

What The Good Schools Guide says about Rowan Preparatory School

Headmistress

Since 2014, Susan Clarke BEd, NPQH University of Southern Queensland (primary and psychology) (late 30s); joined the school as deputy head in 2012 following a West Acton primary school headship. 'I wanted a solid grounding in an independent school,' she explains. After the previous head's early retirement, she became acting head before being appointed head in April 2014. Mrs Clarke believes her own education in an independent all girls' boarding school helped prepare her for her present role whilst gaining 'valuable operational experience' in a state school which was part of the community, a feature of the Rowan with its close village and church links. 'I have thoroughly enjoyed leading the school, seeing the prep develop from two to three form entry.' Living in Claygate, with a supportive husband who works in the City, she shows no sign of moving on; her own daughter is in the school and son nearby. Her Australian accent is barely discernible, nonetheless she shared with us her love of warm, sunny days and BBQs. To relax she cycles, walks and enjoys cooking family meals.

No longer teaching, Mrs Clarke ensures plenty of contact with the girls by leading weekly assemblies in both parts of the school, sharing Friday scones with girls and manning the school gate whenever possible. Parents describe her as 'progressive and forward-looking' and feel confident she will ensure their daughters are equipped for life. Loyal staff share her vision, value the school community, and feel supported in their professional development. No stranger to the demands for working parents, she has ensured supervised prep sessions are available and full days packed with opportunities as well as increasing holiday provision. Aware of ambitious parents' expectations, she is on hand to advise parents about their senior school choices as well as listen to any girl who might have a concern. 'I want all the girls at Rowan to love learning whilst enjoying their childhood.' Parents admire how the head and her team provide cohesive leadership and respect 'a head who does what she says she is going to do'.

Entrance

Non-selective throughout, offering taster days for girls to ensure they can access the education on offer. Entry at 7+ involves an activity day with Year 2 girls, all completing maths, reading and writing tasks and some craft with a Year 3 teacher. The nursery takes up to 18 girls from age 2 with priority for joining kindergarten with up to 10 more pupils. Kindergarten splits to form two reception classes with an equal number of joiners who remain until Year 3 with its three classes. Many join from local nurseries, some from pre-preps including Shrewsbury House, Glenesk, Jack and Jill, The Rowans plus state schools including Thames Ditton Infants, Long Ditton Infants, St Matthew's Downside, The Orchard and St Paul's Esher. Parents come from a range of business and professional backgrounds. The means-tested Pell Assisted Place Award benefits prospective Year 3 pupils who might not otherwise be able to afford an education at the Rowan. Other bursaries for those who fall on hard times.

Exit

Rowan has an enviable reputation for securing places at a diverse range of senior schools, the majority independent girls' day schools and these sparkling results are one reason parents choose the school. Guildford High and Surbiton High (fellow United Learning schools) are popular choices with a commendable number of scholarships awarded in recent years. Other regulars are Tornead, Notre Dame, St Catherine's, Bramley, St Teresa's, Effingham; Lady Eleanor Holles and Wimbledon High also feature. A few move on to co-ed eg St John's Leatherhead or Kingston Grammar, a sprinkling to board, usually Benenden or Wycombe Abbey and a few to state grammar Tiffin Girls' in Kingston. Parents state there is 'plenty of hand holding by the head and her team, providing bespoke expertise to ensure the appropriate destination for individuals'.

Our view

In 1936 at Rowan Brae, in the leafy village of Claygate, 16 miles from central London, founder Katherine Millar - whose great niece is a current governor - admitted her first young pupils. The motto *Hic Feliciter Laboramus* (Here We Work Happily) encapsulates the school's ethos, providing a broad curriculum which encourages learning and opportunities for all to enjoy childhood in a happy, nurturing environment. Soon afterwards Rowan Hill, a short distance away, housed the preparatory department, and the school became a charitable trust in 1961. Now a member of United Learning, Rowan shares its objective of encouraging 'the best in everyone' and benefits from ongoing investment, the use of sports facilities and staff training. Parents comment, 'The school has a grasp on reality, so important as we are incredibly lucky to live in Surrey. Home and school life are balanced with the emphasis on the children, not on the business.'

Rowan Brae houses the nursery to Year 2, overseen by one of two deputy heads, who when we visited was moving to her own headship in Oxfordshire after 11 years here. Parents feel confident the many long serving staff will provide continuity, and that the school will employ an excellent successor; a true sign of trust in the leadership. Just as there has been investment in the Hill, so there will be refurbishments to Rowan Brae, providing a welcoming front entrance with ground floor medical room, as well as hall, music and technology rooms, making best use of the space available. Classrooms lead out into the playground and the light, spacious rooms are filled with imaginative, artistic displays, including a wonder wall showing impressive handwriting progress over time. Jam-packed with equipment including computers and banks of iPads, the Brae has its own kitchen with food prepared on the premises, so there's no to-ing and fro-ing to the prep site. Outside is an eco garden room with natural wood and greenery 'to get away from the plastic and bright colours'. Cleverly refurbished classrooms have displays and sinks at child level and there are plans to extend the colour scheme and ideas elsewhere.

We saw inventive topic lessons, girls preparing for sports day in the playground, and others enthusiastically discussing their jungle animal parts in a forthcoming production. Year 2 pupils we

spoke to were happy, engaging and confident, describing trips and activities they enjoyed including ballet, hockey and chess and excitedly anticipating their first sleepover at school. They proudly explained how good behaviour is rewarded with the presentation of the class bear to go home overnight and displayed Rosie Rowan (an 80 year-old school doll), who presents weekly pre-prep awards and celebrates her birthday with a party every May. There is a sense of purposeful activity and girls collaborating, supporting one another, so it is perhaps no surprise the recent ISI inspection found the school to be outstanding.

The nursery hosts a toddler group on Fridays and parents are made to feel welcome. Brae parents describe it as 'nurturing as well as structured'. Comparing it with their sons' schools, they find Rowan more formal in approach, especially for younger pupils who start their day in the playground, taken up to their classrooms by teachers rather than by parents. Parents can view each girl's 'learning journey' folder at any time, attend parents' evenings, concerts and assemblies; additional meetings are by appointment. All value the role play approach to teaching involving song and dance, with extracurricular activities available in reception including chess, sewing, computing and gymnastics. The versatile hall is used for gym linked with topics such as pirates. There is a little homework, reading each night and a page of tricky words based on sounds. Several parents applauded how teachers encourage the girls to use their imagination, for example making maps or investigating what the ladybird heard and saw to catch a thief. Year 2s are carefully prepared for a smooth transition to the prep, with anxious ones invited for lunch and to use iPads to photograph their new building to lessen anxiety. Several teachers work in both buildings so girls see familiar faces and go to the Hill for some lessons, such as art and computing. The head of inclusion learns all she can about the girls moving up and works across both sites.

There is universal praise from parents for the motto 'I can, I can, I know I can' taught to the girls to help them cope with challenges and become resilient, both inside and outside school. The school is a close community, collaborating to bring out the best in everyone. The curriculum is balanced between academic and pastoral, both of which were judged 'outstanding' by inspectors. We saw Mrs Clarke lead a weekly assembly awarding copious certificates, praising not only academic, music and sporting prowess, but the 10 star qualities which include kindness, cooperation, courage, perseverance and resilience. The prep pastoral deputy head has counselling skills and teaches every class social and emotional well-being, and parents praise the 'well rounded education' their daughters receive and consider 'all teachers are approachable and all girls are cared for'. Communication systems between home and school work well, with weekly Friday Notes from the head, email contacts with prompt responses, as well as prep book notes. There are no serious discipline problems and friendship issues are quickly resolved with honesty and empathy.

Specialist teachers in pre-prep for music, art, computing, French, ballet, PE, games and swimming extends to all specialists at the prep. Latin from Year 5 with Spanish and German available as additional language clubs. Philosophy and mindfulness for all with engineering and technology in recently opened, well-equipped room. Year 6 study life skills and learn about careers, businesses, even undertaking risk assessments. Learning outcomes are excellent, catering for gifted and talented girls and those with learning difficulties equally well. Effective assessments and monitoring ensure everyone is supported. Currently 3 girls receive English as their additional language support,

primarily in class but also with one-to-one help where appropriate in partnership with parents. The experienced head of inclusion works closely with her team, focusing on in-class strategies with intervention groups for those who need them. All Year 1 girls receive a free cello or violin lesson, sponsored by the parents' association. Some 80 per cent of girls in Years 2 to 5 take instrumental and/or singing lessons with regular senior school music scholarships awarded. Choir and ensemble instrumental groups are timetabled before school and during lunch breaks.

Confident Year 6 girls chatted happily to us over French Friday croissants and lunch. They feel safe and part of 'a family where everyone knows one another'. They wish their teachers could stay for ever and that drama lessons were longer. They enjoy playing in the woodland spinney, although, some parents commented sadly, 'not in the wet'. Their gazebo was funded by the extremely supportive parents' association, which provides a social side and raises finances for eg retractable seating plus adventure play trail. Sports include netball, hockey, lacrosse, cricket, gymnastics, dance, swimming, athletics, tennis, cross-country and biathlon, with judo, badminton, football, Sh'Bam and tag rugby clubs, plenty of fixtures and facilities a short drive away. Girls excel at gymnastics, hockey, athletics and swimming: the website records their many sporting wins. Grumbles are very few but some parents would prefer the girls to play sport every day and wish there could be more space, suggesting this is not the best choice for a very sporty child. Sports clubs before school using a fleet of minibuses ease early drop offs in a residential side road.

A school with a forward-looking but traditional head, where polite, biddable girls look impeccably neat and tidy in smart red and green uniforms. 'I would never question choosing the Rowan where I have three really happy girls, one dyslexic, one bright and one in every team, as there is something for everyone.' A vibrant, high-achieving school, Rowan manages to be fun-loving and not pressured, ideal for determined triers, keen to do their best.