



KING'S BRUTON

Deo Juvante

THE
GOOD
SCHOOLS
GUIDE

WHAT THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE SAYS

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THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE

The Good Schools Guide is the UK's number one school guide, helping parents in every aspect of choosing the best education for their children.

Trusted by parents for over 30 years, the guide includes unbiased and candid school reviews and in-depth articles on education-related issues. It is available in print, online to subscribers or through GSG's expert consultants.

Uniquely, each school is selected on merit alone. No one can buy their way into the GSG's good books. And from famous names to local treasures, their writers visit every single school, interview the head, speak to pupils and parents, analyse academic performance and challenge the marketing hype. Result? The fearsomely frank and funny reviews for which they are famous.

Over 1,200 schools are reviewed by GSG. In addition, the GSG website has details of all 30,000+ schools in the UK, plus a wealth of insightful information on virtually all English schools - even if GSG has not visited and reviewed them.

The GSG website also provides a comprehensive collection of advice and education data on state and independent schools, tutors, special needs, university choice and much more. Plus, GSG is known worldwide for its tailor-made advice and support, which involves educational consultants helping individual families as they make important decisions on school choices.

The Good Schools Guide is independent, forthright, well-informed and unbiased, which gives it unique authority and has earned the trust of parents and educational organisations worldwide.



WHAT THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE SAYS

HEADMASTER

Headmaster Since 2009, Ian Wilmshurst MA PGCE (50s). A Scotsman by birth. After reading geography at Cambridge and the briefest of flirtations with the army, he spent two terms sampling teaching at the Dragon School before returning to his old college for his PGCE. The roll-call of schools where he has taught since then include Highgate, Merchiston Castle and Royal Hospital where, as the sole deputy head, he had terrific exposure to the top job.

Attracted to King's by its location and the prospect of being able to make a discernible mark on an important school, he moved to Somerset with his wife and two daughters, both of whom went through King's. His eldest daughter is now studying international relations at York and the younger one planning to head to Durham to study psychology. Parents say he is 'approachable, down-to-earth and caring'; easy to

see in action if you walk the school with him, a font of anecdotes about every pupil, demonstrating an innate understanding of what makes each tick.

Communication between pupils and head was a genuine mixture of jovial familiarity and courteous mutual respect. 'He is a really lovely head, super enthusiastic and easy to talk to about anything and everything,' enthused one pupil.

Determined to see the school further expand and 'punch above its weight' in every avenue, he leads with focused enthusiasm and drive. Hobbies revolve around sport – a sometime rugby player and cricketer, he also enjoys cycling and golf, having been known to treat pupils to a game at his local club. Downtime is fuelled by an interest in military history and escaping with the family to their house in Charmouth.



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ENTRANCE

For 13+, places offered in year 7 based on standardised test scores, school reports and interview with head. Sets in year 9 allocated from this and from CE results. Scholarships are awarded based on papers in six subjects, plus a cognitive ability test. About 30 per cent come from Hazlegrove, the linked prep school; others from anything up to 15 other prep schools. At sixth form, the bar is five GCSEs with a 7 at subjects to be taken at A level, plus interview and references. They have a good supply (17-20) of new starters at this stage, attracted from local and London day schools as well as international students. German pupils frequently join in year 11 and 12 for either two terms or a year; pupils from China and Hong Kong often join for the two-year A level programme. Places in other year groups occasionally come up. 'The head, teachers and pupils have all been incredibly warm and inclusive, making the school move so easy that I wish we'd come to King's years ago,' said one parent.

EXIT

About 10 students leave post GCSEs, some to seek the comparative economic or pastoral freedom and wider BTEC options at local sixth form colleges (school has addressed the latter by expanding its own BTEC offering). Post A level, to a wide range of universities and courses, with around half to Russell Group. Cardiff is a perennial favourite, along with York, Newcastle, Southampton and Nottingham Trent. A handful head overseas. One to Oxbridge in 2022.

LATEST RESULTS

In 2022, 48 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 58 per cent A*/A at A level (75 per cent A*-B). In 2019 (the last pre-pandemic results), 40 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 34 per cent A*/A at A level (60 per cent A*-B).

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TEACHING AND LEARNING

Not overly selective, King's prides itself on accommodating all academic abilities via 'dynamic and nimble' teaching. Teachers are, in the main, young and vibrant including several Old Brutonians, newly qualified and raring to teach. Head has no qualms about shaking up departments not hitting laudable heights, recruitment revolving around 'exuberance and ambition as much as experience'. A pupil told us that what unites all the teachers 'is approachability and endless enthusiasm about their subject'.

There's an emphasis on the individual student here - no room for drifting. 'One of my priorities is to keep the balance between SEN and Oxbridge,' says head. Everyone is expected to achieve their personal best: 'We reckon our top 30 per cent is comparable academically to more selective schools.' Setting from the off in maths and, interestingly, French.

Two things set King's teaching apart in the mind of one parent: 'Firstly, the level of one-on-one or small group support is incredible - the staff run drop-in clinics in every subject to help all pupils feel secure. In addition, the plethora of tests mean that exam phobia is not a thing here - they are very used to being examined, it doesn't faze them at all.' Pupils concur: 'The subject clinics are brilliant, it's really helpful to get extra help every week if I need it, without that being a big deal,' said one.

At I/GCSE, 24 subjects on offer with a core of compulsory maths, English, sciences and a modern language plus a solid range of options in humanities, the arts, technology and sport. Year 11 pupils are given early assistance to start thinking about A level choices, which includes a taster programme for 'new' subjects such as psychology, where they sit in on lessons to get a feel for the topic. No allocated blocks and almost all get their first preferences.

At A level, maths, geography, business studies and history are consistently good performers and the introduction of psychology has proved hugely popular and successful. Timetable allows for the odd maths and English GCSE retake





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– it’s almost unheard of for pupils to be thrown out for poor grades, not unknown in other schools. Pupils take four subjects in year 12 making their final selection of three on entry to year 13. Class sizes range from two or three (eg music tech) to 17 in the most popular.

BTECs are offered in performing arts, enterprise and entrepreneurship, sport and hospitality (school has a commercial kitchen). The latter had the honour of helping to cater and serve for the Queen and 100 guests on her visit to the school to celebrate its 500th anniversary, an enviable CV inclusion.

Pupils feel the mix of subjects on offer is broad and comprehensive. A few said they’d like politics and law to be available - ‘although I am sure if we officially asked for them, the head would find a way,’ said one. (Spoiler alert: politics is being introduced from September 2022.)

Careers support is spot on, say parents, with three dedicated members of staff focusing on everything from apprenticeships (notably hospitality management at the nearby, highly acclaimed The Newt) to Oxbridge or medical pathways and everything in between.



LEARNING SUPPORT AND SEN

Assessment for all on arrival. The staff of two, plus other prominent teaching staff with SEN qualifications, address a range of SEN, mainly dyslexia and dyspraxia but also processing difficulties. Speech therapist and ed psych visit routinely. Two dedicated EAL staff support around 40 students. School confident that they can support all except those who need a full-time personal classroom assistant.

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THE ARTS AND EXTRACURRICULAR

The Queen herself opened The Queen Elizabeth Music School on site in 2019. Music is of a scope and standard befitting a much bigger school. From the military band and numerous choirs to fully functioning recording studios and soundproofed percussion rooms, there truly is something for everyone. We witnessed bespoke DJ coaching for an A level pupil who had landed herself a gig in Amsterdam. Music tech offered at A level – a handful of students have gone on to study the highly specialised Tonmeister degree course at Surrey. Forty concerts a year in the impressive concert hall give beginners upwards a chance to conquer performance nerves.

Drama well provided for in Fitzjames theatre, where everyone – not just those studying GCSE or BTEC performing arts – is encouraged to get involved, whether treading the boards or backstage in lighting, sound or set design. Two house plays per year on rotation, alongside whole school, sixth form and junior productions, in close collaboration with the music dept. Recent shows include Little Shop of Horrors with rehearsals just beginning for The Crucible. 'It is going to be intense, dark and amazing,' expounded one student. The theatre manager writes some of the material. Annual trip to London takes in workshops as well as several shows.

'Not everyone is going to be a painter,' says the head of art, whose department offers an impressive range of media (3D design, sculpture and digital media, for example) to students who might go on to take a GCSE in art, craft and design. History of art available at A level, with outstanding results and a trip to Florence. Of course, it does no harm to have the internationally renowned Hauser and Wirth gallery just down the road, with its education director keen to be involved and the gallery already responsible for funding a new exhibition space in the school.

Monday afternoon enrichment programme for sixth formers focuses on employability, CV and interview skills and key life skills for the next step of independence. This is backed up with an inspired list of Old Brutonian talks





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on everything from how to survive the first year at university to apprenticeship opportunities.

Trips (historians to Poland, linguists and musicians all over Europe, geographers to Iceland, hockey to South Africa) and all manner of physical and artistic exploration abound, with strong showings at CCF, DofE and that perennial west country ordeal, Ten Tors. 'The options for extracurricular adventures are fantastic,' enthused a parent. 'I feel as though the school goes out of its way to introduce us to everything possible, to try to light a spark in something we may never have heard of,' said a pupil. From astro-photography to trampolining, there didn't seem much that wasn't on offer.

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SPORT

Taken seriously. Extensive facilities include ubiquitous sports hall, grass pitches, two Astroturfs (one floodlit), eight tennis/netball courts. The fitness suite boasts a full-time head of strength and conditioning offering a bespoke 'athlete development programme'.

Hockey scales heights that would be remarkable for a much bigger school. The U16 girls have qualified for seven national finals in the last 10 years. Numerous pupils (girls and boys) represent their county or region and five have gone on to play for junior international teams since 2019, with one of these currently in the USA on a hockey scholarship, having been awarded her first full GB senior cap aged 19.

Importantly, everyone gets the chance to represent the school, with pupils coached from the start by the hockey pro and director of sport to identify burgeoning talent. But it's not just those competing at top level who are cheered on enthusiastically by their peers. When the head innocently asked if a hockey team had won their match he was chided, 'We don't always have to win, sir, sometimes it is just as beneficial to have fun, keep fit and make friends!'

Rugby, netball, tennis, cricket and athletics prominent and successful. King's teams regularly compete at county and regional netball finals and individual pupils are involved in the Somerset County Academy. Rugby stars have access to the Bath Rugby Academy programmes through the school.

King's athletes complete well and various pupils are involved in county cricket set ups, while the school's winter nets programme is extensive and popular in preparation for matches over the summer. No onsite pool, but school makes use of the 25m pool at Hazlegrove. Broader sport enthusiasts accommodated with a range of options including volleyball, cycling and yoga with King's horse riders supported in their individual British eventing commitments.

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Extensive facilities.**





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BOARDERS

Over half (13 per cent from overseas) board in six single-sex houses where day students are fully integrated; there is no separate day house. The houses are scattered throughout the grounds or within five minutes' walk through the beautiful town.

Dorms of up to four to start with; most have single rooms at sixth form. Day pupils are allocated a room share so they can flexi board (at additional cost) as and when required, as well as having full access to the facilities of the boarding house. 'The inclusion through this approach has been amazing,' reported a parent.

Houseparents are praised for getting to know pupils very quickly and facilitating caring environments with strong intermixing between year groups.

'Boarding at King's is absolutely brilliant,' vouched a boarder, whilst day pupils agreed. 'We do feel as though we miss some of the fun not staying the night here - supper and hanging out together afterwards is a really sociable time and we all try to stay for that as often as we are able,' said one.

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ETHOS AND HERITAGE

Ancient (sits on the site of a Benedictine monastery dissolved in 1537 – one wall survives). Three generous Bruton-born benefactors decided to found the first school here. Varying (mis)fortunes meant it was down to just one boy in 1812, but the first half of the 20th century saw it increase to numbers approximating the ones it has today, and it has taken over buildings the other side of the busy road to Castle Cary and elsewhere in Bruton.

The school works with its venerable buildings, not against them, using the parish church for whole-school services, but its own movingly beautiful memorial hall for assemblies. The sixth form centre houses a mix of social and study space, half of which is a supervised silent working area. 'They will talk if left totally unsupervised,' smiled the head, whilst the other is a university styled, collaborative work space. Comfortable sofas abound, chess games sit tantalisingly primed and tea and coffee facilities are on tap. Parents and students love the school's size and the fact that 'it has soul, has its feet on the ground and is not a grand or overly entitled setting'.

Strong Christian ethos includes celebrations of major festivals and rites such as confirmation. Parents praised a 'young, dynamic chaplain who enthuses on the values of kindness and compassion'. His online (inspired by the pandemic) 'chats about spirituality and general moral guidance for the soul' have, according to parents, led to a surprisingly enthralled response from hitherto nonchalant teenage pupils. A handful of Catholics and Muslims fit in comfortably and lend diversity.

Famous alumni include some heroes (Hugh Sexey, auditor to Elizabeth I, RS Blackmore, author of *Lorna Doone*), a villain (William Dampier, 17th century buccaneer), an Air Chief Marshal and decorated Falklands War fighter pilot (Sir Peter Squire) and an historian (James Holland).

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PASTORAL CARE, INCLUSIVITY AND DISCIPLINE

The tutor system ensures a close understanding and overview of each child, which parents can easily feed into with any emotional or academic concerns. Supported by a diligent and 'hugely approachable' matron and houseparent network, with parents feeling that many problems are nipped in the bud before having the chance to develop.

Though King's students might seem a biddable lot, 'The headmaster can do Scottish strict when required,' reckoned a parent. Indeed, transgressions are treated seriously and publicly – drinkers can expect to wear uniform at the weekend, for example.

Anxiety levels and eating disorders sadly on the rise since Covid, mirroring the national trend, but staff are accustomed to and accomplished at dealing with both. 'Our counselling staff are incredible,' said one pupil 'There are so many people here that you can turn to, you honestly feel that you have someone constantly ensuring you're okay.' Others agreed, speaking freely and refreshingly openly about the school's Whisper website that allows you to voice concerns for your own or others' mental or physical wellbeing, thereby alerting the head of welfare to any problems anonymously and safely. Everyone's Invited has led to school covering gender politics more openly than ever.

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PUPILS AND PARENTS

Pupils we met were an engaging bunch - enthusiastic, modest and considerate. 'There is no one mould fits all - they are unique individuals who are compassionate, kind and full of friendship,' said a parent.

Boarders from southern England, Europe, SE Asia and Kenya. Saturday school compulsory for all with half a day of lessons and half of sport.

Parents include those with strong family connections to the school and newcomers drawn to Bruton's skyrocketing appeal as a west country cultural and culinary hotspot. One parent summed up, 'Bruton's burgeoning "coolness" has brought with it a wonderfully eclectic mix of new school parents from the trendy worlds of media, art and film, mixing remarkably seamlessly with the existing farmers, military families and local business owners. It's definitely not a silver spoon, snobby school.'

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MONEY MATTERS

Impressively strong financial performance at the end of a tricky global pandemic period speaks volumes about the successful management of this school. Scholarships available to a maximum value of 20 per cent of fees. Bursarial help available on application.

THE LAST WORD

A small historical bastion of a school that is absolutely booming in the 21st century. The icing on the cake for parents heading for the artistically inspired and gastronomically fuelled escapism of Bruton's rolling countryside. As one parent put it, 'King's is not grand so does not attract those seeking this. We are wonderfully under the radar and all the better for it.

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