



The Good Schools Guide Review of Millfield Preparatory School

Pupils

450 boys and girls; boarding and day

Age

2-13

Religion

Inter- denominational

Head

Since September 2010, Mrs Shirley Shayler MEd BSc PGCE. Educated at Carrickfergus Grammar School, Northern Ireland, degree in biology from the University of Stirling, PGCE from Queen's University, Belfast, Master's in educational management. No stranger to Millfield, having taught biology at the senior school 1989-2002 and undertaken an impressive spread of pastoral and extra-curricular roles including coaching 1st XI girls' hockey and being a houseparent. Deputy head of Taunton School for four years then head of Stonar for another four plus years doing much to expand and improve the sixth form. Lives on site with husband Gary, biology teacher and head of careers at senior school, and daughter, Caragh, who attends Millfield Prep and rides a school pony.

'Delightful' and 'caring' but steely when need arises. Parents we spoke to all thought she was 'a good head who works hard' and commented on how 'she has won respect through not being afraid to stick to her guns.' Loves being back at Millfield: 'a way of life rather than a job,' she commented to us. Really believes in educating 'whole child' and in releasing children's potential. Often seen walking family Labrador (she recently delivered seven puppies). Still involved in hockey and also enjoys swimming, cycling, skiing (annual family ski trip is a highlight for Shaylers), reading and the theatre. Vision for future includes providing more enrichment à la Dragon's Den-style enterprise activity, more involvement in the local community and further developing pastoral care.

Entrance

Many admitted via interview and report from previous head (eg from prep schools finishing at 11). Some arrive from pre-preps or local primaries and others from as far away as Venezuela or Hong Kong (we have seldom seen such a varied list of feeder schools). LDC tutor involved at interview where there are special learning needs. Can be flexible – will always make the effort to take pupils and has been a sanctuary for pupils unhappy or failing to thrive elsewhere: 'IQ not the only arbiter; we need to see the child, not just a collection of data.' Can and will take when space available; means-tested bursaries available in cases of genuine need and a number of scholarships (all the usuals plus chess) for entry into years 6, 7 and 8. The former depend on success in the scholarship exams which can be sat each January.

Exit

Most proceed to senior school. Dozen or more scholarships won annually to senior school: academic, art, music and sport. Transfer automatic: good behaviour and satisfactory academic standard expected. A small number move elsewhere, mostly to other independent schools.

Remarks

A unique prep which adheres to traditional pattern of Saturday morning lessons followed by games. Sport and learning support facilities are second to none. Millfield provides a top notch experience in almost every sphere. Lively boarding community which doesn't empty out at weekends (apart from exeats) and still includes Sunday chapel. Boy and girl numbers pretty equal throughout. Many sign up for complete (2-18) Millfield experience. Parents underline how school 'instills confidence and maturity' and how it 'has brought a global dimension to rural Somerset.' Prep campus benefits from more acreage than its senior partner. Centrepiece is an elegant Victorian home of former local landowners. Oak-panelled hall leads to head's capacious study (now made-over to suit her taste) which looks out across manicured, leafy site. Internal standard of classrooms, sports and other facilities more than compensates for lack of architectural cohesion on a site that has grown like Topsy. Unusual external touches include a huge outdoor chess set and the multi-coloured climbing wall. Children seem quite content, scurrying around like worker bees under the queen's command. Main entrance sits on a bend of A361 on the Pilton side of Glastonbury opposite (and safely accessible via footbridge over main road) school's small chapel, nine-hole golf course and Edgarley Manor (a boys' boarding house) at the foot of the famous Tor.

Show starts successfully with Millfield Minis, a three-day-a-week event for local parents and toddlers using pre-prep hall from 10.00-11.30am. There are even Minis' swimming, tennis and trampolining: mind-boggling stuff. Pre-preparatory department (no boarders) moved from town centre to its present complex on main site some years ago and caters for pupils aged 2-7. Safe, ideal location within former walled garden. Reception area shouts creativity and fun; classrooms are flexible learning spaces with eye-catching displays, live animals and loads of interest. Outdoor raised beds for veggie growing, safe play and exploration including forest school area (two teachers trained leaders) nearby. Pond includes underwater camera for pupils to watch submarine activity on linked computer screen inside. We liked the three little pigs guarding the gazebo and outside quiet area. Cosy library to make reading fun and Indoor tumble room for scrapes without scratches. Read Write Inc a favourite phonic approach, number games abound and we saw some beautiful progressions of pupils' cursive handwriting on display. Humanities and science themes run alongside core learning. Music, art and drama (last performance was *The King's Magic Cloaks*) all play a big part. Pre-prep had played out the Olympic opening ceremony a few days before we visited: involvement is the key to learning here. Explore days to sample activities such as willow butterflies and glass painting. Visits aplenty (pre-preppers had been to Olympic sailing venue at Weymouth on day we visited). Children coming into pre-prep are automatically assessed for learning support: one-to-one groups and specialist lessons for those who need extra help from two specialist teachers who work closely with school's learning development centre. Parents appreciate the experience of many long-serving teachers and the extent to which it is 'an inclusive environment' rather than pushy.

Most of the prep school buildings are modern (if not of any particular architectural merit) and provide well for a community of nearly 400 children. The large, refurbished assembly hall not only serves for school's frequent drama productions but is also used extensively for activities such as

fencing and gymnastics. The well-stocked library is above the dining complex (probably the best we've seen in a prep school: all shiny service counters and friendly staff). Food is plentiful and varied. We observed versatile teaching across a broad curriculum in small classes (maximum is normally 16) from an experienced and friendly staff. Years 3-5 are taught by group tutors for most lessons. Setting from year 3 in English, maths and languages with mixed-ability tutor groups. From year 6 all lessons are taught by subject specialists, with tutors continuing to have pastoral oversight. Academic standards are reassuringly high. Despite many children needing extra English, the school's 'language for all' policy ensures that every child can take Spanish as part of their programme. French and Latin are on the main menu with some linguistic side orders also available (eg Mandarin, Russian and Japanese).

The five science labs are still housed in very adequate temporary accommodation close to the main teaching areas, and teachers we spoke to were in no rush to move into a new building. Young number crunchers perform well in competitions such as UK maths challenge and we were told that children particularly enjoy using MangaHigh software. We noticed some examples of mature English writing and imaginative study of poetry. Not overrun with computers though the iPad may be about to become de rigueur. Splendid IT suite with 18 PCs in two areas where we saw some pupils operating robots they had programmed; good use made of smart boards and digital projectors in all subjects. Scholarship group starts in year 7 and we saw some year 8 scholars preparing for Salters chemistry festival at Bath University. Strong eco bias (green flag holders) with regular focus on environmental issues (eg switch off fortnight) and annual eco day. Strong pastoral team overseen by experienced deputy head: each child is watched over by group tutor, responsible for welfare and progress, and first port of call for anxious parents. Reports are termly, with grades for effort as well as attainment. Parents contacted every half-term regarding progress.

Millfield's language development centre (LDC) is a centre of excellence currently helping 100 or so pupils. There are five full-time and four part-time specialists plus a classroom assistant able to administer various software programmes. Strong liaison throughout between LDC, pastoral and academic staff as well as with senior school. Millfield is not a special school, but it attracts pupils with a range of problems from mild literacy difficulties to those with a diagnosis of dyslexia and/or speech and language difficulties. Detailed assessments are carried out in the main body of the school with access to more than 15 different types of assessment including visual and auditory. If reading or spelling is more than a year behind chronological age, this is flagged up, 'But data is not the only aspect taken into account when determining a pupil's current needs.' Each pupil on the SEN register has a pupil diagnostic profile, which details their strengths and weaknesses as well as offering support and guidance to class teachers. The head of LDC is also qualified in neuro-developmental delay with the Institute of Neuro-Physiological Psychology. If the programme is thought beneficial for a pupil and after a positive assessment (co-ordination, balance, visual development, laterality and spatial awareness), a 'five to ten minute a day programme, using no special equipment and replicating movements from the first year of life, is implemented, which gives the brain a second chance to develop the reflexes needed to provide a firm foundation for learning.' Visual overlay and auditory assessments can be carried out by trained members of the LDC team and referral can be made to a speech and language therapist who works closely with both the prep and pre-prep. Good tie-up with houseparents when children may need extra help. All areas of life here based on efforts to find an aptitude, build self-esteem and develop the potential of every child: 'Like a Porsche with a dodgy gearbox ... you just need to sort out the gearbox,' said SENCo. Parents praised how their daughter, previously in a specialist school, was now 'blossoming' at Millfield through the

combination of specialist help and ‘an emphasis on the positive side of everything.’ Special programme (Potential Academic Curriculum Excellence or PACE) undertaken by super-bright. Group help at both ends of the spectrum included in fees but one-to-one support and recall to therapists are chargeable. EAL teacher uses academic lesson time with over 30 international students to immerse them in English before they are progressively fitted into mainstream curriculum. Dining hall was bedecked with flags when we visited for annual international bash: lovely foreign nosh and pupils in own traditional dress.

Sport is a big deal here and a pull for many parents: five PE specialists and a number of ex-international coaches. Sixty pupils in swimming squad alone, partnership with LTA to provide top class tennis coaching and bubble over one of nine courts on site (pupils go to senior complex if necessary) ensures practice continues through winter. Stonking sports hall (includes large spectator area and four squash courts – two of which are glass backed) was opened in 2005, an equestrian centre with extensive stabling and arenas for dressage and show jumping was built at the same time, a nine-hole golf course just for Millfield prep, a fine 25-metre pool (ditto) and all sorts of courts, pitches and fields to cater for every conceivable sport and activity (seven county champions in athletics alone). Rising stars can miss a regular PE lesson to receive individual coaching (eg from ex-first class cricketers). U13 girls had just won national (not just preps) cricket title at Lords when we visited. A powerful presence across all major sports at county and national levels. School is not invincible and meets some stiff competition on the prep schools circuit. Individuals star in many disciplines: fencing, tennis and golf being recent examples. Even the chaplain has a sporting seam running through him (he was going off with a golfing group when we met him). Recent rugby tour was, all of all places, to Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Millfield brain does as well as its brawn with its chess teams defending an enviable reputation in tournaments at all levels.

Cracking music department under long-serving director: attractive modern recital hall (seats 200), classrooms and serried ranks of individual practice rooms; wide range of instruments, 350 individual lessons, 29 music ensembles and 18 annual concerts. Junior baroque chamber orchestra plus four choirs and a chapel choir. Pupils selected for national children’s choir and orchestra. Annual highlights include home-grown Young Musician of the Year competition and a rock and pop concert. Drama lessons lead to many pupils becoming involved (on stage or behind the scenes) in one of four major productions held annually. Staff sometimes have to write plays to suit Millfield’s large casts. Parents have been amazed at positive effect of school drama on their children. Art (including popular after lessons clubs) is strong as evidenced by displays around school, from print-making to ceramics via ICT, with critical discussion an integral part of its teaching. Good environment in both drawing and painting studios; innovations downstairs included an ex-government printing press bought for a song and stone carving taught in warmer months by talented working artist and done under a lean-to adjacent to art department. Picture of the week chosen from pupils’ artwork for insertion in school’s newsletter. Design facilities are more akin to a senior school and include CAD design and a laser cutter. Products range from torches to clocks. Textiles aplenty downstairs and food science upstairs encourages innovative cooking which even includes an inter-house competition.

A peaceful haven away from urban distractions where pupils clearly enjoy themselves. House system is used for internal competitions of all kinds (not just sport). Apart from Edgarley Manor (boys’ boarding house) across A361, remaining four boarding houses are on main site: all modern with capacity for 38 boarders each. No large dorms: boarders either in two, four or six bed units (early

swimmers kept in rooms together to avoid disturbing others when they get up to train). More of a home from home than an institutional feel and bright colours help keep spirits high. Year 8 allowed to do prep in rooms; otherwise, boarders are supervised in school between 5pm and 6pm. Well-equipped common-rooms and cosy kitchens for snacking and chatting. Extra tuck part of house reward system. Boarding houses have outside play areas including tennis court and enclosed field; sick room with alarm in each if houseparent needs calling. Medical staff available 24/7. Day pupils can benefit from fleet of minibuses which ferry children (early rises for some) from outlying villages in time for 8.25am start. Younger ones can leave at 3.45pm but majority of day pupils stay for activities until 5pm. Great choice of daily and Wednesday afternoon activities (for those not involved in matches) includes sailing at Durleigh, sub-aquagroup aiming at PADI junior qualification and caving on Mendips. Weekday activities include Airfix modelling and touch typing, as well as sports from pop lacrosse and indoor go-karting. Diverse theme days and stimulating educational visits to destinations as distant as Rome or as close as Glastonbury Abbey all add to broad mix. Charity fund-raising and activities within the local community are also given importance.

We liked the way that so many year 8 pupils get leadership roles on a rotating basis and how 20 of them trained with Kidscape to become peer mentors. Former pupils include 10 current first class cricketers (including half of Somerset CC 1st XI), rugby stars: Matt Perry and Chris Robshaw, Olympic hockey brothers: Simon and Richard Mantell, Euan Dale (Scottish swimming medallist, Joey Barrington (squash international), Ruth Kelly MP and Max Milligan (photographer, author and explorer). Happy school with genuine excitement at every level. Pupils find their niche here (be it academic, sporting or creative) and 'want to do well.' Facilities to take your breath away but school produces well-rounded individuals rather than arrogant know-it-alls. 'My daughter was dancing with the daisies before she joined Millfield,' said one mum, 'and now the change is unbelievable.' Parents testify to extent that 'academic and less academic pupils can flourish alongside each other.' Hard to do better than this if the package suits.

Self Portrait (completed by Millfield Prep)

Millfield Preparatory School's strength lies in the belief that every child is an individual and to put the child at the heart of everything we do. To discover and develop the talents and abilities of each child has always been the Millfield vision and with world class resources and facilities every child has the maximum opportunity at Millfield to find their strengths and aim for excellence.

The school has a friendly and caring atmosphere where pastoral care is high on the agenda. We believe that happy and contented children will have the confidence to take on any challenge. We do encourage our children to be active and to be thoughtful, considerate and mindful of the needs of others.

It is often commented by visitors and parents of the school that there is an almost tangible feeling of openness and well-being here. Our pupils are happy, relaxed and confident. They enjoy school life and the experience of being part of such a vibrant community and they go on to exceed their expectations.

"Pupils at Millfield have the time of their lives" ISI Inspection Report, 2009.

Please come and experience it for yourselves.