

St Augustine Priory

What The Good Schools Guide says

Head

Since 2023, Christine Macallister BA (Hons) PGCE ACA, previously deputy head academic. Educated at a Cambridgeshire comprehensive before going onto Durham University and a first-class degree in combined arts (music, English and business management). After qualifying as a chartered accountant she worked for Disney for many years, but it was while working at an international school in Hong Kong that she says she 'developed an appetite for the classroom'. More corporate work followed and then a PGCE at the Institute of Education (UCL) when the family returned to Ealing. Ellen Wilkinson, just down the road was the first and only other school she has taught at. An invaluable experience she confirms in what was to be a steep trajectory in her education career. Engaging, sincere, pragmatic and as stylish as her pastel study drawing room, Mrs Macallister lights up when she mentions teaching year 7 music and the new school motto she created while deputy: 'Our girls will change the world' is emblazoned across the website and most walls we passed. She also teaches some enrichment and EPQ classes as well as business and economics A level and thoroughly enjoys working with the preps and pre-preps, 'singing in assembly with the younger girls is the most outstanding fun' she glows. She continues to play the piano and violin, often participating in school events. An assured head with a good financial brain, across everything and sunniest of all when she is participating at every level of school life.

Entrance

An all through school with various entry points from nursery (about 15 places – boys welcome at this stage) through to reception (an additional 12 places, girls only from this point), year 5, year 7 (the largest cohort), year 12 and any number of points in between. Girls are assessed at every stage and for the 11+ the school is now part of the London Consortium testing. Part of the process is a taster day, critical in ensuring that they don't miss a girl who could thrive here. At each entry point they are interested in the whole child and will take account of all aspects of their circumstances. Part of the thinking behind a 9+ entry into year 5 is to enable less pressured movement from the state and independent schools.

Sixth form applicants need a minimum of five I/GCSEs at grade 6 and above, including maths and English language.

Exit

Popular university destinations include Exeter, Leeds, UCL, Nottingham, City and Manchester Metropolitan. One to Cambridge in the last three years (but none in 2024). Huge range of courses include dental surgery at the university of Plymouth, psychology with cognitive neuroscience at Leicester, photography at UAL, Russian studies and social policy at Edinburgh and history at Cambridge. One medic in 2024. Website refreshingly comprehensive and transparent about university destinations as well as results. A significant number leave after year 11, lured into the state sector or to co-ed sixth forms. A few after year 6, mainly to go to local state secondaries.

Latest results

In 2024, 65 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 59 per cent A*/A at A level (82 per cent A*-B).

Teaching and learning

We were unashamedly gripped (even in a year 6 maths class) by almost every lesson we attended; on more than one occasion we had to be hauled from the room to stick to our tight schedule. We were impressed by the rapt faces of eager girls during a year 3 'building the kingdom' afternoon and the level of interaction between pupils and teachers at every level. Setting for maths and languages in year 7 but otherwise girls are taught in their form groups. Four spacious science labs, a mix of the modern and wood panelled traditional. As with any school there are the subject teachers du jour. Currently these appear to be maths, and humanities. Impressive offering of Russian (unusual in a small school) as well as the universal Spanish and French. Majority do combined science, but it is now possible to choose individual sciences at GCSE. No DT but art is enjoyed by the talented and less creative alike who welcome the change of gear offered in the calm art studio tucked among the roof beams at the top of the school. We were particularly impressed with the homespun periodic table spanning one large wall and made up of what looked like colourful giant post-it notes. Further confirmation that there's no need for the swanky art installation style periodic tables we increasingly see at some schools to get the message across. Clear evidence of a challenging curriculum in the senior school includes the HPQ introduced in year 9 (similar to EPQ in the sixth) teaching the girls how to be resourceful in researching for independent project work. Statistics now offered as a GCSE for top set maths, robotics a qualification for year 7, and coding qualification for year 8. Remarkable throughout the school as well as in the classroom is the evident attention given to each individual borne out by strong value-added scores, pupils frequently performing beyond expectation. 'My favourite thing about the school is how well the teachers know and understand how my child learns' observed a parent. Small classes lend themselves to individualised programmes whether that's stretch or support. Small sixth form with around 35 students. Photography, computer science, business, economics, sociology, art and design all offered at A level. Most popular subjects include biology, chemistry, psychology and maths with a relatively high uptake of the EPQ. Highest grades achieved in art, drama, English, geography, maths and photography. Parents very grateful for the bespoke attention each girl gets and most grow in confidence to the extent they would barely recognise their year 10 selves. Plans afoot to integrate Priory farm more fully into the learning across the curriculum. So much of what goes on in this gloriously muddy corner of the grounds is ripe for being integrated in all manner of classes, most obviously science and geography. Yes, you heard that right; this inner London school has a working farm with orchards, allotments, chickens, goats, sheep and guinea pigs not to mention ducks and burgeoning frog spawn. A fabulous resource with still more to offer.

Learning support and SEN

As impressive a team as we have seen in any mainstream school. Seventeen per cent of pupils have additional learning needs. While dyslexia is still most common there has been a significant rise in the number with ADHD and ASD. The SENDCo who has been at the school for over 20 years manages to combine no nonsense pragmatism with a deeply empathetic approach. She is supported by an excellent team of five which includes specialists in dyslexia and dyscalculia, and a full-time counsellor to whom pupils can be referred or can simply attend a drop-in session. They have quick access to an 'in house' educational psychologist 'someone we know we can trust' and use Mabel online therapy for speech and language. Surprisingly low numbers receiving EAL support despite the number of global families. Plenty of accommodation for pupils with ADHD including standing desks and fidget balls, the numbers with a

diagnosis now around three per cent. We loved the safe den of the Galaxy (sensory) room complete with giant egg timers and bean bags, peanut balls and vibrating guinea pig. The cross with dove over the doorway is a reminder that we are in a spiritual and supportive environment. Lots of joined up thinking as teachers can refer individuals but channels open for parents too, concerns swiftly followed up. In addition, a full-time nurse provides a sympathetic ear and medical support to girls with any worries, mental or physical.

The arts and extracurricular

Overwhelming number of theatrical productions each year. To describe the drama here as vibrant would be an understatement and it all ties in with a recurring theme: confidence. Each year group gets involved and though the main hall with stage and theatre space is underwhelming (and in dire need of a makeover), the pearl lies in the performance, the rehearsals, the collaboration, not the external structures. Our scribbled notes could barely keep up with the list of current productions but Wizard of Oz, Midsummer Night's Dream, Annie, Grease and Sister Act at the Watermans Arts Centre were just a few. High uptake of both drama GCSE and LAMDA.

Universal praise for the music department and choral events are renowned for their beauty. The carol service and feast day mass (held in February to celebrate the former Reverend Mother's birthday) in Ealing Abbey are particularly soulful musical events with the sister school in Paris flying over to add to the swell of voices. A variety of orchestras and ensembles means that everyone gets to join in regardless of their grade, and parents enjoy the informal vibe of some recitals with girls bringing along a piece to play rather than having exhaustively rehearsed an orchestral set piece.

Peaceful studio space at the top of the school is home of the arts and girls enjoy escaping there at lunch time. Evidence of an array of creativity covers the many walls and staircases all over the school from stunning portraits to newspaper style collages. School will always work to encourage endeavours that are not part of the mainstream, textiles for example will be supported with a sewing machine, all part of a collaborative approach. Flamboyant dance showcase integrates a range of year groups across the school. Phenomenal number of trips to diverse destinations and for any excuse from art and sport to culture, charity and language. Nepal, Iceland, Norway, Paris and Amsterdam where budding artists visited nearly 20 galleries in almost as many hours. At the time of our visit there had been six trips in almost as many weeks. Prestigious travel scholarship awarded to two lower sixth girls. One is off to work with refugees in Switzerland while two other intrepid travellers will go on a self-organised history field trip to Vietnam. Junior library colourful and enticing but we were underwhelmed by the dreary monotone senior library which seemed to have more computers than books with no attempt to lure students into a literary space.

'And the mud!' cried one parent, asked to sum up her family's experience. Girls return home most days, Clarks' shoes immersed in it. The glorious outdoors, whatever the weather or footwear, is a central part of the education here and therapeutic for many. Priory Farm is somewhere younger girls particularly enjoy during free time when they can feed the chickens, or play hide and seek in the bamboo tunnel. Whereas in many schools you see pupils finding refuge in the library, or in common rooms on computers and phones, here you're more likely to find them on the farm, in the art studio or rehearsing a dance in the hall.

Sport

The usuals with netball, hockey and athletics and more recently football and cricket all played with gusto throughout the school. Basketball, cheerleading, strength and conditioning and current hot favourite, tag

rugby with a former team GB coach to inspire the tough lot we saw charging around the Astro. The intention to win and nurture a competitive spirit is there but it's the taking part that stands out as a motivator. With 13 acres they have the space for sport though much of it takes place in the rather forbidding temporary sports centre that sits like a Tardis bang in the middle of the green fields. Lots of enthusiasm in the middle school when girls perform in competitive matches as well as in eg the Middlesex tournament. With numbers thinning further up the school it is harder for a sixth form girl to get stuck in to team sports but the school's successful integration between year groups helps.

Ethos and heritage

Originally founded in 1634 in Paris by Abbess Mary Tredway, a resolute English nun determined to follow her religious vocation as she escaped persecution in England, the school has been on its current site since 1915. The last nuns dispersed in 1996 but many traditions remain. The spirit of the Catholic faith is very much alive from weekly Mass in the school's simple, peaceful chapel (parents can attend) to the large-scale festivals held in Ealing Abbey (where the odd old girl has also got married). An imposing white statue of Christ, reminiscent of Rio's Redeemer, dominates the lawns at the front of the school and pleasingly distracts from the eyesore that is the temporary sports centre. Catholic symbols are otherwise low-key and discreet. The 60 per cent of families who are not Catholic readily embrace the school's values of courage, tolerance and support and the feisty spirit of its founder lives on in the oft cited school motto that 'our girls can change the world'. The cheerful chatter of the birds as you enter and look down the hill towards the North Downs in the distance, Priory farm on your right, the rose garden on your left is what, for us, captures the true spirit of St Augustine's. Girls here have the freedom and space to grow at their own pace and whether it be helping to keep in line naughty Pedro the goat or reaching out to an empathetic ear of one of the staff, there is a sense of being held while learning how to fly.

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

A nurturing ethos is so carefully sewn into the fabric of the school that it feels disingenuous for pastoral care to have its own heading. Parents struggled to find the superlatives required to praise the individual support given to their daughters. A sensitive approach starts at the top and we were struck by Mrs Macallister's account of how the younger girls are carefully and gradually introduced to Mass; no one is forced to genuflect or made to feel they are doing anything wrong. With only around 450 pupils throughout the school it is possible to give each girl the attention they need at any one time, but only with the right staff and this is where the St Augustine's gem truly shines. We were struck not only by the availability of a senior longstanding staff member to listen to the worries of a sixth form pupil in peak busy time, but also by the support the girls gave to each other during the daunting head girl hustings. Mentoring runs through the year groups, sixth formers pair up with younger girls, younger with still younger. Cross-year group friendships flourish and an unselfconscious familiarity with each other is a reflection of that. 'Inclusivity is at the heart of everything we do,' says Mrs Macallister, 'it's not a bolt on.' Whether it's part of the curriculum, Mass, PSHE or extracurricular activities, the whole school community discusses how they can ensure that everyone feels they belong. 'We are not about grand pronouncements or policies but work with every individual and walk with them on their journey.' The school will readily seek support of external agencies if these would help but many staff are trained in mental health issues. 'We are told straightaway if there is any concern,' observed a parent; 'we feel the school has our back,' said another. School goes beyond just welcoming other faiths as they actively engage with festivals such as Diwali, Eid and Hannukah; pupil-led assemblies, a celebratory Eid breakfast, participation in the Faith and Belief Forum where students meet speakers from different faiths are just a few examples. Multi-faith prayer room available for private prayer. Discipline not rigid – it doesn't need to be. Conversations are had and lessons learnt. Girls

on the whole want to do well and be praised. The challenge isn't keeping them in line but encouraging them to take risks.

Pupils and parents

Refreshingly diverse with many families living locally having descended onto this corner of a hill in Ealing from all over the world including the Far and Middle East, Central and Eastern Europe, Australia and the USA. The majority who are not Catholic are attracted by the principles and spiritualism of the faith and the fact that here their daughters will be sheltered from an overload of sophisticated stimulus. Some find themselves here by chance, the generous offers of occasional places mean that many moving from overseas find a home and then once here pinch themselves at how lucky they are. 'No sign of botox at quiz night,' observed one mother. Families here are not flashy. Both parents work hard to support an excellent education and many will be mixing independent with state. Nor did we hear any muttering about not getting enough bang for their buck. A multitude of events where parents can get stuck in and, because it's a small community, they do. There are quizzes, barbecues, plays, matches and concerts but it's fireworks night that everyone loves most. Girls are thoroughly grounded as you would expect - natural, authentic and continually growing in confidence. We enjoyed eating overly battered fish with a few sixth formers and listening to their future plans. The school motto is sinking in. They may seem naive compared to some of their peers at more high-profile London day schools, preferring to go bowling than to throw glamorous parties at the weekends, but they are not cowed by their calling and left us convinced that they will indeed be changing the world. To date famous alumnae have largely made their mark in the creative industries and include actor and comedian Phoebe Walle-Bridge, film maker Molly Manning-Walker and composer Hannah Kendall.

Money matters

A timely moment for Mrs Macallister, with her shrewd financial acumen to take the helm. Decisions are being made to ensure that any potential future tax burdens can be managed as far as possible without fees rocketing. Building projects can wait, bursary funds can be preserved. The school is in good shape with a healthy foundation fund to support means tested bursaries for new entrants at 11+ and 16+ as well as to support families who fall into difficulties while at the school. Two Mary Tredway scholarships at 16+ worth 100 per cent of fees.

The last word

Unpretentious and a bit scruffy round the edges, we once described St Augustine's as quietly brilliant. We stand by this though its shininess is becoming louder. **We can't think of many girls who wouldn't flourish in the space and with the care they will have here. A school that has always been good but just gets better and better.**