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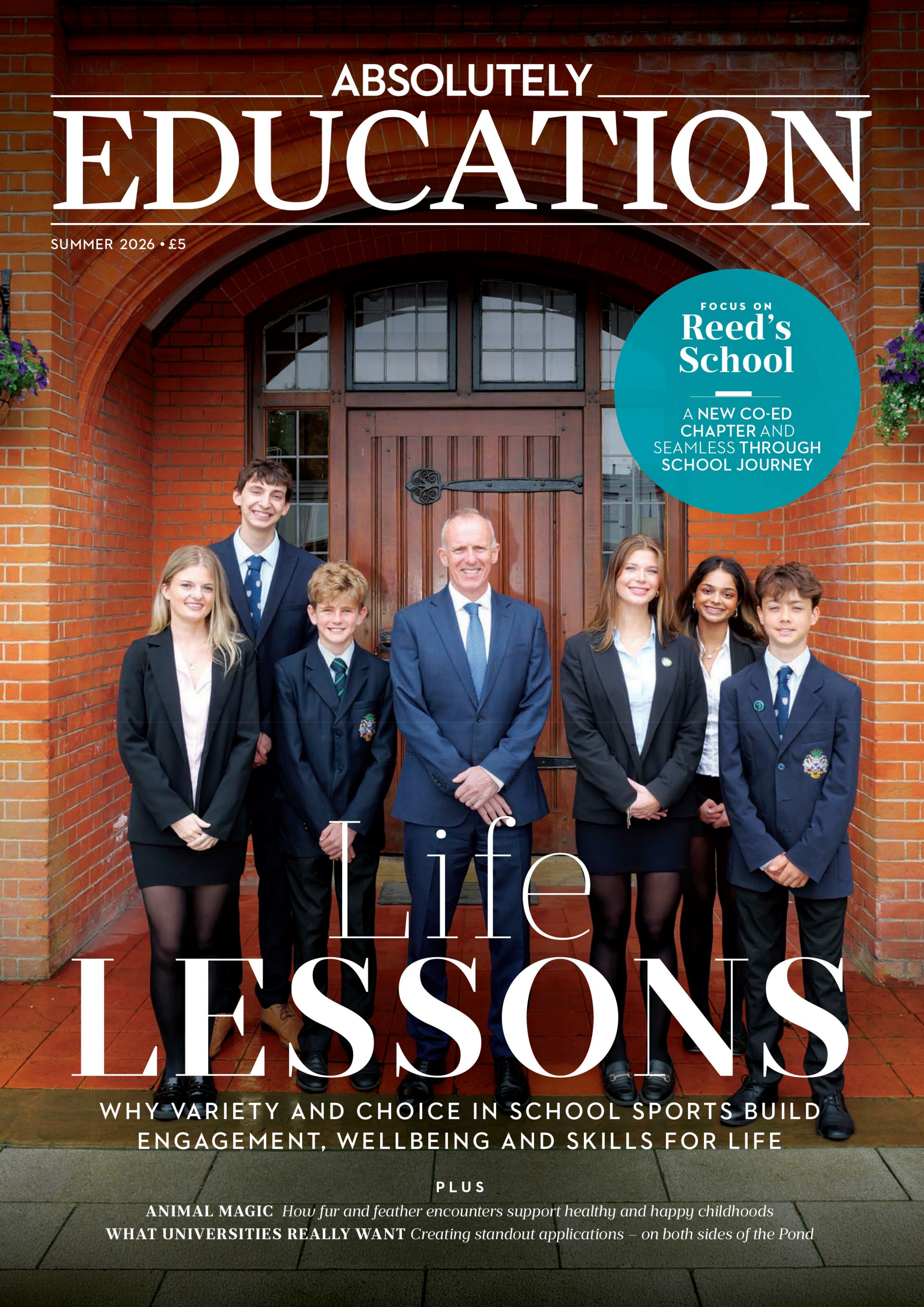

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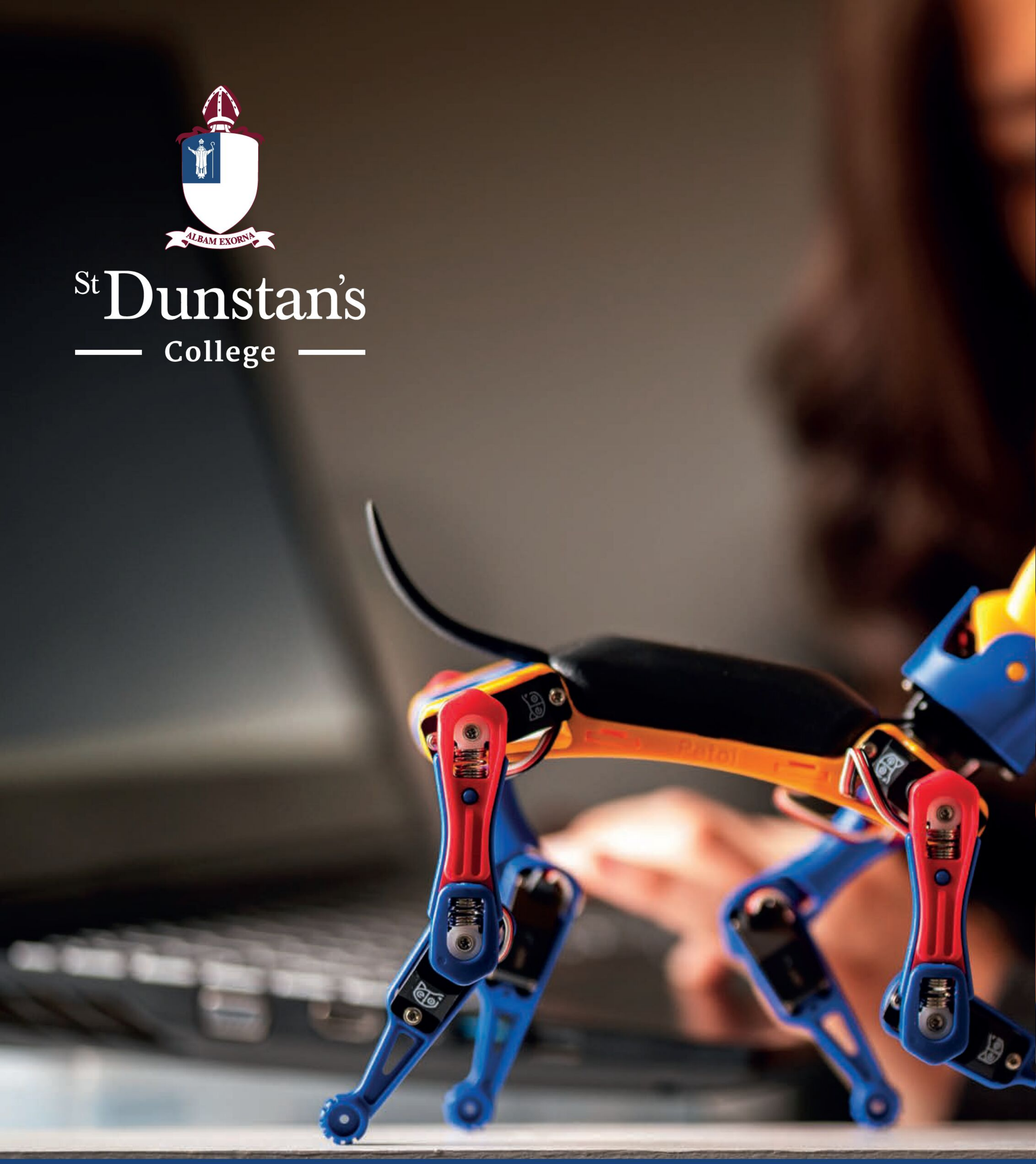

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Rachel Bailey

Headmistress, Benenden School

Rachel Bailey was educated at Badminton and Haberdashers' Monmouth and then read Economics at York University. Prior to joining Benenden as Headmistress in September 2024, she was Head of Senior School at RMS for Girls. She sits on the HMC Education Committee and is Chair of the Girls' Schools Association's South East Division. In this issue she argues that prep schools are intrinsic to British independent schools' success, and senior schools have a moral duty to support them through uncertain times.

Laura Henry-Allain

Author, educationalist and consultant

An educationalist and early years specialist, Laura Henry-Allain MBE is the creator of the CBeebies animation *JoJo & Gran Gran*. She has acted as a consultant to many organisations, including John Lewis and Bafta. She's a board member of the Children's Media Foundation and vice president of The British Association of Early Childhood Education. A proud dyslexic, she is an ambassador for the British Dyslexia Association. She discusses her new book in the *Maya & Marley* series – and why every child has unique talents.

Phillip Makhouli

Headmaster, Aberdour School

Born and raised in the northern Highlands, Phillip Makhouli studied electrical engineering and originally worked in the nuclear power industry. After retraining as a teacher, he taught Years 5 and 6 in Elgin and London, before moving to Holmewood House Prep as Head of Maths and then Director of Teaching and Learning. This led on to his Headship, at Skippers Hill Manor, and he became Headmaster of Aberdour in 2025. In this issue, he discusses the importance of self-knowledge as the platform for success.

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Clare Pollard

Author, playwright and poet

Clare Pollard studied English at Cambridge and published her first poetry collection at age 19. Her work spans genres and age groups and includes a play, *The Weather*, that premiered at the Royal Court Theatre. She's fascinated by children's literature and her non-fiction work *Fierce Bad Rabits* explored characters and themes of well-loved children's picture books. She's always loved the Greek legends, and in this issue she discusses her gripping new take on Jason and the Argonauts for middle graders.

Alex Perry-Adlam

Head of Art and Photography, St Catherine's School, Bramley

Alex Perry-Adlam studied at Liverpool John Moores and Bristol. Alongside his art practice, he has worked in arts education in a range of education settings, including Reed's School, Claremont Fan Court School and Putney High. He has led the Art and Photography Department at St Catherine's, Bramley since 2013. In this issue, he discusses the importance of creative endeavours – both in avoiding perfectionism and in encouraging a mindset that sees mistakes and fails as opportunities to try again.

Annie Crerar

English teacher and Dyslexia Intervention Lead, Burlington House School

Annie Crerar is an English teacher and SEND specialist at Burlington House School's Sixth Form in Ravenscourt Park, part of Cavendish Education Group. She studied at Warwick, Birmingham City and UCL, and holds AMBDA accreditation and Accredited Practitioner Status from the British Dyslexia Association. In this issue, she talks about the benefits of creating a classroom setting for all. Simple environmental adjustments and assistive technologies will, she argues, help to support every student to fulfil their potential and enjoy learning.

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Joel Fearon

Team GB and Team Jamaica athlete

Joel Fearon was a top-level sprinter for Team GB before being encouraged to try the bobsleigh by his coach in 2011. This led on to great success, including at the FIBT and European Championships and the 2014 Winter Olympics, with a 5th place later upgraded to bronze. He came out of retirement to compete for Jamaica in January's Winter Olympics. In 'Making of Me', he talks about challenging school days, his biggest supporters and finding his strength and confidence through sport.

Kristina Lewis

Deputy Head Academic, JAGS

Kristina Lewis joined JAGS in January 2026, having previously held the role of Deputy Head Academic at Blackheath High and, before that, Assistant Head at Francis Holland School. She read History at Cambridge before completing a Master's degree at UCL. Alongside her Deputy Head role, she teaches in the History and Politics Department. In this issue, she discusses the innovative JAGS Pathway, designed to support GCSE studies with a robust internally assessed programme of academic and creative challenges and future-ready skills.

Mark Wilson

Head of School, ACS Egham

A teacher and school leader for over 25 years, Mark Wilson worked in the UK before moving into international education by joining Nord Anglia in 2009. He headed The British International School Shanghai before becoming Head of School at The British International School of Houston. A Drama teacher by training, he has taught across different syllabuses – and still teaches Theory of Knowledge on the IB Programme. In this issue, he discusses ACS' Schools' recent survey revealing what university admissions officers really value in applicants.

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- Parent

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From the EDITOR

As the academic year stretches ahead into summer, there's a very different quality to school life. Exams always bring palpable stress, but cricket, tennis and all the other outdoor elements that bring happiness and fulfilment to school life step up to deliver welcome release.

Happiness is a word that's used a lot at Reed's School, our cover and Focus feature for this issue. It was a pleasure to catch up with Headmaster Mark Hoskins about the ethos and values that underpin the Surrey school, and the Andrew Reed Foundation that started it all back in 1813. The school is moving to a new chapter, with full co-education and a merger with Feltonfleet – so truly exciting times. But, as Mark Hoskins points out, this is evolution and not revolution, since girls are already a key part of Reed's life. Read more on page 26.

There's pure joy in animals, especially when you put them together with children, and our Prep lead feature finds out more about their impact on four schools (from page 44). We also head down to Milton Abbey in Dorset (page 77), where animals are 'the heartbeat' of school life, thanks to its busy farm and equine centre.

Sport brings elation and disappointment – hopefully not in equal measure – but matches can't be won each and every time. In our Senior lead feature, we look at the changing make-up of school games. Where once it was about stuffing trophy cabinets, these days schools offer a menu of brilliant opportunities to ensure children find the sports they love – and learn more about their own strengths and the power of play to unite us (page 62).

Summer brings opportunities for big reads – always to be encouraged but especially right now as a way of getting children to visit worlds beyond screens. We were delighted to talk to some great authors for this issue, including exciting new picture-book talent – and still only in his 20s – – Will Hamilton-Davies (page 56). And if you have a middle-grader to occupy, I do recommend *The Othernauts* (see page 114). Clare Pollard has turned a Greek myth not known for its laughs into a pacy adventure guaranteed to carry children along, also delivering wit and memorable characters to relish.

Enjoy your summer.

Libby Norman
EDITOR

"WHERE ONCE IT WAS ABOUT STUFFING **TROPHY CABINETS**, THESE DAYS SCHOOLS OFFER A MENU OF BRILLIANT OPPORTUNITIES TO ENSURE CHILDREN **FIND THE SPORTS THEY LOVE**"

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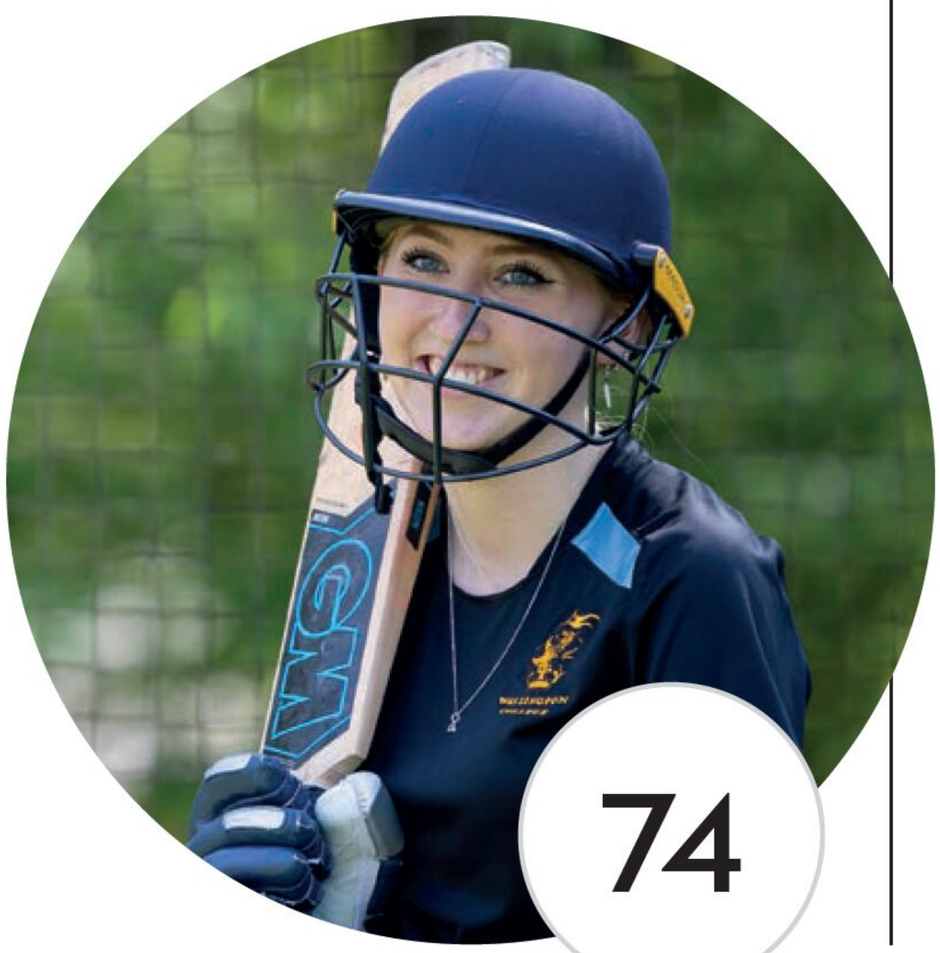
Julie Keller, Head of Nottingham Girls' High School



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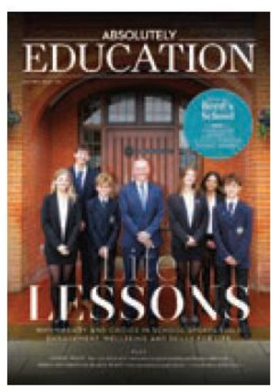

FRONT COVER
REED'S SCHOOL
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FROM EDITING THE LEAVERS' VIDEO TO WORKING ON 'THE CROWN' AND 'BELFAST'.

Carly Brown, alumna 2009,
Freelance TV & Film Editor

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THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE

Up Front

CAMBRIDGE MERGER P. 19 FRENCH EXCHANGE P. 20 OXFORD BLUES P. 23

GREAT WINS

Berkhamsted lacrosse success.

See page 16

NURSERY EXPANSION

Broomwood, Clapham, is opening a third Pre-School (Nursery) classroom from September to meet demand at Little Broomwood. "This new space will allow us to expand while preserving the highly personalised, purposeful education that underpins everything we do," says Head of Pre-Prep Carol Mackay.

"The expanded Little Broomwood will bring more Pre-School places to young learners in Clapham"

Phone free

The Girls' Day School Trust (GDST) has announced that all 25 of its schools – including Notting Hill & Ealing High (pictured) will be mobile phone-free from September for pupils up to Year 11. This builds on current guidance and practices, with many GDST schools creating mobile phone-free environments with lockers or secure pouches.

Lacrosse champs

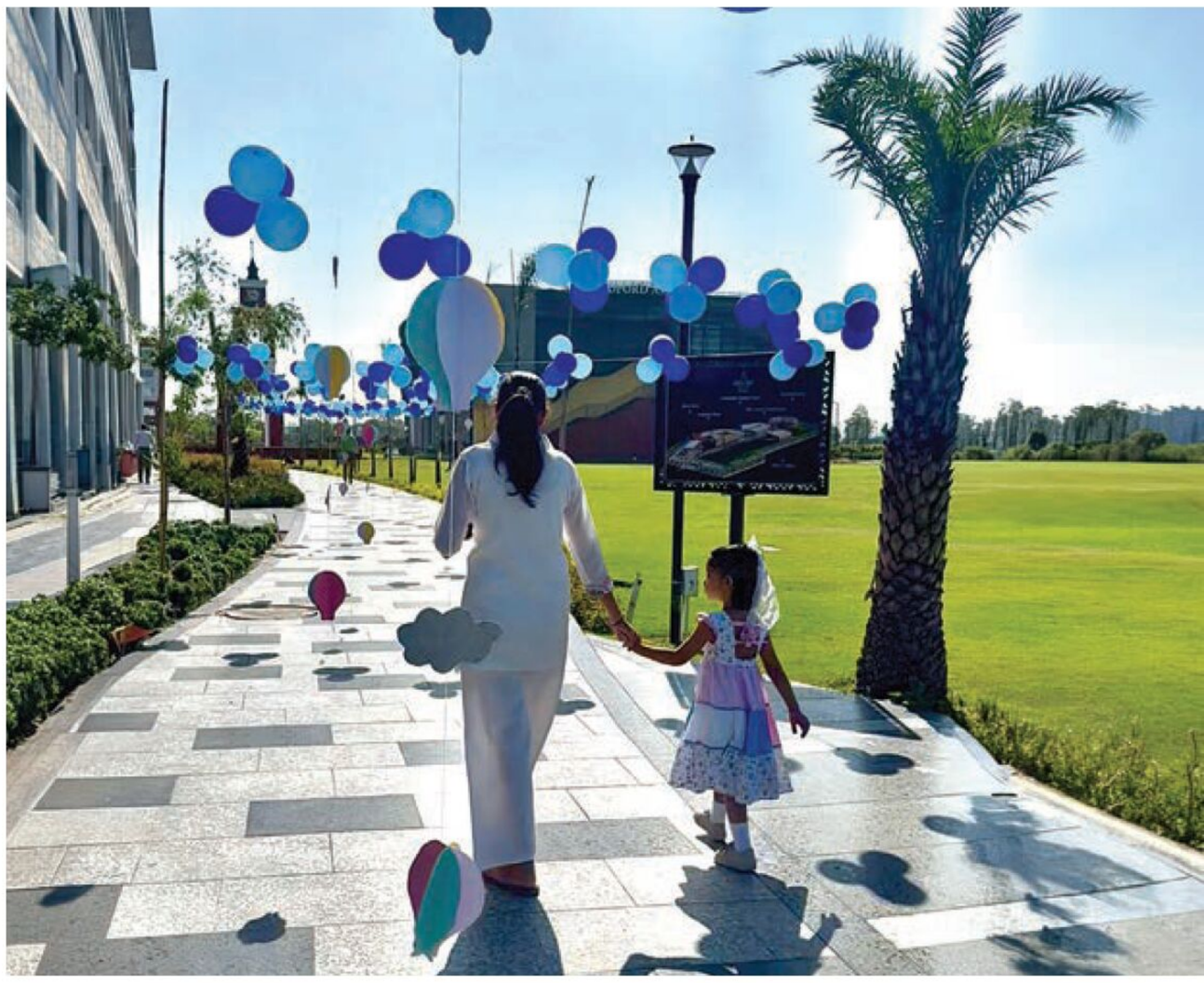
Berkhamsted Schools lacrosse is celebrating an exceptional season of achievements. The school played 150 matches and fielded 15 teams, with strong participation across year groups and skill levels. Berko U14A and U15B teams were champions at National Schools Lacrosse, while U19A and U18B achieved top 8 and runner-up position respectively.

NEW HEAD

Worth School welcomes Ben Pennington as Head this September. He is current Head of Senior School at St Andrews, Turi in Kenya, and with experience encompassing leadership roles at King's Ely, Ampleforth and Sherborne Prep. He says he looks forward to nurturing a community where young people are inspired to flourish.

INDIA OPENING

Bedford School Mohali, the first British International girls' school in Northern India, opened in April. Located on the outskirts of Chandigarh and developed in partnership with Doon International Education Society, it offers day and boarding options. The campus has extensive science, sports and creative arts facilities and a 1,000-seater auditorium.



"It was a great experience...to compete at a certain level. It teaches you discipline, focus, and certainly keeps you out of trouble"

JASON STATHAM

Go pro

Charlie Taylor (16), a pupil at Malvern College is celebrating signing his first professional contract with Warwickshire Cricket Club. He has already been tipped as one of the most exciting young cricketers in the country, having been selected for the England U19 squad at the age of just 15.

DOUBLE SUCCESS

Ludgrove Prep in Berkshire has 'done the double', with pupils Adrian and Kai being awarded King's Scholarships from Eton College. With a maximum of 14 KS awarded each year, it is a remarkable feat. The boys will join last year's leaver Jacky, and Jaey who joined their ranks in 2022.

Reading priority

The Children's Laureate Frank Cottrell-Boyce has called for urgent action to reverse the decline in parents reading to children. A BookTrust survey found that children aged up to 8 who reported liking or loving reading rose from 66 to 80% between 2021 and 2025, while daily shared reading dropped from 60 to 49%.

LONDON LEAD

Laura Rodgers will become Head of Francis Holland Prep School in Chelsea from next January. She is currently Senior Deputy Head at Glendower Prep and has also held leadership roles at Fulham Prep. She studied Law at Newcastle University before gaining teaching qualifications from Oxford Brookes and University of Buckingham.

GLASGOW DEVELOPMENT

Hutchesons' Grammar School has announced an investment of more than £1m to create a new 'campus for excellence' in the Southside of Glasgow. The major transformation brings the primary and secondary schools together on a single site at Beaton Road, in the Pollokshaws area of the city, by August 2027.

"It's important for us to know that our worth isn't defined by how well we do in our sport"

COCO GAUFF

SOMETHING THEY SAID

"WE HUMAN BEINGS ARE STRANGE CREATURES AND STILL RESERVE THE RIGHT TO **THINK FOR OURSELVES**"

MARILYN MONROE

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CAMBRIDGE MERGER

The Leys and St Faith's will become The Leys School, Cambridge from September 2028, offering an all-through education. They have been part of the same foundation since 1938. Early Years to Year 8 will be educated at the current St Faith's site, while Years 9 to 13 will be based at The Leys' site.

Cricketer return

Eve Jackson, who left Christ College in 2025, has presented a framed shirt to the school. The shirt, arranged by the Old Breconian Association, was in recognition of her selection for Glamorgan Women's while she was still in Sixth Form. She also represented Wales in Year 12 on an international tour.

GAME INNOVATION

St Clare's Young Enterprise team, GlobU, enjoyed success at the regional competition in Reading, where they presented an educational board game promoting cultural understanding through interactive learning. The concept, which was inspired by the team's diverse backgrounds, impressed judges with its originality and social relevance, earning the Oxfordshire Innovation Prize.

Head appointment

Sophie Blewitt has been appointed Head of Hanford Prep. She was previously Director of Studies at Sherborne Girls, as well as Head of Languages and Assistant Head of Professional Development. Currently Hanford's Interim Head, she says: "Hanford is an amazing school where a magical childhood and academic excellence go hand in hand".

SCIENCE STAR

St Catherine's Prep, Bramley's Maren Kelly has received the prestigious Primary Science Teaching Award. She joins a network of some 200 Primary Science Teacher College Fellows across the UK and has been selected to represent the UK in a two-year international STEM project led by Science on Stage Germany and supported by the GEA Foundation.

"Maren Kelly of St Catherine's Prep, Bramley will represent the UK in a two-year STEM project"

MUSIC MAESTRO

Talented composer and pianist Jacky Zhang, 17, has won the 2026 Sheepdrove Piano Competition at Newbury Spring Festival, the youngest winner in the competition's history. A Royal College of Music student since the age of 7, he received the first prize of £3,000, donated by Sheepdrove Trust.

Perfect play

Reddam House Berkshire has been awarded a Platinum grade by OPAL (Outdoor Play and Learning), meaning it is within the top 1% of primary schools nationally for play provision. Head Rick Cross says the award: "reflects our belief that children learn just as much beyond the classroom walls as they do within them".

SOMETHING THEY SAID

"Nothing is ever given in this game... It's very humbling as well... The humility just goes hand in hand with the game"

AARON RAI

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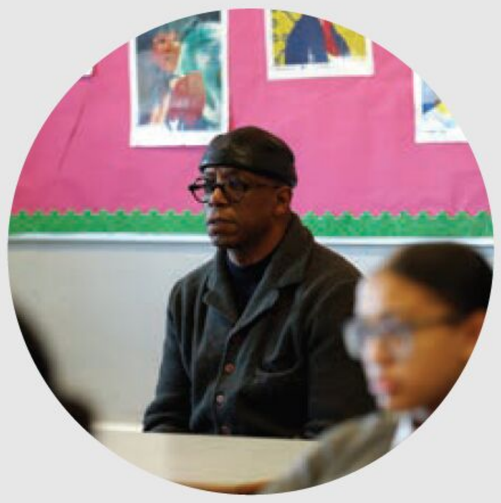
ICE CHALLENGE

Wycliffe Prep pupils in Years 6-8 have been honing entrepreneurial thinking and teamwork through an employer-led challenge in partnership with Marshfield Farm. One tough challenge has been creating a new ice cream flavour, exploring every stage of product development. The project is part of the Gloucestershire through-school's innovative Discovery Programme.

French exchange

Taunton School is helping to revive the traditional pen pal programme through a partnership with Collège Joseph Kerbellec in Brittany, France (pictured), whose Year 8 students recently visited Taunton after exchanging letters, videos, photos, and gifts throughout the year. Both schools are excited to continue growing their relationship and are already looking forward to their next meet up.



BACK TO SCHOOL

Barclays Football Ambassador Ian Wright went back to school, visiting Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School in Islington to listen to what pupils and teachers had to say about sport – in particular, barriers to girls' participation in PE at school and beyond. The visit was part of the FA and Barclays 'Made for the Game: Breaking Barriers' campaign.

FILM INVITATION

Wrekin Prep pupils attended a film premiere at BFI IMAX, London following a personal invitation from Henrietta Grainger, a former student now working with the charity Made By Dyslexia. *What is Dyslexia?* is an animation featuring voices from stars such as Jeremy Irons and Liv Tyler and aims to reshape how dyslexia is perceived.

PROJECT SHOWCASE

The Sherborne Project Qualification (SPQ) exhibition took place in early June, with Year 8 Sherborne pupils showcasing their work to parents, staff, governors and senior schools. The SPQ is an extended independent project, with each pupil choosing a topic of personal interest. This year's themes included gene editing and the science behind earworms.

Science explorers

Felsted School Science week included a talk about how robotics support surgeons, a Faraday Institute workshop on our place in the universe, live experiments and fossil handling. Pupils from Years 3 to 8 collaborated on a series of engineering challenges – from designing structures to slow down ice thaw to designing space rovers.

Celebrating success

Orchard House School in Chiswick, West London is celebrating a year of achievement. The school's 2026 U11 Girls' Netball Team were crowned IAPS National Runners-Up. In addition, Year 6 leavers secured 150 senior school offers and 42 scholarships and Orchard House staff received multiple Pearson National Teaching Awards honours.

SOMETHING THEY SAID

"THE MORE WE EXILE OURSELVES FROM NATURE, THE MORE WE **CRAVE ITS MIRACLE WATERS**"

DIANE ACKERMAN

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ABOVE
Teddies Select XI played at Chelsea FC's Surrey training ground

OXFORD'S BLUES

Teddies Select XI played ***Chelsea FC Soccer Schools*** *in a landmark football match*

A team of talented young footballers from across the Oxford community – the Teddies Select XI – took on Chelsea FC Soccer Schools players at the Premier League club's Surrey training ground in May. The landmark fixture was the first community match in the partnership between St Edward's School, Oxford and Chelsea FC.

St Edward's School announced its collaboration with Chelsea FC earlier this year. It is designed to bring world-class sporting expertise into the daily experience of pupils and extend training and play opportunities across the wider Oxfordshire community.

The school has significantly expanded boys' and girls' football programmes in recent years, reflecting increased interest in the game. At the heart of the partnership is a shared commitment to community-wide engagement. Teddies Select XI brings together keen 11- and 12-year-old players from state and independent schools and clubs in the local area. There are three teams in this Teddies Select cohort – U11 Boys, U11 Girls and U12 Boys.

The teams had already played practice matches at St Edward's and at Chelsea FC's Cobham training ground, where they received coaching from Chelsea FC and St Edward's coaches. The May fixture was an exciting opportunity to play a competitive match on professional-grade pitches against a strong side from the Soccer Schools department's Player Development Programme.

It is hoped this will be the first of many, establishing a regular fixture that connects young players in Oxfordshire with the Premiership club.

"We are very excited about this first match between the Teddies Select XI and Chelsea FC Soccer Schools players," says Chelsea FC Football Projects Manager at Chelsea FC Steve Shipp. "Who knows, maybe in a couple of years, the Teddies Select XI will be playing Soccer Schools Performance Centre players from the local Oxfordshire community."

"We've seen the popularity of football at Teddies increase at pace in recent years, to become a core sport available to girls and boys across all year groups," says St Edward's School Director of Sport Jen Law. "With Chelsea coaches working alongside our own Football Professional, pupils gain access to professional coaching of the highest standard, tailored programmes designed to improve skill development, and pathways that build resilience, leadership and teamwork on and off the field."

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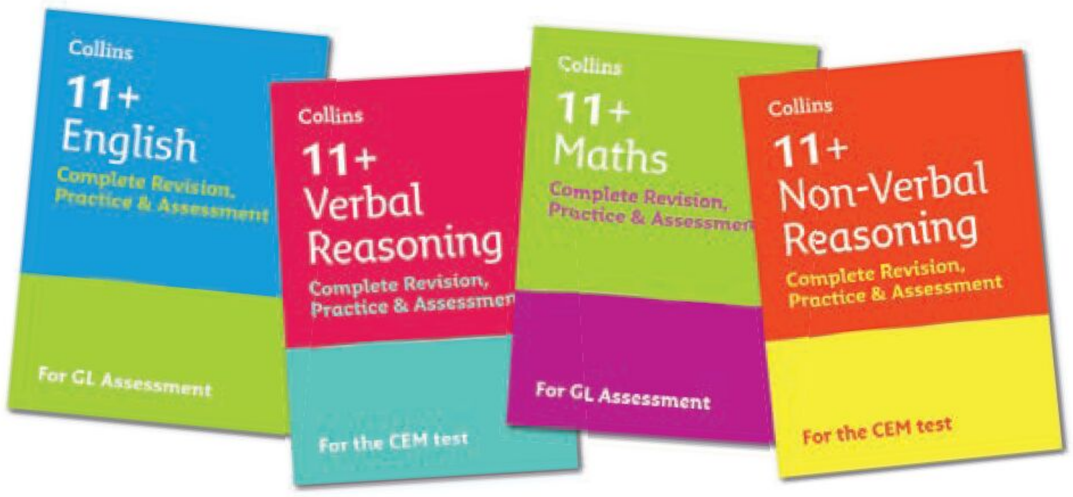

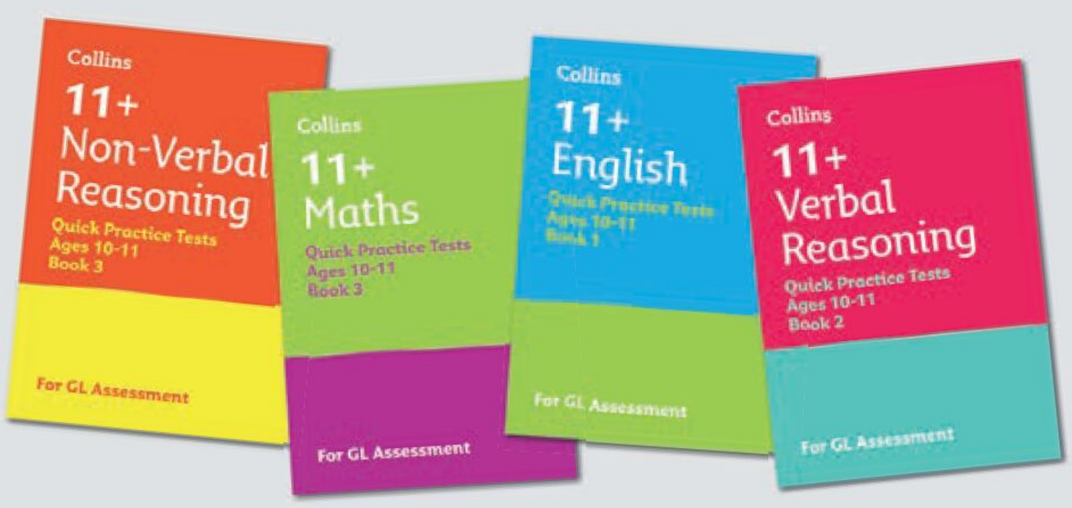

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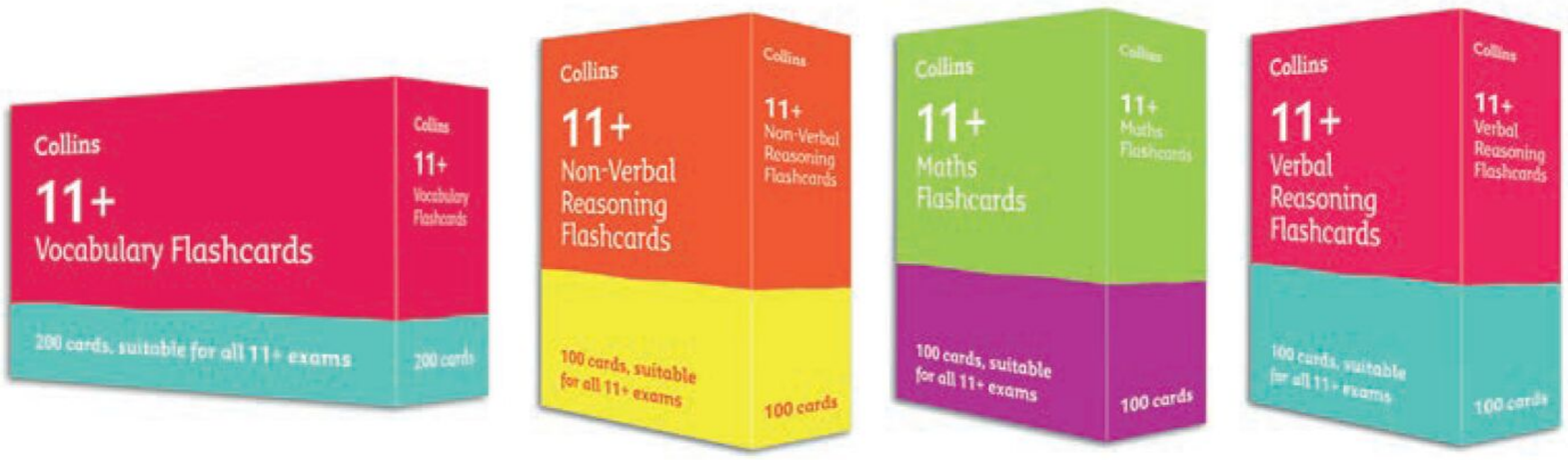

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Focus

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SHARED JOURNEY

Reed's School is going back to its roots.

See page 26

ABOVE
Reed's has a strong cohort of Sixth Form girls already

"WE LOOK AT THIS AS EXTENDING OUR CO-EDUCATION **FROM THE TOP DOWN** – THERE ARE 140 GIRLS AT THE SCHOOL ALREADY"

STRONG FOUNDATION

*With a return to its fully co-educational roots, **Reed's School** is entering an exciting new chapter. That, plus its merger with Feltonfleet, means it can offer a seamless 2-18 journey for boys and girls and expand Foundation support to even more young people*

LIBBY NORMAN

Reed's School has always had an impressive vision, a sense of purpose, that sets it apart. Now it is entering a new chapter, and one that returns it to its roots. Alongside the news of a move to full co-education, beginning in 2027 when girls join Year 7, it has made another important announcement – Feltonfleet Preparatory School, just down the road in Cobham, is joining the Reed's family.

For Reed's Headmaster Mark Hoskins, it was a great pleasure to make the twin announcements in mid May, and the culmination of long thought-out strategy on the part of Governors, staff and the Andrew Reed Foundation. He points out that the move to full co-education is an evolution, not a revolution. "Really, we look at this as extending our co-education from the top down. There are 140 girls at the school already."

Girls have been welcomed to Reed's Sixth Form since 2000. And the Sixth Form is currrently around one third girls. It is extremely popular – always heavily oversubscribed – so girls play a full part in school life already. Admitting girls at 11, and moving to full co-education in 2031, feels like a natural progression for staff and pupils alike. And, of course, there are some obvious side-benefits of having a strong female cohort in the Sixth Form to look up to. "They will be really important mentors for the younger girls," says Mark Hoskins.

"We don't see this as a radical change," he adds. "My Reed's colleagues are used to working with young boys and girls of that age, so it's about adapting what we do rather than reinvention." This experience with a mixed younger cohort comes in part thanks to a sharing of resources and expertise with lots of schools. That includes Ripley Court, the Surrey Prep

School which joined the Reed's Foundation fold back in 2019. And now, with co-educational Feltonfleet in the family, there are two outstanding prep options close by for parents. Reed's will, of course, continue to work with a range of other schools.

Reed's and Feltonfleet have enjoyed a long and close relationship and many of the prep's boys have headed on to Reed's for their senior years. Now, that relationship can grow and girls have the option to move here, too. "At Feltonfleet we have some boarding provision as well, so it's a really exciting element," says Mark Hoskins. "We've really got some options now to extend what the Foundation does – which is really getting back to the founder's vision."

You can't talk about what gives Reed's its unique character without going back to Reverend Dr Andrew Reed. That phrase often used to describe Reed's – 'a Foundation with a school' – still shapes the character and ethos of the school today. What makes the co-education announcement so full-circle is that it really does return Reed's to its beginnings. Andrew Reed's first two orphaned pupils in 1813 were girls. It remained co-educational until after World War II, when boys and girls were moved to separate sites – and that was for practical rather than pedagogical reasons.

Some 12,000 young people have been supported through their Reed's School journey by the Andrew Reed Foundation – around a tenth of pupils here receive some support. There are some female Foundation pupils in the Sixth form, and the through-school pathway provides opportunities to deliver support to girls, alongside boys, from a much earlier age. "Boarding is often a key part of supporting Foundation pupils," says Mark Hoskins.

ABOVE *Feltonfleet School has joined the Reed's Foundation*

"Certainly from my perspective, and the Leadership team, and also the Governors' perspective, the most important element of this is the ability for the Foundation to reach more children," he says. "From the Feltonfleet Governers' and Leadership perspective, the Foundation was a real draw. There's a real 'why' to what Reed's is all about and Feltonfleet are very keen to be part of that. They have a similar ethos and set of values."

The co-education and and merger news has, as you'd expect, been greeted warmly by former pupils. Mark Hoskins' daughter, a quite recent Old Reedonian, was able to report back that all her friends thought it was a great idea. A former Head Girl got in touch and praised the decision. But it goes much wider than that. "We've got a really active Old Reedonian network and have received really positive responses," he says.

Parents have been warmly supportive – indeed, feedback from parents and prospective parents over many years has been consistent in asking why they didn't admit girls all the way through the school. There has been the odd question about whether it will be more difficult to get younger brothers into the school if girls are also competing for places. "We always look to take siblings, so I've reassured parents on that front."

Continuity and convenience are both factors that came into play in the decision made by Reed's. Like all independent schools, it is acutely aware – in real time – of ripples and subtle movements in its landscape. In recent times, those changes have seemed seismic for everyone. "There's been a lot of movement in the school sector, particularly since Covid, and then with VAT on school fees, and that's really quite unsettling for parents," says Mark Hoskins.

"I think there's a desire to really feel confident that, when they put their child into a school, it is going to remain intact all the time that their child is there. And then they want to have a sense of

ABOVE *Reed's prioritises life skills alongside academics*

ABOVE
The co-ed model will return Reed's to its Foundation beginnings

what that next destination might look like." Senior transitions have never beeen considered easy by families. "It has always been a very stressful time around that 11+ moment, for all parents," says Mark Hoskins. "Of course, nothing is ever guaranteed and there is always independence in where parents want to go from prep school. But if your child's junior school is working very closely with a senior school that you're attracted to and you think is a really excellent school – and I hope people would think that about Reed's – then hopefully it gives that sense of comfort. It takes away a bit of that anxiety that parents increasingly feel."

Reassurance is provided by the through-school option, and the day-to-day convenience of choosing one school for sons and daughters is another increasingly important consideration, Mark Hoskins adds, in school choice. "One of the bits of feedback we've already had is that logistics are really important. I don't think it's so often about co-ed or single sex but pick up and drop off of your daughter and son at the same school. It brings convenience for parents."

The fact that there's boarding here (around a tenth of pupils board) also means the 24/7 wraparound care that is so helpful in easing the logistics of family life and helping children make the most of time. And the school is very flexible in its boarding provision, with flexi and Monday-to-Friday alongside full boarding. Mark Hoskins notes that during the recent exam season, the Sixth Form Centre was packed until 8pm at night and busy at weekends. "It's just so much easier – you find a teacher if you need them, you get work done."

Academics are always a key concern for parents, and here Reed's has a lot to shout about, with A-level outcomes that have helped ensure that heavily oversubscribed Sixth Form. There's a great baseline to work this out in the pupils who join at 16+ – you can get a prediction of A-level outcomes based on GCSE results. "So if we look at the girls – and actually the boys – when they come to us at Sixth Form, the value-added is off the chart. So we know that we're adding real value."

It's important to note that Reed's doesn't do a 'weeding out' of pupils who haven't done quite as well as they might at 16.

"IF PUPILS ARE CONFIDENT, WHAT THEY CAN ACHIEVE IS MAGNIFIED A HUNDRED TIMES. **IT'S ABOUT GETTING PEOPLE TO BELIEVE IN THEMSELVES"**

Every boy moved up to the Sixth Form last year. "We might say you can't do Maths, Further Maths, Physics and Chemistry if we think it may not be the right mix, but we'll find a combination for each pupil. So those A-level results that we've got are without playing the league table system. And we're very proud of that."

He is very conscious of the age and stage variations with young people – that not everyone finds their focus early. "Those weaker – so called weaker – students can often do incredibly well at sixth form once the penny has dropped and once they have some ambition for what they want to do next," he says. And denying them that opportunity doesn't sit right. "Going back to Andrew Reed, it's not in the vein of what Andrew Reed would be about."

In fact, when he arrived as Head in 2014, Mark Hoskins set very tough targets academically. "I said, 'we're going to get really great results but we're going to do it the hard way and that way we'll get the best out of everyone'." Reed's aims to do that by providing opportunities for children to shine in a myriad of areas – be it sport, drama, music or special-interest clubs. "You need the academics. But at Reed's we've all come to the realisation that you get better academic results if pupils are engaged in the wider life of the school."

Like all schools, Reed's is attuned to the current pressing challenges of the graduate careers market, so preparing young people for that makes elements beyond academics even more of a priority right now. "It's very important for pupils to have those transferable skills – be able to work as part of a team, present well, speak publicly, move and interact with different sorts of people. And they need to be able to understand that leadership is a lot more subtle than that portrayed in some of the media. All of those things are hugely important, both within the classroom and in the co-curricular life of the school."

Happiness is a word you hear a lot here. Mark Hoskins sees that as an intrinsic part of helping young people find both direction and self-belief. "If pupils are confident, what they can achieve is magnified a hundred times. It's about getting people to believe in themselves, and also getting them not to compare themselves with others but be comfortable in their own skin and feel happy in their own unique combination of interests and attributes."

There's no 'pecking order' of the talents here. "We wouldn't put an Oxbridge student or a medic on a higher pedestal than someone who wanted to go to art school, be a professional tennis player or go into law or accountancy. We see

BELOW
Reed's School is located in Cobham, Surrey

ABOVE
Pupils are encouraged to find their passions and talents

BELOW LEFT
Mark Hoskins with Reed's pupils

all those paths as equally wonderful and valid. Our job is to try and help all those individuals find the path that is unique to them."

Reed's has helped many individuals find their path to great success, from Tim Henman, Jeremy Ovenden and Tom Hardy in sports, music and drama to *Forbes* '30 Under 30'-listed entrepreneurs Jessica Houlgrave and Sarah Neville. There are many who don't have that public profile but have achieved great success in their field, and that Old Reedonian (OR) network is highly active in paying it forward by supporting the Andrew Reed Foundation.

Recent initiatives include Equity for Equity, an OR-led plan to fundraise for future generations of Foundation pupils. The ORs (and current parents) also give back with careers talks and entrepreneurship events, and by offering opportunities to gain work experience – something Reed's is looking to scale up still further. The network continues well into working life, helping graduates and those on the career path to hook up with relevant people in their industry, wherever they may be in the world.

Andrew Reed is an ever-present influence, shaping the life of the school he founded over two centuries ago – both in the legacy and in the values it lives by. "We don't identify Foundation pupils in any way, full stop," says Mark Hoskins. "But I think we're a very accepting and inclusive school. Almost by osmosis, boys and girls from different backgrounds, different parental experiences as well, work together. Collectively, we all learn from each other." The Head talks about Andrew Reed to prospective parents – describing him as the thread through the school since 1813 – and every pupil knows how much his work benefits them. "In assembly, we talk a lot about his legacy, so everybody is very aware of how important the Foundation is to the school." That story of a man of visionary purpose – who understood the value of education and of giving back – is a thread to unite the Reed's boys and girls who continue to learn together and then head out to find their own unique path. "If you can send people off to university and careers who are compassionate, curious and have integrity, then you are doing a pretty good job," says Mark Hoskins. "And that's what we try to do."

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"THERE'S A REAL 'WHY' TO WHAT REED'S IS ALL ABOUT AND FELTONFLEET HAVE A **SIMILAR ETHOS AND SET OF VALUES**"

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ABOVE *JAGS students*

Reframing GCSEs

The Deputy Head Academic at ***James Allen's Girls' School*** *(JAGS) on reframing GCSE provision to prioritise depth, rigour and student wellbeing.*

For decades, approaches to Key Stage 4 (ages 14-16) in schools across the UK rested on the assumption that academic rigour is best demonstrated through the accumulation of GCSEs – the logic being that more qualifications naturally lead to better outcomes.

Nationally, however, the grip of this thinking is loosening. The average number of GCSEs taken has declined steadily over the last decade – today, around 85 per cent of students sit nine GCSEs or fewer.

Across the education sector, there is growing recognition that acquiring the greatest number of qualifications does not necessarily translate into deeper understanding, transferable skills or happier and healthier young people in our classrooms.

As educators, we are increasingly asking a different question: *what kind of education best prepares students for the world they are about to step into?*

This kind of purposeful questioning is not new. In 1741, when JAGS took the radical decision to teach girls to read, it was driven by a belief that education should respond to the realities of the world beyond the classroom and our students should not remain bystanders, but active leaders shaping it. That same ethos continues to guide us today, prompting a deliberate rethinking of curriculum design at Key Stage 4.

The result is JAGS Pathways – a new model that allows students to replace one GCSE with an internally assessed programme which broadens intellectual horizons and develops future-ready skills. Students are able to demonstrate their intelligence, analytic skill, and creativity outside the narrow confines of the GCSE exam series.

The case for change is increasingly clear. Concerns about over-assessment of young people, excessive workload, and the narrowing of the curriculum are shared by students, parents and teachers alike. Employers and universities are also signalling that exam performance alone is no longer the golden ticket it once appeared to be.

International frameworks reinforce this direction of travel. Both the OECD and the World Economic Forum point towards a future where success depends less on the accumulation of qualifications and more on the ability to apply knowledge, communicate and collaborate with others, and adapt to uncertainty. These are attributes that traditional assessment models are not equipped to capture.

> **"Employers and universities are signalling that exam performance alone is no longer the golden ticket"**

The Pathways programme grew directly out of this thinking and was shaped by extensive discussions with both students and staff. The three courses – covering Psychology, Politics and Economics – introduce disciplines that often sit beyond GCSE specifications, despite being among the most popular degree choices nationally.

Crucially, these courses are assessed differently. Instead of a single terminal exam, students encounter continual, multi-modal assessment via portfolios, presentations, research projects, collaborative tasks, reflective writing and structured discussion. For many students, this variety allows strengths to surface that traditional exams obscure, while maintaining a high level of academic challenge.

With this approach, we are not diluting ambition, but redefining rigour. Pathways also reflects a broader commitment to the OECD's concept of human flourishing. By retaining a strong GCSE core while creating space for curiosity, ethical reasoning and real-world problem-solving, the curriculum actively supports motivation, wellbeing and intellectual confidence.

Reducing assessment volume in this way does not lower expectations, it sharpens them. If education is to prepare young people for an uncertain and complex future, then rigour must be measured not by how much we assess, but by how meaningfully students are asked to think.

KRISTINA LEWIS
Deputy Head Academic
James Allen's Girls' School

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INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

Annie Crerar of ***Burlington House School*** *on the positive impact for student outcomes of creating dyslexia-friendly classrooms*

ABOVE *Students at Burlington House School*

Srainmcblg the ltteers in tihs snetecne mkaes it vrey hrad to raed at frsit. Yuor biran siltl fnids a wya, btu it tkaes a lto of effrot. Nwo iamgine rdenaig lkie tihs eevry day. In our daily lives, we read thousands of words almost automatically. Our brains instantly decode symbols, blend sounds, and comprehend meanings. However, for dyslexic individuals, this automated process can be a challenge.

While many people associate dyslexia purely with reading difficulties, the British Dyslexia Association defines it as a complex set of processing challenges, specifically impacting working memory, phonological processing, processing speed and orthographic processing.

Despite the challenges dyslexia can create, one key thing to remember is that dyslexia is not connected to intelligence. Many children with dyslexia exhibit a 'spiky profile'. This means they might score exceptionally high in areas like comprehension, non-verbal reasoning and out -of-the-box problem solving, while scoring much lower in spelling and verbal recall.

Because traditional classroom environments can demand rapid information processing and quick note-taking, dyslexic students frequently experience cognitive fatigue. This constant exhaustion can lead to a loss of motivation, low self-esteem and school-related anxiety. Dyslexia affects every individual differently, so there is no one-size-fits-all approach to creating a dyslexia-friendly learning environment. However, there are ways classrooms can be adapted to support dyslexic students – creating a space where all young people can succeed and celebrate their strengths.

The transformation begins with the physical classroom. A calm, uncluttered environment directly benefits the focus of all students. Teachers can create a more welcoming space by opting for well-spaced information on pastel or neutral display backgrounds, rather than bright, colourful designs that cause visual overstimulation.

Clear daily routines with visual timetables and timers reduce anxiety, allowing students to focus on learning rather than organisation. Integrating subtle resources as a universal – such as cream paper, dual-coded keyword sheets and tiered activities – helps dyslexic learners seamlessly access the curriculum alongside their peers without feeling singled out or 'different'.

Beyond the physical space, effective instruction relies on multi-sensory engagement. Relying entirely on small-print text quickly exhausts a dyslexic brain. By the time a student decodes the words, there may be little energy left to comprehend the concept. By breaking up lessons with practical activities, like mini-whiteboards, physical movement and educational games, teachers provide low-stakes opportunities for students to showcase their understanding. Incorporating dual coding – the practice of pairing written text with explanatory images or icons – further builds the cognitive connections necessary to anchor knowledge into long-term memory.

> **"Classrooms can be adapted to support dyslexic students – creating a space where all young people can succeed"**

Structured scaffolding is vital to keep the class learning together. Breaking complex tasks into smaller, more manageable steps reduces the heavy demand on working memory. Using universal scaffolds like sentence starters, model answers and collaborative discussion groups provides a clear path toward independence. Dyslexic students may need these scaffolds in place longer than their peers to build their confidence.

Common use of assistive technologies – such as text -to-speech software, spellcheckers, and coloured overlays – ensures students embrace these tools as standard learning aids.

Teachers and specialist support staff must collaborate to make these adaptations the norm while building strong relationships and deep understanding of individual student needs.

Parents play a vital role, too, in advocating for their child, in reinforcing school learning at home, and in celebrating their unique, creative strengths. It takes a village to build an inclusive classroom.

ANNIE CRERAR

Dyslexia Intervention Lead

Burlington House School Sixth Form

PREP POSITIVES

*As more parents weigh up options and budgets, Nathaniel McCullagh of **Simply Learning Tuition** considers the long-term value of a prep education and the areas in which it may be most value added*

For many parents, paying for independent school for their child's entire education is no longer an option. With the inclusion of VAT, average day fees are now around £19,000 a year or £50,000 for boarding, but this is an average. Many top schools charge far more – for example, Brighton College charges more than £19,000 a term for UK sixth-form boarders. In effect, this would mean spending somewhere between £350,000 and £700,000 on independent schooling through nursery, prep and senior school – for one child.

Unsurprisingly, a significant minority of families are now considering independent school for a set period. For example, applications to sixth forms have remained strong despite fee increases, as parents choose to make financial sacrifices for two years. As more families mix-and-match state and independent, the question then becomes, what age to prioritise?

Many parents might consider it sensible to focus on senior and sixth, particularly as this covers off public exam years. They may also believe that home environment and family support can have a bigger influence on children when they are younger, but as they become teenagers their peer group matters more.

It would be an oversimplification to assume that independent education in the earlier years (to Year 6 or Year 8) is a luxury, with the greatest value added at senior level. If, say, you live in the catchment area of an academically rigorous senior grammar but a poor-performing primary, then the opposite may well be true.

Local situation plays a key part in such decisions, but there are also general reasons why independent education through the formative prep years delivers long-term value and may be of particular benefit to some children.

EXPANDING HORIZONS

Prep schools typically have smaller class sizes, more specialist teaching, excellent facilities, high expectations for academic achievement and behaviour, varied extracurricular activities and outstanding pastoral care – including before and after school hours.

Prep settings are often idyllic, too. For example, Sunningdale School, near Ascot is set within 25 acres and boys can go fishing, mountain biking, climbing and camping. More rural still, at Pinewood School in Wiltshire there are 84 acres and pupils can ride and go clay-pigeon shooting.

Preps provide both breadth and depth of experience. Annie Gent, Head of Sherborne Prep in Dorset, notes that senior school Heads, "really value the children who come on to them from us – their willingness to get involved in school life, their excellent education grounding across all subjects, and their quiet confidence, sense of community and maturity".

At Sherborne Prep, pupils are offered more than 130 different enrichment opportunities each term. Children play sport every day of the week (by contrast, state primary schools may offer as little as one lesson of PE a week), and every day pupils have a co-curricular lesson – whether that be Art, DT, Music, Drama or project work.

The children can also experience

ABOVE
Preps offer small class sizes and plenty of one-to-one support at an early stage

"An independent prep can really come into its own for both all-rounders and those who sit in the 'middle' of the academic spectrum"

musical theatre, Dragon TV (their own TV show), podcasts, junk modelling, textiles and a range of other academic-challenge activities – all of which are simply not possible at most state primaries. "Children make remarkable progress here and develop a love of learning that will set them in good stead for the rest of their education, wherever that may be," adds Annie Gent.

STRETCH AND SUPPORT

State primary schools can work well for confident independent learners who find the three Rs relatively straightforward. At the other end of the scale, those with severe learning difficulties (critically, children with an Education, Health and Care Plan – EHCP) get one-to-one help, and so can also be well-supported.

However, an independent prep can really come into its own for both all-rounders and the many children who sit in the 'middle' of the academic spectrum. In a typical cash-strapped primary, it is easy for 'middling' or quieter children to be overlooked. An overstretched primary school teacher, trying to instruct a mixed-ability class of 30 with a range of educational and behavioural needs, may simply not be able to adequately support or stretch those students who are not obvious over- or under-achievers.

THE 'PREPARATION' FACTOR

By design, an independent prep school can help your child get a place at a top secondary school. Most parents are already aware that prep schools are excellent at readying students for the demanding entrance tests to academically selective independent schools, but they can also give students the best possible chance of moving on to a non-fee-paying selective school.

For example, Gayhurst Prep in Buckinghamshire sees about 40% of its leavers head to one of the popular local grammars, while Holmwood House in Essex loses half its pupils after Year 6 to Colchester Royal Grammar and Colchester County High. Preps such as these help to prepare students for the rigours of the 11+ exam and senior life, but in a way that is less pressured than the Standard Assessment Tests (SATS) of state primaries, which are invariably much more about teaching to the test.

"Teachers at independent prep schools are specialists both in terms of subject and age group"

ABOVE & BELOW
Specialist teachers and facilities help to stretch children's interests and grow knowledge

EXTENDED CHILDHOOD

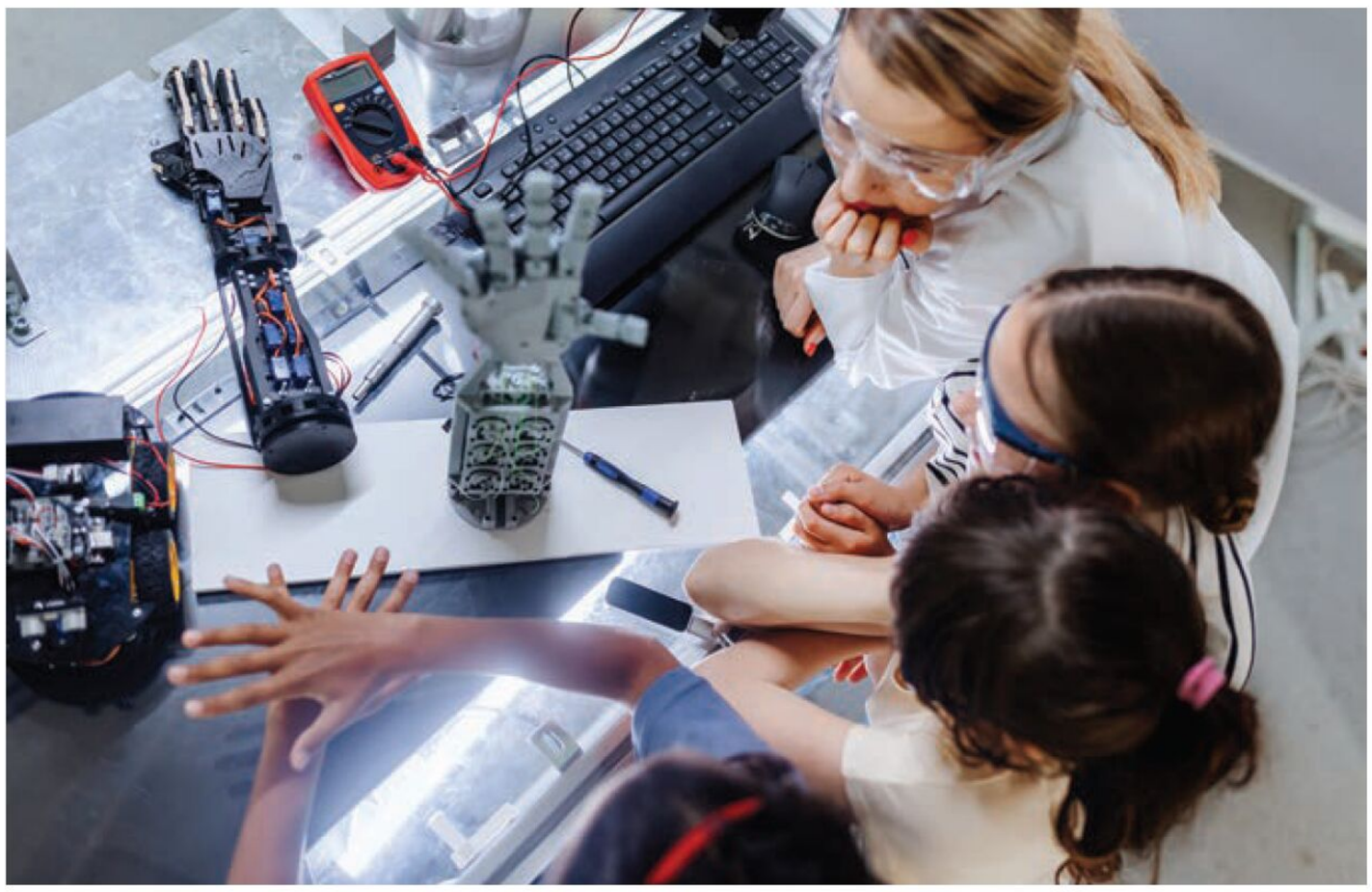
A critical benefit of the classic prep school – educating children from 7 to 13 – is that it gives children an opportunity to stay in primary education, Those extra two years allow time to mature and enjoy a more carefree school existence for longer. Once children are in secondary school, immersed in the world of adolescence and surrounded by much older pupils, some innocence and confidence can be lost.

Christine Cook, Head of Kitebrook School in the Cotswolds, points out that Years 7 and 8 in a prep school are valuable for offering plenty of leadership opportunities. "Students here have lots of chances to be role models to the younger pupils – for example, being a prefect – and can also excel in lots of areas, such as being a Scholar in an academic subject," she says.

"As well as helping to extend their childhood and hold off the pressures of teenage life for a little longer, it can really build up their confidence. For some students, moving to secondary school at Year 7 can make them feel like a very small fish in a very big pond, and force them to grow up very quickly."

It's also worth noting that teachers at independent prep schools are specialists, both in terms of subject and age group. At secondary school, teachers are often incredibly busy prioritising A-level or GCSE classes, or spending time writing references or assisting with university personal statements, and so Year 7 and 8 classes can sometimes be a bit of an afterthought. At prep schools offering places up to 13, these year groups are the top of the school. In many respects, they are the priority.

Despite prep schools' many attributes, this may not be the right route for every child. Ultimately, it comes down to family circumstances, local options and your child's interests, strengths and personality. There are opportunities outside school that help to add breadth and depth. In particular, working with a tutor can be invaluable for parents considering the independent school route for senior years but nervous about the academic leap required. Tutoring represents an accessible investment to help ensure that, wherever your child spends their senior years, they can thrive.



** Nathaniel McCullagh is founder and director of Simply Learning Tuition.* ***simplylearningtuition.co.uk***

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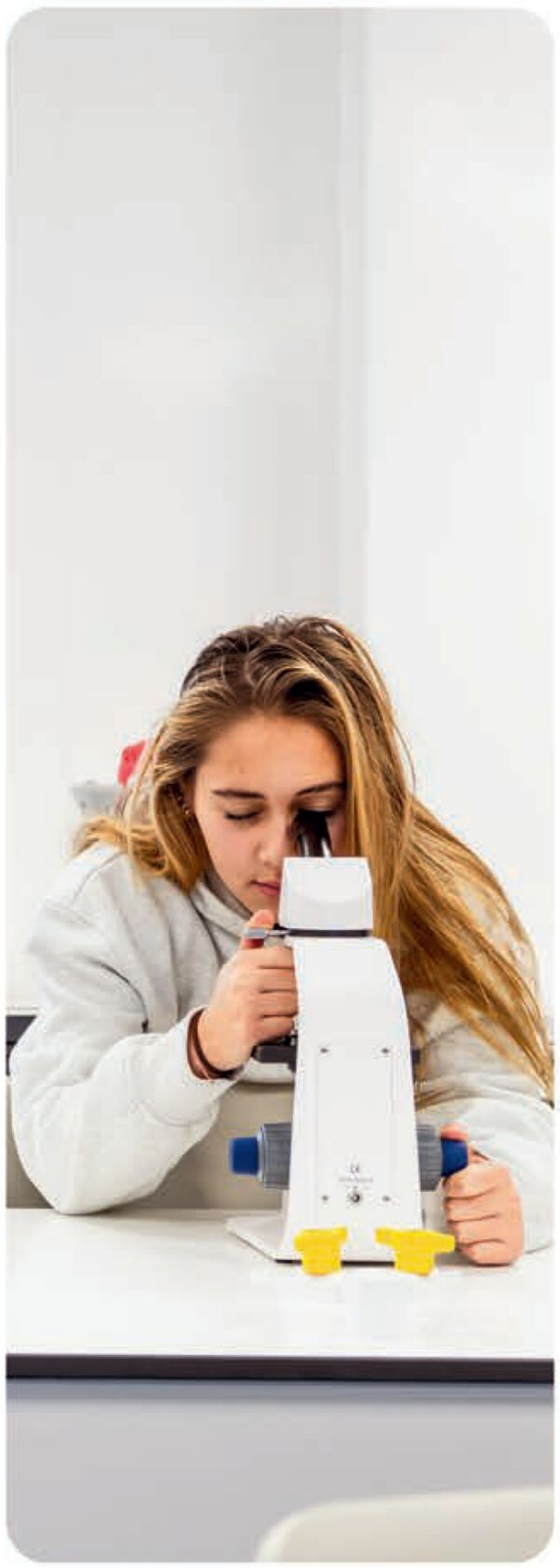

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Talking HEAD

Senior SUPPORT

*Rachel Bailey, Headmistress of **Benenden**, on why senior schools have a moral obligation to support the prep sector*

Tragically, barely a week passes without reports of a much-loved school closing due to financial challenges – and it is deeply upsetting to see the sector's widespread warnings about the impact of VAT on school fees coming true. But those of us fortunate enough to be running some of the UK's leading independent schools can help. In fact, not only can we help. I believe we must help.

British independent education is the envy of the world, and the prep school market is the very foundation of this success. Prep schools – often operating on tight margins – are feeling the current financial strain most acutely.

Prep schools instil curiosity, confidence and character in young learners. If we allow them to falter during this current – temporary – challenge, the entire ecosystem suffers. Senior schools benefit enormously from the calibre of pupils that preps produce. They therefore have a responsibility to help safeguard the integrity and quality of education for future generations.

We are proud to have recently completed a partnership with Orwell Park School, a highly respected prep school for girls and boys aged 2-13 in Suffolk, with which Benenden has long had a strong and mutually beneficial relationship.

"Senior schools benefit enormously from the calibre of pupils that prep schools produce"

ABOVE
Benenden pupils

This collaboration is not a takeover, nor a short-term fix. It is a long-term commitment to share best practice, align educational values, and work together in the interests of both schools and – most importantly – in the interests of the children. We are investing in each other's futures because we believe that the strength of our sector lies in unity, not competition.

We are sharing resources, pedagogical insights, and strategic planning. We are listening to each other, learning from each other, and building a future that is resilient and rooted in shared values.

Our schools were drawn to one another for strong reasons, most significantly our shared values and ethos. An additional compelling factor was our educational philosophy and commitment to delivering an exceptional educational experience. On a practical level, the most significant benefits of this partnership will be seen through the sharing of best practice among expert staff at both schools, while pupils will benefit from academic and co-curricular opportunities.

As a leading school, Benenden wants to help as many children as possible receive an outstanding education, whether directly at Benenden, through its wider group or via other partnership working. Partnerships like ours with Orwell Park are a model for what is possible. This is not charity – it is leadership.

I urge other senior schools to step up. The time for complaining about the impact of VAT has passed and, sadly, there is nothing we can do for those schools that have closed. We must be proactive, collaborative, and courageous. The independent sector has always prided itself on excellence, but excellence must be underpinned by responsibility.

It may not be within our power to reverse the VAT decision, but we are far from helpless. We have a moral obligation to support those who are most affected. We owe it to our colleagues, to our communities and, above all, to our children.

RACHEL BAILEY
Headmistress
Benenden School

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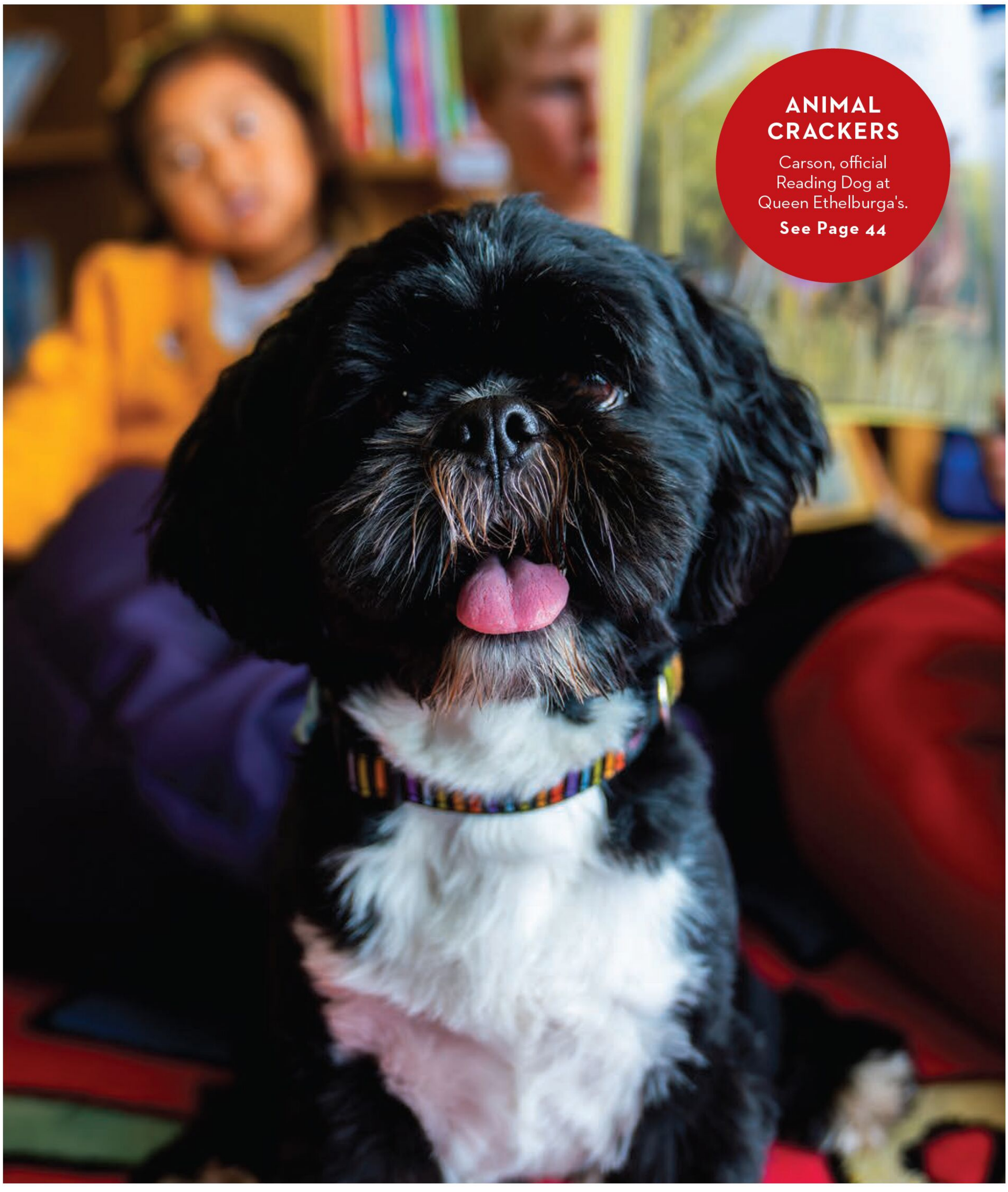

ANIMAL CRACKERS

Carson, official Reading Dog at Queen Ethelburga's.

See Page 44

ABOVE
Animal encounters at Francis Holland Prep

ANIMAL MAGIC

From providing comfort and teaching valuable lessons about empathy and care for the world around to supporting shy young readers, animals add magic that brings learning to life. Three schools tell us more about the rich benefits they bring

Chapter House Prep School, Queen Ethelburga's

At Chapter House Prep, part of QE in North Yorkshire, there's no doubt of the value animal encounters add to school life and learning. But the Head of Chapter House Karen Kilkenny says the arrival of reading dog Carson has been one of the most successful and popular initiatives of all time, especially with the younger children (Chapter House educates children from age 3 to 10).

"It has increased the confidence of reluctant readers having a non-judgemental audience. The children are purely reading for pleasure with no one pointing out mistakes or questioning them on the text," she says. Carson is a terrific listener, never interrupts or looks bored, and is more than happy to be read to. And the effect is profound. "We have seen their confidence increase and their reading has become more animated, with more expression – one Year 1 child's reading age has improved by two years over one term, and they are more curious about reading different texts."

ABOVE *A great listener, Carson supports pupil progress at Chapter House Prep, QE*

"Thanks to Carson, QE pupils' reading has become more confident – and one Year 1 child's reading age improved by two years over one term"

Carson does more than listen, playing an active part in school life by encouraging throwing practice – he gives his undivided attention if you throw a ball and will come back for more. He also encourages pupils to get outdoors in all weathers and enjoy a bit of exercise. Alongside his reading support, Carson helps to boost wellbeing for everyone. "Being around our calm, friendly Carson helps reduce children's anxiety, boosts mood and gives the children a chance to talk about any worries in a nurturing, inclusive environment," adds Karen Kilkenny. She believes the friendship without judgement Carson provides helps children regulate their emotions. "His presence also encourages social interaction and fosters empathy and responsibility among our children."

While Carson is the undoubted star of Chapter House, the children have plenty of other opportunities to learn from animals, with visits to Yorkshire Wildlife Centre for the younger pupils and exciting trips to see the bigger wildlife of Chester Zoo for Year 5.

Such visits reinforce classroom learning. KS1 children are learning about animals from Africa and Polar regions, as well as animals through time (including dinosaurs). Visits to see real species in their habitats builds curiosity and reinforces what they are learning about classification, food chains, diets, habitats and the differences between behaviours. As they move up the school, there is more scientific knowledge about rainforest habitats and animals, prey and predators, nutrition, and the way some animals have skeletons and muscles for support, protection and movement.

The Downs Malvern

At The Downs Malvern, animals play a large and lively role in school life, particularly through the school's smallholding, where pupils are able to experience animal care, food provenance and the natural world at first hand.

"Our resident animals include pedigree Oxford Sandy and Black pigs, with numbers fluctuating depending on piglets," says Andy Nuttall. There are also around 40 Japanese quail, plus guinea fowl, ducks, chickens – including Cream Legbars and Cuckoo Marans. "And Ayam Cemani chickens from Indonesia," adds Andy Nuttall who, it's worth noting, studied Zoology at Imperial College. "We also have three beehives on site. In addition, sheep graze in our orchard, giving pupils the opportunity to learn from a local farmer, although the sheep are not part of the school's own animal collection."

ABOVE
Avian care at The Downs Malvern and (below) quality time with the pedigree pigs

This wonderful collection brings multiple learning opportunities. Pupils interact with the animals through regular farming activities, including Pre-Prep sessions on Fridays and Prep School farming activities as part of the school's extensive Saturday Hobbies programme. There's also the value of just having animals around. "Children from Nursery to Year 5 also pass the animals on their way to Forest School, making these encounters a familiar and joyful part of everyday school life."

While all the animals are of interest, The pupils are enchanted by young animals – from the tiny quail chicks and ducklings to new piglets. "Different children naturally gravitate towards different aspects of animal husbandry. Some love the direct contact, whether that is gently cradling a quail or rubbing a pig's tummy, while others are drawn to the practical side, such as building shelters and improving animal environments," adds Andy Nuttall.

The team at The Downs Malvern find that its animals will often prompt wider conversations around empathy, responsibility and looking beyond ourselves. And caring for other living creatures helps pupils understand that animals have needs, routines and sensitivities, which encourages pupil patience, kindness and responsibility.

Andy Nuttall can see big educational benefits. Children gain first-hand knowledge of life cycles and the features of different vertebrate groups, while also developing an understanding of food provenance and hygiene. They grow supplementary food for the animals, learning more about plant life cycles and the importance of ensuring a balanced diet. "These encounters also open up broader conversations about seasonality, sustainability and food miles, particularly when discussing the value of locally produced meat and vegetables."

Across The Downs Malvern, there is huge excitement when the smallholding welcomes a new arrival large or small. The children are also very interested in the life of the school beehives, leading an assembly on the pollinators' vital role in our world. "They recently enjoyed marking World Bee Day with a honey-tasting experience and honey-themed cuisine."

"The Downs Malvern pupils pass the animals on their way to Forest School, making encounters a familiar and joyful part of everyday school life"

"At Francis Holland Prep, the annual Charity Dog Show is hotly contested, showcasing animal whisperer skills alongside creativity"

BELOW *Francis Holland therapy dog Kanga*

Francis Holland Prep School

At Francis Holland Prep, school life is made joyful by Kanga, a Hungarian Vizsla Therapy Dog, who belongs to the school's Lead Counsellor and has been a resident for six years – ever since she was a puppy. Kanga is a key member of ContemPlace, the FHP counselling service, and works alongside five specialist human therapists.

Pupils have the opportunity to drop in and visit Kanga whenever she is at the Prep – her time is split between Francis Holland Prep and the Senior School in Sloane Square. She comes into her own at the start of the academic year, especially for any new pupils finding it hard to settle, and she's also a huge support to Year 6 girls who are anxious about the 11+. Often, being with her for a few minutes is enough, say the team, and many friendships have been made between girls gathered in the Wellbeing Suite for a chat with Kanga.

Children have lots of other opportunities to encounter the animal kingdom. Reception and KS1 pupils enjoy incubating, hatching and rearing a number of chicks at school each year as part of their work on life cycles. There have been similar projects with butterflies, which pupils loved. There are regular trips, including the annual Reception trip to Bocketts Farm – a firm Summer Term favourite – where children meet chickens, rabbits, horses, goats, cows and even 'racing pigs'.

The bespoke Francis Holland Foresters programme is tailored for every year group and combines nature identification with shelter building activities, connecting children with both animals and bugs. Girls learn about the importance of mini beasts within an ecosystem. Their creative skills are seen in bug hotels equipped with lifts, swimming pools and even bowling alleys. They also learn 'detective skills' over the course of the school year scouting for different tracks left by bigger beasts – including foxes and badgers.

All this fun outdoor learning also embeds knowledge, and FHP immerses pupils in hands-on science and geography from the outset. In the Early Years, pupils explore through play, and their natural capacity for experimentation lays foundations for deeper scientific thinking. As they move through the school, the curriculum becomes increasingly specialised, introducing key concepts in biology, chemistry and physics.

There are enrichment sessions for every year group involving animals to help bring these subjects to life. For example, Zoo Labs recently visited, bringing an array of fascinating creatures to support pupils' learning about adaptation. From desert lizards that detach their tails to escape predators to giant snails with retractable eyes, the girls were captivated by the unique survival and adaptation strategies animals employ in their natural habitats.

Zoo Labs gave pupils the opportunity to get up close and handle some of the animals. The girls held the white snake, felt the texture of the giant snails and observed the intricate details of the tarantula. This hands-on experience not only deepened their understanding of science and nature but also helped many overcome initial fears of 'creepy crawlies', fostering curiosity and appreciation for the beauty of wild creatures.

Another aspect of animals up close, and a highlight of the school year, the Francis Holland Prep Charity Dog Show is all about fun and community spirit – raising funds for a chosen charity. This year, just under £2,000 was raised for School in a Bag. The competition is hotly contested by parents and pupils across five categories – Obedience, Loveliest Lady, Most Fabulous Fella, Puppy Love and Best Dressed. It offers pupils the opportunity to showcase their animal whisperer techniques, alongside creative and fashion skills and communication with the animals that bring magic to their life.

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Talking HEAD

Early EXCELLENCE

*The Head of **DUCKS**, Dulwich College's kindergarten and infant school, on what excellence in early childhood education looks like*

In May 2026, The Duchess of Cambridge, an active campaigner to raise awareness about the importance of early years education, visited Reggio Emilia – the Italian city known worldwide as a centre of excellence in the field.

The visit reflected the importance of innovative approaches to early childhood learning – and particularly 'Excellence in Education'. That describes a journey where children are exposed to opportunities that instil passion for learning with awe and wonder. This comes in parallel with building resilience and relationships with the environment and those around them. A centre of early excellence is an environment that stimulates and inspires children to learn while ensuring wellbeing.

Children make connections through relationships with the adults around them – from the Early Years practitioners and front office team to those who make and serve lunch. Daily connections happen not only within the school community but also children's surrounding environment – including family and neighbours – and are vital in early years.

Supporting children to explore is critical. Children are capable and competent, and we often do not give them the appropriate space to take safe risks or to express themselves and their ideas. Taking time to listen, offering opportunities for shared experiences, and time for independent exploration and play all give opportunities for learning with passion and inspiration.

"Children are capable and competent, and we often do not give them the appropriate space to take safe risks or to express themselves"

ABOVE
DUCKS pupils

When a child takes on the challenge of climbing a tree, riding a bike or writing their name, we know that at first they may not succeed. With encouragement, they try again, making links with previous knowledge and altering their approach in order to succeed. They learn persistence and perseverance along the way. Here, the power of the word 'yet' is vital. It's a small word that helps children develop a growth mindset – 'I can't do it...yet'. When a child is struggling, we can show them an image that contrasts a fixed mindset with a growth mindset and talk it through together. The image becomes a prompt to remember 'yet', so they are more likely to keep trying.

Teachers and Early Years practitioners are facilitators of scaffolding learning. This includes setting up the indoor and outdoor learning environments to foster curiosity. Children have a natural curiosity, and we need to tap into that with opportunities to inspire learning. A balance of freedom and routines provides confidence and a feeling of safety in exploration.

In our DUCKS Forest School setting, our children do climb trees and they do take risks – and we need to trust them. This means giving them the guidance and information to stay safe and climb as high as they feel capable. We will be there to verbally help and to facilitate the steps to come down but not carry them out of the tree. This is an example of promoting empowerment.

Academic excellence and success in older years are supported by establishing the passion and the enthusiasm for learning in these vital early years. This is coupled with solid relationships and connections to both the adults and environment surrounding the young learner.

As parents and practitioners, we too continue to learn. Reading research, listening to parenting podcasts, and taking the time to observe our children can inspire us to reflect and continue our pursuit of early excellence.

JO PARKER
Head of DUCKS
Dulwich College

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Talking HEAD

Confidence BUILDER

The Head of ***Aberdour School*** *Phillip Makhouli on why self-knowledge is a vital foundation for confidence, ambition and future success*

ABOVE *Aberdour School pupils*

What gives a child the confidence to aim high? The ancient maxim 'know thyself' has endured for centuries, and it feels strikingly relevant to education today. Is confidence built through repeated success? Praise from adults? Academic ability? All of these things matter. But I increasingly believe that one of the deepest foundations of genuine confidence lies somewhere quieter: in a child's ability to understand themselves.

Self-knowledge is not always given the prominence it deserves in education. It is less visible than exam results, harder to quantify than a grade, and perhaps less easily celebrated than a scholarship or prize. Yet when children begin to recognise their strengths, understand how they learn, identify where they need support and reflect honestly on their progress, something powerful starts to happen.

They become more secure. More willing to try and more able to respond to challenge without feeling defined by it. Their ambition becomes less about comparison with others and more about a developing sense of what they themselves might achieve.

Confidence without self-knowledge can be fragile. It may depend on always getting things right, on adult reassurance, or on success arriving quickly. Self-knowledge gives confidence roots. A child who can say, 'This is difficult for me, but I know how to approach it', is developing something far more lasting than surface-level self-esteem.

Educational research points in a similar direction. The Education Endowment Foundation highlights the importance of metacognition and self-regulation – helping pupils to think deliberately about how they learn, and to plan, monitor and evaluate their progress. In that sense, self-knowledge is not an abstract ideal, it is a practical educational strength.

This matters deeply in schools. We want children to leave us not simply with knowledge, but with a sense of agency – the belief that they can make progress, shape their future and pursue ambitious goals with purpose. To achieve that, they need adults who know them well, but also adults who help them know themselves.

At Aberdour, this has long been central to our approach. During our recent inspection, our personalised learning programme was identified as a significant strength of the school. Inspectors observed that pupils develop 'high levels of confidence and self-knowledge'. That connection is important. Success is not presented as something separate from confidence and self-understanding, but as something that flows from them.

> **"Self-knowledge gives confidence roots – developing something far more lasting than surface-level self-esteem"**

At Aberdour, this is given deliberate structure through our Personalised Achievement Learning (P.A.L) programme which sits at the heart of school life. Through regular one-to-one conversations, reflection and purposeful goal setting, pupils are encouraged to articulate what they have found challenging, recognise what has helped them make progress and think more deeply about the learner, teammate, friend and person they are becoming. Personalisation becomes more than differentiated work in a classroom – it is a way of helping children take increasing ownership of their development.

Of course, academic outcomes matter, but the most meaningful success is not produced by pressure alone. It emerges when children combine knowledge with curiosity, ambition with resilience, and confidence with humility. The world our children are growing into will require them to adapt, collaborate, and navigate uncertainty. Self-knowledge will not be a soft extra but a form of preparation.

When children understand who they are, they are more likely to believe in what they might become.

PHILLIP MAKHOULI
Headmaster
Aberdour School

BLUE NOTES

*The new picture book from **Frances Stickley** explores negative emotions frankly, giving both language and positive guidance on navigating the blues*

We adults do our level best to protect children and ensure their happiness. But not every day can be a good one, despite our efforts. So do picture books focused only on positivity do children a disservice? Frances Stickley certainly thinks we need a dose of realism and her new picture book, *The Storm Cloud*, tackles sadness, anxiety and depression head on.

Bear wakes up with a storm cloud above his head. Even though it's a warm spring day he feels chilly and decides to go back to bed. There's nothing he can do to shift that cloud, which keeps on growing. Feeling overwhelmed, he refuses to go out for a picnic with his friends because he doesn't want to spoil their day.

The emotions described in the book are complex enough for adults, let alone very young children, but with spare and thoughtful text and clever use of colour, *The Storm Cloud* takes us on a journey through darkness and back to lighter times.

We all like to envisage early childhood as carefree – halcyon days – making it hard to admit that anything can ever interfere with that. We do this even knowing that children are complex beings, just like adults. Frances Stickley thinks it's vital for us to acknowledge childhood's darker moments without apportioning blame or guilt to ourselves. "I actually feel like we wilfully minimise those feelings because, for so many of us, they feel like personal failings – especially as parents," she says.

"There's such a culture of toxic positivity. Even the very idea of being sad or anxious is inextricably intertwined with, *'What's wrong?'* If our children aren't happy, something needs fixing. But it doesn't, does it? Not really. With the best will in the world, we're never going to shield them from those feelings and surely we'd be doing them a disservice if we did."

As a former primary school teacher and literacy specialist, she sees books as a

ABOVE
Frances Stickley

LEFT
Emily Hamilton's vivid illustrations capture Bear's journey

"There's something about seeing a feeling played out at a slight remove – through a character, through story – that makes it feel permissible"

critical way of helping children understand themselves and their place in the world. "I think books are one of the safest and most effective ways we have of helping children make sense of their emotions. There's something about seeing a feeling played out at a slight remove – through a character, through story – that makes it feel both manageable and permissible," she says.

Just as important, books put names, colours and shapes to emotions. This brings clarity and some sense of control. "It gives children the language scaffold for something they might have only felt as a sort of internal chaos up until that point." And seeing feelings played out in a story also normalises them. "That moment of, *'Oh, it's not just me'* is huge, especially when there's such an underlying expectation that happiness is the default. Books quietly challenge that. They allow space for complexity without demanding resolution or 'fixing' things too quickly."

Fixing things – feeling better – is a process that we know can take time and honesty, and this what Bear goes through in *The Storm Cloud*. Once he has admitted out loud that there is something wrong, his buddy Squirrel sits with him and helps him talk about the cloud above his head (a cloud that only Bear can see), bringing comfort and care without passing judgement or minimising those feelings. It's a message to bring comfort to children experiencing dark times, and it also supports the development of empathy – including for readers who know that there's something up with a friend or family member.

Frances Stickley recently wrote a piece for BookTrust about the value of books which tackle difficult emotions – life's downs as well as ups – and especially as read-out-loud choices for groups of younger children. She sees this as an important way for peer groups to process the complexities and trials of life by making connections together. Such read-out-loud sessions become a public acknowledgement that negative feelings exist for everyone and having them doesn't make you different or weird.

She's certain that only reading books to children about happy characters doing lovely things is a form of dishonesty, of misplaced overprotectiveness. "We approach all art forms anticipating some reflection of the human experience, and by censoring those emotions that we know children experience in total abundance we're not only doing them a disservice, but arguably real damage," she says.

"The cognitive dissonance that comes from, *'Hang on. I know that I'm feeling angry or frustrated or really sad, but I'm not seeing that reflected anywhere in my cultural surroundings,'* is massive. We're not just failing to show them what life is really like; we're teaching them to distrust their own bodies and feelings in response to events. It's how we end up with all the secondary issues around those feelings – the shame, the guilt, the confusion, the compartmentalisation."

Frances Stickley is an old hand when it comes to writing books that resonate with children. Her three daughters have acted as both critical readers and influences on themes she's chosen. "Absolutely, they're the readers and the reason, not even consciously, just by osmosis really," she says.

"My first book, *What Will You Dream Of Tonight?* was a desperate cry for help to get my now nearly 14-year-old daughter to sleep through the night," she adds. "Now I can't get her out of bed!"

** **The Storm Cloud**, written by Frances Stickley and illustrated by Emily Hamilton, is out now (Post Wave, £12.99).*

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NATURE CLASS

*Tara Warren of **York House** on how the school farm celebrates life and builds lifelong skills*

ABOVE *York House pupils learn about caring for animals*

At York House we are no strangers to wildlife. We are currently permanent home to more than 50 different animals, including donkeys, pigs, goats, sheep and deer. Our pupils have recently welcomed six new lambs born on our onsite smallholding.

The children have shared the lambing journey, from the arrival of Mowgli the Southdown ram, who was matched with four of the school's Shetland ewes. They have observed the pregnant flock while they grazed, as well as being involved in various health checks leading up to their move to the maternity paddock. Finally, they enjoyed the arrival of the lambs – five rams and one ewe. The children have named the newborns Chandler, Rocky, Polar, Cloud, Matias and Twix.

We are keen that our children have the chance to experience the miracle of seeing new life being born into the world. Lambing also provides us with the opportunity to incorporate science topics such as life cycles. Celebrating our fourth season of lambing, this year is even more special, as we are now lambing from the ewes we bred back in 2023.

It has been another successful season, with our first-born ram being healthy and strong. The pupils were amazed to see him stand on his own and take his first drink within 30 minutes of being born. To watch the resilience and strength of these tiny animals is a wonderful learning experience for children.

Lambing teaches children lessons for their own life, too. It highlights the importance of calmness around animals. It allows children to recognise the stages of reproduction. Children are drawn to the strong bond and nurturing instinct they see between ewe and lamb, which is helpful when discussing their own families. We find that children tend to think more carefully when they are around young animals. This behaviour is also reflected in how they treat their peers.

The lambs will stay at York House and join the rest of the flock during the summer holidays. They will enjoy grazing in the valley paddock, along with daily feeding from nursery and reception pupils during outdoor learning and smallholding clubs across the school.

> **"Children tend to think more carefully when they are around young animals. This is also reflected in how they treat their peers"**

Alongside lambs, we have all enjoyed the arrival of several baby chicks this spring. This includes a Serama chick called Peanut, the smallest breed of chicken at the school, along with a Silver-Laced Wyandotte called Walnut. The children have been able to see the lifecycle process – from eggs collected from our hens and 21 days of incubation to hatching. The newborn chicks join the flock in the smallholding once they are fully feathered.

The pre-prep pupils are very much involved in the care of the chicks during their early morning and after school clubs. They have been able to have the chicks out in their play pen, taking turns to have some time with them, while learning to handle and care for fragile creatures.

As well as the obvious links to academic learning, being around any animal helps to improve a child's mental wellbeing as the brain releases endorphins. Having these new members of our school brings other benefits – every animal has its own personality, and the children build long-term relationships with them and feel a part of their life story.

TARA WARREN

Smallholding Manager
York House Prep School

GRAND PLAN

Becoming a children's author in your 20s is no mean feat, but ***Will Hamilton-Davies*** *honed his ear for writing as a reader of stories, and kept on going until that grand plan was realised*

Any author can tell you that finding your writing voice is the first hill to climb, and the second is finding an agent and publisher to believe in you. Will Hamilton-Davies has achieved all three things, still in his mid 20s. He is modest about it. "I should say, a lot of stars had to align for *The Mole And The Mound* to get published," he says.

This is actually his second book. His first was self-published – and pretty much self-distributed – after a crowdfunding round at the grand old age of 22. He recalls standing in a cheese shop trying to persuade them to put a poster about the book in their window, and then being amazed when they actually said yes.

After that came what he thinks of as his really lucky moment. "I had already sold several thousands copies of *The Shrew With The Flu* (more or less by hand), when I entered *The Mole And The Mound* into my first competition, and, by some miracle, got shortlisted." This then led on to offers from publishers and he found his agent. "By another stroke of fortune, Post Wave Children's Books was on the hunt," he adds. "And the rest was history."

His second book is an endearing tale about a most determined mole constructing a place underground he can call his own. His friends, Bird, Beaver and Bee, can't see what's under this muddy mound and show off their superior housebuilding techniques. It's only when a huge storm breaks, and shatters their nest, lodge and hive that they venture down Mole's 'great, grand hole' to seek shelter – and find a veritable des res, full of sophisticated home comforts.

As with any good picture book, the illustrations share in telling the story. Will Hamilton-Davies worked very closely with illustrator Kasia Fryza to capture both the characters and the amazing home underground – a delightful reveal for young readers. "Mole's ever-expanding system of tunnels – complete with home-gym, kitchen and bathroom – is quite exquisite, isn't it!" he says.

The fact that Will Hamilton-Davies gravitated towards writing so early is surprising when you consider he was a reluctant reader as a child. He says this came down to lack of confidence. "My reluctance to read was more of a symptom of a lack of confidence and a fear of competing with other (much more capable) readers. A more confident child would probably have channelled their curiosity towards the one place known for being great at answering questions – books," he says. It has had a lasting impact. "I'm always thinking about how I can help readers solidify a sense of confidence, as it's confidence that creates children capable of picking up books and using them to get from A to B."

Another vital aspect of Will Hamilton-Davies' journey as a writer came from his family. Growing up in a village outside Bristol he was the middle of three boys. Then, just around his teens, the family dynamic shifted. Another brother and two sisters came along – so he was now one of six. "It was reading those three much younger siblings picture books at bedtime that really opened me up

ABOVE
Kasia Fryza's illustrations help bring Mole's kingdom to life

LEFT
Will Hamilton-Davies

"It was reading those three much younger siblings picture books at bedtime that really opened me up to how incredible they are at packaging up the world"

to how incredible they are at packaging up the world and helping you understand quite complicated ideas in really simple ways."

This fired up an idea of becoming a writer. His stepmother was the first to encourage him to give it a try. Then, while he was studying journalism at Newcastle University, a "formidable" retired primary school teacher – his best friend's grandmother – told him he had something and gave him further encouragement to keep going.

Will Hamilton-Davies credits his siblings for shaping his journey, too. "It certainly means I've read a lot of picture books," he says. "I can say that I often think about my siblings when I'm writing stories." And the whole family have been invaluable supports as 'critical readers' – even down to the science behind the story. "My youngest brother spotted an error in the way I referenced the construction of Beaver's lodge in *The Mole And The Mound*, which led me to reword a section to make it more scientifically plausible."

He likes to write in rhyme, and has thought a lot about why this is so effective for picture-book audiences. "Rhyme is a pattern that we can all get on board with, that kind of tells us what is going to happen next with the words in the story," he says. "We can start guessing at what words are coming next, and we can start to be an active participant in the story. The flipside is that, because it is also a little bit more predictable and it has boundaries in a way that a prose picture book might not have, it makes it feel a little bit safer."

Rather like Mole in this story working on his 'great, grand hole', Will Hamilton-Davies has put his head down, honed his skills, and shown how persistence can lead to grand results. "It does feel like a big achievement but also it feels like that is totally down to having other brothers and sisters and people around me that have been really encouraging since the start.

"What I've found is that the more passionate you are about something and the more willing you are to go out into the world and talk to people about those ideas, or those things that you've created, the more people are actually willing to support you."

***The Mole And the Mound And The House Underground**, written by Will Hamilton-Davies and illustrated by Kasia Fryza, is out now in both paperback and hardback (Post Wave, from £7.99).*

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"Supportive, inclusive, ambitious" — ISI Inspection Report, November 2025

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EMBRACING **AI**

*The Director of Innovation at **Haberdashers' Elstree**, on how we design AI teaching for younger pupils in a way that's exciting, safe and purposeful*

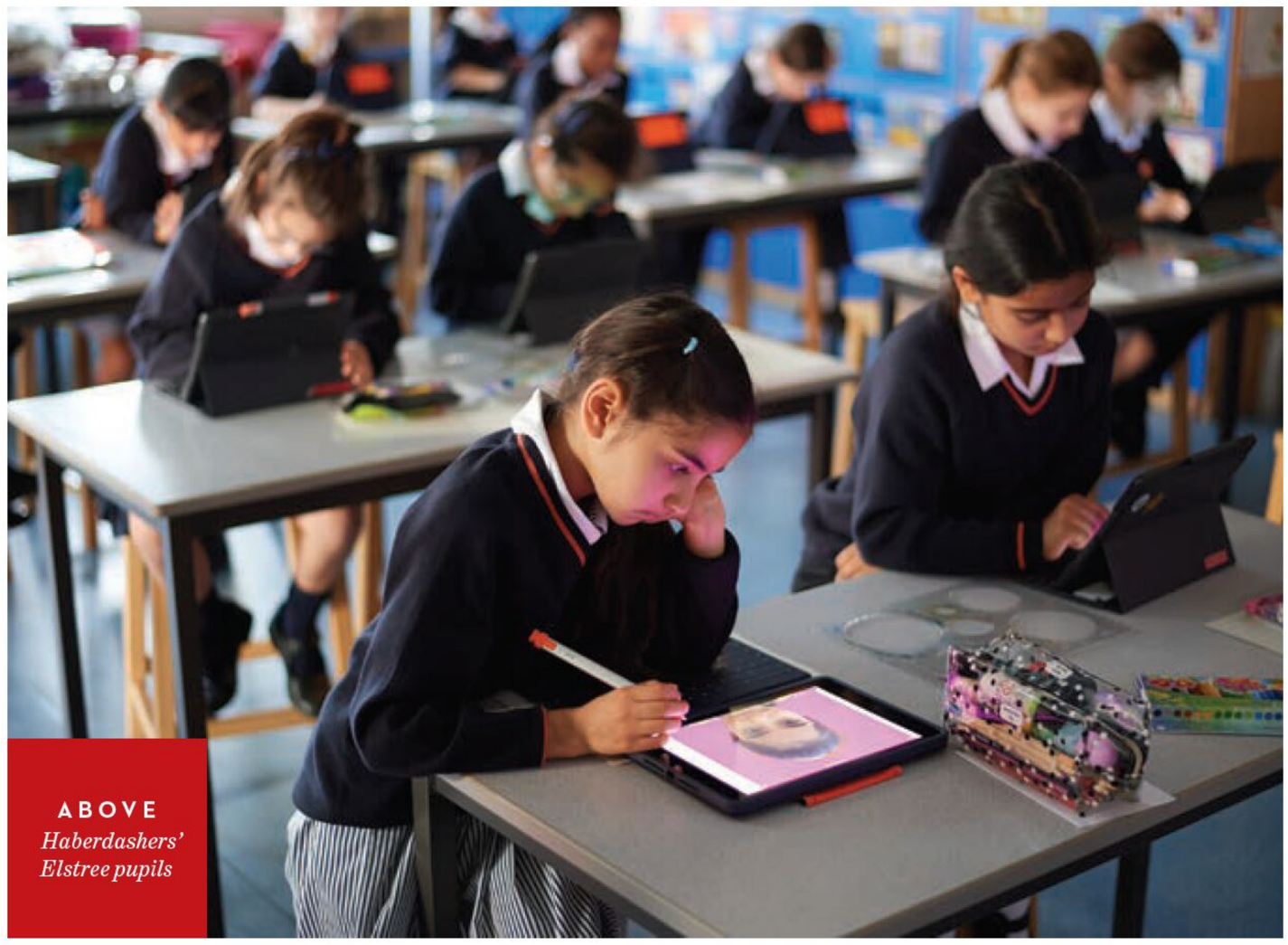
Artificial Intelligence (AI) is advancing quickly, so the conversation in schools must be ongoing. As teachers, we have to be explicit regarding our goals if we want to give pupils the very best opportunities to use AI to make a positive impact in the world. That means nurturing an ongoing, open dialogue around how to achieve that. The discussion is always evolving and although daunting at times, it is something that schools should feel excited to be part of.

Prep schools have particular challenges responding to AI. On the one hand, the job market is going to be the most different for the youngest students. On the other, age restrictions on many AI tools put them beyond the direct use of pupils (and, many would say, rightly so). So prep schools must respond to AI while not giving pupils access to much of it. It can be tempting to just look for a tool – an AI program – that pupils can safely use, but that approach ticks a box without necessarily addressing a wider issue.

Viewing integration of AI technology in relation to children's development as people is a good place to start. AI is not simply a new tool, like a glue stick or pair of scissors, but challenges what it means to think, to work, to come up with an idea. Ultimately, this means prioritising an ethical, pedagogical and philosophical understanding of AI, which in turn will promote critical thinking and positive engagement across the school community.

At our school, we are launching a new curriculum for pupils aged 8-13 years in September, which is designed to assess 12 key dispositions, such as collaboration, initiative and integrity. These are the deeply human traits that we believe really matter, and are not replicable by AI.

"We have a duty to ensure that any approach to AI is rooted in purpose, to empower young people to become more than simply passive users"



ABOVE *Haberdashers' Elstree pupils*

We piloted this approach in Year 5 last September, building a curriculum about ethical entrepreneurship, sustainability, human rights and fast fashion around the ISEB's iPQ qualification. The feedback we have had on this approach so far has been really positive. Parents and students are both recognising the complexity of thinking, as well as the new ways of problem-solving this brings to the curriculum.

At the same time, it is important, to recognise what skills remain important at this stage. Pupils need to learn to research, to write, to remember, to think and to analyse. Academic standards still matter.

As schools, we have a duty to ensure that any approach to AI is rooted in purpose – to empower young people to become more than simply passive users. Pupils should be encouraged to become active makers who use the technology available to solve real-world problems. They must start to think critically about AI, understanding how algorithmic bias affects outputs and how deepfakes can affect what we think of as reliable.

More than anything, we must respond with a curriculum which cultivates what is best about humans. In the end, foundational learning around the use of AI is more about understanding our individual pupils and our educational journey with them, developed and nurtured through an ongoing process of learning.

** Haberdashers' Elstree Schools is one of five UK independent schools to hold a Gold AI Quality Mark from the Good Future Foundation for strategic integration of AI technology in relation to the development of students.*

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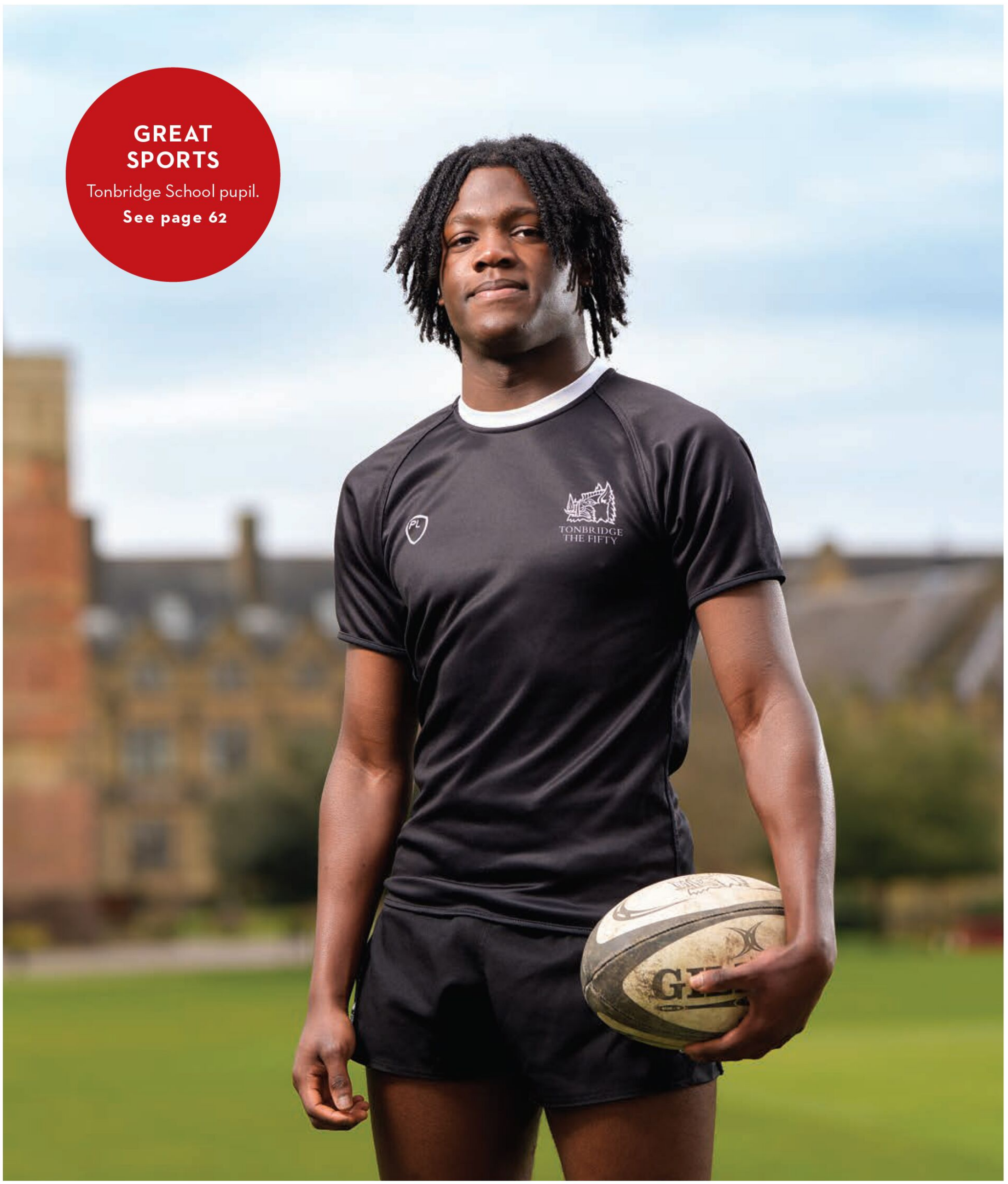


GREAT SPORTS

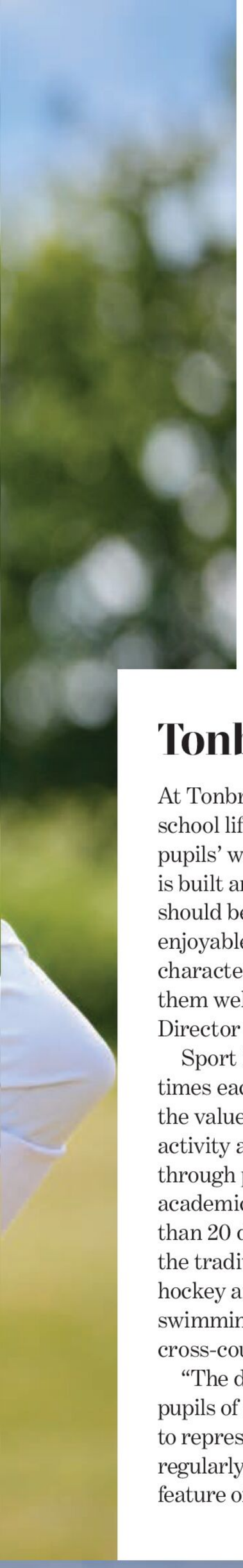
Tonbridge School pupil.

See page 62

ABOVE *Tonbridge School cricketer*

SPORTING VARIETY

Sport is intrinsic to school life. But where once it was trophy cabinets to be filled, now choice and inclusivity are key – so young people find games they are inspired to take further, including into adult life. Four schools tell us how they ensure sporting variety



ABOVE & BELOW
A cricket match in play at Tonbridge and learning how to sail

Tonbridge School

At Tonbridge School, sport is central to school life and an important element of pupils' wider education. "Our approach is built around a simple philosophy: sport should be inclusive, challenging and enjoyable, while helping boys develop the character and life skills that will serve them well beyond school," says Director of Sport, Chris Morgan.

Sport is fully timetabled three times each week, underlining the value placed on physical activity and the lessons learned through participation. Across the academic year, boys can access more than 20 different activities, ranging from the traditional team games of rugby, hockey and cricket to athletics, basketball, swimming, tennis, fencing, badminton and cross-country.

"The depth of our provision means pupils of all abilities have opportunities to represent the school and compete regularly," adds Chris Morgan. "A distinctive feature of the Tonbridge programme is the involvement of our academic staff alongside specialist coaches, creating strong relationships between pupils and teachers both on and off the field."

"A distinctive feature of the Tonbridge programme is the involvement of academic staff alongside specialist coaches"

Beyond the formal games programme, Tonbridge places significant emphasis on broadening participation and encouraging pupils to discover new interests. Thriving sports clubs operate throughout the year, many of them student-led, helping to create a culture where boys feel empowered to take ownership of physical activity. "Alongside established sports, we actively encourage 'have a go' opportunities and outdoor pursuits, ensuring pupils experience a wide variety of challenges and environments."

Chris Morgan notes that while some boys naturally gravitate towards traditional team sports, others prefer solo pursuits. "Our philosophy is to encourage pupils to try as many sports as possible for as long as possible. We appreciate that specialisation may eventually become necessary for some, particularly talented performers, but we aim to delay that process to support broader athletic development, reduce burnout and minimise overuse injuries," he says. This is assisted by a programme of education delivered through the school's Sport, Health & Fitness curriculum. "Exposure to team sport remains important, whether through the games programme or our extensive House sport competitions, because of the teamwork, communication and resilience it fosters."

Creating an environment where pupils are willing to persevere, make mistakes and try again is considered vital. Tonbridge says that because sport sits within the timetable, boys understand that it is part of their education rather than simply an optional extra. "We continually reinforce the idea that sport provides opportunities to learn resilience, self-discipline and perspective. Success and failure are both valuable experiences, and pupils are encouraged to reflect, improve and support one another."

For those boys aiming higher in a particular sport, there is tailored guidance and careful monitoring via the Sport,

Health and Fitness programme. In the first two years, all pupils are taught key training principles, recovery, nutrition and injury prevention. Strength and conditioning coaches work closely with pupils and coaches to monitor workloads and promote sustainable athletic development.

Sporting variety also includes introducing Tonbridge pupils to the broader benefits of games and activities that bring people together. "We believe sport has the power to connect communities," says Chris Morgan. "Tonbridge regularly hosts community events, including walking cricket festivals, and runs weekly sporting activities with young unaccompanied child migrants. Recent initiatives have included a cricket festival bringing together police officers, migrants and Tonbridge pupils, using sport as a vehicle to foster understanding and shared experiences."

ABOVE & BELOW
Girls and boys have a wealth of sports to try at Emanuel, including games like hockey and disciplines like rowing

Emanuel School

Sport is a central part of life at Emanuel School in Battersea. "We are striving to deliver the very best sporting experience in London, with the aim being to provide every child, regardless of their starting point, with breadth of opportunity, variety of experience, confidence – and importantly the challenge – to find their long-lasting, personal pathway through sport," says Director of Sport Sam Lavery.

One of the most visible ways in which this is achieved is through variety. "Pupils change sports each term throughout their early years, with at least one additional sport introduced each year. This means that if a pupil does not immediately connect with a particular sport, they are never compelled to continue with it for more than a term," says Sam Lavery.

With broad exposure to different sports, Emanuel also looks beyond the classic school games with a broad range of development sports, including basketball, table tennis, squash, swimming, water polo, girls' football, girls' rugby, boys' hockey and athletics. "These sports still retain their own fixture programme, while providing pupils with the opportunity to discover activities they may never otherwise have experienced – many of which they continue beyond school."

Sam Lavery says that the team sports still have allure.

"Naturally, many pupils develop a passion for our traditional performance sports – rugby, football, cricket, hockey, netball and rowing. These sports foster strong social communities that pupils and parents alike become part of throughout their journey at Emanuel. Importantly, however, the flexibility within our programme allows pupils to move between sports and even pursue rowing alongside other activities as they establish their own sporting connection. As a result, when pupils do choose to commit more fully to one or more sports, that decision is informed, meaningful and more likely to remain with them into adult life."

Whatever sports 'stick', the emphasis at Emanuel is firmly on continual development, focusing on building aspiration, personal connection and empathy. The school ensures young people are aware that both victory and defeat make vital contributions within any sporting journey. "Pupils approach fixtures understanding that success can take many forms and that achievement is often shaped by the context and challenge presented on any given day," adds Sam Lavery.

One key part of Emanuel's approach is the grounding in athletic development that all pupils receive in their early years at the school. This provides a strong foundation of physical literacy and athletic capability to support whichever sports they favour as they progress through the

"Emanuel pupils change sports each term throughout their early years, with at least one additional sport introduced each year"

ABOVE
Duke of York's offers both breadth and depth in sport

school. There's an in-house physiotherapist who works closely with both the athletic development and coaching teams, ensuring a proactive approach to prehabilitation and injury prevention. "Our staff know our pupils. With regular daily interactions both formally and informally, we strive to build strong relationships to ensure that our pupils continue to receive both challenge and support, in the manner they need to pursue their aspirations.

"The sporting provision at Emanuel also extends well beyond our own pupils. As a school, we are proud to sit at the heart of the local community. Each week, local primary schools join us to experience the opportunities available here. We also host annual tournaments across a range of sports and deliver holiday coaching programmes for the wider community."

Duke of York's Royal Military School

At Duke of York's, sport is built around both breadth of opportunity and individual choice, so that every student can discover activities they enjoy while developing a lifelong appreciation for physical activity.

All students enjoy plenty of games opportunities, with two timetabled games afternoons each week. In Years 7–10, the programme centres on building a strong foundation in the school's major sports – rugby, netball, hockey, athletics, cricket and tennis. There are regular fixtures and multiple teams across each age group. In the senior years, students are given greater autonomy, choosing from a range of options to suit their interests and strengths. Alongside this, a weekly PE lesson in Years 7–9 introduces a wider spectrum of activities, from swimming and gymnastics to trampolining, badminton and basketball.

"Duke of York's students explore new and emerging activities – such as mountain biking, rock climbing and girls' rugby or football"

Sporting variety is further enriched through an extensive co-curricular programme of over 60 clubs each week. Duke of York's students are encouraged to take part in at least two, with the flexibility to switch pursuits each term. This means they have the opportunity to explore new and emerging activities – such as mountain biking, rock climbing and girls' rugby or football – while also ensuring additional, small-group training sessions for those pupils who want to develop further in core sports.

The school places a strong emphasis on mindset as well as performance. Students are encouraged to set realistic, individual goals and to see setbacks as part of the learning process. This approach is designed to foster perseverance and also maintain enjoyment, so that young people continue to see sport as a positive and motivating experience.

For those with a particular passion, training is carefully structured to balance progression with wellbeing. Workloads are monitored across school and external commitments, and bespoke programmes come into play to help prevent overuse injuries. Students have access to one-to-one coaching, strength and conditioning and

THE WHOLE PERSON IS THE WHOLE POINT.

RUGBY SCHOOL

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ABOVE
Malvern offers 17 competitive sports, including a student favourite, rugby

"At Malvern College, Inter-House competition is fierce, but it's also where sport feels most accessible and fun"

physiotherapy. An on-site medical centre ensures further holistic support. Budding athletes maintain a close collaboration with academic staff to ensure all is well.

Beyond the school environment, sport is used to build community connections. Duke of York's regularly hosts local fixtures, tournaments and inclusive events, while also opening its superb facilities to external clubs and organisations. This not only broadens participation but reinforces sport as a shared, lifelong pursuit. The school is proud of its sporting partnerships with professional clubs – including Rugby Scholarships with Saracens Rugby Club. The team at Duke of York's say they are committed to variety and personal development, giving students the tools to find what they love and the confidence to pursue it in and beyond school.

Malvern College

"After more than 160 years of history, almost every pupil leaves Malvern with a story that begins, 'I played...'," says Malvern College Director of Sport Mark Hardinges. "Whether that means representing the College, competing in House colours or simply trying something new for the first time, sport is a shared experience that defines a Malvern education."

The school works to ensure both depth and breadth to that experience. The traditional core of cricket, football, netball, rugby and hockey remains central, with opportunities that stretch from first-time participation to representing school, county and even country. "It not just the strength of these pathways, but the variety that ensures every pupil finds something meaningful during their time here," adds Mark Hardinges.

There are 17 competitive sports offered, with 158 active teams representing the school. It is particularly proud that 72% of pupils have represented Malvern in one of its competitive teams. Alongside the team mainstays, activities such as golf, fives, rackets and dance – plus a rich co-curricular and outdoor pursuits programme to encourage exploration – reflect the College's broader philosophy of education.

This variety is intentional, says Mark Hardinges. The school sees the opportunity to try different sports as encouraging pupils not to specialise too early, but to experience a wide range of activities. It means a cricketer might discover an aptitude for tennis, while a footballer may find that cross-country sharpens their stamina. Breadth not only reduces the risk of injury but fosters a more sustainable relationship with sport – one built on enjoyment as well as achievement. "Crucially, it also prepares pupils for life beyond school, equipping them with the confidence and desire to remain active long after the structure of school sport has fallen away."

At Malvern College, sport is not viewed in isolation, but as part of a wider approach that develops the whole child. The variety on offer is designed to build far more than physical ability, as students develop emotional intelligence, cultural awareness and intellectual curiosity. "Sport is one of the most powerful ways we develop character. It teaches pupils how to respond to challenge, support others and understand themselves, as well as each other," says Director of Co-Curricular and Character Justin Major.

The team at Malvern believe there is real value in ensuring pupils share common sporting experiences. "For many of our international students, this includes exposure to traditional British sports they may not have encountered before. Engaging with these games is not simply about learning new rules or skills, it is a way of building cultural empathy and understanding. Through shared participation, pupils gain insight into each other's backgrounds while developing a collective sense of identity and belonging," adds Justin Major.

As a boarding school, House sport sits at the heart of this culture, he adds. "Inter-House competition is fierce, but it's also where sport feels most accessible and fun. Playing alongside housemates builds confidence, sharpens commitment and forges a strong sense of unity and belonging that lasts well beyond the game."

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Golf Benefits

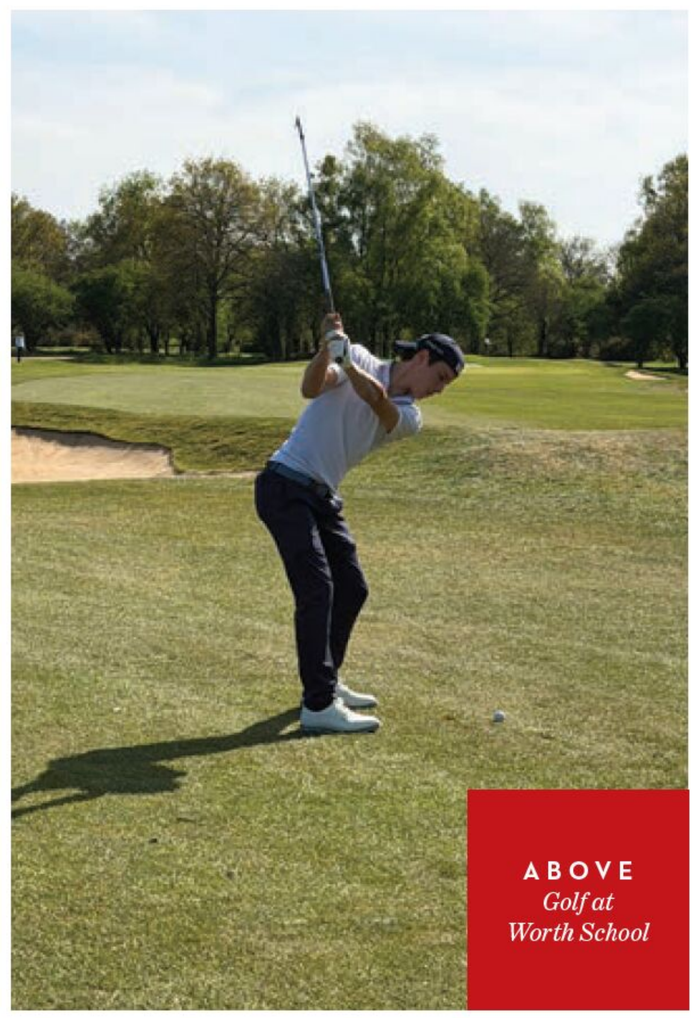
In a technology-driven world, David Burton of ***Worth School*** *discusses the counterpoint offered by rich sports opportunities – especially school golf*

In a world increasingly shaped by screens, algorithms and AI, the importance of sport in education has never been greater. Young people are growing up surrounded by extraordinary advances, yet also facing digital distraction, reduced physical activity and fewer opportunities for genuine connection. As schools prepare pupils for this technology-led future, they must ensure they develop the qualities technology cannot replace – resilience, teamwork, integrity, confidence and wellbeing.

At Worth School, the sport programme aims to foster a lifelong love of physical activity. Pupils learn, develop and compete across athletics, badminton, basketball, cricket, cross country, equestrian, fencing, football, golf, hockey, lacrosse, netball, rugby union and tennis. All pupils take part in the timetabled sports programme, while enthusiastic players and school team members often train more frequently.

Within this broad mix, golf has emerged as a particularly distinctive and valuable part of school life. The Worth Golf Academy provides pupils with the opportunity to develop and perform at whatever level of golf they aspire to. Through our partnerships with Tilgate Golf Academy and Copthorne Golf Club, pupils benefit from coaching delivered by PGA professionals, access to a 32-bay driving range equipped with Toptracer technology, an 18-hole course and excellent short-game facilities. On the Worth School site, we have a 9-hole golf course and an indoor golf facility with simulator, state-of-the-art launch monitor and performance analysis technology.

Competitive opportunities are extensive. There's an internal Order of Merit, plus inter-school fixtures and national competitions such as ISGA and HMC tournaments. Beginners and developing golfers join the Development Squad, enjoying three to five hours of coaching each week. More experienced and aspirational



ABOVE *Golf at Worth School*

players train within the Performance Squad, receiving five to eight hours of coaching and playing opportunities weekly. Our golf scholarships allow talented pupils to combine a first-class academic education with an outstanding golf programme.

While every sport contributes to child development, golf fosters qualities that feel especially relevant in this digital age. Modern life conditions young people to expect instant responses and immediate reward. Golf offers something different, and there are no shortcuts. Improvement comes gradually and is earned through patience, repetition and reflection. Teenagers learn quickly that setbacks are not failures but part of progress. Mastering a skill over months and years – rather than moments – creates a deep and powerful sense of achievement and self-belief.

Golf also develops accountability in a uniquely direct way. Players must take ownership of decisions and performances, learning how to recover from mistakes and remain composed under pressure. The game's culture reinforces honesty

> **"Golf offers something different, and there are no shortcuts. Improvement comes gradually and is earned through patience, repetition and reflection"**

and integrity, too, often requiring players to uphold standards of play and scoring even when nobody is watching.

Just as importantly, golf encourages something increasingly rare – sustained concentration and genuine human connection. Walking a course creates space for conversation, friendship and reflection, while its intergenerational nature allows young people to interact with peers, but also teachers, parents and older adults.

For schools considering how best to prepare pupils for modern life, the lesson is clear. Sport must remain central to education, with programmes that are inclusive, celebrate participation alongside excellence, and foster long-term engagement. The future may be digital, but childhood should never be so. Sport has never been more relevant – and golf shows us precisely why.

DAVID BURTON
Director of Sport
Worth School

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INDEPENDENCE DAYS

*The team at **Eltham College** discuss the value of residential trips for building academic and life skills – and lifelong memories*

Residential trips have long been a cherished part of school life. The very words can evoke in each of us a treasured memory of forays away from home. In an era where academic outcomes often dominate the conversation, their importance can't be overlooked. They are key to the broader purpose of education of nurturing confident, curious and capable young people, ready to engage with the world around them.

At Eltham College, which educates boys and girls aged 7 to 18, such experiences are high on the co-curricular agenda at every stage of the journey through school. For younger pupils, a first residential trip provides an opportunity to practise essential life skills – packing their own bags, managing routines, coping with homesickness – as well, of course, as trying exciting challenges such as abseiling and rafting for the first time.

"Our Windmill Hill adventure centre trip is often a child's first time away from home," says the Junior School's Head of Year 3 and 4, Nicki Chamberlain. "They return that little bit changed – more independent, supportive and connected. Food and dorms are highlights. Night one brings excitement and little sleep, night two complete exhaustion. For staff, it is a wonderful opportunity to get to know the children beyond the classroom."

"Residential trips are key to the broader purpose of education – of nurturing confident, curious and capable young people"

ABOVE *Eltham College students*

As students move into teenage years, these shared experiences strengthen friendships and encourage collaboration, says Eltham College. Pupils learn to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts and appreciate diverse perspectives – perhaps even redefining themselves within their peer group, away from the structures of school.

Eltham aims to offer opportunities for all interests. Recent Lower School visits have included a camping trip plus a STEM residential to Bletchley Park, Bell Heath and Cadbury's World. Special-interest trips have included an Activity Language trip to France, a conservation trip to Devon, a netball trip to Disneyland, Paris and a rugby trip to Cardiff. Overcoming challenges and finding unknown strengths builds self-sufficiency and a sense of achievement – these trips often become lasting memories.

For older students, residential trips may take on a more academic and aspirational focus. Opportunities such as Eltham's recent study tour, which took 80 students to NASA's Houston space centre for a six-day immersion in space science, can be transformative. Whether local or overseas, such trips deepen subject knowledge while connecting learning to real-world applications – and also, potentially, future careers.

"Residential trips remain a vital part of education, fostering independence, resilience and meaningful social connections beyond the classroom," says James Willatt, Head of Co-curricular and Partnerships at Eltham College. "From a Year 7 camping trip that builds confidence and camaraderie to Sixth Form visits to Uganda combining service with global awareness, these experiences enrich learning and inspire ambition. Together, they help shape well-rounded young people, prepared not only for exams, but for the wider demands and possibilities of life."

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CONCORD COLLEGE

Artistic LICENCE

Alex Perry-Adlam of ***St Catherine's, Bramley*** *on how creative subjects give students licence to embrace setbacks, take on challenges and grow as learners*

Parents naturally want their children to succeed. We celebrate good grades, polished performances, and carefully completed projects. Yet in creative learning, the path to growth is rarely neat. Paint spills, clay collapses, and big ideas fail to take shape. While these moments may look like setbacks, they are often where the deepest learning happens. When children understand that mistakes should be explored, not avoided, they develop confidence, resilience, and a love of creativity.

One of the most valuable lessons children gain from creative mistakes is resilience. When a drawing doesn't match what they imagined or a design falls apart, they face a choice – give up or try again differently. With encouragement, children discover that they can adjust their approach. This flexibility strengthens their ability to cope with challenges, not only in art but across all areas of life.

When mistakes are treated as part of learning, children begin to see challenges as opportunities, not threats. Rather than saying, *'I'm not good at this'*, they are more likely to think, *'I'm not good at this, yet.'* That single word 'yet' can transform frustration into motivation. However, many children feel intense pressure to get everything right first time. From an early age, they can become trapped in a cycle of perfection. This mindset often develops unintentionally.

"When children learn that nothing terrible happens if an idea fails, they become braver thinkers"

ABOVE *St Catherine's, Bramley art class*

Praise that focuses only on results can send the message that being correct is more important than being curious.

Breaking this cycle requires a gentle shift in adult responses to children's efforts. Instead of asking, *'Is it finished?'* or *'Did you do it correctly?'*, it can be far more powerful to ask, *'What did you discover?'* or *'What would you try differently next time?'*. These conversations show that the process matters. When experimentation and persistence are recognised, perfectionism loses its grip. A child worrying about making mistakes is less likely to take imaginative risks. Over time, this caution can dampen originality. By contrast, children who feel safe making mistakes often produce more inventive work. Moments of playful uncertainty are where creativity thrives. When children learn that nothing terrible happens if an idea fails, they become braver thinkers.

Assessment also shapes children's willingness to take risks. If children believe they're only rewarded for perfect outcomes, they'll naturally aim for safety. But when educators value progress, reflection and effort, children start understanding that growth is the real goal. A slightly messy project filled with original thinking often reflects deeper learning than a technically perfect one completed by following instructions alone.

Ultimately, breaking the cycle of perfection does not mean lowering expectations; it means redefining success. Success becomes courage to try, patience to improve, and confidence to continue after something goes wrong. Children who learn this early carry it beyond the classroom. They become more adaptable, more willing to solve problems, and less afraid of challenges.

Mistakes, then, aren't interruptions to learning, they're the heartbeat of it. They signal that a child is stretching beyond what feels comfortable. When educators treat these moments as valuable, children see themselves not as performers striving for flawlessness, but as individuals capable of growth.

By encouraging a growth mindset and welcoming imperfection, we give children a powerful gift – permission to be unfinished, to experiment, and to evolve. And in that freedom, creativity flourishes.

ALEX PERRY-ADLAM

Head of Art and Photography
St Catherine's, Bramley

TOP CLASS CRICKET

*While **Wellington College** has a strong cricket heritage with star players past and present, it's the momentum of the girls' game that's making waves right now*

Wellington has a proud cricketing heritage, playing a key role in the development of great players, including Old Wellingtonians Tom and Sam Curran. But in recent years, it has become an emerging force in the girls' game with notable success stories among current and former pupils.

The strength and momentum of girls' cricket is led by Thea Brookes, who has been instrumental in shaping the game, drawing on her own experiences across domestic cricket. This includes spells with Birmingham Phoenix, Central Sparks, Southern Vipers, Warwickshire and now Surrey.

With such training talent and playing experience on board, girls' cricket is enjoying its highest ever levels of participation. Commitment to this priority school sport is reflected in the facilities available at the Berkshire school. There are nine grass cricket pitches, 14 grass cricket nets and a further 12 artificial nets. Four indoor cricket lanes (purpose built) mean rain doesn't stop practice. It helps that Wellington is positioned in a powerful cricket county, closely aligned to Hampshire, and with Middlesex and Surrey nearby.

"I am extremely proud of the rapid growth of girls' cricket over the past four years," says Thea Brookes. "When I first arrived at Wellington, the programme was very much in its infancy, with only a single XI in place. Since then, we have expanded from one team to six, growing participation from just 11 players to a thriving pathway of 60–70 girls – a significant and hugely rewarding development."

BELOW *Wellington girls joined a cricket tour to South Africa*

This year, the start of the season was made even more special as the College celebrated Old Wellingtonian Francesca 'Cesca' Sweet, who has signed a richly deserved two-year deal with Hampshire Cricket. Cesca embraced every opportunity that came her way and her success is defined by resilience, determination and unwavering self-belief.

Having never been part of a formal academy set-up, she forged her own route into the professional game – an achievement that the school believes speaks volumes about her character. Playing first as a young cricketer at Sussex, she continued with Berkshire, Leicestershire and through the Challengers, where she competed against professional players and grew her confidence at a higher level.

Wellington's new Head Coach of the Girls' 1st XI is Olly Tapp, also Assistant Coach to the Challengers 1XI where Cesca plays. Bringing his international coaching expertise to the College training programme, he works alongside Thea Brookes to ensure every player is supported and challenged to become the best they can be, both technically and tactically.

Whereas in the past, girls who wished to play cricket often had to join boys'

"We have expanded from one team to six, growing participation from just 11 players to a thriving pathway of 60–70 girls"

teams, Wellington now offers a strong and competitive fixture programme, with the 1st XI playing up to 25 matches each season, plus involvement in four different cup competitions. To enhance opportunities and experiences for girls, the College is also part of the Girls' BOWS Festival cricket tournament – the competitors are Brighton College, Oakham, Wellington and Sedbergh.

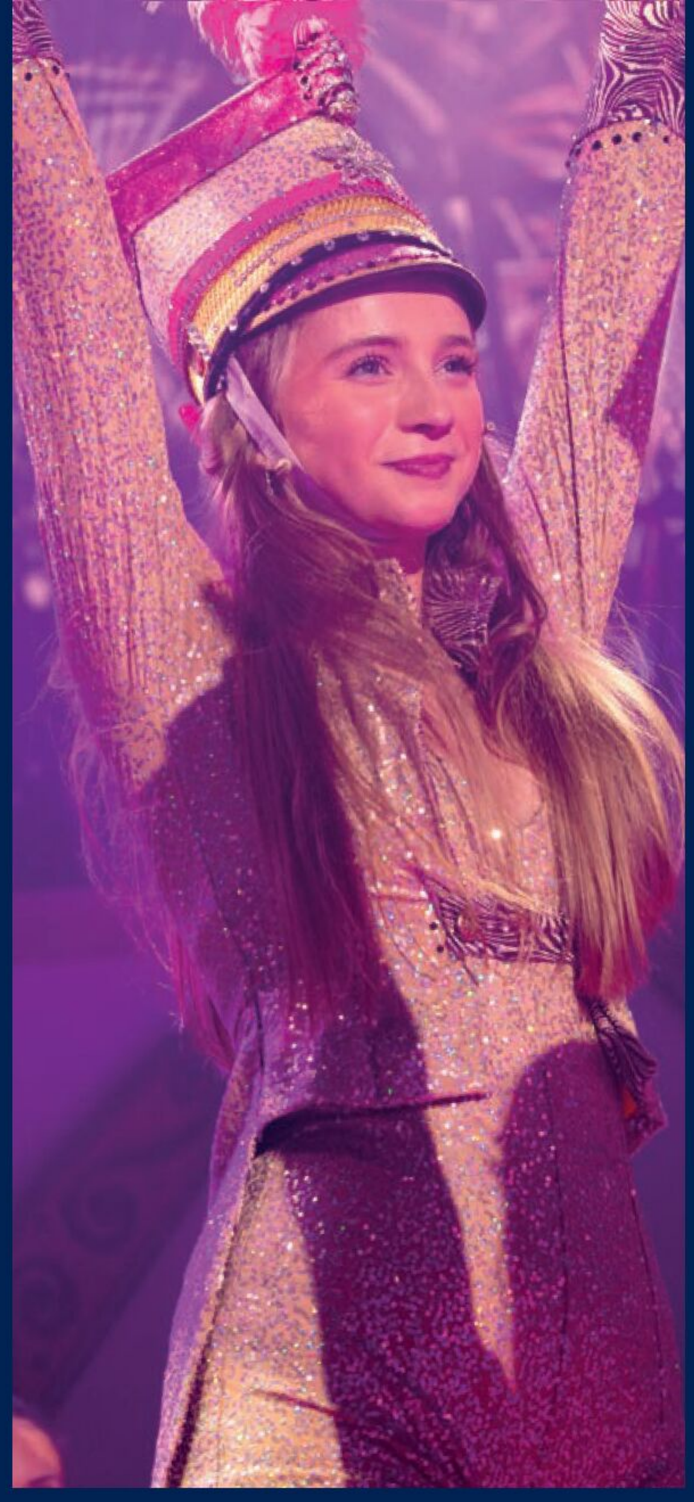
Wellington celebrated another landmark moment this spring when Lower Sixth students Nishka and Zaara became the first females to join the Cricket Honours Boards at the school, setting the standard for other girls to follow. It is even more impressive that their stellar achievements happened on tour.

Wellington College Cricket Club embarked on a memorable and gruelling international tour to South Africa in February. And the girls' team toured alongside the boys for the first time in the College's history. In a match against Framesby, Nishka's outstanding innings of 114, from just 63 balls, was a masterclass in controlled aggression and composure, guiding the team to a total of 186.

Soon after, Zaara produced one of the most extraordinary bowling spells – five wickets in five consecutive balls. Finishing with remarkable figures of 6–22 from 3.5 overs, she also delivered an unbeaten 101 against Somerset College. It was an innings that secured her place on the Wellington Honours Board for scoring a century, as well as recognition on the bowling board during the same tour.

The entire girls' team played phenomenally well in South Africa with stand-out performances from several pupils. A fitting conclusion to the tour was climbing Table Mountain, where Wellington's cricketers – both girls and boys – felt on top of the world of cricket.

AN INDEPENDENT DAY & BOARDING SCHOOL FOR AGES 0 - 18



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Farm FOLK

*With a farm and stables on site, **Milton Abbey School** in Dorset offers unique opportunities to learn from animals and the land*

Milton Abbey offers rare and exciting opportunities to get up close to animals and nature, and build knowledge and skills along the way. Located in Milton Abbas, in an idyllic location with grounds designed by Capability Brown, it has a working farm and stables on site, home to a wonderful variety of resident animals. "Pupils regularly care for and interact with sheep, chickens, cows, goats, an alpaca, stick insects, and our cheeky mini-Shetland ponies, alongside riding-school horses and ponies," says Director of Land Based Studies Charles Burnham-Slipper.

As well as this wonderful menagerie on the farm, across the boarding houses there are also many different breeds of dogs and two much-loved cats. The team here says it all helps to create a warm and lively community for pupils – also a home from home feel.

There are valuable lessons in being given access to the farm. Students have regular and structured opportunities to interact with animals through both timetabled activities and enrichment provision. "Every Friday afternoon, as part of our Round Square programme, we run a Land Based Studies club where students visit the school farm to engage directly with animal care," says Charles Burnham-Slipper. "This includes practical animal husbandry, such as grooming, feeding, and supporting general welfare checks, alongside opportunities to spend time observing and building confidence around the animals in a calm, supervised environment."

Milton Abbey offers exceptional opportunities for keen and aspiring riders. Students can access equestrian provision through the "Sport Every Day' programme, with horse riding available for all abilities. Those who bring their own horses, which are stabled on site, get regular coaching and development sessions. A partnership with Dorset Polo Club provides weekly coaching and, for more experienced riders, instructional chukkas that develop advanced horsemanship skills.

"Animals are not an add-on to school life, they are part of its heartbeat"

There's no doubt, say the team, that pupils respond incredibly positively to having animals around. Their presence creates a calm, welcoming atmosphere and offers valuable opportunities to pause, connect and unwind. To mark this year's Mental Health Awareness Week, there was an animal therapy session at the Health Centre. The mini-Shetland ponies and school pony Rooney visited, alongside Equine students, so everybody had the opportunity to groom, cuddle and spend time relaxing and de-stressing after a day of exams.

Milton Abbey is a full boarding school, so the dogs are a familiar and comforting presence across boarding houses to support pupils through good and bad days and offer company – also creating that feeling of being at home. They also bring great exercise opportunities. Dog walking sessions through the Dorset

ABOVE & BELOW
Pupils have regular exposure to farm life at Milton Abbey

countryside are an opportunity to spend time outdoors, connect with animals, chat with friends and support the school value of service to the community.

Pupils form strong bonds with the animals in their care, which helps nurture responsibility, compassion and resilience. "Working with horses encourages pupils to be present, patient and empathetic. It has a remarkable effect on both confidence and emotional wellbeing," notes Equine Teacher Amber Da Silva. Animal encounters are carefully embedded into both the academic and co-curricular curriculum. In subjects such as Biology, Environmental Science and Geography, pupils deepen their understanding through real-life observation and practical activities, exploring topics including animal husbandry, ecology, conservation, biodiversity and sustainability. Working within the surrounding countryside also helps pupils understand food provenance, habitat management and the relationship between humans and the natural world.

Learning at Milton Abbey is deliberately experiential. Pupils care for animals daily through feeding, grooming, mucking out and carrying out basic health checks, while also taking part in activities such as vegetable growing, hedge and tree planting, wildlife monitoring and habitat improvement. These experiences encourage curiosity, responsibility and environmental awareness, while also supporting teamwork, confidence and personal wellbeing. The team point out that when young people can relate classroom learning back to real experiences with animals and nature, it deepens understanding and enthusiasm.

ABOVE & BELOW
Animal care and opportunities for learning or improving at riding are all part of life here

This close connection with animals is celebrated throughout the year through a range of special events, including open days, taster days and equestrian showcases.

A particularly memorable event is the school's Harvest Festival, celebration, when animals join a Sunday Chapel Service outside the School Farm. "Surrounded by animals and the sights and sounds of the farm, the service becomes a joyful, hands-on moment of reflection and gratitude. It also brings our school community together in a really special way, as pupils and staff share the experience side by side, enjoying the outdoors and feeling part of something shared and meaningful," says Charles Burnham-Slipper.

Pupil voice reflects the enduring value of these experiences. As one pupil noted "One of my favourite lessons is Equine. I love this lesson because I am able to be around animals, which I love, and be able to have the opportunity to take a practical GCSE." Whether Milton Abbey pupils are keen to take their experience with animals further, via Land Based or Equine Studies, or simply enjoy their company, there's no doubt farm life and the added bonus of dog and cat companions around the school adds something special. "Animals are not an add-on to school life, they are part of its heartbeat, shaping a calm, connected and deeply enriching educational environment, for all to enjoy," says Milton Abbey's Charles Burnham-Slipper.

"Pupils deepen understanding through practical activities, exploring topics including animal husbandry, biodiversity and sustainability"

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ABOVE
St Albans School pupil

Pastoral PROGRESS

*Melody Jones of **St Albans School** on the ways in which pastoral care is evolving in our schools to better support students and families*

Schools across the country are navigating several key trends in pastoral care that reflect an increased focus on whole-school wellbeing. Responding to widespread concern, including from parents, schools are implementing visible and evidence-based pastoral structures that tackle teenage mental health, online risks, peer relationships, and academic pressure. Clear communication and structured intervention pathways provide parents with assurance that their child's school is actively promoting safety and wellbeing.

The focus on mental health awareness is essential. Students between the ages of 11 and 18 face increasing rates of anxiety, social media pressure and academic stress. Establishing a positive whole-school culture around mental health enables schools to identify any concerns early and encourages students to seek support before issues escalate. Typical multi-tiered support systems may include wellbeing spaces, peer mentoring and robust PSHEE programmes. Integrating mental health education within PSHEE and tutor time helps to normalise discussions around resilience and regulating emotions.

Teachers need comprehensive training that equips them to handle complex emotional, behavioural and academic pressures. It's helpful to have a significant number of staff trained as mental health first aiders – at St Albans School all staff members receive regular safeguarding updates and training on restorative approaches. Strong INSET frameworks also ensure that teachers are well prepared to detect early signs of distress and then work closely with pastoral leads.

Restorative behavioural approaches promote accountability, empathy and improved peer-to-peer relationships within the school community. Such methods can de-escalate conflicts, also encouraging a culture of student reflection around actions and behaviour. Over time, these approaches enhance trust between staff and students, support robust community values and build a more resilient school culture.

School and parent partnerships are vital in fostering a supportive pastoral care environment. Collaboration between home and school sets consistent expectations

"Collaboration sets consistent expectations and helps parents feel supported in navigating any teenage challenges"

and helps parents feel supported in navigating any teenage challenges. Schools enhance these relationships through regular updates, transparent behaviour and device management policies and frequent parent events.

As pastoral care evolves, leadership and financial stewardship pose challenges for school leaders. With high thresholds for support from external mental health services, schools frequently find themselves handling complex cases internally. It is no secret that the financial implications of pastoral care have significantly increased over the last decade. There is a greater allocation of teaching time towards tutoring and PSHEE programmes, and extra investment in training. Nurses, counsellors and mentors add additional staffing requirements. Continual investment in robust IT systems, and the creation and upkeep of spaces such as wellbeing hubs and gardens, are other pastoral additions.

For schools, these are not optional but fundamental to ensuring student wellbeing. Effectiveness of pastoral care is measured through wellbeing check-ins, behavioural patterns and engagement in peer mentoring. But strong pastoral systems lead to improved emotional regulation, higher levels of engagement in both academic and co-curricular activities and – most important of all – students' willingness to seek early support.

MELODY JONES

Second Master
Designated Safeguard Lead
St Albans School

WIKI'S WORLD

As Wikipedia celebrates its 25th birthday, the open source, non-profit encyclopaedia that anyone can contribute to is engaging tomorrow's knowledge community – and that means being where young people are

By **LIBBY NORMAN**

Wikipedia is an institution that signifies a way more optimistic, even halcyon, online age. Born in 2001 – but conceived a few years earlier – here was an encyclopaedia to democratise knowledge. Or, as co-founder Jimmy Wales put it in 2004: "Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That's what we're doing".

It is still standing tall in 2026, even though the online landscape has shifted dramatically. Social media and AI are increasingly shaping where people access news and views. The very idea of reading a printed newspaper (let alone a printed encyclopaedia) is quaint to many in Gen Z and Gen Alpha. TikTok, Instagram or YouTube may be their chosen platforms for now, but their cynicism is growing about information sources and agendas. So an opportune moment to look at what Wikipedia offers – and what it is doing to stay relevant to younger generations.

TOMORROW'S AUDIENCE

Maryana Pinchuk is Principal Product Manager at the Wikimedia Foundation in Berkeley, California. One of her tasks is leading on Future Audiences, an initiative that began around 2023 and can be summed up as taking Wikipedia to where young people are. "We've been looking at these external trends for a while, this shift to multimedia, video-pop forms among young people, and a shift away from websites and text and long form," she says.

Part of Future Audience's remit is delivering what Maryana Pinchuk calls "scrappy" projects – agile and small-scale experiments to test out delivery methods and audience reactions. "We wanted to do something to understand if we could take Wikipedia and Commons content and remix it into a short video format – and if we did would anyone want to watch it, would anyone actually care?

"So we ran a small experiement to take some articles and turn them into these 30-second explainers and publish them on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube. And we saw quite a bit of positive traction."

Indeed, they did. Among their biggest hits were – curiously – topics from the UK. She cites the Wikipedia short-form explainer about a particular style of post-war pub (one of those delightfully obscure topics you never knew could be so fascinating) as a particularly strong contender. "Flat-roofed pub was one of our greatest viral hits."

Audience reactions to the selection of explainers provided a signal. The project has been scaled up, not just to deliver information, but to show younger audiences what goes into Wikipedia and: "give them a sense of how the content is made, and that it is a volunteer project, and that it is about finding reliable sources," says Maryana Pinchuk.

Reliable is a key word to remember here. Beginning as a start-up TikTok account, Wikipedia has become what she describes as: "close to the back row influencer". It has been done mostly organically and has indicated something significant when it comes to Gen Z and Gen Alpha. "When we cover very obscure topics that no one else is talking about – the weird stuff that's in Wikipedia – we will see page view spikes around the time our videos are in circulation. So that is showing us that there is an audience that is interested in going and reading more."

Wikimedia Foundation's Future Initiatives project doesn't just create its own content on

"There is a real power to the idea that this is a community that is not for profit. It is not for some agenda – it is purely for love of knowledge and reliable information"

these channels but supports other content by helping out with comment sections. The team have noticed that when big brands (the Wendy's, the Tesco, say) contribute content there's a more negative reaction. "People on these platforms are so over 'the brand is talking to me'," she says. "But with Wikipedia, they get so excited."

Being where young people are is critical to Wikipedia's future, but managing the AI-generated mash-up that happens when anyone looks something up on a search engine is trickier. Wikipedia is scraped for knowledge routinely – sometimes its information is attributed and sometimes it isn't. Future Initiatives' work feeds into profile raising, so that Gen Z and Gen Alpha know Wikipedia is there, a source of verified information, and it belongs to all of us.

Maryana Pinchuk is optimistic about younger audiences. She says every time the Wikimedia Foundation does a survey across its user base (although it can't, for legal reasons, collect data on under 18s) the most signficant recorded cohort is the population aged 18-24. So Wikipedia is delivering something young people respond to. She believes that's about much more than the desire to be a content creator or editor. "There is a real power to the idea that this is a community that is not for profit. It is not for some agenda. It's not to push any kind of political bias. It is purely for love of knowledge and mutual and reliable information. I think that, maybe, is a more powerful motivator – especially for young people."

It also seems highly likely young people respond to the devolved and anti-corporate nature of Wikipedia, as set out in Wikimedia Foundation's original blueprint. "A big chunk of our work is supporting and funding regional communities. This is like a superpower that we have. We're a small non-profit but we have this very global, very excited, very motivated volunteer user base that is out there in all the different parts of the world and has a very clear regional focus."

BUILDING MEDIA LITERACY

Those regional organisations (recognised affiliates known as chapters) run to 40 around the globe, with some 300 languages supported. They include Wikimedia UK – an independent registered charity. Education is a big part of its work, and with a clear goal. "We are trying to support upskilling young people – and adults for that matter – with much better information and media literacy

Fast facts

7m
The English Wikipedia contains over **7 MILLION CONTENT PAGES**

500
is the average number of **new articles a day**

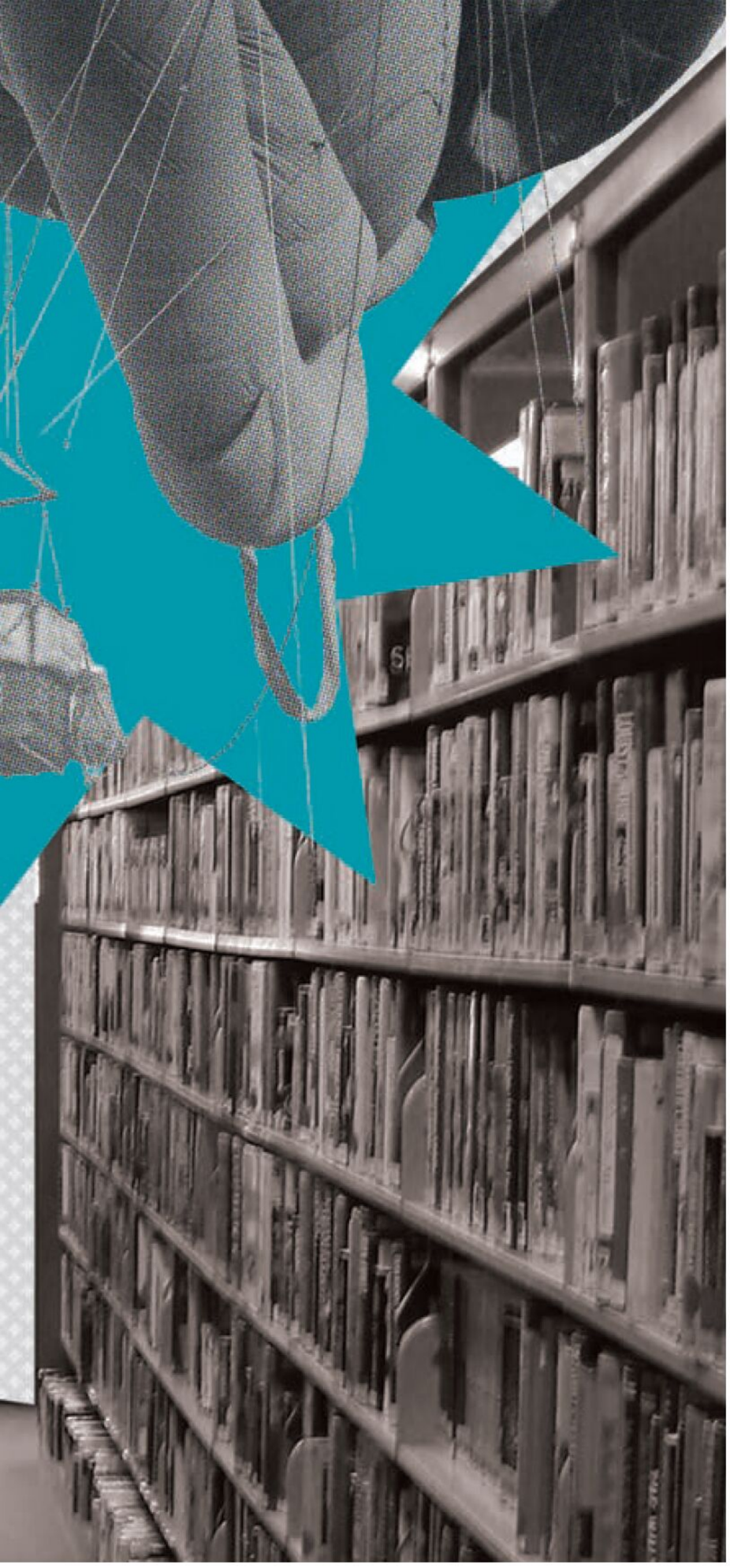
1.35bn
Total edits since English Wikipedia was set up is over **1.35 BILLION**

20.58
Is the average number of edits per English Wikipedia page

53m
Registered users (members) over **53 MILLION**

278k
Active registered users (past month) over **278,000**

Source: English Wikipedia data as of May 2026 (wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Statistics)



"One thing that we're very keen to move into is the widening participation space – this idea of digital poverty not just being lack of access to tech but poor media literacy"

skills," says CEO Lucy Crompton-Reid.

At Wikimedia UK the team talk about developing 'misinformation resilience' and work to increase representation – both across its user base and Wikipedia content. The team have done good work with the likes of the British Library and BBC. In education, where previously its work centred on the 18+ cohort in higher education, there's been a step change in order to increase support for school-age students. There's now a dedicated Education Lead, Dr Sally Latham, a former teacher, who took up the role last September,

Her work focuses on three strands – supporting teachers' work, delivering resources for classrooms, and organising specific workshops, partnerships and campaigns. "One thing that we're very keen to move into is widening the participation space – this idea of digital poverty not just being a lack of access to tech but poor media literacy," she says.

"Not only does that make young people politically and socially at risk but also in terms of progression in higher education or whatever comes after school. You have, unfortunately, anecdotal evidence of students who haven't had that preparation in media literacy either not making it to university because they don't know how to navigate that system or getting there and then struggling with the research because they have never been trained."

Wikimedia UK has a strong tradition of 'Wikipedians in Residence' at universities, helping to develop students' skills as writers and researchers. Along the way, the students who participate also improve Wikipedia as a source of factual knowledge. But going out to schools delivers something that can be a game changer for building critical thinking skills and the ability to sort and assess information sources at a formative age.

Last November Sally Latham ran a 'Knowledge in the Digital Age' workshop for schools in conjunction with University of Birmingham. Speakers included professors from the university and children from its network of local schools were introduced to topics ranging from conspiracy theories and the ethics of social media to knowledge gaps in representation.

Filling knowledge gaps can be a real hook for this younger audience. "That's one thing we wanted students to understand – that they can be active contributors, not just passive consumers," says Lucy Crompton-Reid. This can be contributing to the most popular pages on Wikipedia – or something local, niche, even obscure. The band that doesn't yet have its own entry can be introduced to the wide world of Wikipedia, provided the student can write its page using the required neutral point of view (NPOV) and cite acceptable published sources to evidence notability for inclusion.

Sally Latham cites a session she did in a school in Smethwick, her own home town. A starting point was to get the children to think about the town's Wikipedia page. "I brought the page up and said 'is that photo really the best way to represent our town?'" It's a straightforward question, but one that opens up a world of possibilities – from changing a grotty photo for one you've taken and uploaded to Wikimedia Commons to helping improve a lowly Stub to a Start- or even C-class page. Registering as a Wikipedian (which you're strongly encouraged to do), means a place within the community and a network to communicate with, but without the risks associated with social media profiles.

The Wikimedia UK team believe that becoming an active contributor to Wikipedia makes young people more likely to engage with wider society. Certainly, the most recent annual UK survey shows that some 70% of all respondents agree that work done here had encouraged civic engagement.

Wikipedia's mission to share knowledge for free may date from a kinder internet age, but 25 years in it's still here, and still with a far nobler purpose than data mining and clicks. That's a fact worth celebrating for all those who were there then – perhaps even more so for the generations raised in an online world that, for the most part, sees them as exploitable commodities. "It's about them understanding that Wikipedia is a place that isn't driven by algorithms. There's no private chat. It's completely transparent. I think there's a longing for that from young people," says Lucy Crompton-Reid.

** For guidance on getting started as a contributor to Wikipedia, visit* ***wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia: Contributing_to_Wikipedia***

** To find out about Wikimedia UK education projects and contact the team, visit* ***wikimedia.org.uk/home/education*** *or email* ***education@wikimedia.org.uk***

"Wikipedia Future Initiatives' work feeds into profile raising, so that Gen Z and Gen Alpha know Wikipedia is there, a source of verified information, and it belongs to all of us"

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THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE

Ask the EXPERTS

Our experts answer your questions on teenage volunteer roles and finding a tutor for a child who struggles to focus

DAVE STOTT

Director of Volunteering, Royal Voluntary Service

Q ***My teenage daughter is keen to do some volunteering, both to add to her practical and social skills and do something useful. Can you advise on where to start?***

A Teenagers and students can benefit hugely from volunteering, but unfortunately not knowing where to start has been a common barrier to entry for many years now. Last year, Royal Voluntary Service launched a digital volunteering platform, GoVo, to make volunteering more accessible for all.

GoVo can connect young people with bite-sized opportunities that fit in easily with studies and social life, and so is a great place to start. There are currently more than 10,000 opportunities live from over 1,700 charities of all shapes and sizes – so there should be plenty for her to choose from. Roles include everything from remote tasks or flexible local volunteering to longer-term scheduled roles associated with more traditional volunteering.

Your daughter can search for roles using a number of filters. There are 14 different cause areas, from animal welfare or environment and conservation to community and neighbourhood and sport and physical activity. Or she can simply put in her postcode to see what local opportunities there are within the community.

There is so much to be gained from volunteering our time, especially for the younger generations. At Royal Voluntary Service we believe volunteers should get as much out of volunteering as they put into it. We have done considerable research into the benefits of volunteering, and consistent themes include improved mental health, wellbeing, social connections and – for those who choose a role that gets them out and about – improved movement levels and physical health too.

Many of the wellbeing benefits come from the sense of fulfilment, achievement and purpose volunteers feel. It's definitely a two-way street and it's great to know you both recognise that and that your daughter is keen to reap the rewards of volunteering.

For teenagers and students who are looking ahead and preparing for the competitive job market, volunteering can improve social mobility, life chances and employment prospects. It can present opportunities to learn and hone both soft and hard skills that can strengthen applications. Volunteering itself demonstrates an ability to dedicate yourself beyond studies, which can also help make a CV stand out.

Our research found that 34% of 16 to 19-year-olds reported that volunteering helped them get their first job. And almost 40% reported improved confidence and communication skills, which is unsurprising as volunteering is a brilliant way to meet new people and expand your social horizons.

There are lots of fun, unique and even quirky roles available that I think many people would be surprised to hear of – from social media, vlogging or gaming volunteers to theatre, festival and sports event support, and even crafting, gardening and hairdressing.

GoVo can be used by people aged 14 and above, and you can filter opportunities by age requirements, too. Of course, another great route into volunteering is to visit local volunteering centres to discover a range of opportunities within your area. I'm confident that, especially with your support, your daughter will find a volunteering role that enables her to give back, to develop her skills, and to enjoy.

GoVo.org

"Our research found 34% of 16 to 19-year-olds reported that volunteering helped them get their first job"

ALISON MELROSE

Director of Client Engagement, Simply Learning Tuition

Q ***My son is academically able but has focus issues. I'm keen to get him extra support via a tutor, but I'm not sure how he'll take to it – especially if it's online. How do I go about finding the right match?***

A I must have heard this a thousand times, and indeed, it rings true for one of my own teenagers. As a parent, it is incredibly frustrating when you can see that your child is bright and quick to catch on but can't stay focused. The great news is that good tutoring will not only help prepare your son for key assessments but also boost his self-confidence and develop key executive functioning skills – the ability for him to maintain focus.

Talk to him first, so he feels included – he may be relieved at the offer of external support. Then find a reputable private tutor to work with. I say reputable very purposefully. This means a professional who knows the curriculum, understands what your child needs, and has experience of working with young people who need the right approach to engage their brains. There are now many tutors who are skilled in teaching children for whom focus and executive functioning skills are an issue. Here is some guidance to help you find the right fit.

Let go of your preconceptions
You might be surprised by what works for your child, so try to start the process of finding a tutor with an open mind. Many people believe in-person tutoring to be 'superior'. This just isn't the case.

Look for skills, not just knowledge
Getting started and being overwhelmed by the thought of an assignment are often the main challenges for easily distracted students – it is not necessarily about the lesson content.

Perhaps look for a tutor who has experience working with children who are easily distracted or have ADHD. The key is to break down the work into bite-sized chunks, with regular praise and brain breaks.

Involve your child
A good relationship between child and tutor is vital. If they like them, they will engage far more. Allow your child to be part of the interview process and meet the candidates online – even if just for a few minutes to say hello and then listen in.

Embrace fun and games
With the right tutor, sessions will be active, fun, and perfect for keeping an easily distracted mind engaged. Good online tutors use creative tools such as interactive whiteboards, educational games and quizzes, short videos and pictures. All these elements add fun, embed knowledge in different ways and vary the pace.

Consider lesson structure
An hour sitting still can be counterproductive for a child with focus problems. Easily distracted children need shorter bursts with brain or movement breaks in between. Ideally, an hour's lesson would be split into sections – say, two 20-minute lessons split by brain and movement breaks, then a final five minutes reviewing the lesson and follow-up work for the next one.

It is important to be honest from the start about your child's issues – that way you will be more likely to find a good tutor match. Don't expect miracles – the relationship takes time to build. But by choosing the right tutor, you can turn lessons into something your child looks forward to, as they build self-confidence and make academic progress.

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Superyacht Cadetship Graduate

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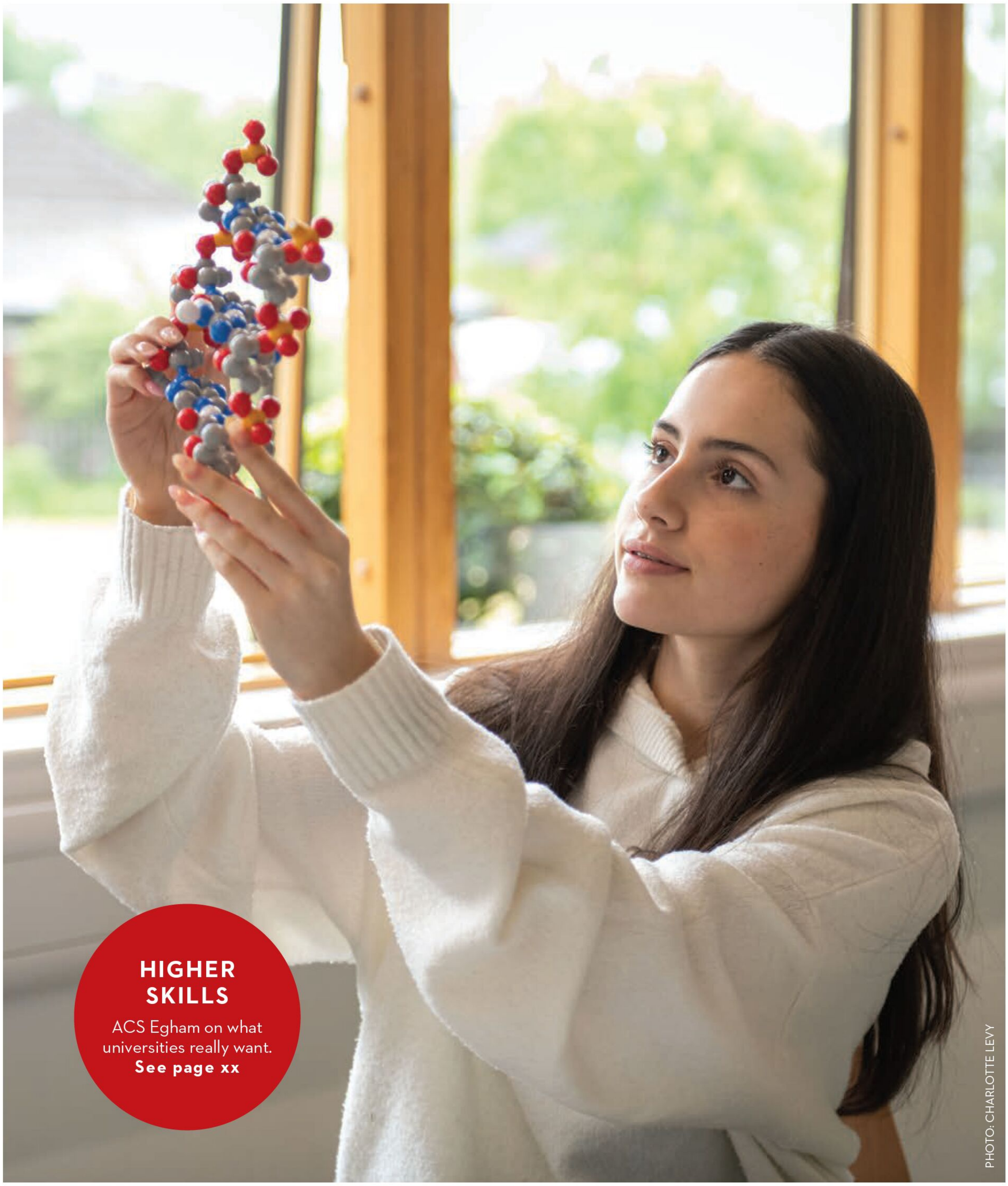

HIGHER SKILLS

ACS Egham on what universities really want.

See page xx

PHOTO: CHARLOTTE LEVY

Perspective

WHAT UNIVERSITIES WANT

Universities have told us what they value in applicants, says ***ACS Egham*** *Head Mark Wilson – and this should change the questions parents ask when choosing a sixth form*

The question I'm asked most often by parents thinking about university is a simple one: 'what grades will they need?'. It is a reasonable question. But after reading what 50 university admissions teams told us when we asked them directly what they look for in applicants, I think it may not be the most useful one.

Last autumn, we commissioned FieldworkHub to survey admissions officers from UK universities – Cambridge, Edinburgh, Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol and many others – asking what they look for in applicants and how qualification systems compare. The results gave me pause. They were clear enough to make me really reconsider the conversation we typically have with families before their children start their sixth-form journey.

The headline number that has attracted most attention is that just 5% of admissions officers identify A levels as the best overall preparation for university. But that figure, taken in isolation, misses what the research actually shows. The more telling finding is in the detail of how admissions officers rate different competencies – and where they expect priorities to shift over the next five years.

When we asked officers to rate the importance of three broad areas – knowledge, skills and attitudes – skills came out on top, rated 4.49 out of 5, and projected to rise further. Attitudes – intellectual curiosity, resilience, motivation – were rated 4.17 and also rising. Knowledge, rated 3.66, was the lowest of the three and expected to fall. A decade ago, this ordering would have looked very different.

This is not universities saying that subject knowledge doesn't matter. It does. Grades at sixth form remain the gatekeeper to admission, and no admissions officer we spoke to was suggesting otherwise. The point – and they were explicit about this – is that knowledge is increasingly seen as necessary rather than sufficient. In a world where AI can retrieve facts and structure information instantly, what universities care about is what a student can do with what they know.

Here is the part that often surprises parents when I share it. When admissions officers were asked to rate A levels and the IB Diploma specifically on developing in-depth subject knowledge, the two qualifications scored virtually identically – 3.97 and 3.98 respectively. Both are seen as rigorous, academically demanding routes to specialist degree study. The perceived gap in academic substance isn't there.

The differences, in my view, show up in the broader competencies – precisely the areas universities say are rising in importance. On independent enquiry, the IB scored 4.2 against A levels' 3.52. On communication skills, 4.0 against 3.29. On global awareness, 4.24 against 3.17. Across all eleven competencies measured, the IB

"Knowledge is increasingly seen as necessary rather than sufficient – what universities care about is what a student can do with what they know"

ABOVE & BELOW *A varied skillset and independent working are increasingly valued*

Diploma scored on average 23% higher, and highest on nine of the eleven measures.

Admissions officers were consistent in explaining why. The Extended Essay – a 4,000-word independent research project that all IB students complete – came up repeatedly. One university put it plainly: the programme invites students to work on projects that develop independent thinking and research skills that match what UK higher education actually expects. Another noted that IB students arrive already used to managing a heavier and more varied workload, meaning the transition to degree study is less of a shock.

None of this means that students following A levels aren't succeeding at university – clearly many are, and the subject depth data confirms why that route commands respect. But it does suggest that the questions families ask when choosing a sixth form might benefit from a different frame.

The question, 'what grades will they need?', is really asking about the threshold. What this latest research points toward is a different question: 'what kind of student does this qualification produce?'. Does it develop the ability to work independently, to synthesise ideas across disciplines, to sustain motivation through a complex and varied workload? These are the qualities universities tell us they are depending on – not just to fill places, but to hold on to the students they admit.

So what should parents ask at open evenings? I'd suggest something along these lines: 'How does sixth form here prepare students to work independently?'; 'What opportunities are there for research or project work beyond the examined syllabus?'; 'How broad is the curriculum and where does it push students to connect ideas across subjects and disciplines?'.

These questions don't have a neat numerical answer. But they are closer to what the people who read the applications and shape university cohorts say they are actually looking for. Grades open the door. What happens after that depends on the habits of mind a student brings with them.

MARK WILSON
Head of School
ACS Egham

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CONFIDENT FUTURES

*Kim Fry of **UKSA** on its personalised welfare support to ensure students build self-belief and the confidence to thrive*

At UKSA, we believe education should do more than prepare young people for a career – it should prepare them for life. For families exploring post-16 and post-18 options, UKSA offers an exciting alternative to the traditional university route. Here, we combine hands-on training and exceptional pastoral care with pathways into global industries.

Based on our four-acre waterfront campus on the Isle of Wight, students are immersed in an environment designed to build their confidence, resilience and independence. Whether joining us for further education courses, maritime training or our flagship Superyacht Cadetship course, every student is supported both personally and professionally from the moment they arrive.

We know that stepping away from home for the first time can feel daunting, and that success in education often depends on feeling safe, supported and understood. That is why every student has access to dedicated welfare mentors, one-to-one support sessions, professional guidance and career mentoring throughout their time with us. Student welfare sits at the heart of everything we do.

For students training to enter the superyacht industry, this support is particularly valuable. Life and work at sea can be demanding, requiring maturity, resilience and strong communication skills. Alongside technical qualifications and industry preparation, cadets receive structured wellbeing support designed to help them manage stress, build confidence and adapt to professional life onboard.

"Over the past year alone, UKSA has delivered more than 1,200 welfare support sessions and trained over 650 individuals in mental health awareness"

ABOVE *UKSA training for onboard life*

Our welfare team works closely with students on everything from homesickness and anxiety to health concerns and future planning. Sometimes that means helping a young person build confidence in a new environment. At other times, it can involve supporting them through illness, grief or periods of uncertainty. We provide an environment where students feel encouraged to ask for help and supported to thrive, not just survive.

Over the past year alone, UKSA has delivered more than 1,200 welfare support sessions and trained over 650 individuals in mental health awareness. We have also introduced wellbeing initiatives for superyacht crews, helping to promote healthier onboard cultures across the wider maritime industry.

We often say that young people only need one person in their corner to succeed. Here at UKSA, they have an entire team behind them, helping them to gain qualifications, grow in confidence and take their next step with ambition and belief in themselves. We know our students as individuals and support them through every stage of their journey, both personally and professionally. We encourage every young person to dream big, build confidence and approach life with ambition, resilience and integrity.

KIM FRY

Head of Student Safeguarding & Welfare
UKSA

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Talking HEAD

Collaborative COMMUNITY

Dr Michael Truss, Principal of ***Concord College****, on how students with strong collaborative skills put technology to good use*

Learning to collaborate and solve problems creatively is one of the key goals of education in the modern world. Schools work hard to put in place opportunities to practise and develop these skills.

At Concord, we use team competitions, regular outdoor education trips, music, drama productions and sports to provide fun and fulfilling opportunities to scaffold this kind of learning. For example, our youngest students in year 9 benefit from a special pre-GCSE curriculum designed to set them up with skills such as these. Their year culminates in a Shakespeare production for which they have created the set, costumes and music, with every single child involved in all aspects – including the final show.

This is all exciting, fulfilling stuff, but what does success in developing these skills really look like? At Concord, we argue that it is much more than simply delivering the lessons or the activities and competitions. Rather, it is students collaborating and problem solving within their own community for the benefit of themselves, their friends and the world beyond. Crucially, very often this happens without the students themselves being asked.

Concord is highly academic and many of our students could be described as competitive – they like to score highly; they like to win. They also form a uniquely positive community and some of our 2026 leavers – many of whom I am proud to say have been here since year 9 when they created a magical and memorable *Romeo and Juliet* – have really brought home to me the power of that community to work together.

"The success of our young people should not be seen as a zero-sum game – they can and will work together to make things better"

ABOVE *Concord College students*

We have always had a formal network of student volunteer subject mentors who help other students. However, what has emerged this year is a far wider collaboration among our students to enhance the already impressive resources at their disposal, to share those widely among the community and, hopefully, to pass on a legacy for students to come.

Beginning with small, informal study groups in classrooms after prep, they expanded to meeting online when they were at home (wherever in the world that was). From there, shared folders of notes, links, ideas, questions appeared – each member of the group adding what they had, all willingly discussing their thoughts, preparing work to talk through, willingly admitting when they were unsure.

In particular, for A level History and Physics, members of the study groups took using the available technology further – using computer coding and some AI tools to collate exam questions and categorise them in ways that make tackling specific aspects of the syllabus or particular types of question simpler. Another student harnessed the power of coding to develop a collection of resources for students choosing their university courses and looking for activities they could take part in that might support their applications.

The students of 6.2 at Concord are a demonstration that the success of our young people should not be seen as a zero-sum game. They can and will work together to make things better and they will think even bigger than that if we equip them well. They are a positive note among the worries around AI – demonstrating that technology can be mastered by young minds equipped with the very human skills to use and not be used by it.

MICHAEL TRUSS
Principal
Concord College

SECRETS OF STATESIDE SUCCESS

*Dr Jamie Beaton, CEO of **Crimson Education**, gives an insider perspective for students looking to study at a US university*

What trends has Crimson Education noticed in students' choice of subject areas?

A Right now, the most dominant majors are AI, Business, Pre-Med, Pre-Law, Economics, and Entrepreneurship. This is because of the rise of AI – a lot of people want to learn AI, machine learning and MathType-related skills. Also, a lot more students want to go on to direct entrepreneurship. On the whole, students are return-on-investment focused – choosing majors they think will give them good job outcomes.

Probably the most notable trend is that Environmental Science is less common than it was five or ten years ago. Also, Computer Science directly is less popular than five years ago, partly because of the availability of AI tools. More students are looking at pure engineering subjects such as Electronic Engineering or Applied Maths. I'd add that some of the smartest students I see are typically doing Applied Maths, Data Science, Statistics, Economics, or AI if they have a STEM background. They tend to be the majors that lead to some of the highest-paying jobs.

How about destinations – both consistently favoured, and up-and-comers?

A The up-and-comers are Vanderbilt, University of Michigan, Duke and UChicago, in my opinion. Vanderbilt, for example, wasn't considered that selective 30 years ago – it had an admissions rate of 60%. Now the admissions rate is down to sub 3% for the regular admissions round.

ABOVE
Stamford remains a top choice

LEFT
Duke is rising up the popularity stakes

Vanderbilt is now opening campuses in West Palm Beach, California, and has become very popular because it's viewed as a bastion of independent thought, which fosters that free speech culture. And it gives you that quintessential US experience – the sports culture and all-American movie-like college adventure.

Another up-and-coming school I'd note would be The American University in Washington DC. Dave Marchick, who has taken over the Business School there, has been really pushing to build the school's success in AI, entrepreneurship, and sustainability – with some success.

As far as the most popular schools, Harvard is the most popular overall, followed by Stanford at number two. Stanford is in a dramatic rise because of its exposure to Silicon Valley and entrepreneurship. The other school that's really thriving is NYU. Its location, right in the middle of Manhattan, is very attractive to both American and international students.

Do you see any shifts in students' approach when it comes to building compelling applications?

A There have been some major shifts. The first thing is that AI tools enable students to crank out capstone projects, apps, and other initiatives that would once have taken them six months in three weeks. The top students who are really entrepreneurial can do more with their time, which means the standard of competition at the high end is going up.

The second thing is that research is becoming very mainstream – 90% of our admits to Harvard and MIT this last year had submitted research papers. Schools like Yale and Columbia now require research papers on the application (it's 'optional', but optional means compulsory). These research papers enable students of anything from a humanities pathway like Sociology, all the way to Astrophysics, to show their technical domain knowledge and academic curiosity.

Beyond that, I would say there's a rotation back to standardised testing in a big way. Universities like Princeton found out that the students who didn't take the SAT performed worse, so there's a snap back. I would say there's definitely a renewed focus on academic excellence

"A student of mine who got into Yale and Stanford wrote his essay about his love of heavy metal rock music, like Metallica and Iron Maiden"

From Crimson's experience, what are the features common to successful applications?

A Last year, the average student applying to America had all As and A*s, two to three leadership projects, typically one to two research papers, plus five honours that we've trained them for, often at regional or international level.

Now, for a British applicant, this might involve taking extra A-level subjects – as I did – self-studying outside of school. On top of this, a lot of successful students will have very differentiated application essays. I wrote mine about working in a chicken burger shop. A lot of the best essays are quite wacky. A student of mine who got into Yale and Stanford wrote his essay about his love of heavy metal rock music, like Metallica and Iron Maiden.

What are your top tips for students aiming for standout appeal to admissions officers at top-tier universities?

A First nail the basics – crush your academics – starting as early as you can. Secondly, opt for standardised testing. Even though schools are test-optional, don't listen to that. Train hard on the ACT/SAT and get a high score. My average student who went to Harvard or Stanford last year scored 1560. My average Ivy League student scored 1540.

Next up would be getting extra honours. You've got to compete in a range of online competitions and other activities early on and work up to winning awards. And thirdly, top schools like Stanford are trying to find student entrepreneurs – the kind that launch initiatives when they're still in high school. Schools are looking for early indicators of entrepreneurial flair, so don't be afraid to get out there and launch something.

**** Crimson Education***
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DEVELOPING leadership

*As **Framlingham College** celebrates 125 years of Combined Cadet Force (CCF), it continues to see these activities as vital in helping pupils to develop life skills*

Research carried out by the University of Northampton in 2025 found that the presence of CCF in education institutions not only positively impacts pupils' behaviour and learning, but also the school environment itself. Published in March 2025, the report found that areas such as enrichment, attendance, wellbeing, confidence, engagement, career aspirations and a sense of belonging were all enhanced in schools with CCF.

Today, more than 500 schools across state and independent sectors have cadet units, with the CCF at Framlingham College just one of three CCFs in Suffolk to offer both Army and Air Cadets pathways. Now in its 125th year, the Framlingham College CCF, is just as popular today and still plays a vital role in the life and traditions of the school, allowing pupils to develop key life skills in leadership, teamwork, resilience and respect.

Year 12 pupil and CCF Sergeant, Hattie R is among CCF's greatest fans. "Here at Framlingham, joining the CCF is something everyone does between Year 9 and 11, but I chose to continue this into Sixth Form because I have genuinely grown to enjoy it. I recognise the opportunities it has afforded me, many of which I would not be able to get anywhere else, and it has also allowed me to give back to the school community."

"CCF has helped me develop resilience, discipline, leadership – all valuable life skills which are essential for adulthood beyond school"

ABOVE *CCF at Framlingham College*

She sees multiple benefits beyond school life, too. "The CCF has offered me opportunities to work as part of a team, challenge myself, and develop leadership skills. It has helped me learn how to cope with pressure and adapt to whatever situations I am faced with."

This year, Hattie was appointed as one of the Lord Lieutenant's Cadets – the highest honour a cadet can achieve. "It feels like a real honour to be recognised as the Lord Lieutenant's Cadet," she says. "I'm incredibly excited and proud to represent both myself and my school while carrying out service and responsibility within the community. It is very rewarding to have my commitment to the CCF acknowledged."

Framlingham College's CCF combines outdoor education alongside first-class military experience days. Activities include flying, shooting competitions, field days, and acts of remembrance. With team building, strategic planning and communication in the mix, the CCF allows every pupil to develop skills that are readily transferable to everyday life and future careers.

Hattie notes that CCF develops the kind of skills and attributes that are invaluable. "It instils real leadership opportunities from an early age," she says. "CCF has helped me develop resilience, discipline, leadership – life skills which are essential for adulthood beyond school. It has taught me how to be a responsible and supportive leader who looks after everyone in the team."

She says she is proud of the journey undertaken thanks to CCF. "The structure and discipline provided by the CCF has helped prepare me for future challenges and responsibilities Overall, my biggest achievement has been seeing my own personal development – becoming a stronger team member, developing leadership skills, showing long-term commitment and taking pride in the responsibility I have been given."

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Talking HEAD

Extra BENEFITS

Caroline Jordan of ***Headington Rye Oxford*** *on why a broad extracurricular programme provides much more than a healthy balance*

It can be tempting to think that the most important thing you take away from your time at school is academic grades and subject knowledge. Clearly, this is important – universities and employers will use this information to assess whether you're capable of the study or work you have applied for. However, I would argue that everything that happens outside the classroom is just as important.

This is not just in terms of healthy balance. What you do alongside your core studies can make you more employable and better able to tackle the different challenges you are likely to face in higher education and the workplace. This is why schools like Headington Rye Oxford place such high importance on broad and varied extracurricular programmes and encourage pupils to try out different activities.

So many skills are developed and honed in the practice rooms, on stage, on expeditions and on sports pitches. Let's take sport as an example. Physical fitness is crucial for life, but everything that surrounds it brings huge benefits. Young people develop teamwork and leadership skills, and learn how to manage their time. In addition, they are often confronted with what it means to lose, and how to take disappointment and convert it into a better performance next time.

"So many skills are developed and honed in the practice rooms, on stage, on expeditions and on sports pitches"

ABOVE *Rowing at Headington Rye Oxford*

At Headington Rye, we have pupils competing in sport at all levels, from the 'C' teams to our elite rowers who compete against the very best boat clubs in the world – and win. Many of our rowers have capitalised on their exceptional experience to secure scholarships at prestigious Ivy League universities.

We have a thriving performing arts department, with hundreds of music lessons taking place each week, along with a programme of concerts, plays and dance shows. The opportunity to perform on stage is a fantastic way to develop self-confidence, articulacy and oracy. These are skills which help young people stand out at interview and beyond. Externally accredited exams in music, speech and drama and dance provide vital exam practice, while many of the higher grades also come with UCAS points.

There's a big focus at Headington Rye on providing opportunities to develop leadership skills. That could be by planning an expedition for the Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DofE), taking on a position of responsibility in our Combined Cadet Force contingent, or applying to become a form captain, Head of Year or prefect.

Pupils take charge of student clubs and societies and even create their own. In many – for example History Society and Classics Society – students take a leading role in planning, arranging and booking speakers and sessions. In academic clubs, older students cement and solidify their learning by sharing knowledge and skills with younger pupils. At each point, they are learning what it is to be a leader – how to get the best out of themselves and others.

A school should offer so much more than academic outcomes. Transferable skills developed outside the classroom are what help children discover who they are and what they can do.

CAROLINE JORDAN
Headmistress
Headington Rye Oxford

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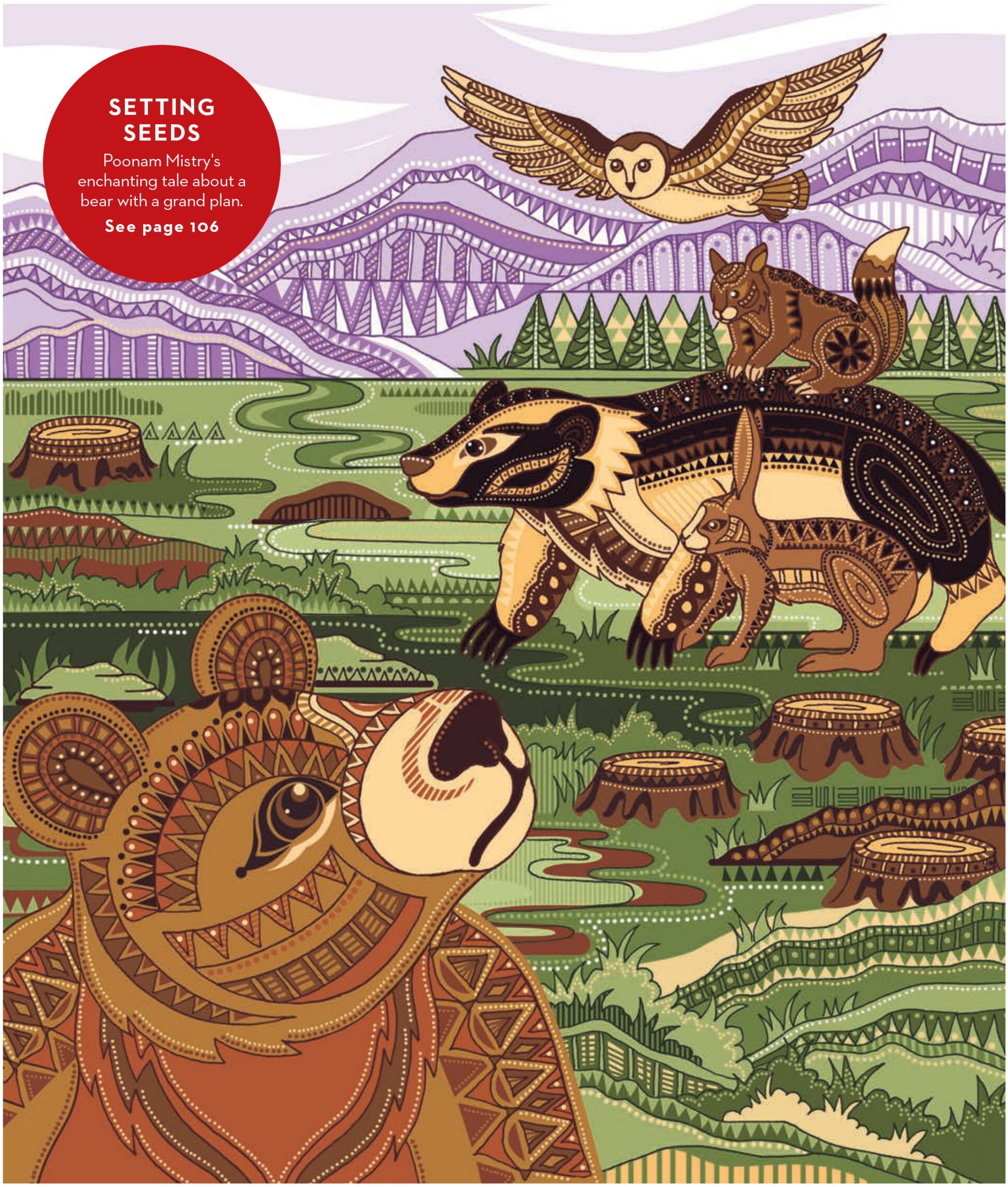


SETTING SEEDS

Poonam Mistry's enchanting tale about a bear with a grand plan.

See page 106

Books

From a magical bear and an exciting science primer to football tactics and a very needy ghost, our pick of great summertime reads

MUST READ

7+

This Book Will Make You a Scientist

by Dr Sheila Kanani
illustrated by Ellen Surrey
NOSY CROW, £14.99

Created in association with University of Cambridge, and fact-checked by its scientists, this book delivers 25 experiments to try, as devised by inspiring minds through time. Young boffins can measure volume like Archimedes, find the centre of gravity like Sir Issac Newton or create static electricity like Nikola Tesla. Or they may prefer to grow mould, create perfume, make crystals, create a rainbow or mix invisible ink. Clear descriptions of the original experiment and step-by-step instructions for a DIY version are supported by a glossary of terms at the back.

3+

HOME IS A HUG

by Cindy Wume
POST WAVE, £12.99

This picture book for very young readers is created by Taiwan-based illustrator Cindy Wume and considers the meaning of home. She explores different styles of home – humble and grand – and describes all that happens there, from comfort in dark times to arguments and making up – and the place where our own story starts. The illustrations include lovely 'lift the flap' and 'windows' elements to carry readers on through the narrative. And the author's conclusion is that home is something we carry with us, wherever we go, and can return to for love and belonging.

9+

TADPOLE SUMMER

by Catherine Bruton

NOSY CROW, £7.99

The author of *Bird Boy* returns with a story about love and the healing power of nature. Frog has always known Tad is unwell, but it has never stopped their close relationship. When her brother goes to hospital, she can no longer bear sleeping in their bedroom. She starts camping out in the garden, finding unexpected calm in nature. Tad returns home with a room full of hospital equipment – meaning there's no space for Frog. Knowing that they might be running out of time, she decides she must make this an unforgettable summer.

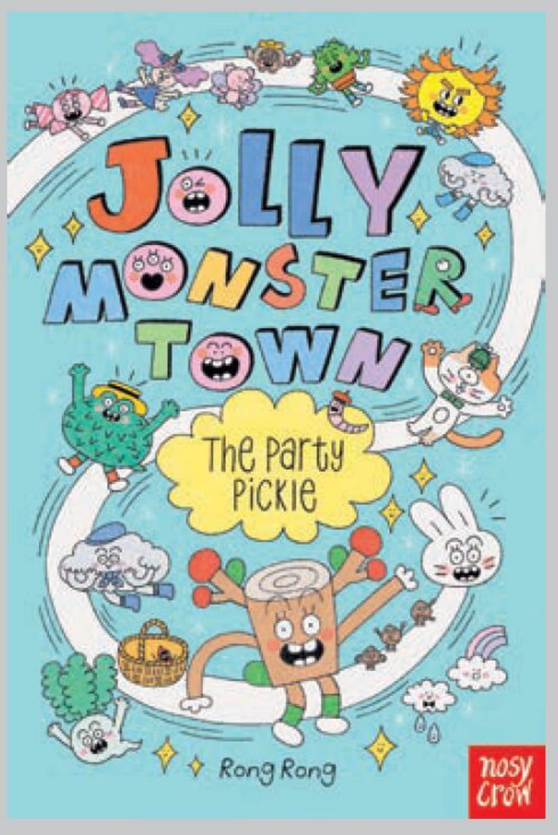
5+

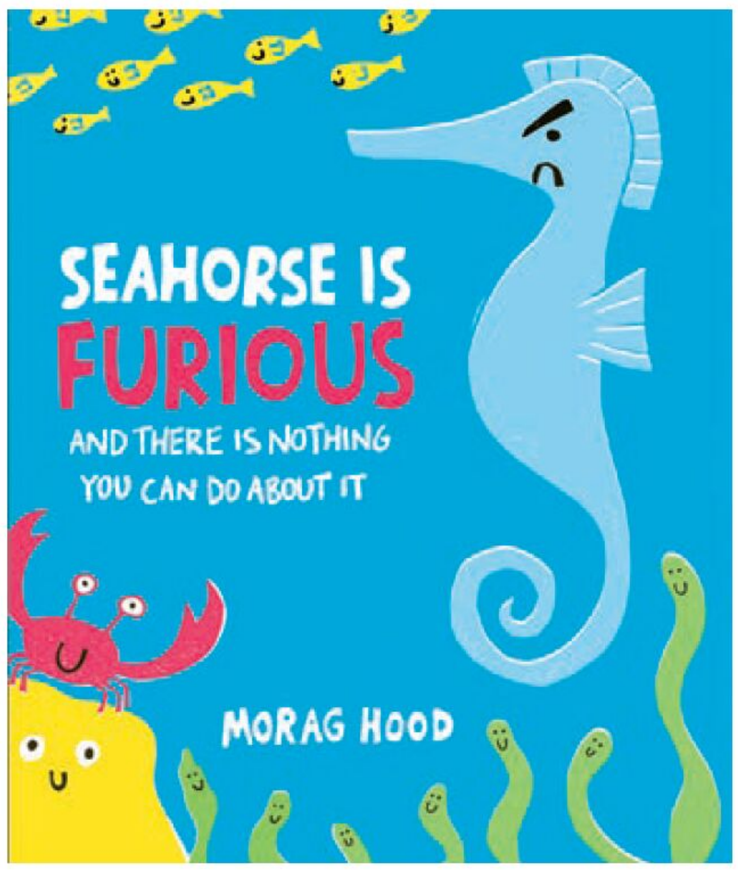
JOLLY MONSTER TOWN: THE PARTY PICKLE

by Rong Rong

NOSY CROW, £7.99

This book centres on monsters who aren't scary at all, although they are rather unusual. Twiggy the Log Monster is planning a sleepover party in her garden and all her friends are coming. She wants it to be perfect, no help required. But when Ralph the Pufferfish Monster comes to help it all starts going very wrong. Fun illustrations and an endearing cast ensure the story romps along. It's a great introduction to chapter books for newly independent readers, with detailed illustrations to take you right into Jolly Monster Town.





3+

Seahorse is Furious

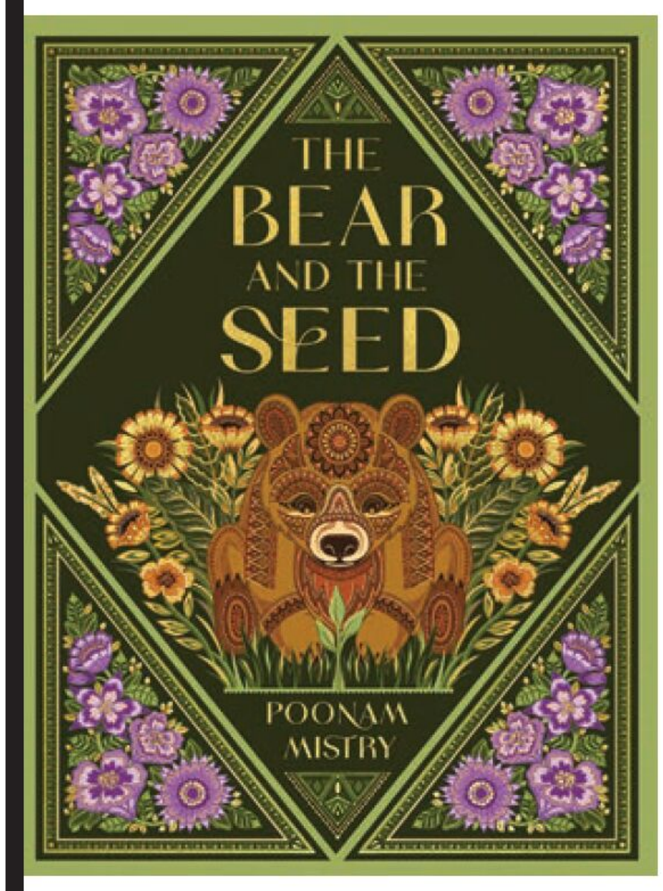
by Morag Hood

SIMON & SCHUSTER, £7.99

This book is about waking up on the wrong side of bed, or in this case ocean. Seahorse wakes up and stubs his tail. He doesn't want to cheer up so nobody can help him – he especially doesn't want a hug. Over the course of the story, he refuses to crack, even faced with his favourite snack, cut into four pieces on his favourite green plate. A happy ending makes this a great reminder that everyone is grumpy sometimes, and we all get over it, with a little nurturing from friends.

Editor's pick

3+



THE BEAR AND THE SEED

by Poona Mistry

TEMPLAR BOOKS, £12.99

Greenaway Prize-Shortlisted Poonam Mistry has created a lavishly illustrated folktale about a little bear that lives in a bountiful forest until, one day, the lush trees and greenery disappear and all the animals flee. Bear sets out to recreate this habitat, finding and nurturing a seed to ensure it grows and seeking advice from passing animals. Then it's time for him to hibernate, so will the seed survive? Rich colours and spare text make this a wonderful read-out-loud choice – with superb illustrations to enthral very young readers.

RICKMANSWORTH

17 88

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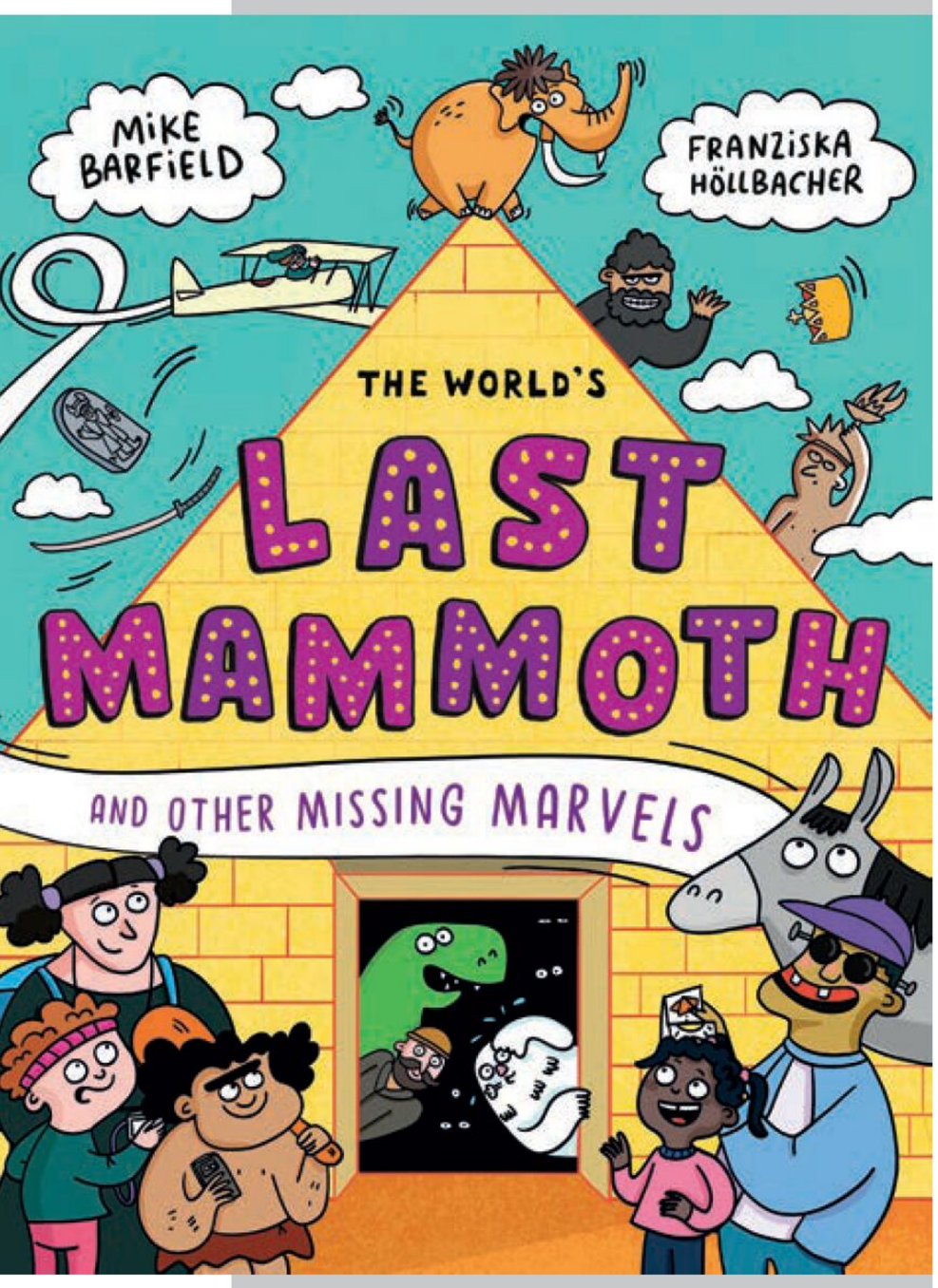


9+

THE WORLD'S LAST MAMMOTH

by Mike Barfield
illustrated by Franziska Hölbacher
TEMPLAR BOOKS, £10.99

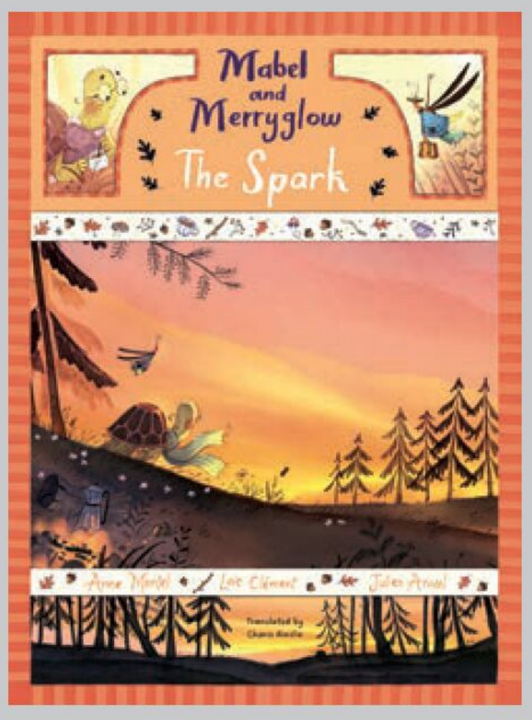
Mike Barfield is back, with another round up of wonders of the world. Children can explore the stories behind Big Foot and Nessie, as well as missing people – from Genghis Khan to Amelia Earhart – and the great places and inventions that are no longer around. Packed with information, and plenty of jokes, it's a great choice for children who love fascinating facts, theories and unsolved mysteries. There's even a spread on whatever happened to the Neanderthals. Franziska Hölbacher's illustrations and the graphic style are enticing, even for reluctant readers.

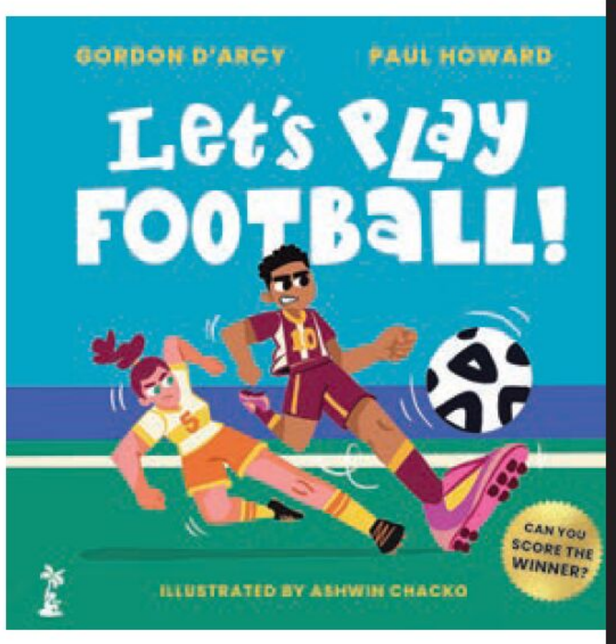
3+

MABEL AND MERRYGLOW: THE SPARK

by Anne Montel and Loïc Clément
illustrated by Julien Arnal
POST WAVE, £12.99

The first of a delightful new series, translated by Charis Ainslie, centres on Mabel – a tortoise who is terrified of the dark. She spends a lot of her time dreading the sun going down and fearing what darkness will bring, but should she do what the rest of her family do and hide in her shell? When a friendly firefly Merryglow comes to tea, he begins to support her, guiding her way and teaching her that she can embrace the darkness, and also stop feeling ashamed of her fears.





3+

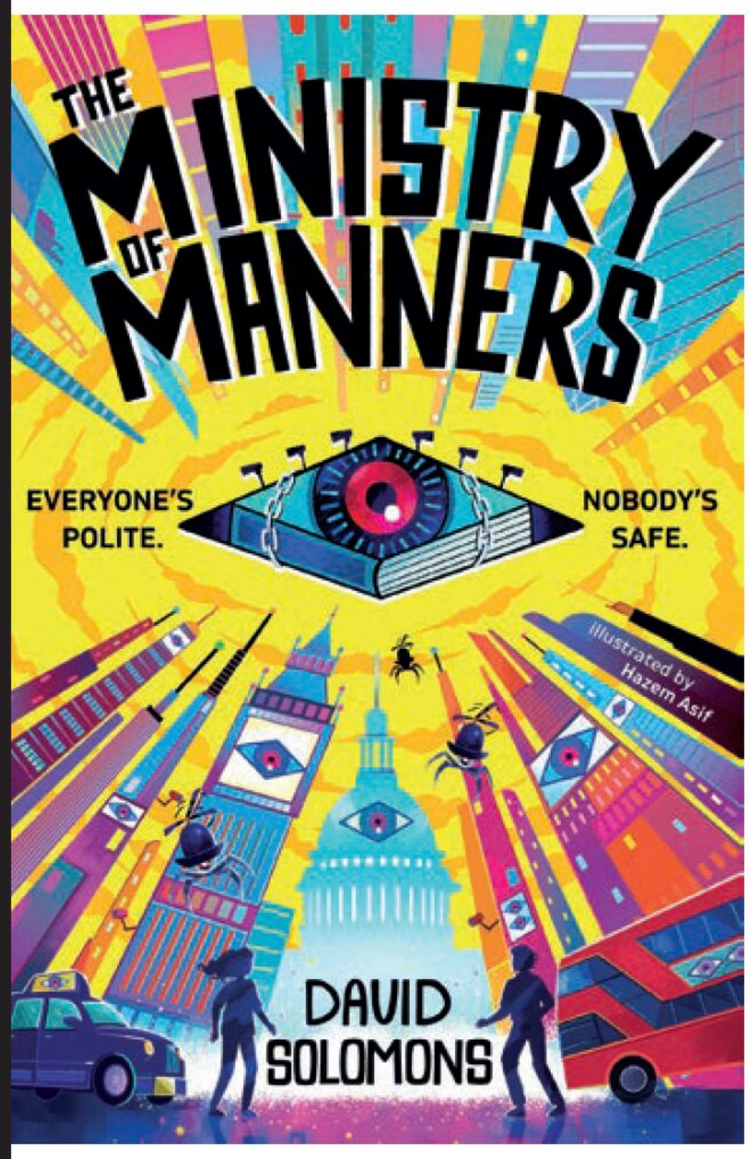
LET'S PLAY FOOTBALL

by Gordon D'Arcy and Paul Howard
illustrated by Ashwin Chacko
LITTLE ISLAND BOOKS, £9.99

Irish rugby star Gordon D'Arcy and author and former sports journalist Paul Howard have teamed up to deliver a book to inspire young footballers on match day. Beginning with warm up exercises they will probably want to try, it moves through the game right down to the final winning goal and post-win victory dance. Vivid illustrations by Ashwin Chacko add to the fun, although footie purists might raise an eyebrow (or two) about the advice to ham it up on the floor to ensure a free kick after you've been fouled!

Editor's pick

9+



The Ministry of Manners

by David Solomons
illustrated by Hazem Asif
PICCADILLY PRESS, £7.99

The author of *My Brother is a Superhero* is back with a tale about control. fear and courage. Alfie and Margot Hawthorne have grown up under Ministry of Manners rules – always be polite, never answer back, know your place. It's the law, so one wrong word can land you in Manners Retreat where your identity will be erased. Alfie knows how to stay safe, but Margot ends up taken. That's when Alfie joins the Unsilenced, a group that dares to speak out, in order to fight for his sister and to create change.

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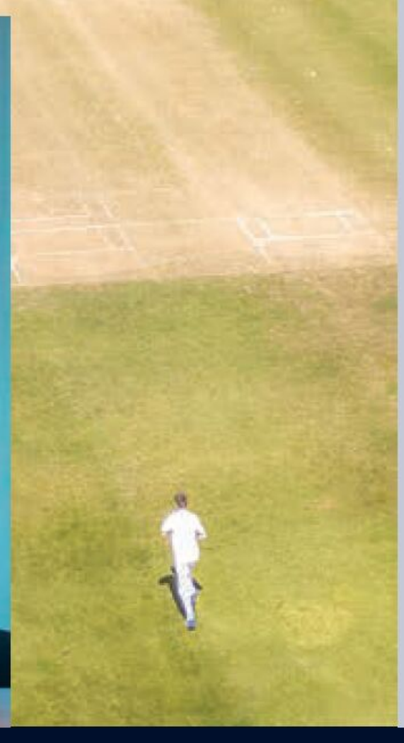

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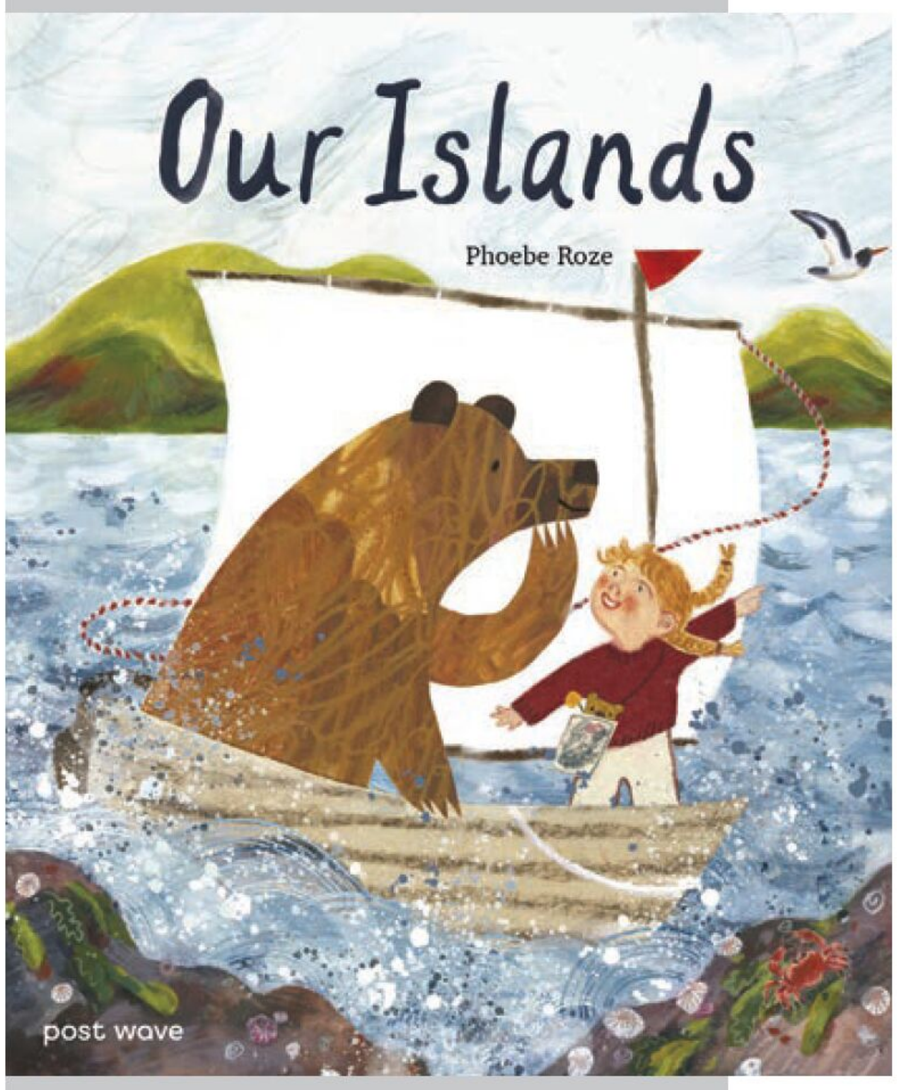
Editor's pick

8+

America's Founding Myths

by Christie Mihaly
Illustrated by Marta Sevilla
BAREFOOT BOOKS, £14.99

Subtitled '...*And What Really Happened*', this book takes a look at some of the great stories the USA was founded on – from Christopher Columbus' discovery to the US Constitution. Worth noting that the author lives in Vermont, so has an insider's perspective on how such stories have been handed down, and alternative narratives. A blend of bold illustrations and infographics – including True or False cards to reveal the answer – make this a useful resource for young historians that also raises questions around bias, source checking and critical thinking.



3+

Our Islands

by Phoebe Roze
POST WAVE, £12.99

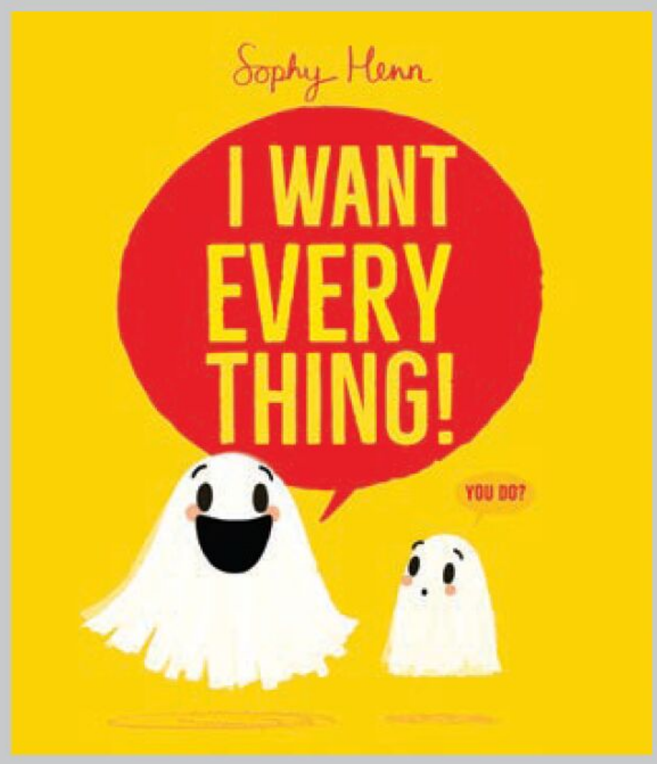
Scottish author illustrator Phoebe Roze is inspired by landscapes, and in her first book she tells the story of Bear, happy on his little island, the only home he knows. Then, one day, he is swept away by a storm while swimming. Washed up on unfamiliar shores, he's discovered by Isla. She decides to help him get home and so they set sail to find his island. The book is beautifully drawn – with evocative island landscapes – and introduces themes around friendship, discovery and finding our way back home.

3+

I WANT EVERYTHING

by Sophy Henn
SIMON & SCHUSTER, £7.99

The wonderfully talented author of *Bad Nana* has come up with a very funny book about Big Ghost, who has decided they want everything. Little Ghost tries to help out, guiding them through all the things that might not be so enjoyable, such as spots, an octopus as a hat, a hungry lion, soggy cereal or infinity mushy peas. Whittling down to wanting nothing at all, Big Ghost eventually realises that what's really important is to have is a friend who can help them out in a pickle and give them a hug.



3+

Magpie and the Sparkling Words

by Lucy Rowland
Illustrated by Craig Shuttlewood
TEMPLAR BOOKS, £7.99

Speech and language therapist Lucy Rowland has created this rhyming book about Magpie, resident of a magical forest who falls in love with the words of her fellow woodland creatures and starts to steal them. Eventually, the animals stay silent so their words can't be taken. When Magpie's nest is destroyed, sending her word treasures back into the forest, she learns the lesson that it is unity and sharing language that makes it sparkle. Vivid illustrations by Craig Shuttlewood, and a whole host of exciting new words, make this a lovely read-out-loud choice.

LEFT
Laura Henry-Allain

Friends IN DEED

*With the second book in the 'Maya & Marley' series, **Laura Henry-Allain** returns to home turf to explore themes around friendship, empathy and community spirit*

Laura Henry-Allain had a perfect vision of where she wanted to set her *Maya & Marley* series – an adventure playground. And she found inspiration in Hornimans Adventure Playground in North Kensington, a place she knew and loved during her own childhood.

"As a child, it was literally across the road," she says. "A lot of the illustrations in the books mirror what actually goes on in Hornimans – and Hornimans has been going for over 60 years. They've always had a goat – when I was there, they had a goat – and now they have two."

Our central characters, brother and sister Marley and Maya, have the run of the most exciting place a child can be – it is their home – and this is a great springboard for stories full of play, fun activities and interesting characters.

It's especially relevant to her 4+ readership, embarking on those huge adventures that come with stepping out into the world of school and new friends.

The first book in the series, *Maya & Marley and the Great Big Tidy Up* launched in September 2024 and, of course, the launch party had to be at Hornimans. The guest list included school children from her old primary across the road, St Thomas's, former school friends (primary and secondary) and even some former play workers. The mayor stopped by and a local pub did the food – it was a perfect community get-together.

How apt then, that in this this second book in the series, *Maya & Marley and the New Friend*, there's a big community lunch happening. The sibling duo are there to meet and greet guests, but when a boy called Kazuki turns up, it soon becomes clear he's very nervous. Between them, they help him stop worrying, start to relax and even join in with the fun.

We don't know if Kazuki is shy, neurodivergent or simply overwhelmed by being without his mum, but this brings plenty of talking points for children – whether they relate more to Maya and Marley or to Kazuki.

A strong storyline and rich and detailed illustrations by Yabaewah Scott help children engage with words and pictures, and there's no resisting the playground's naughty goats Lou and Chou.

Simple and reassuring stories can open up the world for children and, with her background in early years teaching, consultancy, literacy, TV and books, Laura Henry-Allain always has a keen eye for the settings and situations that draw children into stories – she says they love to imagine themselves into a story.

She sees play, and the outdoor playground setting, as a really vital aspect of this Ladybird series, because it's what children aspire to even if it's happening less than we'd like.

"We know that children are now playing less and less outside," she says. "We also know that with children now there are issues with physical development, problem solving – all these areas they should take with them into adulthood."

She certainly doesn't blame parents for any of this. "There are multiple reasons why children aren't playing outside as much, so it's about how we can support parents. How can we be solution driven?" Reading about this wonderful world is surely one way to encourage children to broaden their horizons and see the outdoor environment as something to be explored and enjoyed.

We also know that the 4+ age-group go through seismic transitions – moving on to school, to formal learning, to meeting a whole raft of new people. So the idea of an open-to-all adventure playground supports the concept that new experiences are fun and exciting.

That's not to say Laura Henry-Allain is immune to the challenges transitions bring. She's the mother of two adult sons, and her eldest is autistic, so knows that not every child copes the same way in new situations.

"We know ourselves as adults how intimidating that can be. But then, if we focus on the experience of a child who may be four or five, that can be quite daunting. Imagine that for a child who may not even have language, a child who is just learning verbal skills or a child who may be neurodivergent."

There are notes at the back to support parents and caregivers and help them to teach children to express big emotions – including the negative ones. "It actually is OK to feel sad sometimes, but it's what you do with that. A child who is angry or sad may decide to throw a chair, but we want to support them to regulate their emotions," she says.

"When we're talking about being school ready, I always say it's about giving children the skills for life – that they are able to regulate their emotions. Yes, they are feeling sad, but they can verbally share that they are feeling that way with others."

Kazuki, the new boy in this story, doesn't say too much, but enough through words and actions for his anxiety to be recognised by Maya and Marley, who then try to help. It's a great lesson for young readers in empathy and kindness through actions. Laura Henry-Allain believes stories have to have elements that resonate – and that means they have to have heart.

She has reassurance for parents preparing their child for those big and sometimes scary transitions to nursery, school and beyond. First, while it's a quite natural parental response, comparison with other children doesn't help – every child is different and socialising comes easier to some than others. "Your child is unique. They may just have one friend and that is OK. And sometimes, even if that child isn't neurodivergent, some children may be fine playing by themselves," she says.

She thinks we should make sure to remind children of their strengths. "Everybody has something to offer. Some children may be really good at cooking, at football, at cricket. Or sometimes it may just be that you are a really good friend."

Maya & Marley and the New Friend, *written by Laura Henry-Allain and illustrated by Yabaewah Scott, is out now (Ladybird, £7.99).*

"Your child is unique. They may just have one friend and that is OK – some children may be fine playing by themselves"

Epic Adventure

While Jason and the Argonauts is not famous for laughs, ***Clare Pollard*** *has delivered a funny and gripping take on the myth to delight middle-grade readers*

How do you solve a problem like Medea? It's one of the reasons Clare Pollard believes Jason and the Argonauts is a story that hasn't been retold for a young audience in a while. But it's a challenge she decided to take on, in part because it began her lifelong fascination with the myths and legends of Ancient Greece. "I think for me the starting point was seeing the movie of *Jason and the Argonauts* when I was a kid, which is why the story means so much to me. I absolutely adored it."

The result is *The Othernauts*, with adventure, characters to love and – it has to be said – a slew of epic jokes about the weirder aspects of the tale and the lives it describes. The time felt right because Clare Pollard now has her own middle graders as inspiration. "I've got children who are nine and 12, so middle grade is right in the zone." And there is, she admits, a little bit of their sibling dynamic in central characters Phoebe and (plot spoiler) her twin brother Perry.

This is an author who has worked across genres and age groups – from *The Weather*, a play that premiered at the Royal Court, to poetry, adult fiction and non-fiction, plus a new translation of *Ovid's Heroines* that she toured as a one-woman show. "I've always love writing everything, really."

Her book *Fierce Bad Rabbits* was an exploration of the sometimes dark and sinister elements of children's stories. "I take children's literature very seriously," she says. "I think we should all take children's literature seriously and think about what stories we're telling them. These books completely shape our imagination and often shape our moral code, our sense of what's possible in the world." Now with two children of her own, she's been reading a lot of middle-grade stuff and believes the biggest mistake

a writer can make is to underestimate the audience. "Your storytelling needs to be just as good, your descriptions just as evocative, your characters just as rounded, your jokes just as witty."

In *The Othernauts*, there's no dumbing down in the language, and she shows the same respect for the wit of a child audience as an adult one, albeit with some thought about the grislier bits of Greek myths. "There is dark material in them that you have got to handle quite carefully. But I just love the idea that I'm telling a story to children that is a version of the same story told to children thousands of years ago. I find that just incredible," she says. "I really love reinterpreting these myths and trying to make them relevant now."

Medea, that problem character, is handled rather beautifully. "I had quite good fun making her into a Goth teenage witch," she says. From her first stomping and slamming entrance after she's taken a night off from the shrine (where she spends her time making potions and sun-drying shrews' hearts), she's riveting and ghastly in equal measure. As Phoebe puts it: 'I thought she'd be cooler than this'.

The seriously cool character in *The Othernauts* is Phoebe, who is also incredibly funny. What's not to love about a heroine who starts out telling us how deeply bored she is, with only a wicked stepmother and poisonous flowers for company on the dust-smothered and man-free island of Lemnos. She certainly doesn't want to be a boy – having been educated in man hating since she was small – but she wouldn't mind a change of scene.

"I really wanted Phoebe to be that cynical, sarcastic character," says Clare Pollard.

ABOVE & LEFT
Illustrations by Macha Yao help set the scene – and the humour

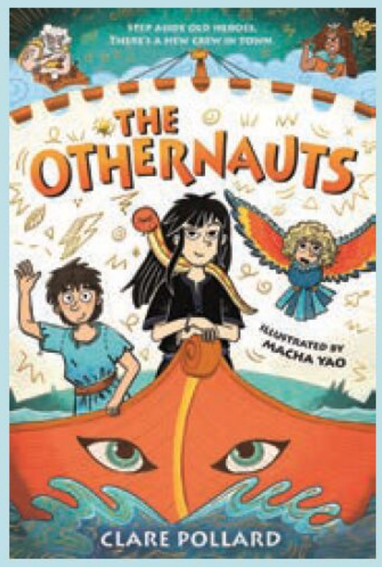
Here, she admits, she was influenced by her own children and the way they crack jokes – part of the shared language of home. "We all really love that deadpan humour." She believes jokes are a hook for this age group, as long as they are actually funny, but she had the perfect judging panel of two. "Children are a particularly good audience to test jokes on. A joke will fall absolutely flat – it's humbling," she says.

There's no doubt that audiences – boys and girls – are going to enjoy the polished humour in a story that treats a dark myth with lightness. Clare Pollard thinks the Greek myths endure because they have a plot that's for everyone. "What's so appealing about Greek myths – and the same is true of fairytales and a lot of these traditional tales – is that they weren't aimed at children. There wasn't such a thing as childhood in those days. It was literature for everybody."

She's looking forward to taking *The Othernauts* into schools – where she already does a lot of work with The Poetry Society – because she already knows there's a keen audience. "The couple of workshops I've done so far, it's been hard to get a word in edgeways because children start giving me blow-by-blow accounts of The Odyssey – they get geeky about it!"

She'd like the workshops to cover something else the Greek myths gave us. "I think the Greeks invented the shapes of stories – the stories that we still tell now," she says. "One of the things I'm going to be asking is, how does a story work?"

The good news for readers who get behind Phoebe and Perry is that they ride off into the sunset in search of another adventure. The second book is well into production – no plot spoilers but expect monsters, a fiendish female and other typical hazards of ancient times. Clare Pollard is delighted because these are two characters she isn't ready to let go of quite yet. "I'm fond of Phoebe and Perry. It's really nice to take them forward into another story and see them grow up a bit."



***The Othernauts**, written by **Clare Pollard** and illustrated by **Macha Yao**, is out now (£7.99, Piccadilly Press).*

"I just love the idea that I'm telling a story to children that is a version of the same story told to children thousands of years ago"

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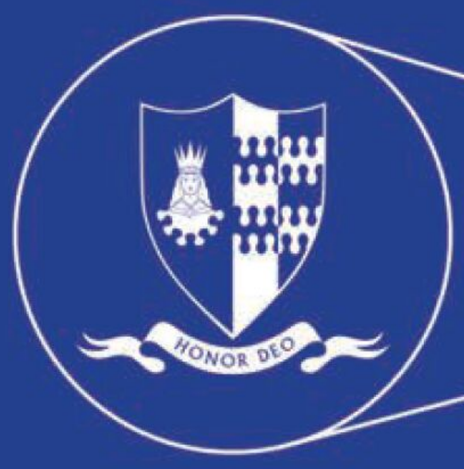

School's Out

MAKING OF ME: JOEL FEARON P. 118 SAIL AWAY P. 120 LAST WORD P. 138

BARCELONA CELEBRATES

A milestone year in the Catalan capital.

See page 128

The MAKING of Me

Joel Fearon

The Team GB sprinter and GB and Jamaica bobsleigh star on challenging schooldays and the supporters who helped him to shine in sport

Where did you go to school and when?
A I began my school journey at Lakey Lane School in Birmingham before moving to Coventry, where I attended Woodlands Boys' School.

What was school like for you?
A School was a challenging place for me. I had dyslexia and ADHD at a time when they weren't widely recognised, and very early on I was labelled as a 'naughty' child. That was difficult – especially for my mum, who knew that wasn't who I was.

Did you love school, or hate it?
A I'd say I was somewhere in the middle with school. I enjoyed the social side and got on well with my peers, but in the classroom I was often misunderstood. There wasn't always the patience or understanding I needed, which made learning more difficult. That said, there were moments – and people – that made a real difference.

What were your favourite subjects and teachers at school?
A In Year 4, Mrs Wright changed everything for me. She allowed me to express myself in ways that worked – using things like K'NEX and Lego to build and create. Sometimes she would let me stay in during break just to focus on building, and I loved it. I'd make cars, air balloons, really intricate designs. That was where my love of engineering began.

More importantly, she helped me get diagnosed with dyslexia, gave me strategies to read, write and spell – and most of all – she gave me confidence. She took the time to understand me and nurture me and I've never forgotten that.

Of course, PE and sports were always my 'best' subjects – the ones where I got the most praise. A couple of coaches outside school have been absolutely instrumental in getting me to where I am now – Charlie Kelly at Coventry Godiva Harriers, and MIchael Khmel at Loughborough.

Where was your best school moment?
A Funnily enough, a key moment was when I was sitting in detention and picked up a book about Linford Christie – I wasn't really reading it, I was looking at the pictures. And I remember seeing him standing there, holding the British flag, strong, powerful, proud. And I thought to myself, 'I want that to be me'. That moment planted a seed.

What was the most trouble you ever got into at school?
A As I moved into secondary school, things became harder. There was less time to build relationships with teachers, less understanding, and I fell behind

"I REMEMBER SEEING LINFORD CHRISTIE STANDING THERE, HOLDING THE BRITISH FLAG, STRONG, POWERFUL, PROUD – AND I THOUGHT TO MYSELF, **'I WANT THAT TO BE ME'**"

ABOVE
Joel Fearon as part of Team Jamaica

quite quickly. If I'm honest, I struggled throughout most of that period.

I wasn't expelled but I was 'managed moved'. Both schools I attended were in Tile Hill, Coventry and I experienced racism. There were things said and behaviours shown that I wasn't willing to accept. I always tried to handle those situations in the right way but ultimately, instead of addressing the issue, I was the one who got moved. Looking back, it felt like the problem wasn't being fixed.

What beliefs did your time at school give you?

A When I left school, I didn't have much belief in myself. Deep down, I felt like there was more in me but it had never really been unlocked. It's sad to say, but I don't remember many moments where I truly felt proud of myself during that time.

Were you ever 'too cool for school'?

A While I struggled with a lot of aspects of school, I also didn't take up the opportunities that were there. I didn't join sports teams – I didn't step into sport until I was around 16. I didn't take part in drama or creative activities, even though I would have liked to. Whether I was trying to be too cool or was just shy, I held myself back.

What was your proudest school moment?

A One of the first times I remember feeling proud was winning the Coventry 100 metre championships in Year 11. There were a lot of fast athletes there, so to win meant a lot. What made it even more special was that my mum had won that same race when she was younger. It felt like something bigger than just a race – it felt like connection.

When and how did your love sport begin?

A PE was always when I got the most 'well dones' at school, so in Year 7 I joined Sparkhill Harriers in Birmingham to train outside of school too. When we moved to Coventry in Year 9, I found a new club – Coventry, Godiva Harriers – and continued to work hard, eventually ending up at Loughborough with Michael Khmel. He was my sprint coach first, and also the one that persuaded me to move to bobsleigh, so I have a lot to thank him for.

What other key influences shaped you growing up?

A My biggest influence throughout all of this was my dad. I was lucky to have him in my life the whole time. He showed me how to work hard, how to never give up, and how to find solutions when things got tough. He wasn't involved in sport, but everything he taught me, I carried into it – and that's what made the difference.

What projects and challenges are you involved in now?

A Today, I visit over 60 schools each year, sharing these stories with young people. I've also recently written a children's book called *Just Be Brave*, inspired by my journey. It follows a young boy named Joel as he finds his courage and learns to face the world with confidence.

I'm also really excited to be back at Festival of Sport in Packington this summer. It's an amazing opportunity for kids from all backgrounds to try out dozens of different sports. It's the kind of thing that could be as inspirational to a child today as that book with Linford Christie in it was to me.

How would you sum up your school days in three words?

A Fun, daunting, and shaping.

Festival of Sport 2026 *at Packington, Warwickshire is from 24 – 27 July, with weekend and day tickets available now.*
festivalofsportuk.com
Just Be Brave *by Joel Fearon is available on Amazon.*

SAIL AWAY

Sailing around the Cyclades on a tall-masted ship delivers island jewels, and the ***pleasure of being carried on the wind***

SANDY CADIZ-SMITH

ABOVE
Ios, Cyclades

The Cyclades islands are scattered across the Aegean like a handful of sun-kissed pebbles. Their name comes from the soft circular sweep they make around sacred Delos, ancient spiritual heart of the region.

More than 220 islands and islets make up this constellation – many of them uninhabited – and they bask in 300 days of sunshine every year. The islands are known for the Meltemi, seasonal winds that make sailing exhilarating, sometimes unpredictable. We are about to discover this for ourselves aboard our stately tall-masted sailing ship, Sea Cloud II.

Our Cyclades journey begins in Athens, where boarding is smooth and unhurried. We're shown straight to our splendid Junior Suite with generous lounge, walk-in wardrobe and gleaming marble bathroom complete with bathtub and shower. There's a chilled bottle of champagne to welcome us – a sure sign of indulgent days ahead.

Sea Cloud II really is a sight to reckon with. She carries just 94 guests and combines the facilities of a modern cruise with the old-world romance of a tall ship. She's beautifully finished, with open teak decks, where meals are often taken under the Greek sun. It's a delightfully

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intimate setting with ocean views guaranteed.

Life aboard begins properly the next morning with our first sight of the theatre of sail. It's all done manually and we watch while some of the crew scale the mast and others gather, ropes in hand. With practised skill and precision teamwork, the crew raise the canvas until the whole ship seems to breathe out. It's captivating – an awe-inspiring start to a voyage.

We quickly learn that safety is everything, and the wind is the one true master. Captain Christian keeps us informed, his calm voice describing the onward journey, and there's always a thrilling edge of uncertainty in our plotted course. Plans shift as our stately tall ship stays in tune with the Meltemi.

Leisurely days on Sea Cloud II are punctuated by easy meals taken in the sea-salted open air, while lectures fill us in on the fascinating history of the islands ahead. And for the bold, there's always the rigging to climb or the bosprit to edge out onto, the sea roaring below in a blur of blue and white. Whether you're bold or not, it's an exhilarating ride, with the wind carrying us fast and clean through Aegean waters.

"With precision teamwork, the crew raise the canvas until the whole ship seems to breathe out – an awe-inspiring start to a voyage"

ABOVE *Amorgos, a ruggedly beautiful and tranquil stop on our journey*

LEFT *Sea Cloud II*

Patmos greets us first, serene and welcoming with its dazzlingly bright white houses. We climb to the Monastery of Saint John and wander through the Patmian houses of Chora, where sunlight catches on walls and wooden shutters. On Ios, a Zodiac wet landing brings us to Manganari Beach with its calm waters and unhurriedly island pace of life.

"Boats bob lazily and the aroma of sage and thyme fills the air as we sip on local beer and swim in the crystal-clear sea"

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ABOVE
Elegance below deck on Sea Cloud II

BELOW
The food on board is sublime

Amorgos is ruggedly beautiful, with unravelling folds of rock and herb-scented hillsides. We cross its spine, hairpin by hairpin, before spending time relaxing at a beach club in the gorgeous little town of Katapola. Boats bob lazily and the aroma of sage and thyme fills the air as we sip on local beer and swim in the crystal-clear sea. We wander the narrow streets in the sunshine, picking up local olive oil, herbs and zesty citron liqueur, the island's signature tipple.

Poros, with its lively harbour and easy charm, is the final port of call. Cafés and shops line the waterfront, so it's perfect for one last wander and one last deep breath of herb-infused air. We almost feel like sailors from centuries past and it's been a wonderful discovery of a Greece that feels more ancient and less travelled. The unique character and glittering blues of each island will stay with us, but the Meltemi defined our trip – a reminder that, in the Cyclades, the exact course of every journey is in the gift of the wind.

LEFT
Relaxing on deck is a highlight

SEA CLOUD CRUISES
In brief

Sea Cloud ships operate select and low environmental impact sailings in the Mediterranean, as well as themed events and cruises in locations such as the Azores, Canaries, Caribbean and Central America.

Prices from €4,790 for a 7-night Summer Breeze Through the Aegean itinerary in July, taking in the Cyclades islands of Amorgos and Milos plus Nauplio and Poros in the Peloponnese.

seacloud.com/en

REAL NAPLES

Naples is a city steeped in history, but out on the streets it's refreshingly real, says ***Sandy Cadiz-Smith***

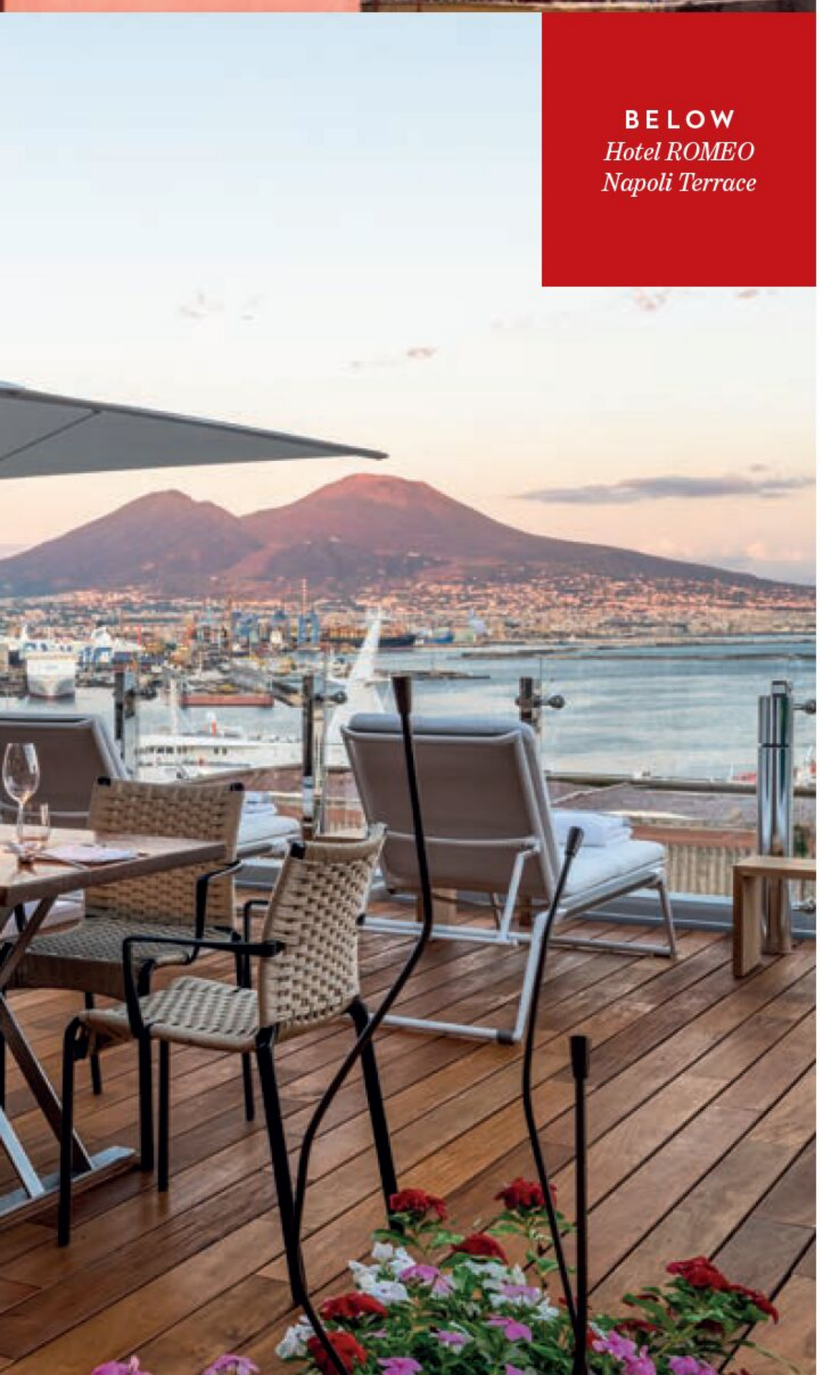
Naples hums with a restless energy and, given its geology, that's no surprise. The city sits atop the simmering super volcano of Campi Flegrei, while just across the bay, Mount Vesuvius keeps its silent guard. It feels gloriously chaotic, alive with activity, noise and tempting aromas.

The best way to get Naples' pulse is on foot. We start by wandering down Spaccanapoli, the long, narrow artery that splits Naples in two, threading together more than two thousand years of Neapolitan life. From there, we slip into the tangled maze of the Spanish Quarter (Quartieri Spagnoli), where everyday life spills out into the open. A unique energy fills the air – scooters buzz past, laundry lines flutter overhead, street shrines mark every corner, and crumbling palazzi jostle for space alongside the city's hundreds of churches.

As we walk on, the city shifts from intimate alleyways to grander architecture. The glorious Galleria Umberto, a 19th-century shopping arcade with sweeping glass dome and intricate mosaic floor, rises like a glittering jewel. And Castel dell'Ovo stands proud above the bay, steeped in centuries of myth and history.

Markets overflow with glossy tomatoes, fresh seafood and peaches so fragrant you can smell them before you see them. Coffee here is super strong and taken standing up, and no visit is complete without a stop at Gran Cafe Gambrinus for your caffeine hit. Established in 1860 it has been a gathering place for artists, writers, intellectuals, and royalty – those Belle-Epoque interiors conjure up a glittering past. Amid this rich

BELOW
Hotel ROMEO Napoli Terrace



"Scooters buzz past, laundry lines flutter overhead, street shrines mark every corner, and crumbling palazzi jostle for space"

and layered history there's pizza. Blistered crusts and oozing mozzarella – simplicity and flavour delivered in every bite.

After an immersion into the city's rich contrasts, we're drawn to the water. The Bay of Naples stretches wide and luminous, and with views to the isle of Capri and ever-watchful Vesuvius.

From our home-from-home in the dazzling ROMEO Napoli overlooking the harbour, we are perfectly placed to enjoy the whole panorama. We are within easy walking distance of all the city's treasures but have a calm base to return to. It is a wonderfully quirky and stylish hotel – an eclectic art collection adding another layer of cool to its Neapolitan vibe. Our deluxe front room is modern and inviting, all dark wood tones and clean lines and with floor-to-ceiling windows framing the harbour.

Up on the top floor, the superb Alain Ducasse restaurant delivers stunning views across the bay and has recently been awarded a Michelin star. This is also where you'll find two pools and a gorgeous terrace – the perfect spot for soaking up the Neapolitan light and the views.

Downstairs the hotel's spa is nothing short of magnificent. A sprawling sanctuary, it is complete with sauna, steam bath, frigidarium, cold baths and a blissful wet area lined with chaise longues for rejuvenating.

We treat ourselves to a restorative massage at the Sisley Paris spa, which offers a wide array of beauty treatments – the perfect way to complete our stay.

Naples delights the senses and steals our hearts. With its layers of history, lively street scene and wonderful dining and grazing opportunities, it delivers a city break that feels both energising and refreshingly real.

NAPLES EXPLORER

In detail...

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Navigate Naples' maze of streets on a walking tour with Italy Charme's knowledgeable local guides. ***italycharme.com***

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CATALAN

RETURN

Barcelona is always worth visiting, but especially in a year when it's marking two Gaudi milestones, says ***Sandy Cadiz-Smith***

Visiting Barcelona is always a good idea. This year, though, the city is offering particularly persuasive reasons to return (or make your first foray). It is the centenary of Antoni Gaudi's death and, in a feat that has long felt more mythical than plausible, the Sagrada Família is finally nearing completion (or so we are assured). There's something irresistible about enjoying the Catalan capital just as one of its most audacious dreams edges towards fulfilment. And we can't resist.

I've long had a personal dream to stay within the Gothic Quarter. And that's exactly what we're doing, right in the heart of this historical district at the stunning Hotel Neri. A member of Relais & Chateaux, it occupies two landmark buildings. One of them just happens to be a magnificent 12th-century palace.

Hotel Neri has been renovated with Catalan verve, and also full respect for history and provenance, with 22 rooms and suites – each one of them delightfully different. There's an exceptional restaurant here, too, and a wonderful urban rooftop oasis. Our room is spacious and light-filled, with a huge, modern bathroom and lovely views of the courtyard. It's a calm, cool and elegant place to be – the perfect foil to the bustling streets below. And appropriately, Gaudi regularly attended the church opposite.

Below these bustling streets lie the stones of Roman Barcino – still visible in fragments of walls and columns – while above them rise the Gothic palaces, churches and civic

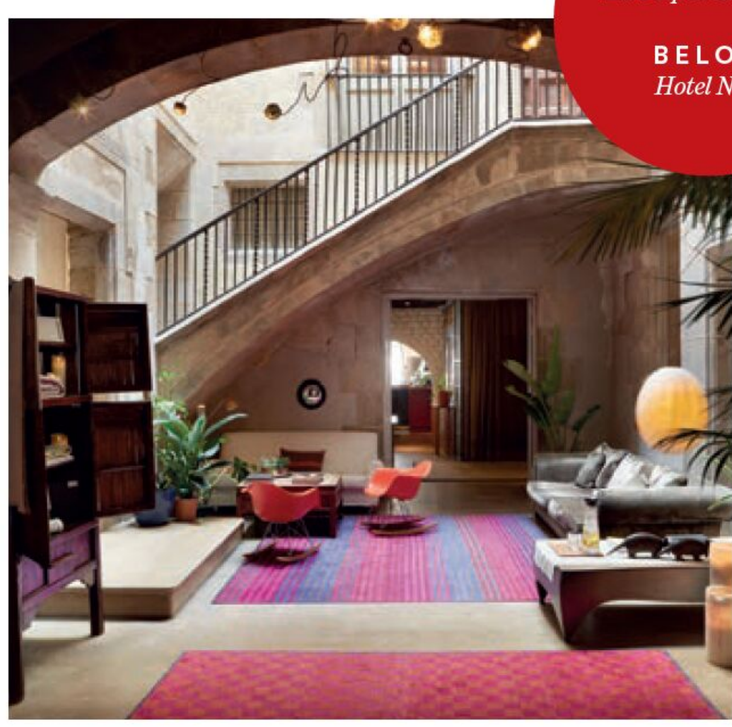
LEFT
Sagrada Familia

RIGHT
Gaudi's Casa Batlló

buildings of a medieval city that once ruled the Western Mediterranean. Today, the Gothic Quarter remains a beloved, lived-in neighbourhood – which is my favourite thing about it. Laundry flutters from wrought-iron balconies, people walk their dogs and children play. And the streets are lined with what seem like endless shops, cafés, bars and restaurants. There's enough to keep you occupied for weeks, even tempt you to move here for good.

Just around the corner is my favourite market in the world (a bold claim, but one I stand by). La Boqueria is Barcelona at full volume – bright, busy and noisily alive. What began as an open-air market beyond the old city walls has developed into a cathedral of food, its iron-and-glass roof sheltering stalls piled high with jewel-coloured fruit, jamon strung like festive bunting and seafood so fresh it still seems to glisten with the salty sea.

This place is not merely a box to be ticked, though it is endlessly photogenic. La Boqueria remains a working market, pulsing with the rhythms of daily life. Locals navigate the crowds with practised ease, while visitors – us included – still pause to marvel at the abundance. After stocking up on surprisingly well-priced herbs and spices, we retreat to a favourite corner for chilled cava, tapas and oysters, the perfect restorative, before drifting back out into the streets. Barcelona is a city made for wandering, after all, and



ABOVE
La Boqueria market

BELOW
Hotel Neri

La Boqueria is Barcelona at full volume – bright, busy and noisily alive

ABOVE
Hotel Neri Courtyard

from here it feels entirely natural to meander onwards towards yet another of its great spectacles – the famous work in progress that is Sagrada Familia.

Construction of this mighty cathedral began in 1882, with Gaudi taking over a year later and slowly turning it into the defining work of his life. Barcelona is scattered with his visionary designs and details, but this was the project that consumed him. When he died in 1926, only a small portion was complete, leaving behind a vision so vast it seemed almost inconceivable it would ever come to full life. And yet here it is, rising majestic, funded by awestruck visitors and shaped by modern technology. It manages to look both ancient and startlingly new – and certainly more complete than on my last visit three years ago.

Officially, the aim is to finish it this year. A small part of me hopes it never quite gets there. An unfinished and ever-changing masterpiece is, after all, the best possible reason to keep coming back to magnificent Barcelona and check in on its many treasures.

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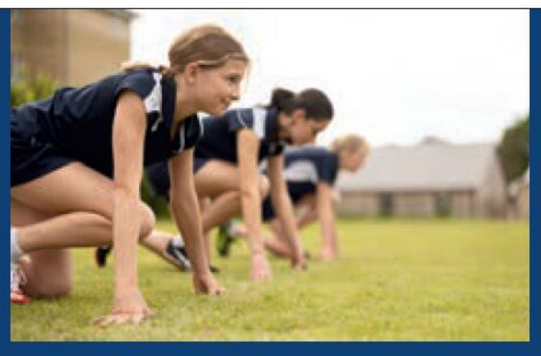

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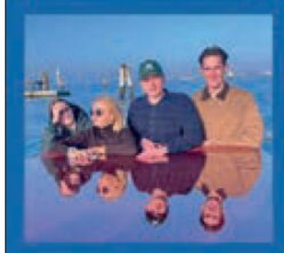

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Julie Keller

The Head of **Nottingham Girls' High School GDST** on her background and educational philosophy

What is your background?
A I'm proudly Nottingham-born and have spent all of my career teaching in the Nottingham community. I went to the local comprehensive school, then on to University of Leicester to study Economic and Social History, and back to University of Nottingham for my PGCE. Following 11 years in the maintained sector, I joined Nottingham Girls' High School as Deputy Head in 2011. I have just celebrated 10 years as Head of the school.

What excites you most about your role?
A The girls always laugh as I say, often, that I have the best job in the world. Every day is exciting. Who wouldn't want to work with 600 female leaders of the future? We are a progressive, creative school with an outstanding staff and brilliant students. Seeing just what girls can achieve, when they are taught in an environment built entirely around them is incredible.

What is your academic philosophy?
A My mantra is that no girl is left behind – every girl makes progress and achieves outstanding results. My belief is that girls should go off to study what they want where they want and play to their strengths, whether that be the incredible numbers who go off to study medicine and law or those who pursue their passion for classics, acting, music or aviation.

Can you tell us about one pivotal moment in your career?
A The most pivotal moment was becoming Deputy Head. Having never experienced a girls' only environment before I was blown away by the ethos and opportunities that just aren't there in a co-ed setting. Since 2011, I have become a passionate advocate for all girls' schools and see it as my mission to ensure they survive long into the future. I want to demonstrate to people that far from the old-fashioned stereotype, schools like ours are the most progressive possible.

ABOVE
Julie Keller

What is your school's approach and what sets it apart?
A I truly believe that Nottingham Girls' is unlike any other school. We smash stereotypes. Every girl, whether an introvert or extrovert, goes on to become an outstanding leader. We are a family and a community, we know every single girl, and we never give up on anyone. Everyone is valued and respected and it's genuinely the most happy place to be. In fact, all our visitors comment on how welcoming the school feels.

What makes a great student?
A Girls are naturally perfectionists, so students who are honest and brave – honest about their weaknesses, and brave enough to admit how they're feeling – are the ones that thrive. We don't need to add any further pressure – they do that enough to themselves.

From your experience, what makes a great school environment?
A A school that builds trust with staff and with parents. No school can turn out successful and well-rounded individuals if their teachers are working in a culture of pressure and micromanagement. I believe in leading with honesty and transparency, and my open-door policy is exactly that. The fact that in our most recent staff engagement survey, 92% of staff said they enjoyed their role means we are doing something right. A happy girl is a successful girl, but you need happy staff for students to succeed.

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