

St Augustine Priory

What The Good Schools Guide says

Head

Since 2012, Sarah Raffray BA (English and Latin, Manchester) MA (literature and modernity, Salford) (40s). Knows more than most about Catholic schools having taught at St Mary's Cambridge, St Bede's and St Mary's Shaftesbury, where she was deputy head; governor at Farleigh School and Stonyhurst, where her son was a pupil. 'There's something really special about Catholic education which the world struggles to articulate,' she says. 'Adores' literature and still teaches English. Believes you get to know how somebody ticks in a discussion about books. Warm but firm, funny but sensible: all the contrasts you'd want in a head. Married to Mr Raffray, who manages the school's farm.

St Augustine's was struggling when she arrived and parents claim she's been 'revolutionary', 'retaining its heart whilst taking things forward'. A constructive approach to criticism, a good listener; 'reasonable and normal'. 'Terrific' with the girls, inviting groups for cake and card games in her study. Zero pretensions or ego: 'I once had a long chat about my dogs with a really nice lady at the gate before realizing later it was Mrs Raffray', laughs one mum.

Vision is to equip girls for success in life, 'whatever that may look like'. Serious about the school's social responsibility: 'we need to level society, not create more barriers'. An 'avowed feminist' (small f); believes passionately that every girl should 'know her worth'. Wants girls to leave knowing how to have difficult conversations and talk through conflict rather than 'nourishing grievances'. Loves the school's diversity and the 'richness' that this brings; eyes twinkle as she tells us about Hindu and Sikh parents who want a Catholic education for their daughters in London having been educated by nuns in India.

A vocal advocate for rethinking how we assess teenagers ('GCSEs have got to go') and for parity between academic and vocational qualifications. Speaks eloquently on social and national media about it, though her focus is on nurturing young people rather than plugging any kind of political message or self-promotion. Supports young people 'unconditionally' – 'we've got your back', she tells them.

Laughs a lot too – 'serious moments are punctuated by absolute hilarity', she says with a knowing grin. Personal commitment to fancy dress during Book Week is legendary; recently burst into song during weekly video message to parents. Finds herself in 'hysterics' at the jokes in the nativity play. 'We're pretty unusual,' she tells us, 'we're not nutters, but we are different'. We're all for that.

Entrance

Around 15 at nursery, 12 more in reception and then 12 again in year 5. A further 25 in year 7 and a handful in year 12. Other entry points considered. Every applicant interviewed by Mrs Raffray. For nursery and reception, classroom assessment to ensure key academic and emotional milestones have been met. Prospective year 5s take exams in English, maths and reasoning alongside a taster day. School recently joined London Consortium at 11+ to avoid year 6s 'sitting a vast number of entry exams': multiple choice test in maths, comprehension and reasoning. Year 12 applicants submit school reports and mock grades before being interviewed; offers are conditional on GCSE results. Sensitive approach to admissions; extenuating circumstances considered.

A lot from state primaries, sometimes before year 7; parents and girls recognise that making the jump before 11+ relieves the pressure. Those joining higher up often looking for something calmer than their bigger, noisier secondaries. Recent growth of year 7 numbers in part to allow for smaller class sizes – two bigger forms have become three smaller ones. An admirable alternative to the usual ‘bums on seats’ attitude.

Exit

A few leave for year 7, often to state schools. Just under half leave after GCSEs, usually in pursuit of a bigger setting and perhaps boys – parents commend the school’s supportive approach to this. Popular university destinations include Exeter, King’s College London, SOAS, Plymouth. Two to Oxbridge in 2020 – the first the school has sent but not the last, we suspect.

Latest results

In 2020, 77 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 72 per cent A*/A at A level. In 2019 (the last year when exams took place), 69 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 69 per cent A*/A at A level.

Teaching and learning

Sciences, modern languages and English literature successful recently, though small cohorts mean numbers vary. Good take-up of EPQ. Sets from year 9 in maths and foreign languages; choice of double or triple science at GCSE is ‘effectively streaming’. Religious studies compulsory at GCSE.

Notably positive language around academic results – ‘we cherish all results individually,’ Mrs Raffray says, and we believe her. Adamant that nurturing does not mean fluffy – ‘we produce brilliant girls who are not defined by their grades’. Staff tell heartwarming stories of girls who beat the odds or overcome a challenge – whether it’s a C or an A*, the grade is less important than the individual journey. Parents feel the school ‘does well with those in the middle’ who may get lost elsewhere. Mrs Raffray sums it up with characteristic grace – ‘While we rightly celebrate with girls who have earned the top grades, we also rejoice with all girls who have exceeded expectations at every level.’

Teachers wonderfully un-corporate – lots of personality in the classroom. Mrs Raffray is conscious of it – apparently St Augustine’s first Greek teacher, ‘a horrible Miss Trunchbull-type’, put him off it and she’s determined that won’t be the case here. So, lots of Miss Honeys (and Mr Honeys too): relatable and amusing, they have a comfortable, easy rapport with the girls. We enjoyed a lesson on religious postures (‘I usually demonstrate prostration, girls, but the carpet in this room’s a bit thin’). Casual reference to exam questions (‘who can write a 4 marker on this?’) suggests an awareness of the end goal without it being rammed down anyone’s throat. No danger of being picked on or caught out; an unthreatening atmosphere for those who might feel anxious elsewhere. We felt that classrooms lacked a bit of fizz, or bustle, as a result; but then again, fizz does not work for everybody. Lively trips calendar (Italy, Iceland, Paris etc) enriches it all and brings it to life.

A broad range of academic subjects; versatile teachers and flexible timetabling. Some students pointed out gaps in practical subjects – no food technology, no D&T – though this is quite common in a smaller school. Happy to run unusual GCSEs and A levels – Russian, computer science, ancient Greek, classical civilisation – though as one parent pointed out, ‘it’s hard to get a debate going in a class of one’.

Learning support and SEN

Just over 10 per cent on the SEN register, majority dyslexic. Can cater for ASD and ADHD. Lessons tailored to individual needs by experienced and sensitive teachers. Learning Support team supplement with 1:1 support and drop-in sessions. Very few receive EAL support though lots from multilingual households.

The arts and extracurricular

'Vibrant' extracurricular offering and a sense that everybody gets involved in everything. Music prominent – choirs perform demanding pieces and tour internationally. We cooed at the display of brightly-coloured ukuleles in the prep's dedicated music room, with specialist computers and software for composition introduced in year 7. Around a third have individual music lessons. You don't have to be on the Grade 8 treadmill, though – one angelic prep student told us that what she really loves is 'DJing on the decks with my dad'. Lively collaborations with drama including major biennial at Questors Theatre in Ealing – staff and pupils alike very excited to share plans for upcoming production of Hairspray.

Drama recognised as an excellent way to build confidence and social skills. Drama Gifted Pathway offered to those who show sign of some talent. Very high take up of LAMDA throughout the school. Busy art department encourages girls to 'live and breathe their art'. Life drawing and textiles offered off curriculum. Sixth formers have been let loose on the staircase up to the art rooms, creating an awesome collage of work and interesting images that literally plaster the walls. Famous alumnae are creatives: musician Hannah Kendall, comedian Phoebe Waller-Bridge (learnt her trade in the nativity, presumably) and Valerie Hobson, actress and long-suffering wife of John Profumo. All the gallery and theatre visits that you'd expect given the school's access to central London. Drama, music, art all offered at GCSE with photography added at A level; creative teaching is 'fabulous'.

The school's real USP, though, is Priory Farm. It's what 'makes our school the best school', according to year 6. Developing organically from a chick-hatching activity in 2017, it's largely run by the girls and requires significant commitment. The benefits are myriad. Ducks quack joyfully when they see us coming (expecting lunch, according to our guide); pigs – real, grunting pigs, not a sanitised London version – snuffle and snort. It's properly muddy work (note: remember your wellies) with the girls involved at every step, from helping with lambing to selling eggs to fund chicken feed. They take it seriously – some will go on to study veterinary science having become managers on the farm. The simple, back-to-nature combination of fresh air, physical work and looking after animals is therapeutic, an enormous help to those who are struggling elsewhere. 'If you're having a bad day, the animals are always there', says one grateful mother whose daughter has benefited. A superb initiative for which the school has deservedly won recognition. While up and down the country teenagers huddle around YouTube in the common room, Augustinians are running around the orchard or digging the vegetable patch. A modern Malory Towers without the 1940s attitudes or the saltwater pool – it all seems so unlikely in west London, and yet it works.

Sport

Thirteen acres in London? 'What a winner', say parents. Sport central to the outdoorsy culture. As one parent says, 'it's all onsite, so you might as well'. An inclusive approach – everybody gets to have a go – with special sports breakfasts laid on as a treat for those who have turned up regularly. Recent addition of sports scholarships suggests the school keen to attract talented athletes too. Netball and hockey busy with lots of fixtures and regional tournaments. Training for both before and after school; shouts of 'Oggies!' at the sideline apparently drown out opposition chanting. We were pleased to hear that these otherwise gentle girls show their true mettle on court. Killer instinct doesn't always translate into victory (does it matter?); 'they win, they lose', say parents. Small intake historically made it challenging to field decent teams, but with growing numbers this will be less of an issue. 'Superb', 'inspiring' coaches spot potential and encourage girls to play for local clubs too. Other options include gymnastics and football. Team involvement drops off as girls get older (a story everywhere, really), but they stay active – Zumba popular in sixth form.

Ethos and heritage

Epic foundation story kicks off in 1634 when English nuns, escaping persecution, set up a convent in Paris. They taught girls there for nearly 300 years – surviving two revolutions and

hosting both Napoleon and Wellington – until in 1911 new anti-clerical laws forced them out. And where did they go? Why home, of course, to leafy Ealing. One became a full-blown, chained-to-railings suffragette, whilst the other Sisters set about building a new school as war tore Europe apart. What mighty women. As Mrs Raffray says, ‘those nuns didn’t just roll over and give up’. It’s feisty and no-nonsense – Sound of Music meets Les Mis – a potent blend which sets the tone for the go-get-it attitude that we see throughout the school.

Their ‘think big’ approach also survives – ‘Spread your wings and see how far you fly’, cries one classroom noticeboard, surrounded by pupils’ tiny origami birds. A sixth form pressure group which campaigned against ‘period poverty’ recently won TES Student Initiative of the Year. Any concerns about small schools being too molly-coddling quickly dispelled: on the contrary, we found confident, brave young women.

Weekly mass in the pretty chapel – lots have ‘no idea what they’re doing’ the first time. A few parents wary of the Catholic ethos before they came but found it ‘not nearly as Catholic as we had thought it might be’. Indeed, other than one earnest confession that ‘sometimes mass can be a bit boring’, we heard nothing but praise for the positive role that mass and prayer play in school life. Focus on faith rather than Catholicism per se: Eid Breakfast an annual highlight. Member of the Three Faiths Forum. Rich and varied community partnerships and a generous approach to sharing resources and expertise, particularly with local state schools.

Pebbledash buildings create a distinctly suburban look not out of keeping with the residential neighbourhood. Site feels warm and welcoming. Nice convent-y touches with original signage still in use – Rev Mother’s Parlour now a cosy meeting room with traditional brown furniture that looks like it belonged to Rev Mother herself. Some classrooms could do with brightening up a bit and it all smells quite, well, school-y: none of the Farrow & Ball on the walls, Diptyque in the loos’ effect that we see elsewhere. Major development set to modernise things, providing ‘new academic heart’ including glass atrium, new classrooms and library. Parents grumble about building work but appreciate that it’s for the greater good.

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

Pupils say their school is ‘loving’, ‘caring’ and ‘friendly’ – it’s this atmosphere that draws many families in the first place. Displays remind girls who to talk to if they are worried about something, though ‘you can practically talk to anybody’, we are told.

Inclusivity lies at its heart. Girls comfortable coming out; school has supported a handful through gender transition. Sixth formers act as informal mentors to younger girls – we were struck by the refreshing lack of hierarchy with genuine friendships apparent between year groups. Big sister-little sister scheme encourages this culture. Older girls wave to little ones on the street at the weekend, something which would be deemed deeply uncool elsewhere.

Exceptionally non-judgmental community – everybody bumps along together. Attitudes towards socialising and friendships unusually mature and unselfconscious, particularly in sixth form. Single sex factor feels like a natural part of that – this is a safe place where girls can be themselves. Pastoral and academic teams closely interwoven – wellbeing is front and centre throughout the day, not a vague concept discussed once a week in PSHE. Dedicated wooden cabin in the grounds acts as a snug ‘Sanctuary’ for those needing a quiet moment.

How does the school’s Catholicism sit alongside its modern values like equality and diversity? We had to ask – Catholic schools are having a rough ride at the moment. Our tentative questioning was met directly by Mrs Raffray, who is excited to ‘reclaim the word Catholic from a negative semantic field’ and ‘talk about its modernity’. ‘We would not be allowed to teach ferocious dogma. We talk about loving them’. They really do; that ‘L’ word seems to underpin everything.

Girls embrace the charmingly unsophisticated uniform, complete with St Augustine’s tartan. Pleated skirts remain firmly knee-length: no creeping hemlines here. Juniors walk to school

wearing their distinctive felt hats, ribbons tied under chins. Girls, particularly the younger ones, wear their smart PE kits with pride. Suits for sixth form with 'smart casual' Fridays. Not a scrap of make-up in sight.

Flexibility when it comes to discipline; another advantage of being small. Teachers don't seem to mind too much about the odd missed deadline or forgotten hockey stick. As a result, no dog-ate-homework culture: 'if I haven't done it I apologise and do it for next time'. School's motto is 'veritas' (truth); girls respect this and take responsibility for their actions. System straightforward: warning for minor infringement, three warnings and you're in detention. Girls 'mortified' on receiving a warning. Corridors feel calm and orderly: 'we can be understanding, because girls simply follow the rules'. Ideal.

Pupils and parents

'None of those shouty girls', says one parent. We agree. Not all outwardly confident or particularly polished, but engaging, amusing and well-mannered to a tee. Plenty of space for those who have yet to find their voice. We met a super mish-mash of girls, all brilliant in their own ways and all very loyal to their school. Younger than their peers at racier west London day schools, though not naïve. Birthday parties are sleepovers, bowling, pizza.

Wraparound care popular with working parents. Parents are 'low key', says one gratefully: 'if they do have flashy jobs, they keep it quiet'. Lots of successful professionals: doctors, lawyers, pharmacists. Not posh, although inevitably in this area some very wealthy. Less of a drinks party scene than elsewhere – those we spoke to did not seem that interested in comparing notes over canapés – though lots of coffee mornings in the prep. Most are Ealing locals though some from Chiswick, Acton and Shepherds Bush.

Very diverse. 40 per cent Catholic including families from India, Africa, eastern Europe. France and Spain well represented. Further 20 per cent from other Christian denominations, and the rest from other faiths (lots of Muslim, Hindu, Jewish families) or none. Nearby Japanese prep school sends a few. Clearly not a place for those too squeamish about religion, but other than that it is very hard to pin down a St Augustine's 'type'. We have rarely seen such a mix of colours and creeds in a small independent school and we are delighted to report that it works beautifully.

Money matters

Means-tested bursaries offered to exceptional candidates at 11+ and 16+ who meet admissions criteria but may otherwise be unable to attend due to financial hardship. Bursaries for girls already at the senior school who experience a substantial change in circumstances.

The last word

It's not every day in London that you see year 9s leapfrogging through an orchard, bare-kneed in the chilly autumn sunshine. 'Lots of cake, lots of jollity, lots of having a really good time', as one happy mother says. Different from its neighbours, but not for the sake of it. Kind and loving – we really couldn't find a nasty bone in its body – with a commitment to getting the best out of your daughter. A quietly brilliant little school.