



# RYDES HILL

PREPARATORY SCHOOL & NURSERY

WHAT THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE SAYS



THE  
GOOD  
SCHOOLS  
GUIDE



## MRS SARAH NORVILLE

Since 2018, Sarah Norville. State school educated. Childhood dream to be a teacher realised across the south west London state sector, including 11 years at the helm of St Mary's Catholic, Wimbledon where she was appointed head at the tender age of 30.

At Rydes Hill the 'handcuffs' came off. Fascinated by the fourth industrial revolution that her protege will emerge into, her mission is to empower girls for 'life beyond school'. She has 'accelerated the school into the 21st century,' according to parents.

A self-proclaimed coffee snob - insists on making her own coffee from a machine in her homely office - we would liken her to that first latte of the day. Warm, authentic and invigorating. Traditional, with a splash of almond milk. Very little froth.

With no prior independent school experience, her biggest challenge upon arrival was building relationships with senior school heads. 'Lucky for me the Rydes Hill girl speaks for herself.'

Quickly won over parents via morning gate duty and parent forums on issues from homework to BLM, although she is keen to stress that it is not a case of the tail wagging the dog on decisions. Parents say she is 'the driving force of the school' and praised her 'incredible efforts' to deliver 'outstanding' remote learning throughout lockdown.

Everybody we talk to describes Rydes Hill as a family and this matriarch nurtures from the front, even taking it on herself to deliver the relationship, sex and health education to year 6. From the brightly coloured mini origami reward stars she hand makes, to the extracurricular coding club she personally runs - 'because I don't like the children to be a step ahead of me' - this is a head who genuinely cares for each of her charges. Parents concur - 'Wonderfully passionate....seems to emanate contagious energy. She is kind, she has good humour, and she has a profoundly holistic approach to the development of every single child,' said one.

Her ambition is to grow the school without losing its traditional values and family feel. 'A little more space would be nice too'. Plans are afoot.

Married with one young son, she and her husband are big football fans, Fulham for her, QPR for him, making interesting family rivalry. Stress relief is 'yelling from the terraces' at Craven Cottage.



## ENTRANCE

Annual open day and personal tours plus 'bear-hunt themed family days out' (all currently virtual).

**Non-selective with all faiths welcome.** Open to boys and girls at nursery where the split is 50/50.

Numbers reduce dramatically into single figures at reception until the end of year 2 when boys leave the school. Children are welcomed into all year groups, places permitting. Head would like to see 'a few more bums on seats'.

## EXIT

True independence sets Rydes Hill apart from the local competition. Ironically, all parents we spoke to wished for a Rydes Hill senior school. Instead, Guildford High School, Tormead and St Catherine's are the most popular pathways for girls. Lanesborough, Aldro and Cranmore are top choices for boys. The school's position at the bottom of the fee schedule in the region might explain the small number that opt for the state sector. **An impressive 16 out of 20 leavers were awarded scholarships in 2020.**



## OUR VIEW

Steeped in, but not stifled by, tradition. According to parents, Rydes Hill is 'a small, but mighty hidden gem' on the outskirts of Guildford.

Main building dates to the 18th century. A dark wood panelled entrance hall, complete with vintage dolls house and antique rocking horses, reinforces the 'special family feel'. Only the vast display of scholarship boards and packed trophy cabinet hint at the school's stellar academic and sporting results.

House names and 'barrelling' games on the lawn, distinctive uniform complete with berets and boaters and white gloves at prizegiving, all pay homage to the nuns who founded the school after the WWII. Ownership was transferred to a charitable trust in 1990.

Christian values remain at the core of this Catholic school, though only one third of intake are now Catholic. Thrice daily prayer is cited as 'the original mindfulness' by the school's pastoral lead. Portraits depicting Joan of Arc's life border ornately carved walls in the former billiards room, now a small library - contents of which were recently audited in light of the BLM and Me Too movements. 'We promote strong warrior women,' Mrs Norville asserts, before adding the girls are more beguiled with the mural's burning at the stake image.



Curriculum is traditional with a flourish of Forest School and ballet from the off. Children are 'educated rather than minded' at the 'busting at the seams' nursery which offers flexible year-round care. Focus is on becoming reception ready. Half have strong reading and writing skills by the time they move up. We observed a pre-lunch prayer recited flawlessly by children, some just out of nappies. Prospective parents will be delighted to hear work has begun to double capacity for the coming academic year.

With one-form entry and diminutive class sizes (15-19) each child enjoys an almost bespoke education. Cross curriculum and independent learning are encouraged early on. Lessons in the lower school are bustling. Children are highly engaged as they recite phonics and learn about seed cycles. A year 5 history lesson we observed was calmer, more studious.

Standards are high. The books we leaf through are impressive in both content and presentation. The use of fountain pens is another nice nod to tradition. Students are consistently stretched, but organically and in line with their own talents. Homework begins in year 3 and increases gradually to an hour a night in year 6.





Families chose Rydes Hill because it's 'not ferociously academic'. One said, 'There is a focus on a broader skill set than purely academics, valuing courage, communication and resilience and encouraging the children to take on any task without fear of failure.' The environment is clearly nurturing, not pressured. No last-minute push here. Year 6 artwork, classically framed along corridors, provides proof that this is a holistic school not a hothouse. By the time they emerge from this 'second home', the Rydes Hill girl is marked out by her rounded confidence, adaptability and self-motivated approach to study.

Parents say this is a substance over style school; 'not flashy'. Science and technology facilities prove their point, though had not dampened the enthusiasm of the pupil who demonstrated her metamorphosing robotic Lego frog to us. The science lab opens its doors in year 4 when girls are 'tall enough' to see over the desks. Elsewhere, huge bright classrooms with traditional blackboards and vintage flip lid desks charmed our attention away from the 'lived in' décor.

SEN pupil numbers in line with the national average. Teaching methods are described as 'dyslexia friendly as standard'. 'Stable, motivated and experienced' teachers quickly identify issues and provide one-to-one support. One parent described the provision as 'absolutely exceptional.' Another, whose daughter started the school with significant speech and hearing problems and is now flourishing, told us, 'She has never felt different to any of the other children in her class which is testament to the wonderful and caring teaching'.



Kindness is valued here above all else and modelled from top down. Bursary provision occasionally offered to families unexpectedly unable to meet fees and in lockdown, key worker state school children were invited in. One teacher told how the kitchen cooked and delivered evening meals for her children as she recuperated from a long-term illness.

Achievement girdles originated by the nuns, are both a cherished tradition and moral motivator for pupils. Awarded each week in assembly, we spotted numerous girls proudly adorned - one wearing a trio of the coloured sashes. There's a kindness board and even a kindness cup awarded annually.

'Not like a school, more like a family,' said one pupil. 'Everything I ever dreamt of,' gushed another. When asked what they might change about their school the pupils we met were truly stumped. 'Nothing. It's all precious and wouldn't be Rydes Hill if we changed anything.' One girl did start to divulge details of a minor 'bullying' incident but was soon back on message, 'Because we can only keep our own sunshine shining'. Future careers in marketing await.





Being such a tight knit environment can be both a blessing and a curse when it comes to discipline and friendship issues. As expected, there's a zero tolerance approach to bullying, with the school keen to ensure it's not a term either children or parents 'band around' without substance. Younger children are kept in line with the usual positive rewards based visual discipline techniques. By the time they reach year 1 any creases are ironed out. All classes leap up to say a respectful 'good morning' upon our entrance.

In comparison to its counterparts, Rydes Hill's sporting opportunities and facilities are middling. A classic selection of sports is on offer - netball, gymnastics, swimming, hockey, athletics and cricket. But this is not the school for those seeking numerous games courts and a state-of-the-art sports hall. **Emphasis is firmly on enjoyment and participation, though not at the expense of competitiveness, which is actively encouraged.** The dedicated head of PE has her sights set beyond the Small Schools Shield. The netball team recently secured a place in the National IAPS U11 Finals, sadly curtailed by lockdown. Weekly swimming lessons at the nearby local pool start in reception. Rydes Hill took first place in both medley and freestyle relays at the 2020 ESSA Gala. Three girls received sports scholarships the year we visited. Nurturing and inclusive, older girls take on coaching roles and largely due to numbers, every single girl is in either the A or the B netball team in the upper school.

There's space for everyone at the standard selection of afterschool clubs.



The performing arts is where most scholarships are awarded. With two choirs, an orchestra and 'unlimited opportunities' to perform, this is an all-singing, all-dancing school in the literal sense. Year 4 were rehearsing for the summer production and belting out 'Singing in the Rain' complete with jazz hands on our visit. The school nativity still ran during lockdown, featuring year group bubbles in various locations within the school grounds - it was streamed to parents an episode a night. Led by an ardent and long-standing drama teacher, *distinctions in speech and drama exams are standard. 'My daughter is better at public speaking than I am,'* reckoned one parent. Children learn the violin, wind and brass instruments from year 2 and enjoy two 40-minute music lessons a week from reception. 'Almost any instrument' is available as they progress with up to 90 lessons taking place each week.

Parents are hard working, with their feet on the ground. One told us, 'We wouldn't have considered private education, but we came to look around and fell in love'. A mixed bunch, both socio-economically and in terms of ethnicity. A super-social school, life-long friendships are made between children and parents alike and alumni are actively encouraged to return regularly. From informal cross year group family camping trips in the holidays to fundraising quiz nights, fairs and dinners run by the 'Friends' – you'd be the 'anomaly' if you weren't involved, said one parent.

## THE LAST WORD

A school for families that value community, care and confidence building over flashy facilities. It delivers a diverse extended family as much as a robust but unpressured education. It is indeed small, but mighty.











WELCOME TO  
RYDES HILL  
PREPARATORY SCHOOL

