

St Anthony's Preparatory School

• *St Anthony's Preparatory School*
90 Fitzjohn's Avenue
London
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- An independent school for boys aged from 4 to 13.
- **Boarding:** No
- **Local authority:** [Camden](#)
- **Pupils:** 304
- **Religion:** Roman Catholic
- **Fees:** £19,005 - £19,425 pa
- **Open days:** Contact the school.

What The Good Schools Guide says

Headmaster

Since 2010, Paul Keyte (early 50s). Educated at Bloxham and then read philosophy and theology at Oriel, Oxford, where he got a first. Says he rather fell into teaching but 'loved it, and so stayed': after spells at Dulwich and KCS Wimbledon, he was director of studies at Winchester and deputy head at both Highgate and South Hampstead.

A warm-mannered and, as befits a philosopher, a reflective man. Evidently deeply thoughtful about the nature of the school, its potential strengths and pitfalls, and tries hard to interpret the school's Catholic mission to a multi-ethnic and metropolitan constituency. Although his own teaching background is rooted in senior schools, his pride in the school, and affection for pupils and staff, is palpable.

A pragmatist, when the need arises: 'Schools face ever more outside scrutiny. We have to embrace change and feel easy about accountability – but without losing what's special'. St Anthony's has always been a touch quirky – teachers always known by their first names, and music and drama given strong prominence within the curriculum. But, as Mr Keyte makes clear, parents tend to enjoy school idiosyncrasies only to the extent that they don't get in the way of children's happiness and well-being, and the ability to get to an appropriate senior school.

Plenty of action to back up his words: major refurbishment of the plant over the past eight

years and, although it is split-site, both parts are now brimming over with fresh paint, ever-changing (and enticing) wall-displays of pupils' work, smart-screens in every classroom – and a huge drive forward in the range and quality of sport: 'children need to be fit and resilient,' he says. 'Life throws a lot at them, very early on.' He has even discreetly overseen the introduction of a dress code for staff - done with a light touch. 'Not rocket science, is it? We have to lead by example.'

Entrance

For the past few years, main entry point has been at reception, where there is now a two form entry. Boys come from about 25 different feeder nurseries: Catholic pupils have typically been at either St Mary's down the road or St Christina's in St John's Wood. Although the school is keen to maintain a strong constituency of Catholic pupils, everyone has to go through the assessment procedure. 'Given that most of the children are only 3 or 4,' explains the Head, 'we try to make it feel like a play day as far as possible, and to identify those most likely to respond to our style of teaching and learning'. Occasional spots for boys coming in at other times, but the general rule is to take a tour and then, as early as possible, register.

Exit

Leavers' destinations showcase how adept the school has become at nurturing a whole range of interests and appetites: predictably, a broad sweep of London destinations, especially Westminster, St Paul's, CLSB, Highgate, UCS and Mill Hill. But there's been a surge in popularity for Merchant Taylors' and Habs, and for the Catholic London Oratory and Cardinal Vaughan. Some boarding schools are also becoming popular with St Anthony's families – Eton, Winchester, Harrow, Sevenoaks and Tonbridge have all featured strongly in recent years. For Catholic parents especially, so also have Stonyhurst and Worth.

Like so many London prep schools, St Anthony's has had to adapt to a ruthless and rapidly changing world in which many pupils are under pressure to join junior departments of their senior schools aged 11, rather than hold off until 13. For many pupils, years 5 and 6 leading up to the 11+ is the time of maximum pressure. 'The heyday of common entrance feels quite distant at times,' says the head. 'But for those staying all the way, we make sure these last two years are the most enriched: to release the full academic potential of youngsters, and spice it up with the individuality which St Anthony's has always sought to foster.'

Our view

Taking children mainly at reception, the aim is to offer at once a broad and balanced curriculum. 'English and maths open up a whole world of learning,' says the head, 'and we want our pupils exploring all of it.' Science and ICT are there right at the start, but from year 1 there is French and Mandarin as well as everything else one would expect – history and geography, art and DT. Religious studies is also taught - but with an eye and an ear for pupils of all faiths and of none.

By the time pupils are 10 and have moved to the senior school, everybody studies Latin and there are after-school opportunities to do ancient Greek and Arabic as well. There's a specially equipped classroom for DT, as well as lashings of art, music and drama. 'We don't want any part in the reductionism in the curriculum one sometimes hears about,' says the head. 'Creativity is at the heart of the school.' There are also a host of out-of-school hobby

and discussion groups – philosophy and chess among them alongside the arts. 'My son has been given masses of opportunity in which to find his voice,' said one parent. Another added: 'The staff have a genuine love of learning, and are superb at communicating it.'

Because testing, in all its iterations, has become such a big feature of life for prep school children from the age of 10 or 11, St Anthony's deploys a range of tests (such as CAT4, PIPS and MiDYis) to acclimatise pupils. 'They are useful visitors,' says the head, 'but life here is dictated, first and last, by what we believe to be enriching in its own right. Dedicated Study Skills department – one full time teacher and one part time, and two of the TAs have special training. There are regular diagnostic assessments to identify anyone needing extra input.

All qualified teachers at St Anthony's – from the half dozen or so who have been there for over 20 years to the young Turks. Five TAs have recently studied for their PGCEs while working full time at the school. 'They are astonishingly dedicated,' says the head, 'and many are already academically highly qualified.' One parent, whose son had won a scholarship to a famous school, said what he liked most was that his son had felt 'inspired, rather than under pressure'.

Limited play areas (it is in the middle of Hampstead, after all), although it does have its own rather splendid swimming pool ('Thank God,' says one parent). Normal games see pupils take a 10 minute coach ride to Brondesbury playing fields. 'There's the odd day when traffic is a nightmare,' said a father. 'But they do well at getting them out at break and into the fresh air.' Since we last visited, a quiet revolution has taken place in the profile of sport, perhaps not unconnected with the appointment of outstanding sports teachers. Recent pupils include a boy who went on to captain the first XV at a major rugby-playing senior school, and two members of the Lawn Tennis Association. The main staples are football, rugby and hockey in winter and cricket and athletics in summer, but efforts are made to offer reasonable choice. Cross-country is enjoying a surge of popularity: 15 teachers ran a half marathon recently and another is an elite marathon runner. 'This level of commitment', says the head, 'rather rubs off on the pupils.'

The school is explicit that it wants all pupils physically literate, and there are competitive fixtures with other schools from year 4. 'They have to be fit enough to cope with life's assorted pressures,' says the head. Inevitably, 'some have to learn they are not always the best in the pack, but the idea is that everyone who wants to represent the school at sport can do so.' There is a clear underlying message here – for parents as much as for children: emotional resilience is all-important, and teamwork and games can, or should be, a significant part of the learning.

As always, masses of drama, music and art, with regular visits to museums, theatres and galleries. One of the head's early moves was to triple the number of music lessons, and the fact that the school also acquired a grand piano and built a new music studio left no doubt that he and the governors were dead set on protecting the school's reputation as a bastion of the creative arts. There's a full orchestra and a jazz orchestra, and the head of music allegedly claimed that every boy who finished his time at St Anthony's could take grade 5 theory in music – quite an achievement, if true.

Plays are performed annually – every pupil takes part in a play for their year group each Christmas and summer, and there are myriad further opportunities for performance - in designated school assemblies and so forth. There's also a major Shakespeare production

every year – the most recent (‘a triumph,’ said one parent) was Macbeth. Art is every bit as strong – a raft of student work has recently been gracing the Saatchi Gallery, and the walls of the school are filled with pupils’ latest creative output.

Founded in Victorian times, the school moved from Eastbourne to Hampstead in 1952, and was a family affair until recently – indeed, the present bursar is one of the founding family. It has long enjoyed the reputation for being ever-so-slightly alternative. ‘Terms like "wacky" and "bohemian" fall too easily from the lips,’ chuckled Mr Keyte. ‘Schools always spawn myths, and one myth is that it always used to be wackier than it is now – now being 30 years ago, 10 years ago, or here today.’ One parent said, ‘The place fosters individuality, but they also foster awareness of others. My sons’ friends at the school were all lovely kids.’

In fact, there is strong continuity: it’s less academically assertive than some of its competitors, and continues to invest huge time, as well as significant resources, in its arts and mixed curriculum. What is gently shifting is the extent to which it can compete, on all fronts, with the best. The plant is hugely impressive, there is a long waiting list and the staff are evidently completely committed. Taken over by Alpha Plus in 2009. ‘They’ve offered massive support – moral and material,’ says the head, ‘and through the links they offer to other schools. In academic, pastoral and administrative terms, we are part of a powerful shared network of understanding and best practice.’

Good local community links and endeavour, and energetic and impassioned fundraising. A particular charity to which the school has attached itself – Mary’s Meals – seeks to provide food for the neediest children all over the world, and pupils raised over £58,000 for the key school charities recently. ‘Not bad,’ says the head, ‘and it came from the heart, I assure you.’

The prevailing atmosphere is of calm – children always generate a degree of noise, but the motif is jolly rather than manic, and there was a laudable absence of rush around the classrooms and in the school canteen (the food is widely regarded as excellent). It may be a boys’ school, but it is blessedly short of that testy laddishness which serves to exclude rather than embrace. There is also a strong and experienced senior leadership team – of whom the bursar, head of junior school and academic deputy head are all women.

High ceilings and shrewdly-adapted Victorian buildings have managed to foster a sense of space and light. A school for all-comers, all types, and for all seasons. The sense of children at ease around the place is emphasised by the way they wear their uniform - a green and grey affair, which sits comfortably on them. The effect is to suggest an identity, and it’s easy to see it’s worn with pride – but, mercifully, without swagger. A big emphasis on kindness and tolerance. We heard teachers talking to classes and individual pupils, quite unaware that anyone was around, and the tenor was consistently one of calm benevolence. The payoff is obvious – the children seem remarkably patient and tolerant of one another. Very strong sense that the care of the children is anchored by affection and good sense.

A high-powered staff room - Oxbridge and doctorates all over the place – but school culture fosters collegiality among staff, and old hands willingly share best practice with newbies. Form tutors are the first point of contact for parents, and share concerns with senior teachers as well as with the pastoral deputy head. Stout denials from all parties that parents are anything other than strongly supportive. ‘We aim at prevention,’ said one long-serving teacher. ‘We encourage anyone – child or parent – to tell us if they’re worried or doubtful about something. It breeds trust, and it usually means stuff gets sorted out before it gets

difficult.' It seems to work too – the headmaster has, in all his years here, invoked the sanction of detention precisely twice.

Reports get sent home twice a year, and there are two annual parents' evenings, as well as a lot of informal meetings. 'We aim to be around,' says the head. 'A lot of goodwill is built up, and a great deal of information exchanged, simply by teachers being around – not least at the school gates.'

Pupil constituency is noticeably more European than many other schools of its kind - hardly surprising given that St Anthony's is the only all-boys Catholic prep school in north London, and hence a favoured destination for the many Spanish, French and Italian who live around here. It also won a string of 'outstanding' commendations in its recent diocesan inspection, which helped to cement its credentials with this particular parent body. On the other hand, it's also a mainstream Hampstead prep school, with lots of parents drawn from the professions, the media and the City. Some remarkable old alumni – David Suchet and Antony Gormley among the older generation; a more recent luminary is Jack Steadman of the indie band, Bombay Bicycle Club.

A very likeable school. Conscious of its individuality, but not in thrall to it. 'A nice balance of informality and old school,' said a parent. Smack in the middle of north London, it is championing values more abiding than merely those of fame and fortune. It achieves considerable success, but not by stepping over the bodies of others. As the head says: 'Working in a school isn't just for the glamour and the good times. The test of vocation comes when it's difficult.' The affection with which St Anthony's is viewed by parents and staff seems to suggest they, like the pupils, are only too glad to have bought into this wisdom.