



KENT COLLEGE
CANTERBURY

**GOOD
SCHOOLS
GUIDE**



EXCELLENT IN ALL ASPECTS
ISI INSPECTION 2022

WHAT THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE SAYS



Head

Since September 2020, Simon James, previously deputy and acting head for two years and before that, houseparent and head of business and economics at the senior school. Educated in Gloucestershire, followed by a business management degree at Oxford Brookes University. Ventured to South Africa to work on the Eastern Cape but the classroom drew him back, returning to teach at Horris Hill Prep, Berkshire, indulging in one of his main loves, rugby, coaching the first XV team. Completed his MBA while at the senior school. Married to Sian, a TA who provides Spanish language support alongside a Spanish club. They relish living onsite with their two children – and, yes, the pressure is now on for a dog.

You need stamina to keep up with this energetic, charismatic and – according to pupils, 'really chatty' - head, who plans to finally complete the mother of all treehouses with a viewing platform. 'A place for Prospero to command,' he quips. 'Keep them excited about school' and 'Give them lightbulbs' are among his many mantras. He takes pride in the history of the school and is tickled by the unearthing of an old 1950s photo of pupils digging the swimming pool – 'You couldn't get away with it nowadays!'

he laughs. Parents say he has 'super-injected' a new 'pace' and 'rigour' into school life. Says teaching year 3 and 4 maths is 'one of the highlights' of his week.

Fuelled by a love of the outdoors and obsessed by - wait for it - cheese, and its production around the world! Provides a perfect excuse to indulge two hobbies in one holiday.

Entrance

From 3 months into nursery, with reception and years 3, 5 and 6 the other most popular entry points – although newbies can and do (we met a few) join at any time, including mid-year. Academically non-selective but meeting with SENCo arranged 'if appropriate to ensure all needs can be met.' Immersive taster days include an informal meeting with the head. Reports from previous school required.

Exit

Nearly three-quarters make the 'smooth' transition to the senior school after taking the entrance exam. The rest head off to local grammars in Canterbury and Faversham and a couple each year to independents, notably King's School Canterbury but occasionally further afield for scholarships. Not unusual for some pupils to re-join in senior school after dipping their toes elsewhere.

Good preparation for the 11+, according to parents (most take it even if no intention of moving to a grammar). Good advice too, they add, with school's data tracking informing options and conversations starting from year 4. In 2022, 23 scholarships.

Our view

While it would be easy to kick off by raving about the heritage, academic expectations and prowess in sport and music, it's the groundsman's efforts that deserve the first shout out. Stand still too long, and you might get repurposed into something useful. The school's amphitheatre, for instance, has been made by hand using resources from the grounds. A place for plays and concerts, yes, but also part of



everyday life – the backdrop for fencing club or the set for an imaginary game. The very soul of the school, we were told. **Freedom to play is a major theme here – all under the unobtrusive eye of teachers. Plentiful climbing frames help, and there’s even a zip wire** – ‘popular with mums on speech day’, laughed the head.

The tone set in the early years appears to be inspired by the TV reality show, ‘The House of the Tiny Tearaways’ - stimulating and inspiring. A line of wooden trikes looks ready for action, and we spot some tinies making ‘messy tea’, while others industriously make tickets to sell for an imaginary bus ride to London. In older years, there is focused Numicon inspired maths work, where children are happy to ‘go back and have

another think’ when the answer wrong (sometimes several times). The foldaway doors between classrooms give free flow. A forest school teacher visits twice a week. **French and German from reception, taught by a native French speaker and her friendly assistant** – we enjoyed watching an interactive lesson on the seasons, hard to resist not joining in. **Science, music and PE all taught by specialists – keeping it hands on and fun.**

From year 3, pupils like the independence of following timetables and moving around the school. At this stage, **groups of mixed aged pupils are taught together to allow for accelerated learning in English and maths – tailored to development rather than age**, and

supported by 'breakout' groups. Initially sceptical parents are now completely sold on the idea. The general vibe is that the right pace leads to happy children - 'a bit like a small rural school where classes can have a few year groups in,' as one parent pointed out.

The days are divided into three 'chapters': accelerated learning (academic), a creative afternoon (games or the arts), and co-curricular (clubs). Friday is 'GREAT' (Gifted, Really Enthusiastic and Talented), motored by specialist teaching in areas chosen by pupils, such as advanced science or music composition. We swung by a science lesson where there was a lively cholera discussion covering the stream, filtering, disease and breweries - year 6 had it covered all in one lesson's work. Teaching, explain parents, is 'super interesting, real-world stuff'. Great classroom displays too, including a bunch of photos showing pupils dissecting an ox heart - now that's hands-on!

The 17 per cent on the SEN register (above national average) are supported mostly for dyslexia by the experienced SENCo and two assistants. Pupils describe subtle strategies being effective, and feel that the staff support them 'just because they care.' Parents say the staff are 'with you every step of the way' and that, 'given the right support and academic diaries, children with SEN cope well.' Support, when not in the classroom, takes place in two intimate learning strategy areas in the main house (one for bespoke support, at extra cost; the other for breakout groups). No EHCPs.

'All children could leave with at least 150 caps,' staff enthuse. It's not unusual for six teams to travel to core sport fixtures simultaneously. **Cricket and hockey high profile, with netball and football also taught to all.** The inaugural girls' football fixture has kicked interest into gear, no surprise with the nifty footwork we saw. Three annual cross-country events are hosted,



welcoming hundreds of hopefuls from state and private schools - word on the street is 'win or lose, everyone just loves the tea'. We ducked past a boys' mixed ability cricket lesson with no less than four specialist teachers. **On the new Astro with nets, we picked up some bowling tips from Kent women's cricket captain, teaching year 5 and 6 girls.** The heated outdoor swimming pool, in use through the summer term, is popular and open in the holidays thanks to lifeguard parents. 'Children who would never have dreamt being away from home, let alone for sport, have the time of their life on tours to Brighton or Ipswich,' said a parent - not just for the elite, then.

Drama popular, although a year 6 confided that 'there's already been a leak' about the leaver's play (meant to be a surprise for the rest of the school!). 'Something fun, not too serious,' staff told us about it, and this is the drama vibe

throughout. Each year group performs once a year, including the nativity, and participate in events like Harvest Festival on the amphitheatre. Specialist teaching from year 1 on the curriculum, plus clubs and GREAT programme.

Pupils' music (strings and voices) is played all day, every day in the main school - a fitting welcome to what is a musical school. **Pupils rightfully proud of being recent Junior Choir of the Year and finalists in Barnardo's National Choir Competition four years in a row. A few cathedral choristers among the pupils.** Two thirds learn an instrument - school says it will find a teacher for 'anything' (with the possible exception of bagpipes, 'yet'). Orchestra open to pupils who have reached grade one - music director's husband arranges some of the music. Ensembles for flute, strings, clarinet and brass. The chime of hand bells drew us into a focused year 5 class - alongside two curriculum music





lessons per week, there are opportunities to specialise in composing for GREAT option. Popular choir tour to Austria.

Art in need of an 'injection of inspiration,' feel parents, but there's excitement building with the development of art specialism – watch that blank canvas! Bright new art studio (very organised, very clean), overlooking the grounds.

Teachers are a dedicated and loyal troop – mix of 'rejuvenated' long termers and fresh new recruits, all of whom feed the diverse extracurricular options. We hopscotched through the programme: author club, French cine, drama, absolute problem solving (at which point, our minds were blown by the Die Hard 3 gallons problem!), fairy club, ultimate frisbee and podcast club among them. For one pupil, it still wasn't enough – he wanted coding every term.

No prefects or head boy and girl. 'We don't need them, we have school council,' say pupils, who relish discussing classmates' ideas - 'even if you think it sucks!' Hot topic of the moment: what to replace campfire crumpets and hot chocolate

with for 'golden morning' in the summer. Perhaps 'ice pops and chilling by the pool' or 'hammocks between the trees,' reckoned one wistfully.

The dazzling dining room, which leads onto the large terrace, is more like a hip café than the traditional school dining experience.

We bagsied one of the best al fresco tables in the house to devour a cheeky chickpea casserole. Sausage and mash with yorkies popular among the younger, hungrier crowd.

'Can I swap roles?' the volunteer bully pleaded in a PHSE class. All agreed it's a hard role in a school that emanates kindness. 'Children are too busy for nastiness,' felt one parent – and any issues get 'nipped in the bud quickly.' 'Love is Love' and 'Love Has No Gender' posters dotted around the school, evidencing approach to inclusivity. School values (all the usuals) feed into a token reward scheme whereby you can win a 'golden morning' - 'better than any trophy!'

Pupils say staff are 'patient' and 'listen', that teachers work with them if they feel nervous or unsure. Good communication triggers the 'right

mechanisms,' parents say, which have a 'profound' effect on the child's wellbeing. The school counsellor visits weekly, and a Listening Ear is available.

Parent Voice avoids issues rumbling away on class WhatsApp groups, and parents approve of the 'professional' and 'positive' use of the Class Lists app. A sociable bunch, they organise regular get-togethers described as a 'blast'. The newsletter could be easier to access, say some, but all feel listened to – including, recently, about the need for a more practical uniform.

A five-minute minibus ride whisks pupils to the school farm where we saw year 1s feeding calves, collecting eggs and piglets licking their wellies. Overseen by three full-time experts, with oodles of energy. **Horseriding popular here at weekends.** We spied the nativity star in the corner, a reminder of the annual carols at the farm. Lots of visitors (including local schools) at other times of the year too – not only to see the native breeds but to enjoy the maypole dancing, folk music and welly wanging.

Boarders

Cosy dorms in the main house for the small number of, mostly international, boarders, cared for by the houseparent as part of her family, including her cats. Shared rooms, not show rooms - neither polished nor precious but happy children's hangouts. Cleaners leave items out to gently nudge towards independence and responsibility. Mid-week activities include breadmaking and board games. All are ready for their bedtime story after the daily Zoom call with parents. Saturday breakfast sometimes shared with the head's family, and then the luxury of 'having the playpark to ourselves,' we were told. 'All-in' Sunday excursions enjoyed with the seniors, eg London to see Shrek, gel balling and even Euro Disney. Main meals at the senior school at weekends when siblings get to see (or ignore) each other, and all get a taste of boarding life 'up the hill'.

The last word

An education for inquisitive active learners, happy to be swept along with the pace. The type of place where, within a few minutes of stepping inside, you feel right at home and don't want to leave. An outward looking school that's keen to build on its resources for generations to come.





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