

What The Good Schools Guide says

Headmaster

Since 2015, Richard Nicholson. The appointment of a male head to a girls' school can pose challenges that are not there for a woman head. Challenge is probably the key to this appointment. Richard has set about challenging the stereotype criticisms of girls' schools as being staid, out of touch and narrowly focused on exam results. He is as passionate about empowering young women as any female head, and this radical dimension has inspired the school and wider community. With a background in girls' schools, director of music at St Catherine's, Bramley and then deputy at Lady Eleanor Holles School, he came to King's High well versed in what excellence in all girls education looks like. He has since become the overarching head for Warwick Preparatory School and King's, within the Warwick Independent Schools Foundation (which includes Warwick School), and one of his successes is bringing these two schools much closer together.

He is a musician, and was an organ scholar at Pembroke College, Oxford. So far he is resisting joining local music groups, but doubts he can hold out for very much longer without indulging his passion for choral singing.

A key priority at present is the impending move of the whole school from its present site to a new build, joining Warwick School and Warwick Prep school on a huge site at the edge of the town from 2019.

But that is by no means all that is happening. Curriculum development, a new house system, pastoral progress and a huge drive on co-curricular opportunities are just a few of the areas that Richard has transformed. He is an inspirational figure for his staff, who have swung behind his agenda for change and high aspirations. 'He is dynamic and he listens to us', we heard from various teachers. His idea to create an innovation space is seen as a symbol for where the school is going in terms of creative teaching and learning. 'He is brilliant', parents tell us.

Academic matters

There is a belief in a few quarters of the Warwickshire parent body that Kings' High is some sort of forcing shed for A grades. But that is the standard glib criticism of girls' schools that do very well academically. It is far from the case. Kings' High is carefully crafting a heady brew for the girls of absolutely top academic aspirations, endless opportunities to develop passions outside of the classroom and a focus on actions that will ground them in the real, inclusive world.

There is no doubt Richard Nicholson has academic aspirations high on his agenda. He has appointed a director of educational innovation, a director of co-curricular activities and an academic deputy, who are all driving excitement about teaching and learning in a wonderfully holistic way. There is a researcher in residence who is working on all sorts of innovative ideas to share with colleagues. Weekly staff meetings include a teaching and learning section where new practices are introduced and shared. There is more digital tracking of girls' progress than formerly but staff tell us it is 'data for a purpose'.

The school is academically selective, but with considerable competition from excellent local grammar schools, it can't be highly so. The results are strong. At A level, 71 per cent A*-B, 41 per cent A*/A grades in 2017. At GCSE, 78 A*-A/9-7s in 2017. Value added is very high both by maintained school and independent school standards, coming in the top 45 of both groups last year. Data shows the school adds nearly a full grade, comparing GCSE results with baseline tests in year 7. Ability sets for maths and languages from year 8.

There is a small amount of joint teaching with Warwick School at A level, currently in German, drama and Latin.

The sixth form is off academic lessons on Friday afternoons and can take a number of options,

some joint with Warwick School, including Young Enterprise, BBC Young Reporter, French with business. This is going to be extended to younger years from September 2018 with a huge range of options and is eagerly anticipated.

French, Spanish and German are the main modern foreign languages and Latin is also on offer. At a recent Language Showcase day, girls taught themselves enough Japanese to sing a song. The languages department arranges homestays and other overseas visits regularly.

There is a big push on engineering. It has been introduced to the curriculum in year 8 and Meteor - a programmable, humanoid NAO robot - is very popular. Around 40 per cent take maths A level.

There are four or five forms in each year with class sizes of up to 24, with smaller groups at GCSE and in the sixth form. For girls who might struggle from time to time with academic work, the school has recently launched its Boost programme which brings together a range of academic support sessions, bespoke individual guidance, small group sessions and student mentoring. Parents with girls who are dyslexic spoke highly of the school's ability to spot problems quickly and implement an effective strategy.

Girls who join the school at unorthodox points are given plenty of support. We found parents particularly keen on the student mentoring programme, where senior girls help those lower down the school with difficulties. Parents felt it was hugely beneficial for both the mentor and the mentee, who sometimes felt more able to share difficulties with another student than with a teacher. While most of the Boost learning support offer is covered by school fees, bespoke one-to-one tuition and some small group mini-courses for KS3 students do come at an additional, though modest, cost. Girls say the support programme feels very non-judgmental, and also appreciate the online support websites the school recommends.

Games, options, the arts

Balance and extensive opportunity is the underlying ethos of this co-curricular side of the school, with a King's School Bacc qualification recognising a range of endeavours. The number of clubs and societies has greatly increased over the last year or two. They plan big at King's. As an example, the week before our visit there had been a Space Day with a range of high profile visiting speakers, special events and activities, including a rocket building challenge with a professional rocket engineer, with students from Warwick Prep and local schools invited. The day culminated in a dinner for staff and students with an award-winning physicist from Imperial College giving the after-dinner speech. This was followed later in the week by a live link up event with an astronaut on board the International Space Station – an event initiated and planned by a sixth former. All of this was a part of a year-long school-wide space project with lectures and events – the star gazing evening at the prep school proved very popular. A resident space scientist from Warwick University - with which the school has a number of links - is continuing to build on the work.

Within Inspire, the academic enrichment programme, there are activities in most areas – Café Philo that focuses on PPE topics, the Lit and Phil Society, Café Scientifique, Ruth Court Mathematical Society, for example - all of which combine discussion with occasional inspirational world class speakers and events. The head and his team are developing the Landor Dining Society, with regular dinners hosting speakers. There are new essay competitions for different age groups. It is all immensely exciting.

Sport gets mixed reports. The negative comments from parents and girls were largely around limited facilities, and this is being addressed with the move to the new site. Nevertheless, the external sports results are very impressive – the school has been county champion in 11 different sports in recent years and the new director of sport intends to build on this. Professional hockey and netball coaches have been hired and there is a Talented Athletes' Programme,

where girls get their own mentor to help them manage the sport/academics balance and train appropriately for them. Lots of different physical activities are on offer with a view to finding something that everyone can enjoy and will want to take with them beyond school. Unlike in their brother school, sixth formers can largely opt out of organised sport, which some parents disapprove of, wanting all the sixth form out playing hockey every week.

Art is strong with much multi-media work on display around the school and the department has its own artist in residence. Everyone does some food tech and DT in the first few years and a strong cohort continues to GCSE.

As one might expect, there is much joint activity with Warwick School around music and drama and this will no doubt increase with the move to the new site. As well as the combined orchestras and plays there is also a number of all girls' performing arts events and groups, including opportunities through the newly established house system. Music is on the up – there are more groups, including a new jazz ensemble, and the girls are being encouraged to pursue individual interests: a year 7 trio plays Cuban music. The new artistic director (music), also works at Warwick Prep and conducts of the joint foundation symphony orchestra. There's a new Model UN group, D of E and CCF. The recent proliferation of clubs has provided increased leadership opportunities, girls attend National Council for Young Women meetings and report back, and debating is increasingly popular.

Background and atmosphere

You cannot think of the King's atmosphere without being influenced by its grade 2 listed buildings. Bang in the historic centre of Warwick, these are both a unique blessing and something of an incubus. The possibilities for extending the site and making it fit for purpose in the 2020s have been taken as far as they possibly can, with every nook and cranny used to the full in the compact site, and hats off to the head who has continued investing in the site despite the imminent move - starting in 2019 - to a complete new build on the Warwick School and Warwick prep site. Where there are now leaded windows and low oak beams, there will soon be glass and aluminum, open spaces and greenery. Of course this is wonderful. The lack of open space on the current site is restricting and there is only so much you can do with main school buildings dating back to the mid 17th century and earlier, but it will be with real sadness and regret that present and, particularly, past students say good-bye to the existing buildings. The sort of investment that the head has continued to make includes an Innovation Centre, which boasts desks and walls that can be used for scribbling down thoughts and inspirations. This, and the whole dynamic feel of the school with its can-do attitude, has meant the girls see their school as fleet of foot and poised to take advantage of every opportunity, whether ones suggested by the girls themselves or coming from outside. Both parents and girls note how swiftly the school responds to any concerns. When one group felt overwhelmed by homework, a temporary homework amnesty was speedily put in place. The school council is taken seriously by girls and management.

Pastoral care, well-being and discipline

Pastoral care is regarded as a great strength, and whoever you talk to, there is a sense that every girl is known as an individual within the school. The head has set up a well-being working party so girls can feed in what they would find helpful in this area. Outside speakers address girls, staff and parents' forums on areas such as mental health.

A mother and daughter befriending scheme allocates new year 7s a year 8 'sister' and a sixth form 'mother' to smooth their passage through the new school. Richard Nicholson introduced a house system in 2016 and one of its advantages is increased links and friendships between the different year groups.

There is a system of conduct and credit marks to encourage good behaviour and attitude to work. Conduct marks are given for minor misdemeanors and seem to be quite enough of a deterrent to stop anything escalating to the rarely given detention level. One mother reported her

daughter had wept for hours on receiving her one and only conduct mark. When we asked the girls what were the worst crimes they could recall, the only thing they came up with was that someone had once smashed a window with a netball but, we were earnestly assured, she had certainly not meant to do it.

Everyone commented on the excellence of the school food, with lots of wholesome choices as well as almost-very-healthy goodies.

Pupils and parents

The girls are just lovely. What can you say? Who wouldn't want their daughters to be like this at 18? Confident but not arrogant; excited about their future but hugely loyal to their past; believing the world is theirs for moulding into something much fairer and better than has gone before; sure that they can do it, but knowing they will need support and networks and kindness and empathy to succeed.

Parents are deeply committed to the school. The majority seem to have professional, academic or business backgrounds, some travelling for their work rather than move their daughter to another school. There are a lot of families where both parents work. There clearly is a significant range in family income backgrounds but parents say the school has a very egalitarian feel. There is an active parents' association.

Entrance

About a third of each year 7 intake comes from Warwick Prep. Overall girls come from up to 50 different primary schools each year, about half from state primaries and half from private schools. The entrance exam consists of maths, English and verbal reasoning.

Foundation buses bring children in from a wide area – Rugby, Coventry, Solihull, Tamworth-in-Arden, Alcester, Chipping Campden, Shipston-on-Stour, Adderbury, Badby.

About 10 new girls enter the sixth form each year, places dependent on interview, school report and GCSE grades of at least B/6 in all subjects plus A*-A/9-7 in A level choices.

Exit

There is a big drive on preparation for university and beyond, with a full programme of careers talks and visits, using past pupils where ever possible. A Higher Education Evening includes representatives from a range of universities and there is careful and focused individually tailored work on UCAS applications and Oxbridge preparation. The range of universities to which girls go is wide as is the range of subjects. A handful go off to Oxbridge each year but a new drive looks likely to change this – about 10 applied in 2017 with two successes. Far more A level scientists are applying for pure sciences and engineering than in the past, when they all went for medicine.

Money matters

There are scholarships and bursaries available at 11+ and 16+ and the head - who was himself educated at an independent school through the government funded assisted places scheme - is passionate about widening access so it may be the bursary pot will increase in the future. About a fifth of the pupils receive some form of financial assistance.

Fees are about average for girls' schools in the Midlands.

Our view

If anyone doubts that girls' schools are the catalyst for gradual but determined social revolution, they should come to King's High. At the heart of a relatively conservative area is this dynamic powerhouse for social change, unleashing on the quiet byways of Warwickshire the full force of young women who know what they want the world to look like and how to go about getting it there. There's a careful and not sensational development of confidence and leadership, a respect

for serious academic thought and analysis that is not showy or judged by solely A*s. These mean that King's girls go out optimistic but realistic, determined to work towards making things better but emotionally intelligent in their sensitivity to the views of others. A winning combination.

It will be fascinating to see how the move to the new site works. 'It is an increase in size', said one of the girls, 'but that means more space, not more people. We will still be a family.' There is no doubt the schools (Warwick School, Warwick Prep and King's High) will benefit from close proximity, and the new joint sixth form centre will be immensely popular. Will the very special atmosphere of King's High get diluted? We would be greatly surprised if anything could dilute that.