

Amesbury

What The Good Schools Guide says

Jon Whybrow

Since November 2020, Jon Whybrow (60s). After a short-service commission in the Royal Marines, pursued a teaching career beginning down the road in Farnham at Edgeborough. Some 20 years' experience of headship across a variety of preps followed, including Beachborough School in Bucks and most recently five years at Cheltenham College Prep.

From his comfortable office, over a crackling fire (lit every morning by school cleaner Cath, 82) he tells us he can't wait for our chat to be over. 'I make a deliberate effort to get out of here and I'm itching to get on the field to watch this afternoon's matches,' he explains. A PE teacher by trade, and in full kit during our visit, he insists, 'I'm absolutely not a "jock". 'I'll sing and perform wherever I can too'.

Says he is 'growing old badly' after a failed attempt at retirement - Amesbury, it turns out, has given him a new lease of life. One parent suggests the school needs a younger, more dynamic leader next, but 'for now, he has swooped in and made everyone happy again'. He insists he's in it for the long haul.

Recruited to the school after a couple of years under rather less experienced leadership, parents are unanimous in their praise claiming he has 'steadied the ship'. He says he has restored the school's confidence and established traditional management structures so that 'if I were to go under a bus, the school would be ok'. Staff describe him as 'a strong leader with a clear vision for the school'. We agree. He's authoritative but benevolent and could be termed a progressive traditionalist. Each evening during lockdown he read stories to the younger children and held quizzes for the elders. Now he produces regular HED talks for parents. He is plugged into current issues from the environment ('I don't glue myself to roads, but we do our bit') to gender equalities; his daughter is a professional cricketer, and he abhors the 'rugby culture that can pervade some senior schools to the detriment of girls'.

Parents like how he makes education relevant. He is 'just what Amesbury needed', 'a straight down the line old-school head'. He doesn't mince his words and has a firm view of the role of education; refers to PSHE as 'parents should have explained' and pupils tell us, 'he likes a "good morning" when we walk past'. A big believer in 'customer service' - staff have been instructed to respond to parental queries promptly within 24 hours. In return there is a post 6pm and weekend email blackout.

The strategy for Amesbury is to remain 'unashamedly and fiercely independent, but not like Woolworths...' Furious that one local school recently offered large financial discounts to

attract girls in an ‘underhand blow to the sector,’ he references the ‘last rat standing’ analogy from his favourite Bond film Skyfall to explain how the market is turning in on itself to survive. He enjoyed the newest 007 offering immensely having been gifted a ticket by a generous parent.

A frustrated farmer, he tells us he’s ‘getting lot of grief’ for unashamedly declaring the new school pigs (whose tummies he loves to tickle) ‘will be sausages eventually’. TV favourites include All Creatures Great and Small and The Yorkshire Farmer. Married to Julie with two daughters at university, he enjoys theatre, skiing, sailing and reading about military history.

Entrance

From pre-nursery to year 4 entry is through registration, plus visit. No formal assessment ‘as long as they are not biting everybody,’ but head is insistent that ‘the doors aren’t open to anybody’. From year 5 it’s a little more formal with CAT scores considered. Two form entry – up to 18 per class. No waiting lists.

Exit

True independence leads to a broad array of aspirational senior destinations including Canford, Churcher’s College, Charterhouse, The Royal Grammar School, Bryanston, Cranleigh, Portsmouth Grammar, Lord Wandsworth, St Catherine’s, Prior’s Field, Guildford, Seaford College, Wellington, Winchester and Bedales. Seventeen scholarships in 2021. Relationships with senior heads are head’s forte - ‘they trust me’ he says. Retention at year 6 (particularly for girls) is a concern with very small numbers currently. Plans afoot for a ‘retention day’ to calm ‘parents spooked by aggressive senior schools.’

Our view

It’s dank and dismal on the day we visit Amesbury. But adverse weather is not enough to dampen the spirits of this school’s pupils who we find darting around outside, coatless, excitedly chanting ‘rugby in the rain’. There are no ties or blazers - ‘it’s just not Amesbury’ say parents who admit with pride that children here ‘are a bit scruffy at times’. Uniform - ‘a brilliant vehicle for gender equality,’ according to the head - is under review and no-one will miss the tight-necked brown scratchy jumpers.

Founded in 1870 the school is steeped in history and heritage. A blue plaque on the main building tells us Field Marshall Montgomery adopted Amesbury as his Rear HQ in World War II, planning the D-day landings from a room above the head’s office. In remembrance, pupils who have attended since nursery are still presented with a Monty bear when they leave the school.

The main house is a Grade 2 listed building and the only school ever designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens. Wide corridors and staircases, and low windows so children can easily see out, all point to an environment where children come first. Our delightfully haphazard tour is the perfect visual representation of the Amesbury experience featuring quite the smallest chapel we have ever seen next to one of the largest sports halls (displaying 150 years’ worth of first team boards). Gleaming glass fronted, mirror backed dance studio; cosy wellness and learning support hub; bright new library; embryonic pig farm; and immense modern art block, built around an ancient tree.

For all its tradition, Amesbury is one of only 52 Microsoft Digital Showcase Schools in the country. Technology is embedded throughout the school enhancing learning and teaching for pupils and staff alike. Years 5 and above all receive their own laptop and homework is as likely to be a voice note as an essay, all managed online. 'The continuity of learning makes a massive difference, everything is easily accessible,' explains one mother. While school bags are most definitely lighter, the school maintains books and more traditional resources are still valued.

Parents tell us this is a 'rounded, unpressured school' compared to some of its more 'powerhouse neighbours', but not at the expense of academic rigour says the head. 'We do not lack aspiration, we are ambitious and determined, but we don't crawl over others to get there.' One of the first preps to adopt the Prep School Baccalaureate framework of study. Setting in English and maths from year 4. Specialist teachers and Latin from year 5. French from nursery, Spanish in years 7 and 8. We see some inventive interpretations of the scientific elements outside the two well equipped and spacious science labs and geography is a favourite subject for all pupils we speak to who light up at mention of the inspirational department head. 'Without question the academic expectations are high,' says one parent. Most evident in the early years where a focused new head of department with 25 years' experience is 'cracking through the curriculum'. Spacious purpose-built nursery/reception block encourages 'purposeful, free-flow' learning - they're studying books through microscopes in one corner and plugged into learning programmes on iPads in another (on five-minute timers we are assured).

New head of sports and health recruited to 'bring innovation' to the currently very traditional arena. Strong in netball (girls have won last 10 matches they've played), cricket and rugby – multiple boys and girls play for the county. A, B and C teams are evenly challenged in fixtures across 'a quite local circuit' so that travel time doesn't outweigh match time. Ethos is play and move on, whatever the result. Parents with uber-competitive, match orientated offspring, might want to be aware, school 'doesn't need a fixture every week'. Tchoukball is big here with several Amesburians representing at national level. Established tennis academy is enjoyed by large percentage of pupils, and a neighbouring state primary free of charge.

The performing arts department pick up those who prefer to find their groove on the dance floor. 'Everybody dances here, it's seen as normal and comes naturally,' enthuses head of department. There's a contemporary class for year 7s underway when we visit. Hip-hop, ballet and tap are also popular with three girls gaining positions at The Royal Ballet School last year and more currently rehearsing for The Nutcracker with English Youth Ballet.

Drama is led by characterful hipster complete with bushy beard, DMs, flat cap and passion aplenty -though no formal teaching qualifications. He 'fell into the role' 23 years ago and now 'represents the heart of Amesbury'. All drama lessons are geared towards an actual performance. 'The culture here is kids get up on stage,' he says. Year 3 do a 'show in a week' and in a recent production of Oliver Twist a year 8 scholar wrote the soundtrack. The timetable is suspended for the biennial weeklong arts festival which features performances from west end shows and local senior schools alike.

Even busier music department. Numerous choirs – the chapel choir wear scarlet robes by royal consent. Around 180 children undertake individual lessons in all the usual instruments. Numerous but normal after-school clubs, quirkier ones like jewellery making, Mandarin and

gardening are slower to returning after the pandemic.

Pupils are at ease with adults. Unguarded and unpretentious, 'they know how lucky they are, that something special is going on here', says head. At lunch a boy voluntarily pours water for the girl next to him and our year 8 guide is clearly revered by the younger children. 'They're unregimented and allowed to be individuals,' one parent says. We do see a little harmless horseplay at break time and head freely discloses he dispensed a break time detention to 'three likely lads' just before our meeting. Discipline is swift and measured. Continued misdemeanours result in being sent home for the day and on rare occasions where patterns of behaviour indicate underlying issues, the school's aptly named psychologist, Dr Smiley swoops in. Most of the time his role is to help bolster confidence for those with learning support needs and he runs a Friday club for children with dyslexia to share experiences. Small team supports 75 pupils with mild needs. One is a yoga specialist, another a qualified ELSA. Teaching assistants are trained to provide in-class support too. One parent described the support her child received as 'fantastic'; another said it could be 'bolstered'. School says it can only support mild needs.

Pastoral support goes beyond the physical wellness hub, knitted into the daily fabric of the school and underpinned by a kindly school nurse who patches up more than the odd scrapped knee. No performative values plastered on walls; they're dismissed by head 'as just for inspections'. Instead school irradiates an atmosphere of straight-forward decency and mutual respect - illustrated nicely by year group charters jointly agreed between pupils and teachers.

Parents are in the main local, dual income and feet on the ground. The sort that won't hog the middle lane of the A3, but will overtake if needed, politely. Certainly, no tailgaters or flashness - 'there's no ostentatious wealth coming down the drive at drop off'. One parent concurs bashed up Volvos are more usual than fancy Range Rovers in the car park. Regular dinner parties between parents and lifelong family friends are made.

Money matters

Scholarships (academic, tennis and expressive arts) available in years 3 to 7 for those 'head and shoulders above other very talented children'; worth applying for, with awards worth up to 50 per cent of the fees.

The last word

A truly balanced school that delivers a progressive education wrapped in traditional values and served in a most picturesque setting. Parents and teachers are aligned and children are happy and achieving. As one parent said, 'it totally delivers.'