

What The Good Schools Guide says

Headmaster

Since 2023, Robert Sykes, BA (University of Manchester). Educated at City of London School, then read French and Spanish at university. Began his teaching career in the East End via the Teach First programme. Mr Sykes then spent five years in his old stomping ground at City of London, became head of Spanish at Habs, and then headed to North London Collegiate School for six years (first as head of MFL then as assistant head and part of the NLCS international team). When the opportunity arose to rejoin Habs as deputy head academic in 2020, he 'jumped at it'. Most of the older boys already knew and liked Mr Sykes as one of their teachers when he was elevated to head, and he remains distinctively down to earth, friendly and, despite age and experience, in possession of a boyish charm. Married with a son in the prep and a daughter at Habs Girls'.

An enthusiasm for modern languages underpins Mr Sykes's vision of education, he tells us. 'It's not (just) about ordering paella in a restaurant but developing connections with people and seeing the world from different perspectives including literature, arts and culture.' Same goes for schooling – it's not just about teaching children to be clever, but helping them grow up to be 'good people with empathy' and an understanding of different points of view.

We asked Mr Sykes how Habs differs from its closest rivals, not far away. 'We have the academic edge,' he said frankly. 'We're academic beyond exams. A large catchment means you're buying into a community of learners like you.' That said, 'We are not for the parent who just wants 9s and A*s. Children need to get involved here, and their parents must support that.'

Might one, perhaps, refer to the school as 'geeky', we queried gingerly. 'That's a word we love!' roared Mr Sykes unexpectedly. 'Geeky, quirky – that's us! We wear geeky with pride,' he told us before describing year 8's Lord of the Rings Society, the school's success at the world robot olympiad, and the magnificent final of the Maths Integration Bee ('It was like the X Factor with a cheering crowd packed to the rafters!'). 'We allow academic kids to be themselves.'

Mr Sykes's predecessor, Gus Lock, now holds the flexible position of executive principal – at once above, alongside and, at times, floating quite separately from the heads of the girls' and boys' schools. Mr Lock focuses on the big picture across both schools, from philosophical vision and future-proofing to finances, estate matters and hiring. Think of him as the Steve Jobs of Habs: a spiritual lead with a commercial instinct. He lives on the premises, his three children attend the two schools and he was a student here – no stranger, then, to this elegant corner of Elstree.

The big news is that, at long last, Habs Boys and Girls are – delicately – dipping their little toes into the coeducation pool. A fully mixed-sex Habs remains unlikely, but now every sixth form boy has at least one A level taught together with girls. A timetabling nightmare ('challenge', says the school), this limited, but important, joint teaching has come with logistical improvements (paths, extra time between lessons) to help students skip to and fro. A good number of co-curricular activities now take place jointly, especially in music, drama,

partnerships and community service. It helps that Mr Sykes has previous experience working with the head of Girls' as they were colleagues together at NLCS.

This Great Leap Forward into the 21st century, a process that unrolled over decades at similar schools, happened quite briskly here. The 'new Habs' is perhaps best epitomised by the appointment of a director of innovation who works across both schools. Says Mr Lock: 'We need to be brilliant. And forward thinking. And not go into our shell. We should have done this 25 years ago, but we had a formula that was working.' Most parents were happy, or at least comfortable, with the change. 'A handful were not thrilled,' says Mr Lock candidly. 'But no one left.'

Entrance

Fiercely competitive. Around 100 enter in year 7 (11+) joining the 55-60 boys who automatically move up from the prep. They arrive more or less evenly split from private schools (eg Manor Lodge, Radlett Prep, Devonshire House, Lochinver, and The Hall, Hampstead) and state (eg West Lodge Primary, Grimsdyke, Cassiobury Junior, Brookland Junior and Akiva). Boys sit an online assessment in English, maths, VR and non-VR. Half will be invited back for interviews (both boys and parents), group activities and 'smaller subject-based tasks'.

Another 25 or so places are available for year 9 entry. Applicants sit written papers in English, maths, history and geography, theology and philosophy, and the sciences. Selected students are invited back for interview. Many Habs families will also apply to Highgate, UCS and Merchant Taylors – 'with St Albans the safety net' clarified a parent.

Now enthusiastically welcomes applications for occasional places (12+ and 14+) and to sixth form. Minimum of nine GCSEs grade 7 and above, including maths and English, is the bare minimum required for sixth form entry. Grade 9s are recommended to undertake A level maths and sciences and absolutely required for further maths. Maths grade 9 also recommended for students who wish to take A level economics or computing. NB There is now one admissions team covering both the boys' and girls' schools.

Exit

A handful leave after year 11. University destinations strongly lean towards STEM and into London. Economics was the most popular subject in 2023, with engineering snapping at its heels, and there were a whopping 26 medics. An impressive 17 Habs clever-clogs headed to Oxbridge in both 2023 and 2024; Warwick, Bristol, Imperial, UCL, LSE, Kings and Edinburgh also feature prominently. Recent US destinations have included UC Berkeley, UC San Diego, NYU, Carnegie Mellon, University of Chicago, Penn State and the Universities of Wisconsin, Michigan and Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Also Canada's Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Occasional places in conservatoires (Trinity Laban in 2023) or to study music at US universities. Two to University of the Arts London in 2023. Three coveted degree apprenticeships to EY, Denton and Santander.

Latest results

In 2023, 81 per cent A*/A at A level (school has not released GCSE results). In 2019 (the last pre-pandemic results), 89 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 76 per cent A*/A (93 per cent A*-B).

Teaching and learning

This may be the new Habs, but the exam results look a lot like the old Habs. Exams are the holy of holies, no pussyfooting around it, and the results are outstanding. 'Exams are the baseline upon which everything else is built,' the head explained.

Years 7 and 8 are a (relatively) relaxed period of exploration. Broad range of subjects includes weekly drama, music and art. French, Spanish and German run on a carousel in year 7 with boys choosing two languages to carry on in year 8. Traditional list of GCSEs includes Greek and Latin (both exceptional). Graphics is a less usual offering. Everything is brilliant, though English shines a tad less brightly than most subjects. Of 163 boys taking (compulsory) maths and English language GCSEs in 2024, a stunning 126 received the top mark of 9 in maths; 'only' 49 did so in English.

Maths is far and away the most popular A level with more than double the number of boys taking it compared to second-place chemistry, followed closely by economics, further maths (almost a third of the year) and physics. Philosophy is a newish offering. While there is no shortage of creative talent here at Habs, it's not immediately apparent in A level exams: in 2024 only one brave soul attempted A level art (two in 2023), six music (two in '23), six drama (zero in '23); GCSE arts numbers more robust. Even English is a bit 'out there' at this temple of sensible endeavour. Only three boys took A level English language in 2024, ditto the previous year (a few more did English lit).

Quality not quantity, however, is the guiding principle, whether in numbers choosing particular subjects or in the school's philosophy of keeping GCSE exams to a manageable nine or 10 and three or four A levels. Sixth formers also complete the new 'Habs Diploma' which includes research, community service, a deep dive into one subject (useful for university applications) six short elective courses taught by passionate teachers, and a visiting speaker programme. No IB but 'not ruling it out'. No EPQ but all boys do independent research projects in year 7 (family history), year 9 (sparky topics like Pablo Escobar's role in saving rhino or how to maximise the spin on a cricket ball) and year 12 (part of diploma which is being accredited by the University of Buckingham).

Sixth form history class we observed was majority female. Students were absorbed, fully in the moment, working on a mix of laptops and paper. 'Hugely attentive!' we wrote in our notes. Similar focus in the English class we observed using the Socratic method: only one laptop; all hands raised eagerly. Staff a mix of old and new ('[executive principal] Gus was in fifth form when I started teaching here,' the head of the middle school murmured en passant).

University application support is excellent, as you would expect. External consultants used for US applications.

Learning support and SEN

SEN firmly at the mild end. Around 185 boys have an 'additional need' and the number is gently rising with increased awareness, says the school. As with everything, Habs approaches learning differences, disabilities and mobility issues with excellence. A whopping 685 senior school students have EAL, but few require additional support.

The arts and extracurricular

A great strength of the co-curricular programme is that it's tailored to academically ambitious kids. 'We have to make sure they're balanced and healthy and get a breadth of experience,' says Mr Sykes. Music is particularly awesome – there are over 70 ensembles a week including symphony orchestra, a rock band, five jazz groups, big band and dhol and tabla ensembles. Habs boys are selected for national youth orchestras and choirs and a few attend RCM or RAM junior departments on Saturdays. Over 500 boys take part in the house music festival and there are performance opportunities out and about, from St John's Smith Square to Abbey Road Studios to the annual carol service at St Albans Cathedral.

'We were relatively conventional until three years ago,' the director of performance music explained. But life no longer revolves around ABRSM exams. A few parents took some convincing but most are now on board this refreshing, risk-embracing journey in music education. Musician in residence provides inspiration and helps kids with songwriting. Closer links with the girls school are perhaps most visible in this department with girls 'flooding over to be involved at every level'. 'If you can make noise with an instrument, we're putting you in a group!'

Drama also sizzling under the school's 'radical' director of drama, a 'professional theatre-maker'. School describes its drama offering as 'creatively ambitious' with much encouragement to 'be bold and take risks'. Sees the department as a sort of mini National Youth Theatre, with much emphasis on teamwork, process and self-discovery rather than 'just learning lines'. 'There's no point in replicating Les Mis for the thirtieth time,' we were told drily. Recent performance of Brief Encounter (jointly with Habs Girls') was a modern take depicting a queer romance. Students also write and produce their own films in collaboration with experienced film-makers. The National Youth Theatre looms as a motivating ambition for these boys: over 20 Habs boys and girls have been accepted there over the past five years. Gorgeous 550-seat performance hall for music and drama plus the Lime Tree Studio – a state-of-the-art purpose-built drama studio and rehearsal space.

Habs community partnership involves several state schools, notably nearby London Academy, whose children come to Habs for weekly swimming lessons and academic enrichment, robotics, music and more. This is no box-ticking exercise but a deeply embedded, mutually beneficial co-operation involving around 56 Habs staff and 350 Habs students (boys and girls); more than triple that number from London Academy. Habs also supports around 80 external applicants through university applications, exams and interviews. 'I couldn't believe how complacent this supposedly great school was when we first started these programmes,' the director of partnerships told us. 'People talked openly and proudly about the "Habs bubble".' No longer. The progress made over a short period of time has been astounding, and staff we spoke to were proud of their role in such an outward-facing school.

Over 160 clubs and societies each week. 'If you're fascinated by anything, they'll turn it into a club,' said a mum. 'The school helps them find their passion, whatever it is,' said another. Several boys singled out the wide variety of clubs – Dr Who, photoshop, robotics, debate, you name it – as one of their favourite things about the school, especially in years 7-9.

All boys in years 10-13 are shooed out into bright daylight on Friday afternoons for some

form of outdoor education (eg mountain biking, climbing, orienteering, archery or a PADI diving qualification), CCF or community service. DofE is slowly rising from the ashes and is now offered in concert with the girls' school.

Sport

Much mention of 'the Habs way' by the games staff which was never defined but we think loosely translates as values above victory. Breadth and depth both important, and the meek are given as much care as the mighty. 'Everyone is paying the same; they deserve the same,' said the head of sport refreshingly.

Rugby has been edged out by football. Habs has partnered with Tottenham Hotspur for coaching and development, and two boys had recently joined the U14 ISFA squad when we visited. Cricket huge; rugby and hockey still holding their own. Boys' gymnastics is a niche triumph with the Habs' U19 and U16 teams recent British champions; water polo offers another distinctive USP. Notable successes also in tennis, badminton and squash – a total of 36 sports or physical activities are offered. All that said, 'parents of a very, very sporty child are unlikely to look here,' said a mum. Games still mainly single-sex barring some cricket, a joint sports day and the weekly Habs Dash, a 3.5km fun trot around campus, open to students and staff. No rowing (though some sailing is offered).

Outstanding sports facilities include the Medburn (sports) Centre with indoor 25-metre swimming pool, squash courts, climbing wall and gymnasium (plus Joe's café serving home-made snacks and drinks). There is a cricket centre with indoor nets, bowling machines and projector screen for video replays, umpteen tennis courts, hockey pitches and games fields galore.

Ethos and heritage

Founded in 1690 by Robert Aske, a wealthy merchant who bequeathed funds to the Worshipful Company of Haberdashers (buttons and bobbins trade, if you're wondering) to provide education for 20 sons of poor members. Poor old Robert, the 'Aske' was dropped in 2021 in recognition of his (fairly obscure) connection with the slave trade. At the same time, the school motto was changed from the awkward (given the circumstances) 'serve and obey' to the more ambitious 'making a profound impact'. Opened in Hoxton, the school moved to Hampstead in the early 20th century and then, in 1961, to its current site in the grounds of Aldenham House in Hertfordshire. The attractive 17th-century red-brick mansion remains the focal point of the school. The BBC Africa Service broadcast from here during WWII, and the grounds were used as a backdrop for sixties TV series *The Avengers* and Roger Moore's *The Saint*.

Not quite a 'London school' but nor is it rural. Generous 100-acre campus (shared with the girls' school) sits in the greenest of north London's leafy petticoats. If you are looking for small and cozy, this may not tick your boxes: there are up to 1,120 boys in the senior school with almost 350 in the prep. All are bustling with intellectual purpose in a harmonious hive of old and new buildings. 'I liked that there's no down time for them to wander around town like I saw at some schools,' said a mum explaining why she chose Habs. School site opens at 8am, with a few before-school clubs and breakfast offered. With the exception of some sixth form drivers, most boys arrive in the morning and stay firmly put until ferried home by parents or coaches at the end of the school day at 4pm or on late coaches at 5.30pm.

Eclectic list of old boys includes businessmen Tim Steiner (co-founder of Ocado) and John Vincent (founder of Leon restaurants), MP Sir David Lidington, cancer scientist Sir Mike Stratton, racing driver Damon Hill, historian Simon Schama, critic Brian Sewell, opera singer Roderick Williams, presenter Mark Kermode, and actors and comedians Matt Lucas, Sacha Baron Cohen, David Baddiel and Jason Isaacs.

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

Last time we were here we said: 'A ferocious work ethic is essential to survive happily at this school and the push from parents, particularly of the tiger variety, tends to be as strong as that from teachers.' While this still applies, pastoral care has shot up the priority list at the new Habs. Form tutors see boys in groups of 14, and the house system is 'enormously helpful', said a parent. 'Pastoral care is proactive,' reported the mother of a boy who had struggled with the loss of a grandparent. 'They really came through.' Mental health is becoming more important with student-led initiatives, assemblies and fundraising efforts (recently for a suicide prevention charity). There is a safeguarding team with full-time counsellor. Sketchy phone reception on campus is a 'huge bonus', say parents. 'We're so grateful!'

Increased focus on carrot rather than stick is evident in commendation breakfasts and the new system of 'credits' for good behaviour. Ten credits = a free drink voucher. Red lines are drugs, theft, bullying or weapons; three expelled recently for behaviour issues. Changing room devilry has presented a tenacious challenge of late: 'It's the bane of the parents' WhatsApp group,' admitted a mother, 'but the school is all over it.'

Closer contact with the girls' school is 'already showing dividends'. 'Integration has stopped the boys feeling they're missing out by not attending a co-ed sixth form,' said a father. Sixth form study areas can be used by boys and girls in both schools. Many families have a boy and girl on the site, one of the advantages of the school.

Parent after parent praised the school's multiculturalism – it's unlikely that parents would choose this school if they didn't like the multi-ethnic, multinational, multilingual milieu it offers. A few spoke matter-of-factly of there being large South Asian and Jewish populations with 'everyone else in a minority', but did not see this as a defect. 'There's no animosity; no problems.'

The school was tested with the outbreak of the Gaza conflict in 2023. 'There were lots of parent discussions about what the school's response should be,' a Jewish mother told us. 'They came out quickly with a message of tolerance.' Boys are encouraged to voice their opinions, differences are accepted and boys rub along amiably. 'On the leavers' day last year some boys drew Israeli flags on their shirts and others drew Palestinian flags. The school didn't make a big deal of it – there was no issue.' Head of DEI celebrates cultural differences highlighting eg religious festivals and pride.

Pupils and parents

Confident, personable, self-motivated, highly-numerate lads. 'I used to hire a lot of young men who had attended Habs,' a parent told us. 'They all had one thing in common: they were self-assured and comfortable in their own skin.' A good choice for 'individuals', we

were told. 'The school captain did an assembly on knitting during exam revision. It was seen as perfectly normal.'

Parents mainly academically ambitious professionals who value a breadth of education and reflect the ethnic mix of northwest London. 'There are a lot of very, very pushy parents,' said a mum brightly. 'You feel it.' (One mum took us aside to make sure we noted that the girls' school isn't quite, quite as high up the exam tables as the boys'.) Brand new parents' committee launched in 2024 aims to weave together Habs' far-flung parent community.

Around 70 per cent of boys arrive via the school's intricate coach network. They stream in from a 30-mile radius, from St John's Wood to Harpenden – an enormous geographical area from which to cherrypick the best and brightest. Every single parent we spoke to raved about the coach service: 'It's the best coach network of all the schools in the area.' 'There are so many routes, so they don't have to be stuck on one coach doing the rounds for ages.'

'Old boys are very loyal and committed,' a mum told us. 'There's a real community feel we didn't see at other schools we visited.' It's a great network for work placements and careers advice.

Money matters

Around 10 per cent of students receive financial support. A new venture, Bright Futures, offers targeted, donor-supported bursaries to students of Black African or Caribbean heritage.

Academic scholarships (based on the entrance assessment papers sat by everyone) are available at the three main entrance points. Additionally, art, drama and music scholarships are offered at 11+; same at 13+, as well as DT. Sports scholarships are a brand new addition, signalling the school's increasing emphasis on physical excellence. The first four recipients took up their awards in autumn 2024 (one internal).

Alumni relations have been beefed up and there is a flowering of (tasteful) commercial activity, eg cricket camp, music school and weekend music lessons. Impressively proactive in cutting costs as a precaution against VAT concerns.

The last word

Behold the new Habs! Still fiercely academic and unapologetically competitive. But this is no smug Privet Drive or secluded monastery. The fortress has been well and truly breached and the drawbridge is down. Habs boys are making an impact – not just through their own achievements but by reaching out a hand and bringing others with them. Geeks of the world unite! Delicate flowers and boys who need mollycoddling may look elsewhere.