

VIRTUAL VISITS

Schools have been inventive in lockdown with online tours, even featuring drone footage. But how do they compare to the real thing?

This summer, Oxford University carried out the first undergraduate virtual open days in its illustrious history. Current students took part in Q&A sessions, answering thousands of questions while more people went on virtual tours of colleges than in any physical open day.

The Covid-19 pandemic has rewritten the rules of traditional open days. In London, schools have not let parents pass through their gates since lockdown began in March. And while many have traditional open events tentatively scheduled for autumn, contingency planning is afoot.

For Francis Holland, which has a junior and a senior school for girls in Sloane Square and a senior school for girls in Regent's Park, the challenge was to collate video footage for a virtual tour from scratch, says Vanessa McKinley, the school's head of marketing and external relations. "We weren't set up like some of the boarding schools. We're a central London school and don't have acres of rolling land. What we sell is the amazing relationship between staff and pupils."

With London in lockdown the school took advantage of the clear skies and traffic free roads to release the school's drone to record footage – the first time a central London school has had permission to do so. They filmed key worker children running around the school, giving much-needed life to the otherwise empty spaces.

Armed with footage of the school viewed from high above Belgravia, videos talks from head teachers, head girls and pre-recorded drama events, McKinley sent out a link to prospective parents an hour before their June virtual open day. Parents logged in to a Zoom webinar platform, which



A DIFFERENT ANGLE Above: The netball court at Francis Holland School, Sloane Square, as viewed by the school drone which was used to record footage for the new virtual tour for prospective parents and pupils

included live Q&A with the head teachers. The experience was positive and one that Francis Holland plans to repeat, especially for parents who cannot visit or are based abroad. "We've had parents say we can't visit but we'd like to sign up anyway," says McKinley. The webinar platform can host up to 500 parents, a number the school's small buildings would struggle with in terms of a socially distanced autumn open event. Parents can access the virtual tour

also putting together a film "just in case". "Parents can consider Garden House School further if they like what they see on the website," says a spokesperson for Garden House, but stresses that only a real visit can give you the "feel" of the school. "We want to make sure they get the correct impression."

The sentiment is echoed at Wetherby Senior School, an independent boys school in Marylebone, where to date they have not

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at a time that suits them. "It gives you so much more scope and from an admissions perspective it's more curated."

North London Collegiate in Edgware is another school which invites viewers to take a swooping aerial video tour of their impressive grounds. There are 360 views of everything from chemistry labs and lacrosse pitches to music practice rooms.

Yet most schools agree that virtual viewings and online open days are no substitute for the real thing. Garden House School, a co-ed independent primary just off Duke of York Square in Chelsea is

conducted virtual tours or open days. "I firmly believe that our boys are the best ambassadors and this would be lost in a virtual open day experience," says Seth Bolderow, the headmaster. If the school cannot go ahead with the traditional open day in October, for which 50 families are already signed up, says Bolderow, "we will of course offer virtual tours of the school". The Wetherby boys, in the meantime, enjoyed virtual highlights in the summer term: "field trips" to the Anne Frank museum, a museum in South Korea and a Nasa operations room. ■