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‘Sidcot School taught me to think for myself’

Adventures start early, says Tim Bevan

Four Weddings And A Funeral film producer, Tim Bevan, has said his time at Sidcot, an independent Quaker school in Somerset, taught him how to live adventurously: ‘The biggest take-away from a Sidcot education was “don’t be afraid to think for yourself”. I learnt tenacity, resilience, and not taking no for an answer.



CHRISTIAN CLAVADETSCHER

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For musically gifted children, a specialist school could enable them to thrive and shine, says Vanessa Berridge

STRIKING THE RIGHT CHORD

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The fact that pupils come from a ▶

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Symphony orchestra practice, an essential element

variety of backgrounds makes for a vibrant community,' says Dr Kenneth Taylor, headmaster of St Mary's Music School, Edinburgh, one of the five specialist music schools; the others are Chetham's, The Purcell, Wells Cathedral School and The Yehudi Menuhin School.

'Pupils share a common love and enjoyment of music. Self-discipline is learned early through music, and pupils are motivated to make successful use of their time. And because we have small classes, the school can focus on individual needs.'

Entry is competitive and by audition, based on musical ability and potential. 'Children audition between the age of eight and 18. Some might be awarded a place having already gained ABRSM grade 7 or 8,' explains Dr Taylor, 'while others who have not been playing so long might be accepted with grade 4. Advisory auditions are available: these are conducted by senior staff who give the advice.'

St Mary's invites successful candidates to spend two days at the school, for lessons on a main and second instrument, and in some academic subjects. 'These stays help the school and the candidate to determine whether or not they are right for each other.'

There are some disadvantages in attending such a specialist school. Pupils may need to move far from home, and, Taylor admits, there are fewer opportunities for challenging sporting activities than in many schools.

Wells Cathedral School is unique in that it is a specialist school within a mainstream independent school of 750 pupils aged between three and 18, so is able to offer wider challenges. It has 79 government-funded places for musicians from as young as eight, and the school itself also funds some talented children, who come from as far afield as Europe,

the United States and Australia.

'We really like the mix,' says director of music Dorothy Nancekievill, 'and it is not a hot-housing environment. It is quite complex because we have to fit in the specialist lessons and choir practices for the cathedral choristers. But then juggling is what life as a solo musician is like, so it's good preparation.'

There are other challenges, too. 'Sometimes children have to adjust if they've come from a school where they've been very much the best musician,' says Nancekievill. 'On the

'Children are singing daily to a professional standard, which provides the seed capital for the whole school'

other hand, they're not under the same pressure as they might be on a music scholarship to a non-specialist school where they're expected to play in every concert.' The school has between 60 and 70 ensembles and stages up to 200 concerts per year. 'We are interested in long-term development,' she adds, 'so we will work with a child and won't put them in concerts if their technique, for instance, needs changing.'

The school's remit is to get the specialist musicians a choice of conservatoires at 18, but some also apply to universities for music or post-graduate music study after another degree. 'But all tend to contribute in some way to the country's musical life – by running amateur music groups, for example,' says Nancekievill.

Wells is very mindful of child safety. 'Staff training is taken very seriously,' says Nancekievill. 'The windows in all the teaching rooms are now bigger – which has proved successful as it has lightened the whole place and produced a feeling



Cedars Hall at Wells Cathedral School

of widespread industriousness.'

Wells likes to claim that it is the oldest specialist music school in the country, as it has provided choristers for the cathedral in an unbroken line since 909.

Only slightly less ancient is the tradition at Salisbury Cathedral School, which dates from 1091. Forty of its 200 pupils are choristers, and 90 per cent of pupils learn an instrument. Pupils don't have to be musical to come here,' says Ian Wicks, the director of music, 'but everyone gets swept along. The benefit of the choir is that there are children singing daily to a professional standard, which provides the seed capital for the whole school.'

Fifteen to 20 children aged seven or eight are auditioned annually for four places. They may be existing pupils or come to the school on a choral scholarship. 'We're looking for musical potential, not necessarily a perfectly >



Choristers at St Mary's, Edinburgh



The brass section rehearsing at Salisbury Cathedral School

trained voice,' says Wicks. 'Children need a good ear, and to be able to pick up a note from a chord. We also listen to their instrumental playing and assess their academic potential. They have to be able to combine their schoolwork with choral singing without struggling.'

There is, he says, no rivalry between the choristers and the rest of the school: they wear no special uniform, and between 9am and 4pm are integrated into lessons with other pupils. But the choristers' days are extended, with more than an hour's rehearsal before school four days a week, and on Saturday morning, plus services in the cathedral.

In 1991, Salisbury was the first cathedral to establish a girls' choir, choosing to showcase girls' voices in the same seven/eight to 13 age range. The two choirs now sing an equal number of services, only joining together at Easter and Christmas and for major concerts. They are also rehearsed separately. 'Boys and girls do learn in different ways,' says Wicks. 'Girls are very diligent, while boys are more flighty, and choirmasters have to tailor their approach to each. If we put them together, there would be a

diminution of the boys' tradition. What we want to do is to build up a special girls' tradition here.'

New College School, an all-boys' preparatory school in Oxford, is not specialist like, say, Westminster Abbey Choir School. But music is at the core of the school, which is as old as the college, the foundation stone of which was laid in 1380. The aim was to educate 16 choristers to sing masses for the soul of William of Wykeham, New College's founder. A master was appointed, of whom the current headmaster, Robert Gullifer, is the direct descendant. 'There's an unbroken choral tradition,' he says, 'except for a little lapse during the Civil War. That was our most recent difficulty.'

Although the school is now first and foremost a prep school with justly celebrated sport and drama, 98 per cent of pupils learn a musical instrument, and 75 per cent learn two. 'The difference is that most schools don't have international stars, which our choristers are,' says Gullifer. Since 1976, the choirmaster has been Professor Edward Higginbottom, who has built up its reputation through dozens of recordings and concerts around the world. 'All our boys know that the choristers work alongside professional adults as equals – and their hard work inspires everyone.'

Gullifer, who has been headmaster for six years, has ensured that the choristers have much the same routine as the rest of the school. We fit their three hours' daily practice in with other lessons – and they are only occasionally pulled out. We are also flexible, so that if a cricket match runs on, a chorister won't have to leave early. It all helps with integration.'

But the choristers do need some careful handling. 'The voice can break at a boy's finest hour,' explains Gullifer. 'This has to be coped with, when a boy suddenly finds he can't do something

that has been part of his life.'

Many choristers win musical scholarships at senior schools, and famous New College School alumni include tenors James Gilchrist and Ian Partridge; broadcaster and composer Howard Goodall, and violinist Ralph Holmes. A choral education teaches application, self-discipline, organisation, and concentration. It is also a big commitment for parents as New College is a day school. 'There is a lot of ferrying, so it does become part of their lives,' says Gullifer. 'We try to help: some siblings, for example, serve in chapel.' At Salisbury Cathedral School, a Christmas lunch is held for choristers and their families.

Studying at these schools has many advantages. 'Learning a musical instrument helps with focus,' says Wicks of Salisbury Cathedral School. 'Music touches other areas of the brain, and helps with work like creative writing.' Nancekievill of Wells Cathedral School agrees. 'It is a very privileged and wonderful environment.' ■

CONTACTS

◆ **Chetham's School of Music**, Manchester: 0161-834 9644, www.chethams.com

◆ **Choir Schools' Association**: 01962-890530, www.choirschools.org.uk

◆ **Music & Dance Schools**: www.musicanddanceschools.com

◆ **New College School**, Oxford: 01865-285560, www.newcollege.oxon.sch.uk

◆ **St Mary's Music School**, Edinburgh: 0131-538 7766, www.st-marys-music-school.co.uk

◆ **Salisbury Cathedral School**, Wiltshire: 01722-555300, www.salisburycathedralschool.com

◆ **The Purcell School for Young Musicians**, Bushey, Hertfordshire: 01923-331100; www.purcell-school.org

◆ **The Yehudi Menuhin School**, Stoke d'Abernon, Surrey: 01932-864739, www.yehudimenuhinschool.co.uk

◆ **Wells Cathedral School**, Somerset: 01749-834200, www.wellscathedralschool.org

◆ **Westminster Abbey Choir School**, London: 020-7654 4918, www.westminster-abbey.org/choir-school



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WHICH HEAD IS BEST?

Today, women run boy's schools and vice versa - with good results all round

When most schools are now co-ed, it may seem to matter little whether the head of a single-sex school is a man or a woman. However, there are only a handful of male heads in all girls' schools, the latest recruit being Oliver Blond at Roedean last autumn, and even fewer women in all boys' schools.

The highest profile is Felicity Lusk, head of Abingdon School since 2010. She was surprised by the flurry of media interest that greeted her appointment. 'My gender wasn't discussed when I was selected,' she recalls. 'Schools are looking for outstanding leaders and gender is irrelevant.'

Indeed, the attention Lusk received



Abingdon School

has helped to put the school on the map. 'The boarding houses are full and many more boys are now applying for places - we're on the crest of a wave.' She has also seen an increase in applications to become teachers, thanks partly to her decision to stop Saturday-morning lessons, a time when teachers want to be with their own families.

'Only 20 per cent of the teachers were women when I arrived,' says Lusk. 'Now it's nearer 50 per cent. More women but also more men have applied, so we've had a larger pool from which to choose, which is good for the school.' Although she admits that there may be some advantages in being a woman. 'I have been a mother and have a certain understanding of human issues. Male staff will sometimes discuss their lives in a way they might not to another man.'

Lusk's previous headship was at Oxford High School, where she talked to the girls about leadership, realising their aspirations, believing in themselves, and the dual roles they were likely to have as professional women and mothers. 'I don't have those conversations with the boys here. They expect to lead,' she says. 'Since my arrival at Abingdon, we've engaged a full-time counsellor, and have put more emotional support in place. It's important to embed that in an all-male culture. I am also trying to teach the boys to treat all women with respect. That's why it's good for them to see a woman running the place.'

Dr Millan Sachania, head of Streatham & Clapham High School, believes that it is good for girls to see a man heading a Girls' Day School Trust (GDST) school. Set up in the 19th century to promote female education, the trust has always been a very feminine enclave, in which only women rose to the top. 'I hope that my being head teaches girls that if you present the right skills you will get the job you want, even if it looks as though the odds are stacked against you.'

Sachania only received one negative reaction when he was appointed: from a former governor of the school, who thought a male head was 'inappropriate and sent out the wrong message'. But, for the most part, he has received positive feedback. 'The girls who were already here enjoyed the novelty,' he says, 'but the girls who have come since have never known anything else. It is like when John Major took over from Margaret Thatcher - small children were surprised that a man could be a British prime minister.'

Sachania began his teaching career in an all-girls' school, so starting at Streatham & Clapham has been like coming home. 'I see girls as people with bags of potential. And after all, even as a woman, I would have been brought up in a different age.' He has a dedicated pastoral team who supervise sensitive female-development issues. 'I don't get involved with body image/shape, or the length of girls' skirts. As head, it's my job to impart the core values of civilisation: what it means to be a human being and the value of the arts such as music, and

sports. There is still a place for single-sex education, and I want to help girls believe in themselves.'

Likewise, Matthew Burke, headmaster of St Martha's School in Hertfordshire, believes in the value of single-sex education, because the staff don't have to make compromises when teaching to suit the different ways in which girls and boys learn. He acknowledges that when girls leave the school, they will find themselves in a mixed environment. 'So having a male head gives them another positive male role model, alongside their fathers. The school is richer for having that blend of experience and gender.'

Vanessa Berridge

CONTACTS

- ◆ **Abingdon School**, Oxfordshire: 01235-521563, www.abingdon.org.uk
- ◆ **Roedean**, Brighton, East Sussex: 01273-667500, www.roedean.co.uk
- ◆ **St Martha's School**, Hadley Wood, Hertfordshire: 020-8449 6889, www.st-marthas.co.uk
- ◆ **Streatham & Clapham High School**, London: 020-8677 8400, www.schs.gdst.net



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'They may not be able to write an essay on Shakespeare,' Mrs Thomlinson continues, 'but they can empathise with the characters, understand the drama and hear the beauty of the language.'

All this, as year five and six boys get ready for their production of Henry V. 'By speaking Shakespeare's words, which give such fantastic emotional expression,

and by hearing great works of literature from different traditions, the children grow in freedom and confidence to express their own ideas,' she continues.

'To make school really interesting and fun, a teacher must bring the curriculum alive, and what better way to illustrate a subject than by using the best materials.

'We have to inspire young minds to explore, ask questions and to wonder - to love knowledge. One must have no expectation of their response, just a wish for them to enjoy the best.'

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BUILDING BLOCKS

People are behind the best education, but do ensure your child's school has buildings to match its standards, says Vanessa Berridge

At my sons' junior school 20 years ago, buckets caught the drips when it rained on their flat-roofed classroom. When I drive past now, I see an array of new buildings. In two decades, independent schools have become increasingly competitive – across the board. What was once acceptable would now drive prospective parents away, and every school has one eye on its competitors. 'There is a facilities arms race,' says Alice Phillips, current president of the Girls' Schools Association (GSA) and headmistress of St Catherine's,

teachers to do their job properly.' He's right, but nevertheless the Anniversary Halls at St Catherine's, which were opened recently by the Duchess of Cornwall, feature a performing arts centre that will enhance the girls' experience of music and theatre. The auditorium, for instance, can be adapted for a full symphony orchestra or chamber concerts.

Sachania himself is awaiting authorisation from the Girls' Day School Trust (GDST) for a major development to include a new sixth-form floor, arts centre and sports hall, dining room

include a cafeteria, which, says Sachania, 'is now in the repertory of expectation for sixth formers'.

School developments can be an opportunity to involve pupils who are interested in architecture, design, engineering, or even business. For 30 years, lower-sixth girls at Moreton Hall School in Shropshire have run Moreton Enterprises. When a new shopping mall was needed for their businesses, the girls worked with the architects on the plans, raised funds, and pitched successfully to Barclays for an interest-free loan. There are now three separate shop areas: one has a cafe, sports shop and a Barclays bank; another is a Ryman store, kitted out by Ryman; and a shop selling everyday essentials.

A new science centre opened in September 2013, within which is a medical science facility, aimed at taking aspiring medical students a stage further towards their university studies. Funding came in part from grants available because of Moreton Hall's work with local state schools. 'This building has enabled that programme to develop,' says marketing director Alexandra

'When visiting schools, parents must look beyond the dazzle of the facilities to sense if the school has a real buzz'

Bramley, which has recently spent £15m on state-of-the-art sports, music and theatre facilities.

'People, not buildings, constitute schools,' says Dr Millan Sachania, headmaster of Streatham & Clapham High School in south London. 'Facilities alone do not make a successful school, but they should provide the context for

extension and some re-landscaping.

As I walk round the school with the headmaster, I see how students have already played their part: the current sixth-form common room was designed by the girls, and has a bank of work stations curving through the room, and groups of sofas, all in smart primary colours. Their new sixth-form floor will



The Common Room at
Streatham & Clapham High



The Duchess of Cornwall
visits St Catherine's



Moreton Hall's
new science block



Moreton Hall
School

Hankinson. 'It's a two-way street: our girls get a lot from the interaction, too.'

But how do heads run multimillion-pound projects when their own professional experience is derived mainly from teaching? That's where governors are important, says Dr Tim Hands, master of Magdalen College School, Oxford, and current chairman of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC).

'Last summer, we had a governor-driven master planning exercise. It involved the estates committee and an architect, and was chaired by our bursar. We looked at our site for a 35-year development plan. One of the striking things was that one of the buildings should be used entirely differently – which would never have occurred to me. As a head, you look for support from the governors on subjects you don't understand, like finance and buildings.'

For schools that are part of a group or a trust, such as the GDST, the planning is handled differently. The GDST's buildings range from the Grade I-listed Ipswich High School, to the modern, cutting-edge design of newly renovated Notting Hill & Ealing High School. In the GDST, individual schools are responsible for budgeting on maintenance, but the central trust estates team of architects and surveyors oversees and approves major capital projects.

But, says Dr Kevin Stannard, the trust's director of innovation and learning, 'We bring in the whole school community at an early stage. With pupils, teachers,

local governors and sometimes parents, we have a live audit about what works well, what could be better and what facilities should be added. Even the junior school may make models of their ideal playgrounds, buildings and lockers.'

At a recent GDST conference, Erica McWilliam, an Australian professor, spoke about the need to break down boundaries between formal classroom learning and informal learning elsewhere. New technology has allowed more flexible use of areas. 'Ten years ago, technology helped teachers give snazzier presentations,' says Stannard, 'but now it's more about learning. It's liberating for students, who can access internet anywhere in the school, and can study in corridors and cafes and use old spaces inventively.'

Children have fewer textbooks, so no longer need large, individual desks. At Northampton High School, bright, refurbished classrooms have been equipped with lockers. Space freed up at the end of a corridor has become an informal learning environment, with soft furnishings and computers.

When visiting schools, however, parents need to look beyond the dazzle of the facilities to sense whether there is a real buzz. Are there examples of curiosity, learning, exploration and purpose in the wider spaces? Parents should listen to what pupils say, advises Stannard, and how much ownership they take of the school buildings.

And, as Dr Sachania emphasises, a

school is only as good as the people within it. That's why the management team of St Benedict's, Ealing, was delighted to win the Investors In People Gold Award for its development, support and motivation of staff. Schools, both their people and their facilities, need constantly to change and develop, as is recognised by John Telfer, managing director of Investors in People South, in his citation about the school.

'The current economic climate makes it even more important that organisations adapt to survive. St Benedict's proves what can be achieved.'

CONTACTS

- ◆ **Girls' Day School Trust (GDST):**
020-7393 6666, www.gdst.net
- ◆ **Girls' School Association (GSA):**
0116-254 1619, www.gsa.uk.com
- ◆ **Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC):** 01858-469059/465260, www.hmc.org.uk
- ◆ **Magdalen College School, Oxford:**
01865-242191, www.mcsoxford.org
- ◆ **Moreton Hall School, Oswestry, Shropshire:**
01691-773671, www.moretonhallschool.com
- ◆ **Northampton High School:** 01604-765765, www.northamptonhigh.co.uk
- ◆ **St Benedict's School, Ealing, London:** 020-8862 2000, www.stbenedicts.org.uk
- ◆ **St Catherine's, Bramley, Surrey:**
01483-893363, www.stcatherines.info
- ◆ **Streatham & Clapham High School, London:** 020-8677 8400, www.schs.gdst.net

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HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT SCHOOL

It's the ultimate question and a life-changing decision. But the answer might be easier than you think

If you're considering sending your son to a top pre-prep, and then boarding him from the age of seven, the likely overall fee will be more than £300,000 in today's money. Girls may come in at just a bit less. With such huge sums at stake, you want to be sure that you're picking the right school for your children. Here are a few pointers.

KNOW YOUR CHILD

- ◆ Are they outgoing and sociable or rather shy and retiring?
- ◆ How would you gauge your child's relative academic ability?
- ◆ Do they focus and pay attention for periods of time?
- ◆ What subjects do they actively enjoy?
- ◆ What other talents do they have? Do they have particular leanings towards sport, music, drama, ballet, art?

DRAW UP A SHORTLIST

- ◆ Look at the ethos of the school: carefully examine the prospectus and website. Consider the efforts the school is making within the wider community to retain its charitable status.
- ◆ Try to meet parents who already have children at any schools you are considering. Do they share your values? Are their views on key aspects of child-rearing similar to yours?
- ◆ Look at the range of subjects offered: is the curriculum flexible enough to include minority interests, such as more unusual languages?
- ◆ Ask for absolute numbers as well as percentages, for when you look at league tables. Some schools are inclined to claim, for instance, a success rate of 100 per cent in gaining A*s in Mandarin, when only one student is sitting the

exam. If the school is reluctant to give you this breakdown, ask yourself why.

- ◆ Evaluate the school's attitude to risk. Is the school preparing children for adult life or is it inclined to wrap them in cotton wool?
- ◆ Go and look at several schools, to make comparisons between them.
- ◆ Do the groundwork yourself initially, without your child. Going to a new school is a highly emotional event, so it is best only to take a child to a school that you are seriously considering.

HELP YOUR CHILD GET TO THE RIGHT SCHOOL

Junior and preparatory level

- ◆ Spend time each day reading with your child so that they are ready to sit quietly in class with others listening to a teacher.
- ◆ Don't allow the television to become your electronic nanny.
- ◆ Encourage your child to spend time on creative activities, such as drawing, making models or doing jigsaws.
- ◆ Encourage habits of concentration and attention by giving your child undivided attention for certain periods of the day. Don't walk through the park with your ear glued to your mobile phone.

Secondary level

- ◆ Make sure that the child's junior or preparatory school is preparing pupils properly by taking them through previous entrance-exam papers and giving them mock interviews.
- ◆ But don't over-tutor a child to push them into a school above their academic ability. Education is, above all, about building confidence: bumping along the bottom does not help children to learn.
- ◆ Encourage your child to talk about their strengths in the interview.

WHAT TO DO WHEN VISITING A SCHOOL

- ◆ Prepare the questions you want to ask ahead of your visit.
- ◆ Visit the school during term time when lessons are in progress.
- ◆ Ask to sit in on a couple of lessons so you can assess the interaction between teachers and pupils.
- ◆ Notice whether the children look happy and well adjusted.
- ◆ Study noticeboards and classroom walls throughout the school. Do they match the school's boast of clubs and extracurricular activities?
- ◆ Find out about the pastoral care and whether there is a tutorial system that deals with emotional, as well as educational, problems.
- ◆ Check whether the grounds and buildings are well maintained.
- ◆ Take your child to the school you are most likely to select and encourage them to spend time without you, alongside current pupils.

DO NOT

- ◆ Be seduced by the obvious: the grounds and buildings may be magnificent but are they matched by the quality of the teaching?
- ◆ Allow the school to set the agenda entirely on your visit: ask to look inside the classrooms and talk to pupils and teachers.
- ◆ Forget to ask yourself whether you would be happy leaving your child at the school.
- ◆ Send a child to a school if you have serious reservations about it, even if other parents praise it to the skies.
- ◆ Be afraid to trust your own judgement.

Vanessa Berridge