

Good Schools Guide 2014: St Laurence School (from Good Schools Guide website)

Since 2013, Fergus Stewart (early 50s), a chemist by academic discipline, with an MA from Oxford and a PGCE from Nottingham. Despite the Scots name, upbringing and colouring, Mr Stewart has spent most of his career in Wiltshire, latterly as deputy head of Nova Hreod (no, it's not a misprint) school in Swindon, before moving to 'that good school that I'd always been aware of in the corner of the county'.

An unequivocal believer in comprehensive education, Mr Stewart expresses his two key aims for his school to be academic excellence for all and the development of well-rounded young people – and holding those in tension. So does he achieve it? Ask parents, and you will find a pretty satisfied lot: 'Thrilled, blown away by it', said one mother with sons with very different needs. 'It shames the private schools'. Everyone we spoke to had chosen the school over local independents and state options. Mr Stewart has gone down well with these same parents, who find him approachable, receptive to suggestions and, crucially, quick to respond to concerns raised with him. We found him very much on-message (as befits a new head), but we did uncover a fisherman, a runner and a walker not averse to enlivening his peregrinations with a pub lunch. Mr Stewart is married with cats, two children at university and one at school.

Curriculum is predominantly broad and academic, offering GCSEs and more than 20 subjects at A level, but there are vocational options such as BTecs in a few subjects and ESPE (employability skills and personal effectiveness) which helps the less academic with pre-16 education and training. 'We teach the classes in front of us,' says Mr Stewart, though the raw material at entry is more promising than at many comprehensives. Results at A level have risen markedly over the last three years: a 15 per cent rise in A*/B to current high of 57 per cent in 2013. 'My boy was very happy at the school and came out with his three A's', said one delighted mum of an undergraduate.

A slightly bumpier ride at GCSE, where percentage of EBacc passes has fallen recently, attributable possibly to harder marking or weaker candidates. Extra English and maths teaching has just been brought into year 11 to address this. In 2013, 62 per cent of pupils got 5+ A* - C grades including English and maths. Teaching staff come in for high praise: 'encouraging, supportive, they clearly enjoy what they do, committed – volunteering to help strugglers in their own time, very good at understanding individual children, particularly the problematic ones' were some of the comments made to us by parents; 'they are incredibly proud of the school,' adds the head. Their commitment is evident by the long list of revision and catch-up sessions laid on in the 3-2-5 sessions after school. Clear expectations are set, and individual targets recorded in possibly the best student diary we have ever seen, equipped with the periodic table, a world map and a trigonometry crib sheet. Only irregular verbs and musical notation were missing.

For the first year, teaching is done in mixed ability sets, but maths and languages are set from year 8. SEN provision and care is highly rated, where the balance between those needs and other students' progress is finely struck.

St Laurence is known locally for its music, as the Wiltshire Music Centre is built in its grounds and the school has day time use of its excellent facilities: 'the finest acoustics outside London', apparently. Some musicians achieve diplomas before they leave; music is timetabled. When we visited, two St Laurence girls had just won the Amnesty Young Songwriter competition – sadly, technical difficulties and time constraints meant we did not see it performed, but we were treated to the wonderful GCSE dance display which was that day's house assembly. Productions range from Hamlet to Joseph, via Les Mis, and include less formal and highbrow events, such as the 70s gig night.

Sport also prominent: rugby, netball, hockey, football and athletics the main ones, but also HRE (health-related exercise), for the ball-phobes, presumably. A national swimmer and skier among current students. Advantage also taken of nearby river Avon for rowing, and as training ground (water?) for Olympic and European kayaking champions Ed McKeever and Hannah Brown. Staff also don their whites on occasion, taking on Prior Park at cricket – and winning.

Art comes as part of a rolling programme with design and technology; parents like the range of opportunities younger pupils experience, such as cookery and textiles, 'where boys are free to explore things which might be

considered a female preserve', as one mother put it. There was certainly a selection of smelly boys' shoes outside the dance studio. The new Mac suite is also 'as good as anything you would find at a private school,' opined the same lady. Extracurricular activities are many and varied, much taking place off site and at weekends, such as D of E, Ten Tors, a ski trip (where staff have gone to considerable lengths to include at least one pupil with SEN), French and German exchanges every year, plus a practical building trip to Romania with a local charity, a spiritual trip to India and World Challenge to Nepal.

Very much the town school of the charming, historic and prosperous town of Bradford-on-Avon, with its honey-coloured buildings tumbling down to the river (we could get quite carried away), and determined to remain at the centre of the community; each September the school holds a street party for all residents. Built in the 70s from an amalgam of previous schools on a site at the top of the town, where there is still a fine Roman mosaic floor buried under the sports pitches – seems a pity. As the town's only secondary school, there is a very inclusive feel about the place, appreciated by parents and students alike. A heartening initiative is the pairing of children with special needs with abler companions on an away-day, all of whom can miss a day in the classroom without detriment, or (better) to their mutual benefit. 'The staff have really stuck with my daughter who has ADHD,' said one mum. The Christian ethos of the school is apparent – it is a Church of England school - and the head's personal faith is clearly important to him, but regular church-going plays no part in the admissions process. Neither is it touchy-feely to the exclusion of real endeavour and winning, whether places at Oxbridge/Russell group, on the rugby pitch or eventing at nearby Stonar – but all achievement is celebrated. Despite its ancient setting, the buildings are largely unremarkable, with the exception of the new Moulton maths block, named for its benefactor, local cycle manufacturer Moulton Bicycle Company, which boasts the latest eco-wizardry, including a turf roof.

Very much a place where achievement is talked up, and positive reinforcement rules. Vivos (sic) – an electronic points system - are awarded for good work, mannerly behaviour and everything one would wish to encourage, then totted up and go towards house totals for ceremonies at the end of term. We heard very little about discipline from anyone. The vertical tutor groups were universally praised – as well as offering support to younger students, one parent suggested that they also reduce bullying, as bullies would not want to be known as such by their tutor group and risk consequent disapproval. Tutors appear to play a more meaningful role here than many who bear that overused title, and teachers praised for knowing children as individuals.

Representative of the town and surrounding (affluent) villages. A lower than average percentage of children on free school meals and predominantly white, but, as the head points out, the absence of notorious estates in Bradford-on-Avon does not mean an absence of pupils with difficult home circumstances. 'We try to reach less confident parents who find negotiating herds of middle class parents very daunting', says he. When asked to describe a typical St Laurence student, he replied, 'Terrific, in terms of sociability, openness and enthusiasm.' We will have to take his word for it, as we met but two of them when we visited.

At 11, 220 places applicants mostly from five local primary schools, but a significant number from outside the catchment area, including some from local prep schools; oversubscribed. As an academy, the admissions policy is set by the governors but applications are made through Wiltshire LA. Transition arrangements highly praised. At sixth form, applications are made direct to the school: five GCSEs at grade C or above including English and maths are required, four for BTec courses. All hopefuls are interviewed at the school.

About a third after GCSE, the majority of those to further education. Negligible, if any, fall-out at year 8 when children could go to local independents at 13+. 'We didn't even consider it,' said one mother who might perhaps have wavered at year 7. In 2013, three-quarters of sixth form leavers went straight to university (a percentage which has risen inexorably in the last few years), about a sixth took a gap year, the rest to college, employment or apprenticeships. Famous former students are mostly sportsmen and women, in rugby and water sports.

Lots of extras on offer, such as trips, for which parents pay, but amounts seem very reasonable, payment terms are long and gradual and anyone likely to experience difficulty is encouraged to say so at the earliest opportunity. Very active parents' association, which, as a registered charity, maximises its revenues by tapping the CSR resources of

parents' employers, as well as dealing with second hand uniform and holding fund-raising events to provide extras, such as special effects for drama and data-logging equipment for the science labs.

Comprehensive education does not get much better than this. Parents in a position to choose from the entire range of education on offer in the UK choose St Laurence. If you live locally, why look anywhere else?