

# What The Good Schools Guide says

## Head of College

Since 2015, Mr Rob Jones (early 50s). Educated at Canford and with a degree in economics from Swansea, a PGCE from Worcester and a masters in educational leadership from Buckingham, Mr Jones' career has taken him to quite the roll call of schools in the south – that's if you stretch a point to include Kings School Worcester. Mainly a teacher of economics but always with a large side order of coaching rugby or rowing, Mr Jones' journey to Rendcomb has taken him to Dauntsey's, Clifton, alma mater Canford and latterly Shiplake as deputy head. He was disarmingly frank about the state of Rendcomb when he arrived, best diplomatically summarised by 'There was a job to do.' But there was much to love: its intentionally small size, its focus on character education, its fabulous situation, its offer expressly so very different from the nearby Cheltenham schools. We were quite won over by his talk of the Rendcomb family and the seesaw between ambition/challenge and support/nurture - and indeed by his sharp suit, polished shoes, red socks and twinkly blue eyes, as we chatted to him in his office with its splendid view and standing desk. Parents similarly won over: 'organised, affable, friendly and genuine,' said they of him, and approval also given for knowing the students' names and securing investment in the school, noted one father. Married to Pippa, a former rock singer (oh, the street cred!) - but these days 'minister without portfolio', as he described her, who does lots of crucial stuff within school such as equality, diversity and inclusion work, recruitment, forest school and so on - he has two teenagers both at the college. Leisure time and holidays will involve health and fitness and 'anything that floats' (the family keeps a boat in Spain) including himself – he is a former long-distance swimmer.

The junior school is headed by Mr Gavin Roberts, promoted from deputy in 2017, and before that at the Cathedral School Llandaff for several years teaching English to both juniors and seniors, plus junior maths. A proud and unmistakable Welshman and qualified WRU referee, he engages brilliantly with the children, tolerates the parents, remarked one mother wryly, and has raised the banter he has with Mr Jones to an art form that teenagers could well emulate. 'He's funny and jokes with us, but can shout when we're naughty,' say his young charges. Married to Jen, who teaches younger children in the junior school. Off the pitch and outside the school gates, he enjoys theatre and live music.

## Entrance

Straight into the nursery from the age of three. Junior school hopefuls have to attend a taster day, a two-way process designed to check the fit between child and school and a chance for some informal academic assessment. All entrants for the senior school, including the 80 per cent from the junior school, do online CEM assessments in verbal, non-verbal and mathematical skills, a process designed to show academic ability and potential, rather than the regurgitation of facts requiring masses of cramming. Main entry points are years 7 and 9, but the school can adapt well to other entry points. Children arrive from local prep schools and the odd primary. At sixth form, the handful of new applicants need five GCSE passes above a grade 4, including English and maths; grade 6 or above in any subject to be taken to A level, except maths and science, which require a 7. A helpful timeline for admissions is on the school website. All international students do age-appropriate written papers in English and maths; verbal reasoning also for anyone below sixth form.

## Exit

Most junior pupils to the senior school (any child unlikely to make it will have been identified a couple of years before); tiny numbers to local state schools. As an 'unashamedly through school', no CE or 11+ prep, eg for very competitive Gloucestershire grammars, is laid on. Some leave the senior school after GCSE but are replaced by incomers. The expectation is higher education at the end of their school careers: the odd Oxbridge success, a medic or two, a handful to art or music college (a recent scholarship to the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama) and everyone else to a range of universities, Swansea and Bath being especially popular.

## Latest results

In 2021, 46 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 56 per cent A\*/A at A level (81 per cent A\*-B). In 2019 (the last year when exams took place), 36 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 28 per cent A\*/A at A level (54 per cent A\*-B).

## Teaching and learning

The junior school follows the national curriculum, but peps it up with some French (specialist teachers for that, music and PE) and lots of time in the marvellous forest school, which is what it says - not some apologetic little patch of scrub off the playground. Sitting on a log watching small and energetic children work through a checklist of minibeasts to find was heart-warming - and boy, they were not shy of getting their little hands dirty! Two small classes per year group, where the children are set by maths: one was tackling fractions using exercise books and pencils, but there is no shortage of tech - they just use it wisely. Own lab, library, DT and computing facilities. We loved their remake of the Bayeux tapestry, with felt figures stuck on a hessian background. While the children clearly have a lovely time at school, one parent felt that the cleverest were not stretched enough and that differentiation was not as developed as it should be, even though there is scope to move bright sparks into the class above for spelling and phonics.

Twenty-five subjects are listed on the senior school curriculum, some of which (economics and business studies, for example) are available only at A level. General science only for the first two years and a choice of two out of three modern languages offered; no classics at all. We liked the sound of the themes of environment, empowerment and entrepreneurship linking parts of the curriculum at this stage. Ten GCSEs are the norm, with compulsory maths, English and sciences. Options include four level 2 BTECs (or equivalent) in sport, business studies, travel/tourism and hospitality. One or two year intense GCSE courses are offered to international students. A levels and two BTECs in business studies and PE are on offer at sixth form, the expectation being three subjects studied; EPQ is optional, as is the school's own gold arts award, where students create a portfolio, then design and deliver an event. Sixth form biologists were gazing intently at garlic cells under the microscope and in an English class, a rigorous analysis of a comprehension was taking place the day we visited. School operates a policy of 'bring your own device', duly checked and linked to the school's system. Teams is now the mode of communication between teachers and students, but, as the head said, 'A balance is had. Nothing beats the authentic relationship between teacher and pupil.' Strenuous efforts made over the last few years to dispel any notion that Rendcomb does not take academic matters seriously are paying off, but the approach is oblique: 'Our focus on the pupils rather than the exams, and developing the whole person,

mean the results take care of themselves,' as the head put it. Parents greatly rate the way the school gets their children to where they need to be, without undue pressure: 'It's academically very integrated,' one told us. Small class sizes in what is actually quite a small school prevent students feeling as overwhelmed as they might in a larger setting. It could not be further from a hothouse if it tried – hurrah for that.

## Learning support and SEN

Exceptional – and we don't often say that. Part of it is the beautiful new centre opened right next to the sixth form centre in 2021, expressly designed as a calm space with the minimum of sensory stress, hence muted décor, bare walls and frosted glass for the computer room so students can fully focus on their screens. Part of it is the highly qualified learning development (sic) team, with two holding masters degrees in inclusive education and able to assess and diagnose learning differences, plus in-house ADD and ASC specialists. Yet a third part is the way in which co-curricular activities are designed to suit everyone, eg students needing small group or solitary activities such as bell-ringing, paddle-boarding or knitting. The centre has its own garden whose lawn is mown by students benefitting from that kind of regular physical activity, and whose design is conceived by mix of dig, design, debate - it gets kids talking without eye contact. 'Our governors are not obsessed by numbers, so we can try out individualised hobbies,' the SENDCo (with the longest string of letters after her name that we had ever seen) told us. Working closely with the admissions department, everyone is screened in years 2 and 7 or on arrival, so that any extra needs are picked up early. Some support is provided in class, and some one-to-one. Exam support is skilfully laid on – we met one staff member fresh from scribing for a GCSE student – and underpinned by a long look at things like individual working memory and processing speed. No fewer than three dyslexic students recently tried Oxbridge and guidance is given throughout the UCAS application process, eg steering students towards campus universities in cases where they would find that environment easier.

## The arts and extracurricular

Let us start with the beautifully designed Griffin theatre, which also houses a proper dance studio. 'Industry standard', according to the website, the theatre provides opportunities not only for acting, but also for lighting, sound design, costume and set design – in fact, backstage support of all kinds – and is used by everyone from the nursery children up. Five major productions a year, with a mix of plays and musicals: recent productions have included *What a Knight!* (junior), *Beauty and the Beast*, *Peter Pan* and an outdoor production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The dance studio is well used, not only for ballet, but for modern, contemporary and fitness too; students perform and compete at local festivals in Cheltenham and Swindon. Dance is compulsory for boys – a mix of ballet and balance work and, it must be said, not universally enjoyed.

Music is strong here too. Perhaps fair to say that the performing venues outstrip the teaching ones, but we were pleased to see a lot of supervised practice sessions timetabled from the youngest children up; about a third of students take individual music lessons. Talented junior musicians might be invited to join senior orchestras or choirs. Simply masses on offer – music is compulsory until the end of year 9 – from the ukulele band to the auditioned chamber choir. We were enchanted by the coffee concert we were lucky enough to be at, held in the exquisite surroundings of the mansion's reading room (all pale blue stucco and moulding) and featuring classical guitar, piano and solo song. Performers of all

ages and degrees of expertise are encouraged to take part and their friends turn out in droves to support them. We hope that is not just because of the excellent cookies on offer... Public performances at Chapel Arts, Cheltenham and parents flock to the annual carol service in Cirencester parish church.

Art, DT and photography are housed in their own building just across the quad, with light, spacious and well-equipped studios and workshop; A level artists have their own space where work can be left out. One parent felt art facilities should be expanded. Alongside the teaching of traditional skills like drawing, students are very much encouraged to explore their own creativity. DT students have the use of a laser cutter and 3D printer and are looking forward to building an electric car, having secured the funding.

A wide (25+) selection of clubs and activities in the junior school encourage children to explore other interests and lengthen the day for busy working parents: fitness dance, pop lacrosse and stop motion club caught our eye. At senior level, activities include academic clinics, academic pleasures like Latin and the (new) diversity book club, and an array of sporting and artistic options, such as slacklining and rock band. Mountain biking takes place within the school's extensive 230-acre campus. The highlight of our day, however, was being whisked 'up top' (as the glorious sports pitches right on top of the hill above the village are known) in the director of sport's convertible to see some very happy students blasting clay pigeons way out over rural Gloucestershire. The noise is such that local landowners limit the number of occasions on which they can do it – though shooting is surely a life skill in this part of the country. DofE but no CCF.

## Sport

Quite a range and quite a standard provided by what is essentially a small school, such as serious lacrosse: it's the girls' sport of choice for prominent local schools Westonbirt and CLC. That said, senior girls' hockey teams remained unbeaten for a whole season recently. Rugby for the boys (of course) but tennis and cricket for all; less netball played here than in other schools. In the junior school, boys' football is big, as is cricket for everybody. Newish Astro was the scene of happy mixed tennis when we were there and is well used; grass for rugby and lacrosse. The school is pleased to host small schools' tournaments for these games, even though match teas came in for a little flak from some quarters! Swimming happens either at Cirencester Leisure Centre, 15 minutes away, or at neighbouring schools (outdoor pool is to be decommissioned).

While some parents love the way that there is room in a team and a fixture for everyone, others feel that the 'senior teams get whopped every time they go out', but all we spoke to concur that Rendcomb is not the place for elite or ruthlessly competitive sportsmen/women. County-level sport – and there is some – is done outside school. No stabling or equestrian centre on site – a missed opportunity, one mother thinks – but a keen and successful riding team, as might be expected in this horsey part of the world.

## Boarders

No junior boarding, and thereafter in four houses grouped by age and, in case of years 10 and 11, by gender. All houses have a mix of day students and boarders; when the day students leave at latest 6pm, the houses revert to the boarders' home-from-home. The youngest and oldest boarders have mixed accommodation, though dormitories and rooms

are segregated, but the girls' and boys' houses have the Barn, a shared hang-out space with sofas and jukebox. Everyone above year 10 has their own room. It was all bright, cheerful, clean and not too flashy – just right.

Sixth formers board in Park House, but the pinnacle of excitement is the week they will all, at some point in the year, spend in the Garden House – the nearest thing to a student flat we have ever seen. Each group of sixth formers will be responsible for budgeting, shopping, cooking and generally taking care of themselves while not losing their heads - or sight of their academic commitments. The state of the kitchen strewn with the remains of a roast chicken dinner caused us to laugh out loud and a blush to suffuse the cheeks of the delightful head of pastoral as he gingerly pushed open the door...

Saturday morning programmes are based on what might happen at home, such as a later start and time at the gym or library, unless students are members of school teams with Saturday matches. There is always a trip on Sundays which younger boarders are encouraged to go on; plenty of freedom to go home with other students and integration is reckoned to be good. Small numbers (just 20 per cent full boarders, the majority from overseas; higher concentrations in sixth form) mean plenty of scope for flexi- and occasional boarding. Any early homesickness is well handled. Not everyone agreed with the verdict younger children passed on the food ('amazing' and indeed our lunchtime chow mein was pretty good): we also heard 'too little choice' and 'too many incidents of jacket potatoes, chips and beans'.

## Ethos and heritage

Founded only in 1920 - so extraordinarily unlucky in terms of a centenary year - by Noel Wills, a member of local tobacco magnates who gave Bristol University its most iconic building, the school occupies a site and mansion rather older than it is. The present iteration of that mansion dates from the 1860s and echoes the Italianate style of some of Bristol's most beautiful houses, sitting high above the road, a golden edifice drawing the eye on the approach to the village. A pretty church and some less showy (but pleasant) buildings dot the surrounding area (fabulous former stables for the steeds of yore now house science labs), but it's an exceptionally green and gracious setting.

First impressions are of a country house: reception occupies an elegant hall with parquet floors and plaid armchairs, the wide staircase with its stained glass and galleried landing is as splendid as you would find anywhere and the gorgeous library is the only room still used for its original purpose. However, the Wills family did not set the school up to further the privilege and life chances of the local nobs: it was instead 'to provide a boarding school education of a modified public school type for boys from primary schools in rural Gloucestershire'. That less pretentious ethos persists to this day, with everyone we spoke to praising the down to earth nature of families sending their children to Rendcomb – okay, okay, all things are relative. 'It feels privileged in a more balanced way,' one father remarked - as did several more on the 'Rendcomb family' – and many noted the sense of accountability that staff display for the young people in their care. Pushy or showy it is not; in fact, some parents think it could make more of its assets, smarten up and move with the times a little more, such as reducing its dependence on oil for heating the place – but that is surely a long game.

## Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

Highly rated, and the reason that some choose the school: 'end-to-end,' as one mother described it – though another thought that a closer eye needed to be kept on the junior school playground, to ensure that every child had a playmate. Support for individuals comes in many guises, starting with tutors and house staff, then the medical or wellbeing team. Without hesitation, the head named his top priority as 'the kids – what can we do to make their experience better? It is easy to work out who is not breezing through their day, as we know everyone,' he added.

It struck us as a pretty inclusive place to be too, where it's okay to be you and out. 'There's always work to be done,' the head conceded, 'but no group would feel left out.' Indeed one parent told us of the heart-warming way in which students 'of all colours, creeds, religions and languages were cheering each other on at sports day'. We were pleased to learn that a neuro-diverse student gave a whole school assembly and that the school deals swiftly with sexist chat. Students set up groups, eg Woman Up, themselves. Discipline does not seem to be a matter which rears its ugly head too often; major offences include drugs, unauthorised drinking, malicious or bullying behaviour. The in-school night club (truly!), a subterranean graffitied dark den of very moderate iniquity, is the icing on the sixth form cake or the froth on its beer, provided in strictly controlled amounts – loud music and sweat are unrestricted.

### **Pupils and parents**

Surprisingly ordinary and down to earth for the Cotswolds: 'a good cross-section ethnically and economically,' as one father summed it up. A maximum of 30 per cent from across the globe, including Japan, South Africa and Nigeria. A few German students come for a year. UK students come from about a 40-mile radius, served by a network of school buses; the school is well off the beaten track for public transport. 'Families who send their children here have their feet planted firmly on the ground. They have no sense of entitlement and the children realise they are lucky to be here,' the head told us. The ones we met were delightful enthusiasts: school was described as 'amazing, fun and kind' and the only change the younger ones wanted to introduce was a 'bring your pet to school' day. An active parents' association is more about socialising than fundraising; it sounds welcoming and unpressured.

### **Money matters**

Boarding fees increase as students go up the school, falling in line with comparable schools by year 10. The head is proud to have been able to reduce the day fees slightly, so as to make Rendcomb possible for more families. Usual array of scholarships at conventional entry points to the senior school and one place fully funded for an outstanding applicant from a Gloucestershire primary school, who would not otherwise be able to come. Since 2019, up to five fully funded centenary scholarships, two from year 4, three from year 12, to celebrate this landmark. School has traditionally strong links with military families and has signed up to the CEA scheme.

### **The last word**

An idyllic school which expects to keep its youngsters until the end of their schooldays and where they can grow into themselves, learn and experience wonderful things. Rendcomb makes sure that those teenage years are about more than grades, grades, grades, yet still manages to get its students successfully to the next stage of their education.

