THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE
"UCS IS A VERY GOOD SCHOOL AND SET TO RISE EVEN HIGHER UNDER ENERGETIC AND CONFIDENT HEAD"

The Good Schools Guide has reviewed UK schools for the last thirty years. The Guide does not take advertising from schools nor are there any fees or retainers paid. Therefore, it is able to be impartial. The authors visit all the schools they review and talk to pupils, educationalists, parents and staff. Their reviews are intended to be portraits of the school and not inventories of their assets or achievements. They are, however, subjective and there is no guarantee of factual accuracy.

The Good Schools Guide is independent, forthright, well-informed and unbiased, which gives it unique authority and has earned the trust of parents and educational organisations worldwide.
“STUDENTS LOVE TO LEARN HERE & TEACHERS LOVE TO TEACH HERE”

The Headmaster

Since 2013, Mr Mark Beard BSc MEd (early 40s), a chemist. Mr Beard came from Brighton College where he’d been deputy head with a period as acting head between the redoubtable Seldon and the remarkable Cairns – a good place to cut headmagisterial teeth. He is credited with this school’s greatly increased number of Oxbridge entrants. He began his career at King Edward’s School, Birmingham, where he is remembered as ‘a jolly good chap’, thence to St Paul’s School, as head of chemistry. Mr Beard is married with two young children and enjoys squash, reading and ancient history.

He is energetic, open, likeable, relaxed and clear-sighted. He followed a loved and warmly respected head, Ken Durham, and big shoes can be hard to fill. However, ‘I came in to be myself,’ he asserted when we met. ‘I set out my stall openly and clearly from the start’ and whilst Mr Beard’s appointment to this major school as a first headship was a considerable vote of confidence, he has more than filled his predecessor’s shoes.
He flustered some in the school community when, in his first term, he cracked down on aspects of this traditionally ‘liberal’ school – notably its somewhat relaxed attitude to uniform. ‘I have been keen to explain... that liberal scholarship is not the same as liberal attitudes... There is a school uniform and it is to be worn properly at formal occasions; you should be punctual to lessons, mind your manners and if you have homework, you do your homework.’ Many parents applauded. ‘Things needed tightening up,’ one told us. ‘I think he’ll make it stricter, smarter and tidier - but within the ethos of the school,’ thought another. He has broadened the curriculum throughout the school and has placed a stronger emphasis on community links with an expansive volunteering and outreach programme now in place.

Parents and students recognise the changes they have witnessed. ‘He’s less overtly charismatic than Ken - more cautious and considered. He will be a very good influence.’ Sixth formers concur: ‘He’ll do interesting things over time.’ One thing that remains constant throughout is the ‘soul’ of the school. There is a buzz across the site. Students love to learn here and teachers love to teach here.
“IT’S A WONDERFUL, LIBERAL, FREE-THINKING SCHOOL”

Background & Atmosphere

The main buildings, dating back to 1907, are solid and imposing but rest comfortably on the southern slopes of the Hampstead hill. An unusual history. Founded by the University of London and various interested liberal intellectuals in 1830, it was designed to give an education to boys from dissenting (i.e. not conformist C of E) families and, initially, had no form of communal worship – unique at the time. Also no corporal punishment and no boarding.

Its earliest incarnation was in Gower Street, hence the designation of Old Gower for an alumnus. So, from the off, it was regarded as ‘liberal’, and the tradition has been proudly maintained. What does it mean? ‘It means, “no rules just for rules’ sake”’, ventured one parent, and that’s at least part of it. Another parent quoted a prep school head: ‘It’s a school for mavericks.’ While we like this observation, we feel it’s a bit off the mark and UCS suggests that, while the great majority of pupils are far from being mavericks, the school is inclusive and can certainly accommodate them.

Perhaps best summed up by a veteran parent: ‘It’s a wonderful, liberal, free-thinking school - you can look however you want to look, whether whacky or entirely traditional. They are accommodating and accepting and they celebrate difference.’ It also still means no RE or religious assembly and a spirit of tolerance and inclusiveness.
A terrible fire in 1978 destroyed the huge Great Hall but the rebuilt version is almost overwhelming in its size and gravitas – wood panelling, stucco ceiling, huge organ and brass chandeliers. All eat in the handsome panelled refectory – all refectory tables and forms – with a strangely monastic feel. Droolly enthusiasm for the school food. 'No-one complains here,' we were told, and the menu was about the most varied, tempting and creative we can remember.

Later buildings include the 2006 sports centre with excellent pool – also used by the local community; the sixth form centre with large and well-appointed common room, study areas – with and without PCs – and an excellent all-day café; the Lund theatre – a large and flexible space in which most productions happen and which is constantly in use; a 1993 block with well-designed and well-stocked library – with carpet; plus music dept. etc. Site now feeling a touch full (head prefers 'compact') although space still for super vegetable garden and beehives, three Astro pitches/courts and little green nooks for sitting and relaxing. Some smartening up going on hither and yon – a little paint and patching doing wonders as part of the rolling refurbishment programme, with the opening of the Kenneth Durham Social Sciences Centre and the construction of a Centre for Innovative Learning and Teaching. The emphasis here is not on every kind of here-today-obsoletemorrow IT gizmo but on rock solid teaching.

Girls arrived in the sixth form in 2008 to both trepidation and excitement from staff and boys. But it has worked, and not too much to the detriment of relationships between the school and its all-girl neighbours. 'The boys love the girls coming in the sixth form - it works very well,' one veteran parent assured us. 'They take very confident girls - the multi-tasking, vibrant, feisty ones - and they settle well.' The girls we spoke to bore this out, but they also paid tribute to the efforts made to integrate them before term and to help them quickly make friends once the year began.
Mr Beard’s charges have not let him down. Recent results have been some of the best in the school’s history with 70 per cent of A levels graded A*/A, 91 per cent A*-B in 2017. At GCSE, 91 per cent A*-A/9-7 grades. Impressive by any standards.

Far freer choice of GCSE and A level subjects than elsewhere including no blinkered – in our view – insistence on the holy trinity of sciences. Twenty plus A level options, with psychology just added. Much teaching material tailor-made by school’s own staff – that’s proper teaching. Universal praise for the English dept. ‘It’s phenomenal,’ drooled a parent. Very good languages dept. and exchange system. Mandarin is growing seriously now and a new short course in Italian is on its way to the sixth. School has switched to the Pre-U for languages, DT and English. We approve. But teaching praised across the board. A sense of academic work being serious but also offering infinite opportunities for thought, exploration and discovery.

Parental approval of Mr Beard’s instant moving of A level mocks from March to January. Much appreciation of staff dedication. ‘They’re always there if you need help. There’s a young bunch of teachers and many run extra classes for those who need them,’ we were told. There are also support mechanisms such as regular tracking and reporting back to parents, to help boys who need pushing.

All are screened in general literacy, numeracy and reasoning on entry. Mild SEN seen as no problem here. Two full-time and one part-time learning support specialists. Individual support either by withdrawal or classes before and after school – also for those with mild EAL needs.
The school has traditionally focused on inclusivity over winning – an excellent principle but one which can elicit grumbles from motivated and competitive boys and parents. However, this is clearly changing now. Regular Saturday fixtures for up to 18 teams including C and D teams and many extracurricular clubs/practices in eight key sports taking place before school, after school and lunchtimes. Under Beard, there is greater emphasis on performance. There is now an ‘elite sportspersons’ programme, additional soccer and cricket coaches, increased games options and other initiatives to allow pupils to reach their potential. Top sportsmen are given the opportunity to flourish: the 1st Rugby XV won the Middlesex Cup in 2016 and play flagship matches at Allianz Park – home of Saracens. Recent results in several sports including some individual triumphs suggest that, indeed, a sport fuse is alive and kicking here. They have county/academy rugby players, hockey players and cricketers, England (ISFA) footballers, tennis players very high in the national rankings, international swimmers as well as individual rowers, sailors and fencers. £10,000,000 investment in improving the nearby 27 acre playing field site in West Hampstead, including the building of a brand new double pavilion, should be completed in 2018.

SPORT IS ALIVE AND KICKING
‘The music and drama are simply brilliant,’ a parent enthused. Music has long been exceptional here and we noted the number and quality of ensembles e.g. the symphony orchestra, chamber orchestra, several chamber groups, umpteen bands of all kinds including jazz and swing and excellent choirs. Well-provided for. Many pupils take LAMDA exams to high levels. Students write and direct their own plays and performance values are high. DT and art are outstanding. Evident creativity, freedom and experimental ethos and the dept has more the air of an art college than a school. Many media, some wonderfully bizarre and arresting work and all good stimulating stuff. Far more interesting sounding clubs and extracurricular activities than we meet in most schools. Friday afternoons are given over to sixth form enrichment and staff follow their own enthusiasms in running classes such as Latin American film culture, wine tasting, life drawing, rock climbing, Literary London. Pupils set up clubs to pursue their own interests so we found a medical ethics society, a law and justice society, an eco-friendly club and beekeeping among many others. We wanted to sign up to them all. Far from being a crammer in atmosphere, independence in all things is key. ‘If your kids are self-starters, motivated and organised there is so much on offer, but they have to make the effort to get it. They don’t come after you,’ an appreciative parent explained. ‘There is so much on offer even for the less academic child,’ said another. Exceptional outreach activities include collaboration at all levels with several state schools and pupil volunteering.

“EXCEPTIONAL OUTREACH ACTIVITIES”
Pastoral Care,
Well-Being &
Discipline

“PHENOMENALLY
GOOD ON
THE PASTORAL
SIDE”

Houses are called ‘demes’ here and matter, but not too much. Praise for the Beard tightened-up regime. ‘Some of the younger boys were getting lippy and needed reining in.’ But equally, parents, pupils and OGs keen that the school’s treasured ‘liberalism’ is maintained. ‘It isn’t a school for those who need a highly regulated, organised system,’ explained a devotee. Another parent concurred, ‘It’s very friendly and informal. It’s warm and family-like.’ Much praise for the home-school communications. ‘I have mobile numbers for all my son’s teachers and they reply to emails almost before you’ve sent them.’ Even warmer praise for the deme wardens: ‘They are phenomenally good on the pastoral side.’ Mr Beard has a light touch but a firm view. ‘We want them to be the problem solvers of the future, not the problem causers. That’s partly what a liberal education should be about.’ Few discipline problems.

Leavers reflect thoughtfully on their schooling: ‘You learn to manage your time. They cultivate you into someone who can deal with a high level of intensity in your work. They build it up so that you don’t really feel how much more deeply you are thinking. You become very independent and self-reliant in this school.’
Entrance

About two-thirds of 11-year-olds come from the junior school in Holly Hill. They move up without needing to take an entrance exam. At 11+, 350+ boys, mostly from local primaries, try for 30 places. Exams in maths, English and reasoning in January. Around 40% of applicants thereafter invited for interview. NB part of a group of independent co-ed/boys’ schools that coordinate 11+ results, but forbid those who have accepted a place at one school from taking up a subsequent waiting list offer from another.

At 13+, 300 boys apply for some 30 places – mainly from local preps, e.g. Arnold House, Devonshire House, The Hall, Hereward House, North Bridge House, St Anthony’s and Trevor-Roberts, but also Notting Hill and Westminster Cathedral Choir School. Pre-test in year 6 in maths, English and reasoning. About 150 return for an activity morning and interview in the October of year 7. Offers conditional on performance at CE.

At 16+, some 200 apply for around 50 places. Most entrants at this stage are girls, but no actual quota – entry on merit. Girls come from e.g. City of London, Francis Holland, North London Collegiate, Channing, South Hampstead. Some from Highgate School. Also from St Marylebone School, Hampstead School and William Ellis. Selection via November assessment and about 50% of applicants interviewed. Assessment is an objective test of thinking, reasoning and problem-solving. All offers conditional on GCSEs.
Pupils & Parents

From all over north and central London. Pupils are as diverse as the capital itself. They are articulate, thoughtful, independent. Parents are achievers, ambitious, cultured, moneyed – for the most part – and involved. ‘Increasing numbers of middle class parents have to work hard to find the fees,’ acknowledges Mr Beard.

Money Matters

Around £1m a year disbursed to pupils who would not otherwise be able to afford UCS. At the time of our visit, 52 pupils were on 100 per cent bursaries – one of the most generous provisions in the UK. Most of this funded by the letting of school facilities to the community, charitable work and donations. No academic scholarships but music scholarships worth up to 25%.

Exit

Everyone goes off to a good university to read a proper subject. London University is a favourite; many also to Durham, Manchester, Leeds, Bristol, Nottingham. Impressive numbers annually to Oxbridge (20 in 2017, with six to the US and 11 medics). The vast range of subjects they pursue is testament to the individuality fostered here.

Notable Old Gowers include: Tristram Hunt, actors Hugh Dennis, David McCallum and Bertie Carvel, journalists Ian Katz, Jonathan Freedland and Paul Dacre, Thomas Adès, members of Bombay Bicycle Club, Will Self, Justin Stebbing, Chris Bonington, Roger Bannister, John Barrett.

“WE WANT THE PUPILS TO BE THE PROBLEM SOLVERS OF THE FUTURE”