

The Good Schools Guide Review of Dorset House School, Pulborough, RH20 1PB

Our View



School was founded in 1784 as Totteridge Park School in Hertfordshire. After various incarnations it became Dorset House in 1905 and moved to its present site in 1964. Housed in a 12th century manor house, with medieval great barn, modern teaching blocks and a separate junior school building. Set in 16 acres of grounds at the end of a quiet country lane, next door to the church and with magnificent views in all directions. Children allowed to build camps and dens in the woods and play in the adventure playground. 'No one minds about mud – you just fling on your wellies,' said one boy. Children spend as much time as possible outside – Pre- Prep has two hour Forest School session each week - and some of the younger children often drink their break-time hot chocolate on a log in the woods. Small amphitheatre in the garden used for speech day and house drama competition.

One-form entry, with a maximum of 20 per year group – nearly full in Years 4 to 8 and waiting lists further down. Numbers have now reached 133 (maximum capacity of 160). Forty boarding places for flexi and weekly boarders – often suits families who live in London and have a weekend cottage nearby. Warren of dorms under the eaves reached by a spiral stone staircase are warm and cosy, with old fashioned iron bedsteads and lots of teddies. Only a few of girl boarders so far but they are accommodated in great style. Real family atmosphere – feels more like someone's elegant country house than a school - the children take their breakfast and tea on the terrace during the summer. Everything immaculate with not a weed in sight and fresh paint everywhere. Head describes the school as 'traditional but forward looking.'

He would like to adopt Anthony Seldon's 'catch a tiger by the tongue' initiative to foster links with China and encourage the children to learn about the likely cultural and economic impact of the rise of China. He has recently visited a number of Chinese schools and a group of 20 Chinese children came to visit Dorset House for five weeks. This made for lots of interesting discussions and the English children were amazed at how hard Chinese parents expect their children to work.

Streaming for maths, English and science from year 5 depending on the class size and the ability range within the group. Scholarship children kept within their year group and are offered extension classes at break and lunchtimes.

Some staff left when the school became co-ed but school now has a dynamic team with a good mix of age and experience. Charismatic science teacher who brings the subject to life – he teaches through experimentation and investigation like testing the efficacy of indigestion remedies. Bright, light and airy science lab where 'we love blowing up jelly babies in the fume cupboard,' says one budding young scientist. Recently won Green Link award which funded the boardwalk around the pond.



Children do particularly well in science at CE, often achieving top grades, and many go on to study it at university. Very enthusiastic young geography teacher is also the director of sport – geography trips to the Isle of Wight and the Jurassic Coast; the flood plain of the river Arun just beyond the garden makes a wonderful outdoor classroom. French taught by a native speaker. Latin or classical civilisation introduced in year 5. Local vicar teaches RE and

Greek (the later to bright Year 8s).

Light, cosy library with comfortable sofas where children can curl up with a book. Prep done at school and supervised by members of staff. Three full-time SEN teachers, mainly for mild dyslexia and dyspraxia. Bright yellow room for the junior SENCo where the motto is 'learning with laughter.' Children not routinely tested but any problems picked up quickly in such a small environment.

Magnificent medieval barn acts as the school hall and is big enough to fit everyone in - also doubles up as the sports hall and is hired out for weddings. Inner barn is used for plays and assemblies. New head of art has revitalised the art department. Art and DT are linked and the kit car club built a car and



raced it at Goodwood as part of the Greenpower Project. Photography very popular and each child is given their own memory card from year 3 to take photographs around the school and are

taught to use Photoshop. Photographs of the children displayed around the school and dining room doubles as an art gallery. Brightly coloured totem poles made from recycled materials dotted around the garden.

New young director of music (Dorset House old boy) – who also acts as houseparent with his wife and dog, Mylo - has made music 'cool and fun' and there are now lots of informal concerts, ensembles and whole school concerts. The choir sings at services in the church next door and at the Christmas carol service at Arundel. Music timetabled from the early



years and every child learns to read music through learning the recorder – about 60 per cent learn a musical instrument. Is apparently the first prep school in the country to have JamClassHD system which is linked by JamPod technology (no, we don't know what that means either). Senior play each year, plus one or two for juniors as well as the house drama competition. Annual poetry reciting competition and children have to read out match reports and prayers – all great for building self confidence.



In sport the school 'punches above its weight' – under-nine rugby team recently unbeaten in Sussex. Almost all the boys and girls in a year group are required to make up a team and often children who did not consider themselves sporty step up to the plate. All children in years 3 to 8 play in at

least three matches a term - everyone has a go. There are now enough girls to put together netball and hockey teams to play other schools. Ballet and gymnastics particularly popular and girls can take exams in these. Riding a popular extra and team takes part in regional competitions.

Other extras include drama, pottery, Mandarin, cookery gymnastics and football coaching (with pros from Chelsea). Chess taught by outside specialists. Recently formed Cub group with children from local primaries and some from Dorset House meets in the barn every week during term time.

Leadership and taking responsibility promoted from a young age through leadership programme – 'children learn how to work together as a team and to listen to one another.' Leadership training once a week before school for year 8s – they take part in the decision making of the school as elected

representatives of the school council and act as positive role models.



There are more opportunities to take a position of responsibility in a small school – children start as lunch helpers and book monitors and progress through outdoor adventures and camping trip (including one to the top of Mount Snowdon). Grand finale is an adventure training week in north Devon after CE.



Small nurturing school with a family atmosphere produces open chatty children where everyone knows everyone and each child is given the chance to find their niche. 'It's a lovely, friendly school where children have a proper country childhood and don't grow up before their time,' one happy mother told us. School is run on Christian principles and the parish church next door is central to the life of the school – Monday morning assemblies in the church and parents often come to the special Friday service. The vicar is a part time member of staff and teaches RE.

Recently introduced house system means there is lots of crossover between year groups and as one parent said, 'the older children are sweet to the younger ones.' Firm policy on bullying. Many young members of staff live on site and in the manor house, which contributes to the family feel. Board games round the library fire in the evenings for boarders and a dedicated games room.

Most children live within a 20-mile radius and the school is increasingly popular with families moving out of London - 'a good antidote to the pushy London day schools,' according to one new arrival. Active parents' association raised £25,000 at the summer ball for an Astroturf (in a school with 140 pupils). Also organises bonfire night party, quiz and welcomes new parents to the school. A fathers' cricket team meets regularly. Famous old boys include former Gordonstoun head Mark Pyper, comedian Harry Enfield and actor Ed Speleers (of Eragon and Downton Abbey fame).

If you are looking for an all-singing, all-dancing school with facilities galore, this school might not be for you but if you are looking for somewhere that achieves good academic results, is small and nurturing and where every child gets a chance and is expected to do their bit – take a closer look.

Headmaster

Since 2008, Mr Richard Brown MA PGCE (early forties). Educated at Magdalen College School, Oxford and at Oxford Brookes, where he read English and law. After five and a half years as an officer in the Royal Dragoon Guards, he took an MA in English and education at Reading University and a PGCE at Roehampton. Then spent three years teaching English at the Edinburgh Academy, where he was also a boarding tutor and games teacher. This was followed by eight years as a housemaster and English teacher at Pangbourne. On his arrival the governors gave him the task of introducing girls into the school and phasing out Saturday school. This caused a certain



amount of angst and unrest amongst some parents and some took their children away. However, things have settled down and numbers have been rising since 2010 (girls now constitute 36 per cent and a couple of year groups have waiting lists). Head feels that school is about 'preparing children for today's challenges – not wrapping them in cotton wool' and that 'small prep

schools provide an antidote to a world where children grow up too quickly.' His aim is to 'make learning fun and challenge children to think about the world around them.' Divorced with two sons – one at Brighton College and one still at Dorset House. In his spare time loves mountaineering and trekking in remote places.

Entrance

Children can join at any time so long as there are spaces, subject to informal tests in English and maths, a report from their current school and, ideally, a taster day. Parents are made aware of what the school is able to offer and that the ultimate goal is CE.

Exit

To a wide range of senior schools, including Hurst, Cranleigh, Worth, Brighton College, Christ's Hospital, Lancing, Winchester and some further afield to Marlborough and Radley. Most children stay until CE at 13+ but school will prepare children for 11+ entry to senior schools and also for pre-selection tests. Scholarships won every year for the past few years – mixture of academic, music, sport and all-rounder.