

The Good Schools Guide review of St Augustine's Priory

Head

Since 2012, Mrs Sarah Raffray BA (English and Latin, Manchester) MA (literature and modernity, Salford), 40s. With a career, seemingly, purpose-built for this post, Mrs Raffray is universally praised. She inherited a school with a venerable tradition but a recent, prolonged and very public upheaval accompanied by a mass exodus. It is a tribute to her energetic, frank and warm approach that the school is in such good heart and that it merits this, its first inclusion in The Guide. She knew what she was doing when she came here - 'I almost didn't apply but I had an "if not you, who?" moment and I absolutely believe in Catholic education, with a 21st century resonance. Unless you encourage people to sit still, go deeper and challenge things, everything becomes superficial.'

From St Mary's, Shaftesbury, where she'd been deputy head, Mrs Raffray had previously taught at St Mary's, Cambridge (head of sixth form) and St Bede's, Manchester. All good Roman Catholic schools and providing solid experience for taking on St Augustine's - less well-known than her earlier schools but, under her aegis, this is set to change - and not just in the locality. Not least among her achievements is the unity and community she plainly fosters - her parents tell us: 'she has recruited many, really outstanding, teachers'; 'she is a figurehead with real presence'; 'a dedicated leader'; 'she walks the playground - it's good to see the boss of the shop at the door and she's not afraid to deal with difficult things...all her changes are good - she now needs to be even more ambitious'.

No fear of failing in that department. Lots of new initiatives and a wholesale upgrading of staff. She is relaxed, easy to talk to and very open. "I can't bear the idea of a 'safe' sixth form - we need to look after people but we need to be edgy too.... We're not afraid to say we got it wrong but we're learning all the time... ." One of the best appointments we have seen for years.

Academic Matters

Small classes. A pervasive air of orderliness and atmosphere of quiet study. Pupils pay tribute to the outstanding teaching, especially of many newer appointees - 'they are real experts in their subjects,' enthuse parents. Range of subjects respectable but not huge - as you'd expect from a small school. IGCSEs now taken in all sciences, modern languages and English. Russian on offer, as well as Spanish and French. Ambition shown in the arrival of additional maths on the GCSE curriculum. Very good results in, especially, art, English and Latin GCSEs, biology and physics IGCSEs. In all, 54 per cent A*/A grades. A level results suffer from too many post-GCSE leavers but that is changing. Only one A* in 2015 (Japanese) and 17 per cent A*/A grades in total, but the retention of academic high-flyers in the current sixth should see changes here. Around 50 per cent fewer leavers in the 2015-6 cohort than the previous year - the Raffray ambition taking effect - but more still needing to be done. Girls would like thinking skills or critical thinking lessons. But the sixth form is ripe for expansion and we are confident that, given another year or two and the school's reputation growing as it must, they will be turning girls away.

Good learning support from f/t SENCo plus f/t learning support/literacy teacher and much p/t help from subject staff and a dyscalculia expert. Parents of dyslexics appreciative of the support their daughters receive - 'my daughter outperformed all expectations and will now get a great crop of

A levels - we never dreamed it'd be possible'. EAL also supported. School flexible over GCSE subjects when SEN hinders achievement - 'They let my daughter stop French - which she was never going to get. So sensible!' And all parents we spoke to praised the value added to their daughters' academic aspirations by the culture of the school. Some sense that the extra-bright could be stretched more but this, too, is on the way with a new Oxbridge group - open to all aspirants - from year 10 up. Also, blow-up pics of successful former pupils around the place, pour encourager... Despite improving academics, this school is not striving to be another league-table topper and quite right too.

Games, Options, the Arts

With sports fields like nothing we have seen elsewhere in London, St Augustine's is uniquely privileged. And they're not just extensive but quite beautiful. Good new Astro used for team sports and athletics. Unsurprisingly, PE is a GCSE and A level subject. Much praise for new head of sport and team - 'a new energy,' said a parent. Hockey, netball and lacrosse on offer plus fitness and taekwondo. Matches played with enthusiasm. D of E is popular and girls rave about their trips eg skiing in Switzerland and Bulgaria, geography trips to eg Iceland and to Morocco where they helped build a girls' boarding school.

We were impressed, again, by the enthusiasm displayed in the art and photographic studios - much experimentation, colour and free expression in textiles, paint and modelling. Pupil art well-displayed in every corridor. Lots of musical activities too - choirs and ensembles and all backed, now, by tip-top equipment - IT etc - and super large music room. Carol concert held in nearby Ealing Abbey. School badly needs an all-purpose hall (and will, eventually, get one) but drama and music thrive notwithstanding and the chapel lends its own peculiar magic to events. Much success in eg Young Enterprise, Youth Speaks, Youth Games, maths challenges and various writing competitions and a sense of striving for achievable goals.

Background and Atmosphere

The school was founded in 1634 by Mother Lettice Mary Tredway CRL (1595 –1677) a canoness regular and abbess who, together with Miles Pinkney (Father Carré), founded a monastery for the English members of her Order in Paris. A pension for English ladies and a school were attached to the new monastery, of which Tredway was abbess till 1675, when illness compelled her to resign. The priory survived, along with the school attached to it, until the French Revolution, when the English canonesses were forced to flee. They returned home, where they were able to live out their life as a religious community. Eventually the community established itself as St Augustine's Priory in Ealing and the school has occupied its, rather wonderful and surprising, present site since 1915.

It's tucked into a corner off the North Circular as it rises to meet the A40, yards from the unlovely Hanger Lane Gyrotory System - as the monster roundabout is grandiosely named. From the front, the school looks a hotchpotch of brick and pebbledash buildings of no particular distinction. However, surprises await. From the back of the building, the view over 13 acres of fields to the spread of the capital is astonishing. There are gardens, an apple orchard, a prayer garden, chicken runs, many mature and beautiful trees and the whole thing is, literally, an oasis. You don't hear the traffic, you just relax into this beautiful space. Many of the school rooms look over this - most notably, the exceptionally well-appointed sixth form common room and the art studio

at the top of the building. The rear of the building also surprises - its monastic principles clear in the pastiche Norman windows, the row of windows on the floor above which would have been those of the nuns - now gone - and the simple cruciform architecture - more obvious when you walk the school itself.

'It feels like the countryside,' as a parent said. It also feels like a village community - lots of Old Girls and staff send their daughters here. Junior school occupies building at one end of the site - with its own meadow and nursery playground. Little demarcation between the junior and senior schools - seen as a plus by some while others feel there should be more of a 'step up' up at 11. Junior school itself is lovely - lively, imaginative activities with some pleasing mess (we hate sanitised nurseries) and happy, occupied children. Very orderly classrooms for older children and an air of productive purpose throughout.

We have seldom visited a school with so powerful a sense of commitment amongst its community. It's small - too small for a few - but the girls know each other and the strengthening of houses and inter-year activities are helping. Lovely features like the new outside theatre, the willow tunnels constructed by 'amazingly inventive groundsman' and a feeling that 'anyone who comes up with a good idea gets encouragement and, if need be, funding'. Lack of a proper school hall felt by everyone, but 15-year development plan in the offing should sort this as well as provide other much-needed facilities. All classrooms have names of saints or worthies - Thomas Aquinas houses science, St Cecilia music etc. Tuck shop and two refectories - modern, bright and with 'excellent' food. Whole school now bristles with new PCs.

Much of the interior is nondescript, though all is in good order - clean and spruce. But the chapel - even to heathens like your reviewer - is a source of pleasure. With balcony, vaulted roof, splendid marble columns and altar, and white walls, this Douai-inspired centre of the school life induces reflection and calm. Monday assemblies and three-weekly mass for each year held here. Little Muslim prayer room, but that this is a Roman Catholic school is inescapable. Life-sized statues of saints, crucifixes, pictures and pious posters and messages are everywhere, yet under half the school population is RC and not all those are practising. However, RC values underpin the school's teaching and the girls we spoke to were comfortable with the ethos, and felt the ethos of community and equality will stay with them when they leave. No-one felt oppressed by it.

Pastoral care, well-being and discipline

Very few problems. Some legacy of past difficulties persists but, as with everything here, a sense that Mrs Raffray and her team are on top of it and there is little left to do. 'We have changed our bullying policy. There are clear sanctions.' Impressive new deputy has pastoral role among others. Universal praise for pastoral care and equipping the girls for the wider world: 'The school allows them to stay as children in an environment which wants them to grow up too early,' a parent told us. 'There are lots of leadership programmes and a growing sense of boldness and confidence.' 'Our daughters are very happy.' Big Sister/Little Sister buddying between sixth form and year 7 newbies. Before and after-school care.

Pupils and Parents

Roman Catholics (around 42 per cent of school's population) from Ealing and surrounds. Further 20 per cent are other Christians. Culturally and ethnically diverse, as you'd expect in this part of

London - lots of Asians and mixed race families. Strong community holds all together. Middle class, professional families. Mostly from local primaries. School runs a minibus from Chiswick. No identikit pupil. Says head, 'The school has a tradition of accommodating girls who want to be different.' We met nothing but relaxed, articulate, smiley girls.

Entrance

Ealing is well-served by good local state primaries - many of them RC. Nursery and reception places available but waiting lists now in years 3 and 4. Few places in years 5 and 6. At 11+, 60+ apply for c12 places via exam and interview. Places available for year 12. However, all this is set to change. This school is now a player and, notwithstanding the good local state provision, the school's site and, now its academics and inclusive culture - along with the outstanding pastoral care and community feel - will drive custom. Get in quick.

Exit

Latterly a sizeable exit post-GCSE to state RC heavyweights, and local co-eds. That is set to change. All 18+s to higher education, mostly to good universities to read proper subjects. No Oxbridge in recent years but we met some impressive current candidates and would confidently predict success.

Money Matters

Fees appreciably lower than those of local competitors. Worthwhile discounts for siblings. Academic/sports/music awards at 11+. Academic awards at 16+. All worth 10-20 per cent discount on fees. Bursaries for existing students in case of need.

Our View

We came away with a bottle of their home-grown and pressed apple juice. And much more you couldn't bottle. The school for which the cliché A Hidden Gem was invented. However, it won't remain hidden for long under inspirational leadership.