The Good Schools Guide Review of The Prebendal School

“Most people are attracted to Prebendal by its small size and family feel, and describe the school as gentle and nurturing...”
Since 2017, Louise Salmond Smith BA (East Anglia), MMus (Hull), PGCE (Gloucestershire), Keele (MBA). Previously head of junior school at Tormead School in Guildford and the school’s first female head. Plain talking, feisty and a virtuoso on the recorder. Has introduced hot chocolate at Bill’s as the termly treat for pupils with the most pluses, this replacing a book token; her parish is wholly convinced by the wisdom of this move, and all aspire to join her.

Pupils say she’s ‘really nice’ and that they see a lot more of her (than the last head): ‘she’s a lot friendlier’. The children seem to appreciate that they don’t have to leap to attention when they see her around the place; a small child, post music lesson, saw the head with relief and gave up her private battles with the timetable to ask for help.

Stands up for children, and refused to remove from the classroom a child with SEN who was, a parent complained, disturbing her child’s learning. The complainant and her children departed, the other parents appreciating that lessons of the classroom are not just those found in books.

Parents are very enthusiastic: ‘brilliant...knows every child’s name...speaks in a way they can understand’; ‘a doer...not full of bluster. Has great ideas and is interested in the children themselves’. 

Head
Our View

This is a school of sounds. Children move through corridors at their own pace, making their own noises, from chatter, to sung snatches of anthems, to an odd experimental mixture of the two: children finding and expressing themselves by voice. Music is a way of life at this school; virtually all the children learn one instrument and many learn more, and each year there are a clutch of music scholarships to senior schools.

School buildings range from ancient to modern, but it’s the old ones that arrest you: the curved classroom doors off a spiral staircase; the jail from the old magistrates' court (now storage behind bars); the cavernous old kitchen in the Bishop’s Palace, used for band practice and drama. The Prebendal is as old as the cathedral (1100s), and was founded as its song school, with its first head listed simply as John. To be in these buildings is to feel centuries peeling back around you; teachers say to children: ‘this room was here when...’ Pupils are sitting in time, and this is something they are very aware of - ‘I can feel it in English when the windows rattle as a bus goes past’, said one pupil: history shaking down through the centuries.
Pre-Prep is the modern part, full of light and colour; but from its playground the cathedral arches up, ancient behind modern.

The school treats the cathedral as its chapel - ‘but we let them use it for other services’, said the head kindly. Pupils say it’s a religious school, with lots of prayers and services (they quite like the ritual of it), and parents like that the children get used to talking in cathedral assemblies; ‘not arrogance, just what they do…’

The divine sound of the choristers comes at a cost: 23 hours of practice and services a week; like having a part time job on top of the full time job of school and being a kid. Asked if he would recommend it, a chorister said, ‘only if you like life very hectic’. But if you love singing, this is a chance to be part of a professional choir, with the cathedral paying 50 per cent of fees, and there’s topping up if needed. It’s boys only, and there’s no prospect of a Prebendal girls’ choir in the near future; funds only run to one professional choir, and a girls’ choir instead of the boys’ one would be a radical step too far.

“The divine sound of the choristers...”
A mix of abilities at this non-selective school, the very academically able and those that just ‘muddle through’, said parents. ‘No divide or distance between them’, said another, they all mix, and pupils from the state sector comment with pleasure on teachers who focus on all, not just those at the lower end.

Teachers know the children well, one parent describing how her son’s teacher approached her at the end of his first week at Prebendal - ‘this is how I am thinking about teaching [your son]....’

Prebendal follows the CE syllabus, but also the pre-senior baccalaureate, which focuses on skills rather than spoon feeding. It’s a great idea, and parents feel it will set pupils apart, but it hasn’t really kicked in yet, and pupils would like more time to talk in lessons; a teacher pointed out that both pupils and teachers have to get used to a different way of being. But we saw some lively lessons, a year 8 pupil standing on a chair to work out an equation in blue marker on the window to the encouragement of her peers; scribbling on windows during lessons is encouraged here.

Most people are attracted to Prebendal by its small size and family feel, and describe the school as gentle and nurturing - ‘they won’t shut your kids down, judge them for being dyslexic, or anything else...’ Learning support staff are ‘on it’, said a parent, describing how they read with her dyslexic son daily, and provide extra in class support free of charge (one-to-one sessions are charged as extra).
Beach School fortnightly for the little ones, the Head saying she would rather they are learning their letters outside, with a stick in the sand, than a pencil on paper inside. On the day of our visit, year 2s were finding things, man-made or natural, then building them into castles (this term’s project). It is difficult to imagine a happier place for children to learn.

The boarding here is mostly weekly or flexi; only the 11 choristers and a couple of international pupils are around at weekends, when it is very quiet, said a chorister, although there is a family feel to Sundays, when the families of choristers join the school for Sunday lunch.

A dormitory (of 14) with old wood panelling has ancient graffiti, carved into it by pupils long gone; pupils of the present day are allowed their own graffiti, by pen not penknife, on the wall of a tight spiral staircase. Dormitory numbers shrink as pupils get older, to three for year 8s. Bathrooms are clean, sometimes elderly (when did you last see a wall mounted cistern and chain?).

Pupils describe the school as ‘strict but friendly’. Bullying is ‘taken quite seriously’ said a pupil, and the head says they encourage snitches. Pupils say they talk to both sides, but there are not always evident consequences for the person doing the bullying, and things can recur. System of pluses for all things good, comments for the bad, with three comments getting you a detention - this might be copying out a portion of an encyclopaedia, or some Mandarin. Parents report prompt dealing with pastoral concerns; the form teacher or school chaplain are usually first port of call, ‘but anyone passing would help...’
A playground big enough for break time football, tennis and hen coop; the rescued factory hens have nearly all their feathers now, and Vera, the bravest, enjoys cuddles at break time (two pupils at a time in the hen coop only), and has braved the hen swing (who knew).

There’s a new outdoor classroom with wood chips underfoot (year 8 patiently pick up the ones that get away), and a more informal area called the amphitheatre: a circle of wooden benches with a fire pit at the centre (a wise head prioritises toasting marshmallows).

They have their own entrance to the Bishop’s Gardens from their playground, where they can climb trees - to a certain point. At night, after the gardens are closed to the public, boarders use the garden for manhunt in the dark.

For a small school, there is a vigorous programme of sports, and parents think this is probably the only element of the school that feels really competitive; but they read both losses and wins out in the cathedral, and no-one holds it against those who haven’t achieved on the sports field, added a parent earnestly.

One pupil told us how wonderful it feels to play cricket on their pitch next to the cathedral - it is the backdrop to their lives here, and gives great pleasure. Girls are pleased they now have opportunities to play cricket, and football too, but want to keep playing all their traditional sports as well. In some years there are cool kids and it’s the sporty ones who get the kudos (not any nastiness, we gather, more ‘idols...’); a bemused shake of the head from a chorister at the thought that his status might command any admiration from his peers.

Parents like the long school days, and the flexibility, geared for working parents - ‘they will keep children if you’re late to pick up...I’ve picked up at 9pm...’ It’s a friendly, busy parent group, with nearly all parents working (lots of professionals); ‘no one has time for bitchiness...’.

Pupils agree that the food is OK, though not up to home cooking: ‘main courses packed with mushrooms, puddings packed with raisins’, said a pupil resignedly, but compared to his old school, it’s really good.
A girl who likes her skirt gravely told us that she still thinks there should be the choice to wear trousers, and the boys were very clear that they would like to wear shorts in summer. A sympathetic shudder from all at the requirement for Pre-Prep boys to wear shorts all year round. Some pupil uncertainty as to whether using Pupil Voice (their council), makes a difference, but the Head is keen to change this; she has refurbished the girls’ changing rooms, and the pupil who suggested a zip wire over to school from the cathedral wasn’t all that surprised it was turned down.

Parents say Prebendal would suit all, from the really sporty to the meek and mild. ‘It looks very traditional, but the thinking is new’, said a parent. ‘Not that it’s Bedales’, she added.