



ST PHILIP'S SCHOOL

THE  
GOOD  
SCHOOLS  
GUIDE

**February 2022**

## What The Good Schools Guide says

### Headmaster

Since 2016, Alex Thomas BA PGCE (40s). The first person boys meet and greet on the front steps every morning, Mr Thomas is the face of the school. He shows an interest in everyone and greets every boy by name. 'He even knows the name of our dog,' said one mother. His jaunty air of confidence sets the tone and he is considered 'a very safe pair of hands' by parents who feel he is 'engaging and caring.' They trust his judgment and value his approachability. 'He's not on a pedestal, but gets down to everyone's level, whoever they are.' In his study hang prints of his alma mater Stonyhurst, and also of University College, Durham, where he read Russian. Mr Thomas started his teaching career at Westminster Cathedral Choir School, thence to St Philip's to continue to promote Catholic values in a traditional boys' prep school where academic achievement and personal growth carry equal weight. He sees St Philip's as authentic, 'we mean what we do' and 'a little bit different, not bland.' A dog lover himself, he says: 'Boys are like puppies: they like routine, they like to know who is in charge and they love to please.' Throw a ball and lashings of praise into the mix and you get a good idea of why this philosophy pays dividends with the boys under his charge. 'Anything sporty,' is a passion.

Not many heads pride themselves on an International Tennis Federation world ranking for doubles. He is also rather good at cricket and cross country, and is a keen amateur astronomer. The youngest star of the St Philip's family is Mr Thomas's new baby daughter – photographed in the arms of two beaming head boys in the weekly newsletter.

### Entrance

Up to 10 boys admitted at age 7 and same number at age 8, usually from local pre-prep and primary schools. Assessment in English and maths; also looking for 'best fit' based on school reports, academic potential and impressions on the day. Priority is given to siblings. You don't have to be Catholic to come here, but if you are it helps. Approximately 10 per cent of boys are from other faiths. Occasional places arise higher up the school - one boy told us, rather charmingly, that he was 'welcomed with open arms' into year 7.

## Exit

Roughly half go on to board - Eton, Harrow and Winchester are traditionally popular. 'Our boys are known to be good medicine for a boarding house,' says the head, borne out by the registrar of Eton: 'A tiny dot of a school which send us impressive boys.' Two academic scholarships to Ampleforth and a King's scholarship to Eton in 2021. City of London and Dulwich tend to be the day schools of choice, alongside KCS Wimbledon, St Paul's and The Oratory. Mr Thomas has designed an impressive app to guide parents through the minefield of the application process; and he makes an effort to build relationships with schools, ever mindful of 'playing with a straight bat,' so that each side understands what they are getting.

Standardised testing, twice yearly, tracks each boy's progress and helps manage parents' expectations from the outset. 'They trust us and, usually, listen' says the head, 'so there are few surprises and each boy ends up at the right school for him.' One parent said: 'They seem to get them to peak at just the right time'

## Our view

It comes as no surprise to hear boys refer to school as a 'home from home.' School is, after all, a handsome, red-brick Victorian house on a smart terrace in SW7, with tasteful décor to match the boys' eau de nil blazers. But for the bright-eyed boys selling school calendars for charity, we might well have walked past the front door with its discreet glazed ceramic plaque of St Philip Neri. Established in 1934 by the community of Oratorians who felt there was a dearth of educational opportunity for Catholics in the neighbourhood, the school retains close links with the Oratory Church at Brompton. Special saints' days are celebrated, and many boys make their First Holy Communion, their First Confession and their Confirmation there.

Somehow all 110 boys manage to squeeze, legs firmly crossed, into the main room for whole-school assembly three times a week. We visited on the feast day of St Kentigen, patron saint of Glasgow. Between the Lord's Prayer and a story of the miracle of bringing a robin back to life, was a lively discussion about Glasgow's football teams. On a desk, a ping pong bat neatly aligned between a rosary and a pile of books was further evidence of a balance between the physical and the spiritual.

Teaching is rooted in the good, old fashioned prep school tradition, focusing on core common entrance subjects but allowing time to go off-piste to delve deeper or to introduce new ideas along the way. 'Freedom from the National Curriculum is helpful,' admits the head, understanding that boys need to be inspired by following their enthusiasms. Small classes

and 'discreet setting' in maths, English and Latin allow for flexibility, stretching those preparing for a scholarship exam, or to support others who need a bit of extra help. Huge and timely investment took the school's IT from behemoth to Teams before lockdown. Online schooling, we are told, was 'exceptional.'

All teachers have the highest aspirations and, according to many parents, 'go above and beyond' to get the best out of the boys. One 'legendary' member of staff, much revered by parents and boys, has just completed his 100th term at the school. Experience is complemented by the energy of younger teachers, including an old St Philip's gappie. The energetic deputy head who is a much-respected English teacher is also responsible for safeguarding; the young head of sport is form teacher for year 8 and runs PSHE. Asked what makes the teachers special, one boy reflected and said 'they really do care about you.' This is borne out by many examples, including one teacher, a passionate reader herself, who has been known to buy books at the weekend with specific boys in mind. One parent added: 'Without overstating it, the boys are standing on the shoulders of giants.'

In the science lab we were shown a preserved pig's heart, source of great fascination, particularly in the week of the first ever pig-to human heart transplant. The screaming jelly baby experiment was explained against a backdrop of realistic sound effects. It was heartening to watch an English lesson about girls' rights in Afghanistan. 'Being positive can change the world; little things can help' contributed one thoughtful child.

'Performing arts' must present a challenge in a compact school with neither hall nor stage but St Philip's does its best. Peripatetic music teachers deliver a roster of instrumental lessons in a room which would barely hold a cello case, let alone a string quartet, but we heard no complaints. Parents celebrate the quality of singing at the carol service. Schola, the small school choir, provides choristers for a weekly Mass at the Oratory and strains of Panis Angelicus rose up the staircase into the headmaster's study pervading the school with a sense of other-worldly calm. A music lesson talking the boys through a classic production of Tosca was heart-warmingly old-fashioned. LAMDA exams are an optional extra, poetry recital is popular, and the annual whole-school play generates much excitement. The art department joins forces with parents to create props and costumes; even mothers of old boys have been known to come back to sew on buttons and do make-up on the night.

Some parents admit that the lack of outside space was initially a cause for concern but the delightful garden is used to optimal effect from 8am every day, and for annual events (summer fair, leavers' barbeque and prizegiving - the Conkers Cup as coveted as the Server's Thurible). Round the World (in 80 seconds?) ping pong is a year-round craze played with redoubtable energy. Sport is important to all, not least the head, whose ambition it is for boys 'to feel confident kicking a ball in five or ten years' time'. Boys are bussed twice a week to the many acres of high-quality playing fields at Barn Elms for football, rugby or cricket (coveted grass wickets, pavilion and changing rooms). Hockey is played at the Westway sports centre, and swimming takes place at Fulham Pools. Competition against larger schools can be fierce, but all St Philip's boys get to represent their school and have learnt that it's not all about winning. Match teas (hot chocolate, marshmallows and home-baked cookies) are, we are told, 'the best in town.'

There is a plethora of clubs, from history of art to robotics. Ornithology was introduced after an enthusiastic pupil phoned the Barnes Wetland Centre, recorded a piece to camera and gave a presentation to staff. Film club was started by a young classic movie aficionado, garnering support with his popcorn machine. Suggestions are also welcomed from the school council, named The Witan after the council of the Anglo-Saxon kings in England. Trips to London museums and further afield for bushcraft and camping are an extension to the curriculum and, judging from the boys' enthusiasm for the latter, are eagerly anticipated rites of passage for each year group.

Rewards (house points and praise) rather than sanctions (at worst, having to miss break) are the order of the day. 'Teachers tend not to fly off the handle' said one boy, and a mother told us, 'They keep the lid on boisterous behaviour in a firm but fair way.' In such a small school it would be hard to sneeze without being noticed, and there's nowhere to hide if mischief is in the air. All teachers, including the 'brilliant and kind' office staff, are interlinked, such that pastoral issues seem to be picked up on almost before they become an issue. The head encourages parents to come in, 'if the mood music isn't right.' If special needs are identified, a programme is set up and extra help put in place. A delightful alcove, no bigger than a large arm chair, is a cosy place for reading support. PSHE allows boys to talk about their feelings and covers topics such as bullying and kindness. External speakers are sometimes brought in to address other issues, for example digital safety.

Many parents mention the supportive, 'grounded' community of St Philip's families, many of whom are continental European and speak other languages at home. One mother described them as 'a diverse bunch of people who share the same traditional values and appreciate the Catholic element. Although many families are local, the catchment area stretches from Barnes to Brompton, with a few families coming from south of the river.

## Money matters

Owned by an independent charitable trust in a position to offer means-tested bursaries of up to 100 per cent of fees. All applications assessed by an independent auditor. One parent with children at other schools said St Philip's represents 'extraordinary value for money,' even with the added extras of after school clubs and an optional hot lunch.

## The last word

Parents and boys alike love this 'little gem of a school', the only disadvantage being that none of them seems to want to leave. 'The experience has been dreamy,' said one parent wistfully. One soon-to-be-leaver told us: 'It's very friendly, everyone knows everyone and I wouldn't change anything.' In a nutshell: great results, clear values, good fun.