



PORT · REGIS

Muddy Stiletto's Review 2024

This co-ed day and boarding school for 2 to 13 year olds is one of the great prep schools, with outstanding facilities and results – and lots of fun.



WHAT, WHERE?

Port Regis is a co-ed, day and boarding prep school for children aged 2 to 13 in the heart of the 150-acre Motcombe Park on the Dorset/Wiltshire borders, with Shaftesbury and Gillingham within throwing distance, and Salisbury not much further. The main house, at the heart of the school, was built in 1894 for aristo Richard Grosvenor and the school – founded in 1881 in London – made it their home post-war after moving via Broadstairs and St Albans, following a short jaunt camping out at in a wing at Bryanston School, where they had been evacuated. Girls were welcomed into the fold in 1976.

There are 300 pupils, around 70% in the Prep School board, either full or local (two nights a week, which is included in the day fees in Lower School – very handy). Culturally, it's a mix, with some pupils coming from within 10 miles, others from London and around 15–20% from overseas.

You'll need to get your head around the nomenclature: Year 3 is F Form, Year 4 is E Form, Year 5 is D Form, all the way up to Year 8 as A Form. Got it? Let's go.

FACILITIES

The Mansion lies at the heart of the school, with 360-degree views over immaculate lawns with willow deer sculptures 'grazing' alongside the long drive, walled gardens, woods – even a 9-hole golf course.



This is where the Head and admin staff hang out, and your first port of call if you're visiting the school. Even though it's pretty grand (enormous rooms, Italian plaster work, polished wood-panelled walls, floor to – very high – ceiling windows), the Mansion's not at all stuffy, with pupils' colourful artworks on display and a sense of fun in the air.



The impressive wood-panelled Old Assembly Hall is used for parents' meetings, open days and Christmas carols, as well as street dancing and fencing clubs; it's even an indoor scooting venue on rainy days. A recent promenade performance of Macbeth, with parents watching from the main staircase must have been incredibly atmospheric.

The simply stunning library – headed up by a former Head of English – has masses of books, bean bags and views out across the parkland.

A mix of traditional and striking contemporary buildings are dotted around the extensive – gorgeous – campus with a large lake, winding pathways, climbing frames, lawns and lots of trees, creating a lovely villagey atmos.

The Lower School (F & E Forms /Years 3 & 4) classrooms, adjacent to the Mansion, have their own playground

and Middle School (D & C Forms/Years 5 & 6) in Centenary Hall has its own tree house, and is where the whole school meets for assemblies. The nearby walled Rose Garden is a wonderful place for outdoor learning, with an outdoor stage and with lots of space to run around.

The Upward Academic Centre for B & A Forms /Years 7 & 8, is a light-filled modern building which feels much more like a senior school than a prep. There's a lively common room with table footie and poetry wall, a quiet Reading Room for down time, revision and the like, and the Upward 'Cafe which serves up hot choc and breakfast once a week. It's a buzzy place, with lots of activities going on – quizzes, gingerbread house making, self-care



sessions.... practice interviews for senior schools. Independence is encouraged as pupils move around for lessons and return to tutor groups for registration, which could be in any part of the school.



The Cunningham Centre has ceramics, art, tech and DT rooms the likes of which I've rarely seen outside of a senior school. The block is so huge you could get lost in it and the equipment, including laser cutter, 3D printer and kilns, help the children produce creative works that look positively professional. They even do raku firing in ceramics (if you haven't been watching The Great Pottery Throw Down, it's a Japanese technique involving taking ceramics from the kiln when they are glowing hot and putting them into straw, where they catch fire – eek!). They're about to introduce textiles.



F Form/Year 3 upwards have creative lessons (plus hobbies) each week covering everything from up-cycling to stripping engines, and the work undertaken here is absolutely equal to successes in the classroom or on the sports field.

The Farrington Music School not only has classrooms, individual practice rooms, music tech room and a recording studio but also a recital hall with grand piano, professional-level lighting box – and a vast glass wall with brilliant views across the lake.



About a third of the pupils play an instrument: Year 2 learn the recorder; F Form/Year 3 the violin; E Form/Year 4 the ‘toot’ mini flute. There are orchestras, samba bands, recorder groups, string groups and choirs galore, and a newly formed ‘boys choir’ is proving popular.

Everyone eats their meals in a new and stunning glass-fronted dining room with views over the lawns. It’s the best I’ve ever eaten in a school, with dishes like wild mushroom and blue cheese risotto, caesar salad, rare roast beef and smoked salmon on the menu (I kid you not). Pupils’ preferences are always catered for, whether that’s vegan, gluten-free – whatever. Parents can stop by for a coffee after drop off – and admire the wall of trophies, awarded not just for the usual sports and academic achievement but also for good manners and tolerance.



SPORTS

Sports facilities here are whopping. There are the obvious rugby, football cricket (for girls and boys) and astro pitches but they have two (two!) sports halls – Queen’s and Jowett’s – with a full-sized indoor pool so impressive that it is open to the public at certain times, gymnasium and a climbing wall.

There’s training for the swim squad three times a week and lots of records being broken at swimming galas this year. Every child takes part in competitive matches and there are additional opportunities, such as running clubs and hobbies (boxing, squash, basketball, you name it..), for those who are keen. There are plenty of cross-country routes through woodland and over streams, an off-road bicycle track, an assault course, a skateboard ramp and loads of space to generally get down and dirty in. Oh, and did I mention the golf course?



PRE-PREP & NURSERY

The Pre-Prep – Pre-School, Reception and Years 1 and 2 – is located in the estate’s former stables, set around a courtyard with a well-equipped playground. A new Cottage Nursery catering exclusively for two year-olds in a (you guessed it) cottage next door, has a home-from-home environment, dedicated sleeping space and age-specific resources and equipment.

In the Pre-School, some areas are colourful; others are more neutral, a calm corner has twinkly lights, blankets, cushions and sofa, and there’s a dedicated library area with bean bags. Learning is through play and very child-oriented, yet work often feeds into whole-school projects, like the National Portrait Gallery’s ‘Take One Picture’ exhibition.

In Reception, they use Read, Write Inc Phonics and White Rose Maths. There are specialist teachers for PE, gym, dance, music, drama and languages, and outdoor learning every day, often in the Rose Garden or Forest School.

They take a great deal of care in preparing children for the transition up to the Prep, both formally and informally; 'Pre-Prep Pals' (B & A Forms/Years 7 & 8 pupils) volunteer each week to help with reading, the Directors of Sports and Music take some lessons and there's storytelling with the Head.

You don't have to be a Port Regis parent to attend a whole host of Parent and Toddler Groups.

Coming soon: a brand new adventure playground.

ACADEMICS

The Prep is divided into three sections – Upper, Middle and Lower – with a head for each, so pastoral care is strong. Prospective pupils, apart from those coming from Pre-Prep, will sit an entry assessment but this is more to establish that they will enjoy life here rather than selecting based on ability.

English, maths and science are taught by specialist teachers from D Form/Year 5. Classics is strong, with two specialist teachers. Modern languages include Mandarin, Italian, German and Japanese as well as French and Spanish.

The school is proud of their mixture of abilities and academics are strong; candidates tend to fly into their first choice senior school, with an outstanding number of A* and A grades in their CE papers. In 2023, pupils were awarded a total of over 27 scholarships to their future schools, including academic, sport, music, art, design and technology and performing arts. The most popular destination schools include Bryanston, Canford, King's Bruton, Winchester, Harrow, Marlborough and the Sherborne schools.

PASTORAL

In the Lower School, the class teacher takes on the traditional tutor role, and in Middle School, children are put into tutor groups of 10-15. Senior pupils are in mixed tutor groups (B and A Forms/Years 7 and 8) with their own tutor but all staff are pastorally 'savvy' and

know all the kids really well. Pupils are encouraged to have friends across the year groups, creating a tight-knit community.

BOARDING



While Port Regis school offers local boarding and day-only options, it has the feel of a full boarding school, with the majority of children choosing to board by their final year. There are three houses: Mansion for girls and boys aged 7–11; Grosvenor for girls 11–13 and Prichard for boys 11–13.

House mothers create a relaxed, homely atmosphere. The dorms are cosy and lived-in, huge bright rooms with high ceilings. Loved the girls' rooms in Grosvenor, which are cleverly designed with sliding doors to create private cubicles within an open dorm.

There are funky phone boxes to call from in the evenings, common rooms with bean bags and pool tables and table football galore – a boarder roller skating down the halls wouldn't look out of place – and possibly the biggest sofa in Dorset.



There are a good chunk of Forces' families, overseas boarders from more than a dozen countries, including Japan, Nigeria and Spain and enough children from London (as well as more locally – three quarters of children live within 10 miles but lots still board) to make for a proper sense of boarding with a full schedule of weekend and evening activities. Recent Sunday trips include outings to Hollywood Bowl, the Fleet Air Arm Museum and Go Ape as well as walks to Motcombe village and in-house games.

HEADTEACHER

Titus Mills has been Head since 2021. An Old Etonian who's worked in a state primary in Lambeth, a school in Uganda as well as independent Walhampton Prep in Hampshire, has revitalised what he described as a very good but rather traditional school. He's a dynamic, charismatic man who prefers to be striding around rather than sitting behind his desk.



As he walks, he talks about the school's excellent teaching, depth of learning and ambition (but not hot-housing) and its amazing 'kit' but where he gets really passionate is in his belief that a school should be a joyful place (the word 'joy' pops up a lot). He believes that a school should be a place where children can be younger for longer, where they can learn the discipline of study and the joy of learning and understand that they don't have to be perfect to be amazing. The school's values are: generosity, endeavour, joy, courage, creativity (you see this all over the school). Values Ambassadors are pupils in B & A Forms/Years 7 & 8 who've modelled all of these values. The biggest trophy he gives out is for good manners.

Arnhem is another passion; he organises annual trips with parents and pupils, pupils research the history and make connections with veterans and their relatives.

His wife Jemima is very involved with daily life of the school, especially with community and creative projects. I met her over lunch; she's lovely and clearly – like him – has a great relationship with the pupils.

REPORTS

In the latest report from the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI), equivalent to Ofsted in the state sector, the quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements, and personal development was declared 'excellent'. You can see the full ISI report [here](#).

WHAT ELSE?

Forest School is taken seriously, with proper lessons outside from Pre-Prep to Year 4 and outdoor hobbies for older pupils.

A new and innovative STEAM centre is in the pipeline. With art, design and tech in the current Cunningham Centre already seriously impressive, with pupils winning multiple scholarships, the future looks even more exciting.



There's a late start on Saturdays (9.30 am) followed by two lessons for From D Form/Year 5+ and the school's enrichment programme PR Plus. It's an eclectic range of activities: recently, Old Port Regian Sebastian Conran talked to senior pupils about his journey through design, and there was a careers talk about becoming a test pilot by a parent (who flew in in an AW109E VIP helicopter, of course). Parents with specialist knowledge are often involved, from delivering cheese-making sessions and film-making masterclasses to sport and science of nutrition courses. PR Plus is optional for Lower School pupils (F & E Forms/Years 3 and 4), though most attend. Well you would, wouldn't you?

There's literally something for everyone on their Hobbies programme, with around 70 different activities from boxing and ceramics to street dance, Warhammer and rookie lifeguards.

The Learning Support department is situated in the heart of the school and spreads out in colourful sofas and work spaces where pupils have one-to-one as well as small group sessions. There's strong support for a wide range of children with learning needs.

Everyone's committed to the school's Green Vision initiatives with pupils involved with recycling, composting and re-wilding projects. The school aims to reaching net zero by 2030 by trebling their solar power capacity, installing battery storage and new ground source heat pumps.

QUIRKS & BOASTY BITS

The biggie here is the breadth that is on offer. I don't mean just the physical facilities, although it is lovely to cross a bridge over a pond to get to the Upper School building, but the benefit of what is on offer combined with the attitude at Port Regis means that, whether academic, musical, sporty or an interest in reconfiguring NASA software, whatever each child is good at, the school will find it. Children are encouraged to try their hand at anything and everything – and above all, enjoy themselves.



The space here means that the classrooms and common rooms enjoy a bright, relaxed feel and outside bikes, scooter, roller blades – one pupil has a unicycle – are welcome.

Port Regis won the BSA ‘Stephen Winkley Award’ for one of its houseparents, Tom Murray. It was also the only standalone prep school in the country to be shortlisted for ‘Boarding School of the Year’ at the Tes Awards.

They love their animals. A new enclosure houses two goats called Pepper and Splash. Port Regis honey comes from the school’s own beehives and there’s a bird box with a camera in it behind the Ecology Hut, which provides hours of fun for twitchers. Pupils spend time with guinea pigs, school dogs, and a rabbit called Hatter in Pets Corner. A ‘Guinea Pig Olympics’ in the senior girls’ boarding house sounds hilarious. Lower School pupils brought their pets – tortoises, stick insects, a family of worms and even a pony – into school for a special assembly last year, and there is a much-loved annual Dog Show, featuring a host of ‘school’ dogs in the lineup.

WRAPAROUND CARE

Good. The nursery runs from age 2 and once children hit the Prep School, the hours are long but they sure do manage to pack a lot in. Breakfast club is available in Pre-Prep from 7.30am.

FEES

Nursery, £32 morning or afternoon, £64 per day; Pre-Prep (Reception to Year 2) £3,530 per term; F Form/Year 3, day pupils £6,610, E–A Forms/Years 4–8 day pupils £8,270 per term. Full boarding £11, 125 per term for Forms /Years 3-8. Day fees include two days boarding a week for Lower School pupils.



WORD ON THE GROUND

E Form/Year 4 pupils I met said their favourite things about the school were 'nature' and 'pets'; they love the outdoor learning, ceramics, lunch – and breakfasts! Form/Year 8s talked about the school's 'special touches'.

Parents talk about the caring community, the vast breadth of opportunity and the infectious energy in the school. The facilities are 'second to none', levels of academia are high, with support and challenges for all abilities. They say kindness is a key tenet of life of Port Regis, with staff keeping a close eye on behaviour, with children taking responsibility for other's welfare and wellbeing too. They value the mix of young and more mature, fresh blood and the very experienced staff and the Head is 'exceptional'. Of course, they rave over the food!

THE MUDDY VERDICT

Good for: Those seeking adventure as well as a rigorous academic education. Parents who want their kids to enjoy their childhood for as long as possible and like the idea of a modern Swallows and Amazons schooling with lots of outdoor fun. Families looking for a proper boarding school (albeit one who listens to parents and adapts) which sets children up well for senior school.

Not for: Maybe not for anyone dead set against boarding, as so much of the fun happens in the dorms, especially in the final years.

Dare to disagree? Go and visit yourself on an Open Morning, the next ones are Pre-Prep, Fri 10 May and Prep Sat 11 May 2024. To book a place or to arrange a private tour, please contact the Head of Admissions on admissions@portregis.com or 01747 857914.

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