

THE
GOOD
SCHOOLS
GUIDE



NORTHWOOD
COLLEGE

FOR GIRLS

GDST

What The Good Schools Guide says

Head

Since September 2018, Zara Hubble, previously head of Northwood College junior school since 2015. 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. Was persuaded to come to Northwood for one term post-merger with Heathfield in 2014, where she 'completely fell in love with the school because it quickly struck me that everybody is a somebody here'.

Surprised but elated when it was suggested she went for head honcho ('junior heads don't become whole school heads'), she is immensely popular and widely praised for her research-based thinking in taking the school forward and emphasis on taking an already strong pastoral offering to the next level ('I firmly believe it's the gateway to academic success – the most successful people I know have the strongest mental health'). 'It's as if she was made for the job', said one parent; 'she's a breath of fresh air, effortlessly motivating everyone around her – you almost want to work there yourself', cooed another, with all agreeing that her 'one of us' approach means 'she's never intimidating, always welcoming and thoroughly lovely'.

Pupils, who describe her as 'engaging' and 'empowering' and 'a real listener', say she has 'brought new energy to the school' and love that her door remains wide open at all times – 'it was a bit scary at first,' admitted one, 'but now we realise we really can just drop in with ideas whenever we want'. And what a striking office it is – flooded with light, with soft and contemporary greys, stunning pupil artwork and a large conference table instead of a desk ('everyone has something equally important to say here'), all reflecting her inclusive, welcoming temperament.

Youthful, calm poised and sociable, she lives locally with her husband ('You can never go out in your tracksuit – everyone is a parent or prospective parent,' she laughs), with whom they have two grown-up daughters, one who works in financial PR, the other studying postgrad medicine at Oxford. Keen skier and book lover.

Academic matters

In the ferociously academic context of this corner of North London, this school has historically favoured a more pastoral bent and value added over striving to be top of the pile when it comes to results. But with pastoral provision gaining increasing recognition as an academic strength, not a 'softly-softly' add-on, it should perhaps come as no surprise that results are on the up, with a very respectable 77 per cent A*/B grades and 50 per cent A*/A at A level, while at GCSE, 71 per cent scored A*-A/9-7.

Make no mistake, these girls work hard. Expectations are universally agreed as being higher than in the past and the Oxbridge whip is cracked harder than it was. But the broad-ish church intake and continuing pastoral emphasis means that academic superstars coexist happily alongside their more pedestrian peers, with neither group feeling undue pressure. 'Girls are supported to get better results than they thought themselves capable of, but somehow it's achieved without the hothouse, competitive and non-nurturing environments of some of the neighbouring schools,' summed up one parent. 'And they prepare us for well beyond university,' one pupil told us. 'It's also about becoming highly employable, so everything we learn is given relevance to the world of work. Why are we learning this? How will it help us in the long run? How can we make sure the learning sticks? These kinds of questions are embedded into lessons, increasingly so as you move up the school.'

Independent thinking is also in the spotlight – staff say it's the school's *raison d'être*, with a full-time cognitive development director ensuring consistency of message and integration across all parts of the curriculum. Even the youngest in the school evangelise about it – 'teachers don't spoon feed us', 'we are taught that mistakes in learning are good – it's how you learn' etc. Lessons we visited bore this out and were interactive (think periodic table bingo), with open-ended questions from teachers, for which girls gave articulate, confident and considered answers. And nobody is resting on their laurels – 'If I'm being completely honest, I still want the girls to be a bit more feisty – asking more questions, challenging in more creative ways,' says head. Teachers offer extra classes and clinics not only for those who feel they're falling behind but to stretch the more able.

Girls choose one modern language from French, Spanish or Mandarin in year 7, one of which must be continued to GCSE. Latin also compulsory from year 7 (not popular with everyone). Setting currently in maths from midway through year 7 and English from year 8, plus in science at GCSE level, although head's signature evidence-based thinking means it might not stay that way ('Looking at the latest research, I'm increasingly convinced mixed ability is the way forward so we're re-evaluating'). Girls take between nine and 11 GCSEs from a traditional curriculum, with non-core options including classical civilisation, drama, music, art plus the very popular textiles. IGCSEs taken in some subjects, at the discretion of each departmental head.

Similarly broad choice of A level options, of which most girls take three, with popular choices including sciences, psychology, economics, maths and music. EPQ compulsory – 'it isn't popular with everyone and some girls in my year really didn't enjoy it, but we all felt glad we stuck it out,' said one pupil. Historically, there was a disappointingly low take-up of more 'artsy' options, reflecting the parent demographic aspiring to careers in the sciences for their daughters, but there has been an increasingly successful push from the school on both the value of doing a subject you really love and that even if you want to be a scientist, you need to be able to express yourself, for which non-science subjects can be crucial.

University application process universally praised by parents and girls. Dedicated full time careers and UCAS adviser delivers 'loads of one-to-one advice,' say parents, plus programme to provide every opportunity for girls to build CV. Visiting advisers are frequent fixtures, eg mock university interviews with admissions staff from Imperial College or staff from nearby Merchant Taylors' and endless internship opportunities.

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.

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 well enough equipped. Stand out facility is the recently refurbished 25m pool – with everyone swimming all year round and weekly lessons for years 7 to 9. Sports hall has a new climbing wall 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 even in sixth form, with girls playing to a high level in netball, plus tons of extracurricular sports on offer to suit all tastes – hockey, badminton, football, cricket basketball, yoga, you name it. Perhaps not the most obvious choice for super sporty types, parents told us – 'it's not sports-crazy or fiercely competitive, although we are getting better in matches and the new director of sports seems to have a better vision,' said one. But for every girl that agreed, one seemed to disagree – 'Sport is my absolute love and I've never felt I've missed out here', said one, with a number of outstanding gymnasts and swimmers attending the school.

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 School of Rock and Daisy Pulls it Off, and although there's no grand theatre space for such performances, the assembly hall does the job. Parents describe music as 'amazing' – for all tastes and levels – from a 50 strong orchestra that plays everything from classical to pop, to jazz bands and chamber choir. 'My husband isn't musical at all, but I dragged him along to the latest concert, in which the head of music did an incredible version of Bohemian Rhapsody with the girls, and he absolutely loved it,' one parent told us. Singing is a biggie here, including head's popular new Monday morning sing-a-longs – 'there's something really special and tribal about group singing that gives you a real feeling of belonging'. Art popular, with three large studios, lots of talented work on display throughout the school, and an animated head of art. Extracurricular activities mean there's something for everyone – from the active to the cerebral.

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 great wars with an annual wreath laying at Ypres.

Joined Girls' Day School Trust (GDST) in 2013 as a precursor to merging with Heathfield School, already a member of the Trust, with Northwood girls now benefiting from participation in GDST music and sport competitions, and in conferences on eg Oxbridge application, as well as access to travel scholarships and to an alumnae network numbering some 75,000 members, bringing a healthy pool of work experience and internships in which to fish. Staff also benefit from additional training and development opportunities, which bears obvious fruit in the classroom.

Space is at a premium and the plethora of disparate buildings wouldn't win any beauty contests, but somehow it all hangs together nicely in this urban setting to create a cosy and unthreatening atmosphere - and all aspects are highly functional. The library is among the most attractive we've seen – once the original gym, it is now a contemporary Scandi-style space, in the same muted greys and whites of the head's office (same interior designer) and lovely mezzanine level for fiction. The homely sixth forms common rooms buzz with chatter, and there's plenty of seminar rooms and quiet working space for this upper end of the school who feel well looked after. The dining room, although not huge, is light and airy and we enjoyed tasty fodder and plenty of choice. Most striking to visitors is the calm – almost serene – atmosphere that pervades the school. Smiling faces are everywhere to be seen and parents and pupils report supportive behaviour between girls.

Pastoral care, well-being and discipline

Pastoral support has long been the backbone of this school, although some might say it's been a double-edged sword, giving it a reputation of being the softer option among local schools. The reality is, say pupils and parents, that the 'strong school community' and 'ethos of kindness' which permeates every aspect of school life has a direct impact on learning - 'I can be myself here,' said one pupil.

Behaviour wise, there are minor transgressions only in the main, and these mainly tiny bumps in the road to adolescence, reportedly dealt with 'brilliantly and sensitively', with school focusing on discussion and resolution (including coaching), although there is a detention system. 'They hear both sides of the story and keep an eye on girls they need to,' said one parent. 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'. Lots of talks for parents and pupils alike on subjects such as social media and cyber-bullying. There is a strong house system with competitions in anything and everything, the highlight being the house music competition in which every girl participates.

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, and girls we met appeared to work towards their own best, not someone else's, as well as genuinely celebrating each other's achievements and thinking outwardly – 'these girls have a huge moral compass,' one parent told us. Parents, many of whom are dual income, are – as one put it - 'just normal and down-to-earth. You don't get many of the mums who have been home all day and turn up done up to the nines'. Wide-reaching coach routes transport girls from Ealing, Edgware, Kenton, Gerrards Cross and Pinner, while proximity to Northwood station on the Metropolitan line gives easy access from both directions – a good job given the 'nightmare parking' reported by parents.

Entrance

Girls joining senior school from other prep or junior schools take the London 11+ Consortium cognitive ability test, with great emphasis on the interview. 'But don't worry if your daughter is quite shy – we are good at finding the spark,' says school. A few join for A levels, with places conditional on GCSE results (at least five grade 9-5s in total, with 9-7s in the subjects they want to study) plus online test and interview. Occasional places in other year groups ('we've recently been inundated in year 8 – now a very popular year to join') so worth a call if you're moving into the area.

Exit

Around 10 to 20 per cent leave after GCSE, with nearly 85 per cent of those who stay moving on to Russell Group or new universities. Just one to Oxbridge in 2018 (English and French); this explained by school's demographic with hard working, dual income families often not wanting daughters to move too far for uni – hence many take places up at London colleges or others within commutable distance, although school says take-up at the likes of Bath, Exeter and Durham on the up, among other more far-flung places. 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 feel too large, aggressive or hothouse, this may be just what you've been looking for. All things pastoral are at the very heart of what they do and this, combined with a purposeful culture and vibrant and evidence-based teaching, means Northwood girls emerge as independent thinkers, confident communicators and happy all-rounders, with nobody left festering in the background.

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Head

Since January 2019, Mark Maddocks (40s), previously deputy head (academic) and head of upper school at Notting Hill Prep. Spent his schooldays at Merchant Taylors; classics degree from Oxford; has been head of classics at Orley Farm and Arnold House. It came as no surprise to us that he was recruited by senior head, Zara Hubble - their strategic speak is almost indistinguishable, no doubt helped by the fact that they are both keen evidence gatherers and red hot on pastoral support and the independent thinking being the baseline of everything the school offers. The next steps for the junior school, he says, are streamlining and refining the timetable and modernising the curriculum, with a particular emphasis on global responsibility and knowledge. Strategy aside, he says the areas of headship that float his boat the most are 'the sheer variety and making a difference to young people's lives'.

Displaying seemingly contradictory qualities of being reserved yet with huge energy and spirit, he met us in his office in Wray Lodge, where children now (his decision) enter at the beginning of each day. Parents refer to his 'approachability' and 'clear dedication to the role', with pupils adding that he's 'lots of fun' and 'easy to talk to'. Says his barometer for the children's happiness, which everyone had told him about, would be how they seemed as they walked into school on his first day – 'they came bounding in and that wonderful moment really stays with me,' he says.

When he's not working, he enjoys gardening and nature ('I'm dedicated to conservation') and piano ('I was a musician in a previous life and it still pays a big part in my life').

Entrance

Oversubscribed for entry at 3+ and 4+ with three to four applicants for every place. Gently selective with nursery and reception places offered after observation in play. Head meets all parents: 'we want to see them in a sociable environment to gauge whether they will thrive in a busy school environment and with a long school day.' Up to 10 new places at 7+, when applicants are assessed in maths, English and reasoning and by interview.

Exit

Almost all to senior school at 11+ with a small handful taking up state grammar places most years.

Junior school comprises of three purpose built buildings – along with Wray Lodge, which houses the headteacher’s office and admin staff – all on same site and a handy hop, skip and jump from senior school, which makes the already super-smooth transition from year 6 (when a few lessons start to be taken with their soon-to-be secondary teachers) even more efficient.

Delightful Bluebelle House is home to early years girls – designed with a fabulous 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. Years 1 and 2 in Vincent House, with junior school housing years 3 to 6 – both immaculate, modern buildings, with every available space proudly adorned with colourful art and meticulous handwritten work. Benefits from sharing facilities including swimming pool, sports hall and science block with senior school – and occasionally they get access to the fabulous Scandi-style library, one of the most welcoming we’ve come across (a good job as one year 4 girl told us, ‘I’ve almost read all the fiction in the junior library – it could definitely be bigger’).

Parents, who are spoilt for choice for local schools, praise the ‘inclusive atmosphere’ and that ‘it’s really not pushy, yet the girls thrive’. ‘You still get the results, it’s just how you get there,’ said one. Pastoral support isn’t just prioritised – it is thoroughly embedded, insist parents, who talk about the ‘personal level of care they have for each child’ and the ‘culture of kindness that you see in every person in the school’. Parents feel teachers take time to understand who their child is and what makes them tick – ‘they capture sparks of interest, grow them and make them shine,’ said one. ‘If you want your child to be in a competitive environment, outwitting each other, with academic wins at every possible opportunity, go for one of the other local schools – this one teaches you that winning comes from within, how to get there without burning yourself out, and that looking after your mental health is key, even at this young age,’ summed up one parent. Girls,

too, talk about how they feel ‘nurtured rather than pushed’ and, happily, few are denied the right to move into the senior school. Head told us, ‘The children’s emotional literacy is incredibly powerful here – that really hit me when I arrived. There’s no sense of, “here’s the pastoral care and resilience model – go figure”. There’s a kind of built-in CBT programme, with the school constantly questioning ourselves, “how can we teach you to become emotional strategists and work out what you need and how to access it?”’

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. Curriculum well-paced and not so overloaded that deep learning is missed. Setting in maths from year 3 and all girls learn Spanish from nursery upwards and Latin from year 5. Teachers are described as ‘professional’, ‘dedicated’ and ‘thoughtful’, with ‘impressive amounts of preparation for each class’. ‘They love the girls – they really look after them.’ Lessons we observed were engaging and interactive – not a yawn in sight. All girls screened for SEN in year 4 and supported in small groups either within or outside the classroom – ‘they’ve been really good with my daughter,’ said one parent. A handful of girls receive EAL help.

Despite academics taking centre stage, school also 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, plus a wide range from ballet, martial arts, outdoor explorers and gardening to newspaper club. ‘I started up a cupcake club,’ one year 6 girl told us, while another had set up a movie making club.

PE lessons focus on mobility, flexibility and core strength in years 1 and 2, then there’s specialist teaching from year 3, with sports including netball, rounders, athletics and tennis (other specialist teachers, including in some academic subjects, are introduced from year 3) and weekly swimming for all in the magnificent 25m swimming pool. ‘It’s probably not for the super sporty, but it’s absolutely fine,’ said one parent.

Music, for which there's a dedicated teaching room, 'is in the DNA of the school', we were told, with a much-praised junior head of music who teaches the foundations of music 'almost by osmosis' and gets the girls involved in 'joyful but highly accurate performances'. 'You do get the parents who demand why their kid isn't picked for the concerts, but the school manages it in a good way,' one parent told us. Peripatetic teaching also available, and frequently taken up, by year 1 upwards. As with the senior school, communal singing is huge – 'there's a real lack of inhibition with it, which makes it very uplifting'. 'Really extraordinary' major stage production each year – practising for Joseph and the Technicolour Dreamcoat when we visited – with the whole of year 6 participating and many behind the scenes roles up for grabs for lower year groups. Art is primarily taught by form teachers, who work closely with heads of art in the senior school, often with cross-curricular themes – plenty of evidence of talented work adorns the walls.

Misbehaviour is minimal. 'Families here take education very seriously and really believe in us and support what we're doing and they share those values with their daughters, so they come to school ready to learn,' explains head, who says that when he's teaching Latin to year 5s, he never has to get further than a 'quiet look'; other staff concur. 'It's almost as if the girls know what they want from their education and that's a lot more powerful than sanctions'. You almost wonder if the girls are a bit too compliant, although there is all the usual 'scratchy sort of stuff' between the girls, says school. 'We're mainly encouraged to sort it out ourselves, which usually works, and if it doesn't a teacher advises us,' a pupil told us.

Super catering, with lunches (included in fees) freshly prepared on site. Year 2s upwards eat together in dining room. Wraparound care run by Superclubs from 7.30am (includes breakfast) and after-school care (including supper) up to 6pm – great for working parents, although the new system has had 'some teething problems', according to one parent.

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 there's a strong parent community, with no cliques – 'I absolutely love the mums,' said one, although another told us, 'It's not in your face –

there's a massive social life if you want it, but it's not frowned upon to step away'. Most come by car – 'not an easy-drop off,' admit parents about the residential street where the school is located.

Gone are the days when this school felt it almost had to apologise for itself. In fact, we spoke to parents whose original plan involved moving their daughters to other secondaries at 11+ and in some cases won places at 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. Definitely one for the list if you want an all-through, rounded education – not to mention avoiding the 11+ frenzy...