

Ardingly College Review



What The Good Schools Guide says

Head of College

Since 2014, Ben Figgis, MA (Cantab). Married to Joanna, with three children – all educated at Ardingly. Head of the entire school, and soon to be a super-head, with day-to-day head duties being passed to senior deputy Nicola Burns. Education is Mr Figgis's second career; his first was in broadcasting, which he left after concerns about ethical compromises in newsgathering. He indulged his passion for history in his first teaching job at Abingdon, then after a stint as housemaster and head of boarding, became deputy head at Oakham.

Parents describe him as 'reassuring and competent', indeed it is difficult to imagine Mr Figgis ever being ruffled: he has the enviable skill of being able to turn disaster into opportunity. A pupil who didn't get the necessary A level grades was told, 'this will be the making of you', then supported through a year out to achieve the second time around. Really cares for his pupils: 'he knows everyone, and has your best interests at heart'; 'you really listen to what he says'.

He has increased the number of girls in the school to nearly 50 per cent and now he wants to hear from them. 'Well behaved women don't make history,' proclaimed one of the many signs about women covering the lawn for International Women's Week. What misbehaviour would he encourage, we asked? 'Pupils will be expected to work cooperatively with teachers,' said the head prudently, 'but not to conform', going on to explain that they have

noticed girls are less willing to speak up in large groups. 'There is a danger of women being self-silencing,' said the head. 'We want girls to engage and have their voices heard.'

Head of prep since 2018, Harry Hastings, BA (Hons), MEd (Oxon), married to Kate, with three children at the school. Previously head of Brighton College Prep, and taught history at the Dragon School and Cumnor House. Mr Hastings has a warm, eager energy and a wholehearted interest in his pupils: he knows their strengths and their foibles. Parents are delighted: 'I can't sing his praises enough'; 'thoroughly invested in those kids... an educator'. High point of the week is the head's celebration assembly, loved by parents and pupils alike. It's not just for the glorious best, the F team are as likely to be team of the week as the A team: 'Assemblies aren't boring any more,' said a pupil. Mr Hastings loves what he does, his greatest aim is for Ardingly prep to make a lasting difference to pupils' lives. Applies his characteristic energy in and out of school; a keen sportsman, he runs and plays golf, and is an avid supporter of Brighton & Hove Albion FC. Leaving in July 2024, to be replaced in September 2024 by Laura Lamont, currently head of Queen's College Prep School.

Entrance

For prep, a taster day plus tests in verbal reasoning, English and maths. CAT around 105. For year 7 entry (senior school now starts in year 7, not year 9), there is an 11+ assessment day including exam and interview, and applicants also need reference and school reports. For year 9 admission, ISEB pre-test in year 6. For admission into year 10 or fifth form, assessments in English, maths and science, plus interview. Admission into sixth form by assessments in English, maths, verbal reasoning and critical thinking.

Exit

A handful leave after year 6 – those who don't make it into the college or fancy a change. Just over a quarter leave after year 11. Over 80 per cent of sixth form leavers to Russell Group. Newcastle, Bath, Exeter, York, Durham, King's College London, Leeds, LSE and UCL all popular. Five to Oxbridge in 2023, and 10 medics. Plus 20 overseas – to Harvard, NYU, UC San Diego, Trinity University San Antonio, Lake Forest College Illinois, University of Toronto, Bocconi, Milan, Hong Kong University, Trinity University, UMCH Hamburg, LMU (Munich), UNED Madrid, Leiden University, Esade, Universita Cattolica, BI Norwegian School of Business, Nyenrode and TU Delft.

Latest results

In 2023, 68 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 58 per cent A*/A at A level (89 per cent A*-B). IB average 36. In 2019 (the last pre-pandemic results), 65 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 54 per cent A*/A at A level (86 per cent A*-B). IB average 38.

Teaching and learning

Parents say the academic level is good and the teaching 'excellent'; IB excellence is a definite pull factor for overseas families. They describe a school with a strong work ethic; 'they will ask the students to make more effort,' said one approvingly. 'My daughter wasn't so motivated at her previous school.' Senior pupils describe teachers as 'very supportive', commenting that they 'try to connect subjects to the real world'. Pressure increases as pupils progress through the college, but gradually, said a parent, adding that teachers help children balance their workload, and there are rigorous evening study sessions at school. 'So glad I'm not having evening rows about homework,' said another candidly.

Admittance to the college is now decided in year 6 for internal and external candidates alike (no CE since 2021). The transition from prep to senior was a bit of a shock work-wise, said one parent, but efforts are being made to increase continuity with a curriculum that runs through prep and senior. School says the move from senior school starting in year 9 to year 7 has led to some changes in the academic curriculum which is now 'better aligned to the GCSE's pathway'. The structure of the school week has also been adapted.

Excellent teaching is evident in the prep school, with classes around 18, and strongly focused lessons; concentration and participation required of all, no relaxing in the back row. Or, as a pupil put it, 'always on your toes'. 'It's the first school we've come to where every teacher intimately knows my child... it's reassuring,' said a parent, describing staff willing to go to considerable lengths, one learning chess to connect with a shy child. Another, whose child was below average when they joined the school, 'found the teachers really positive, not disparaging... they picked out anything done well to praise her and spur her on.'

Each term in pre-prep pupils choose a topic and every skill is learnt through their chosen area – dinosaurs or space are always popular. 'They're so encouraging that the kids want to learn,' said a parent, enthusiastically describing how the reception teacher is 'always dressing up'.

Learning support and SEN

The SEN department is situated centrally between the college and prep, not hidden away in a backwater. Staff assist pupils with mild to moderate dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and some ADHD. They are also, newly, offering support for children with mild autism and say that fellow pupils have shown great kindness and are tolerant of differences. Twenty-five per cent of pupils receive help, often just needing a strategy to cope with something they are struggling with, such as focus, or memory. Pupils have great faith in the SEN support: while we were there, a child brought a friend along to his session, confident the unit would also be able to help him with his problems.

A lot of class observation goes on in prep and pre-prep, SEN staff pointing out that it can be hard to spot problems with children who are well behaved and keen to please, a parent confirmed that they are 'very, very vigilant'. Individual and small group sessions available, but the aim is to help children in class as much as possible.

The arts and extracurricular

Music is a 'real release' from academic pressure, said a parent. The head of music (described as 'inspirational') is determined to make music relevant school wide. In GCSE music, pupils were exploring how conflict is depicted in the unsettled and strained notes of Tristan and Isolde and learning to recognise a half diminished seventh. 'I hear Love on Top, and think half dim,' said the teacher enthusiastically; 'So the Tristan chord is like Beyoncé?' asked a puzzled pupil.

In a year 10 physical drama lesson pupils were quickly immersed in movement and emotion. The teacher exhorted them to enter an exhausted state – 'you show raw emotion when you are tired and committed' (something that pupils at high-performing senior

schools can vouch for). A good number of pupils take GCSE drama; just a handful take A level. A dance studio has been built and head of dance appointed, with a variety of dance options are on offer. Prep pupils described their head of drama as 'always enthusiastic... very calm and positive... just takes it gently'. Just three or four weeks to put on the Grinch, said pupils with approval – 'and she looks after the bunnies... that's a really hard job'.

Colour and vibrance are on show in the large light rooms devoted to art. We saw an outspoken display from IB students, who choose their own theme. 'Voting Tory will cause your wife to have bigger breasts and increase your chances of owning a BMW M3,' proclaims one banner, next to a mangled President Trump and selection of Angela Merkels.

'Lots of random stuff going on,' said a prep pupil happily, and there is, from futsal or bushcraft to robotic Lego. Plenty of opportunities for enrichment in the college too, from the solar car project, now conducted jointly with a community college, to taking a service trip to sponsored schools in Kenya, India or the Gambia. A couple of boys described a reluctant trip to the ballet, and their awed surprise at 'the athleticism'. Pupils could learn beekeeping or sign language, and DofE (bronze, silver and gold) is popular here.

Sport

Sports have always been a focus – 'the most competitive school we came across,' said a parent. All the regulars, and the less so, such as sailing or rowing on the nearby reservoir. A new sport and conditioning centre opened a few years ago and talented athletes in the elite sports programme benefit from coaching and highest-level competition. PE at GCSE and A level, and a BTEC in sports and exercise science.

The prep school has seven national champions in an array of sports, but at this inclusive school it's not just about the elite: all prep pupils participate in lots of matches, whatever their ability, to gain from the experience of being in a team – there are often thirty teams playing on match day.

Boarders

Around half of the pupils at the college board (full, weekly or flexi) and both pupils and parents love it: 'feels like joint parenting,' said a parent in relief; 'relaxed, laid back, lots of freedom,' said a pupil. Around a quarter of pupils are from overseas. Ardingly is well placed for quick transfers to Gatwick and is popular with those working overseas and parents looking for a 'British education with an international feel', one parent telling us her Spanish child 'adapted well and settled quickly'.

Modern and colourful decoration in the recently refurbished girls' houses. Girls can embellish their rooms as they please – no obsession with pristine paintwork. A common room with comfy sofas, a drum kit, the Daily Telegraph and table football; smaller area called the snuggery for quiet moments. Kitchen facilities are available for pupils to make tea and toast when they want; the common room table was ready for break with deep boxes of biscuits (so no one knows how many you take, said the housemistress) and fruit.

Boys' houses are mid-renovation, with common rooms completed – boys were consulted as to colour and style. Bedrooms haven't yet been done, but furnishings are in good condition

and each room has a basin; slightly elderly, but still, a boon. Bathrooms are clean and fittings up to date. A brew room on each corridor.

Around 150 pupils are present at weekends. There are sports fixtures on Saturday mornings and a busy activity programme for those who want it, including trips to shops, cinemas and a shuttle bus to take pupils into Haywards Heath. Older pupils, with permission, can visit London or Brighton.

Boarding in prep is available for two to four nights each week, with 37 regular boarders. 'Boarding specials' are tremendously popular, giving children a taste of boarding by spending the night at school, playing in the pool and feasting on pizza.

Ethos and heritage

Handsome red-brick Gothic revival buildings, alongside utilitarian red-brick new. One pupil chose to come here for the glorious view from the terrace across nine acres of playing fields to the countryside beyond; this green belt certainly enhances the feeling that Ardingly is a protected and protective space. 'Bubble' is a word often mentioned by parents, who partly desire their children to be insulated from the world outside but also worry that too much bubble wrap could be a bad thing. The head shares their concerns and in response he has constructed the World Ready programme. Senior pupils enjoy a week during the summer term learning practical stuff: 'drills and paella,' says the head. But World Ready is also about finding experiences for pupils that are 'genuinely purposeful' to their lives beyond school: a psychology student might work for a level two counselling qualification; a prospective accountant might work for financial services qualifications. Parents are sold. Pupils enjoy it and appreciate the opportunities, though 'it's not changed things drastically', one adding, fairly, that they won't really know if it's worked until later in life.

In prep, the equivalent programme is called Shaping Our World, with the aim of getting pupils to engage positively with their environment. Skills range from understanding sustainability and being able to name trees, to the ever-popular practical lessons (sewing on buttons not proving quite so much fun as learning to put up shelves).

Pupil numbers have increased by over 100 under Mr Figgis and while there's room for growth they are keen to keep the family feel: it's one of the things parents value most about the school, many referring to the warmth of their welcome at Ardingly in contrast to other schools in the area.

The schools feel uncluttered and calm. While not a place for laden walls and lavish display, pupils' excellent artwork is around the place, and posters of women scientists filled the stairwell of the science building. The library is well stocked, with extensive online resources, including journals, and audiobooks. It has a most determined aim: not just to instil a love of reading, but also to ensure all pupils know how to research, from finding the Mr Men books at age 2 to writing a proper bibliography at age 18. New Café 150 celebrates school's 150th anniversary.

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

Thorough approach to ensuring good mental health for pupils. A parent told us that academics don't dominate: 'It has that side, but it is more about the pastoral side, and we liked that a lot.' A third of teachers are trained in first aid mental health, and the health centre staff also provide support. Day houses now have house supervisors to look after fabric of house and pupils – 'very successful as early warning system'.

Anxiety is a problem, as it is at all schools now, but the head disputes the connection between this and high expectations from school. 'It comes from different directions – online, parents, the number of 'likes'... pupils have a permanent open invitation to come and talk.' Similarly, in prep, pupils are encouraged to just tell someone, 'a friend, a member of staff, head of welfare... write it down, leave a note – as someone from year 8 did, about a friendship issue. We got them together, sorted it out,' said the head. Quite strict, agree pupils and parents, but 'they're fair and want the best for you,' said a pupil; kind and caring too, said a parent. Pupils feel it is a school which gives second chances: 'they will try and keep you here'.

Bullying is not much of an issue, said one pupil; 'the atmosphere seems to shut it down,' said another. Of course things happen, but they are dealt with promptly; a boy who made an inappropriate post online was disciplined and soon writing letters of apology, the post immediately removed. (Pupils are allowed to take phones into school, but they must be left in houses during the day.) In PHSE lessons, pupils explore the difference between bullying and banter, the difficulty of finding the line.

Care for pupils goes beyond 9-5, even for those who are not boarders. A parent planning to serve alcopops at her underage daughter's birthday party found herself in receipt of a courteous email requesting she didn't. Parents approve – '[the head is] really sensible'. Sixth form boarders can have two drinks a week, carefully policed.

Pupils and parents

Senior pupils are friendly, articulate, and unassuming. A parent told us how confident her child has become in social situations; the deputy head recalled his first week at Ardingly, walking home and bumping into a pupil who was at pains to ask how he was settling in and put him at his ease. Prep pupils are eager to talk about their school and beamingly happy. Boys and girls mix here, 'unlike my old school,' said one. 'This school is unjudgy,' said another.

Parents from the locale (bus routes cover the area), London and abroad. Broader social mix than might be expected, from wealthy Russians to taxi drivers, the culture of the school does not encourage 'flexing' (flaunting wealth), said a parent. Communication is excellent; emails and calls receive prompt responses.

School hours support the many working parents: 8am-7pm is included in the fees, and can pay more and drop off at 7. Nursery available from 7am-7pm, 50 weeks of the year. Parents report some difficulties with car parking; prep school has introduced 'kiss and drop' which has eased congestion somewhat, and planning permission is being sought for a new car park.

Money matters

Academic, music, art, drama and sports scholarships available, between five and 25 per cent. Can be supplemented by a bursary award.

The last word

Community is vital here and pupils need to participate: no loners, even high-performing ones; everyone is busy and involved. Often picked by parents as a particularly caring all-rounder, but this school is ambitious for its pupils and eager that they excel academically: they usually do.