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We happy few

Bigger schools aren't necessarily better, says *Luke Smolinski*

I should have worn trainers. I should not have worn black shoes. Not in the drizzle, not trudging through the mud and watching the rugby, speaking to the parents of public schoolboys: 'I'm writing a piece for *The Spectator's* independent schools guide.' In muddy Clarks.

I recall my school days. At Ardingly, at quarter to four, in rugby garb: shinguards made of cotton and a five-year-old gumshield that tasted of boot. I would stand proudly in my itchy shirt, clean, unruffled, having spent the past hour lingering at the back, avoiding anything that even looked like soil. As I counted down the minutes, the whistle would blow. 'Right, who's clean?' Gulp. 'Luke?' That's me. 'Dive in that patch of mud over there, will you?'

The headmaster assures me it's different now. I am not so sure.

Rugby still seems to consist of boys rolling about a rugby ball, as parents bark at them to 'quick hook'. Each boy

tackles differently: some block, some grab, most attempt a hug. The best employ the excellent technique of tugging on the opponent's shirt.

The ones who enjoy it most are the parents. It's just a bit of fun, I'm told, before a dad yells at a ten-year-old as he races around in Ravenclaw colours. Well done, Wilf! Good boyyy! Superb pick-up! Down the line! Eight well-spoken Sussex parents shout in unison as if it's an Everton Cup Final. Then: 'Are you all right in those shoes?' I say I'm happy, but only because it's too late to go back.

Dorset House School is one of the few small boarding preps left, comprising 144 pupils, boys and girls aged between two-and-a-half to 13. Some year groups contain fewer than 20 children and it is not rare for an 11-a-side to include all the boys of the year. 'Do you know Christopher?' one parent asks another. 'Of course I know him,' is the reply.

The headmaster knows parents by name. The teachers act almost like private tutors: 'The teachers know straight away if there is a problem with the kids,' says a happy mother. Little Oliver has more chance of getting a star role in the play (or choir) and less chance of being cast as Second Bystander. One mother tells me that parents and pupils are less gratingly competitive than they are in large schools. The children are more relaxed, she says.

Headmaster Richard Brown, a former Army man, is a chummy and approachable sort. One might expect him to be a little detached — heads often are — but he plays hockey with some of the dads and talks breezily with the parents. He takes a lenient approach to boarding, says a mother. This is good, she adds: you want children to enjoy boarding as much as they like home. Some boarding schools are oppressive. Not this one.

The smallness of the school doesn't intrude on the quality of the facilities. The place has an outdoor pool, large playing fields, an amphitheatre, a barn and a nearby church, which is used for assemblies. The dining room is quaintly tiny, like a medieval canteen, with heraldic crests on the walls and (one supposes) occasional orange juice. The network of passageways and dormitories in the attic could have been built by shrews. The building itself dates from the 12th century and looks from the outside like a spa resort. One half expects a masseur to come in and offer a head rub.

Nor does the scale mean a lack of resources. The head is keen to say the school offers Latin from year five and French from reception. Ancient Greek was cancelled after only three kids came to the lessons. Mr Brown speaks, however, of conker competitions, Mandarin classes and racing-car building: like most public schools, Dorset House excels at extra-curricular activities. The countryside, too, offers a refuge for artists and geographers.

I return to the headmaster's office. Does Mr Brown have any plans for expansion? Most successful schools do, after all. 'Oh no,' he says, 'Size is our unique selling point.' Speaking to the parents and children, I understand what he means. I get a sense of intimacy. Even if it is on a muggy Saturday afternoon on a rugby pitch.

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