school day, children can stay for after-school activities and supper, with final collection at 6pm. For working parents, it offers real flexibility and means that, when children return home, families can enjoy quality time together.

"It's that wrap-around care that really helps. Children also have the opportunity to take part in a range of sports and activities after school, giving them a chance to discover new interests and hobbies."



Underpinning everything is Stonyhurst's Catholic faith and Jesuit tradition, with its emphasis on cura personalis – care for the whole person. Faith and spirituality are woven naturally into school life, encouraging children from an early age to develop gratitude, compassion and an awareness of the world around them.

Reflection is part of the everyday experience through the Examen, an important part of Ignatian spirituality and prayer at Stonyhurst. Beginning with gratitude, it encourages children to look back over their day and recognise where God has been present, in an age-appropriate way. Giving them the opportunity to reflect on the good things in their day and consider moments that may not have gone to plan. "The children become very familiar with this daily activity and take ownership of their reflection." says Charina, "They become more self-aware, learn about forgiveness and develop resilience."

This daily habit of prayer and reflection helps even the youngest pupils begin to understand what it means to live out Stonyhurst's Jesuit values in their relationships with others.

The ISI inspection similarly highlighted the nurturing environment at Pre-Prep, noting that in Early Years 'children build trust because of their warm relationships with adults'.

That sense of connection extends to parents, with daily communication and a close partnership between home and school.

"We work very closely with parents and have high expectations of pupils within a nurturing environment. There is a strong sense of belonging."

For families joining St Mary's Hall, Pre-Prep is also the beginning of a much longer Stonyhurst journey. Children move seamlessly through SMH and ultimately on to the College, with the continuity of people, place, values and relationships providing a reassuring foundation as they grow.



Reflecting on her new role, Charina said: "I want to build on the success we have achieved and protect what makes SMH so special, ensuring that each child can be the best they can be as they start their Stonyhurst journey in Pre-Prep."

Perhaps that is the real strength of Stonyhurst St Mary's Hall – children are given the space to explore, while surrounded by opportunities that encourage them to become confident, curious and resilient learners. And with the whole of the historic Stonyhurst campus and surrounding countryside on their doorstep, it is an extraordinary world for them to discover. ■

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