



Leighton Park
School

Good Schools Guide 2011

Report on Leighton Park School

**“More schools would do
well to adopt the LP model”**

Good Schools Guide, 2011

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A mainstream independent school for girls and boys aged from 11 to 18 with a co-ed sixth form. Takes boarders.

Pupils: 500 girls and boys; 127 board

Age: 11-18

Religion: Quaker (all faiths welcomed)

Fees: Senior full boarding £9154; senior weekly £8042 senior day £5998; junior full £7783, junior weekly £6844, junior day £5095.

Open days: Monthly Open Mornings as well as individual meetings with the Head are available: please see website for details

Head

Since January, 2011, Mr Alex McGrath BA PGCE. After being educated at The Manchester Grammar School and Durham University, where he read History, he began working life as a Police Officer in Durham Constabulary before first teaching post at St. Bees School, Cumbria. PGCE at York University, followed by early teaching career back at The Manchester Grammar School and Epsom College teaching History and Politics. Head of History and Boarding Housemaster at Cheltenham college, before Deputy Headship at Trent College. MA in Educational Leadership and Management currently being undertaken at University of Nottingham. Keen interest in Writing, Fly fishing, Russian History, Rugby Union, Marathon Running, Drama and Fine Art. Wife (an artist) and three children.

Academic Matters

In 2010, 70 per cent A*/B grades at A level. Twenty-three subjects on offer. Almost half A level students take maths, about a third physics or chemistry - extensive labs with separate wet and dry areas. Head of science spent years in industry and encourages pupils to use science as a route to any career. Sciences taught separately as three subjects. History and politics both popular. New multi-media languages centre opened in 2005 followed by well appointed but architecturally incongruous maths building in 2007. Great workshop space for DT - popular at GCSE; some continue to A level. No food studies (shame). Fortnightly timetable and fifty-five minute lessons. Class sizes across school average 15 (often smaller in sixth form). LP boys perform as well as girls despite national trends. 99 per cent achieved five or more A* - C grades at GCSE, with 53 per cent at A*/A. Pupils averaged 9 'passes' each. School launched IB as an alternative sixth form syllabus in September 2009. Religious studies (called 'beliefs and values') includes philosophy of Quakerism. Pupils love individual learning centre (mainly for dyslexia) with highly skilled and friendly staff (2 f-t and 4 p-t). 'Not a soft option,' says SENCo who looks after ninety or so pupils - 'most of them wouldn't hit radar in other schools,' she confides to us. Range of needs include Asperger's, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and (currently) two visually impaired.

Games, Options, the Arts

An impressive list of county athletes, runners, hockey, netball and rugby players - 'we punch above our weight,' says head of PE. A rugby and hockey South Africa tour in 2007 made time for bush excursions and ocean safaris, as well as visiting a township school. Floodlit AstroTurf and beautiful games pitches - space for 400 metre athletics track in summer. HOD adds 'when we play we want to win' but is adamant that 'how you deal with winning is more important'. Recent individual successes include rowing, cycling, ice dancing, swimming and world-class sailing. Parents are pleased with way that sport has 'come of age' at LP in recent years. Walled area provides sheltered netball or tennis courts. Super 25 metre indoor pool 'boosts confidence' of many tentative swimmers; more than adequate gym but sports hall is on the wish list. Wide choice of hobbies: ceramics, debating, good causes, Duke of Edinburgh (some take gold), photography, textiles, plus wide choice of sports and musical groups. Young Enterprise is an ambitious throng.

Music area (linked to main hall) is currently being expanded. Over half school learn a musical instrument 'from beginners to grade 8 and occasionally diploma level. Huge range of ensembles and groups with loads of opportunity to perform at regular concerts. Choir and orchestra tour Europe regularly, recently to Sweden and Denmark. Talented jazz musicians have made impressive 'Liquid Silk' CD. We watched year 7 music class sharing own compositions and opinions - we liked way music teacher prefaced his own observations by, 'Shall I tell you ...?' - authority is not taken for granted here. Pupils practise hard before school/lunch hour/evenings. New music technology studio and mobile 'Music Mac' trolley very popular - 25 Applemacs armed with software such as 'Garageband' for composition. Annual house music competition an annual highlight of gladiatorial proportions. Great stress laid on aesthetics at LP - ranch-like art studios provide more creative space than in most schools this size. Separate gallery to exhibit home grown talent; artist in residence works closely with pupils. Drama uses studio in adapted (former) squash court and theatre style concert hall. We watched thirty year 11 pupils preparing nine GCSE drama presentations on day we visited. Two

major productions a year with bi-annual musical (recently 'Grease' and 'Under Milk Wood'). Pupils ooze talent (some already acting professionally). Masses of cultural exchanges - recently with a lycée in Nantes; Barcelona, Hamburg, and joint ventures with other Quaker schools. Trips galore - when we visited some pupils had just returned from a joint English and geography expedition to 1st World War battlefields and others were going skiing in the USA. Adventure training trips recently include Ecuador (senior students) and Pembrokeshire (year 8) plus Ladakh in 2008, skiing in Canada and Pembrokeshire (year 8). Sixth form bi-annual cultural trip (Russia 2008, China 2006). 'Sixth Special' on Friday afternoons welcomes a range of speakers. 'Litebytes' enhancement programme for sixth includes critical thinking, Mandarin and dance. Amnesty group; sixth formers get to attend Quaker events hosted by school eg Peace Conferences organised by Forgiveness Project (Martin Bell and Jill Hicks were recent participants). Close link with Penn Charter (Quaker) school in America and Friends' School, Hobart, Tasmania.

Background and Atmosphere

Quaker ideals permeate LP - first name terms throughout emphasise equal worth of all; unexpected moments of stillness during day - we experienced this at 'Collect' (the morning assembly) and, remarkably, twice during lunch. At weekly 'meeting for worship' silence is longer. Worship is not 'led' but anyone can 'witness' (or speak out their inner feelings) - this sometimes leads to poignant and emotional moments, felt individually and collectively. Younger pupils 'find silences difficult at first' but soon latch on. Older pupils speak movingly of how the Quaker ethos has made a deep and lasting impression. Sixty acres of parkland (as school name suggests) - a welcome oasis of greenery; calm and (mainly) gracious buildings provide a welcome change from Reading's maze of tarmac, cheek by jowl with the University of Reading; close to M4 corridor and Heathrow. Some areas of meadowland and a lovely natural pond help create a rural feel on hot summer days. Keen eco school (bronze award) and in partnership with local state schools; 'Save the Planet' group active and inspired by one year 'ecologist in residence' (appropriately clad in green when we met her).

Not as old as some other Quaker schools, LP began as a public school in 1890 with the specific intention of educating scholars for Oxbridge. Nicknamed 'the Quaker Eton' at the time, it still has style but in a modern, forward thinking kind of way. Current improvements are enabling planned expansion to a maximum of 510 pupils. The 'old school' is a fine Georgian building with a gracious reception area; outside, a small lawn and ha ha date from its origins. All boarding houses now adapted for co-education and former dining areas converted into enviable recreation spaces. Some areas of school have a 'collegiate' feel whilst others are futuristic. Fryer House (where 11-13-year-olds live) has retained in-house eating for breakfast and supper. A lively, warm environment with lots of space for recreation/prep/outdoor activities housed in a self-contained building. New (2006) sixth form centre - The Caradon Centre - opened, with areas for IT, study and relaxation as well as kitchen and meeting rooms plus own garden. Careers also based here - school uses ISCO's all-in package with pupils going on university taster days, conferences etc. Circular dining facility - very trendy 'Oakview' opened October 2004, offering wide and healthy choice of meals for the whole school community (breakfast, lunch and 'tea') plus sixth form café. 'Soups are finest in the land,' claimed one teacher. Library to die for on top floor of old school with themed, artful displays prepared by a librarian who lives to make people want to go in there and read. School regularly hosts visits by authors, some being Berkshire Library book events. Head proud of Radio 4 broadcast in BBC 'Sunday Worship' to 1.75 million people worldwide - BBC and listeners (judging from postbag afterwards) greatly impressed but Auntie 'found managing the silences a challenge,' chuckled head.

Pastoral Care and Discipline

'Anyone can fit in,' say pupils. Haven't abolished corporal punishment - it was never introduced in the first place. 'Pupils here learn about self-discipline,' says head and a mum praised how school manages to create a 'sense of responsibility between the pupils'. All belong to either Fryer (junior) or one of four senior houses. Lovely environment for juniors (Fryer started life as a children's sanatorium) and has 'home from home' feel despite smell of floor polish. Kitchenettes in all houses where pupils 'learn to provide for themselves' from an early age. Pupils raise loads of money for charity, led by active 'Good Causes' committee - eg 'Ray of Sunshine' for seriously ill children or currently a community in Malawi. Flexi-boarding ('cheaper than a babysitter') available on request - many pupils sleep over once or twice a week. Facilities for day pupils and boarders in each house - improve as pupils move up school. Not much division between day pupils and the rest - many stay for evening meal and supervised prep if required. All pupils participate in residential week of team building/adventure training. Anyone bringing drugs onto premises permanently excluded. Alcohol is banned. Head boy and girl chair monthly school council meetings. Pupils like way staff don't impose beliefs but 'accept pupils for who we are'. Sick bays in each house plus 24 hour medical cover at health centre; separate room where school counsellor visits 2 half days per week. Well established and highly rated pupil mentoring scheme.

Pupils and Parents

Parents often from IT plus lawyers, business and university types. Head says, 'parents are articulating need for something more from a school than good exam results'. All major faiths represented here. 20 per cent from overseas and a sprinkle of ex-pats but mainly from Berkshire, Oxfordshire, north Hampshire and Bucks. Only five per cent of pupils Quaker. Youngest pupils have uniform (with symbolic oak leaf emblem on jumper); 'collect dress' for middle years and 'business dress' for sixth form - 'allows pupils to express some individuality,' claimed head but we weren't totally convinced. Parents love fact that 'pupils make friends across the age groups unlike at many other schools'. Lots of day pupils choose to have breakfast and supper (no extra charge) at school. 'My friends can't work out why I choose to spend so much of my spare time at LP ... but I just love it here,' beamed one year 11 girl. No Saturday

lessons - so many of the boarders are weekly - hence exodus on Friday nights though much to do for those remaining. Long standing link with German school provides trickle of Teutonic one-termers. Old Leightonians: Sir David Lean, Sir Richard Rodney Bennett, Jim Broadbent, Michael Foot, Lord Caradon, Lord Frederick Seebohm (who reformed social services) and a fair clutch of MPs, Rowntrees, Cadburys, Clarks, Reckitts, Morlands and Frys.

Entrance

Tests January for years 7-10 (though alternative dates can be set if needed); tests in maths, English, non-verbal reasoning. Pupils chosen on previous report, interview and reference from current head. Mostly Common Entrance for year 9. At sixth form about 35 enter from outside with at least 6 A*-Cs with A*-B grades in chosen subjects (A/A* for maths). Large number of feeder preps and primaries in Reading and wider area. Overseas pupils from about twenty countries including USA, China, Australia, Europe.

Exit

Most to universities (often getting firsts). About twenty per cent take a gap year. A few leave at 16 for sixth form colleges. One or two annually to Oxbridge; wide range of other universities and specialist colleges, conservatoires etc.

Money Matters

Several major and minor awards for art, music and sport. Means tested bursaries. Friends' schools' bursaries given to those with Quaker parents. David Lean Foundation awards one annual scholarship for 100 per cent of day fees, for academic excellence.

Remarks

Many schools vaunt their 'special atmosphere' but at LP it's tangible. No room for hypocrites (staff or pupils) here. One of the most distinctive schools we've visited - it gave us a renewed sense of hope for the future. More schools would do well to adopt the LP model 'it has 'integrity and honesty at heart'.



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