

## What *The Good Schools Guide* says

The homely sixth form common room buzzes with chatter. Most striking to visitors is the calm – almost serene – atmosphere that pervades the school. Smiling faces are everywhere to be seen and parents and girls report nothing but kindly and supportive behaviour between girls. If leading from the front is the cause, then this pressure-free, friendly vibe...

### Head Mistress

Since January 2009, Miss Jacquelyn Pain MA (theology and philosophy) MBA PGCE NPQH (youthful 50s). School has benefitted from the wealth of experience she brought with her, with two headships of other high flying academic establishments (Henrietta Barnet and St Albans High School), plus a stint prior to these as deputy head at Northwood, under her belt.

'Immensely proud' of Northwood College's recent merger with Heathfield – both of her staff's success in the seamless joining of two cultures ('a lesson on how to be in change') but also of the girls' willingness to accept and embrace their new peers. Also highly instrumental in school becoming part of prestigious GDST group, a move which, she says 'has not changed the culture of the school' but has provided 'a plethora of opportunities that a standalone school doesn't have'.

Understands her customer to perfection and has air of calm control that immediately makes you feel your money would be well spent at any establishment with her at the helm: 'every girl here achieves the best she's capable of. It's not just spin'. Value added stems from pastoral excellence, she says: 'we're not nice just for the sake of it – it's about academic outcomes.'

Elegant and understated, parents describe her as 'a great communicator' and say she takes no issue with dealing with problems raised, however small. Like all the best leaders, she's surrounded herself with a formidable senior management team who not only sing from one hymn sheet, but give a very genuine impression that they are as committed to the cause of excellence as she is.

Head of junior school since 2015, Mrs Zara Hubble (very youthful looking 40s), educated at Westonbirt School and City of London Girls, after which she took a Montessori nursery teaching course then a BEd specialising in KS2 at Southbank University. Cut teeth at St Hilda's in Bushey before joining Heathfield, where she taught year 6 and ultimately became head of year 7. Moved to Northwood as head as part of merger with Heathfield in 2014. Likeable, calm and poised, with two daughters at university. Keen skier and book lover.

### Academic Matters

Delightful Bluebelle House is home to early years girls – designed with a wonderful playground, outdoor explorer area (minibeast heaven), masses of IT and spacious, airy and inspiring classrooms where girls learn Spanish via action songs, yoga and ballet from age 3. Three reception classes of up to 20 girls also enjoy this space with life skills such as resilience already high on the educational agenda. Lessons we observed were engaging and interactive and girls highly articulate. Years 1 and 2 in Vincent House, with junior school housing years 3 to 6 – both immaculate, modern houses, with every available space proudly adorned with colourful art and meticulous handwritten work. Thinking skills – pioneered by the whole school from nursery through to year 13 – taken very seriously by all with pupils able to explain the purpose of De Bono thinking hats with enthusiasm and clarity. All girls screened for SEN in year 4 and supported in small groups either within or outside the classroom. Around 30 girls receive EAL help.

In the ferociously academic context of this corner of North London, school is by no means at the top of the pile when it comes to results – but neither does it either pretend or want to be. Value added is the name of the game and head is delighted to be in top four per cent nationally in relation to this, if not topping academic league tables. Broad-ish church intake, coupled with

ethos encouraging every girl to outperform her potential, means that academic superstars can co-exist happily alongside their more pedestrian peers, with neither group feeling undue pressure. Head more interested in 'building a portfolio of skills relevant to each girl' than cracking the Oxbridge whip – 'girls need a raft of skills beyond the academic', she says. 'Soft skills can mean the difference between success and failure.' Listen up, neighbouring hothouses.

It's compulsory Spanish in years 7 to 9 in the languages department (not popular with everyone), with French or German as an option. Mandarin on offer from year 9. Classrooms we visited were formal in format – old school even – girls in rows facing the front and lecture style lessons. That said, lessons were interactive (think periodic table bingo) and when questioned in class, the girls we saw were incredibly articulate, confident and considered in their answers. Parents cite RS and English teaching as 'really impressive' and results bear this out, with the former producing 'ridiculously high' grades at GCSE and A level.

Girls take nine or 10 GCSEs from a traditional curriculum with compulsory language and three sciences, plus options including art, classical civilisation, drama, Latin and Greek, home economics, RE and textiles. IGCSEs now taken in some subjects, at the discretion of each departmental head. In 2016, 65 per cent of GCSEs scored A\*/A. Similarly broad choice of A level options, although disappointingly low uptake of the more 'artsy' options – including English, history and languages – reflecting parent demographic aspiring to careers in the sciences for their daughters. 'Our families value STEM subjects,' says head. 'It can be a challenge to persuade them otherwise...but it's one we're happy to grapple with.' After sciences, psychology and RE most popular A level choices. Respectable A level results in 2016, with 65 per cent A\*/B grades and 30 per cent A\*/A.

Because large number of girls move through from junior school, any SEN usually identified years before arrival in senior school, with seamless transition a major benefit for girls requiring support. Most mild SENs managed in lessons, with only occasional withdrawals. School supportive of girls pursuing interests or sports to a high level outside of school and will adjust timetable to accommodate if possible. Bespoke programmes occasionally put in place, for example to help girls be more outgoing.

Independent thinking is school's raison d'être – even, according to the girls we spoke to, above and beyond sport, music or drama. Girls formally taught Thinking Skills from nursery upwards with a full-time cognitive development director to ensure consistency of message and integration across all parts of the curriculum. Even the youngest in the school evangelise the benefits of eg looking at problem solving from different perspectives – 'teachers don't spoon feed us' and 'we're taught how to learn from our mistakes', we were informed. School is pioneering in its approach and is working towards Thinking Schools International status.

University application process universally praised by parents and girls. Dedicated full time careers and UCAS advisor delivers 'loads of one-to-one advice,' say parents, plus programme to provide every opportunity for girls to build CV. Teachers described by all as 'really supportive', offering extra classes in preparation for eg medical exams. Visiting advisors are frequent fixtures, eg mock university interviews with admissions staff from Imperial College or staff at nearby Merchant Taylors' and endless internship opportunities both through school portal and GDST – one sixth former we lunched with was spending her summer interning at Nomura thanks to the latter, with another looking forward to her work experience in Beijing via the same route.

## Games, Options, the Arts

Doesn't boast the most gleaming array of facilities we've ever seen and the field is tiny, but for what is essentially a London school, it's as well equipped as it needs to be. Stand out facility is the 25m pool – with everyone swimming all year round and weekly lessons for years 7 to 9. Sports hall has a new climbing wall (2015) used both in PE lessons and by clubs. Gym also attractive and well equipped, apparently well used at lunch times by older girls. PE and games compulsory to year 11. Tons of extracurricular sports on offer to suit all tastes – hockey, karate, basketball – you name it. Try as we might, we couldn't get the girls we met to extol the virtues of

school's sporting prowess and, with just three compulsory games sessions per fortnight on offer, we wondered whether school was perhaps not the most obvious choice for super sporty types. Parents reassured us, however, that cohort includes a number of outstanding gymnasts, swimmers and even a British team triathlete – we stand corrected, but worth investigating further if your daughter is sports mad. The overall message for sport was: 'it's about right'.

Performing arts centre looks newer than it is and includes an excellent drama studio, recital hall with a sprung floor plus well kitted out music tech room and a plethora of instruments from steel drums up. Plenty of opportunities for budding thespians to throw themselves into productions, most recently Narnia for the lower school, and although there's no space for such performances to take place in a grand theatre, the assembly hall does the job. Parents describe music as 'absolutely fantastic' – for all tastes and levels – from a 50 strong orchestra that plays 'everything' from classical to pop, to jazz bands and chamber choir. There's hours of fun to be had leafing through the booklet detailing all the extracurricular activities on offer with something for everyone – from the active to the cerebral.

Despite junior school parents admitting that 'the academic is the most important thing,' school works hard to ensure balance with a dazzling array of extracurricular clubs which take place either at lunch time or after school. Something for everyone, with all major sports represented, ballet, martial arts, masses of opportunities for musicians to do their thing and everything else from outdoor explorers and gardening to newspaper club. 'Really extraordinary' major stage production each year – recently *The Wizard of Oz* – with the whole of year 6 participating and many behind the scenes roles up for grabs for lower year groups. Super catering, with lunches (included in fees) freshly prepared on site and all girls from reception up eating together in dining room. Hot suppers also available (charged as extra) up to 6.00pm and there's a breakfast club from 7.45am – great for working parents.

## Background and Atmosphere

Founded in 1878 in Endsleigh Gardens, Bloomsbury, with around 25 boarders and a handful of day girls. Headmistress Miss Buchan-Smith, concerned about the unsavoury influence of the Euston area on her girls, moved the school to its current site in Northwood in 1893. The current front building – red-brick late arts and crafts with leaded lights – was opened for 20 boarders and just two day girls. The Briary, next door, accommodated little boys, and although they are long gone, school pays tribute to those who went on to fight and fall in the two wars with an annual wreath laying at Ypres.

Joined Girls' Day School Trust (GDST) in November 2013 as a precursor to joining with Heathfield School (75 per cent of their girls made the move to Northwood), already a member of the Trust, the following September. Head reports that the governors thought 'long and hard' before taking up the rare offer of membership and all are delighted that belonging has not changed the culture of the school at all, 'merely provided a plethora of opportunities that a standalone school doesn't have'. Northwood girls now benefit from participation in GDST music and sport competitions, eligibility for travel scholarships, participation in conferences on eg Oxbridge application, as well as access to an alumni network numbering some 50,000 members, bringing a healthy pool of work experience and internships from which to fish. Staff also benefit from additional training and development opportunities, which bears obvious fruit in the classroom.

Beyond the main building and with notable exceptions (the quaint William Morris-esque, parquet floored reception area and quirky, characterful library) the site wouldn't win any beauty contests and space is at a premium, but the combination of disparate buildings somehow hang together nicely in their urban setting to create a cosy atmosphere - and all aspects are highly functional. The homely sixth form common room buzzes with chatter. Most striking to visitors is the calm – almost serene – atmosphere that pervades the school. Smiling faces are everywhere to be seen and parents and girls report nothing but kindly and supportive behaviour between girls. If leading from the front is the cause, then this pressure-free, friendly vibe is most certainly the effect of Miss Pain's presence at the helm.

Junior school in three purpose built buildings on same site and a handy hop, skip and jump from senior school – handy when girls reach year 6 and start to take a few lessons with their soon-to-be secondary teachers. We spoke to parents who had wanted their girls to have the option of moving to other secondaries at 11+ and won places at – in some cases – arguably more high flying schools. Invariably, none wanted to leave, thanks in no small part to the clever balance of nurture and academic rigour they enjoyed at Northwood.

## Pastoral care, well-being and discipline

Not a negative word to be heard from junior school parents – ‘they’ve really brought our daughter out of herself - we love the inclusive atmosphere’, raved one and indeed girls are nurtured rather than pushed and, happily, few are denied the right to move into the senior school.

Minor transgressions only in the main and these, mainly tiny bumps in the road to adolescence, reportedly dealt with ‘brilliantly and sensitively’ according to parents who were full of praise for the pastoral side of Northwood life. Reports of girls experiencing ‘the grass is always greener’ effect and returning within weeks of departure, particularly for other sixth forms. ‘There’s just something about Northwood,’ said one mother: ‘everybody knows everyone’. ‘Incredibly strong’ house system plays into this, with fiercely fought competitions (‘the life blood of the school’, according to one pupil) in anything and everything, the highlight being the house music competition in which every girl participates. Bullying is a ‘no go zone’, say pupils. Older girls pick up concerns of their younger peers and head reports ‘very few’ eating disorders or instances of self harm – highly commendable in an academic girls’ school – ‘we don’t value aggressiveness’. What about lost sheep? ‘We grab hold of concerns early and work in partnership with parents’, says head. Indeed, parents appreciate this approach and seize opportunities to attend school for talks on subjects such as social media and cyber bullying.

## Pupils and Parents

Majority from British Asian backgrounds although all cultures and religions represented (there’s a multi-faith prayer room for free use by girls as and when) and a more sensible and earnest cohort you’d be hard pushed to find. No reports of cliques, with the majority of non-Asian parents relishing the opportunity for their daughters to ‘stay younger a little bit longer’ due to the positive influence of other cultures. Wide reaching coach routes transport girls from Ealing, Edgware, Kenton, Gerrards Cross and Radlett. Proximity to Northwood station on the Metropolitan line gives easy access from both directions.

## Entrance

Oversubscribed for entry at 3+ and 4+ with around three applicants for every place. Gently selective with nursery and reception places offered after observation in play. Head meets all parents: ‘we’re looking for children who are ready for school,’ she says. Up to 10 new places at 7+, when applicants are assessed in maths, English and reasoning and by interview. Parents attracted to the junior school in the hope of selecting an all through school generally not disappointed as transition from junior school is a given (although junior school pupils do sit the same 11+ exam as outside applicants) unless it is felt a girl really wouldn’t thrive in the senior school. Even parents of most able appreciate this ethos – ‘the fact school doesn’t have a policy of shedding pupils spoke volumes to us about its culture’, said one.

Girls joining senior school from other prep or junior schools take the North London Consortium exam at 11+ plus an online CAT-style test and group interview, with around 30 places up for grabs and up to six applicants for every place. Another 20 join for A levels, with places conditional on GCSE results plus online test and interview. Occasional places in other year groups so worth a call if you’re moving into the area.

## Exit

Almost all juniors to senior school at 11+ with a small handful taking up state grammar places most years. Almost all stay on for A levels with vast majority moving on to Russell Group or new universities. Just two to Oxbridge in 2016; this explained by school's demographic with hard working, dual income families often not wanting daughters to move away for uni – hence many take places up at London colleges or others within commutable distance. Generally several medics.

### Money Matters

A few means-tested bursaries – up to full fees for particularly deserving cases. Scholarships for academics, art, music and sport.

### Our View

If neighbouring options are too academic, too large or too aggressive, Northwood is (in the words of Goldilocks) just right. Unfettered access to a world of opportunities in a supportive and purposeful culture await. In the words of one parent: 'girls come out happy, healthy and rounded'. What more could you want?