

Good Schools Guide – Review for Blundell’s Prep

Since 2011, Mr Andrew Southgate BA Ed (mid thirties). Raised in Maidstone, but venturing westwards for his degree in physical education and history at St Luke’s, Exeter, he spent the first 13 years of his career at Moulsholme Prep(qv), ending up as deputy head. Impossibly youthful, he came bounding out of his office to meet us, and his enthusiasm for Blundell’s, Devon, prep schools, children and life in general is infectious. Though he denies it - ‘I talk quite a good game of rugby’ he says - he looks pretty fit: there is talk of introducing a veterans’ rugby team for keen dads, and he still coaches and referees. Married to Sarah, with 2 children in the school, Mr Southgate has gone down very well with parents, who appreciate the aspirations and pride he has injected into ‘what was a somewhat complacent offering’, according to one. We also heard ‘passion, energy and buzz, yet willing to take criticism’. Praise indeed.

All leave at the end of year 6 (unlike traditional prep schools which conclude at year 8 with Common Entrance), and the vast majority move on to the senior school by means of entrance tests in English, maths and non-verbal reasoning. ‘No-one is looking anywhere else now’ remarked one mother, but those who might are equally well prepared for entrance tests elsewhere.

Sited next to Blundell’s itself, so able to use some of its facilities, but separately run and administered. Attractive semi-rural setting in 12 acres on the edge of Tiverton, where outdoor learning is top of the pops, complete with pond and wetland area. Old red brick house has been beautifully extended and adapted to create light and airy spaces, where art is effectively displayed. We particularly liked the science lab and the fabulous and well-equipped food technology room, where sessions for everyone are timetabled, and where keen young Blumenthals knock up delicious fare for parents and any other lucky diners. School lunch looked and smelt pretty good too.

‘The children who come here are a broad church’ says Mr Southgate, ‘and our challenge is to accommodate them all; we’re not an academic hot house’. The last 2 years have seen significant changes to SEN provision - not least its renaming as Learning Success - increased hours for the SEN specialist, targeted reading groups every morning of the week (no extra charge!) as well as handwriting club and a TA in all lower sets.

Lots of sport on offer, but everyone gets a game and to represent the school: sport for all rather than winning at all costs. Valuing the individual child is top priority, as is the nurturing environment: ‘After all they are still little at that age’, say parents.

School’s location in Devon means all its glories are there for the taking: roughly-toughy stuff on Exmoor, derring-do on the coast, culture in Exeter or Taunton and so on; parents report far more trips and visitors, such as a circus school for a day, which has gone down extremely well. Much loved by local community - one commentator said faintly dismissively that Blundell’s is the school for those who will never leave Devon – and refugees from the urban rat race, but it’s a beguiling proposition for all takers.