



King's High School



THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE

KING'S HIGH REVIEW 2022

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WHAT THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE SAYS



*We have opened
the windows
and doors and let
everyone breathe
and be themselves.*

Head

Since 2021, Dr Stephen Burley, previously deputy head academic for four years. 'Unashamedly academic' and clearly proud of his English lit degree from ULC, MPhil medieval and romantic literature from St Catherine's College, Oxford (where he was also a tutor for admissions) and PhD in the literary, political, philosophical and religious culture of the late 18th and early 19th centuries from Queen Mary, University of London.

First foray into teaching was university lecturing – 'but it's not the same when you don't have daily contact with your students.' Not that he did his PGCE for any other reason than 'to travel,' he smiles impishly – and he did indeed start his teaching career in Bogotá. Back in the UK, he started out as an English teacher and resident tutor in a sixth form girls' boarding house at The King's School, Canterbury, thence to Sevenoaks School as assistant head of English followed by head of English at Headington School, Oxford. Still teaches – when we met him, he was fresh out of a year 12 class on Paradise Lost.

His office is meticulously ordered yet relaxed and unpretentious, a fitting reflection of its owner. 'Change' and 'growth' are his buzzwords. 'Ten years ago this was a traditional and much smaller straight-laced girls' academic school which was widely known as a hothouse, but we have opened the windows and doors and let everyone breathe and be themselves,' he exclaims. Parents – among whom he is universally popular – agree, praising him for his quiet confidence ('which instils trust'), his considered responses ('he won't say something just to keep you happy') and his comms (just the right amount and not too wordy, always concise). 'Very conscious' of being a male head of a girls' school, though no parent nor student we talked to seemed bothered by his gender. Girls describe him as 'really sweet,' saying he 'always comes and talks to us.'

Has quite a commute from his Oxfordshire home but you won't find him swapping his idyllic location 'on a farm in the middle of nowhere' anytime soon. His daughter is at the prep and his son is at a special school in Banbury.

Entrance

Oversubscribed with over 200 girls battling it out for the 110-120 places via 11+ tests in English, maths and verbal reasoning. But while the school is academically selective, the considerable competition from excellent local grammar schools mitigates this, with value added very high both by state and independent school standards. Forty per cent of places are scooped up by Warwick Prep, the rest from up to 50 different prep and state primary schools (usually a pretty even split). At sixth form, 10-20 places are dependent on interview, school report and GCSE grades of at least 6 in all subjects plus 9-7 in A level choices.

Exit

Just four per cent left after GCSEs in 2021. Three-quarters of sixth formers to Russell Group. Bath, Bristol and UCL popular. Wide range of courses – no trends. Two to Oxbridge in 2021 (normally more), plus five medics. A few degree apprenticeships most years eg Dyson, Barclays, Santander, Deloitte. Excellent careers advice starts early – ‘they look at things from every angle and are not tunnel visioned about more traditional routes,’ said a parent.

Latest results

In 2021, 91 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 83 per cent A*/A at A level (95 per cent A*-B). In 2019 (the last year when exams took place), 73 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 53 per cent A*/A at A level (87 per cent A*-B).

Teaching and learning

‘Drives me mad,’ sighs the head about the lingering perception of King’s as an exam factory. Parents say, ‘there’s no mistaking it’s hard work’ and that ‘you have to be able to cope with an element of pressure,’ but all agree that reducing it to a hothouse couldn’t be further from the truth if only because of the enrichment. In fact, the school recently took the bold (certainly for an academic school) step of reducing the expectation of 10 GCSEs down to nine to allow students to take up one of two new internally designed programmes, Global Changemaker (covers social justice, global citizenship, climate change, law and the legal system) and Innovation and Entrepreneurship (covers sustainable engineering, data analysis, neuroscience and entrepreneurship). ‘Of course we want pupils to come out with good qualifications but we also want to prepare them for working in the 2040s and 50s in jobs that don’t yet exist,’ says head excitedly (though points out that it’s not compulsory with 60 per cent of girls still choosing to do 10 GCSEs).

Educational innovation practically oozes from the walls of these shiny new classrooms. ‘Should Twitter pull out of Russia?’ debated students wholeheartedly in a geography class, while ‘The world would be a better place without prisons’ was thought for the day in a year 9 class, with pupils tapping away on their laptop keyboards ready to discuss their responses (there’s a bring your own device scheme). Teachers are widely praised for inspiring the girls, often getting them to love subjects they hitherto disliked. ‘My daughter joined with no interest in science but is now doing two at A level.’

2021

91%

GCSE
9-7

83%

A level
A*/A

95%

A level
A*/B

2019

73%

GCSE
9-7

53%

A level
A*/A

87%

A level
A*/B

Wellbeing is at the centre of the school – they truly care and champion the girls to be themselves.

Class sizes max at 24 in KS3, 20 in KS4 and 12 in sixth form, though many are smaller and they will run A levels for just one or two students, as well as teaming up with the boys' school for Latin, German and drama A levels. Gentle setting in maths from year 7, but nothing else. All year 7s do Latin and French then add Spanish or German in year 8, with most choosing one for GCSE; other languages are available as extracurricular eg Mandarin. History, RS and geography most popular at GCSE, while chemistry, biology and psychology fight it out for the top popularity spot at A level. Exceptional results across the board, with geography, biology, RS and English lit currently edging above the rest on results day. Reasonably heavy on homework and testing – 'not an issue as they teach them to be independent, self-directed learners, but you should go in knowing there's a high level of expectation,' said a parent. Blended learning could be improved, reckon some girls – 'some teachers seem to really dislike teaching online,' said one.

Big push on engineering, which is a distinct subject in year 8. The girls were awaiting 30,000 parts when we visited from which they will build a plane, MOT it, take it to an airfield and fly it! Girls from year 9 up are off academic lessons on Friday afternoons and can take a number of options, some joint with Warwick School, including Young Enterprise, BBC Young Reporter and French with business.

Learning support and SEN

The Boost programme is available both for the 12 per cent of girls on the SEN register, as well as for any girl who find she's struggling with certain subjects or aspects of academic life. Options include student mentoring, small group sessions and one-to-ones (some of which cost extra). One parent told how her daughter's dyslexia was 'picked up and dealt with in such a way that her confidence only grew and she flew all the way through the school including sixth form'; another was 'particularly impressed with how supportive they are in accommodating access arrangements as well as helping with related issues like anxiety.' Support for processing issues came in for high praise: 'It's careful and considered and never with a ceiling put on expectations – my daughter got amazing results and never felt inhibited.'

The arts and extracurricular

A heady brew of opportunities encourages girls to develop passions outside the classroom – and they do so with gusto. We could barely keep up with all the programme names rolling off the tongues of staff and pupils. Inspire, the academic enrichment programme, warrants its own glossy brochure of academic societies – dissection club, ancestry

society, French cultural club and Da Vinci Society, to name a few – all combining discussion with inspirational world class speakers and events. Owen James recently spoke on the war in Afghanistan and Dr Tim Middleton on whether Christianity is an ecological disaster. Hot debates are order of the day at Café Philo, a student-led discussion group, and there's the chance for sixth form biologists to don white lab coats for IRIS Genome Project Decoders. Postgrads from the Warwick Writing Programme at Warwick University are currently working with girls on a project around creative writing. Model UN group, DofE and CCF all popular. For lighter relief, there are clubs in eg gardening, origami, climbing and textiles.

No expense spared on the new multi-purpose music block, which is shared with prep – 'it's unbelievable what they've designed, and there's a standard of playing to match,' exalted one parent. In the main auditorium, complete with organ, the acoustics can be adjusted to the instrument or voice. Every child gets to try out an instrument and many learn one privately in one of the super-duper new sound-proofed practice rooms. Open mic takes place in the quad every Friday, and there are choirs, pop, rock and jazz groups, various ensembles and an orchestra. 'My friend's daughter got into Royal College of Music on a scholarship and she's by no means alone,' said one mother.

Young thespians can perform both informally and formally at the mighty Bridge House theatre and the well-equipped rehearsal studio at least every half term, and five new drama clubs had just been added when we visited. Big focus on musical theatre and increasing opportunities to act with the boys' school. 'They push you through LAMDA at quite a pace if you're minded to it,' said a parent, and there's set design, sound and lighting for those less keen on performance.

You can barely turn a corner without being stopped in your tracks by an accomplished, thought-provoking piece of art. Ceramics and printmaking get their own dedicated rooms and there is opportunity to pursue fine art, photography, installations, digital media, DT etc. Girls told us there's nothing formulaic about art here – 'you're able to take your ideas in any direction you want.'

Masses of trips – a geography noticeboard alone had photos of visits to Iceland, New York, Morocco, Italy, Azores and Yorkshire all taking place in recent years (except Covid, of course).

Sport

Pupils don't take the onsite sports facilities for granted, having previously had to be bussed out here from the old town centre campus. Astro, courts and pitches all plentiful, spacious and in good nick, while inside there's a hall with sprung floor dedicated to gymnastic pursuits and a main sports hall where young netballers were strutting their anaerobic stuff. Girls appreciate the fitness suite, and a swimming pool is shared with the boys' school.

Netball and hockey are the mainstays, with football and rugby on the up. Table tennis, horse riding and bench ball among the more niche sports recently added. School says the litmus test for sporting success is participation and girls confirm that 'you can play in teams even if you're not brilliant.' 'I'm not sporty but thought I'd give badminton a try and now I'm in the academy!' exulted one. Still, there are professional coaches for the main sports and the double glass cabinet packed to the brim with silverware suggests bountiful wins at regional and national level. Unlike in the brother school, sport doesn't seem to be as pushed further up the school and sixth formers can largely opt out, which we thought was a shame but the girls we met seemed quite relieved.

Ethos and heritage

Founded during the early wave of girls' school expansion in the late Victorian era – in 1879, to be precise, with just 22 girls. By the 1900s, pupils were learning botany, chemistry and Euclid, and a trickle of sixth formers started to head off to bright lights of university. And by the 1920s there were class and school councils, almost unheard of at the time. Despite extensive building works over the years, there are limits to city centre locations, especially listed ones, so in 2019 King's upped sticks to its new £43m school building on the same site as Warwick School (the boys' school) and Warwick Prep. Where there were leaded windows and low oak beams, there is glass and aluminium, open spaces and greenery.

The atrium style reception area sets the mood with its 19 portraits of change-making women (chosen by the girls) plus a framed mirror. Highlights include the colourful, well-stocked library and massive food tech room where we watched students cooking apple crumble, burritos, curry, enchiladas, bacon mac and cheese and more. We also loved the sixth form centre, shared with Warwick School, with cosy chatting/eating space on the ground floor, quiet-ish second floor and supervised silent (and we mean silent) study area on the top floor. 'Means we don't really bother going out for lunch or in

our frees,' said one girl – and why would you? Parents would like to see more collaboration with the boys' school but school points out that years 9-11 join ranks with the boys for Friday afternoon activities and one girl said firmly, 'No more, please – I chose to go to a girls' school!'

Super dining room with masses of choice and deli-style salad bar (though younger years, as is so often the case, seem to opt mainly for plain pasta and bread). Main classrooms are built around a pleasing outside quad where there always seems to be something going on – CCF, Remembrance, Ukraine fair, science fair etc.

The whole place feels dynamic, forward thinking and big.

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

'Very thorough,' say parents about the pastoral care. 'Wellbeing is at the centre of the school – they truly care and champion the girls to be themselves,' said one. Outside speakers address girls, staff and parents' forums on mental health, and there's a house families programme that connects year 7s with older students as part of what parents describe as a 'phenomenal' transition into the school. Our tour guides were disappointed we didn't get to meet the school therapy dog – 'one of the girls is probably walking her,' they shrugged.

Some parents feel that, as one put it, 'tough cookies fare better here – it isn't a touchy-feely school and if you want somewhere really nurturing it might not be the place for you.' A pupil concurred, 'I don't think my sister would like it here – she's too shy.' School disagrees, saying 'tough cookies' are in the minority and the school is 'incredibly nurturing.' Friendship fallouts – the bane of girls' school life – could be dealt with better, felt some: 'They can be a bit old-school about knocking their heads together and telling them to get on with it.'

Girls are proud of the ambassador schemes for wellbeing, anti-bullying and diversity – 'all are trained and you get to host assemblies and really make a difference,' said one. The Big Conversation is a series of lunchtime debates – recent topics have included George Floyd and Sarah Everard, and pupils say the school encourages 'a lot of openness in PSHE' including for LGBTQ+ issues, for which there is also a society.

As with most academic girls' schools, discipline largely takes care of itself through high expectations. But we noted some discrepancy between the school's perception of sweating the small stuff ('we don't') and girls' experience ('oh they can do – with uniform and jewellery, for example'). One or two suspensions a term at most; no permanent ones for as long as anyone can remember.

Pupils and parents

The girls are bursting with energy and ideas and that goes as much for the fledgling year 7s we lunched with as the more sophisticated sixth formers. They know what they want the world to look like and how to go about getting there. Considerate and earnest too, though one group was not above leaving our meeting in fits of teenage giggles – quite a relief to hear, actually! There's a definite 'King's girl,' say parents – someone who is 'relatively conformist' and 'wants to learn and soak up everything on offer.'

Parents are deeply committed to the school. The majority from professional, academic or business backgrounds – most hailing from Leamington and Warwick but increasingly from Kenilworth and Solihull and further afield including Oxford, Banbury, Northampton and Birmingham. Foundation buses ship many of the girls in, and there's a train station a 12 minute walk away. Good ethnic diversity among pupils, 'less so among teachers,' grumbled one parent.

Money matters

Year 7 scholarships in music, sport and drama, plus all-rounder, dance and academic and at sixth form in music, drama, sport and academic – as well as the Northgate Organ Scholarship. Fee remittance usually 10 per cent. Means-tested bursaries available. About a fifth of the pupils receive some form of financial assistance. Fees about average for girls' schools in the Midlands.

The last word

They plan big at King's. Though there's masses of respect for academic thought and analysis, top grades are only part of the picture with a real drive on actions that prepare these aspirational girls for the real world. 'King's gives boundless opportunities and really gets the girls thinking about their future – and what I most love is that they do this by opening their minds to things they might not even realise they're interested in,' summed up one parent.



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King's High School
Banbury Road
Warwick CV34 6YE
t: 01926 494485 e: enquiries@kingshighwarwick.co.uk

kingshighwarwick.co.uk

 @KHSWarwick  @Kingshighwarwick  kingshighschoolwarwick

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