

# What The Good Schools Guide says

## Headmistress

Since 2022, Kate Bailey (MA, PGCE), previously founding head of Wetherby Pembridge School, Manhattan. Started teaching at Broomwood Hall, then head of the junior school at Westminster Under School and senior deputy head at Wetherby Prep, London. Educated at Queen's Gate Junior School, London, and Cheltenham Ladies' College. Read history and English lit MA at Edinburgh; PGCE from the Institute of Education, London.

Warm and quick to laugh, she welcomed us into her large, elegant study painted in delicate pale blue and cream. To the right, squishy sofas face each other and to the left, a round table with chairs. 'It's what I'm about,' she says. 'Community, equality and people feeling comfortable so we can get the conversations going.' Only pupils' artwork on the walls apart from one serene watercolour of a deserted Scottish beach: 'It's the only thing of mine. Since my days as a student, I've loved Scotland.'

Her years in New York gave her practical experience of all aspects of education from architecture and legalities to designing and delivering a curriculum from scratch. She says, 'I literally got to understand the foundations that underpin a school. It was a privilege. Hard work, certainly, but a rewarding and unique experience.' Back on home soil, she says, 'Godstowe felt the perfect fit. Having been only to single-sex schools myself, I can attest to the opportunities and advantages of all-girls education.' Godstowe's location is a bonus too, 'We're not far from the Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire border where I grew up and where family still are. It feels like home.'

Ms Bailey has already won over pupils and parents alike. One pupil told us, 'She's kind and joins in with what we're doing.' A parent told us she found her gentle but assured authority 'a compelling mix', adding, 'She can be strict when she needs to be.' Her fundamental goal is to re-energise after a couple of difficult pandemic years. She's introduced a 'try something new' concept for staff and pupils but her established hobbies include cooking, reading and walking.

Lives in a house on site and is soon to be joined by Arlo, a black Labrador puppy. Will anybody's shoes be safe?

## Entrance

Non-selective – first come, first served. Interview and tour for family and child. Online options with gentle assessments if not able to travel. A level of English is required to access curriculum but support on hand to bring to speed if necessary. Quick to offer places and provide interim support. Entry to pre-prep The Lodge (boys and girls) at 3+; almost all girls move up to the prep, with a third class for newcomers in year 3. Other main entry point is year 7 but both day and boarding pupils can join all the way through (space permitting). Scholarships (academic, art, sport, music. and all-rounder) awarded for exceptional talent at entry to year 7

## Exit

About a third leave at 11 for Wycombe Abbey or local grammars. At 13 they disperse widely to top day and boarding schools, eg Heathfield, Wellington College, Stowe, Headington, Pipers Corner, Oundle St George's Ascot, St Edward's Oxford, Haileybury, Bradfield College, Cranleigh, Great Marlow, Claires Court, St Mary's Ascot, Marlborough College, Shrewsbury School, Queen Anne's Caversham, Holyport College, Oratory School and Cheltenham Ladies' College. A long list of scholarships and exhibitions awarded at next destinations – 21 in 2023.

## Our view

Tucked back from the road, atop a hill, Godstowe enjoys panoramic views over High Wycombe. Now England's only girls' boarding prep school, tradition is in the (beautiful red) brickwork. Large Victorian main building, with original features and flourishing Virginia creeper, was purpose built in 1900 when school first opened. It's often claimed that Godstowe, with its history and turreted boarding house, may have been the inspiration for Enid Blyton's Malory Towers.

The Lodge (pre-prep) is nestled behind in the school's 12 acres of land, alongside nursery and reception buildings. At this stage girls are joined by a handful of boys (mostly siblings) who move on at 7, often to Caldicott and, increasingly, Davenies.

Reception atrium is large and light filled. Struck by phenomenal artwork, we saw clay sculptures of the Queen (year 5) and colourful blooming flowers inspired by Georgia O'Keefe (year 6). The grand annual art exhibition, where every child displays work for parents and guests, was imminent and the creative buzz was palpable.

Although reception pupils were away on a trip to Oxford's botanical gardens (head eager for more off-site learning), we saw colourful playgrounds, modern classrooms and the spacious Little Godstowe nursery with contented children at play. In the Lodge, opposite, we watched year 2 pupils grapple with tricky fractions with a visual cutting and sticking task taught by well-loved head of pre-prep with whom our pupil guides recollected their halcyon younger days. Classes are a maximum of 18, currently 16 in each. Setting introduced first in maths from year 3 and then in all academic subjects from year 6. Girls stay in form rooms for most lessons in years 3 and 4, after which they start to move around the school for individual subjects.

Two dedicated SEN staff work flexibly across all year groups (just under six per cent receive extra help). Staff given regular training for range of SEN including autism, dyslexia, dyscalculia. EAL teachers, mostly for international students, provide specific timetabled support. Girls' needs assessed upon entry and tailored to meet their specific requirements. One parent felt it was the 'right support and the right amount'. Extension groups for the most able, including a Carnegie book club for extra competition, stretch and challenge.

STEAM comes high on head's agenda. Science taught in separate biology, physics and chemistry lessons from year 4 and this is how they're assessed at CE. We chatted to a class of year 8 students who'd made different types of salt, copper sulphide being the favourite for its bright blue crystals. Bunsen burner licence given in year 5 once you've shown due understanding of process and precaution. Science is both hands-on and on your feet. One pupil told us, 'It's practical, fun and memorable.' Girls enjoy success in Bebras, the national

computing competition and ICT considered an important part of curriculum.

French taught from reception, Latin from year 6 (with Latin and Spanish as options from year 7). In DT a state-of-the-art food technology centre was opened in 2017 by the great Mary Berry (another former parent) and is used to teach girls practical cooking but also jazzier fare. One pupil told us her sister made a firework cake for a bake-off style competition.

While majority stay to 13, a third or so leave at the end of year 6 and there's no teaching time for 11 plus (there are computer programs to practise tests). One parent said, 'More could be done for those leaving at 11. The school makes it clear they want them to 13, but some outgrow the Godstowe bubble sooner.' Another agreed: 'While it can make sense for the child and family, leaving can be hard as girls feel they're missing out on well-promoted fun in years 7 and 8.'

Godstowe has the sports hall of dreams (words we thought we'd never say). Opened by Gabby Logan (a former parent), the multi-million-pound masterpiece has soaring ceilings, vast sky-blue floors, an extendable dance studio, exercise spaces and viewing gallery. Everyone has their own changing and storage area. Netball's the main sport but hockey popular, as is lacrosse where girls start with soft plastic balls and nets. Godstowe is one of the very few schools in the country to offer lacrosse at prep level, culminating in popular USA Lacrosse tour for years 7 and 8. One girl, recently returned, told us, 'We kept to our years to begin with but by the end, everyone was one big friendship group.' There's also football and cricket as well as athletics on the fields. A 25m competition swimming pool was opened in 2019 by Rebecca Adlington (who better?). Swimming is from reception and girls compete to a high level. A parent told us all girls are given opportunity to represent school at sport. As to which team (A-D), 'It's meritocratic. Movement is possible.'

A creative cauldron, JK Theatre, with full sound and lighting, was being converted into art gallery/catwalk for the annual exhibition and fashion show. Year 7 and 8 girls had made clothes from recycled denim and were about to model their creations. Although much to do, no fraying nerves and egos on display, just organised teamwork. Head of art (also head of cross country) considered heroic. We watched year 4 girls sketching flowers with precocious skill; they'd also researched, sketched, clay modelled and painted the most beautiful exotic birds, each one unique, for the show. There is a kiln in the art department as well as a large, light art room bursting with artwork which is 'a consistently phenomenal standard', one parent told us. In micro-electronical engineering girls had made scaled down vintage fairground rides with moving parts. There's a new 3D printer for design and a dedicated sewing room.

In drama, year 5 do a whole year group production. Year 7 put on outdoor performances; Macbeth was one and our pupil guide reeled off the Macduff's closing lines and Macbeth's 'tomorrow and tomorrow' monologue for us: 'I had a go at both roles and know them by heart.' Year 8 do 'a play in a week', this year an ABBA-themed musical about a game show. Regular smaller productions for lower years.

Fifteen well-equipped music studies were over 300 girls learn instruments, often more than one. One pupil told us that she'd wanted to play the drums but there wasn't a teacher. Her

parents requested and school found one. She loves to play (loudly): 'Sometimes, I think my parents regret asking,' she laughs. Recital hall with gallery for concerts and other performances.

A list of 90 after school activities range from LAMDA, ballet and pottery to yoga, chess and Mandarin.

Wraparound care good for day students as you might expect from a boarding school. Early drop-off with breakfast (7.30am) and clubs or prep available until 6.30pm. Drop off on the road is staggered and waiting teachers chaperone pupils safely into school. At pick up, parking can more of a bun fight, we're told. There are three bus routes from a 20-mile radius but school assures they'd add to this list if needed.

Uniform is a light red and white striped blouse, sensible knee length matching skirt, boater and smart blazer for summer. Winter is a grey wool skirt, red pullover and a long red wool cape. One parent thought it 'expensive but well made', advising to 'buy well'. Another felt uniform was 'okay, but a bit outdated. The summer cotton is thin and a bit see-through while the cape is heavy and impractical – my daughter only wears it for the carol concert.' Uniform shop, new and secondhand, on site.

Polite and enthusiastic pupils have the 'get stuck in' approach. The head agrees: 'Being all girls they don't have the same inhibitions and just go for it.' Behaviour is very good and rare exceptions result in LOFT (loss of free time, aka detentions). Pupils speak courteously to adults and each other and though one girl curtsied on introduction, most now choose to shake hands instead.

Active PTA fundraises and organises socials. In general, parents are a happy cohort, relaxed and confident in the long-standing reputation and smooth running of school. One told us, 'You know your daughter is in the best place and will get to the right next school for them.' The Godstowe Diploma prepares older girls for life skills such as charity work, time and finance management, negotiation etc. Head says, 'We want them to be rounded community builders.'

## Boarders

From year 3. Full-time boarding is 80 per cent international. Flexi is a popular taster for senior school and school can often accommodate requests for ad hoc and last-minute stays. 'If we can do it, we will,' head says. According to parents, boarding is 'homey, nurturing and consistent'. Girls move around termly to allow for new friendships and dorms are clean and neutral (sleeping between four and eight). Large, attractive common rooms and dining rooms for communal eating. All boarding houses have large gardens with play equipment. Non-teaching boarding staff give full attention to pastoral care. No phone policy but old Nokias provided for calls home and girls can use tablets to Facetime on Sundays. Weekend activities include bowling, skating, theatre, cinema etc. 'I was homesick at first,' one international boarder told us, 'but was kept busy and soon settled.'

## Money matters

Fees towards lower end of top third nationally. Means-tested bursaries available and special consideration for talents that could be particularly nurtured at Godstowe. Scholarships awarded at year 7. For more details, contact the bursar.

### **The last word**

A model and front runner for all-girls boarding prep education. Godstowe girls are go-getters: confident, courageous and community minded. A traditional 'roll your sleeves up' ethos goes hand in hand with nurturing care and prepares happy, creative girls with excellent standards across the board.