

Parents rush to get children into the very best London independent schools like Harrow



A CAPITAL AFFAIR

Dance like a butterfly and sting like a bee and you might just get your child into a London school, says **Charlotte Fairbairn**

Carolyn Parrish, registrar at Fulham Prep, which takes pre-prep entry on a first-come, first-served basis, doesn't turn a hair. A man is chasing her down the school corridor waving a piece of paper at her. It's the school registration forms for his baby, born just a few hours earlier. This is London and she knows that parents, desperate to get their children into a limited number of good schools, have to act fast.

'If you don't register your children for the prep school, pre-prep school or even nursery that you want them to go to the moment they are born, you are in trouble,' says Mia Reay, a mother of three children under the age of seven. She is Finnish and was educated at a series of international schools before going to Cambridge University. She is married to an Anglo-Dutchman, a Westminster School and Brown University alumnus and the family lives in Kensington. London has always been a melting pot of different cultures, but now that parents arrive with the francs, dollars and euros to match their aspirations, the schools are chocka. Sitting at her children's table are two school friends, half-Nigerian, half-Zimbabwean, whose doctor parents spend every single penny of their incomes on ensuring that their (divine) children get the absolute best education.

In many ways, this vignette represents a microcosm of the London independent school landscape. Yet this is not the whole story.

According to rankings released by the World Economic Forum in 2016, the UK's schooling system does not rank high on the list. It does not even feature in the top 11. Finland, which is about to introduce 'phenomenon' teaching at sixth form, meaning pupils are taught in topics rather than by subjects, heads those rankings. Switzerland, Singapore and Canada also perform consistently well.

Yet in spite of its relatively modest showing in these tables (it hovers around

number 20), the British private school education sector has an extraordinary international allure. Stories demonstrating the desirability of London schooling are legion. One London parent told me of a Russian child who had been dispatched with the nanny to a Belgravia pre-prep. The parents remain in Russia and the child is miles from its family – a high price to pay for a place on the ladder.

How to explain this? There is the cachet of the private school tradition – the great buildings, the ties with the Church, the pomp and the history. Our oldest private schools go back to the sixth century (King's Canterbury was founded in 597), and in London, St Paul's Cathedral School has been in existence for 893 years. On top of that, parents who pay for their children to go to an independent school in Britain know they are placing their children in an environment which looks after the whole child in an all-encompassing way, which is rarely available in other countries.

Moreover, in this globalised world we now inhabit, the English language is the leading lingua franca. One in four global citizens communicates in English with an estimated

565 million people using the language on the internet. If you can pay for a venerated, sophisticated, nurturing education for your child in one of the world's great cities, what are you paying for if not the opportunity for your child to become one of the most enabled?

London is the home of Westminster School which, along with St Paul's School for boys and Eton, accounts for more boys' admissions to Oxford and Cambridge than any other. Paulinians – pupils of St Paul's Girls' School – are renowned for their achievements beyond the classroom. Alumnae include Dodie Smith, of *I Capture the Castle* fame; the composer, Imogen Holst and politician and stateswoman, Shirley Williams, to name a few. From the loins of Dulwich College sprang explorer Ernest Shackleton; Arts and Crafts designer Charles Voysey and visionary and P. G. Wodehouse, creator of the perennially brilliant Jeeves. At 270 years old, James Allen's Girls' School (JAGS) is London's oldest independent girls' school and can claim credit for the achievements of artist Winifred Knights and writers Anita Brookner and Lisa St Aubin de Teran.

Great private day schools in London include the Hammersmith-based Latymer Upper School, King's College Wimbledon and North London Collegiate Girls' School (which ranked fifth in the 2016 *Sunday Times* independent secondary school league tables). Feeding these are a host of prestigious and highly rigorous prep schools, from Wetherby and Pembridge Hall – both members of the Alpha Plus Group – through to the six Eaton House group schools based around Eaton



ABOVE: King's College Wimbledon is one of the capital's best day schools
BELOW: Places at Fulham Prep are like gold dust





ABOVE: The oversubscribed Knightsbridge School has adopted a 'work hard, play hard' mantra
RIGHT: North London Collegiate School looks beyond its own grounds with international links to a Korean school



But there is another important factor says Sebastian Hepher, headmaster of Eaton Square School, 'In the 24 years since I have been working as a London head, the horizon has altered dramatically. More are applying, yes. But there is also a far wider incidence of scattergun applications. One child may be put forward for any number of different schools, which puts even more pressure on the application system.' In other words, while there is more competition, there is also, as Jennifer McEnhill points out, a greater perception of competition.

Old-fashioned market economics dictate that when supply cannot meet demand, prices rise. In the schooling context, this is evident – only the definition of price is broad in the case of schools. Fees have risen – but that is a fact nationwide, and schools genuinely work to keep them as low as possible. But as well as this is the more concerning academic inflation, as standards rise year upon year in London. This is the price your child has to pay in order to succeed in a crowded market. There are more exams. More pre-tests. Why would you put your child through the 8+ for example when you can have a go at the 7+ and double your chances? I am shown a copy of a 7+ paper. 'The child is required to write a story in English consisting of three paragraphs and to understand "inference and sarcasm",' says parent Joanna Jackson, whose six-year-old son is

doing 'homework club' two days a week, which implies a ten-hour day. 'Homework club' is a euphemism for being groomed for the 7+.

Magoo Giles, head of Knightsbridge School, a prep founded in 2006 and already heavily subscribed, is very keen to help the 'below top ten per cent' who might not make the most academic schools. This goes hand in hand with his 'play hard, work hard' mantra and his desire to create a community school, where all pupils can reach school on foot. Nevertheless, for applicants over nursery age (nursery places are for siblings only), Knightsbridge candidates (along with their parents) are interviewed. Not selective exactly but at the same time, another daunting hoop for a young child to leap through.

All of this makes it sound as though the London school scene is something to be lamented. Overcrowded, over competitive, stress-inducing. So what are the advantages of going to all this trouble? Suzie Longstaff, head of Putney High School (an all-girls' school and member of the 24-strong Girls' Day School Trust), has nothing but praise for the London landscape. 'Yes, applications to our school went up by 25 per cent last year alone. And yes, I do crawl on my hand and knees to make sure I go through every single application. But I do think we are really lucky in London. We have great students and committed parents. And the parents have great schools to choose from.' In the recently published *Sunday Times* league tables, 12 out of the top 20 independent UK schools were London-based.

And there are signs that the situation may ease as increased

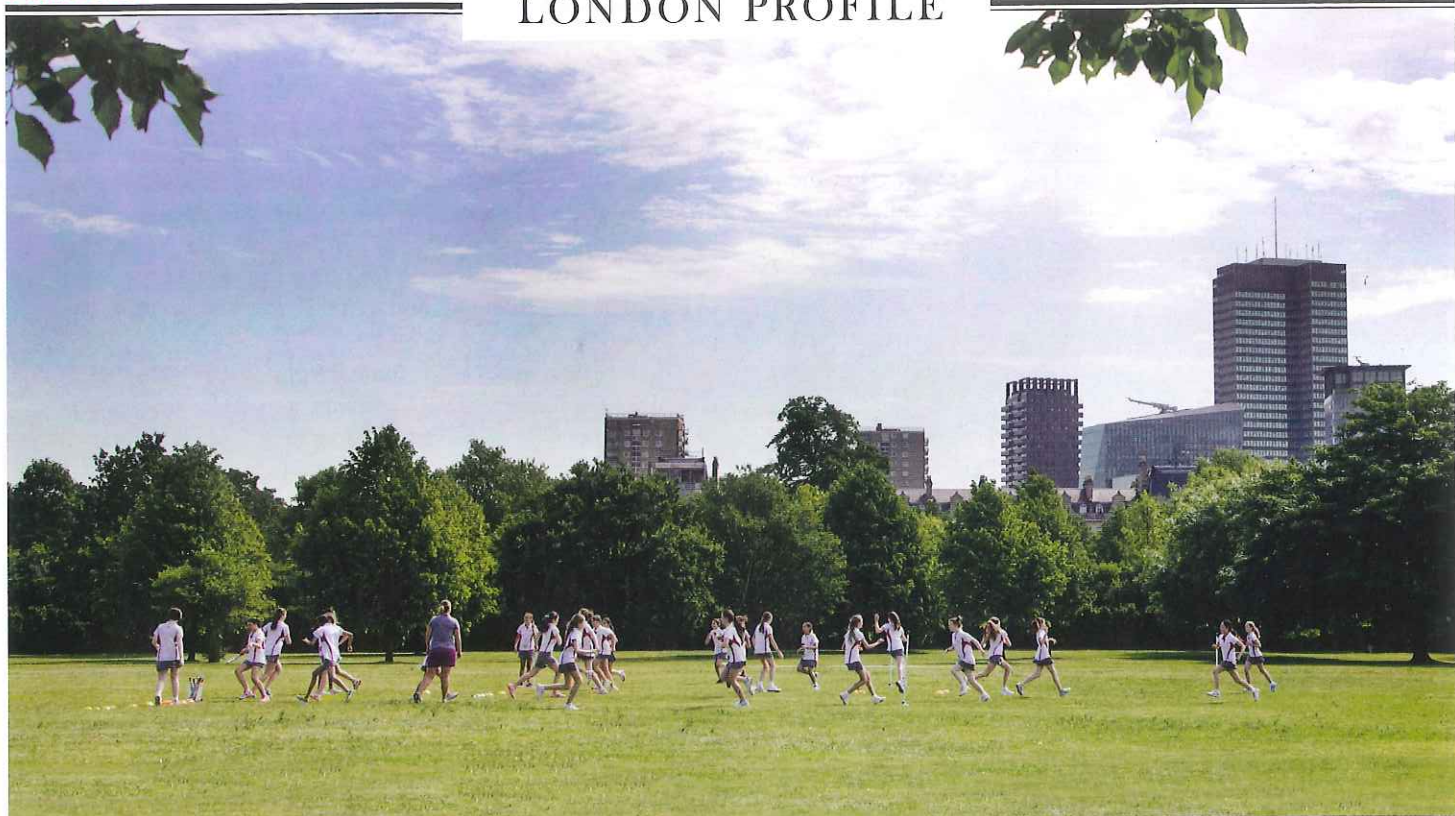
demand is creating supply. New schools are springing up – Notting Hill Prep is about to open a senior school; Fulham Prep, headed by the newly appointed Neil Brooks and recently absorbed by the South African-based Inspired Education Group, opens its senior school in September 2017. Eaton Square is preparing to open a secondary school in Piccadilly, also in 2017. These are just a few of many.

Not only that, but when Fulham Prep opens its secondary school, its pupils will not have as many hoops to jump through to gain a secondary place. 'In London, it's not uncommon to find pupils transitioning to senior schools sitting several exams at both 11+ and 13+. By presenting parents with an alternative, where children enrolled at Fulham Prep automatically receive a place in the senior school, we will provide an easy, natural transition.' Whether or not this array of new schools will be sustainable is open to question. Andrew Halls says: 'I am personally supportive of these initiatives. There is definitely a gap in the market for good schools that are less selective than, say, Westminster. On the other hand, I believe that Michael Gove did a great job for schools in his tenure and it may well be that the state sector quite properly comes to erode the private school foundations.'

The opportunity to study at these schools is becoming more readily available. At St Paul's School, for example, the number of bursaries has doubled. 'In recent years,' says Zeena Hicks, the school's head of communications, 'families who might have sent



Alley's in London occupies a 26-acre site in south London



ABOVE: Francis Holland Regent's Park is one of the best girls' day schools in the capital
RIGHT: Britain's first school to teach lessons in English and Chinese has opened in London

their children to our school or similar have found the fees make us inaccessible. We wanted to broaden our reach. The uptake has been tremendous.' In December 2016, a nationwide bursary initiative was announced by the Independent Schools Council, proposing a scheme jointly funded by schools and the government to create another 10,000 free private school places across the country.

Innovation is on the cards. Professor Hugo de Burgh has gone into partnership with the Cothill Trust and in 2017, Kensington Wade will welcome its first ten pupils. Named after Sir Thomas Wade, who was the inaugural professor of Chinese at Cambridge, it will be Europe's first 'immersive' English-Chinese school: children aged three to 13 will be taught the whole curriculum in both languages. As de Burgh explains, 'I had a Damascene moment when I organised a symposium on Chinese relations for Gordon Brown at No. 11. The then director of Rio Tinto Group piped up and said he only recruited staff who spoke mandarin. This was echoed throughout the room by other business leaders – and it was at that point, I thought we should act on it.' To some, this may sound like a scary prospect – a tiger mother's dream come true. But in a globalised world, perhaps we have been lagging behind? 'Eight-hundred such Anglo-Chinese immersion schools exist in the United States,' says de Burgh. And already, he adds, the partnership and the model have had interest within several other European countries.

But what if your child is not super academic? What if you, as a parent, cannot face the horror of trailing from school to school, finding doors closing because the inference train has passed you by? Of course, you need not confine your search to inner London – there is an excellent selection of schools within commuting distance. Ludgrove, set in 130 acres of Berkshire, is a top feeder for Eton. Papplewick and Caldicott likewise are commutable prep schools and have excellent relations with their secondary counterparts. A host of the top independent schools as cited in the recent *Sunday Times* ratings are if not in London, then close



it. Gill David, of St Catherine's Bramley in Surrey, puts the advantages of such schools in a nutshell. 'Increasingly it is London parents that we see coming to look at St Catherine's. What they like when they come here is the space. Yes, we have high academic standards – these can be achieved in a lovely green environment. Weekly boarding is an option, plus we run a bus to and from Guildford station.'

London may be a hothouse but it seems that's where the tallest flowers grow. On my pilgrimage round the London scene, talking to pupils who went to Westminster for example, I have been nothing less than impressed. These are highly motivated, argumentative, opinionated young individuals. At 18, they have as much to say about Brexit as I do. They are confident, engaged, interested in reading, thinking and debating. Any school of course can bring this out – and you would be hard pressed to say that the best teachers are always drawn to working in the capital. But tradition lends authority; so too does an international setting; cultural diversity lends interest. All in all, it may be fairly hellish for the parents who have to dance like butterflies and sting like bees – but if, as Andrew Halls suggests, 'parents do careful research, do not panic and keep an open mind', the opportunities are there, with even more in the pipeline. ■



S.R. Binney - King

Bassett House Birthday

Headmistress **Philippa Cawthorne** reflects on the North Kensington school's 70-year history

What makes an education at Bassett House School unique? My staff and I pride ourselves on giving all the children a solid academic foundation, while also seeking to find and develop each child's innate ability and talent. Subjects are taught to a high level by specialist teachers in small classes or groups, and children are given the opportunity to demonstrate their achievements through concerts, musical ensembles, drama, art exhibitions and sporting competitions. At Bassett House, we believe in maximum participation so that children may grow in confidence as they try a range of different pursuits. Friday afternoons are dedicated to a varied enrichment programme in which children can develop their skills in activities such as animation, coding, orienteering, philosophy or even Scottish country dancing!

Residential trips like sailing on the Solent or bushcraft activities allow children to experience what has been termed the 'hidden curriculum' – the values, attitudes and capabilities they need to grow into adults who can navigate their way through 21st-century life. All the trips have been selected to include activities that promote resourcefulness, decision-making and practical thinking.



Does the school's founding ethos still persist today? When Sylvia Rentoul founded Bassett House in 1947, she was strongly opposed to the factory approach prevalent in most schools at that time. Instead, she was determined that her school should focus on each child as an individual and adopted the Montessori method of education. In terms of each child's own potential, her objective was to provide an environment in which pupils are happy, secure and confident.

A prominent feature of the school's ethos is for all members of the school community to show each other mutual respect and concern, and for close relationships between school and home to be nurtured and valued. The children run their own school council in support of these aims, which is a learning process in itself.

What is your selection process? We do not believe in testing very young children, as the experience can be stressful to the child and the parent, while the results themselves can provide little evidence of a child's potential. Consequently, there is no entrance test for children entering the Den (at age three) or Lower 1 (at age four). Parents are, however, expected to inform the school of any factors affecting their child that may cause difficulties with his or her education.

For children seeking an occasional place at the school in any of the forms above Lower 1 (Reception), the school conducts assessments to determine the child's attainment, particularly in English and mathematics.

What are the benefits of an education at a city day school? London is such a vibrant and exciting city, with almost limitless learning opportunities, including its world-renowned museums, theatres, exhibitions and sports facilities. City day schools may not have acres of green fields at their disposal but we are fortunate to be within walking distance of the Westway sports centre and Kensington Memorial Park.

At Bassett House, there are workshops and educational visits each term and the buzz of being in a London school is palpable. There is also a wide choice of first-class senior schools within the city for the children to move on to for the next stage in their education.

What do you want Bassett House pupils to be like when they leave? We celebrate each child's individuality, so there is no one template for how Bassett House pupils should be when they leave the school. However, each will be a happy, confident learner. Entrance results for the leading senior schools have been consistently excellent and academic, art and drama scholarships have been awarded to Bassett House pupils in recent years. We want our children to embark upon their secondary education feeling confident about themselves, with a range of abilities and a life-long passion for learning and adventure. We believe that the leaders of the future will need to be resilient, flexible and creative: qualities that are instilled and nurtured in Bassett House pupils and which, when they leave us, are second nature.



Bassett House School is part of House Schools Group. For more info visit: bassetth.org.uk