

What The Good Schools Guide says

Head of College

Since 2014, Ben Figgis, MA (Cantab). Previously he was deputy head at Oakham and taught history at Abingdon School after an early career in broadcasting. His wife Joanna is a part-time teacher in London and their three (now adult) children all went through the College.

Despite his long tenure, there are few clues to this head's personality in his beautifully appointed study, besides the history and politics books displayed on the shelf behind his desk. A few MI6-themed novels could be a nod to his upbringing (he's the son of a diplomat) but he wryly implies that this was never a career option for him.

In his time at Ardingly Mr Figgis's focus has shifted from 'upping the academics' to 'pupils' wellbeing.' The school's 'world-ready programme' which focuses on equipping pupils with skills to thrive in the modern world, could be his legacy, although he says he 'really enjoys the school and the people' and will remain in post 'whilst they'll still have me'.

Well-liked among the staff and pupils we chatted to who find him 'personal', 'funny', 'friendly', 'supportive' and 'honest'. 'He follows through on things', said a pupil with an interest in an army career, recalling how Mr Figgis connected him with his army officer son for an hour-long phone call. 'He knows our names,' said many sixth formers, although parents of younger years were unsure. Perhaps the regular lunches he has with pupils might help. He also takes the public speaking module in the co-curricular programme, another chance to know pupils better.

'A quietly prominent CEO,' said a parent, but one who 'mucks in', referring to seeing Mr Figgis clearing up litter after a school event. While he is the man in charge, deputy head Mrs Burns, 'runs the place' say parents. A few felt 'lots of time and money is being spent on the overseas schools' and Mr Figgis is certainly focused on 'building momentum' at Ardingly's schools in China and Kazakhstan saying, 'It's the money coming from those which allows us to keep fees low at home and offset the VAT... there's actually no capital investment in the international schools.' Ardingly has recently taken nearby Great Walstead prep school into the fold which will operate separately to existing on-site Ardingly Prep.

'Affordability is a priority for parents,' says Mr Figgis of his current priority for the College. And a focus on ensuring ed-tech meets the needs of teenagers. 'Over my dead body,' was the quick reply when we asked him whether AI could ever replace human teachers. Mr Figgis is also keen to focus on the relationship 'between the school and parents'.

Cooking is Mr Figgis's favourite pastime, 'I'm happiest at the stove,' he says. Indeed, Mr Figgis teaches cookery to pupils in his own house as part of the College's enrichment programme, lasagna rumored to be his signature dish!

Entrance

For year 7 entry there is an 11+ assessment day including exam and interview, a reference and school reports also needed. For year 9 admission (still the main entry point into the senior school), ISEB pre-test in year 6. For admission into year 10 or fifth form, assessments

in English, maths and science, plus interview. Admission into sixth form by assessments in English, maths, verbal reasoning and critical thinking.

Exit

Almost all the children from Ardingly Prep now transition into the College's lower school (years 7 and 8) where they are joined by a new intake of applicants who mainly come from local state primaries. Around 15 per cent of students leave the College after year 11, mainly to join local state sixth form colleges. Over 80 per cent of sixth form leavers go on to Russell Group universities with Durham, Edinburgh, Exeter, Imperial and LSE all popular. Four to Oxbridge in 2024 and six medics. Around 25 students to the USA or Europe including Harvard, Northwestern, University of California, Penn State, Boston University, Bocconi in Milan, UCLL in Belgium and ESCP in Paris.

Latest results

In 2024, 72 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 64 per cent A*/A at A level (89 per cent A*-B). IB average 38.9.

Teaching and learning

One of the few schools in the country which successfully manages to teach A level and IB simultaneously. Around a third of pupils opt for the IB which has been on the menu here for 24 years, so the school has had time to tweak and perfect the offering. BTECs available in sports science and business studies, which 16 per cent take alongside two A levels. School stands ready to adapt if the new EEQs do indeed replace BTECs.

A broad offering of subjects at GCSE and A level including sociology, politics, psychology, philosophy, DT, photography, Mandarin (GCSE only) and Russian. One thrilled parent talked of how the school was 'amazing' at allowing their child to follow the Mandarin IB pathway in sixth form, in lieu of no A level, crediting the 'wonderful' head of sixth form. Latin compulsory in years 7 and 8, optional thereafter. Spanish most popular language, with 30 per cent taking GCSE and 11 per cent A level.

Pupils are set from year 7 across all core subjects, including languages. Class sizes are around 20 in years 7-11, and 10 in sixth form.

We heard many parent concerns about the overuse of laptops in lessons, although the school says they've introduced pens to the Surface Pros to encourage physical writing. Indeed, in the lessons we observed on the day of our visit (French, German, Chemistry) all pupils were using laptops, most with their Pro-pens. Tech aside, we noticed a genuine rapport between the staff and their pupils, much humour and warmth, a sentiment echoed by many parents we chatted to.

Overall, parents are very happy with the teaching: 'outstanding', 'absolutely fabulous', 'lots of expertise'. Teachers are 'exceptional across the board', 'dynamic' and a 'real strength of the school.' Ardingly isn't a hothouse or pushy say parents and teachers, although a few outliers implied teachers 'tend to focus on the really bright' and 'those they want to hang on to'.

Pupils and parents praised the GCSE revision clinics on offer, mandatory for those whose mocks weren't up to scratch, optional for others. There's 'academic monitoring' for those

underperforming and although pupils we met said 'It's cool to be smart here', the contrary opinion was voiced by a parent who thought that 'kids wear this [academic monitoring] as a badge of honour'.

Learning support and SEN

Learning support (LS) sits on the top floor of one of the wings of the main building, four rooms off a large bright corridor. Around 16 per cent of pupils use the department.

Long-serving SENco and her 19 staff oversee LS from pre-prep to U6. Dyslexia the most common need, followed by ADHD and autism. 'We're not equipped for those with severe learning needs' SENco admits, saying she wants children to 'thrive and not just survive'. Each department has a 'universal support toolbox' (ear defenders, sensory and fidget toys, white boards et al) for pupils to dip into. Pupils can take seven GCSEs (usually nine) if the department, pupil, and parents feel it's necessary.

Parents say the department is 'well run' and 'fantastic'. 'Once you're in the system, it's good,' said one. 'My child wouldn't be in school today without the department,' said another. Others, however, mentioned inflexible timetabling, a few saying their child misses the same subjects each week.

The arts and extracurricular

We sat in on a lunchtime rehearsal of sixth form play, 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' in The Under (school's modest drama hall), and were blown away by the standard and professionalism of the cast, crew, and the school's new drama head (a former understudy for Imelda Staunton no less). There is no grand theatre at Ardingly, a grumble shared by almost every parent we chatted to, but the strength of performance we saw proved that talent, good teaching and technical support wins over bricks and mortar. Pupils are involved in set-making, costume, make-up, tech and lighting, marketing and ticket sales. Whole-school annual plays and musicals, too, and all can audition. Les Mis, the most recent. New musical, 'You're Fired! The Musical' (co-written by pupils and staff), is off to the Edinburgh Fringe in the summer, we're sure it will be a sell-out.

Weekly drama is compulsory to year 9; GCSE and A level uptake is 20 and 11 per cent respectively. LAMDA on offer, 28 per cent uptake.

Art rooms, all interconnecting, occupy a floor of one of the grand wings of the main senior school building: kilns, pottery wheels, dark room, ceramics, textiles, sewing machines on offer. Head of art gives pupils the freedom to 'go with an idea' when they reach GCSE level. The in-house gallery was showcasing some exceptional pieces the day of our visit. The GCSE art session we walked through showed the makings of many 9s. Nineteen per cent take art GCSE and seven per cent A level. DT block has resources to rival most universities; a former parent told us that their child's desire to study the subject at university stemmed from their time here.

'Dance is becoming quite big,' said a few parents, unsurprising with a wonderful dance studio on campus, in full throttle the day of our visit. Great to see a few boys in the optional activity class, too.

Weekly timetabled music lessons until year 10 happen in the music school, with its five full-time teaching staff and a whopping 25 visiting staff. Over 450 individual music lessons each week, including drums, organ, and the harp. Choirs, ensembles and orchestras aplenty and mostly open to all, although some are invite-only and year dependent. Head of music keen to foster music as an 'industry subject, rather than academic' and the in-house music studio facilitates this. Pupils can create their own videos, arrangements, recordings and school is looking to set up its own record label. Nearly 50 per cent of the senior school take at least one instrumental or singing lesson. Parents and pupils spoke of choral trips to beautiful places, the summer jazz cabaret concert, and the spring concert at St John's Smith Square and Westminster Abbey, all major highlights. A parent said, 'Those in the choir are beautiful ambassadors for the school.'

D of E (bronze) offered to all year 9s, most take it up, silver and gold for the older years. No CCF. Over 200 extra clubs and activities including rowing and sailing on nearby Ardingly reservoir. We liked the sound of bystander training – niche.

Sport

All the facilities you'd expect including a super gym equipped with every machine there is; a 'girls only' strength and conditioning 'Remembrance Day' class was happening when we dropped by, everything in reps of 11 -, thoughtful. Head of sport is quick to inform us the boys have their own session too, and there are of course mixed sessions.

'Sport is amazing,' said parents of those with children in the As or Bs. Less positive comments from others, one saying, 'My child has dropped all interest in sports, which is a real shame,' referring largely to competition getting stronger from year 11 when three years (fifth form, L6 and U6) compete to get into just a few teams. Parents told us provision is 'amazing for sports scholars...so much laid on for you...but no pathway for those who aren't.' Winter cricket nets are by invitation only.

Quite a few parents commented on Ardingly being a football school. Head told us, 'No testosterone alpha boys here, thanks to no rugby.' As befitting a football school, head of sport is an ex-professional footballer (Manchester United) and boys' football is undoubtedly the main event, one parent saying, 'It's the be-all and end-all.' Football is the boys' main sport, hockey for the girls, and girls' football is gaining traction. Bede's and Whitgift are the teams to beat on the football pitch, and Hurst for hockey. Many county hockey players in the girls' As, we're told. Regular weekday fixtures against Bede's, Hurst, Lancing, Brighton College, Roedean. Girls' cricket a bit late to the party, only a year in, but head of sport says, 'It's going to fly.' Plenty on offer if you're not into the trad sports, including sailing and rowing on school's nearby reservoir, climbing, yoga, pilates, Zumba, and athletics.

Head of swimming is a notable World Champion and Olympian, and school has on-site 25m indoor pool in full use the day of our visit, open for pre-prep to U6.

Sports day is for pupils only, which parents said is 'a real shame' and 'a real sadness'. School's (somewhat grumpy) view is that the day is 'there for the pupils and not for parents having picnics'.

'Those who aren't sporty do miss out on a huge part of the school,' said one parent. 'A non-

sporty child would fare badly here,' said another. Not all agree: 'My child is trying every sport the school offers...they love it.'

Boarders

Boarding staff are 'beyond fantastic', said a parent, 'They've embraced my child like a family'. Many parents of overseas boarders talked of how their child has 'grown in confidence' and is 'so happy'. A few confided that they had chosen Ardingly over schools such as Sevenoaks, Epsom, and Cranleigh for its pastoral care, 'Way above the others,' said one.

Boarding houses (single sex to L6) are dotted around the campus, all purpose-built and well laid out. Mixed-age houses from year 7 to L6, younger years in rooms of two to four, older years either in singles, many en suite. Around 40 per cent of pupils do some form of boarding, flexi boarders get the same bed each time and can stay up to three nights a week. Pupils must choose between full boarding (inc weekly) or day in U6. Plenty to do at weekends, pupils told us, older years can head to Hayward's Heath in the school's minibus to get tuck and have a hot chocolate.

All U6 (day and boarding) go into Godwin House. Day pupils have shared study rooms, some with loo and wash basin. All boarders' rooms are en-suite. One of the smartest and most well kitted out sixth form boarding houses we've seen in the area, complete with own bar (supervised, naturally) and enormous common rooms with snooker tables, sofas, bean bags, and flat screen TV. Godwin looks out onto the glorious cricket pitch with its charming pavilion, a wonderful spot for summer evening hangouts.

Around 20 per cent from overseas, a mix of 30 different nationalities – IB attracts quite a few from Europe, notably Germany and Italy. Houses are 'carefully curated' to not have too many from any one country.

Day pupils have their own houses, too, of equal size and stature with similar facilities to the boarding houses. All very cosy and warm, with large (shared) study rooms, modern showers and plenty of chill-out spaces. Pupils (of all ages) were huddled up watching a Christmas film, with hot chocolates and popcorn in hand, when we popped into Neal, a popular and centrally located girls' day house. A homely scene.

Ethos and heritage

Founded in Shoreham in 1858 as a public school for Christian children, part of the Woodard group of schools, Ardingly moved to its current 240-acre site adjacent to the village after which it is named, in 1862. The modest entrance and short drive belie Ardingly's grand, gothic revival, red brick buildings. Dotted in amongst this grandeur are purpose-built boarding houses and modern teaching blocks, all set against a backdrop of glorious countryside.

Many pupils we chatted to chose Ardingly over some of its nearby rivals because of its 'friendly feel' and 'good sense of community', something we noticed on the day of our visit. 'Community', was repeatedly mentioned by pupils as a real strength of the school, less so some parents who told us they felt quite removed from the goings on of the senior school, 'There is nothing for parents between years 9 and 12...nothing,' said one. 'It lacks heart and soul', said another. Parents' association, Friends of Ardingly, might disagree, they lay on a

summer party, bonfire night (attended by over 1,000), quiz nights, murder-mystery party, summer ball – plenty of opportunities to gather.

Pupils attend chapel once a week. Sadly the whole College can no longer fit in, but thankfully the entire senior school still can. Services taken by school's Reverend. 'They don't harp on too much about tradition', said a parent; others rather wished there was a bit more.

We love the sound of the formal annual house dinners; parents attend and pupils serve the meal and arrange all the entertainment. Commemoration Day is a full summer's day of speeches, prizegiving, and chapel service for sixth form leavers and their parents and guests, culminating in a black-tie ball in the evening.

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

Protected characteristics posters are on display in each boarding house and there is a definite feeling that everyone is accepted here; pupils agree, one saying, 'Ardingly is a place where everyone can be themselves.' Plenty of school counsellors and a mental health lead on site shows school takes mental health seriously.

Chatting with Mr Figgis, it's clear pupil wellbeing is a priority, a noticeable change in tone from our last visit where the focus leant towards the academic. A shift in tone too perhaps, regarding the future of formal end-of-year exams, with more continuous assessment happening within class in the future. Head says he's looking at ways of 'taking the academic heat away' going on to say, 'A school needs to flex for kids.'

Pupils can 'go to friends, prefects, HMs, wellbeing staff and tutors, if any issues,' says school, although those we met said they rarely need to. Older pupils peer-mentor younger students and receive training in this, a system which all feel works well. A big focus on 'getting to know every student as an individual', achieved by ensuring no tutor group in the senior school is more than ten students. Zero-tolerance policy for drugs - one pupil recently expelled for possession.

According to parents the school has, 'Got it pretty right...it's pretty impressive,' regarding pastoral care. Most spoke of how happy their children are. 'Staff go out of their way to look after pupils, pastorally they're very strong,' said parent of full boarder. 'Not stuffy, 'Inclusive', 'Progressive' said others.

But we also heard some contrary opinions: one parent said, 'It's not great...it's messy.' 'Staff are decent people but strategies are lacking re tackling some simple problems,' said another. A few felt that communication between departments was weak.

Pelican Awards (PA) are given out for acts of kindness and general courtesy. Pupils nominate one another; a recent recipient received a PA for helping carry a new pupil's bag to the bus stop.

Whilst the school's new Cafe 150 is popular with pupils, a few parent grumbles that it's added pressure to give their children money for panini on days when the school menu doesn't appeal.

Pupils and parents

A broad mix: local day pupils bused in on the school's efficient minibus routes, flexi boarders from London and surrounds, and 20 per cent international pupils. Many dual-income families working hard to afford the fees.

Former pupils, Old Ardinians, include four Conservative MPs; satirist Ian Hislop; actor Terry Thomas; Formula One World Champion Mike Hawthorn and author Neil Gaiman.

Money matters

Academic, music, art, drama and sports scholarships available, between five and 25 per cent. Can be supplemented by a bursary award.

School hours support the many working parents: 8am-7pm is included in the fees and parents can pay more to drop off at 7am. Nursery open from 7:30am-6pm, 50 weeks of the year. Three meals a day across the entire College included in the fees, no need to pre-book.

The last word

An authentic all-rounder. A very busy place with a wonderful balance of tradition and modernity, where pupils get 'stuck in' and are 'gritty and grafty'. Ardingly successfully balances IB and A levels, an academic mix that benefits everyone. 'My kids love school and are happy,' said a parent; 'I know they'll end up doing very well academically and going to good universities,' said another