

What The Good Schools Guide says

Head

Since 2018, Jill Silverthorne, who joined the school in 2001 as head of English and expressive arts. Grew up in the 1980s in a disadvantaged community in the valleys of south Wales. Always wanted to teach. English degree, PGCE and MA, all from Leicester. Swapped a 'wonderful 10 years' of teaching at a sixth form college in Rutland to come here – 'Most people do it the other way round and my colleagues were shocked,' she admits. 'Can I do it?' she wondered at the time. 'I genuinely felt like a newly qualified teacher again.' Clearly she could, as she was swiftly promoted to assistant, then deputy head before landing the top job.

Parents love her sunny disposition, unwavering commitment to valuing the individual, while also having a 'massive sense of community'. As a Christian, she is attuned to the school's CofE values, and this doesn't go amiss among parents either. We noticed her repeatedly popping out of her office (handily located opposite reception) to praise pupils for recent successes (eg singing in a concert) and were impressed that one of the pupils she chose to guide us round the school was very shy. 'It will have been so good for her confidence,' she grinned. Pupils say they don't see all that much of her, 'except at assemblies', but say she is 'always friendly'.

Lives locally, where she is very involved with her local church, including volunteering. Enjoys reading, theatre and music, especially the piano. 'I'm also trying very hard at the harp, although getting it in tune is half the battle!'

Entrance

Heavily oversubscribed, with around 330 pupils applying for the 216 year 7 places. Entrance is on a faith-based priority system, with siblings also favoured. Pupils come from around 80 primary schools, mainly in Northamptonshire, Rutland and south Leicestershire.

Up to 75 join the sixth form, some of whom travel quite a distance. 'There's lots of choice but I wanted to come here because I want to get good grades,' said one newcomer. Entry is not faith based at this stage, but joiners need to embrace the ethos of the school, as well as having 50 points from their best eight GCSEs, including a 5 in English (and there are some subject-specific criteria, eg a 7 in maths to study further maths).

Exit

Just over a third leave after GCSEs, mainly to vocational courses at local colleges. Vast majority of sixth formers to university, around a third to Russell Group. Leeds, Nottingham and Sheffield recently most popular, 'all conveniently on the East Midlands trainline!' as heads points out. Five to Oxbridge. STEM subjects popular, with two medics in 2023. Two to overseas universities: Bulgaria and Spain. Degree apprenticeships are taking off, especially in engineering, construction and the care industries – four in 2023.

Latest results

In 2023, 39 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 84 per cent 9-4 in both English and maths. At A level, 25 per cent A/A* (56 per cent A*-B). In 2019 (the last pre-pandemic results), 38 per cent 9-7 at

GCSE; 86 per cent 9-4 in both English and maths. At A level, 23 per cent A*/A at A level (49 per cent A*-B).

Teaching and learning

Consistently impressive results for a non-selective school. We saw purposeful classrooms and engaged students, and picked up a good vibe between staff and pupils. Setting in maths from year 7 and science and MFL from year 8. At GCSE, everyone takes RE and one language out of French or Spanish. Over half do combined science, the rest triple. Everyone takes either history or geography then chooses from computing, PE, music, drama, textiles, art, DT, food tech or health and social care. Science results in top one per cent of the country, and English, history and geography do very well too. Pupils say there are no weaker departments but pull out MFL for its 'particularly amazing teaching' – 'they use loads of quizzes and really make it fun' – although numbers at A level are, as in most schools, small.

Parents say the teachers – many of whom have been here over 10 years – know pupils well and are keen to help them reach their potential. They told us of a 'culture of high expectations' and 'extension work where appropriate'. They get regular updates on progress, 'and if there are any issues, I'm the first to know'. Some said their children 'can feel pressure at times' but 'they are never pushed to the point where it's detrimental'. Lots of teacher training on how to connect, consolidate, retrieve information etc – and we noticed a clear, structured pattern to each class, many supported by bespoke workbooks. Average class sizes 27, plus lots of whole-year themed days, eg year 9 geographers were all in the main hall learning about 'disaster management' during our visit, where they worked in small groups with the mission to protect their community from imminent volcanoes, typhoons and earthquakes. They were so engrossed they didn't even notice us.

Sixth form housed in a separate modernish block where being on target can earn you the right to go off site for free periods, although most choose to stay in school and study in their study centre, library or a free classroom. 'We get great access, so there's always somewhere to go for a change of scenery,' said one. Pupils told us there's an expectation to 'really crack on and be more proactive in sixth form, but they want you to do well and there's support there'. Most take three (out of 27) A levels, four if they're doing further maths. STEM subjects most popular, along with psychology, sociology, business and economics. We enjoyed a sociology class on gender crime where pupils were making some cracking notes with mind maps. Best outcomes for psychology, RE, biology, English and history at this stage. Only 10 per cent are allowed to take EPQ, which pupils find 'frustrating' – one girl we spoke to had loved doing hers on the evolution of Japanese medicine through time. External careers company visits to help with everything from UCAS to apprenticeships to work experience. We attended an informative year 13 assembly on student finance.

Learning support and SEN

Just six per cent on the SEN register, way below the national average. School says this is because they make such good progress that they stop needing additional support: 'We have a lot of students with diagnoses who are not on the register.' Dyslexia most common, followed by autism, then ADHD. Twelve EHCPs when we visited. Pupils praise school for 'making necessary tweaks', eg looking at where you're sitting, allowing doodling, finding hooks to engage you in subjects you find less interesting. There's a real emphasis on inclusive classrooms – we saw lots of use of laptops, plus glossaries and word definitions,

but very few slant boards, headphones etc – ‘Pupils don’t want to stand out,’ explains SENCo. Some students get one-to-ones or small-group work. One parent felt her child ‘wouldn’t have managed anywhere else – here, they looked at her as an individual and catered for her needs, which are complex, in such a thoughtful way, it definitely wasn’t EHCP box-ticking’. Another told us that although ‘one or two teachers haven’t paid attention to her pupil passport, the majority are vigilant’.

The arts and extracurricular

Choirs, bands, ensembles, orchestras – you name it, they’ve got it. The week we visited, there was a concert showcasing strings, rock band, choir, guitar ensemble, concert band and soloists. Staff get stuck in too – currently 13 in the choir. Carol service at the parish church popular. Around eight per cent learn an instrument in school. Roomy, well-equipped music rooms are stuffed with guitars, ukuleles, drums etc – not to mention the multiple keyboards which younger pupils were enthusiastically composing away on as part of a music lesson.

Drama taught as part of carousel of creatives (DT, cooking, textiles) up to the end of year 9, plus there are drama clubs running most evenings. Every other year, the school takes over a local theatre for a whole-school performance, most recently School of Rock. Over 90 get involved – from thespians to tech team to costume making. ‘One of the best things is the crossing of year groups,’ we heard. Sixth formers get to write their own plays with the help of the National Theatre. ‘My son got a drama award, which was lovely because he’s so obviously not a showbizzy type but really quite shy,’ said a parent.

Back in the mists of time, this was a tech college and the uptake for product design is still strong, including at A level. Plenty of impressive 3D work on display to inspire younger ones – ‘Just look at the detail on that CD case,’ admired one of our guides, and pupils told us they also love the ‘marketing aspect the teachers bring in’. Decent numbers too for art, although we’d like to have seen more on display. Still, we learned a thing or two from younger pupils turning J-cloths into felt.

All the pupils we met attended several clubs a week. Music, science, chess, drama and writing all popular. Debating pupils pleased as punch to have come second out of six schools in a recent competition. Sixth form societies have really come on – they run these themselves. The Brilliant Club supports high achievers, and they recently hosted a philosophy conference. School also runs enterprise days, eg on STEM and careers in medicine. DofE gets good take up. Charity work important – they were collecting for Christmas hampers when we visited, and there was great competition between the classes to create the biggest and best. School works with food banks and old people’s homes, and they support their own disadvantaged pupils’ families too.

Year 7s go on an outward bound residential to Govilon in Wales, and year 8s to the Scilly Isles. There’s a year 9 MFL trip (France or Spain) and a year 10 ski trip. Plus subject-related trips and tours, eg sports tours to Canada and Singapore.

Sport

Not the shiniest sports facilities if you’re comparing to newer local schools. But there’s certainly nothing to complain about, with a sports hall, AstroTurfs, pitches, courts and MUGA. Nice to see all the gym machines being used by younger years – so often, we find

them empty or only used by older years. Lots of silverware in the cabinet, especially for rugby, hockey, netball and cricket. Football increasingly popular, including for girls. Some pupils compete at county level, but the emphasis is very much on sport for all, with lots of teams and practices. Definitely not the kind of school where children are constantly trying to get out of PE. Everyone loves the termly house games, culminating in end of year sports day. The sports leaders' programme gets pupils working with local primary schools. Sixth formers have their own football league, but they said it's 'really just for fun'.

Ethos and heritage

Now over 50 years old, the school is located at the end of a residential road not far from the centre of Kettering. Lots – around nine, reckoned our guide – of low-level buildings, some dating back to the 1960s, others more modern. The whole place is kept smart, with no litter, and there's plenty of outside space. A few parents said they'd looked round newer schools in the area – 'all glass and fancy facilities' – but felt they 'weren't a patch on this one when it comes to developing the whole child'.

There can't be too many modern state schools with a chapel on site – it's a cosy, welcoming space with a Bible study group going on when we popped our heads in. Masses of science labs – practicals are big here, with pupils excitedly telling us about dissecting a pig's heart – 'Or was it a sheep?' wondered one; 'No, an ox, I think,' reckoned another. We loved the library – big, well stocked and comfortable with a lovely librarian who had been hard at work making a Christmas tree entirely out of green books and fairy lights.

In June 2022 Ofsted downgraded the school from 'outstanding' to 'requires improvement' and it's clear that this has caused both shock and distress to the head, her staff and everyone else concerned. While committed to turning around the areas of perceived weakness, the school has appealed against the decision and all parents and pupils we spoke to were 'outraged', 'horrified' and 'disgusted', insisting the report 'does not reflect the school we know'.

Pupils wear blue (KS3) or black (KS4) sweatshirts and ties; sixth formers dress in business attire. School has a strong green agenda, and recently built a new garden encouraging bees. Food excellent – proper fish and chips when we visited, as good as any seaside chippy, eaten in a large dining room with smaller sixth form café to the side. Pupils would like more water fountains.

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

A welcoming and friendly school – you feel it as soon as you walk in. Big emphasis on kindness and feeling part of a community, with parent after parent talking about how happy their child is here. Pupils stay with the same form teacher up to the end of GCSEs, and after the pandemic the school also introduced non-teaching heads of year. 'It means you can go to them at any time and they really take action,' said a sixth former. All pupils name two adults they'd turn to at times of difficulty, and there's peer mentoring, wellbeing classes and a thisisnotok@bishop.com email address. Chaplain available for counselling, plus a visiting external counselling service. A mental health lead ensures the school is giving all the right messages around eg eating disorders and anxiety, and the school works with a local mental health and wellbeing charity that gives talks to parents on eg sex education and being a parent in a tech world.

Pupils are frequently reminded to 'be an upstander not a bystander' and the school won't stand for language that could be deemed to be insulting. There's a Pride group and pupils told us about a recent Black History Month poem competition, as well as covering institutionalised racism in English. Pupils of all faiths can use the chapel, and there's a prayer room for worship – or the mosque down the road, which sixth formers can walk younger ones to (with parental permission). Curriculum constantly evaluated, eg to check there's enough art from different cultures being taught.

Some parents told us they turned down other local schools 'that seem to mask problems and turn a blind eye completely if they happen outside school'. Not so here, they told us, where 'they don't hide the fact that children make mistakes' and have consistent, clear-cut rules 'so everyone knows where they stand'. Parents particularly like that the school's principle – impressive in such a big school – is that not all students need the same approach. One mother, for example, felt they'd gone 'completely above and beyond in their recognition that my daughter's behaviour was coming from somewhere and that putting her in isolation wouldn't work at all'. She told us this 'pastoral and positive approach' allowed her daughter to 'really improve her behaviour'. Another parent liked that when her child got into trouble, a teacher said, 'Remember it's not you but your behaviour.' 'It also really helped that he guided him around what to do if he felt his temper burning again – and in quite a cool way too, so it made him really trust them.' The school flexes in other ways, allowing those very gifted in eg music or sport, to take time out of school to follow their dreams.

Pupils and parents

Parents are very supportive of the school, describing it as 'easily the best in the area'. Several we spoke to are educationalists and know what a good school should look like – and even they struggled to find fault. Many came here themselves, and some of their parents too. The school has more disadvantaged families than in the past, although the majority are financially comfortable. Around 65 per cent are white British, rest mainly Asian, then black. The Christian faith aspect is important to families and even those of other faiths, or none, buy into the ethos. Families are prepared to travel quite a distance, helped by the train station, and there are some school buses although most feel they are 'too expensive'. Parent community felt to be split into cliques of sport, music, drama etc – 'not in a nasty way, just the way it is'. Pupils are upbeat, chatty and very loyal to their school.

The last word

A welcoming and friendly faith-based school that sets high expectations for all its pupils, gives them loads of opportunities and avoids the one-size-fits-all approach to pastoral care and discipline that we see in so many big schools. One pupil – a first for us – asked if he could read us a poem he'd written about his school, where he talks of 'golden opportunities', 'adventures unwinding' and 'vibrant debate'. High praise indeed. No wonder parents fight to get their children in here.