

The Good Schools Guide Review of Millfield Preparatory School, Glastonbury, BA6 8LD

Our View

Extensive site spread round a bend in the road outside Glastonbury, facing the school golf course and a boarding house at the foot of the famous Tor across the road (better view if you move a tree or two). Quite difficult to find reception - the signposts are in just the wrong place, and having started in the wrong place, it is quite difficult to locate. An external car park services the stunning games complex.

Appearance of school functional rather than beautiful, with limited attempts to co-ordinate or blend in new and less new with the Gothic Victorian pile at its heart where the head is based, and quite a lot of stuff (as in mantelpieces and the like) looks as though it has come from the Abbey itself (the previous owners used to own both). Lots of unusual touches, though – a huge outdoor chess set has moved from outside the girls' houses at the senior school (where we last saw it) to just in front of the main building, and the multi-coloured climbing wall on the outside of one building gives it the personality much of the architecture lacks. Architecturally the place needs a Bowen Jones makeover: an enormous (three storey – why? – in the country?) cruciform classroom block was deeply muddling to this (experienced) editor, but the children seemed quite content, scurrying around like worker bees under the queen's command – well, it was the end of the school day and it was daylight, and there were golf clubs everywhere, and we do mean everywhere (golf is the current passion). Two boarding houses opened in September 2003 and a pre-preparatory department, catering for pupils aged 2-7, is now based on campus in the former kitchen garden – stunning, specially made story chair and super, cosy library.

Children coming into the pre-prep are automatically assessed - one to one groups and up to three specialist lessons a week for those who need help. The language development centre (LDC) is a centre of excellence, currently more than 180 pupils in this deceptively small building: ten tutors, five part time, and strong liaison throughout - the school all other prep schools recommend when they can't cope (and here this editor speaks from experience).

Over 120 pupils of all ages are currently attending the LDC on a regular basis, being taught in small groups by specialist teachers. Visual overlay and auditory assessments can be carried out by trained members of the LDC team and referral can be made to a speech and language therapist who works closely with both the prep and pre-prep. Good tie-up with houseparents when children may need extra help. All areas of life here based on efforts to find an aptitude, build self-esteem and develop the potential of every child. Special programme (Potential Academic Curriculum Excellence or PACE) undertaken by super-bright. Help at both ends of the spectrum included in fees.

Pupils follow broad curriculum with setting for maths and languages in all but first year, French taught from the first term and Spanish and Latin added by the age of 10. Plenty of exciting trips out to bolster learning, from nearby basketworks and Hinckley Point power station to London galleries and France. Class sizes small, normal maximum 16. Each child watched over by group tutor, responsible for welfare

and progress, and first port of call for anxious parents. Reports are termly, with grades for effort as well as attainment. Scholarships for chess as well as academic, music, sporting and art.

Set in acres of manicured greenery, with a bubble over the tennis court in winter (some houses have their own – as opposed to the school's one). Sport as important as expected: a second sports hall was opened in 2005, an equestrian centre with two maneges (school's preferred word is arena) was built at the same time, a nine-hole golf course just for Millfield prep, a fine 25-metre pool (ditto) and all sorts of courts, pitches and fields to cater for every conceivable sport and activity. Underpinning the school's ethos, finding talent in whatever area and inspiring confidence in its wake, the games list includes Airfix modelling and touch typing, as well as sports from pop lacrosse and indoor go-karting to squad training for swimming, rugby and soccer.

Music is particularly well-supported, with a wide range of instruments, 350 individual lessons, 29 music ensembles and 18 annual concerts. Facilities include 28 music rooms and a light and airy recital hall (currently under wraps); junior baroque chamber orchestra plus the expected choirs et al. Art of all kinds very popular, from printmaking to ceramics via ICT, with critical discussion an integral part of its teaching.

Pupils are chatty, bubbly, confident and clearly have a fun time. The school makes great efforts to preserve pupils' childhood for as long as possible - a welcome air of separation between the school and the town beyond. Boarding houses are particularly cosy, aiming to create homes from home, with bright colours, football team duvet covers and jazzy pinboards a feature of the bedrooms.

Welcoming, cheerful school with pupils treasured whatever their special talent, be it rugby or brass-rubbing. Wonderful facilities in every sphere. Genuinely turning out well-rounded individuals and a centre of excellence for those with serious problems. Couldn't do better.

Head

Since September 2010, Mrs Shirley Shayler MA BSc PGCE. Educated at Carrickfergus Grammar School, Northern Ireland, degree in biology from the University of Stirling, master's in educational management. Taught at Millfield Senior 1989-2002 - senior tutor, houseparent, manager/coach to the girls' 1st XI hockey team, in charge of waterskiing, parachuting and SCUBA diving, part of the Millfield activities programme. 2002-2006 deputy head of Taunton School, then head of Stonar School, where she led significant development of sixth form experience.

Married to Gary, biology teacher and deputy head of careers at Millfield Senior; a daughter, 11, who attends Millfield Prep. Hobbies include swimming, cycling, skiing, reading and the theatre. Coaches hockey at school.

Entrance

Variety of ways in - many via interview and report from previous head, from prep schools finishing at 11, pre-preps, overseas and local primaries. Others sit scholarship exam in January for September entry. Can be flexible – will always make the effort to take pupils and has been a sanctuary for pupils unhappy or failing to thrive elsewhere: 'IQ not the only arbiter; we need to see the child, not just a collection of data'. Can and will take when space available.

Exit

Vast majority go to Millfield. Transfer not automatic, with good behaviour and a satisfactory academic standard necessities. A small number move elsewhere, almost always to other independent schools.