

THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE

The Good Schools Guide review of Queen's College December 2015

Principal

Since 2009, Dr Frances Ramsey MA PGCE DPhil (Oxon) (40s). Educated at co-educational boarding schools, the Dragon, then Oakham, she read history at Oxford and her doctorate is in medieval history. Prior to becoming principal here at Queen's College, she was director of studies at Westminster School and master of the Queen's Scholars for 17 years. She says the transition from Westminster to Queen's has been seamless. A similar central London culture – intelligent teachers lead their own full lives out of school and many parents have sons at Westminster and their daughters here (as indeed does she). The education is broad and each child is treated as an individual and difficult to pigeon-hole. Unusually for a head of a busy and high profile senior school, these two schools are the extent of her teaching experience. It is obviously more than enough. We couldn't find a parent to speak in anything but superlatives when describing her. 'Brilliant,' said one, 'outstanding' said another, 'very very genuine' observed a third.

We found it hard not to be bowled over too. As soon as you meet this highly intelligent and incisive woman you feel at your ease and charmed by her gentle but focused attention. Dr Ramsey is like a tiny bird, modest and seemingly fragile but beneath that delicate surface robust (but not steely) and capable of (almost) anything. Her husband is a professor of archaeological science at Merton College Oxford, where they met. Parents speak of her 'vision' and her presence - 'she is always there', says one, 'and available,' says another. Without any fuss and with a great deal of subtlety she has managed to turn round a prevailing sense of 'laissez faire' about learning. 'Yes, the bright ones would get to Oxbridge, but if you decided that learning was not for you, you could sit back and enjoy the ride without putting the effort in - and that's what's changed,' commented a parent. Now Dr Ramsey doesn't allow any girl to be overlooked. Everyone needs to focus at all times. As this has become more ingrained into the culture of the school there is less necessity to enforce it rigidly from the top. The intake is also becoming of a higher calibre academically as the word spreads. This has created some murmurs of dissatisfaction – a slight feeling among senior girls that the school is losing its creative flair and marshalling a more uniform collection. However, parents comment on the excellent appointments Dr Ramsey has made since she arrived. She notices, too, when an existing member of staff could flourish in another department, and this is where she makes the difference. Bold and imaginative, she is unafraid to rock the boat, but she does it with gentleness and empathy.

Academic Matters

The trend is upwards and results get more impressive year on year. Over a three year period the percentage of A*s, As and Bs at A level has increased by nearly 10 per cent – the 2013 figure is 75 per cent, 80 per cent in 2014 and 83 per cent in 2015. GCSE results follow the same trajectory. In 2013, 68 per cent of results were an A* or an A, and this figure rose to 74 per cent in 2015. The range of subjects is broad, but by far the most popular and successful subject – according to recent results - is English, closely followed by history. Philosophy and ethics is another popular department. Tiny take up of further maths, and no A*s in this subject. No A*s in any of the sciences, but plenty of As and a healthy number - six or seven - doing biology and chemistry, although only three took physics. The number of girls doing a modern language at A level appears to be low. Only two took French in 2015 and, with the exception of one girl doing Japanese, no one sat any other modern language. This is despite the fact that there is a lot of language provision in the early years – in year 7 they do Mandarin, Spanish, French, Italian and German, and then can choose a second modern language in addition to French in year 8 and 9 before finalising GCSE choices. We swept through a corridor overhearing the songs and languages of different European countries that poured out of each classroom. Results in modern languages are good at GCSE – in French, Italian and Spanish. A shame that this doesn't seem to carry through – yet – to A level. This may change following the recent appointment of a new head of modern languages from North London Collegiate.

Classics department is lively, we were told, with lots of recital competitions, for example, organised by the London Classical Association, as well as plays, trips and activities. Top Latin set in year 9 are introduced to ancient Greek and a tiny few take GCSE. The take up of Latin is also low. Only one sat Latin A level in 2015 and she got a B; at GCSE approximately five each year take the subject, some achieving strong A* and A grades.

In some of the EBacc subjects (maths, English, history, geography, and French, but not sciences) the girls take the tougher IGCSE. Results in maths are excellent. No one has got below a B in recent years, with 19 As and 8 A*s recently. Parents of girls in years 7 and 8 are excited to report their daughters discovering a love of science and enthusiasm for subjects they had never shown an interest in before. From 2018 girls will take the tougher IGCSE in sciences too.

Reports across the board about the excellent relationships between staff and pupils. Girls here are treated with respect and consideration by their teachers and we were told by a number of parents that the atmosphere was more similar to a university than a school in this respect - helped, no doubt, by the 'supervision style' class sizes in the sixth form. Our guides enthused about the teachers 'being there for them' and that they felt they could always trouble them - in or out of lessons - with a question or concern. Small class sizes (15 - 20) and sometimes tiny in the sixth form - contribute to the particular personal rapport that develops between teacher and student.

One SENCo only, employed four days a week. Dr Ramsey emphasised the strong weight on literacy and numeracy that is given to the admissions process. Anyone with a 'spiky profile' is unlikely to reach the standard. Although the one SENCo can meet the needs of pupils with mild dyspraxia, dyslexia, dyscalculia etc, 'we are not a school that specialises in this,' asserts Dr Ramsey. The approach is holistic. Girls needing extra support are rarely taken out of lessons but will have 'individual learning plans' which all their teachers will be familiar with so that support can be given all the time during every lesson. Laptops and extra time may form part of the plan. 'We adopt a much more joined up approach,' confirms Dr Ramsey. No EFL tuition but will give support for EAL if necessary.

Games, Options, the Arts

Sport here is surprisingly strong considering this is a central London all girls' day school - and a relatively small one, too. Lots of choice of sports - netball arguably the strongest, but girls can also play lacrosse, football and tag rugby in winter, rounders, cricket and tennis in the summer. Despite its urban centre - Oxford Street and John Lewis only a stone's throw away - Regent's Park is also just up the road in the other direction and the girls can walk there in 10 minutes. Plenty of fixtures against other schools - they normally field a first and second team - and games is timetabled heavily in the early years. Twice a week girls will have double games, once a week PE and once a week dance. A gym in the bowels of the school is well equipped and a great space for letting off steam and doing (almost) any kind of sport, dance, ballet or gymnastics and even spinning and zumba. The school's sports uniform - 'a hoody and leggings,' as one parent described it - is very popular with the girls, no doubt a positive influence on the relish for physical activity.

Enthusiasm for sport wanes somewhat in the senior years but they then graduate to yoga, pilates and zumba classes at the University of Westminster gym off Regent Street. Swimming takes place at the Marshall Street Leisure Centre. Dr Ramsey has worked on sport since her arrival. Her aim has been to create a fuller programme with a wider range of activities on offer and to encourage the competitive spirit. The appointment of a dynamic head of PE and her vision is reaping dividends. 'We are working on two threads,' she points out, 'coaching for excellence and ensuring everyone has a go.'

Drama and music are similarly flourishing under her supervision. We were particularly excited about the innovative ways large performances are devised and developed. A recent production, *Belles of the Ball*, was devised by the girls with the help of a visiting professional writer and was based on a women's football team, formed during World War 1 to raise money for men at the front. In writing and producing the play the girls not only wowed an audience with their final performance but were able to extend and enhance their understanding of a particular period through a very personal and liberating female experience. We spent some time with the head of drama, a former actor, who impressed us with her spontaneity, passion and experience. Lots of lunchtime clubs connected with drama. We were told that the girls recently requested a script writing club. This is now in the pipeline. Productions here are inclusive, exciting and impressive.

Since Dr Ramsey's arrival the school now has a full orchestra, and a number of ensembles. We heard rave reviews of the singing and tales of girls who had shown no interest in music before starting here, now being entered into choral scholarships for university. Formal recitals and concerts held in the beautiful Waiting Room on the ground floor. Annual jazz concert and a healthy number of girls are starting to choose to take music A level.

The art on the walls and the sculptures on display take your breath away. The art room is creatively inspiring – lots of girls taking part (24 chose to take art GCSE in 2015, about 64 per cent of the year) in an inspiring barn-like, large, long room with windows in the ceiling and sun beaming in from every corner. However, when we visited the atmosphere was distinctly chilly. The girls were focused but not relaxed. What should have been a buzzy, creative warmth was instead stiff and wary. Perhaps we caught it on a bad day, but we did hear a few reports from parents that suggested we weren't imagining it. Girls who do art have historically done well here; large numbers continue to apply for the handful of art scholarships at the 11 plus. This should be a strength of the school: whether it will continue to be so remains to be seen.

Plenty of opportunity to travel, whether on cultural exchanges with schools in Pennsylvania and France, for example, or on football and cricket trips to, eg, Sri Lanka.

Background and Atmosphere

Founded in 1848 and given a royal charter in 1853, a pioneer in education for women, this was the first institution in Great Britain to give academic qualifications to girls. Still on its original site in four elegant, well-proportioned Georgian houses, internally it has often been altered through the years in order to provide the best modern education possible. There is a faint whiff of Victorian hospital about it, with some cold stone floors and forbidding doors; however, the William Morris wallpaper decorating the ground floor corridor, tastefully toning in with the pale green school uniform, together with the high ceilings, large windows and frescos, goes a long way to making the school feel tastefully familiar, and comfortable. The school, tucked between expensive doctors' private practices on Harley Street in the heart of central London, with the music blaring out of New Look and Top Shop only yards away in nearby Oxford Street, is deceptively large. The houses extend some distance to the rear and classrooms and corridors are large and airy. An exciting plan to extend up at the top of the building, 'the roof project', is currently underway and will improve provision for the sixth form – giving them an area they can both relax and work in.

The school is more intimate than many of its kind in London. Older girls frequently smile and greet much younger ones, a sign of refreshing vertical friendships. This is not a school paralysed by hierarchy. Our guides said the thing about their school they were most proud of was the 'community'. 'Everyone knows each other and everyone is involved,' they enthused. A wonderfully atmospheric, wood panelled library with grand fireplaces, dark green wallpaper and serious looking, distinguished people, staring down from paintings on the walls, is where the sixth form currently work. The Waiting Room is an elegant old-fashioned room with an arresting frieze on the ceiling, where once girls waited to be taken to their next lesson. Now PSHE talks are held here, small drama productions and concerts. One of the few criticisms we heard of Dr Ramsey was that she had decided to carpet this room: to make it more comfortable and warm was her view; it undermined the grace and history of the room, say her detractors. The fish bowl, a striking glass walled computer centre in the heart of the school, is a startling modern contrast to most of the rest of the school and just outside the fish bowl, Daunt books runs a book stall where parents can place credit and girls can buy books at will. Plenty of computers around the school and a number of classrooms have desks with drawers containing laptops.

Spacious dining room in the basement, colourful Perspex chairs cheering up the dank basement ambience. Large glass doors open out onto an attractive courtyard area, with surrounding benches, into which girls can spill during the warmer months. Another Dr Ramsey touch. Lots of choice, sushi and salad as well as the usual pasta and potatoes. Sixth formers can go out at lunch and sample what Oxford Street has to offer.

Pastoral care, well-being and discipline

One of the first areas that Dr Ramsey tackled when she arrived here six years ago was the pastoral side. Year heads, known as year tutors, help to monitor each individual girl, and there are section heads to oversee, for example, years 7 – 9 and years 10 and 11. Key appointments have been made at a senior level. The deputy head pastoral was previously a boarding house mistress at Oakham school. The deputy head academic was previously at St Paul's and Channing. The fairly recently appointed head of sixth form is popular, high powered and an inspirational teacher. Dr Ramsey can attract high calibre staff and deploy them effectively. Not always easy to

achieve in an all girls' school. There do not appear to be any serious disciplinary issues. We were surprised to hear no mention of drugs at all among the parents. 'Girls here are respected and treated as adults.' 'They feel listened to, the atmosphere is more like a university than a school' commented a number of them.

There is a perception among parents that there is not enough collaboration with boys' schools in the area. However Dr Ramsay points out participation in the Model United Nations, and debating in the London leagues which 'brings the girls into contact with boys' as well as musical events organised with Harrow school. Next term Harrow's big band will visit Queen's and the girls will sing.

Pupils and Parents

Traditionally regarded as a school that caters for the well brought up, upper middle class girl whose parents regard a good education as of the highest value. The latter persists, and while there remains a faint fragrance of aristocracy, the demographic, like in most central London schools, is highly cosmopolitan. A wide mix of nationalities, Middle Eastern, European and American as well as Scandinavian, Antipodean and Asian; but there is no EFL teaching so they have to speak good English. The culture of the school is very English, however, and the majority of the pupils 'tend to be British,' says Dr Ramsey. Girls here are well mannered and polite. They will look you in the eye and can hold their ground. A number of parents said how pleased they were that their daughters had formed such good and healthy friendships. Their view is that Dr Ramsey is selecting grounded girls who are willing to take advantage of the opportunities on offer. There used to be limos parked outside on Harley Street delivering girls – not any more.

Two of the earliest students, Miss Buss and Miss Beale, went on to found the North London Collegiate School and Camden School for Girls, and St Hilda's College Oxford, respectively. Katherine Mansfield and Jacqueline du Pré also stand amongst the long list of distinguished old girls as well as, more recently, writers Daisy Goodwin and Imogen Lloyd Webber. A distinguished tradition and history in the making.

Entrance

Mainly at 11+ via the North London Consortium group 1 exam. In 2015 there were 500 applicants for 60 places and the numbers seem to rise relentlessly each year. Unusually at Queen's everyone is interviewed, regardless of performance in the exam. Indeed interviews take place between October and December before the exam. 'We like to form a picture of the child without seeing her test results,' avers Dr Ramsey. They are genuinely selective and are looking for someone who is going to enjoy getting involved and seize the opportunities available. 'I personally read every prep school report,' she observes.

No automatic entrance from Queen's College Prep but a good percentage come from there. Otherwise over 40 different feeder schools, with about 15 per cent from local state primaries. Another (small) intake at 16+ subject to GCSE results and letters of recommendation from their previous schools. All prospective entrants at this level interviewed by the head of sixth form.

Exit

Less than 10 per cent leave after GCSEs, mostly to board or move into the state system. Post A level leavers to top universities: one medic and one to Oxbridge in 2015; others to eg Edinburgh, Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham, UCL, York, to study everything from art and design to science subjects.

Money Matters

Several means-tested bursaries available at 11+ and 16+, funded by the Old Queen's bursary trust fund. Academic, music and art scholarships, for up to 25 per cent of fees, for both internal and external candidates. Would hope always to be able to find a way of keeping a pupil in need.

Our View

An elegant school offering a broad education to bright, interesting girls. There is nothing generic about Queen's College. A very individual place where each girl is genuinely treated as an individual. Will suit your all-round daughter who will thrive in a structured, nurturing community that takes a personal interest in every child. Stimulating teaching with strength in both breadth and depth. An excellent preparation for life for a young woman in the 21st century.