

Forest School review

Warden

Since 2016, Mr Marcus Cliff Hodges. No Damascene conversion to teaching – he ‘evolved into it,’ he says, after completing English degree (Cardiff) and Master’s (Institute of Education). Started here in 2005 as Head of Boys’ Senior School, became Deputy Warden 2014. Previously at Latymer Upper for nineteen years as Head of Middle School and Assistant Head, preceded by three years teaching English and drama at Bedford School, his second post after starting his teaching career (English and outdoor education leader) in the early 1980s at Gstaad International School.

While his attractive study in one of the oldest School buildings radiates tradition, Mr Cliff Hodges has presided over considerable change. Move from diamond model to co-ed in 2022 brings School into line with competitors, though the 14 houses will stay single sex for the time being. School’s rationale – that life is co-ed and ‘no recognised research ... shows single-sex teaching leading to better outcomes,’ makes ‘evolutionary sense,’ says the School.

Some parents would have liked greater consultation, but most have taken it in their stride. Felt to be far better, too, for any pupil with gender dysphoria. Worries about friendships and lesson dynamics quickly allayed. ‘Lessons could be an echo chamber...now you can have a wider discussion,’ ‘Feels like going from the anomaly to the norm,’ pupils told us.

Mr Cliff Hodges’ priorities include strengthening pastoral care, overhauling the curriculum and honing teaching skills so lessons are uniformly dazzling.

A diligent attender at events, he’s ‘very good at steering the ship,’ says a parent and much praised by pupils and staff for a confidence-inspiring approach that encourages everyone to speak their mind. Having heard pupils’ forthright and mature comments on every aspect of school life, we’d agree whole-heartedly.

Mr Cliff Hodges ‘trusts [staff] to make a decision but catches [them] if needed... will hold you to account without pushing you down a particular path,’ says a member of staff. Above all, he’s ‘a very good human.’

Lives next door to the School and gives up his life to it during term time. ‘I work on the basis that it’s 24/7 with a bit of time on Sunday to switch off.’

Prep head

Since 2017, Mr James Sanderson (FRSA, FCCT). Former opera singer (with a wonderfully mellifluous voice) who moved into teaching when he’d performed just about every operatic role that interested him. He started at the Senior School as Director of Music – appropriately, he and the School ‘just chimed’ – before becoming a Deputy Head in the Senior School and moving across to Prep in his current role. Best bit of the job? Younger children’s evident ‘fascination with learning something new.’

Entrance

At 4+ (48 places) the School looks for ‘sparky’ children ‘who can do all the things you’d expect and a little bit more’, (though reckon can spot those who have been intensively tutored a mile off). They’re asked questions like, ‘What would happen if we had chocolate rain,’ or ‘If a frog could speak, what would you ask it?’ No right or wrong answers but the ability to give an opinion and work well with others won’t come amiss.

At 11+, almost every Forest prep pupil goes straight into year 7 (no longer a 13+ entry point from 2023). Parents of the very few who would struggle are told early – no nasty shocks – and this is extremely rare. Around 140 places to external candidates, increasingly from state primaries although majority currently from independent preps, selected by interview, reference, maths and English assessments. At Sixth Form, 20-25 external places – minimum three GCSE grades at seven and three sixes plus entrance exam and interview.

Exit

Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham and Queen Mary’s London were popular destinations in 2022. Though STEM subjects top the list, English, law, languages, drama and music also feature as well as apprenticeships to Deloitte and Ernst and Young. Three to Cambridge, one to Yale. Twelve places for medicine and related degrees.

Latest results

In 2022, 86 per cent of GCSE results were graded 9-7; 67 per cent A*/ A (85 per cent A*-B) at A level. In 2019 (the last pre-pandemic results), 75 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 35 per cent A*/A at A level (66 per cent A*-B).

Teaching and learning

Pre-Prep pupils have a ‘magical’ start to learning, in classes of 16 (rising to 24 in the Prep) a creative curriculum and regular lessons in the woodland classroom, complete with own pond and (Epping) forest and, on our visit, an ornate carved chair, a leftover prop – appropriately – from a production of *Midsummer’s Night Dream*.

Pupil-centric approach continues in the Prep School where, instead of ‘shoving tiny bits of information at [children],’ says the School, there are three key humanities lessons a week that embrace big topics like ‘why England has become a target for invaders,’ and themes like power, religion and money (economics is now taught from year 3).

Prep pupils praise everything from decolonised history (work on display included touching imagined letters from Windrush new arrivals) to hands-on engineering – making catapults, engines, and scale model prosthetic limbs with string and paper tendons.

School’s learning approach – ‘inquiring, problem solving, respectful,’ came across loud and clear. Only Prep School Mandarin, with its single weekly lesson, came in for flak. ‘Either have it three times a week or kill it off and give us French,’ said a pupil. School points out that ‘not uncommon to have only one MFL lesson in primary phase.’

From year 7, the pace accelerates with most pupils taking ten GCSEs (only maths is set) and an original research option provided by a junior version of popular Sixth Form EPQ. Classes average 20 up to year 11, dropping to 10 post-16, with an overall teacher to pupil ratio of just over one to eight.

We saw exciting, fast-paced lessons, including an investigation by year 7 science pupils into biscuit disintegration in tea (custard creams best for structural integrity).

Timetable, a logistical marvel, squashes most sport and activities into the school day to reduce late journeys home. Largely prep-free holidays must come as a relief all round. Helps to be organised – heavy-ish laptop must be carted to and from school – and anyone falling behind is quickly identified, thought parents, teachers responding swiftly to concerns. ‘Just email them [...] and they will email straight back,’ says a parent.

Where academic support is needed, School will involve parents and consider mental health as well as results. It’s effective, with the 20 or so year 11 pupils whose GCSE grades need a bit of a boost dropping to just three or four by the time the exams take place.

By Sixth Form, interest, enjoyment and aptitude, stressed in big letters on the website, are what it’s all about – School will weigh in if parents are exerting undue influence over the 28 A-level choices. Sciences, maths and economics among the favourites but if just one student signs up (as with textiles, German and Greek in 2022) the course will run.

Most take three A levels, four with further maths. Everyone is expected to drill deep into their subjects, attending Lookout lectures with speakers like David Lammy MP and topics including abolition of private schools, completing university level courses and a compulsory EPQ, recent topics exploring the impact of the abolition of the Motion Picture Production Code on film portrayals of lesbians in the US.

Pupils emerge, says the School, as ‘informed, proficient, experienced and aware young citizens...’ They can also cook and iron, courtesy of the Forest Diploma, which adds a handy layer of practical skills to the substantial academic component.

Like pupils, teachers throw themselves into life here, including weekends. ‘Saturday is my favourite working day,’ says one, with impressive sincerity. Steady stream moving on for promotion (Deputy Warden was just about to take up first headship when we visited) but many long stayers – average is five years and 90 staff members have managed 10 years or more.

School is comfortable in its own skin – pupils likewise. Sticks to its guns (despite requests, Prep reports don’t show where pupils are in relation to their peers to avoid invidious comparisons). Exam grades hardly budged during the pandemic when other schools made full use of the chance to mark their own homework. Not all families happy. ‘We did have parents asking why we weren’t playing the game,’ says the Warden, who points out that ‘post-pandemic exam results are the best in the School’s history.’

Remains unashamedly high-flying, with on-message parents who have perfect recall of its aims. It’s about ‘aspiration for everyone,’ said one. Others cited our previous description of the School as ‘an academic powerhouse’ with approval.

Arts and extra-curricular

School recommends that every pupil ‘dives deep into Forest’ – and with so much on offer, it would be rude not to.

Prep pupils take part in well-received productions like *Bugsy Malone* and can join (sometimes oversubscribed) clubs including ballet, cheerleading and street jazz. Two clubs a day not uncommon, with sports and music/choir tours a much-anticipated delight (mostly happen in year 6).

Senior School pupils can opt for existing clubs – chess to air cadets, queer lit[erature] to cheerleading, or set up their own. Choirs, bands and orchestras cater for every skill level and taste, with visiting instrumental specialists whisking the 550 pupils taking individual lessons through their grades. Pupil favourite, ‘Live Lounge’, features performances by years 10-12, unamplified smartphones that often make backing tracks inaudible to the audience all part of the ambiance. Drama team notable for ambitious productions – recent glitzy production (with music department) of *Barnum* involved almost 200 pupils.

Whole-hearted commitment to the local community ranges from donations to Food Bank Fridays, while every Sixth Former donates time to the local community. Outreach programme involves 50 local schools and a high achieving Sixth Form college and a partnership with the Hackney Empire, helping hundreds of Hackney’s local children (including Forest pupils) to build arts-related, employer-friendly skills.

Sport

Football remains the big event (growing concerns over head injuries make rugby a non-starter) but doesn’t overshadow other sports – hockey, athletics, football and cricket for all (girls also have netball).

Excellent facilities – good enough for 2012 GB Olympians – are a dealmaker for many prospective families, with extras such as fitness and conditioning offered to sports stars. Main campus is home to cricket pitch as well as the Sylvestrian Leisure Centre, a deluxe exercise palace with two swimming pools, sports hall and fitness suite that’s used by the public (separate entrance) out of school hours.

Second large, impressive area, a short yomp from the school through Epping Forest (sturdy footwear on open day essential) is the venue for most matches. Boasts own postcode, numerous pitches (two multi-use), running and mountain bike trails and several fox families (all netting rolled up after play so cubs can’t get entangled). No floodlights, however - vetoed by local residents.

While sport is compulsory for all, team games even in year 7 aren’t, and inclusion is a big feature. Director of Sport’s goal is for pupils to be ‘playing recreational sport in their thirties,’ a worthy aspiration, although mechanism for data gathering somewhat unclear.

Express enthusiasm, try your hardest and you’ll be down for a match, ‘even [with] two left feet,’ says parent. With teams extending to Es, Fs and even Gs, fixtures involve around three quarters of the School and early Saturday starts. ‘With the fun of the journey and lunch as well as the

game, it's like a school trip,' says uncomplaining parent. Manners matter – touchline interference isn't tolerated (in contrast to what a parent described as 'foghorn shouting,' from opposition coaches).

Girls' sports kit re-designed so works for anyone with body image issues and has increased participation. Girls' football (offered as a club) and cricket are both growing, though with just nine girls' football squads to boys' 37, it's a work in progress. Ditto mixed teams – though cricketers have achieved first tournament victory. Individual successes span everything from dressage to go-karting.

House competitions, like sport, are about contribution as well as the conquest. Applause at Pre-Prep and Prep swimming galas often loudest for 'the child who's taking longest,' says parent. The message is that successful or otherwise, 'you've contributed to your house's success.'

History and Ethos

'Down to earth, friendly, diverse,' say parents. Takes itself seriously but not as po-faced as current School website (big on clunky truisms like 'Forest School knows its pupils and knows itself') might suggest – though makeover will – hurrah – include 'a touch of levity,' says the Warden.

And there's a lot to smile about, given the 50 acres of grounds, brilliant sports facilities and – yes – plenty of fun. Visit (public transport recommended as parking is 'horrendous') and you'll see a school that doesn't hide behind marketing gloss. Pupil tour guides tell it like it is on open days, say parents.

After starting off as Exeter College in 1830, the School was re-founded in 1834 as Forest Proprietary Grammar School with 22 boys and boarders, adding new buildings as it grew, from the 18th century main entrance to the Victorian chapel and vaulted dining hall, design also reflecting the school's pre-Raphaelite connections (William Morris' father was a School founder).

Extensive 20th and 21st century additions include assorted red-brick contemporary classroom blocks and some quirky touches. We liked the terrace of tiny shepherd's hut-style buildings, for each head of house, tucked into the shadow of taller, older buildings, and the US style diner, a weekly lunchtime treat, for senior and prep school pupils.

Some buildings are functional rather than fancy (Sixth Form block, with rows of sofas and a slight waiting room vibe a case in point), and designers were presumably thinking of aesthetics rather than young readers' elbows when they blessed gorgeous, airy main library with echoey hard floors (carpet is 'on our wish list every year' says librarian), ambiance further enhanced by the occasional crash from (sprung) dance studio on the floor above. 'Year 3s can be surprisingly loud,' we were told.

Nothing but praise, however, for the ultra-modern Prep School completed during the pandemic and created, Jonah and the whale fashion, by swallowing the old Prep whole (though not spitting it out), 'building a carapace round the building and infilling on the way down,' says School. White with pops of vibrant orange inside and faced in sustainable wood without, there's not a join in sight. Stand-out space is its roof terrace with an enviable panorama of London's skyline, prep playground by day, ideal events space by night.

SEN

Well organised SEN department with one junior and one senior SENCo, latter highly praised by parents – ‘amazing’ and ‘accessible, responsive, collaborative,’ who describes the School community as ‘accepting of all sorts of personalities who tend to find their own path through.’ One pupil with autism comfortable enough to talk about experiences here.

However, this is a fast-paced environment and pupils ‘have to keep up in lessons.’ No mass screening for learning differences but will usually pick up undiagnosed ADHD and ASD in years 7 or 8, sometimes later for dyslexia. Will work with external therapists and have also supported pupils with visual and hearing impairment (though no loop systems and not set up for Brailleists).

Will support where financially/logistically viable, though no child currently has an EHCP – so far, the level of provision required has been too extensive. There are no class-based teaching assistants in the Senior School, for example, so one-to-one support isn’t an option.

Pupil passports circulated to staff outline support needs and there’s extensive help with study skills – organising work, making notes and revision guides, for example. A few pupils might take one less GCSE or – in rare cases – two rather than three A levels. Range of clubs – board games to develop social skills (year 7) and several invitation-only literacy clubs (support for reluctant readers; challenge for very able). Library serves as safe space for some neurodiverse pupils. Support is, however, child led. ‘Have to grasp it – they’re not going to drag a child there,’ says parent.

Wellbeing

Children are ‘at the centre of all [the School] does,’ says the School, confirmed by parents. Prep pupils eat in the main dining hall and are mentored by Senior School pupils at break while year 7 and 8 pupils have many of their lessons in the same teaching block – conveniently close to the traditional tuck shop.

Support children in hospital or those with an absent parent - regular wellbeing survey helps identify anyone who may be struggling.

Fleet-footed, too, in difficult situations, involving outside bodies like CAMHS where needed. After a tragic pupil death, talked appropriately to pupils of every age, not shying away from tough questions. ‘Don’t cloak in secrecy...it takes away the rumours,’ says parent. Plenty of nice, small touches too, like offering energy boosting bananas to A level candidates on exam days.

Pupils, encouraged to raise issues from Black Lives Matter to climate change, can talk to form tutor, head of house or head of section (or any other teacher if preferred). The few niggles from the pupils we spoke to were mainly food-focused – better storage for halal and more nutritious ‘grab and go’ options at lunchtime featured on wish lists.

School invites recent leavers to sit on youth advisory panel, focussing on diversity, inclusion, and wellbeing, while parents – keen for greater involvement – are recruited as critical friends. Results in an impressively open (and not even slightly defensive) discussion around tricky, tie-yourself-in-knots issues, like how to make the listed chapel – positioned as a free-from-proselytising

multi-faith space but packed with Christian iconography – less off-putting to the many pupils from different faiths, or the contradiction between determination to value every pupil's success and the ever-increasing honour boards that record only sunny uplands of top university offers. While staff stress that, 'It's not about how many medics and Oxbridge [places] [we get] it's about everything else,' there seems to be some way to go before this is embedded in school ethos. Watch this (gilt-lettered) space for developments.

Lose one or two pupils a year, usually because of intractable bad behaviour or 'online misbehaviour' always preceded by substantial attempts to bring them back into the fold. 'Only one drug-related expulsion in the past five years,' says Mr Cliff Hodges, who stresses that 'other already full independent schools are reluctant to take pupils whose offence has been particularly corrosive to the school community.'

Parents and pupils

School attracts families from north and east London, and out into Essex and Herts. Some first-time buyers, many professionals, huge diversity, with pupils spanning 45 nationalities and speaking over 50 languages including Welsh, Letzeburgesch and Amharic (though all are 'highly proficient' in English).

WhatsApp groups, genuinely useful and 'not just about lost socks,' bring families together, as does daily family breakfast club – attendance highest on pancake Fridays.

Website quaintly describes pupils as '[to a] young man and young lady ... very well aware that he or she is learning about and being prepared for life outside the classroom.' Pupils emerge, they say, as 'real people,' all-rounders who achieve academically and are also 'individuals who people remember,' – those we spoke to, at every age, were articulate, fearless and interested in the world around them.

Prospective parents are wowed, in addition to results and green spaces, by pupils' lack of entitlement and good manners – they rush to open doors and pick up dropped possessions on open days, we were told (though giving way to adults, even the Warden, wasn't universal during The GSG visit).

In addition to RSC star Paapa Essiedu, the School has also produced actors Ella Purnell and Nicola Walker and comedian Eshaan Akbar, several overs-worth of cricketers including Nasser Hussain, politicians (Brandon Lewis, Ersin Tatar, president of the Turkish Republic Cyprus and Sir Stephen Gomersall), historians (Richard Evans and Richard Holmes). Also, Geoffrey Wellum, youngest battle of Britain fighter pilot and Edward Atkinson, surgeon on the Scott Antarctic expedition.

Money matters

Scholarships offer maximum glory but minimal money off the fees as bursaries and assisted places grow – reserved for families in genuine need, not those 'who, with reasonable financial and personal sacrifices, could have otherwise afforded paying the full fees.' Two bursaries offered to children in care and young carers, also support a Ukrainian pupil.

The last word

Flourishing, successful and well-led school in a glorious, green setting with consistently strong results that don't require pupils to sacrifice happiness or wellbeing on the way to achieving them. A must-see option for parents wanting an education that's so genuinely rounded you could make hoops from it.