

EXCELLENCE IS EVERYWHERE



St Faith's
PREP SCHOOL



THE
GOOD
SCHOOLS
GUIDE

THE COMPLETE
AND UNABRIDGED
GOOD SCHOOLS
GUIDE REVIEW

HEADTEACHER

Since September 2023, Helen Coombs, previously deputy head for 11 years and teacher since 2008. Educated locally at Simon Langton Girls' Grammar School, followed by a degree in education at Rolle College, University of Plymouth, specialising in early years. She has gained a plethora of accreditations - 'enough modules to complete several masters over,' she laughs, including SENCo, mental health first aid and provision for children who have suffered trauma. She has a strong loyalty and respect for her staff and calls the former head her 'great mentor.'

Pupils say she's 'kind and you want to please her.' Parents say she's 'lovely', 'an advocate for the children' and 'works really hard behind the scenes to make things happen'. 'A beacon of the school's family ethos', according to another parent - perhaps cemented when she bought her first car from one of the founders for £50!

Her homely office feels like a refuge, with its calming colours and comfy sofa - no surprise considering her open, honest, and gentle vibe. On the shelves is her 'being green' book (reflecting her focus on 'empowering pupils' to be more sustainable) and on her desk is a painted stone (made

and gifted by a pupil, treasured through her career). 'That's what it's all about,' she says.

And while her fox-red lab, Bluebell, is too young to be trusted with the soft furnishings yet, puppy school has started and she's looking forward to graduating to St Faith's as a reading dog soon. Never have the words on the painted stone been more apt: 'Patience is a virtue.'

'There's no room for stopping at St Faith's,' she tells us, clearly an approach that spills into her life beyond the school - be it cabbing her teenage children around, running, cycling or cooking for friends (rocky roads and roasts, if you're asking!). Skiing is her real passion, enabling her to whisk St Faith's to the slopes every year where pupils get a taste of 'Action Mrs Coombs'. A farmer's daughter, she lives in the village in her original family home with her close-knit family as neighbours. She is joined by her grandchildren at the school.

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> ENTRANCE

From age 2 into nursery. Admissions into any year group, including mid-year, if spaces are available. Reception, year 3 and year 5 most popular entry points. Academically non-selective but taster days required to assess 'appropriate behaviour.' Two taster days for SEN.

> EXIT

At 11+, 80-90 per cent to local grammars, notably Sir Roger Manwood's, Simon Langton Grammar School for Boys, Simon Langton Girls' Grammar School, Barton Court Grammar School, Dover Grammar School for Girls, Dover Grammar School for Boys and Dane Court Grammar School. The rest head off to local independent schools such as St Edmund's, St Lawrence College, and Dover College. In 2023, 15 scholarships.

YEAR 6 ELIGIBILITY FOR A GRAMMAR SCHOOL PLACE:

94%

(2022-2023)



OVERVIEW

When, back in 1987, four disillusioned London teachers stumbled upon a white Victorian village house in the village of Ash, they all agreed it was a 'leap of faith' to found a new school - but leap they did and St Faith's was born, growing from a handful of pupils to a successful educational community. There's no sweeping drive, impressive façade or glitzy reputation but there are happy children, good manners, focused teaching, high expectations and jolly good 11+ results. Parents say it is 'unstuffy' and barely feels independent at all.

The oh-so familiar self-portrait school tea towels, repurposed as bunting in the outdoor play area of early years, is very St Faith's - with its homely, welcome vibe. Here, the intimate quad is surrounded by busy classrooms with reminders that 'the world is full of different people' alongside nature mobiles, a string of decorated underpants, hand puppets and wellies at the ready.

We joined some tinies around the tadpole tank, delighting in spotting the first frog, while older children in another class were focused on traditional handwriting practice. They were rightly proud of their letter

formation, as well as their times table practice - some were also doing a splattering of reading. The nature garden is also an outdoor space for curious explorers, we were told.

Old-school wooden desks in older years classrooms add to the traditional vibe, while corridors storing books, cricket clobber and wellies signal a lived-in school. Setting in maths and English kicks in from year 2, and breaktime focus groups - as well as early morning study skills - are rotated to ensure no-one slips through the net. 'Not leaving anything to chance,' parents approve. We jumped into a lesson on The Highwayman where year 5s were sensitively writing alternative endings using Surface Pros (touch typing taught in year 3).

Pupils say they like the Accelerated Reader programme because it focuses on 'real books' and they love getting the 'word millionaire' badges where 'reading anything counts.' The eco warriors' book swap has gone down a storm, we're told. Parents say they 'trust the teachers' and value the mix of experienced ones with newer blood.



French, Spanish and German is taught from nursery by a specialist teacher, starting with songs in nursery. 'Understanding the language of language,' not just 'mindless lists of nouns,' staff stress. True to form, year 3 were embarking on a speedy game of Spanish bingo, which we tried to keep up with. In year 6, pupils specialise in one of these languages, with a select group also studying Latin.

Computing is on the up - school is currently awaiting 12 new robots and there's a drive to embed digital learning with specialist teaching. Surface Pros from Year 4 (on a pay as you go scheme). Big on coding; nifty with CAD. A year 6 class were recreating the front of the school - should they ever want a refurb, there are homegrown architects on tap!

“ Excellent preparation for the 11+, say parents ”

Parents praise the support for SEN, saying teachers 'take time to get it right,' although some told us they employ support outside school, not wanting to 'miss out on class time'. The 12 per cent on the SEN register (national average) are mainly supported for dyslexia but also dyspraxia, autism and visual impairment (and social, emotional and mental issues) by the experienced SENCo and two full-time assistants, in a centrally located, well-resourced room. The new sensory room is going down a treat – pupils say it 'really calms me down' and that 'the lights are really cool.' Three EHCPs when we visited.

Sport is high on the agenda, with particular excitement when team sheets are posted for fixtures in cricket, hockey, football and rugby. Up to six teams pile into coaches - 'just the experience of an away game is exciting,' said one pupil, while for

others it's the thrill of the competition and hopeful success.

Several PE lessons for all a week, including swimming in the 15m pool - 'the water is actually quite warm,' pupils reckon, and even those that dip toes in are praised. Sports day a mix of competitive classics plus some fun ones like skipping races, dribbling and obstacles with water guns. Three cross country competitions a year. 'An Astro would be nice,' say parents, but they are looking forward to the new sports hall and appreciate the large sports field and sports court.

Drama is also big, and the leavers' play is always a hot ticket – no more so than the upcoming world premiere of Pearly White and the Seven Bros, written and directed in-house. We sat in on a lively rehearsal where year 6 comrades revealed the pupils' skill around comic timing. Everyone performs once a year. LAMDA available.

This is a musical school, where every child learns an instrument in class – recorder for the youngest, followed by violin then trumpet for the oldest. Over half learn one in an individual lesson too. Grades are celebrated and encouraged, with pupils saying it 'gives you something to work towards.' Everyone performs, with options ranging from informal (no parents, no pressure) to full-on twilight concerts. Rarer instruments nurtured so the orchestra is fabulous - we were treated to an afternoon concert with an eclectic repertoire from Koelma to The Cure to Mozart – professional, confident and accomplished. Three choirs regularly perform the likes of Les Miserables, Cabaret, Parry and Schubert, and we heard that the recent djemba workshop was lots of fun. For those wanting to progress further, theory club hits the spot.

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Art throughout, taught by a specialist from year 3 in a large bright studio. Particularly good 3D - we saw almost- good-enough-to-eat cake slices right through to bandage sculptures of animals - we had lots of fun guessing which types as we waded through the messy working space. Use of sketch books hots up in year 6 in preparation for potential scholarship applications.

“ Pupils are grounded. They’re aspirational too. ”

Plenty of extracurricular – ‘if you can fit it in,’ according to an older pupil. Musical, sporty and academic most popular, but also chess, computing, mindful club, nature garden, cheerleading and quidditch, among others. Cooking club is a hit - Christmas cake baking is the cherry on top. Pupils say the teachers ‘always think of us and what we enjoy.’

The annual panto is a highlight on the trips front, while skiing gets record (not limb) breaking number of pupils, most recently to Serre Chevalier. Next up, Norfolk where, after a day of fun activities including paddleboarding, pupils can chill out in shepherd huts – ‘kind of glamping,’ they giggled.

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All year 6s get to be prefects, with senior prefects meeting the head every week. Lower down, friendship council, eco warriors, school council and form captains feature among leadership roles. There’s serious

kudos to blazer badges here, and pupils dream of their names etched on the honour boards for scholarships, prefects, sporting achievements, exceptional music grades and ambassadors – although one pupil reflected, ‘Everyone is really an ambassador’.

“ The school motto, ‘I can and I will’, leaves no doubt of ethos ”

The school motto, ‘I can, and I will,’ leaves no doubt of ethos. ‘Nowhere to hide for any nonsense behaviour,’ according to parents, with respectful behaviour instilled – although pupils say ‘teachers aren’t strict - we just know what to do’. A culture of rewards seems to work. We saw silverware cabinets heaving, all ready for speech day – even features the Merrygardens Rose Bowl for the annual flower competition. Pastoral care also commended – including the worry bunny where notes are left, read and actioned on a daily basis. ‘Sometimes it’s like magic,’ one pupil confided. Pupils are grounded. They’re aspirational too, with goals ‘to jump 80 centimetres on my pony’ and ‘to become a doctor’ spotted on a PHSE display.



Food, served in the informal dining room, is good – we enjoyed meatballs, while those with more sophisticated palates devoured the pea risotto. But nothing is as good as the ‘cheesy’ mac n cheese, we heard, while the quality and variety for those with dietary needs means ‘not just jacket potato.’ The salad bar looked a bit sorry.

Parents are friendly, open and honest - a joy to chat to. Many make considerable sacrifices to send their children here, for which staff say they have ‘immense respect’ and ‘fuels our drive for success.’ Occasionally, pupils leave but most come back, with parents saying that, ‘it was as if we had never left’ on their return. Most travel from a 10-mile radius and, as soon as they sport the natty purple with gold edge blazer, they feel they belong.

Money matters

Means-tested bursaries (10-50 per cent) available for existing pupils whose circumstances have changed.

“ The bar is set high here and there’s a buy-in to achieving goals through dedication, rewards and praise. ‘Practice makes progress,’ pupils insist and with this clear mantra, anything is possible. ”

