

THE  
GOOD  
SCHOOLS  
GUIDE



1803

**The Duke of York's Royal Military School**

Looking forward with confidence, looking back with pride



***“Pupils surprise themselves, leaving with confidence, self-respect, good results and high ambitions well equipped as future leaders”.***

*The Good School Guide* writers visit on normal school days and meet the headteacher, pupils, parents and teachers, as well as speaking to parents. Their reviews then cover everything from academic matters, sport and the arts to the atmosphere of the school, staff, discipline, fees, facilities and where pupils come from or go on to. Schools are selected on merit and cannot pay to be included.

#### Principal

Since 2017, Alex Foreman, previously head at King’s School, Germany, for 10 years (navigating military withdrawal). Attended Oakham School, degree in theology and philosophy from Roehampton. Ambition to join the police scuppered by rugby injury (he was a speedy winger back in the day) so, after working as sports technician, trained as a teacher in RE and PE at Uppingham School in Rutland, instead. Then, ‘either being really stupid or really clever’, moved to an inner-city school in Leicester as an RE teacher, ‘where I really learnt to teach’. Believes the trick to get the buy-in from pupils disillusioned with education – ‘getting the pastoral care right’. Drawn to this school because of ‘the challenge’ (he felt the school had ‘lost its way’) and, coming from a military family himself (his father was a major in the Royal Artillery), he ‘got it’.

Clearly adores the place, calling it ‘a beautiful, friendly place’ – ‘Being a Dukie is something special,’ he told us. Pupils say he is ‘genuinely proud of the school and works really hard to up our game’ and that ‘he believes in us’. You know where you stand with him, they add – ‘There’s no mixed messages.’ Parents respect and trust him. We found him relaxed (eg popping into classes rather than formal observations) and authentic (‘Why do the pomp and ceremony?’ he shrugs). His traditional wood-panelled office is surrounded – as you might expect – by all things military, but is fascinating not stuffy. Has introduced an open-door policy for classrooms – appreciated by all.

Lives on site with his wife, joking that his two children have ‘had the misfortune of having me as their headteacher,’ but are now ‘successful adults’. ‘So I must have done something right!’ Remains a sport enthusiast, especially rugby (a Leicester Tigers supporter), hockey and cricket.







## ***Progress scores soar above the national average.***

### **Entrance**

Academically non-selective. Interview with assistant principal (registrar) and reference from previous school to assess boarding suitability.

Year 7 the main entry point, but places crop up throughout. Most from state primaries, some from independent preps and senior schools. About 20 join at sixth form – requiring two grade 5s and four grade 6s at GCSE including maths and English, plus some subject specific criteria (grade 7 in maths to study maths; ditto for physics).

### **Exit**

Over half of students remain for sixth form after GCSEs. Those leaving depart to sixth form colleges close to their homes or enter onto Army apprenticeships. Eighty per cent of sixth formers to university, about a fifth to Russell Group. Birmingham, Exeter and Warwick all popular, as are Oxford Brookes, Kingston and Nottingham Trent. Wide range of subjects includes business management, engineering and sport science, as well as law, primary education and pharmacy. Usually a couple of army scholarships a year. Degree apprenticeships gaining traction, eg PWC, Skania and Amazon. One medic in 2023.

### **Latest results**

In 2023, 18 per cent 9–7 at GCSE; 12 per cent A\*/A at A level (39 per cent A\*–B). In 2019 (the last pre-pandemic results), 23 per cent 9–7 at GCSE; 9 per cent A\*/A at A level (36 per cent A\*–B)



## ***Pupils say the support is ‘great’; parents tell us ‘they achieve beyond expectations’.***

### **Teaching and learning**

Progress scores soar above the national average, leaving local competitor state schools in the dust. ‘I couldn’t have dreamt I would be where I am now,’ we kept hearing from pupils reflecting on the top universities they had secured offers from. They attribute this to small classes (maximum of 20, then 15 in sixth form), support for homework (tutors on tap in the boarding houses), investment in facilities (eg whizzy engineering suite) and clear expectations.

Setting in maths and English from year 7, which a few pupils feel holds them back, although parents like the system – ‘Sets aren’t etched in stone,’ said one. Homework on the heavy side (‘about one and a half hours a night,’ groaned one year 8 pupil) and pupils are not fans of SPARX maths, but this a common complaint in many schools. Pupils report easy relationships with their teachers, where lessons are mostly fun – not much opportunity to drift off at the back of a classroom, they say. All pupils use laptops.

Thriving language department, with pupils learning French or Spanish, neither compulsory at GCSE. We saw a lively Spanish session. Eight GCSEs the norm, with geography and psychology popular. Around half do triple science – we witnessed a few investigations underway and an engaging lesson on energy efficiency.

A levels are standard fare – most take three, some two plus BTEC, and no stipulations to what you can or can’t do. Most popular A level subject is history. BTECs in business (the fave for many), computer science,

engineering, sport, dance and drama – all get good numbers. Excellent careers advice – we dipped into a session in the library, a large flip chart filled with options. Cosy, supervised sixth form area is a place to study, as well as engage with pastoral care – with a useful stress reduction display which pupils told us about insightfully. ‘Flexi-study’ can be earned whereby pupils choose to study elsewhere, most heading to the café serving hot drinks and ‘honestly the best panini I’ve ever had,’ raved one pupil.

### **Learning support and SEN**

Ramsay House, a separate building dedicated to SEN, houses exam access rooms, a large area for group interventions and rooms for one-to-ones – all consciously minimalist to avoid sensory overload, yet also welcoming. The 12 per cent on the SEN register are supported mostly for ADHD, autism and specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia by the SENDCo, assistant SENDCo plus three TAs. Pupils say the support is ‘great’; parents tell us ‘they achieve beyond expectations’. The weekly social clubs (three groups of pupils with similar needs, eg anxiety) are felt to be particularly effective. Parents also praise the multiple consultations (three times a year). The school advises parents that ‘very full-on, very busy’ school days could be overwhelming for some, especially with sensory overload, although feel ‘the structure can work well for some children with autism’ and pupils get the option to have each school day explained before they start. Very few EHCPs – well below the national average.



### The arts and extracurricular

Music is outstanding. All year 7s can learn an instrument for free (90 per cent are beginners) and, the vast majority continue, supported by 10 peris and four full-time instrumental teachers. This feeds into the ensembles which include training band (grades 1-3), military band (grades 3-8 from year 9) and the drum corps who play at a variety of prestigious events, the latter so in demand that they have 'to turn invitations down'. Recent highlights include King's Day at the Belgium Embassy, Magdalene College Cambridge, Finnish Ambassador's regimental dinner, Menin Gate and the King's coronation. Repertoire ranges from the classic (and challenging) Royal British Legion March and Sons of the Brave (the pupils' fave) to some Queen and Katy Perry bangers. A gospel choir, rock brass group, and various small pop bands balance the military vibe, and there is a school choir. Curriculum music teaches 'rudimental principals' in a fun way, eg whole class keyboard lessons on James Bond theme tunes. Inclusive too, recognising that a 'quiet and shy' pupil can excel in a band, given the correct support.

Drama and dance both on curriculum. We watched a dance session led by ex-professionals and were impressed by the interactive wall encouraging pupils' literacy in choreographic terms and devices. A handful of pupils study BTEC in dance and about 15 on average at GCSE. Similar take up for drama, where focus is on Berghoff physical theatre. Department is mindful of diversity, eg examining the stylistic features of African dance. One big musical each year - High School Musical up next, with 40-ish students getting involved in everything from lighting to performing. LAMDA available free of charge.

Art said to be 'developing', with growing interest. Two large bright studios with intriguing displays by year 9 on Klari Reis experiments. Photography gaining popularity.

Forget the name, only a small part of extracurricular is military themed (although one parent laughed that their child recently rushed off the phone to polish her ceremonial kit). The 100+ clubs ('key to the all-round-education,' says school) include British Sign Language, basketball, French and sculpture. We swung by cooking club, where pupils were making Swiss rolls, then environment club where the pupils shared ingenious ideas to tackle school waste. Pilates popular (boys and girls) and basketball attracts an enthusiastic bunch. Medsoc has a good turnout, having recently expanded to year 10.

As a DofE accredited centre, DofE is huge. We even spotted a DofE Defender parked casually on the road and were bowled over by the kit - so impressive that local schools borrow it too. All year 9s do bronze (on curriculum), with 75 per cent completing silver and a fifth gold, with some inspirational tales of overcoming adversity. Not surprisingly, CCF also popular - recently enjoying exercises at Crowborough Camp.

Plenty of trips, including skiing in Italy for the thrill seekers, while music tours to Belgium are described as formative moments for many. Drama trips to see shows on the up.



***"As far as the eye can see, there are sporting facilities"***

### Sport

'As far as the eye can see, there are sporting facilities,' said a parent, and she's not wrong. Olympic size athletics track, full size outdoor climbing wall, rugby pitches, sports hall, dance studio, indoor swimming pool (albeit rather dated) and rifle range among them. Well utilised too, according to parents, who feel the school does 'really well' at sport, 'considering the size and local competition'. Collaboration with Ealing Trailfinders rugby academy has put rugby on the map, with teams basking in recent

success against local rivals. A 'skills deficit' in girls sport has been identified so initiatives such as female only swimming sessions, Zumba, badminton and Pilates have been introduced, and the White Rose hockey academy now fields 12 girls' hockey teams. Football (boys only) recently introduced, with U13 and U15 clubs having proved instantly popular - but school says it is being monitored so as not to encourage 'unwelcome behaviours'. The gym sees serious action, with pumping music and all the equipment any gym bunny could need.







### Boarders

The only state school in the country where all pupils are full boarders. Parents like that ‘the school never closes’, and that stability is maintained without the chaos of day pupils (although a few local students do go home on Saturday night for a quick 12-hour flying visit). About two thirds stay at school on exeat weekends.

Large spacious dorms for year 7s in two centrally located houses, with older years bunking down in houses on the other side of the campus. All kept neat, tidy and organised (pupils do chores every morning) but not clinical or lacking character. No shoes policy in the communal areas, adding to the homely vibe. Pupils return at break times to grab a snack and touch base with their houseparent and/or matron (‘We love them,’ pupils gush). Mindful of neurodiversity too, eg being flexible

in sleeping arrangements and creating quiet chill out spaces. The first few weeks can be tricky, admit pupils, but they soon settle – and parents are impressed by communication with staff, especially for year 7s.

The ‘cool’ sixth form boarding house gives a sense of independence – ‘a step between school and uni’ – girls on the upper floor and boys below (all ensuite). Sessions ringfenced for single sex time, eg so girls can hang out in their PJs without boys joining them. Town leave on a Saturday until 9.30 pm – ‘Make mistakes, lose privileges,’ pupils warn.

After Saturday school and sporting fixtures, the popular weekend activities kick in, eg silent disco, panto visit, pamper nights, dodgeball, karaoke. ‘Every minute of the day is busy, they come home to rest,’ one parent laughed.

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### Ethos and heritage

Founded in 1803 for military orphans in Chelsea, the school de-camped to this high vantage spot above the white cliffs of Dover in 1909 and has continued to evolve ever since. Past the gatehouse, the driveway meanders through the 150 acres to the grand main building, with the chapel and plethora of buildings beyond. Some are original heritage, others uber modern (eg sixth form boarding house) and most in between (all in good nick – for a state school it does an excellent job at maintaining facilities). Imposing first impressions, then, yet exudes a surprising and inherent warmth.

We half expected to be met by a military parade (so much for preconceptions) but instead were greeted at 8am by a chapel filled with boys and girls singing with impressive gusto. The parades, it turns out, are saved for Fridays, where ceremonial uniform is dusted off and shoes shined – all culminates in the highlight of Grand Day, where friends, family and old ‘Dukies’ come and watch. Pupils are well turned out the rest of the time too, with navy blazer, tie and kilts for the girls (‘too long,’ grumble some). No let-up in sixth form where only maroon jumper and sixth form badge sets them apart. School cagoule essential, given the large campus and cob-web sweeping weather.

Masses of traditions. We experienced the weekly High Table, whereby deserving pupils are invited to a civilised table service lunch – including cheeseboard! The rest had hot dogs and chips – less appreciated by staff but thumbs up from pupils. New catering firm due soon. The AG (Adjutant General) room hosts regular dinners for eg junior under officers, senior under officers, prefects, mess committees, and scholars – to prepare them for socialising in a more formal manner; speakers are invited too.

House system taken seriously – and it’s not just about sports day. ‘Your house is your guard,’ one pupil explained, showing us their guard’s heart pin. ‘As soon as you start, you’re presented it which makes you feel you belong to something really special.’ Each house competes in the weekly military parade – ‘It really matters,’ said a pupil, ‘You’re letting your guard down if you don’t make an effort.’ But what if you’re new or don’t come from a military family? ‘Not a problem,’ pupils laugh, ‘there’s always someone looking out for you – it’s like a family.’ And they point out it’s such a small part of school life anyway.



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#### **Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline**

Very rare for pupils to step out of line, with sanctions (detentions, internal inclusions and even fines) clearly laid out and displayed around the school. Being 'gated' or moved to Montgomery House is a punishment all strive to avoid. 'You realise quickly that you have to toe the line,' said one pupil. 'But to be fair, it's done me a favour,' reckoned another. School says pupils are 'rarely advised to leave', although some parents believe the reality is more often and wonder whether 'rehabilitation' could be better. Still, overall there's a resounding approval for issues resolved swiftly, and there's an equal emphasis on rewards, with pupils able to earn privileges such as free study.

Good pastoral care, say parents – it has to be, with everyone boarding. House parents are 'second parents,' approve parents, and are the first port of call, with 'pragmatic and easy' communication. Wellbeing posters prominent in boarding houses, dealing with issues head on eg sexting. PHSEE on curriculum throughout, including sixth form. Peer listening and counsellor available, either self-referral or by school. Wi-Fi blocks Instagram and Snapchat.

School feels inclusive, though there is clear hierarchy within houses and ranks. Equality and diversity reps are active –the issue of compulsory c

chapel attendance recently being raised. While there are no overt rainbow flags or symbols around (as in some schools we visit), pupils feel confident that all are welcome.

#### **Pupils and parents**

Pupils are respectful, candid and mature, with genuine curiosity. Diverse ethnicity, with a cohort of Nepalese (from the Gurkha community), Nigerian and Fijian, among others. Three boys to every two girls, no doubt a hangover from its single sex days. Parents from all walks of life, about a half from military backgrounds. They share a common goal in wanting stability for their children for a multitude of reasons, eg London-based and wanting more facilities and space, parents working erratic hours. They are invested in the school and clearly value education.

#### **Money matters**

Free tuition, with parents only paying boarding fees. Year 12 academic scholarships for those gaining three grade 8s and three grade 7s at GCSE – worth 80 per cent remittance on boarding fees. Sports scholarships from year 9 – worth 50 per cent.

#### **The last word**

A school for pupils willing to hang their egos at the door, polish some grit ('life's not going to hand you anything,' say pupils) and trust in the supportive environment. With this, pupils surprise themselves, leaving with confidence, self-respect, good results and high ambitions. For team players, not subverters, who recognise the value of a diverse network of friends and alumnae, proud that 'Once a Dukie, always a Dukie!' 'Go and see it,' parents urge friends, 'Park the name as it's absolutely not a boot camp, just a great school with military heritage.'

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