

What The Good Schools Guide says

Head

Since September 2018, Louise Lawrance, previously head of Channing Junior School for 10 years and before that, head of pre-prep at the Hampshire School for five years. Brought up in South Africa where, as the eldest of three and having lost her dad at 12, she stepped up to help with her family. This, along with her experience teaching at a school for street children and volunteering in a township orphanage, taught her how to be resourceful – qualities still evident in her leadership style today. After her teaching degree in SA, she travelled to the UK to work in a state primary school in Burton on Trent where she introduced initiatives including whole-class computing lessons and installed an ICT suite from scratch. Following a stint in the central business district in Australia, she realised how 'dull' other jobs were and went back into education, this time a London state primary school 'with challenges' before making the leap into the independent sector.

Professional, open and reflective, she has a stylish office which serves as the perfect setting for the pupils' striking artwork, chosen for the 'joyful use of colour', while the school therapy dog, Teddie, has his bed and toys in the corner. Pupils – who feel she's 'positive' and 'on our side' – particularly appreciate 'Teddie tea time', whereby good work or values are rewarded by giving him a treat and getting him to do a trick. Meanwhile, parents appreciate her efforts to champion clubs, extend wraparound care and introduce forest school, as well as praising her 'modern edge', 'straight-upness' and unshakeable 'pro-girl' ethos.

Lives locally with her 'supportive' husband and their son (at New Beacon) and daughter (at this school). Enjoys scuba diving and is a qualified divemaster. Also savours meeting with friends and running with Teddie on the Downs.

Entrance

Academically non-selective, with entry via a tour of school (and school reports where appropriate). Main entry point at 3+ into pre-school (including boys), then it's girls only from reception when another influx joins. Ditto in year 3 when school grows to two-form entry (max 15 in each class). Occasional places in other years, with some mid-year joiners. Waiting lists in some year groups. Minibuses run between New Beacon to help with siblings.

Exit

Around half of year 6 girls sit the 11+ (Kent test) – usually all pass. Vast majority to Tonbridge Grammar School, the rest mainly to independents including Sevenoaks, Caterham, Walthamstow Hall, St Paul's and Wycombe Abbey. Parents praise school for preparing for a wide range of destinations – 'They strip away preconceptions about a child, roll their sleeves up and work to fulfil ambition for what's right for the girl.' In 2024, 35 scholarships.

Our view

Tucked away in leafy Sevenoaks, this is a welcoming school where children are greeted by staff every morning. Founded on VE day in 1945 (the school's crest is a dove of peace and Churchill's victory sign), it moved to its current location in 1957, the Victorian mansion now accompanied by low lying newbuilds, two playgrounds and a playing field. Not the biggest

campus, admit parents, 'but uses every inch brilliantly'. Most recently, an old rickety pirate ship was replaced with modern play equipment and climbing wall for pre-prep. It's the envy of older girls, as we discovered, but we're assured their playground is up next – and there are plans afoot for the cloisters area too.

From pre-school and pre-prep to the more 'grown-up' classrooms in the main building, there's an industrious buzz. In the early years, a phonics scheme gets pupils working in vertical groups so they can work at their own pace regardless of age, and we saw hands-on, interactive learning too – including opportunities for tinies to explore touch with door handles and bells. It was story time in reception, with children delighting in 'seeing the stories in my head', while an older class showed excellent understanding of properties of shapes using Carroll diagrams. Parents say teaching is 'dynamic' and 'relaxed'. Pupils like the cross-curricular learning, most recently the Egyptians where pupils raved about the creation of a sarcophagus in the classroom. Outdoor learning is also popular, with a string of fairy lights leading the way up to the terraced forest school where all children to year 3 get a weekly session. Here, we saw reception pupils making bug hotels and using knots to make a fairy house.

There is specialist teaching from pre-school in PE, music, French, swimming, ballet and ICT, with drama added in year 1 and art in year 2, then maths, English and science (in the swish new science lab) from year 3. By year 5, everything is taught by specialists, with pupils moving around for all lessons. Expect quite a ramp up at this stage, say parents, with the previously 'light' homework – and lack of spelling tests or holiday work – replaced with rigorous preparation for 11+, though pupils seem unphased. Following exams, the graduate programme sees them head off to a residential to France, a visit from an astro-dome, as well as studying the likes of financing and business and for a rookie lifeguard qualification. No setting in any subjects.

The school is big on digital learning, with iPads used from year 3 – we saw many in action. In the well-equipped IT suite, some pupils were using block coding to create a murder mystery game. All year 1s learn to touch type, and one pupil excitedly told us how everyone was going to be using the 3D printer to make a purple school badge. 'What will you do to become a computing legend?' posed a sign on the wall – judging by the youngsters we met, they already had it sussed.

Nine per cent of pupils are on the SEN register, with one EHCP when we visited. Main conditions supported are autism, ADHD and dyslexia, with the department praised for identifying needs as early as nursery. Housed in two cosy rooms (one low sensory) at the top of the main house, the full-time SENDCo is supported by eight TAs (and they can also support visiting specialists including a play therapist and SaLT). A third of the school uses the space at one point or other, with booster groups for working memory, gross motor skills and social skills – and before school one-to-ones are also available (but cost extra). 'The support worked so well that she doesn't need it anymore and is flying,' said one parent, another telling us that 'the SENDCo does an exceptional job not just with the pupils but in training teachers'. This even extends to kitchen staff, who are happy to separate out food.

Drama is on curriculum and every year groups puts on a performance – most recently

Miranda (Matilda with a Granville twist) and (for the leavers) the Wizard of Oz (with year 5s taking on the munchkin roles). Parents say the school goes all out with costumes and sets – think sparkly top hats and canes. School works hard to tie drama in with English too – we noticed punchy theatre reviews in the drama studio. Over half do LAMDA.

Ambitious music programme. The orchestra recently performed The Carnival of the Animals, Purcell Variations, Mozart Rondo plus a 'bit of Strictly', Bossa Nova and Sunshine Rags. Plenty of 'off the cuff' performance opportunities too – 'grabbing those moments to gain confidence'. In earlier years, there's an emphasis on singing and exploring genres like jazz and by year 5, all pupils learn to read music, with several prestigious music scholarships awarded most years. Omnipresent head of music (who popped up everywhere from toddler group to the Wizard of Oz rehearsal) praised for inclusivity, eg inviting pupils with noticed interests or talents to orchestra, even if they don't take lessons (90 per cent do).

Impressive art takes place in studio that's jam-packed with resources and displays. Visits to the likes of the Tate for Cezanne exhibition inspire landscape work, and we were impressed with the interesting techniques the pupils get to try out, eg ageing woodwork with boot polish and cave art using coffee and sawdust. 'I really enjoyed the Lichenstein work – cutting it up and reorganising,' said a pupil. Year 5's animal themed pots with lids evidences the school's specialism in ceramics.

Main sports are netball, hockey, cross-country and cricket, with all pupils getting opportunities to represent the school in A-C teams. Recent national success in cricket, cross-country, hockey and netball. Local partnerships help up their game, eg Knole Park Hockey Club, New Beacon Astro and Holmesdale Cricket Club. Success too in athletics and swimming – the latter taught on-site until year 3, when children migrate to the Sevenoaks Swimming Club. Facilities (small pool, three tennis courts and a field) limited compared to some of the neighbouring schools.

Clubs are popular both before and after school. All the usuals, plus dodgeball, languages around the world, card games, boxing, origami, macrame, sewing machine club and even bubble writing club. We saw jujitsu club warming up with a lively relay race then dropped into pre-prep cricket club where there was a pause in play not for rain but to save a bee on the grass! Parents grateful too for the 'excellent' wrap-around care (7.30am – 6pm) – available at short notice and with 'hundreds of sandwiches'.

Grins aplenty at the mention of favourite foods including mac n cheese and sausage plait. These, and other tasty fodder (such as the hearty bolognaise on the day of our visit), are served in the buzzy canteen where staff and pupils sit together, and year 6s help serve and clear up.

Parents praise the pastoral care, saying 'every girl is known' and that 'even the smallest things are noticed'. A year 2 class was sensitively navigating age-appropriate consent when we visited, and we also passed a year 6 discussion about growing up. All year 6s get to be prefects – these leadership roles are taken seriously, with older girls 'even more adored' by the younger ones, according to parents. At the school's spring festival, the older ones write and teach songs for the younger children to perform.

Girls we met were chatty, confident and eager to get stuck into new things. Parents are mainly dual income professionals, many working in London (school is only five minutes from the station) and living locally. Not much ethnic diversity, but reflective of the area – and school says over 60 families speak another language at home. A hard-working core on the PTA organise the likes of Christmas wreath workshop, with other ad hoc parent activities like dad's dog walking group, curry night and basketball club. So there's quite a sense of community among the parents.

Money matters

Means-tested bursaries available.

The last word

A nurturing, unpressured school that parents choose for being single sex, mixed ability and offering 'excellent' preparation for a wide range of senior schools. A go-getting environment too: 'I was blown away by the can-do attitude and ambition where they roll up their sleeves, strip away pre-conceptions and give every child a fair chance at success.'