

What The Good Schools Guide says

Headmistress

Since 2012, Naomi Bartholomew MA BEd Cantab (30s) who was educated at Portsmouth High School and went on to read English and education at Homerton College, Cambridge. She spent two years in south west China with the VSO, then taught in state and independent primary schools. Five years as head of English at Yateley Manor was followed by the deputy headship at St Catherine's in 2009. Miss Bartholomew's appointment to the headship was as much as anything by public acclamation. 'She is very calm, clever and warm.' Miss Bartholomew has a lovely smiley relationship with both girls and staff. Not remotely a dragon – more of a gentle but firm and very professional fairy princess.

Entrance

Around 50 applicants for 32 places at 4+ and immensely worthwhile nabbing one of them if you can. Tots come in for a morning of fun and observation in groups – heavy staff:tot ratio to allow for lots of encouragement and stimulation – and discreet assessment. They look for children who are 'curious, engaged and absorbed in what they are doing'. Generally around four spaces in year 1, year 3 and year 5 – similar approach plus testing in English, maths and verbal reasoning with 'an emphasis on show us what you can do'. 'We're a pacey school – we look for girls who will thrive here'.

Exit

Most, 75 per cent, go to the St Cat's senior school, some to board at other top schools (some on scholarships) or to other local schools. Lots of strong, local competition in the area.

Our view

Over the road from the senior school, the pre-prep and prep have separate buildings but share much including many senior school facilities – a real plus.

Pre-prep is delightful – also has its own outside space. Peaceful 'cottage garden'. Charming little library, each classroom is chocker with interesting displays and stimuli but all is orderly and reassuring. Senses Den in each room – very exciting. Lovely artwork – we loved the pasta palaces and the various penguin habitats. Top-notch loos with Mickey Mouse taps. No more than 16 to a class in reception and the children we saw were focused, happy and busy. Emphasis on being a 'thinking school' inculcates valuable strategies and habits.

Prep likewise stimulating and orderly. The science lab has been recently refurbished, arranged into four colourful learning 'pods'. There are specialist teachers for most subjects including French; some setting in maths.

Residential trips for all years; sensible mixing up of friendship groups, good library and IT room. Lively art – and years 5 and 6 use the senior school for DT – we enjoyed the really scary papier mâché masks. Emphasis on using the internet and other IT with discernment and discrimination rather than as an end in itself. Good learning support – 'academic mentoring' here – lots of monitoring, working with parents and use of two support teachers for as and when.

Parents are universally grateful that their girls are here. 'They pace it beautifully,' one told us. 'Eight year-old girls behave like 8 year-olds – they are not pushed to be older than they are.' 'Everyone is busy but calm – there are lots of clubs and nice quirky things.' 'The teachers are warm, friendly and approachable. They don't overdo assessment – they just tell you whether they're in the top, middle or lowest third in a subject'. Music is highly praised.

Some sense that more drama productions would be welcome and the hope is that the stimulus given to the subject in the senior school will filter down. Strong sense of an equitable and kind community.

'They don't favour the bright ones – my two very different girls feel equally welcome and valued.'
'Every single child gets a well-thought-out prize at prize giving – for best results or for kindness:
everyone walks out feeling valued for what they are.'