



PORT·REGIS

The Good Schools Guide 2022

In the spring term we welcomed Good Schools Guide researcher, Jane Thomas to Port Regis. Following a thorough appraisal, including lengthy interviews with staff and parents, we are delighted to share her review of the school.

“Port Regis offers its lucky pupils an outstanding education in a glorious setting with plenty of joy along the way.”

Headmaster

Since January 2021, Titus Mills, who has set about rebranding Port Regis with verve and vision. Authentic, charming and a great communicator, Mr Mills has won over parents, staff and pupils alike with his plans to revitalise this country prep. Not short on ambition, he appears just the man for the job. His career to date is impressive and interestingly diverse, including posts as deputy head at a primary school in Lambeth and two years teaching in Uganda. This is his fourth headship. He's already made his mark at Walhampton, The Paragon in Bath, St George's International School in Rome and St Mark's in Kennington. Educated at Eton, he studied history of art at UEA, where he met wife Jemima, followed by a PGCE at Oxford. The couple make a charismatic team and although it's early days, we could see that the combination of Mr Mills' dynamism and his wife's artistic flair has brought colour, creativity, and fresh energy to Port Regis. Their three sons, one at Edinburgh University, one at Canford and the youngest still at Walhampton, together with two fox red labradors, are very much part of the school community.



Mr Mills has a great sense of fun and believes the 'best schools should be full of joy'. We spotted him climbing a tree with a prospective pupil to whom he was giving a tour – a Good Schools Guide first!

Entrance

Dorset is a hotspot for metropolitan relocators with the recent influx of Londoners having resulted in the highest new pupil numbers in a decade. In addition, children join from local primary schools. Parents from all walks of life are welcomed heartily and very much encouraged to spend time together at the school. Pupils join throughout the nursery and pre-prep stages. Years 3, 5 and 7 popular entry points. Pre-prep is non-selective with no assessment required for progression to main school. Assessment for prep school includes verbal and non-verbal reasoning tests and report from previous school alongside an informal chat with the head. Just over 80 per cent of pupils live within half an hour of the school with the main catchment being families within a one-hour radius. The number of international pupils looks set to return to its usual 20 per cent from a covid lull of 12 per cent.

Exit

Most stay on until age 13 and thence to a wide range of co-ed, single sex, boarding and day schools. Local destinations include Bryanston, Marlborough, both Sherborne schools, Canford, King's Bruton and Clayesmore. Harrow, Winchester, Oundle and Charterhouse also popular. Senior schools report Port Regians are extremely well prepared for the next stage of their education as well as being very polite and happy in themselves. In 2021, year 8 pupils achieved a record 39 prizes /scholarships (half of the year group).

Our view

Founded in 1881 in London, the school upped sticks to the Dorset countryside in 1947 after brief stays in Kent and Hertfordshire, basing itself at Motcombe House, a Victorian mansion near Shaftesbury. Took the name Port Regis in 1921, it means 'gate of the king' and comes from an ancient arch, built to commemorate Charles II, in the grounds of one of its previous locations. Started taking girls back in 1976 but a reputation for being rather alpha male lingered. It's now comfortably co-ed with recent appointments of women to the senior leadership team and renaming of two houses to include female role models Edith Cavell and Marie Curie bearing this out.

With roaring log fires and quirky artwork produced by pupils (and a large hall worthy of a boutique hotel) the mansion forms the epicentre of the school's stunning 150-acre campus, situated just a couple of miles from Shaftesbury. This historic town was immortalised (as 'Shaston') in Thomas Hardy's Wessex novels and its cobbled street, Gold Hill, featured in the iconic Hovis advert. It's also on a direct line to London (just under two hours) and has good airport links. The impressive architecture of the school's older buildings is complemented by modern, well-designed additions. Teaching spaces are remarkably light and airy with splashes of colour everywhere and even several well-appointed dog cages. An adorable spaniel puppy made our visit to the year 4 classroom particularly enjoyable - teachers encouraged to bring pets to school. Dogs are a hallmark of the community here and 'very popular with boarders'.



The pre-prep is located adjacent to the main school in the prettily decorated former coach house and stables. The atmosphere is one of overriding calm and peaceful activity. Children enjoy their surroundings, complete with a little shepherd's hut to encourage imaginative play and outdoor learning. Staff we met were gentle yet enthusiastic about giving pupils the best possible start to their education.

'This is what we hoped education would be' extols one parent 'a nod to tradition coupled with forward-thinking innovation.' The school's old-fashioned approach to manners and setting of clear boundaries marries with a very on-trend 'Green Vision' and global ethos. 'Pupils open doors and are very considerate, behavioural issues are rare'. 'It's all

about the children, with the school ambitious for its pupils, not for itself.' Staff are 'very relaxed and enthusiastic,' intent on cultivating the discipline of study coupled with a delight in learning.

This is not a hot house, rather a community where pupils are encouraged to 'have a go' to discover and nurture potential. Nevertheless, academic results are impressive, and pupils enjoy doing well. Achievements in the arts, sport, and music are also outstanding. Making the most of the 'mind blowing facilities' on offer at the same time as being aware of the world beyond, is part of what Port Regis is about, but above all it is about ensuring that children remain children and really enjoy their prep school years.'

Setting takes place from year 5 (year 4 for maths) with scholarship sets in years 7 and 8. Maximum class size of 15. English and maths are a particular focus with cross curricular teaching a feature. Emphasis on developing a love of reading is central to the school's curriculum with 'enforced reading' (much nicer than it sounds) in the school's cosy library led by the former head of English who is now the librarian. Learning languages is seen as vital to thriving in an increasingly multicultural and international age.



All pupils study French or Spanish, with Italian, Japanese, Mandarin and German outside the main curriculum, Latin from year 6 and an ancient Greek club. Overseas pupils from over a dozen countries also reinforce the focus on diversity and inclusivity and the mission to cultivate global citizens. After a recent curriculum review, most academic study now takes place during the week with a new enrichment programme on Saturday mornings to encourage curriculum breadth, incorporating the likes of forest school, lessons in managing money and team building. Saturday school from year 4 onwards, optional for year 3.

Pupils have a form tutor till the end of year 6, then a chance to choose their own tutor for years 7 and 8. The SEN department is located centrally and has a team of six, committed to learning support and inclusivity. Around 15 per cent of pupils receive individual support for e.g. mild/moderate dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, ASD or language and communication needs. Teaching assistants available in classroom for extra support. EAL also offered.

Port Regis was once regarded as a school which suited outgoing, confident children but where children of middle ability ran the risk of drifting. This has changed and the school is now very aware of the need to motivate children of all abilities to develop to their full potential.



Top notch sports facilities include a nine-hole golf course, rifle range, heated swimming pool and impressive indoor complex housing a national centre for junior gymnastics. Fostering a love of the outdoors is a big thing here and there is a real 'give it a go' approach. Pupil numbers ensure teams can be fielded for all major sports. Boys play rugby, football, hockey and cricket and girls enjoy football and cricket as well as hockey, netball, rounders and tennis. 'There really is something for every child here'.

Outstanding art, DT and ceramics facilities which would be the envy of some senior schools, are housed in light and airy Cunningham Hall. From the talking parrot in the art block to truly inspirational ceramics, art and 3-D design, design is used to promote creativity as well as problem solving skills. Above all, having fun is the order of the day and the number of art scholarships achieved endorses this approach.



Purpose-built Farrington Music School is home to a very buzzy department, encompassing a 132-seat recital hall, music technology suite and 17 teaching rooms. Every 7-year-old starts with the recorder and learns how to read music. Such is the school's remarkable commitment to music, all 8-year-olds are taught to play the viola, with keyboard skills introduced at age 9. Wind, brass and string ensembles, school orchestra, senior and junior choirs as well as samba and swing bands feature in regular concerts. Lots of drama too, with the leavers' show and end of year plays in the school's 200-seat theatre particular highlights. Debating is also popular with children encouraged to discuss issues of the day, playing to the school's outward looking ethos.

After school activities include the mysterious and delightful sounding 'chicken whispering', campfire cooking and nature watch. Strolling through the school's recently rewilded grounds, surrounded by bantams and sheep, treehouses, an outdoor theatre and central lake, it's hard to imagine a more rarefied setting. A vast array of 70 more traditional activities, from beekeeping and coding to backgammon and aerobics, also offered.



'Inspirational assemblies' delivered by the head twice a week are used to communicate 'strong spiritual, social and moral values'. 'The Dalai Lama is quoted' in a school where community and a sense of belonging are important, as is the school's mission to develop a sense of wonder at the natural world as well as a responsibility to preserve it. Parents are invited to attend Saturday assembly followed by lunch. The well-structured journey through the school prepares pupils well for roles of responsibility in year 8 and for life beyond Port Regis. There's a head boy and head girl, a team of prefects from all areas of the school, plus dorm captains for boarders. The school council is well supported with all year groups represented. No electronic devices or mobile phones in school (boarders able to call home each night or make video calls when necessary).



School food receives a big tick. The Spanish themed lunch on the day of our visit was visually impressive, varied, and tasted outstanding, with tapas options any fine eatery would have been proud of. Healthy eating promoted.

Notable alumni include the abstract painter Adrian Heath, former Press Council chair Sir Louis Blom-Cooper, fashion designer Jasper Conran, singer/songwriter Bo Brudenell-Bruce, Olympic medallist horsewoman Zara Phillips and historian Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy.

Boarders

Almost two thirds of pupils do some form of boarding, whether full, flexi or occasional nights. Boarding facilities described by a parent as 'superior to that offered by many senior schools, the children really are spoilt.' Weekly boarding is more popular than full boarding and many take up the 'local boarding' package of two nights a week (included in the fees for year 3). Younger boarders are mainly from military or expat families with more boarders from year 6 onwards. By year 8 most board at least weekly. Experience days are held to introduce pupils to boarding. The houses are stunning, with real attention to detail - soft colours and cosy sofas, as well as disco lights, adorning these home-from-home spaces. Two house parents, a house mother and gappies in each house. We loved the bohemian 'break out' caravan that sits just outside one of the girls' houses. Boys enjoy time in their games room decorated with real surf boards. In senior houses dorms are divided into individual 'cubies' which allow boarders to create their own spaces at the same time as being part of a larger community, each with their own dorm captain. The old-fashioned ritual of weekly letter writing is preserved.



The last word

Titus Mills is set to take an already thriving school to a new level. With the backing of excellent staff and forward-thinking teaching, Port Regis is bursting with happy creativity, providing a blend of all that is good about a traditional English prep school education combined with the best of modern global thinking. A broader demographic, together with plans to introduce full bursaries, demonstrates a commitment to widening access. Port Regis offers its lucky pupils an outstanding education in a glorious setting with plenty of joy along the way.

