

Good Schools Guide

Worth School review (latest)



Snapshot: Idleness, said St Benedict, is hostile to the soul, a message taken to heart here, particularly when it comes to sport. Website oozes Catholic take on muscular Christianity (a six pack, at least) featuring video that cuts away to reveal rugby team pitting strength against giant grass roller (and winning, naturally: it'll be a jumbo from nearby Gatwick Airport next). Deceptive, however, as...

Head: Since September 2015, Mr Stuart McPherson, previously a housemaster at Eton College and teacher of English. He took his bachelor's degree at the University of Western Australia before completing an MA in literature and religion at Newcastle. He has also taught at Sydney Grammar School. He is married to Johneen, who is the director of studies at St Mary's Ascot, and they have four children.

Head's title: Head Master.

Academic matters: GCSE More than 50% of grades received by our pupils were at A* and A

A Level 36.5% A*/A and 65% grades were A*-B

IB students at Worth averaged 35.8 points in 2016

All about 'academic worth' says the relevant section on school's website and you really can't blame them for indulging in the occasional pun. School has fair share of bright buttons. However, not all 'are desperate high flyers,' thinks parent. Most are having to gain altitude though, what with school upping the ante with six GCSE B grades or better required to make the cut for sixth form. Essential 'to stand realistic prospect of university success,' reckons school. 'Definitely becoming more academic,' agreed one mother, with slight regret.

Offers fully formed dual systems post-16, taught in class sizes averaging around nine (18 in the school as a whole). IB, currently taken by around a third of the sixth form, pulls in some locals each year, drawn by rarity value and has strong European appeal (though formerly strong contingent from Germany has waned following changes to education system there). IB results averaged 35.5 points

in 2015, ahead of world average. Popularity may increase further now IB subject choices are a closer match with A level options (psychology is the latest to be added).

In 2015, 30.8 per cent A*/A at A level and 64.7 per cent A*-B. A levels continue to be exam of choice for the majority and a non-negotiable for some international students with specialisation already in their sights (maths and science for Chinese pupils, for example).

Sciences have been experiencing distinct off season, biology in particular, psychology broader similar, with physics and chemistry probably not the best version of themselves, either. It's accounted for by status as third choice subject for many pupils, says the school, which stresses this is no longer the case and is also at pains to point out decent sprinkling of top grades. Also speaks of a 'renaissance' with sciences the choice of a third of current Year 12 cohort.

However, plenty of strong subjects including history, art and religious studies, languages in general starting to pack in the boys 'like you wouldn't believe,' comments staff member.

School doesn't shirk from shock of the new, or newish, with economics flourishing (felt to be good route to a crisis-defying well paid job) and government and politics A level on the way in. Unusually no DT, though with design element absorbed into art and successfully so, helping to spawn at least one budding architect in the process, doesn't need to be, thinks head. Ditto engineering which 'we incorporate into science and mathematics.' Lines on the sand are media and film studies. No snob factor involved. 'Just wouldn't be popular.'

GCSE results also very respectable with 50.4 per cent A*/A in 2015. Pedagogues span the age range, some so unnervingly youthful you want whatever they have sprinkled on their bedtime cocoa, others long haul troupers, including one who has featured 'in every school photograph for the last 40 years, even the faded ones,' said pupil.

Have fair share of idiosyncrasies, presentation-focused English teacher responsible for high density notice-board achieving concours standard symmetry (writing quite literally on the wall), language specialised much admired for proselytising Spanish by highlighting party culture rather than demographics (yawn) as well as ways with vocab, word for 'potion' indelibly printed on IB student's memory following mime involving coffee granules and juice.

Overall, broadish palette of ability shades well catered for from the Oxbridge gang (about three or so a year) to the minority who don't have higher education in their sights, in line with one of the plentifully quoted St Benedict's dictums that the strong should have 'something to strive for,' the weak 'not be overburdened.'

Something school is definitely up for when it comes to support. International contingent are well served by EAL department which concentrates on weighting lessons towards nuance decoding – vital in science and maths exams where word games are all part of the fun (or perhaps not, judging by levels of concentration in EAL science class, ears almost audibly straining to grasp finer points of examiners' habits).

Learning support department doesn't venture much beyond 'dyses' in mild form. Asperger's ditto, as 'we don't have learning assistants in the classroom,' (screening for all in year 9). Individual or small group support by withdrawal (often replacing language). What it does do, it does well, though; parents speak of children 'transformed' by support.

Day to day helping hands plentifully outstretched, felt pupils, sixth form learning prefects who run lessons in range of subjects, including Latin, are popular with younger gang as can have edge over teachers who 'don't have the experience of teaching themselves', thought one.

More formally, anyone falling seriously behind will be supported through GCSEs with involvement of house tutors, learning support and addition of extra lessons in the hope, rarely unfulfilled, that galvanising effect will be sufficient to propel them in the sixth form. On rare occasions it doesn't, school will suggest search for suitable plan B school post 16.

Usually does the trick, think parents. 'Takes all comers, gets the best out of most children and they achieve their potential,' reckons one.

Games, options, the arts: Idleness, said St Benedict, is hostile to the soul, a message taken to heart here, particularly when it comes to sport. Website oozes Catholic take on muscular Christianity (a six pack, at least) featuring video that cuts away to reveal rugby team pitting strength against giant grass roller (and winning, naturally: it'll be a jumbo from nearby Gatwick Airport next). Deceptive, however, as you don't have to be terrifically sporty to enjoy it here, say pupils. Though football is finally acquiring the kudos supporters feel it deserves, rugby (which also musters six senior teams) continues to loom large on the sporting calendar.

School, thought one parent, is 'astute' at picking its opponents, middle rather than top rung, success consistent - with several unbeaten teams - if not always earth shattering, a few 'mixed' and 'disappointings' sprinkled through the end of school reviews (particularly good at quarter finals...). However, 'we're still really bad,' agreed group of pupils, cheerfully. On the plus side, there's no in or out crowd, change from days when rugby heroes were school idols (and life wasn't altogether plain sailing for less hearty). 'Completely gone, now,' says school. Pupils and parents agree. 'Friends can share emotional similarities even if interests are completely different,' thought articulate sixth former. Low stress environment allows sport and arts lovers to have their fill, others preferring not to do either with tolerance for all.

Attitudes haven't softened at the expense of choice. Plenty for die hard fanatics to get up to in the way of must-have team sports that tick all the participation boxes. While it's non-negotiable sport for all two afternoons each week and for Saturday fixtures 'not always popular with day pupils and weekly boarders,' most esprit de corps stuff is largely optional beyond year 9, 'though they like us to be in teams,' thought girl. Aerobics, fencing, golf and riding mop up those seeking a personal challenge, the perhaps slightly euphemistically entitled multi-sports catering for those who may not be. 'There's a lot of sport on offer but if you don't want to do it I don't think you have to,' thought parent.

Some sporty girls feel slightly short-changed as they're in a minority and therefore not stretched enough, thought a mum. Something school 'could do little about ... but will be rectified in the natural course of events as more girls come up through the school,' and benefit from 'excellent teaching.'

Gourmet facilities include assorted courts (smart AstroTurf firmly padlocked, presumably against ovine marauders) as well as eight hole golf course. Nearby sports centre offers athletics tracks and 50m pool (would be even better if school had its own, thought a parent). Access to pitches the other side of busy 'B' road is via new bridge, following tragic death of a pupil there in 2011.

Two sports halls, smaller very slightly dingy; larger, approached through front door so heavy that even spectators could end up with a decent six pack, kitted out with decent fitness suite. Somewhat off-message vending machine in foyer, stacked to the gunnels with confectionary and drinks and

thoughtfully putting back the empty calories that exercise has taken out, is being restocked with healthier options. (A second, in sixth form house, will retain sugar as principal ingredient).

If sports don't trigger necessary inspiration, terrific array elsewhere (billed as - wait for it - 'Worth extra' – groan) should do the trick. Drama includes three plays for different age groups in the summer term with lots of Shakespeare (added treat is array of beautiful costumes, many borrowed from the National Theatre). Music also strong, helped by super recording studio and Mac-rich room to hone technical and composition skills as well as sensibly soundproofed rock room for band rehearsals. Forty per cent of pupils have individual instrumental or singing lessons, orchestra (quite audibly not an earsore) particularly praiseworthy for size and boy participation. Abbey Choir, which sings weekly mass (website features a nice bit of plainsong) ditto.

Midweek afternoon given over to colossal range of activities which range from chess, very successful with substantial input from keen father, to community service: 'pupils are taken to charity shops....' (to serve, not for sale) as well as 'invasion games' (you have been warned).

Some, such as choir and jazz club, are vetted with auditions; most are entrée libre, many designed for IB compatibility. D of E-worthy, too, driving lessons apparently counting as a credit-earning skill - who knew? - and school, as a licensed centre, able to run and approve awards, popular trips (South America a favourite haunt) adding an edge of glamour.

Sparky individual achievements, too: sixth form are 'influential role models', says prospectus. Not half, with posts including public relations prefects (surely a first) whose duties include scouting for pupils able to take visitors on guided tours. Further down the school, one year 9 pupil has self-published own fiction, originally prep that outgrew the exercise book/took on a life of its own.

Creativity a-plenty elsewhere, too, with two wonderfully big art rooms, generosity of seniors' space influencing scale of artwork – few miniatures here. 'Means you aren't compressed,' says pupil. By way of demonstration, there's vast, decorated tree trunk, donated to the school and apparently taking root in art room. Pupil creations, some selected for display at the Saatchi Gallery, include orchid-like shapes strung along wires, while floor level delights include a sculpture with the precarious delicacy of a scaled up Jenga game and meticulous, technically brilliant paper and wood confections with concertina folds at crazy angles, like Escher on hallucinogens. Like pupils' poetry, seem to plumb otherwise hidden emotional depths.

Boarding: Boarders (vast majority full, 230 boys to just over 70 girls) have well designed bedrooms, tidy but not unspeakably so - boys' gloriously free of après-trainer whiff - fours and fives to a room, dropping to two in year 13; star of the show the solo accommodation for year 13 boys in smart, self-contained Gervase House, the only one to blend day and boarding pupils, and amply conveying undergraduate feel (more upmarket than many a uni) complete with tiny but perfect en-suites.

St Mary's, sole girls' boarding house, is a delight with well thought out bedrooms, duvets adding flashes of pink to light wood sea, and a common room you actually want to spend time in, best feature 'the pit' - lowered hearth area used for house mass and picnic style meals but, alas, never warmed by roaring fire, vetoed by health and safety.

Parents hope houseparent, just leaving, will have successor equally rich in humour and discretion, from curtains ('you'd be surprised how many don't close them') to conversations (office, just off quiet room 'isn't very quiet' so hears 'everything - and amazing what you pick up.')

Thoughtful touches include washing machines for 'emergencies, delicates and underwear,' says school. Girls only, however, as no boys so far have expressed urge to do own washing.

Background and atmosphere: De haut en bas, literally so, with two main groups of buildings taking up 25 of the site's 500 acres and separated by hill steep enough for twice daily ascents to form basis of daily fitness routine.

At the foot, approached by grand entrance (ornate electric gates, gryphon-topped portico, though you have to nip round the corner for commanding views over Downs) there's the stately pile originally built for Cowdray family and acquired by Benedictines, school's founding order, in the 1930s to mop up pupil overspill from Downside, becoming a separate school in the 1960s.

Teaching, meanwhile, goes on at the summit, school's very own mini Parnassus, with standalone main teaching block (a solid 1980s construction shortly to be extended) housing maths, humanities and languages together with serious looking learning resources centre (solid shelves and workaday displays suggest books as study essentials first, imagination firers second).

It's next to tranche of buildings, home to performing arts, science and the Pitstop, a small café-style eaterie (main low-ceilinged refectory - slightly apologised for; 'it is what it is,' says member of staff; much improved by paint job, mint green replacing previous appetite suppressing mustard yellow - is down the hill). They're clustered in loose extended courtyard arrangement, centrepiece a clock tower so wantonly Disneyesque you half expect it to sprout features and break into song.

Dotted through the site are the school houses, all nine of them, which come at you from every direction. Seen as hugely important centres of r and r for day as well as boarding pupils, they enable everyone to let off steam, enhancing sense of camaraderie as 'you spend a lot of time with your houses even if you're not boarding,' says pupil.

Communal rooms (too many to count – we did try) are swankiest for oldest, who also have study rooms, mainly shared if day, some solo if boarding, while younger day pupils stash stuff in lockers, tops cunningly (and frustratingly) sloped to prevent leaning towers of casually dumped textbooks.

While they take the same newspapers (in assorted shades of blue: Grauniad fans may pine) houses vary enormously in style, ranging from Rutherford House's touch of the Bridesheads (parquet and imposing marble fireplaces no whit disturbed by table football machine and mini bank of computers) to St Bedes's, the newest house, so far away from the main drag that only rooftop is visible on location map, which comes complete with soft furnishings co-ordinated in browns and greens (nicer than it sounds) and eco focus, much lauded though little understood. 'Didn't realise we even collected rainwater,' said pupil.

Pastoral care, well-being and discipline: Insulating tranquillity radiates both from surroundings and what one mother described as 'gentle, smiley' monks, though not a place to come for those with real issues with Catholicism or deep-rooted opposition to introspection.

Spiritual side is 'the heart of the school,' says one of many delightful pupils, impact felt most strongly in tolerance for others with soul-searching high up the agenda and a feature of student magazine which, like a thought for the day compilation, is jam-packed with worthy thoughts about happiness and love and, pick of the bunch, what nuns do all day (pray, apparently).

School temperament is accordingly mild. Even traditional post-exams photograph eschews standard shrieking, certificate-grasping, mid-air riot in favour of a nice, quiet group of girls and boys standing in semi-formal pose, looking slightly embarrassed at being singled out for glory.

Reflects notion of competition as being 'based on the idea of sharing excellence'. Though a possible handicap if opponents' idea of competition is to slaughter the opposition (school team recently lost

debating competition because it was 'too politically correct' says magazine report) seems to damp down house on house aggression despite ferocious-looking face paint applied, warrior fashion, before girls' matches. House music competition is the only event capable of triggering anything approaching blood lust 'because we organise it and it involves everyone,' felt pupil.

Pupils and staff spoke highly of events that blend spiritual with social rather than adversarial dimension in keeping with admirable Benedictine tradition of hospitality. 'Food is a very good reason to mix,' says housemistress. Civilised, too, with wine allowed for sixth formers on Feast of St Benedict 'but only with food,' and over 18s allowed to nip down to the local pub with permission (though hadn't been a single request when this reviewer arrived at the start of the summer term – unusual, thought member of staff). Many house parties, too, (not in the format most parents know and dread, we're assured) as well as 'young ladies' lunches' (young gents' versions, too) where pupils from same house or year group foregather in delightful panelled room to swap news and views in civilised surroundings.

Results in easy going, clique-free contact between year groups, think pupils. 'So refreshing compared with my previous school where the year 11s wouldn't talk to the year 10s. Here, everyone does,' says one recent arrival, who also praised unofficial problem sharing - girls' friendship issues the unsurprisingly regular hot topic.

Tutor groups, house linked except in sixth form, meet regularly; chaplains, one per house, are also useful listening ears. Pupils also felt that lectio divina - Benedictine tradition of reading sacred texts aloud and discussing themes raised – can be effective route in to problem sharing, akin to grown up circle time. 'You can raise worries – it's a personal thing,' felt one.

School recently reported that behaviour had hit an all-time high, and pupils we talked to felt there was little in the way of badness beyond missed homework deadlines, with normal sanctions consisting of warnings and a series of ever-lengthening detentions or, in the case of 'rude or inappropriate' use of phones (a worry as 'can access everything' unlike computers where school wifi blocks undesirable sites, including Facebook) minimum 24-hour confiscation.

Not much obvious kicking over the traces in pupils we saw, who seemed born to walk rather than run (though sloping terrain is admittedly a fabulous natural deterrent), although some current models of decorum were, we were assured by pupils, former wild cards who have been 'subdued' as they come up through the school, ending up 'unrecognisably well-behaved.' Schools stays on top of things, confirmed parent. 'I don't get the impression that children drift off the radar. They're not allowed to misbehave or become lost sheep.'

Pupils and Parents: Fair few Worthians wanting to spread educational joy to second generation, substantial overseas contingent, some from hyper-Catholic parts of the world. One Brit parent, while accepting school's need to get bums on seats, felt that 'you need to make sure that that percentage doesn't get out of hand.'

Riches represented amongst parents, rags less so, though neither end of the spectrum dominates. 'You'll see the odd Rolls Royce as well as the odd beaten-up car,' thought one mother.

Lots of parent socialising, from informal curry nights to large scale events including masked ball fab summer fair complete with fairground rides, jazz band and a profusion of strawberries. 'A very jolly scene,' thought one.

If all goes according to plan, pupils will emerge from the Worth experience 'wise [and] intellectually astute,' (according to prospectus, size defiantly non-standard and so glossy you could skate on it).

They are, as well (so much so that it was a relief to hear off-duty younger girls described as 'very screamy' by sixth former). One parent, with ultra-serious child, felt distinctly frivolous in comparison.

Pupils take great pride in individuality and proclaim absence of a particular school type, backed by staff who thinks school should 'allow people to grow into themselves - a pupil's inner talent could mean that you haven't mastered any one thing but are good at lots. We're 600 weird and wonderful individuals and we've got to learn to get on with each other.'

We admired fighting talk, though couldn't help but notice girls' near identical hairdos, most tumbling manes of mermaid-length tresses, varying in colour, finish as high gloss as prospectus.

Star former pupils include actor Robert Bathurst and publisher Sir David Bell, though sports dominated, from Tim Hutchings (athletics) to Tom Symonds (racing) and rugby (Nick Walshe). All admirable stuff. However, as Old Girls start to make their mark on the world aided by slickly run alumni society (which includes a 'Worthians in Property' group), we'd hope for more variety and quirkiness in years to come.

Entrance: Oversubscribed, says school, which advises registration two years in advance. Around 120 places a year, 40 in year 7, 60 in year 9 and 20 in year 12, occasionally in other years. Feeder schools many and various, majority independent, fair few Catholic (though not all) and also include local state primaries and secondaries, though with school bus network puts Tunbridge Wells, Haywards Heath and Horsham within reach.

Just shy of 20 per cent from overseas (Gatwick a 10 minute taxi ride away), some non-native English speakers, support offered though must be sufficiently fluency to cope with normal lessons.

Currently pushing convincing case for 11 plus entry by citing early leadership opportunities on offer to the brightest and best in years 7 and 8 when academic effort plus helpfulness and embodiment of Benedictine ethos can land a handful a place on school council or as prefects. Fine for boys, who can board from year 7 (with three nights a week flexi option), though it is day places only until year 9 for girls (might account for very low representation in current year 7 - just six out of 25-strong year group).

Exit: This September, three students took up Oxbridge places and half of all pupils gained places at Russell Group universities. Individual students also took up places at the Royal School of Ballet, at the University of the Arts and at higher education institutions abroad.

Up to a fifth leave after GSCE. Around three or so to Oxbridge most years (one musician in 2015), wide range elsewhere recently. Lots to Russell Group and, in recent years, Harvard, Trinity College Dublin, University of Amsterdam, Bocconi (Italy) and Central School of Speech and Drama. Economics, maths, business and management all popular, interesting combinations (history and theology, maths and philosophy) also a big feature.

Sixth formers praised careers advice, helpful email updates arriving at least twice a week, approach informative but low pressure. Many (more than average, it seemed) were postponing university applications with official blessing, gap years viewed as logical make your mind up time.

Money matters: Fees about on a par with nearest competitors. Good scholarships (music, academic and all-rounder) offering up to 40 per cent of fees (music also includes free instrumental tuition). Means tested bursaries are also available, though total fees remission generally capped at 50 per

cent. Local, bright Catholic children can also apply for St Benedict's Scholarships – fully funded day places, one in year 7, two in year 12.

Remarks: 'At some schools, it's all about how clever or hearty and sporty you are - not here,' thought one parent. Another, with experience of several other leading Catholic schools, had no doubts. 'It's the pick of the bunch.' Encourages reflection, not out to dazzle, producing thoughtful pupils, distinctly themselves and quite definitely Worth it.