

Christ College, Brecon

What The Good Schools Guide says

The head

Since September 2017, Gareth Pearson (40s), previously senior deputy head at Lord Wandsworth College in Hampshire. Has also been a housemaster at Wellington College and maths teacher at Millfield, as well as a captain in the Royal Marines for eight years. Mechanical engineering degree from Loughborough, teaching qualifications from Plymouth and Bath and a masters in character education from Birmingham. He is married to Rhian and they have two children.

Academic matters

One of the really tedious pictorial clichés published by so many schools in August is of groups of pupils leaping up into the air clutching their A level results – or so it is to be assumed. It’s a silly picture because it’s so obviously lacking in any spontaneity and you feel the leavers have been treated like performing fleas. ‘One, two three, now jump into the air as high as you can,’ encourages the photographer absurdly. The pictures are enforced as useful advertising for the school. Humbug!

Christ College, Brecon does not go in for that sort of silliness though, naturally, they are happy to share their delight. After all, they have a lot to celebrate. They have always had their bright pupils moving on to Oxbridge and top medical schools but overall results have improved, and in recent A level results CCB came in the top 100 schools in the Daily Telegraph league tables. In 2017, 44 per cent A*/A grades at A level. The most obvious way of showing academic prowess is through endless grid systems. Statistics. Statistical junkies can get a fix here, of course, but the celebration and relief that accompanies success here is more human than most. This school is less about numbers, it’s about human beings and their deserved achievements. A recent publication contains a wonderful account of two boys, great friends, and the academic rivalry which they shared for most of their time in the school. The writing is superb, like a short story. In fact there is genuine suspense as we read on, wondering who has indeed performed better overall. It’s typical of this wonderful school that they should invest statistics with such human interest.

Having said all that the overall statistics are impressive and not to be ignored. They should be celebrated, but above all they should be put into perspective against the background of superb teaching, mutual respect and, yes, friendship between staff and pupils. Classes are small and that helps, though not as much as is frequently claimed. After all, small classes with lousy teaching will produce lousy results. We witnessed some absolutely tremendous teaching. The facilities and classrooms are generously laid out and the pupils respond fearlessly. They spoke to us unashamedly of the exciting quality of the teachers, the energy and fun they injected and the extra time teachers were prepared to offer for catch up and clarification. We saw sparky language teaching, lively music and drama, history, sciences, maths, biology: all demanding subjects – no raffia dolly-making here - and all warmly appreciated by pupils. It

pays dividends. Medicine, science and engineering courses are the most popular. GCSE results are excellent, demonstrating the popularity and success of technical and creative subjects. In 2017, 46 per cent A*-A/9-7 grades. The overall academic standards of the school have improved without the aggressive insistence on the importance of grades adopted by so many schools. Here the grades are merely the boxes: it's the contents that matter and the way those contents are treated.

And what about those people with SEN ? There aren't many at CCB who have SEN and those who do have been described as 'moderate mostly'. But it's almost worth cultivating some SEN in order to be closeted with the highly qualified, approachable teacher who presides in her classroom ever ready to help anyone who drops in. A previous GSG scribbler referred to those visits as pit stops and that's how the SEN guru likes it to be. She perceives her visitors as engaged in learning to overcome weaknesses, developing a sense of belonging and togetherness, of readiness and enhanced expectations. Let them stop by when they want to. She is full of wisdom and compassion. Every Thursday afternoon is tea party time: often, we were told, pretty lively. The parents we spoke to about her 'couldn't find the words to do her justice.' One final joy: most schools charge for help with SEN. At CCB pupils and parents pay with heartfelt gratitude and affection.

Games, options, the arts

Rugby is regarded by many as the number one sport at CCB. However, there is a strong move gathering impetus in the medical world and parts of the media to ban tackling throughout inter-school rugby. Oblivious to that, some ailing schools have turned themselves into something like rugby academies with much emphasis on wooing the biggest and the fastest players. Previous head, who enjoys watching rugby, spotted the potential dangers of such one-sided games and decided that the fixture list should change to ensure safety and competitiveness. It was a sane and sensible decision but initially brought her considerable flack from those who felt that boys should learn to deal with hard knocks and a broken bone or two. However, she stood her ground formidably before eventually winning her point. Rugby is still extremely popular with continued investment in the sport and its coaching with a former rugby professional appointed as director of rugby in recent years.

But rugby is by no means the only game. There is some football played, a lot of hockey – the school has a number of international hockey players, past and present, boys and girls. The boys as well as girls have been recent Welsh champions at U18s, U14s and U12s and there are outstanding netball teams. Lots of cricket, including a 20:20 Festival involving players from the UK and abroad. There's masses to do and much to be admired. Most pupils enjoy getting involved with a variety of sports and activities. Just as well. One pupil told us that he had been selected for five different sports 'and I'm not much good at any of them. But it was terrific fun and we didn't lose them all.'

Brecon is the HQ of the army in Wales, as a trip to the nearby cathedral with its regimental chapel confirms. The CCF is enormously popular, and when you've met the man who runs it you're half way towards understanding why. When we met him he was busy polishing up a trophy to return. Internet news suggests it's back in CCB, along with two silver medals won by what sounds a formidably tough, determined and clear-headed cadet. CCF is compulsory in yrs 9 and 10; girls as well and female staff.

Drama is driven by a dynamic head of department who enthuses not just the pupils but all

members of the school community to tread the boards and join in. With an annual community project to rope such amateur thespians in, as well as an ambitious school production for the different age groups, it really does produce some of the highest quality productions. Their *Les Mis* was ‘jaw-dropping’, according to one West End fan we met who had seen the Christ College version.

Music is terrific. We were shown round by the director of music and met some delightful and talented pupils practising for a concert at the end of the week in the recently enlarged music building. It wasn’t difficult to persuade us to return two days later for a concert at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, part of the school’s celebrations of the 475th anniversary of its foundation by royal charter. It was a thrilling concert full of energy and skill, sensitivity and passion, from the youngest to the most senior. Choral singing that might have been written for Polly Garter, for as the Reverend Eli Jenkins murmured, and many of the audience might have done that evening, ‘thank the Lord we’re a musical nation’. Orchestras of all or most ages playing together; a delightful pupil making an excellent debut on the drums; from the youngest – who were wonderful – to the oldest instrumentalists who played with such skill, the evening was moving and exciting. Eli Jenkins was right.

We met a lot of parents at the school concert and no, they were not selected for their unique loyalty. They had come to support their children and the staff and what they all said in reply to our questions about academics was that it was ‘cool to work’. One parent volunteered the notion that the pupils worked hard ‘out of inspired interest and loyalty.’ That seemed to sum up everything. Another phrase that remains is about the school, overall: ‘Whatever they do, they do well.’ The results of a recent survey would suggest that fewer than five per cent of parents would disagree with that.

Boarders

Boarding is convenient, of course, that’s part of it all, but it ignores the fact that for many boys and girls, boarding is fun. The rooms are designed and built to be attractive. One or two of the students, who had older siblings at university, recognised that the rooms in which they lived were much nicer than they would get at most universities. They’re nicer than many homes: snooker table, luxurious, comfortable sofas, large screen televisions, efficient showers and always friends to talk to. But they have responsibilities, and many to whom we spoke talked of the satisfaction they feel in being given positions of authority and so opportunities to pay back the treatment they had received. How ominous that would have sounded 100 years ago. Nowadays it’s part of the rhythmic pattern of the school; the feeling of continuity and progress: history in the making. All staff are involved in boarding.

The six day and boarding houses include Alway House, where year 5 and 6 pupils from St Nicholas House junior school can weekly board with the year 7 and 8s.

Background and atmosphere

Founded in 1541 by Henry VIII on the site of the sacked and wracked Black Friars' church, victim of the Dissolution. Students are touchingly proud of this ancientness, as of the crowned 'h' tag, which is the school's logo, and of the fact that the chapel where they meet every morning has been worshipped in continuously since around 1250.

Wonderful new junior school: the St Nicholas House for boys and girls aged 7-11 (opened in

2014) and Alway House (boys and girls aged 11-13) which is, unbelievably, over 50 years old. A joyous building and full of intelligently conceived fittings and decorations, an area for sleeping, playing inside and out, ICT for researching particular topics and always kind, creative helpers from all walks of the school and not just walks, because on Fridays they go for a country run. Delightful, challenging climbing frames guiding young adventurers to the distance, where always and for ever the hills beckon and invite. How lucky those very young are and how appreciative everyone seems, from the youngest to the lower sixth volunteers.

Numerically this is a small school, though it has grown in numbers recently. It is amongst the happiest we have ever visited. From the genuinely warm welcome with which we were greeted at reception – something commented on by many parents - and thence throughout the whole tour (with a thoughtful and entertaining mixture of guides) we were treated with courtesy and spontaneous good will. Lunch with delicious food in the wonderful ancient refectory in the company of delightful sixth formers was a real pleasure. Our hosts were confident and entertaining without a hint of arrogance or self-consciousness; informative in their effortless appreciation of the school and generous minded about each other and the staff.

Pastoral care, well-being and discipline

The happiness is palpable and high spirited and that says much about the discipline. Pupils and staff walk around greeting, smiling and chatting and, when they see visitors approaching, focus the eyes and smile inclusively. At some schools visitors are greeted with pasted smiles and glazed eyes: well-trained but fundamentally indifferent. Staff and pupils clearly get on well with each other. Discipline is based on common sense and mutual consideration, and that is presumably what is meant by well-being. We were told stories of incidents in which anxieties and problems were spotted and addressed by teachers, class assistants, senior pupils and ground staff. Everyone is everyone's responsibility. In reply to our question about the school's tangible happiness, one sixth form girl told us: 'It's like a jigsaw: everyone seems to fit in.'

The head of school and deputy (one boy and one girl - this year the head of school is a girl) are selected by the head following nominations from staff and pupils, and there are 15 prefects. Duties? 'Not arduous,' said one. 'People are pretty reasonable.' 'Cowed?' Certainly not. 'Comfortably co-ed' – no difference of opportunities.

Pupils and parents

Most pupils come from a radius of, say, 50 miles or so, the sons and daughters of army officers, farmers, businesspeople. The usual suspects but, in our experience, considerably more loyal to the school than blasé parents in the home counties. 'Fewer demanding expectations,' we were told by parents with experience of both areas. Most boarding schools these days have a number of students from abroad and CCB is no exception. But here you do not get the impression, as with some schools, that they have been imported in lorry loads simply to boost grades in the sixth form. In the nicest possible way, those 17 per cent or so of pupils from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Nepal - there's a strong contingent of Gurkhas in Brecon - and Germans in the sixth form are almost invisible at first visit. The school seems much better at fully integrating pupils from abroad so that many get stuck in to rugby, cricket and choir singing. Those pupils from abroad whom we met were genuinely happy and involved.

Entrance

Into year 3 for St Nicholas House via an entry morning with 'a range of academic and creative activities', plus small group meetings with the college head and the head of St Nicholas House. Into years 7 and 9 by English and maths assessments and IQ test, plus interview and school reports. Sixth form entry by GCSE predictions, IQ test, school report and interview.

Exit

About 10 (on average) leave after GCSEs. Not because they're unhappy, we were assured by prefects and senior pupils, but often for sporting reasons or simply for a change – occasionally geographical. We did not detect any specific grumblings or rumblings of discontent. Of those who stay, most go on to university and to a wide range of subjects. The very helpful literature potential parents and pupils receive in reply to expressing an interest will clarify that. That literature is, incidentally, amongst the best of its kind we have ever seen and read: informative without being chest thumping, elegantly expressed and genuinely interesting. You could read it in bed without falling asleep and that's not true of all prospectuses. These ones would sit easily at the Hay Literary Festival.

Sixth form leavers to eg Cardiff, Exeter, Bath, Swansea, Liverpool and Reading to study subjects such as architecture, biomedical sciences, computer science and mechanical engineering.

Money matters

There are scholarships and bursaries available for the able and needy. Don't be afraid to ask. Incidentally there are no inescapable extras - in fact The Good Schools Guide recently voted CCB in the Top Ten Value for Money Boarding Schools in the UK. We do not have shares in the school.

Our view

When you step back from GCSEs and A level grades; from rugby results and hockey triumphs; from CCF marches and medals; when you pause to marvel at the hills around, enfolding the school and beckoning; when you listen to the wonderful singing in the chapel founded nearly 800 years ago and restored by Gilbert Scott about 600 years later; when you consider that at the time the English Bible was being hammered out by that group of scholars and fanatics presided over by James 1, the Scottish King, Christ College Brecon had already been in existence for nearly 100 years, it is not difficult to feel that much has been absorbed from history and the world around. Perhaps it is not too fanciful to think that the extraordinary atmosphere of friendship, mutual loyalty and academic endeavour has emanated from the variety and insistence of the past. Like many schools of ancient foundation CCB hasn't always been in a good place, but it certainly is now. What's more there is history in the making. Ask about the expansion into the Far East. Great things are being delivered, even more is promised and this is a school that warrants admiration, loyalty and, above all, trust. Go and see for yourselves.