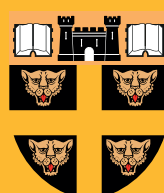


THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE REVIEW

THE
GOOD
SCHOOLS
GUIDE



DOVER
COLLEGE

THINK DIFFERENTLY THINK DOVER COLLEGE



The Good Schools Guide has reviewed UK schools for the last thirty years. The Guide is often written by parents, but always for the parents. The Guide does not take advertising from schools nor are there any fees or retainers paid. Thus it is able to be impartial. The authors visit all the schools themselves and talk to pupils, staff, heads and boarding staff. They also research schools from a variety of external sources including parents. Their reviews are intended to be portraits of the schools and not inventories of their assets and 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.

THE
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THE GOOD SCHOOLS VIEW OF DOVER COLLEGE

Excellent value for money, something we don't often say in our line of work; sending your child here will genuinely set them up. But also a place that is human in its outlook, healthy, kind, and vigorous in its quest for excellence. As one student put it, 'I love it at this school, and I feel privileged to be here.'



ACADEMIC MATTERS

That most refreshing of things in this county, a non-selective school and pleased to be so. The school slogan is 'Think differently', and from juniors up to GCSEs, teaching is delivered via themes e.g. 'Coffee, Tea and Chocolate' 'War and Peace' 'Two Thousand Years Ago'. What children learn across the subjects is therefore inter-connected, and they're encouraged to debate and discuss. It's an approach similar to the IB, and it's no surprise to learn that the school will introduce an IB-inspired curriculum across the school in September 2019. To be clear, the IB itself won't be offered: the school doesn't want to stop teaching A levels and its small size puts offering both beyond its reach. Instead, sixth form students will choose an academic or a vocational pathway alongside a Thinking Differently course, a Leadership and Skills course and the EPQ. 'We liked the IB, and wanted to take the best parts of it whilst not disenfranchising the UK market,' says the head, 'We feel our bespoke curriculum gives the best of all worlds.'

School insists that they have the full ability spread, including the very able, although their exam results reflect the diverse intake: 44 per cent A*/B and 34 per cent A*/A grades at A level; 15 per cent A*-A/9-7 at GCSE in 2017. High praise everywhere for the value-added: students who came to Dover College because they'd failed the Kent Test often leave with better A level grades than their friends who passed it. We spoke to one such sixth former in receipt of offers from 2 excellent universities, who confirmed, 'the academic support I've had from all the staff here has been absolutely fantastic.' Extra lessons routinely offered in the evenings, at weekends and even in the holidays for students who need them.

One small class per year in the junior school, rising to 2 per year in the senior school – usually between 10 and 15 students per class. Setting from year 9 in science, maths and English. Languages taught are French, Spanish, Mandarin – a slightly narrow provision in a school that's so proud of its international connections, particularly the number of German students who come here. Latin was recently introduced for pupils in years 7 and 8. Very good range of subjects on offer at both GCSE and 6th form, commendable in such a small school.

The lessons we saw in both junior and senior schools were lively, enjoyable and expertly taught. The head of science shares her teaching space with fish and guinea pigs – ‘I like to have live animals in a lab, it reminds us of what we’re here for’ – presided over by a cheerful white-coated skeleton sporting goggles. We liked the French class where the teacher had put photos of her own family up on the board and invited students to identify ‘ma soeur’ ‘mon pere’, etc. – so eager were the children to put their hand on the correct photos that they kept knocking them off the board. Being able to see France from the classroom windows is especially motivating, perhaps? Junior school history class was immaculately behaved but full of vim and vigour, a pleasure to watch. At the time of our visit, not the most glittering dynamic intellectually – triple science GCSE was only introduced comparatively recently, suggesting that the school’s expectations of its students may once have been too low – but the staff are now working tirelessly to raise the game in this area and the pupils everywhere struck us as confident and keen to participate. Pleasant Learning Resources Area, but the library was disappointing – small, not many chairs (suggesting few linger here), rather bare and drab; lacking a dedicated librarian, and we thought it showed.

Parents raved about the learning support, which here is called Individual Needs. ‘Sending our children here was the best thing we ever did,’ ‘The help we get for our son and his dyslexia has just been above and beyond.’ School keen to stress, however, that it isn’t geared up for more than a mild level of need. Study skills – organisation, prioritising tasks, time management – are taught to all students as part of the curriculum.





GAMES, OPTIONS, THE ARTS

Drama facilities currently rather moth-eaten, but the school's 150th anniversary is approaching and celebrations include an entirely revamped creative arts centre, to be run by the school's director of performing arts, a recent appointment intended to expand the provision in that area. 'The key thing in a school is creativity,' says the head, himself a devotee of all things artistic, 'and I want to re-establish creativity at the heart of the curriculum.' Regular productions – we looked in on an animated rehearsal of *Scrooge*, where the children were clearly having a whale of a time – and school is happy to send students interested in lighting and sound on technical enrichment programmes at e.g. the Gulkenkian Theatre in Canterbury. The Minerva Club offers an excellent programme of theatre trips, around 8 per year.

The chapel is at the heart of the school's music-making, and choir is especially strong – we thought the standard of part-singing really fine. Other events include concerts, recitals and competitions. Art is lively and popular, and the art block is a hub of focused creative calm, with photography, fine art and textiles all offered at A level. 'My son has really been brought out of himself by the art and the music here,' commented a mother.

Very strong emphasis on charity and community work, with all students taking this very seriously – recent appeal for shoeboxes filled with presents was so successful that when the Christmas Child charity reps turned up to collect some they couldn't get them all in the van. Duke of Edinburgh has had variable take-up in the past, but is now reinvigorated and growing in popularity. School is also in the process of joining Round Square, a network of schools worldwide that all sign up to founder Kurt Hahn's six ideals: Internationalism, Democracy, Environment, Adventure, Leadership and Service. For the pupils, this will bring increased opportunities for overseas exchange and community projects.

Under new leadership, sport here is impressively varied and the approach is entirely inclusive: in 2017 every single pupil in years 7 and 8 played in at least 8 fixtures for the school, making this an excellent place for children who want to get involved. 'We're fostering that participation culture,' said the Sports director with relish, a man who leads the 6am sessions in the Fitness suite, 'We celebrate excellence and we've got some great individuals who are exceptional, but the guy who plays for the Under 13 B team is equally important to me.' Rugby, cricket, athletics, cross country, hockey, netball, tennis, basketball and rounders are all on offer, plus swimming, squash, sailing and horse-riding. Football is flourishing: the boys recently did a football tour to Germany, and the girls countered with one to Holland. The school's Eton Fives courts have been refurbished and put to work, and the astro-turf laid across the Priory's old burial site is in constant use. The monks slumbering below would surely approve – *laborare est orare* and why shouldn't the same be true of playing soccer?

BOARDERS

Available from year 7 upwards. Around a third of the students here board, and about two thirds of the boarding community are from overseas and board full-time (the UK boarders tend to go home at weekends). The school works to keep a good balance of nationalities – it's popular with European students because of its location - but doesn't have quotas. The price of flexi-boarding has been slashed, and the result is a much higher take-up: recently, for instance, a number of day pupils opted to stay over at the school after returning late from an evening theatre trip to London. How sensible is that?

Boarding houses are, according to the students, 'really family orientated'. Students share in 3s until they reach year 11, when it drops to 2, and only uppersixth formers are guaranteed a room to themselves. Accommodation is homely, bordering on shabby – utilitarian furniture and a washbasin is the norm here rather than fitted wardrobes and en-suites – but is warm and comfortable and characterful: lots of light, views of Dover Castle, potted geraniums at the entrances, cheerful common rooms equipped with games and coffee machines, and clothes lines strung across the laundry room ceilings in the basement – 'Every single child here gets their shirts ironed!' beamed the matron. It struck us as more genuinely cosy and welcoming than some schools we've visited, whose boarding houses may have been smart but had all the ambience of a motel. The boys have an excellent kitchen for their own use, and the girls are getting something as good very soon. Prefects get first pick of bedrooms in exchange for responsibilities: organising rotas, tidying the common room, supervising the younger ones, etc.

Unusually, no official exeats, although students can go home if they wish. Every weekend here is staffed, and, according to students, 'choc-a-bloc' with things to do. Saturday programme of trips – cultural, sporting, shopping – plus fun activities such as Qasar. Older students can opt instead to do supervised study. Sundays are relaxed and the emphasis is on winding down. Staff universally praised for their kindness and hard work – 'They're always there for you!' said a year 8 boy.





BACKGROUND AND ATMOSPHERE

Built on the site of the 12th century Benedictine St Martin's Priory, Dover College was founded in 1871 by a group of local businessmen who wanted the town to have its own public school. In 1958 the then-headmaster Alec Peterson opened an international faculty in the sixth form before going on to help create the International Baccalaureate. The school has maintained proud and strong international links ever since. Originally for boys, it became fully co-educational in 1974, opened the junior department in 2001 and its own nursery in 2009.

Many buildings have been patched on down the years, but there's still a wonderful sense of history everywhere. We passed the remains of the original priory on our way to the junior school – 2 Victorian houses knocked together – and were given coffee in the barrel-ceilinged dining hall, which happens to be the oldest working school refectory in the UK. At the heart of the school is the Chapel, which is simply lovely, with white crumbly walls that put us in mind of Caerphilly cheese, and timbered beams – a kindly, mellow, peaceful place. 'We're proudly Christian. It's our absolute moral compass here in the College,' affirmed the head, and who wouldn't feel the same in such a place? The school welcomes children of all faiths and of none, but everyone must attend chapel twice a week. For the seniors, this is formal worship, but for juniors, it's more like an assembly – we watched certificates and house stars being given out for reading, progress, courage, enthusiasm, etc., to children who were chatty, articulate and beautifully well-mannered. Evensong is held every Friday – parents are welcome to attend, and can also come along to assemblies: we spotted several rows of them at the back of the Chapel smiling proudly at their offspring, before they headed off to the refectory to chat over tea and buns laid on by the school.

There are currently around 300 students on the roll for the entire school i.e. from reception to year 13. The aim is to increase this to 350 by 2020, but the school is keen to keep the sense of personalised education that is its USP, and class sizes will stay at a maximum of 15. Lots of integration between juniors and seniors – it really is one school. At meal times children sit in houses rather than year groups, to encourage a family atmosphere. A member of staff eats with them at the head of each table, and judges competitions such as 'Who Can Eat The Most Vegetables'. It seemed a very happy ship to us. All the staff we spoke to expressed great satisfaction at working here, and a number also opt to send their children here. Great sense of loyalty to the school among Old Dovorians, many of whom play an active role in fundraising and development. 'We love the family feeling here,' said one mother, 'It's like a prep school that goes all the way up to 18.'

PASTORAL CARE, WELL-BEING AND DISCIPLINE

In many ways, the teacher we spoke to summed up the appeal of this likeable school as we strolled across the beautiful old College green, dotted with junior pupils having a kickabout: 'In 3 years, I've never had to raise my voice. The children are fantastic, and there are no discipline issues, so you can get on and teach. It's a wonderful place to work.' Parents agree. 'There's a very high standard of nurturing and care,' 'It's a real family atmosphere,' 'The communications are excellent,' 'Since coming here, the improvement in my children's confidence has been amazing!'

House staff are proactive in mending any broken friendships, and wellbeing is taken seriously. PSHE is taught throughout the school and carries a high profile. 'It doesn't have a chance to fall out of favour here,' according to the deputy head. Pupils feel happy, safe and free to thrive. 'I haven't experienced any bullying here – the culture is not fostering of it,' asserted a sixth former. 'Compared to my old school, the bullying is none, non-existent,' said a younger student firmly.

The food used to be a source of unhappiness, but school has listened, created a student food council and appointed new chefs. Results are now 'massively improved' according to students, and we thought it excellent, one of the best school lunches we've had. Arriving on a Friday, we were offered a choice of 4 hot main courses: traditional fish and chips that wouldn't have disgraced an East End chippy, some thoroughly appetizing smoked haddock and potatoes, rather excellent local sausages, and an inviting chicken curry. Unusually at a schools visit, we really were hard-pressed to decide what to have. A visiting speaker who came to give a talk on the tea business liked the school so much that he offered to mix a blend especially for them, taking into account the particular chalkiness of the area's water. We can report that Dover College Tea makes a most refreshing cuppa, inducing a mood of tranquillity and reflection.

Clear rewards and sanctions policy, but amongst both children and staff the overall feel here is a peaceable one. 'Every pupil here will have an opportunity to lead because of the school's size, but they also need to learn how to follow,' was a remark of the head's that impressed us. Students here combine both roles with warmth and composure.



PUPILS AND PARENTS

Day pupils drawn mostly from a 20 mile radius – Canterbury, Ashford, etc., ferried hither and yon by network of school minibuses. Predominantly Caucasian demographic of these reflects the area, but strong international intake ensures diversity and balance.

Many parents here are first-time buyers of private education, and show enormous support for and commitment to the school, actively involved in fundraising and helping out. 'We're just lucky to have our daughter here, and we'll help with whatever we can,' was a typical comment.

ENTRANCE

Non-selective academically, and with every intention of remaining so – 'It's one of our great strengths.' Instead, the school looks for potential, and a willingness to fit into the school environment and contribute to its ethos: 'Pray together, stay together, eat together.' In the older children skills and aptitudes are always of interest – arts, sports, etc.

Happy to admit into most year groups and at any point in the academic year. Largest intake is into year 12, when a lot of international boarders join them, plus a 'surprising' number of local day pupils, often those whose grammar schools have rejected them for sixth form. Very small numbers in the infant year groups, but increasing thereafter as parents get stressed about the upcoming Kent Tests.

EXIT

A few head off to grammar school after year 6 having passed the eleven plus, and a similar exodus after year 11. 'Our parents are not rich,' reflected the head. At 18, a small number to Russell Group universities e.g. Nottingham, Imperial. Others to a variety of places to do courses both academic and vocational – recent choices include Economics at Leicester and Sports Coaching at Roehampton. International students often return to their own countries for university. Art Foundation courses also a popular choice.

MONEY MATTERS

Fees are extremely reasonable: weekly boarding here will set you back less than a day place at one of our leading London schools. A range of scholarships available at 11+, 13+ and 16+: academic, art and DT, drama, music, sport and all-rounder. Means tested bursaries available for those who need them.



