

What The Good Schools Guide says

Head master

Since 2013, Simon Everson MA PGCE, educated at Solihull School and Cambridge (English) before completing a masters in philosophy at Nottingham. Latterly head at Skinners' School in Tunbridge Wells. Was adamant that very few schools would tempt him away but couldn't resist the lure to MTS, where he took over 'a school with wonderful tradition, but one that's vibrant and relevant now'. Still loves teaching – currently philosophy and ethics to year 9s.

Unaffected, unruffled and with a wry sense of humour lurking below the introverted, intellectual exterior. A corporate head, according to parents – well-liked and respected (including by staff) and easy-going face-to-face (we'll vouch for that) but his public persona is on the loftier side, we heard. Possibly a little distant from the younger boys too, resonating more with them by the time they reach sixth form. 'Very fair,' say boys. 'Operationally brilliant and his heart and soul is in the school,' reckoned parent. Increasing the financial benefits to scholars has been a priority. And he never misses a chance to challenge himself (latest endeavour was writing a book during lockdown) – 'it's what we ask the boys to do, so it's important I know how it feels.'

Married to Ginny, a psychotherapist. Enjoys walking, birdwatching and Scotland and is a qualified apiarist (beekeeper).

Entrance

Selective with two main intakes at 11+ and 13+. At 11+ around 450 boys (roughly two-thirds from state primaries) apply for 70 places. At this point, applicants tested in maths, English and a general paper with those delivering the goods on paper invited back for a one-to-one interview ('they always leave with a smile on their face,' says school). Around two-thirds from state primaries, rest from 40 or 50 feeder preps including Radlett Prep, Manor Lodge, Buckingham College, Reddiford and Gayhurst.

At 13+, 75 places (with an additional 30+ places for boys at Merchant Taylors' Prep) applied for by over 300 boys. Applications by the end of year 5, interview in the autumn of year 6 and on strength of this and prep head's report, invitation to sit entrance examinations in January. Large numbers at this stage from St John's, Durston House, Orley Farm, St Martin's and The Hall, plus increasing numbers the Beacon, Davenies, York House and St Anthony's, among others.

School is looking for intellectual curiosity, a passion for something, reasoning skills and ways in which boys can make a wider contribution to the school. Parents say almost everyone is tutored (unique General Paper designed to mitigate this) and school says first thing they do in the interview is 'is take them off script'; one parent warned that 'boys who get in by the skin of their teeth do struggle.'

At 16+ exams in four A level subjects; offer confirmations depend on GCSE results.

Exit

Vanishingly few leave after GCSEs. Thirteen to Oxbridge in 2020 with vast majority of remainder to top universities. London colleges feature highly (particularly Imperial, LSE and UCL) as do Warwick, Nottingham, Durham and Bristol. Strong numbers to read medicine (four in 2020), economics and engineering but diversity across the board from sports science to English, humanities, law and the occasional one choosing film or drama school over university offers. Occasionally, students head to university overseas.

Latest results

In 2020, 92 per cent 9-7 grades at GCSE; 80 per cent A*/A grades at A level (95 per cent A*-B). In 2019 (the last year when exams took place), 88 per cent 9-7 grades at GCSE; 76 per cent A*/A at A level (91 per cent A*-B).

Teaching and learning

Sits coolly around the top of the league tables, seemingly without trying too hard, a testament to teachers who inspire without applying undue pressure. But while it's no hothouse or conveyor belt to top grades, it's not for the faint of heart. 'It's hard to get in and they expect a lot of you right from day one,' said a parent. Academic rigour – and ultimately success – is par for the course. If your son was in top set at his previous school, don't be surprised if he's in the bottom set here. But with exam results a given, MTS is really about what else the boys leave with – and with an intellectually curious and highly motivated cohort, most grab the wider learning opportunities with both hands.

'Every single teacher you meet is amazing,' reckoned parent. There are doctorates galore and at least half are Oxbridge graduates, with this hugely intelligent bunch highly skilled at bringing the dullest of topics to life. 'They're on a completely equal footing with the boys – the mutual respect goes a long way. I've never known a school quite like it,' added a parent. Indeed, humour and empathy pervade the classrooms, evident as much in the way staff speak to the boys as the quirky touches around the buildings – we've never seen fairy lights or a Ferrari flag in a biology lab in any other school. 'They know your child inside out – when you go to parents evening even in year 7, you think, "Ok, that's what I'm paying for,"' said parent. Almost everyone is tutored for maths, parents told us.

Traditional curriculum, with boys taking a mix of GCSEs and IGCSEs – usually 10, including a language, with consistently outstanding results across the board. French and Latin from year 7, with the addition of German, Spanish or Greek in year 9, all available at A level. Russian, Mandarin and Italian also available as introductory subjects. Flexible setting in maths and science from year 7, with some 'banding' in English literature from year 9. 'We tend to separate out the boys who read; the ones who can handle Chaucer and Shakespeare with no problem.' Absolutely no weak spots, but science a particular strength. In sixth form, most start with four A levels, dropping to three after the first term to free up time to eg learn a new language, take up art, do a Harvard course in astrophysics. 'A levels can box people into narrow pathways,' explains head. Around 20 per cent do EPQ, with most of the rest opting for Oxbridge essay competitions. Maths, economics and the sciences top choices at A level with around half the number opting for humanities and English but with no less stellar results. Small numbers for languages – although school still timetables minority subjects such as Greek even for lone students.

'Rolls Royce quality' university application process and careers advice, claims school; parents concur. Personal references from tutors are the cherry on top of the holistic application process. World of Work day in year 11, plus a joint careers conference with the girls of nearby St Helen's School. Former pupils (OMTs) highly visible (even during lockdown) as mentors to current pupils – includes recent leavers who are able to give most up to date info on particular universities and courses.

Learning support and SEN

Learning support mainly for mild dyslexia and ASD. 'Our goal is to provide coping strategies so we can slowly take the scaffolding away.' Strictly no withdrawal from lessons and must be able to keep up with pace. Head of learning support highly praised by parents, and not just for those with diagnoses. 'Both my children have been whipped in for different reasons and they took the necessary tests and got the extra help – they were really good,' said one. Can accommodate pupils with mobility problems, including wheelchairs.

The arts and extracurricular

Not so much shines as dazzles. There's certainly no danger of your son leaving the school only remembering the four walls of the classrooms. 'If you've got your nose in a book the whole time, then MTS probably isn't for you – but if you're playing rugby, a musical instrument and interested in what society you can set up alongside a commitment to academics, you'll be fine,' said parent.

There are clubs for every sport imaginable, from sub aqua to cycling, and far more besides – organ playing and chess have both seen a recent surge. Boys can flex their journalistic muscles by contributing to one of six school magazines or try their hand at societies ranging from dissection society to debating, most of these included in fees. Some 50 extra-curricular activities offered online during lockdown.

Phenomenal music, even during COVID (audiences soared from 300 to 2500 overnight). The two directors 'never shall retire!' laughed one parent, whom we felt was only semi-joking. Everything from Mozart to 'Swing Low with actions.' Fabulous bands, 24 ensembles and choirs galore. Lovely afternoon tea in the summer where the choirs sing. 'Breaks my heart that neither of mine are musical,' said a parent.

Two major theatrical productions each year. Les Mis, which was squeezed in just before lockdown, is widely considered their best performance yet. 'The show must go on!' was the spirit during COVID, with the smaller endeavours continuing, including live-streamed productions by drama GCSE students, though sadly not the fiercely fought house drama competition.

The art blew our minds, but what a shame so few do it for A level (just one the year we visited). DT on the up – 'university level,' claims school, which recently led a consortium of other local schools using their equipment to manufacture PPE for the NHS, for which they appeared on BBC London news twice. Robotics is on fire – five school teams made the national finals and one to the international finals of the VEX competition. MTS has produced a higher number of Arkwright Scholars than any other school since the scheme began in the 1990s.

CCF (one of the largest in the UK) in conjunction with St Helen's, and DofE schemes offer super opportunities to follow outdoor pursuits and take part in trips to eg Morocco, Canada or Nepal. Huge sense of collective pride in relation to outstanding work with Phab, with funds raised throughout the year and an annual residential care week staffed by senior pupils, who consider it a great honour to be selected to take part.

Years 7 and 8 classics trip to Naples, geography to Iceland and history to Istanbul. Eleven language trips each year and six language exchange programmes across year groups. Boys also head off to Israel, China, USA on various trips, alongside day trips into London. We were shown a fabulous film shot on a boys' expedition to the Norwegian arctic island of Senja. Lots of outreach work in local primary schools – boys recently set up a choir, also training the teacher to ensure it was sustainable. 'Shame there's no food tech,' said one parent.

Sport

Sport is a hugely important part of the MTS ethos, with sportsmanship and camaraderie as high on the agenda as winning. Part of the strong community feel comes from the whole school, including 80 per cent of the teaching staff, heading out to the (spectacular) sports fields together twice a week. Rugby, hockey and cricket are the major sports – varying degrees of success in the former (they remained unbeaten in rugby for the first season ever just before our visit), hockey does better (they have reached the national Plate finals for hockey three times in a row) but cricket is king (U17 cricket team have recently been national champions). School boasts over 60 county and five national sportsmen, and in the last three years, two pupils have also won professional contracts at WASPS. All in no small part due to dedicated directors for each major sport, as well as regular visiting coaches. A-F teams across the board, with school promising that every boy competes for the school as often as is feasible and that all wins considered worthy of celebration, although one parent groaned that 'if you're C or below you don't get that much of a look in'. Loads of sports tours – senior boys have toured Australia, Barbados and South Africa,

Sri Lanka, USA; younger boys have toured Ireland, Holland, Portugal and Spain.

And for the non-sporty? With over 20 minor sports, boys simply have no excuse not to find something they love. One or two grumbles about lack of footie until sixth form (the remote football pitches situated on steep slopes are testament to its rank in the sporting hierarchy), but that doesn't stop boys having a good kick around the quad at break times, and school provides goalposts for the purpose. World class facilities include all the usual suspects (international cricket teams train here) plus all-weather hockey pitches, heated indoor pool, athletics track, lakes for sailing and kayaking, squash, an assault course and fencing salle.

Outdoor education on the up, with a specific department recently introduced to allow boys and staff to take full advantage of the lakes for kayaking, paddle boarding and sailing, while the numerous trails around the lakes provide exiting mountain bike activities.

'Perhaps not an obvious choice for an absolutely single-minded sports nut,' reckoned parent. 'There are superstars in everything, but you'll see the same boy you've seen in the first rugby team singing in some a capella group to professional standard too – it's a more rounded picture here.' Sport department could be more slick in its comms, grumbled some. 'Sometimes, you're never quite sure which match your child is in until the very last minute.' Impressive games provision during lockdown – 'It's no good for boys to just be stuck in front of computers' – with home based options ranging from yoga and core strengthening to Strava-tracked runs and cycling.

Ethos and heritage

Founded in the City of London in 1561 by the Worshipful Company of Merchants, then the largest school in the country. Relocated in 1933 to its current location – a 285-acre site comprising a core of listed art deco buildings plus a host of sympathetically incorporated modern additions set before endless playing fields leading down to five lakes and a river. Visitors greeted by exquisite formal gardens and a handsome fascia. School lacks dreaming spires and turrets but gives an immediate sense of purposefulness and solid endeavour.

Culture is low temperature rather than macho. 'Civilised' is the most common description, with 'community' another oft used word. Older boys mentor the younger, the whole school eats together (no exceptions, no packed lunches) and assembles together – 'invaluable', says head. 'We are a corporate body not a disparate group.' There's also a great sense of the traditional juxtaposed with gleaming new facilities – a feeling that a boy who has walked the corridors of MTS would not be remotely overwhelmed walking into an Oxford or Cambridge college for the first time.

Single biggest niggle? Lunches – both the queuing ('a nightmare most days,' said a parent) and the quality ('a far cry from when we last visited,' said another). 'And sometimes there isn't even enough food for the last in the queue,' added yet another. School says it's 'on it'.

Actor and alumnus Riz Ahmed chose MT as the backdrop for one his first movies. Other famous alumni include Nobel prize-winning medic Sir John Sulston, Lord Coggan (former Archbishop of Canterbury), Sir Alan Duncan and Boris Karloff, as well as a host of others from the worlds of politics, business, sport, the military and the arts.

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

'It's more about expectations and not letting people down,' said parent about why boys behave here. 'Very fair and even handed,' reckoned student. Minds of staff and pupils alike are on higher things than the minutiae of shiny shoes and tidy haircuts obsessed over at so many schools – 'Well, we're all grownups,' shrugs head. Boys are not spiky or entitled, transgressions rare (one or two temporary exclusions per term) and bullying almost non-existent ('I couldn't believe how much friendlier it was than my prep school,' said one happy boy). Director of wellbeing keeps a

hands-on eye on boys' mental health, even heading down to Bristol University to see OMTs following concerns about pastoral support there. Vertical tutor system praised almost unanimously by parents and boys. For the most part, parents described tutors as 'almost part of the family', and many keep in contact with former tutees way beyond the A level years. Thriving house system facilitates yet more cross-fertilisation for friendships and opportunities for boys to shine in competitions, with weekly house assemblies covering topics from 'the art of small talk' and 'how to tie a bow tie'. Plenty of chances for responsibility at the top of the school. School run on Christian ethos but there's also a Muslim prayer room and societies for all main faiths.

Pupils and parents

'We don't really do posh,' came the smiling reply to our question about what makes an MT boy. Our opinion: smart, charming, self-effacing and diverse. Not a hooray Henry in sight, but a group of boys wearing their school tie with humility and an awareness of privilege rather than entitlement. Fun to sit with (yes, even year 10s) in the dining room and totally at ease with adult company. 'When you go to an open event, you can walk up to any boy and ask where a particular department is and they'll take you there – they're nice boys,' said parent. Perhaps because around a quarter of boys receive some level of financial assistance, social awareness is a key factor in their all-round pleasantness. 'My worry was that they'd mix with people all taking seven holidays a year, but actual the friends my boys have been to live in modest houses and those with a lot of wealth don't tend to show it off.'

A school where three worlds don't so much collide as mesh. A hybrid London/country school with appeal to local, north and west London and Herts/Bucks families. The London crowd loves the spacious campus, laid back feel and multitude of sporting options on offer, and those from the shires enjoy the slightly edgier, more worldly feel than they find in schools closer to home. Ethnically reflective of local area, around 40 per cent Asian, 40 per cent British and the rest a real mix from Jewish to Nigerian, with all main faiths represented. Wonderfully inclusive – racism and homophobia are absolute no-go areas, with Stonewall a popular society. During lockdowns, school has at least 20 student focus groups on the go. Tutor groups and forms being mixed up every year help create new friendships throughout boys' school lives.

Parents get involved, with the usual fight for best car parking spots at events. And we heard of no less than seven parent support groups ranging from individual clubs to the rather antiquated-sounding 'ladies' association' for charitable causes.

Money matters

School prides itself on staying true to the ethos on which it was founded – to offer an excellent all-round education to boys from all walks of life and offer financial aid to those who would most benefit – these days, around 100 boys at any one time. Academic scholarships awarded to boys who perform particularly well in the entrance papers, with scholars benefiting from an enrichment programme. Up to nine major academic scholarships at both 11+ and 13+ worth up to 50 per cent of fees, plus others up to 10 per cent. Also sport, art, drama, DT, music and all-rounder scholarships. School was transparent in its fiscal planning during COVID and offered discount, but many turned it down to support hardship fund.

The last word

MTS is a rare breed of a surprisingly grounded London school with a country feel. Maybe not the obvious choice for macho rugby types or parents looking for boys to come out with a public school swagger. As long as your son has the brains to keep up, it provides an outstanding environment that produces both interesting and interested young men, with a longstanding history of valuing the quirky and erudite.