

# What The Good Schools Guide says

## Head of prep school

Since July 2024, Michelle Best. Joined the school in September 2023 as senior deputy head of prep and pre-prep but was swiftly whisked into the role of acting head when her predecessor left unexpectedly, and then appointed head. Previously at Priestmead Primary School and before that assistant head at Belmont School. Educated at Bentley Wood High School, Stanmore, then read design management and innovation at De Montfort University before completing a PGCE in primary education through the Institute of Education in London. Tells us she likes attending theatre and visiting the gym in her spare time. Parents are glad to have a steady hand on the tiller after a slightly rocky spell. 'She's firmly rooted because she first served as interim head,' one explained. 'She's confident and straightforward – just great!'

## Entrance

At 4+ over 200 boys are assessed for 40 precious reception places. Applicants are invited for a first round 'play date' in small numbers, by age, in December before the year of entry. These mostly 3-year-olds are scrutinised on language, numbers and social maturity as they take part in activities. Around half are invited back for round two which involves one-to-one work with a teacher plus a parent chat. 'There's a bit of writing, but not too much, as we want to discourage tutoring,' a teacher explained. The competition is fraught, but once you're in, you're in, and barring calamity ('conversations happen,' says the school) your child can remain ensconced to age 18.

At 7+ around 120 boys vie for 22 additional spots, sitting papers in English, maths, reasoning, plus a 'classroom element'. Half are invited back for a round two group interview. Tutoring is 'obvious' at this age, we were told: 'Sometimes we find several boys come up with the same piece of writing.' Occasional places arise from time to time, so do ask.

## Exit

Vast majority fly on gossamer wings straight up to the senior school – no requirement to sit the 11+ entrance test. One or two boys move elsewhere, usually to state grammars.

## Our view

Habs prep and pre-prep share 100 acres of parkland with the senior school and the adjoining Habs Girls'. The stiff barrier between the boys' and girls' sides has softened in recent years, and there are now some shared playtimes and joint activities. Main prep boasts a lovely assembly hall, specialist science labs, an art and design room and well-used library.

Until September 2022, the pre-prep was based an awkward six miles from the main Habs campus and took boys only from year 1. The sensible decision to drop entry to 4+ came with a gorgeous new on-site pre-prep building: light and airy with a gorgeous flexible space, lovely loos, and all classrooms opening to the generous outdoors. We were there for Fun in the Sun day and even the grey June skies could not dampen these children's high spirits.

Two forms per year in reception increase to three forms from year 3, each with a teacher

and assistant. Specialist teachers for languages, music, art, drama and PE – for everything else, boys are taught by their form tutors until year 5, when all teaching is by subject specialists. We were enchanted by the concentration shown in lessons we observed. Lots of shooting flames and youthful enthusiasm in the science room when we peeked in.

Tablets are used from reception on, well balanced with writing on paper. These gadgets stay at school until year 3: 'It's the perfect balance,' said a mum. 'They need to know how to use tech, but I don't have to manage another device at home!' Swish prep school computer suite is a shrine to purposeful endeavour rather than mindless swiping.

Academic level consistently very high: 'it can be an adjustment for those who join at 7.' Inevitably, a few tiger parents would like to see the thumbscrews tightened. Several lamented the recent dropping of end-of-year exams: 'They don't take the 11-plus so they need a way to learn how to make revision notes, plan their time and revise. They will eventually have GCSEs!' 'I think it's perfect as it is,' a mum countered with, we think, the prevailing view.

Still, if you're seeking an 11-plus factory, look elsewhere. Most boys move seamlessly to the senior school thereby allowing them to make the most of their halcyon years in prep. 'They don't have to stop doing everything in year 5 to prepare for entrance tests. They're not spending three or four hours every evening prepping. They're out playing sport and developing other interests, but they're never academically at a disadvantage,' a father explained approvingly.

Not a school you would seek out for learning support, but there are around 30 pupils on the SEN register, one with an ECHP. Parents spoke warmly of the 'whole school' fully adapting to boys' disabilities. Although 217 prep students have EAL, few need extra help.

No chance of these mini-Mensas escaping unrounded. Music, drama, art, and esoterics are all brilliant, abundant, varied and frequently run in tandem with the girls' prep. Chess, bridge, ballet and fencing were the four activities that happened to feature on the year 2 extracurricular chalkboard on the day we visited.

Half the prep boys take instrumental lessons at school, including all of year 3, who each get to learn an instrument free of charge (70 per cent continue – a fab pipeline for coveted oboists and bassoonists). Loads more take lessons outside of school. The prep runs 18 ensembles a week, many in concert with the girls, including junior brass, Indian music club and a composing club – more opportunities than at many senior schools we visit. 'The level of importance they put on music is incredible. The concerts and recitals are on another level,' gushed a parent. The standards of drama and art are also striking for a prep school.

Any number of clubs are offered before and after school and at lunch (which has been specially extended to accommodate them) – outstanding chess deserves special mention. All boys have a go at forest school, once a week in pre-prep and fortnightly thereafter, a facet of education many of these mostly city-dwelling boys may not get elsewhere. Community service is emphasised from day one.

Boys play rugby in autumn, football in spring and cricket or tennis in summer. For 'all but

the most rugby-obsessed', the sporting opportunities excel. Football and cricket are top of the pops but parents say basketball and table tennis are steaming up the charts. Yoga, judo, gym squad, swimming, badminton, fencing, hockey, water polo, tennis and athletics round out the offering. Parents praise the inclusivity: 'Many boys develop later, so it's important that sport isn't elitist in the prep.' 'Lots of our Asian boys are small and slight in the early years, but excel later,' said a mum. 'They really try to get every boy on a team now,' said a long-term parent. 'It's a huge change for the better.' Prep uses the full array of superb senior school sports facilities.

Every pupil joins a house named after a patron saint, and house competitions run throughout the year, eg general knowledge, singing, games and the Donkin Cup cross-country run. Values and kindness are nourished through house points, badges, a 'Book of Excellence' to register gold stars, and liberal use of the phrase 'Don't be a bystander'. The infamous 'Report Book' (boo hiss) has been recently assigned to the dustbin of history. 'It's very, very nurturing,' said a mum. 'Zero-bullying policy,' said another. Forms are reshuffled in year 3 to help spur friendships when new boys arrive.

Pupils are a spicy mix of ethnicities, races, nationalities, geographical locations and, to a lesser extent, social classes, with large dollops of Asian, South Asian and Jewish. The almost legendary coach system transports boys and girls from the age of 7 from a huge radius. A new Little Habs chaperoned minibus service escorts 4-7-year-olds from West Hampstead, Hampstead, Hampstead Garden Suburb, Whetstone and Winchmore Hill. Drop-off as early as 8am. After-care available to 5.30pm. Despite the huge catchment area there are plenty of opportunities for parents to get involved.

### **The last word**

Academic powerhouse with a heart. Much more emphasis on pastoral care and wellbeing than in the past, while academics retains pride of place.