

Sunday Times 14th November Schools Guide

Boarding Schools are proving an increasingly popular choice both in the independent and state sectors, says **Judith O'Reilly**.

From Hogwarts to Malory Towers, Dotheboys Hall to St Trinian's, boarding schools conjure colourful literary images. But their enduring place in the modern educational landscape is no work of fiction, as Reading School and Wycombe Abbey - the respective Sunday Times State and Independent Secondary Schools of the Year - can testify.

For the first time in the history of the Parent Power Schools Guide, both our state and independent secondary title holders are boarding schools. Reading and High Wycombe each credit their successful atmospheres with the added benefits that their boarding communities bring. And with five applicants per place at Reading, and four to one at High Wycombe, parents' appetites for a boarding school experience for their children are clearly far from abating.

Reading is one of just 32 state boarding schools in Britain, and even though there are only 70 boarders split between two houses, their influence on the school culture is immense. The 1870s grade II listed architecture adds to Reading's boarding atmosphere, too, with head teacher John Weeds saying it makes the school look like a miniature version of Harry Potter's famed alma mater.

It may not actually be churning out wizards, but boys-only Reading isn't your run-of-the-mill school either. This year, an astonishing 71.5% of A-level entries were at A and A* grade - and 34.8% at the new A* grade. A total of 94.5% of entries were at A*-B grade. Results *were equally* good at GCSE, with 84.4% at A* and A, and 44.7% at A* grade. The school, described by Ofsted inspectors as "outstanding", is on the east side of Reading, and its 885 pupils are drawn from a radius of 25 miles, crossing county boundaries from Berkshire into Oxfordshire and Hampshire. Up to 15% of its intake comes from preparatory schools, and boarders also arrive from southwest England and north London.

Weeds believes the boarding tradition underpins Reading's effective pastoral care. "Boys like to have someone to talk to and I don't think there is a student here who doesn't feel they have someone to turn to when the need arises." A recent Ofsted report agrees, highlighting the school's determination to ensure the boys' personal development is "outstanding" and that they have a "sense of belonging" and "self-worth".

Boarders contribute massively to the extracurricular programme and also make good prefects and elders in the school community. Annual boarding fees are £9,500 to cover food and lodgings, but there are no tuition fees for any pupils. The school is selective and applicants sit an 11-plus exam for entry into year 7 with papers in verbal reasoning, non-verbal reasoning and mathematics as well as English comprehension. There are 12 places for boarders at this level,

along with 100 places for day pupils. Applicants for the 12 places in year 9 also sit papers in English, maths and science. This year, the number of 11+ plus applicants climbed from 500 to 550.

Another 30 students are taken on in the sixth form on the basis of GCSE results, with successful applicants required to have the equivalent of at least six As at GCSE.

Reading can lay claim to being the 10th oldest school in the country- it was established in 1125 as part of Reading Abbey. In 1665, it was taken over by parliament which had been forced out of London by the Great Plague. Reading School can boast an Archbishop of Canterbury (William Laud) beheaded in 1645 during the civil war, and four serving MPs who manage to keep their heads, whatever the provocation (Andrew Smith, Oliver Heald, Mark Field and Damien Green). It also has a prime minister - Henry Addington. in Downing Street from 1801-4 among its old boys.

Competition is a key element in the school- academic, sporting and musical. "Boys really do like competition," Weeds says.

There are inter-house competitions in rugby and football and a music contest described as the "highlight of the year", when all four houses compete against each other with a 30- to 45~minute programme of musical activities from solo to choir, modern jazz and mini-orchestral performances. "It's not just about the quality of musicianship," says Weeds. "It's also about leadership and organising rehearsals, competing, and getting teams of boys to move equipment."

Boys are free not just to compete with one another in extracurricular activities, but to learn. "It's okay in a single-sex boys school with a reputation for high achievement to regard learning as cool," Weeds says. "They are not embarrassed to read a book, or to calculate pi to extreme numbers of decimal places and they rate highly another kid's ability in a language or in physics - all things which might not go down too well in a less academic school.

"The boys have a great sense of humour and they are passionate about things, for instance, a form of technology or astronomy. and when you have got very bright lads they talk at undergraduate level even though they are in years 12 and 13. We may have a traditional setting, but there is scope to experiment and innovate and challenge."

With its long and distinguished history. great results, an ethos of learning, boarding, cloisters, single-sex education, selective entry and free teaching, as Weeds says: "Reading offers the best of the independent sector within a state school setting."