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BRAMBLETYE

THE
GOOD
SCHOOLS
GUIDE

The Good Schools Guide Review 2016

Brambletye School



Lewes Road, East Grinstead, West Sussex RH19 3PD

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Ages: 2.5 -13

Pupils: 278; Boarders: 46 full, 31 weekly/flexi (from 7 years)

Fees: Day £8,130 - £22,305; Boarding: £26,580 - £27,195 pa

Headmaster: Since 2015, Will Brooks BA (Durham), in tweed and pink (Brambletye's colour). Started by teaching maths and English at Bruern Abbey, where he was promoted to deputy head, followed by two more deputy posts at Sunningdale and Port Regis; glad now to be in a cosy family school and determined to keep it that way: knows all the names, addresses groups with 'Hello rascals', and wants to extend childhood for as long as possible; encourages children to build dens in the woods, and when a child knocked on his door to say 'Come and see our den, we've just finished the second floor', did so with alacrity. ('Children need to make mistakes... but we're not reckless.')

Parents gush about Will and his wife Amelia: 'great having a younger team with loads of energy and ideas'; they've brought 'new vitality to school... really encourage the children.'

Pupils approve too: 'nice and fun', 'easy to talk to' and 'always involving us in his problems,' said one to general hilarity of the rest, clarified to 'he wants our opinions about things' (and indeed has changed homework in response to criticism from pupils).

Entrance: Light-touch assessment and interview.

Exit: Children depart for a wide range of destinations, with Hurst, Charterhouse, Ardingly, Bede's, King's Canterbury, Worth, Tonbridge, Eastbourne College and Bennett School all featuring recently. Head emphasises the importance of children flying into the right senior school in the middle or top of the cohort.

Our view: An old country retreat in the Sussex countryside with views over Ashdown Forest that stretch out into forever. Described by one parent who chose it over a place at a desirable London prep as a 'school in the woods' - 'How could any child not love it?... [there are] trees to play in...' Inside, panelled walls, wood fires, a strolling sausage dog (Hercules) and comfy sofas. A stately home with pupils lounging happily by the fire, as if they were at home; which of course they are, pupils telling us it feels like a 'big family'.

Academically 'a real mix of kids,' said a parent at the this lightly selective school. 'High

expectations,' said the head, 'but plenty of support if necessary.'

A pupil told us, 'It's different to other schools because the teachers help you so much,' another saying, 'You can give your opinion... a different opinion is not wrong.' Special praise for the maths teacher who 'makes it really clear', and for IT, a parent commenting, 'It could be desperate, but it's fun and creative.' The Latin teacher rewards full marks with a turn on the zipwire – an effective incentive for most.

'No one slacks in year 8,' said a pupil, 'you're too scared,' but the head makes no assumptions; he has introduced 'how to revise' for pupils to engage with what they know, don't know, and how to learn most effectively: 'They won't all be up all night before their finals when they're 21,' says the head ruefully.

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Smart new labs following a recent refurbishment, with the academic space to one side, practical to the other. Even newer is the library, plus art and debating chamber space.

Communication is 'excellent', say parents, with a new website, parent zone, and effort and attainment grades fortnightly. 'If a child gets a C3, a member of staff will call to discuss.'

A flexible approach to those with different needs – 'excellent to all its students,' said a parent, describing how her fidgety son in pre-prep was allowed to sit under his desk provided he would listen. 'Beautifully managed, no-one bats an eyelid.' A pupil of high ability with poor writing skills and a need to move around sits on a movement cushion (as do several others), has pencil toppers and wrist things on which to chew, is being taught touch typing, has a scribe in the meantime and is, said his mum, treated as an individual. Bored with history, he has been given a special project on WW1 propaganda and time to discuss it with the head of history. '[They] accept pupils as they are.'

Around 20 per cent of pupils have extra learning needs, and most learning support is free of charge, provided in small groups or in-class support. Where one-to-one support is necessary, this is charged as an extra.

It's a long day here, with day pupils being dropped off at 8am and picked up at 6pm, or

7.10pm if they have activities, but all work is completed at school (very popular with parents). Saturday school lessons recently replaced with a hearty breakfast followed by sport, a very popular move. 'Allows it to be a proper boarding school... keeps it alive at weekends,' said a parent.

'Strong, nurturing care – confidence building,' said a parent, describing how her nervous son has gained a natural sense of confidence through drama, music and giving presentations: another told us her children's senior schools have said children from Brambletye are 'not daunted'.

Changes to pastoral care under the current head. The traffic-light system moves pupils with pastoral needs to an amber light, which kick-starts a process with their tutor and gets parents involved. Tutors are 'very, very vigilant and know of children's niggles,' said a parent, but children can also speak to a school listener or a counsellor.

Generally 'children respect each other and are kind,' said a parent, fresh from helping with school trip to Lord's, but when there are problems between children ('not really bullying, but unkindness,' said a pupil), parents say they are dealt with quickly and thoroughly, one telling us her daughter's problems were dealt with 'sensitive and discreetly'. The school's approach, said a parent earnestly, is that the bully needs as much attention as the victim – they address the problem rather than handing out punishments. 'You're always given a second chance,' said a pupil.

Amelia is always standing outside to greet the children in the morning, notepad and pen in hand to jot down any concerns. 'I feel I can really trust the school – and thank God we're not in this alone as parents'.

Pupils take real pride in the house system with discipline minuses and credit pluses contributing to the inter-house contest – 'it really works, they take responsibility,' said a parent. Pupils get to know everyone in their house – 'younger pupils do talk to us about upsets... or just anything,' said a year 8.

Children are not allowed phones, and are not bothered. 'We manage time better without them,' said a pupil, but older children would like more daytime access to computers and email (windows and iPads are lesson specific). The head works hard to help pupils understand their digital footprint, recommending that if they wouldn't be happy to show their grandparents, they shouldn't post it.

No one goes hungry here – fruit is always available in the dining room, and 'grub' is available every evening until 8.30pm: toast, cereal, fruit, sandwiches. A parent told us how hard the school worked to help her fussy child to eat normally, emailing the parent every day with progress.

'Music and drama are exceptional,' said a parent, describing the musicals in the school

theatre as 'like West End productions' and an 'enormous pleasure'; another saying her child who didn't want to do a play was 'nearly jumping off the stage with enthusiasm'.

The standard of art here is exceptionally high for a prep school – 'amazing', said a parent, and they've had 180 art scholarships to senior schools in the last 20 years. 'Second to none, the teacher cares so much,' said a parent whose unartistic son is slowly developing confidence and enjoyment.

Sport every day for an hour, and activities on top of this, although an extremely musical child who wanted more practice time for a music scholarship was allowed time off games – no rules for rules' sake at this flexible school.

'Not so many to pick from [for teams] but we punch above our weight,' said a pupil, another adding, 'If you're good at sport it earns you enormous respect.'

Girls have been in both cricket and football teams, and the first girl on the rugby team apparently 'played a blinder' – but there's 'not been a boy in the rounders team,' said a parent thoughtfully (although all pupils play in inter-house rounders). Hockey is now included on the curriculum for boys, who will soon play their first fixtures.

Pre-prep is described by a parent as 'so nurturing... a really safe space to hold the children as they grow.' Pupils have a great affection for their exceptional head – 'Mrs Atkinson, I love you a lot,' said a child, arms flung around her knees, and it's the first head we've seen invited on a sleepover.

Golden leaves for kindness fill a tree in the entrance hall and jewels are handed out for good work. Lots of time outside, pupils wearing their all-weather muddy puddles. Growing boxes for each

year (for outdoor maths), plants in wellies, two enormous rabbits (Moonbeam and Paddington) and a proper hobbit hole. A jolly nursery filled with happy busy tines – 'George cries on the day he doesn't go to nursery', sighed a parent.

Boarding: A domestic and international boarding community includes pupils from Russia, France and Thailand. Flexi boarding is available from year 3, and is used by many local parents, who like to be able to just pop in to school. Years 7 and 8 have to choose between weekly boarding (opting in or out of weekends as they wish) or day; most board, with just three of year 8 remaining day pupils.

Dormitories for up to nine with bunk beds, old and quirky rooms for boys, a modern wing for girls, but all recently refurbished to a high standard. The most extraordinary views to wake up to. All dorms named after flowers and trees, and thank goodness for a school that doesn't think it detracts from boys' masculinity to sleep in Tulip.

Between 50 and 90 pupils stay at weekends, and enjoy trips out, such as go-karting or trampolining, or mucking around at school – a slope outside turns into a water slide in summer and snow slide on rugby tackle pads in winter.

The last word: The head says Brambletye wouldn't suit a child with a flat learning curve, or one who never gives anything back – they need to engage with what's on offer. Parents thought reserved children might struggle, but pupils said that shy children will develop confidence, one year 8 telling us she was 'quite timid' in year 4, but 'it's small, everyone is welcoming and you get used to school quickly'.