

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS INSPECTORATE

INSPECTION REPORT ON

Downe House School

Full Name of the School	Downe House School		
DfES Number	869/6002		
Address	Hermitage Road, Cold Ash, Thatcham, Berkshire RG18 9JJ		
Telephone Number	01635 200286		
Fax Number	01635 202026		
E-mail Address	<u>headmistress@downehouse.net</u>		
Name of Principal	Mrs Emma McKendrick		
Chairman of Governors	Mr Nigel Rich, CBE		
Age Range	11-18	Gender	Female
Number of Pupils	552	Number of Boarders	537
Inspection Dates	7-11 February 2005		

This inspection report follows the framework laid down by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI). The inspection was carried out under the arrangements of the Independent Schools Council (ISC) Associations for the maintenance and improvement of the quality of their membership. It was also carried out under Section 163(1)(b) of the Education Act 2002, under the provisions of which the Secretary of State for Education and Skills has accredited ISI as the body approved for the purpose of inspecting schools belonging to ISC Associations and reporting on compliance with the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003.

The inspection was not carried out in conjunction with the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) and the report does not contain specific judgements on the National Minimum Boarding Standards. It comments on the progress made by the school in meeting the recommendations set out in the most recent statutory boarding inspection and evaluates the quality of the boarding experience and its contribution to pupils' education and development in general.

The inspection does not examine the financial viability of the school or investigate its accounting procedures. The inspectors check the school's health and safety procedures and comment on any significant hazards they encounter: they do not carry out an exhaustive health and safety examination. Their inspection of the premises is from an educational perspective and does not include in-depth examination of the structural condition of the school, its services or other physical features.

MAIN FINDINGS

Overall Summary

Downe House School provides a secure and stimulating environment where pupils benefit from a broad academic education and the school's strong, effective commitment to their personal development. Pupils throughout the school gain significantly from the very good facilities and from the dedication of staff in helping them to achieve high standards. The inspection identified only a few areas for development and the school has no major weaknesses.

What the School Does Well

The school has many strengths, of which the following are the most outstanding:

Pastoral care is excellent and is founded on very good relationships. Pupils are well looked after and benefit from the commitment of both teaching and non-teaching staff to their care and welfare.

In the past three years, pupils have attained standards in external examinations at GCSE and A level that were above, and sometimes well above, the average for maintained selective schools.

Very good curriculum planning provides all pupils with a broad academic experience and excellent opportunities for extra-curricular activities.

The school's ethos is a major strength and provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is very good.

Strong links with parents are maintained through the high quality of information provided and the school's responsiveness to personal contact.

The high quality of the living and learning environment make a strong contribution to pupils' well-being and achievements.

What the School Should Do Better

The school has no major weaknesses but attention to the following areas would improve still further the high quality of the education it provides.

The school and departmental development plans are not detailed enough. They do not contain sufficiently clear educational priorities, precise costings and criteria by which their success can be measured.

Standards of Attainment and Progress in Subjects

Pupils' achieve high standards overall. Pupils' attainment in national examinations is good and occasionally high in relation to their abilities. Results at GCSE for 2004 were well above the national average for maintained selective schools. The proportion of pupils achieving A*/A was substantially above the average. Students' performance in examinations taken by Year 13 (A and AS levels) over the last three years have been above that of maintained selective schools. Pupils' attainment is highest in English and art at all stages, and in mathematics and physical education in the sixth form. Literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) skills are well developed at every stage.

Pupils' progress is good in almost all subjects and from year to year as they move through the school. Progress is rapid in art at every stage, in English in Years 10 and 11 and in mathematics, PE and art history in the sixth form. Progress is good in almost all other subjects. Pupils of all abilities, including those who require learning support or who do not speak English as their first language, make good progress that is at least in line with their classmates and commensurate with their abilities.

The Quality of Pupils' Learning, Attitudes and their Behaviour

The quality of learning and behaviour is very good. Pupils are interested and competent learners who respond positively in lessons and are well motivated. Good relationships and group working skills are a feature of many lessons. Pupils are willing to take responsibility for their academic work and seek help whenever it is needed; they take full advantage of the excellent support offered by the learning skills department.

Pupils' behaviour is very good. In lessons they are almost invariably polite, attentive and sensitive to each others feelings. Innate good behaviour is a characteristic of pupils as they go about the school and forms a significant part of the school's ethos.

The Quality of Teaching

The quality of teaching is good. In the great majority of the lessons observed teaching was good and in a large minority it was very good. Teaching was unsatisfactory in only a few lessons. Teachers' knowledge and understanding of their subjects is excellent. The good teaching contributes significantly to the very good progress in class, and in pupils' written and practical work throughout the school.

Throughout the school teaching pays close attention to the needs of pupils requiring learning support, including those whose first language is not English, and pupils usually make good progress as a result. Systems for meeting the needs of the outstandingly able have also been introduced, though they are not yet operating fully in all departments.

Other Aspects of the School

Attendance

The level of pupils' attendance is very good. No unauthorised absence has occurred. Pupils are punctual to most lessons but less so after breaks and lunch, when the lateness of a few interrupts the smooth start to some lessons. Daily registration and admission registers are kept in accordance with statutory requirements.

Assessment and Recording

The systems for assessing and recording pupils' achievements, progress and needs are thorough, consistent and effective. The school uses a wide range of assessment data to identify the progress of individuals and those experiencing temporary difficulties, or who require special provision, are assessed and supported by the learning skills department.

The school effectively uses the wealth of assessment data available to help in planning the curriculum and carefully monitors the success of individual courses. The use of assessment information for planning work at departmental level is at an early stage and so is more uneven.

Curriculum

The quality of the curriculum at all stages is very good. The curriculum is well balanced, broad and suited to the needs of all pupils across the full age and ability range. Pupils are able to make effective progress and to build successfully upon the work undertaken in previous years. Planning, implementation and review of the curriculum promote successful development of the intellectual, physical and personal potential of the pupils. An excellent planned programme of personal and social education (PSE) is included up to the sixth form and good quality careers advice is given throughout. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of education, training, or for employment

Curriculum enrichment is ensured through an extensive and very successful programme of extra-curricular activities, which provides for sporting, creative, intellectual and aesthetic interests.

Teaching and Non-teaching Staff

The quality of the teaching and non-teaching staff is very good. Pupils benefit from the experience and commitment of the staff. Teachers are well qualified and suitably deployed to maintain the academic, pastoral and extra-curricular life of the school. The ratio of teachers to pupils is very generous and pupils benefit enormously from this provision.

Resources for Learning

The quality, quantity and accessibility of educational resources are good; they are well managed and are used effectively throughout the school to promote the quality of teaching and learning, study and

recreation. Significant investment in ICT over the last five years has equipped the school with a substantial number of computers and other hardware, and a full upgrade of software.

Libraries

Library provision is good. In addition to the school's main libraries many departments have good quality specialist libraries to aid learning in their subject areas. The libraries provide a pleasant, friendly atmosphere and encourage pupils to use the facilities for independent work.

Premises and Accommodation

The buildings, accommodation and other facilities are very good and are suitable for the numbers, abilities and ages of the pupils. They are well used and enable the curriculum to be taught effectively.

Since the last inspection the school has carried out its plans to improve existing facilities and add many new ones. Standards of maintenance and décor are generally very good. The notable absence of litter demonstrates pupils' feelings of pride and ownership of the school.

Links with Parents and the Community

The school benefits from its very good links with parents and the community, which enrich the quality of education for all pupils. About half of the parents responded to a questionnaire distributed in advance of the inspection; their replies were overwhelmingly positive. Parents particularly liked the good provision for boarders, the range of extra curricular activities offered and the school's promotion of worthwhile attitudes and values. Inspection findings support parents' positive views.

Pupils' Personal Development

In both range and quality, the opportunities offered for pupils' personal development are very good. The school's major strength is its ethos. It is a community displaying strong values, appropriate patterns of behaviour, good relationships and mutual respect between individuals of all ages. The ways in which the school achieves this special quality are complex, but are exemplified by effective leadership, insistence upon high standards of behaviour, meaningful assemblies, spiritual awareness of the pupils and knowledge of the outside world, as well as of the school itself. The happy, relaxed atmosphere of the school encourages pupils to relate constructively to one another, to take responsibility and participate fully in the school community. The attractive, tranquil site provides an appropriate context for the development of well rounded, mature individuals.

Pastoral Care

The arrangements for pastoral care, guidance and pupils' welfare are excellent. Measures to safeguard pupils' health and safety are good. A strong house structure forms the basis of the pastoral system for both day girls and boarders. All boarders are well cared for by the house-mistresses and their staff. The behaviour policy is clear and the school code is well known by pupils. The school does not tolerate bullying. Provision for careers education and advice is excellent and the careers department has recently gained a national award for its work.

An inspection of boarding standards, by the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI), took place in November 2004. The findings were very largely positive. The provision for safeguarding and promoting the health of pupils is excellent.

Boarding Standards

No Commission for Social Care Inspection team took part in the inspection.

Governance and Management

The governance and management of the school are very good and ensure that its main aims are met. The school provides a high quality of education supported by good quality resources for teaching and learning. Development planning, at whole school and department level, is largely effective but does not make a clear enough link between the educational priorities and the means to achieve them. However, more detailed strategies, which could readily be incorporated into development planning, are formulated at senior management and other committee meetings.

The school is well led by the headteacher, effectively supported by the senior and extended management team at all levels, both academic and pastoral. The academic success, very good teaching and the high quality of pastoral care given to individual pupils testify to the success of the schools governance and management.

Achievement and Quality in Activities

Provision for extra curricular activities is excellent. The school provides a rich and diverse programme of activities which is appropriate for the ages, aptitude and abilities of the pupils. The wide range and quality of the extra-curricular activities are a major strength of the school and are much valued by the pupils. High achievements are made at all ages and in many spheres including sport, music, drama and art.

Progress Made by the School since its Last Inspection

The school was last inspected in March 1999. All of the three main recommendations, relating to the timetable, accommodation at Hermitage House and the registration of day pupils, have been successfully tackled.

Compliance with the Regulations for Registration

DfES Standard		Does the school meet the regulatory requirements?
1. Quality of education:	1.(2) Curriculum	Yes
	1.(3)-(5) Teaching	Yes
2. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils		Yes
3. Welfare, health and safety of pupils		Yes
4. Suitability of proprietors and staff		Yes
5. Premises and accommodation		It meets almost all of the requirements
6. Provision of information		It meets almost all of the requirements
7. Manner in which complaints are to be handled		Yes

Actions Required for Compliance with the Regulatory Requirements

In order to meet all the requirements, the school must:

improve the exterior lighting to the main buildings [Regulation 5(p)]

take action to prevent the York stone flags from becoming slippery in wet weather and repair the surface where damage may cause tripping [Regulation 5(s)]

provide to parents of pupils and of prospective pupils the address of the Chair of the governing body. [Regulation 6.2 (c)]

In addition to the actions set out above, the school is asked to address any issues highlighted in *What the School Should Do Better*. These are set out as recommendations for the school in Section 2 of the report.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

The actions needed to comply fully with the regulatory requirements are specified in paragraph 1.29 of the report. The school has no major weaknesses, but attention to the following would improve the high quality of existing provision.

Improve whole school and departmental development planning by making clear the links between identified educational priorities, measurable success criteria and the means to achieve them.

INTRODUCTION

Characteristics of the School

Downe House School is an independent boarding school for girls aged 11 to 18. The school was founded in the home of Charles Darwin in the village of Down in Kent under private ownership in 1907. It is now administered as a charitable trust by a governing body of thirteen governors and occupies a large site in the village of Cold Ash, having moved in 1921. The site includes eleven boarding houses, as well as teaching and other accommodation, with an additional boarding house for Year 7 pupils in the nearby village of Hermitage. The accommodation has been periodically extended and improved and now incorporates a full range of specialist areas, as well as a purpose-built performing arts centre and new sports hall. Further improvements are planned, in particular to improve facilities for the arts and boarding accommodation.

At the time of the inspection, 552 pupils were on the roll: 403 pupils aged 11 to 16 (Years 7 to 11) and 149 in the sixth form. Pupils are drawn from all over the country, with a small number from expatriate families living overseas. Most pupils have previously attended independent prep or senior schools, though a small number come from international schools and schools in the maintained sector. The majority of the girls come from a British Christian background, though about 5 per cent of pupils come from other ethnic heritages and do not have English as their first language. The school has identified 43 pupils as requiring learning support, mainly related to dyslexia. No pupils have statements of special educational need.

The school selects its pupils by ability and overseas pupils are assessed for competence in the English language. Girls wishing to enter the school in Years 7 to 11 take common entrance tests and the school's own tests for general ability. Pupils wishing to enter the sixth form are usually required to have achieved seven GCSE passes at grades A-C and, in addition, sit specific tests in their chosen A level subjects. Standardised tests indicate that the ability of most pupils on entering the school is intellectually far above the national average, though a range of ability is represented. About one in five is in the top 2 per cent nationally and virtually all are of above average ability. If pupils are performing in line with their abilities their results in national tests and examinations will be broadly in line with the average for maintained selective secondary schools.

Pupils enter the senior school at all stages, mainly from independent schools but also from maintained and overseas schools. The school loses a small number of pupils after GCSE to other post-16 institutions but also recruits a few at this stage. Almost all pupils leaving at 18+ go on to university.

The school's core philosophy has remained unchanged since its foundation and is still centred on providing a community where girls are valued as individuals and 'where relations between staff and pupils should be normal.' Girls are encouraged to pursue academic excellence as well as to develop personal responsibility and to make productive use of sport and leisure. The school provides a Christian framework for pupils' spiritual and moral development whilst also respecting other religious views and traditions.

National Curriculum nomenclature is used throughout this report to refer to year groups in the school. The year group nomenclature used by the school and its National Curriculum (NC) equivalence are shown in the following table:

School	NC
Remove (R)	Y7
Lower IV (LIV)	Y8
Upper IV (UIV)	Y9
Lower V (LV)	Y10
Upper V (UV)	Y11
Lower VI (LVI)	Y12
Upper VI (UVI)	Y13

Key Indicators

GCSE

	Most recently completed Year 11	Average for the last <i>three</i> years
Entered for 5+ subjects (%)	100	100
Achieved 5+ @ A* - C (%)	100	99
Achieved 5+ @ A* - G (%)	100	100
Average score per candidate*	69.3	68.9
Average score per entry*	7.2	7.2

* Scoring is 8 for GCSE grade A*, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 for grades A – G.

A Level and AS

	Most recent Year 13	Average for the last <i>three</i> years
Average score per candidate	35.4	37.4
Average score per subject entry	8.6	8.4

Scoring is 10, 8, 6, 4, 2 for A level grades A – E, and 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 for AS grades A to E.

Attendance for Second Half of Autumn Term 2004

	Authorised	Unauthorised
Percentage absence	2.3	0

Exclusions Over the Previous 12 Months

Temporary exclusions	Permanent exclusions
11	0

EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS ACHIEVED BY PUPILS AT THE SCHOOL

Attainment and Progress

Pupils' achieve high standards overall. Pupils' attainment in national examinations is good and occasionally high in relation to their abilities. Results at GCSE for 2004 were well above the national average for maintained selective schools. The proportion of pupils achieving A*/A was substantially above the average. Students' performance in examinations taken by Year 13 (A/AS levels) over the last three years have been above that of selective and other independent schools.

In lessons, pupils' attainment is high in English and art at all stages. In mathematics and physical education (PE) in the sixth form attainment is also high. In all other subjects and at every stage, pupils' attainment is good. Throughout the school pupils literacy skills are very good. In English, their fluent and confident style in both speaking and writing has enabled them to produce prize-winning poetry and in art history they engage in vigorous debate. Pupils' very good numeracy skills enable them to tackle detailed statistical analysis in science as well as to win awards in national mathematics competitions. Information and communication technology (ICT) skills are well developed in pupils at every stage and they readily exploit ICT resources when studying independently as well as in the classroom.

Pupils' progress is good in almost all subjects, and from year to year, as they move through the school. Progress is rapid in art at every stage, in English in Years 10 and 11 and in mathematics, PE and art history in the sixth form. Progress is good in all other subjects, except for modern languages in the lower school where it is sound. In no subjects or sections of the school is progress overall judged to be less than satisfactory. Pupils of all abilities, including those who require learning support or who do not speak English as their first language, make good progress that is at least in line with their classmates and commensurate with their abilities.

Almost all pupils go on to higher education after the sixth form. Girls are successful in obtaining places at prestigious universities and in national challenges and competitions. They display wide-ranging expertise in sport and the performing arts, especially music, where pupils perform publicly to a high standard.

Quality of Pupils' Learning, Attitudes and Behaviour

The quality of learning and behaviour are very good. Pupils are interested and competent learners who respond positively in lessons and are well motivated. In a Year 7 science lesson on forces, pupils bubbled with enthusiasm when explaining their ideas. Year 13 biology students showed a high degree of self motivation whilst working on the results of their recent field work. They displayed excellent learning skills, including the use of ICT and demanding statistical techniques. A capacity for imaginative personal study was seen in the current affairs scrapbooks which sixth-form economics students put together in their own time.

Good relationships and group working skills are a feature of many lessons. In a Year 10 English lesson, groups of pupils performed sonnets linked to St Valentine's Day and were attentive, supportive and appreciative of each others efforts. A group of Year 10 drama pupils showed a high level of self critical ability as they created a set design together. Pupils work confidently in pairs, sharing tasks and discussing findings as in Year 9 chemistry practicals.

Very good trusting relationships are formed between pupils and with their teachers. Individuals feel at ease when answering questions or presenting their ideas to the whole class. Pupils are willing to take responsibility for their academic work and seek help whenever it is needed. Pupils take full advantage of the excellent support offered by the learning skills department. The school places significant emphasis on helping pupils to develop the skills for managing their own learning and encouraging them to be independent learners. Year 7 pupils, and others new to the school, are each assessed for their preferred learning style and given advice on how to approach their studies to make the best use of their strengths. The learning skills department works actively with other subject departments to promote varied approaches to learning. Most departments have embraced this initiative and pupils make enthusiastic use of the opportunities on offer. In interview, pupils commented on how guidance on learning skills gave them important insights into how to successfully tackle their work.

Pupils relish responsibility both inside and outside the classroom and many opportunities arise for them to be involved in the running of their school. Several committees, such as the Food Council and the Anti-Bullying Committee, involve pupils from all levels of the school and a prefect structure in Year 8 runs in parallel with its senior counterpart.

In all lessons pupils show consideration for others. In a Year 11 life drawing class, pupils showed a proper respect for the unclothed male model. Year 12 art history students reacted strongly against the 19th century French practice of using Africans as a spectacle in Paris. General interest in a range of values and beliefs was evident during a debate on marriage in a Year 10 English lesson. Pupils show their capacity to care in the work they do for community service, in local special schools and day care centres, and in all their charity work.

Pupils' behaviour is very good. In lessons they are almost invariably polite, attentive and sensitive to each others feelings. On the very few occasions when restlessness in class slipped into chatter it was because the lesson moved at too slow a pace to hold pupils' interest. Innate good behaviour is a characteristic of pupils as they go about the school and forms a significant part of the school's ethos.

Attendance

The level of pupils' attendance is very good, and it enables them to take full advantage of the opportunities provided by the school. No unauthorised absence has occurred. Pupils are punctual to most lessons but less so after breaks and lunch, when the lateness of a few interrupts the smooth start to some lessons.

The admissions register and the attendance registers are kept in accordance with statutory requirements. The admissions register is maintained electronically and the school holds a printed version. Attendance registers for all pupils are completed correctly by staff tutors in the morning. A detailed absence list is posted on the notice board in the staff common room each morning and parents of any absent day pupils are contacted by phone. Teachers also check for absentees at the beginning of each lesson and follow up accordingly. Day girls are registered by their section heads in the afternoon.

QUALITY OF EDUCATION PROVIDED

Teaching

The quality of teaching is good. In the great majority of the lessons observed during the inspection teaching was good and in a large minority it was very good. Teaching was unsatisfactory in only a few lessons. Teachers' knowledge and understanding of their subjects is excellent. The good teaching contributes significantly to the very good progress in class, and in pupils' written and practical work throughout the school.

The teaching is at its best in art throughout the upper school (Years 10 to 13) and in sixth form history of art, mathematics, PE and ICT. In all other subjects and stages teaching is good, except for sciences and modern languages in the lower school, where teaching is sound. The specialist teaching for those requiring learning support is very good. In no departments or sections of the school is teaching unsatisfactory overall. Teachers know their pupils very well and relationships within the classroom are constructive. Resources are well used to enhance teaching. In the best lessons, teaching sets high expectations, encouraging and challenging pupils to extend their thinking and creating opportunities for them to do their best. In the very few lessons where teaching was unsatisfactory and in those where teaching was satisfactory but not better, teaching does too much for the pupils and teacher's expectations of what can be achieved in the time are too low. As a consequence the pace of learning slows and pupils have too few opportunities to use their initiative and apply or develop their independent learning skills.

Teacher's lesson planning is thorough and prepares pupils well for tests and examinations. Throughout the school teaching pays close attention to the needs of pupils requiring learning support, including those whose first language is not English, and they usually make good progress as a result. Systems for meeting the needs of the outstandingly able have been introduced and in some subjects, for example mathematics, curricular and lesson planning have been modified as a result. However, in

some subjects teachers do not yet routinely use assessment information to modify planning and so continue to provide the same tasks and activities for all pupils regardless of ability.

Does the school meet the regulatory requirements for teaching?

Yes.

Assessment and Recording

The systems for assessing and recording pupils' achievements, progress and needs are thorough, consistent and effective.

The results of tests in Years 7, 8 and 11 are analysed by the school and passed to all departments and used effectively in the analysis of results from external examinations in Year 11 to provide an objective measure of pupil performance at GCSE relative to their ability. Formal school assessment takes place four times a year for pupils in Years 7 to 11 and twice in the sixth form. Pupils are awarded grades for achievement and for their skills as independent learners and, in addition, they carry out self assessment. All this information is included on pupils' reports so that parents have a comprehensive picture of their daughter's attainment.

Assessment data is also used effectively to identify the progress of individuals and provide support where necessary. Pupils experiencing temporary difficulties or who require special provision, including those whose first language is not English and the outstandingly able, are assessed and supported by the learning skills department. All staff are made aware of pupils' individual requirements.

Marking procedures are usually thorough and the quality of marking is good in most subjects. In art, for example, detailed suggestions for improvement of work are often added. Pupils understand the school's marking criteria and are able to assess their own performance against them.

The school effectively uses the wealth of assessment data available to help in planning the curriculum and carefully monitors the success of individual courses. The use of assessment information for planning work at departmental level is at an early stage and so is more uneven. Some departments, such as English and mathematics, make good use of assessment data to modify schemes of work and lessons to make them more effective but others have not yet incorporated its use to aid improvements to teaching.

Curriculum

The quality of the curriculum at all stages is very good. The curriculum is well balanced, broad and suited to the needs of all pupils across the full age and ability range. Pupils are able to make effective progress and to build successfully upon the work undertaken in previous years. Planning, implementation and review of the curriculum promote successful development of the intellectual, physical and personal potential of the pupils.

In Years 7 to 9, all pupils follow a wide range of subjects, giving them a good general knowledge. In Year 8, a term is spent by all pupils at the school's base in France, where a special curriculum replaces that of the school. This innovative scheme provides a good opportunity for pupils to rapidly develop their language skills. In Year 9 an optional language, drawn from German, Italian or Spanish is offered, along with a taster course in Classical Greek. Science is taught through the separate subjects of biology, chemistry and physics. The curriculum arrangements provide for a balanced programme of study overall. The time allocated to all subjects, with the exception of PE in Years 7 and 8, are significantly below the average for maintained schools and yet this has no negative impact on pupils' attainment. Indeed, it enables the school to maintain a broad range of experiences for them.

In Years 10 and 11, pupils take nine, ten, or exceptionally eleven GCSE courses. The combination of core and optional subject choices allows sufficient breadth to be maintained. All pupils study the three separate sciences and take GCSE in each of them or enter for the dual award in science. The GCSE option advice given in school recommends both options as valid pathways to science study at A-level and beyond, though documentation for pupils and parents is contradictory in this respect and should be amended. The top set in French takes GCSE a year early so that they can do more advanced work in Year 11, though there is no objective of gaining a higher qualification. A GCSE in religious studies (RS) can also be taken in Year 10, although at present it has a reduced period allocation in comparison to other subjects.

An extensive range of subjects is offered in the sixth form, where pupils may take four or five AS-levels and three or four A-levels. The curriculum is enhanced by a seven week critical thinking module in the lower sixth and by the opportunity to take a basic certificate in food and wine. All students take AS level general studies in the upper sixth and GCSEs in Greek, photography and Italian are available if the demand is sufficient.

Pupils are taught in mixed-ability groups for most subjects in Years 7 to 9, with the exception of French and mathematics where some setting occurs; this system works well. Pupils are also set by ability for Latin from Year 8, which enables the school to make good provision for beginners to take up the subject. Pupils who join the school in Year 9 do not study core curriculum Latin if they have not studied the subject before. In Years 10 and 11, pupils are set by ability for French, mathematics, science and Latin. English maintains a mixed ability organisation of classes throughout the school. This combination of setting arrangements works successfully towards meeting the needs of all pupils.

The school works hard to ensure that curricular provision meets the needs of all. Those for whom English is an additional language (EAL), who have special educational needs (SEN) or who are considered outstandingly able in a given field, receive guidance, extra support and periodical review of their achievement, in order to ensure that appropriate progress is made. All pupils review their work in discussion with their tutor and set targets in relation to their individual learning skills. The school seeks to promote effective independent learning through basic skills in the lower school to advanced level skills in the sixth form.

An excellent planned programme of personal and social education (PSE) is included up to the sixth form and good quality careers advice is given throughout. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of education, training, or for employment

Curriculum enrichment is ensured through an extensive and very successful programme of extra-curricular activities, which provides for sporting, creative, intellectual and aesthetic interests.

Does the school meet the regulatory requirements for the curriculum?

Yes.

Teaching and Non-teaching Staff

The quality of the teaching and non-teaching staff is very good. Pupils benefit from the experience and commitment of the staff who contribute materially to the success of the school. Teachers are well qualified and suitably deployed to maintain the academic, pastoral and extra-curricular life of the school. The ratio of teachers to pupils is far more generous than that found nationally and pupils benefit enormously from this provision. In the sixth form, for example, the school supports courses where even a small number of students show interest.

The number of new appointments made recently has brought about an effective balance with more long-standing staff and successfully blends continuity and stability with new perceptions and fresh points of view. The school has proper recruitment and vetting procedures, including the required Criminals Record Bureau (CRB) checks for both teaching and non-teaching staff.

Academic staff receive effective support from the conscientious non-teaching staff. The music department derives considerable benefit from a part-time administrator and the ICT department is well served by a team of three full-time technicians. In art the time allowed for technical support is insufficient for the department's needs.

Very thorough induction procedures are in place for all staff new to the school, and for those appointed internally to management or pastoral positions. The procedures for the induction of newly qualified teachers (NQTs) are appropriate and meet statutory requirements; the school participates in the government induction scheme for NQTs. New teachers expressed satisfaction with the school's arrangements and felt that they were well supported.

Procedures for staff review have been slimmed down recently to improve efficiency. The new system provides an effective mechanism for identifying and meeting staff professional development needs. The annual appraisal process is valued by staff who see it as effective and helpful to their professional development and an opportunity for their achievements to be recognised. Appraisal of teachers includes lesson observation and some departments have used this technique to identify weaknesses and share successful practice. This useful strategy should now be applied consistently across all departments.

In-service training of staff over the last three years has been extensive and the school benefits from the higher than average spending on this area. The training frequently results from departmental requests, staff review or priorities identified in the departmental or school development plans. A significant proportion of training is concerned with examination requirements, especially the opportunities offered by examination boards. Training is also used to support the wide range of non-academic work of the staff in areas such as pastoral care (anti-bullying strategies), sport (coaching qualifications and refereeing awards), medical issues (asthma update) and management.

Does the school meet the regulatory requirements for the suitability of proprietors and staff?

Yes.

Resources for Learning

The quality, quantity and accessibility of educational resources are good; they are well managed and are used effectively throughout the school to promote the quality of teaching and learning, study and recreation.

Significant investment in ICT over the last five years has equipped the school with a generous number of computers and other hardware, and a full upgrade of software. These resources provide good access across the school for direct teaching of ICT skills and for the use of those skills in other subjects such as English, design technology, and mathematics. A small number of departments have not yet made the best use of the ICT resources available. In physical education and music, for example, they have not yet identified what their requirements are and need to undertake training to use ICT effectively. In art, ICT use is restricted because of a lack of space.

Pupils make very good use of computers around the school for prep and they use the internet adeptly for research. They are encouraged to communicate regularly by email to friends and family.

A wide range of good quality books, equipment and materials support learning well at all levels and in most areas of the school. Specialist equipment is readily available when necessary, for example, personal protective clothing in PE and in design and technology. All resources are easily accessible for staff and pupils to use.

Departments are generously funded, though the system for allocating monies to departments is not closely linked to each departments development planning and so the effectiveness of their spending decisions is not easy to evaluate. The well-managed resource centre provides high quality printed materials for staff and pupils as well as supplying stationery and audiovisual equipment. Other

central resources include a car for staff use and three minibuses, which are efficiently used to provide learning experiences for pupils away from the school site.

Libraries

Library provision is good and comprises the Main Library for the sixth form, the Barn Library for the main school and the Careers Library. In addition, many departments have good quality specialist libraries to aid learning in their subject areas.

The Barn Library and the Main Library provide effective support for the curriculum and offer good resources to encourage personal study and recreational reading; they contain a wide range of fiction books. The quantity and suitability of the book stock has been updated in recent years, especially for the youngest and the oldest girls. The non-fiction stock is sufficient in quality and quantity for most areas of the curriculum and for the needs and interests of the girls. The specialist careers library is well resourced with a good range of leaflets, books, videos and magazines to assist pupils in making choices about careers.

A full-time specialist librarian manages the premises and stock effectively. A lot of reorganisation is currently underway, so that the best use can be made of available space. The library is open throughout the day and into the evening and is in frequent use by pupils. All new pupils benefit from the library skills course, which teaches them how to use the library and its systems appropriately. All the books are easily accessible and can be found through the computerised catalogue system.

The library is active in promoting its wider benefits to pupils and staff. Teachers are encouraged to use the library for their own reading enjoyment as well as for teaching. Staff are asked to 'take stock' of their subject sections in order to cull out-of-date material and suggest new titles which may be suitable. This initiative has been partly successful and some departments are already benefiting from their new books.

The exact level of pupil borrowing is difficult to ascertain as there has been a history of free access and unrecorded borrowing. New systems of self-issue are now being implemented to regain full control of borrowing when the librarian is off duty.

The libraries provide a pleasant, friendly atmosphere and encourage pupils to use the facilities for independent work. One group of Year 10 girls have adopted the Barn Library as the place to do their French prep and regularly meet to use the facilities.

Premises and Accommodation

The buildings, accommodation and other facilities are very good and are suitable for the numbers, abilities and ages of the pupils. They are well used and enable the curriculum to be taught effectively. Buildings are well maintained and considerable additions to them over recent years have been thoughtfully integrated into the existing style. The surrounding grounds and gardens give pupils and staff ready access to green space and the internal organisation of buildings does not restrict free movement of pupils between lessons.

Since the last inspection the school has carried out its plans to improve existing facilities and add many new ones. Building developments include boarding house extensions, a new sports hall, performing arts centre, pavilion, two new ICT suites, school shop and a sixth form café and club. The improvements to the boarding houses ensure that all girls have a comfortable space. These and other improvements have had a positive impact on pupils' educational experience and the plans for further work will enhance that provision.

Departmental suites are established and classroom size is generally good, though limited space in the art department restricts the development of some curriculum aspects, such as large sculpture. Office space and storage is adequate, but sound proofing is required in areas near to the drums. Standards of maintenance and décor are generally very good. The buildings are very well decorated with displays

of pupils art work, photographs of student activities and display work appropriate to departmental areas. The notable absence of litter demonstrates pupils' feelings of pride and ownership of the school.

Specialist facilities, for subjects such as science, are modern and well suited to their task. Facilities for PE and games are very good. The sports hall, opened in 2001, includes a dance studio and fitness suite. Changing facilities in this area are of a high standard, though changing facilities in some houses require attention. The swimming pool is an excellent facility along with the associated glass backed squash courts. Outdoor spaces are also good and off-site facilities are well used. The main school field, which provides lacrosse pitches during the winter months and athletics during the summer, is a short distance away. All the specialist facilities are very well maintained.

Does the school meet the regulatory requirements for premises and accommodation?

The school meets almost all of the regulatory requirements. In order to meet all the requirements, the school must:

- (a) improve the exterior lighting to the main buildings
- (b) take action to prevent the York stone flags from becoming slippery in wet weather and repair the surface where damage may cause tripping [Regulations 5(p) and (s)]

Links with Parents and the Community

The school benefits from its very good links with parents and the community, which enrich the quality of education for all pupils. About half of the parents responded to a questionnaire distributed in advance of the inspection; their replies were overwhelmingly positive. Parents particularly liked the good provision for boarders, the range of extra curricular activities offered and the school's promotion of worthwhile attitudes and values. Inspection findings support parents' positive views. A few parents expressed concern about a narrow range of activities on offer at weekends. Inspection found that, whilst there may have been difficulties in the past, the school now provides well for pupils.

Parents are provided with a very good range of information about the school. The booklets for new parents are informative and of a high quality. The newsletter 'Downe to Business' celebrates achievements and informs parents of life in the school. Key policies are automatically provided to parents to inform them about procedures for issues such as bullying and child protection. The procedures for handling complaints from parents are also clearly written and issued to them. The school handles parents' concerns well and on rare occasions when a complaint arises the school's procedures follow the stated policy. Lines of communication are very good, especially with house staff.

Parents are encouraged to attend a vast range of events. The charity fund raising dinner and cabaret for parents and staff has recently taken place, with the girls providing the cabaret and organising the event. Parents assist on visits and journeys, help with extra curricular activities and take part in sports, such as tennis and lacrosse, with their daughters.

Information for parents about their daughter's progress is good. Full reports are issued twice a year and parents are invited to meet with staff once a year to discuss progress. The quality of information on reports is good; they give a clear summary of achievements and advice for improvements. Where appropriate, reports also include information on examination performance and give an indication of pupils' attainment in relation to others in the year and to national standards.

The school has many good links with outside organisations and takes its role in the community very seriously. A member of staff has been appointed to look at ways in which the school can contribute to the wider public benefit and has responsibility for community liaison. Girls' help at the local Sunday school, hear children read at the local primary school, visit the residential care home for the elderly and support two schools that cater for pupils with special needs. They also support a large number of charities.

Does the school meet the regulatory requirements for the provision of information?

The school meets almost all of the regulatory requirements. In order to meet all the requirements, the school must:

(c) provide to parents of pupils and of prospective pupils the address of the Chair of the governing body. [Regulation 6.2 (c)]

Does the school meet the regulatory requirements for the manner in which complaints are to be handled?

Yes.

PUPILS' PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PASTORAL CARE

Pupils' Personal Development

In both range and quality, the opportunities offered for pupils' personal development are very good. The school's major strength is its ethos. It is a community displaying strong values, appropriate patterns of behaviour, good relationships and mutual respect between individuals of all ages. The ways in which the school achieves this special quality are complex, but are exemplified by effective leadership, insistence upon high standards of behaviour, meaningful assemblies, spiritual awareness and knowledge of the outside world as well as of the school itself. The happy, relaxed atmosphere of the school encourages pupils to relate constructively to one another, to take responsibility and participate fully in the school community. The attractive, tranquil site provides an appropriate context for the development of well rounded, mature individuals.

The school provides pupils with knowledge and insight into values and beliefs, and the chance to develop their spiritual awareness and knowledge of self at a level commensurate with their age and stage of development.

Downe House is a school with a Christian tradition and the provision for religious and spiritual development is very good. This provision has been greatly enhanced by the appointment of a school chaplain, who is becoming a focus for this element of pupil development. The spiritual growth of the individual is nurtured through Sunday chapel services, house prayers, day to day conversations and the example of the house staff. On Thursdays, girls who are confirmed may attend communion. The spiritual nature of the formal gatherings for worship is enhanced by the quiet beauty of the chapel and the high quality of the choral and musical accompaniment to the services. The voluntary Eucharist service on Ash Wednesday was well attended. Opportunities for fostering religious and spiritual development are also offered through pupils' wider studies, for example, Blake's poems in English literature and the direct reference to spiritual imagery in the history of art. Pupils' spiritual development is also fostered through PSE, RE and work for charities, such as the concert to raise money to support deaf musicians. Pupils wishing to practise another faith are supported by the school and the Chaplain is developing links with local and national leaders of faith communities.

Very good provision is made for pupils' moral education, enabling them to develop a moral code and to learn to make responsible and reasoned judgements on moral and ethical issues. The behaviour policy and school code underpins this aspect. Pupils are aware of the difference between right and wrong and have respect for the law. The boarding school community offers the chance to develop a strong sense of personal accountability and self-reliance. Sixth form students take on various responsibilities and do so with full awareness of the moral components of their roles. This is exemplified by their involvement in the School Council and the Anti-bullying Council, where all year groups are represented. Tutor time also offers occasion to debate moral issues, such as imprisonment without trial in Guantanamo Bay. English, RE, art and music all bring in issues as they occur in news stories and challenge pupils to have a perspective on them.

Pupils have many very good opportunities to develop their cultural appreciation; they are encouraged to be involved in at least one or two cultural events each half-term. Lessons in English, RE, geography, music, drama and PSE enable pupils to gain a better understanding their own cultural background and to appreciate the diversity of other cultures. Direct experiences of cultures very different to pupils' own are often given. Recent visits include St Lucia, India and the UN trip to Florence. The Chinese New Year is celebrated, and in food technology one Year 8 pupil had based her project on the food of ancient Japan. All Year 8 pupils take part in the extended stay in France, absorbing French culture and language. The school's commitment to pupils' cultural development is exemplified by the recent appointment of a head of music technology and jazz.

Pupils' social development is very good and the house system contributes significantly to this. The school functions well as a family community where pupils show care and concern for one another, mixing happily on informal occasions, such as at break and in lunch. The school behaviour policy outlines the high value placed by the community on respect and trust. Co-operative and constructive relationships are evident in class, on the games field and throughout the wide range of activities available for all pupils. Good teamwork and mutual support are always in evidence. The PSE programme encourages debate on a number of social issues, such as the dangers of passive smoking. Many pupils are also involved in community service and considerable charitable work. Pupils of all ages are given a range of opportunities in class, through activities, and especially in houses, to take responsibility for each other and themselves. They develop independence of thought and a responsible approach to the world around them.

Does the school meet the regulatory requirements for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils?

Yes.

Pastoral Care, including Welfare and Health & Safety

The arrangements for pastoral care, guidance and pupils' welfare are excellent. Measures to safeguard pupils' health and safety are good. A strong house structure forms the basis of the pastoral system for both day girls and boarders. Each girl has a personal tutor who is mainly concerned to oversee academic progress and has a broad remit to monitor pupils' welfare. Tutors meet with tutees every day and liaise with house staff at least twice a week. Each girl has an independent learner profile (ILP) which is used to monitor and record her academic progress. A pastoral equivalent of the ILP, known as the personal development profile, has been successfully piloted in the lower school with a view to extending its use to all years.

All boarders are well cared for by the house-mistresses and their staff. The prospectus states that "effective care is, we believe, paramount in the school". To this end extra staff have recently been added in boarding houses and the matron provision increased. The role of head of section (lower school, upper school and sixth form) has been expanded and consolidated, a new post of senior resident (head of boarding) has been introduced and a resident chaplain appointed. All these measures are aimed at improving contact time between children and adults and providing girls with ready access to an adult of their choice. An independent counsellor may also be contacted by girls and day to day help and support is offered through the houses. Girls are encouraged to seek help and advice from their housemistress, matron or tutor, from members of the senior management, from medical staff, the school chaplain or from more senior girls.

The school behaviour policy is clear and the school code, based on respect for others, is well known by pupils. The principles of these are reinforced through tutor time and the weekly PSE programme. Rewards may be given in the form of stars for outstanding work, commendations for significant effort, improvement in level of performance or for high standards maintained over time. Sanctions take the form of warnings, bad conduct points for minor offences and detentions for the more serious offences. In extreme cases a girl may be suspended or permanently excluded. The school does not tolerate bullying and pupils are members of the anti-bullying committee. During interview, pupils

commented that they felt well cared for and all could name one or more adults in school that they would turn to for help. They could recall very few instances of bullying and were confident that any that did occur would be thoroughly dealt with.

A comprehensive array of policies that support pupils' pastoral care and welfare are published in the staff handbook. They cover a wide range of issues, including accidents and illness, the role of the medical centre, fire drills and the identification and prevention of child abuse. A further comprehensive set of policy statements are available in the staff common room on issues such as child protection, anti-bullying, behaviour, substance abuse, pupil counselling, complaints procedures, learning support, confidentiality and bereavement. A separate Key Policies Booklet is also published containing thirteen policy statements on issues ranging from alcohol abuse to smoking. All policies relating to pupils care and welfare are made available to parents.

The provision for careers education and advice is excellent. The programme begins in Year 7 and continues into Year 13. A series of careers related talks are given in PSE lessons and pupils also have opportunities for personal guidance. Specific careers talks for Year 11 enable girls to make informed choices for A level. The careers programme expands in the sixth form to include information about universities, a gap year and work shadowing. The careers room and library is attractive and well stocked. Girls are very complimentary about the help that they are given and the careers department has recently gained a national award, the Investor in Careers Award, for its work.

The safeguarding and promoting of pupils' welfare is given a high priority and is very effective. Child protection procedures are in place, measures to reduce the risk from fire and other hazards have been taken and the school endeavours to ensure that as safe an environment as possible exists for the girls, staff and visitors. All parts of the premises are more than adequate in terms of repair, cleanliness and hygiene.

Overall responsibility for health and safety is vested in the governing body, whilst authority for day-to-day implementation is delegated to the bursar, who is the health and safety officer. The health and safety committee comprises meets termly to discuss any immediate concerns and routine organisational matters. The school has a full and well-documented health and safety policy aimed at providing and maintaining safe and healthy working conditions for all in accordance with statutory requirements. A specialist health and safety consultant is employed by the school. A full safety audit was conducted last year and all matters identified were acted upon. Individual departments have written health and safety policies particularly in the important areas of games, PE, DT, art and science. There is full risk assessment in these and all other departments. Risk assessments are carried out on all school trips. A member of the maintenance staff is qualified to train staff to drive the minibus and must satisfy him as to their competence before driving with girls.

Appropriate child protection procedures are in place. The headmistress is the designated child protection officer. All new teachers are trained in this important area as part of the formal induction programme. Senior boarders are also made aware of the child protection policy during induction sessions.

An inspection of boarding standards, by the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI), took place in November 2004. The findings were very largely positive and the few recommendations arising from them have been or are being implemented by the school.

The provision for safeguarding and promoting the health of pupils is excellent. The school medical centre is open for appropriate hours throughout the week. The school medical centre has provision for five in-patients and provides 24 hour cover. One of the nurses is a trained nutritionist who helps to monitor the girls' diet. Two doctors, one male and one female hold surgeries four days a week and a physiotherapist and chiropodist come into the centre as requested. Appropriate arrangements exist for the storage, administration and secure recording of medication, specific medical problems and accidents.

First aid training is conducted regularly and ample numbers of personnel on site have some first aid training. Fully maintained first aid boxes are available around the school.

Service of school meals is on a cafeteria system, so that pupils have a sufficient choice and there is a variety of hot and cold food available, including vegetarian dishes. Special arrangements are made to cater for particular dietary requirements. Opinion varies as to the quality of the food. From the sample of pupils asked, more expressed satisfaction with the meals than complained and the inspection team judged them to be balanced, nutritious and available in quantity.

Means to reduce the risk from fire and other hazards have been taken and pupils know the procedures for emergency evacuation of buildings. An unplanned fire alert took place during the inspection and all went smoothly. Planned fire practices are organised termly including one in the boarding house during the hours of darkness.

Does the school meet the regulatory requirements for the welfare, health and safety of pupils?

Yes

Boarding Standards

No Commission for Social Care Inspection team took part in the inspection.

THE MANAGEMENT AND EFFICIENCY OF THE SCHOOL

Governance and Management

The governance and management of the school are very good and ensure that its main aims are met. The school provides a high quality of education supported by good quality resources for teaching and learning. Development planning, at whole school and department level, is largely effective but does not make a clear enough link between the educational priorities and the means to achieve them. However, more detailed strategies, which could readily be incorporated into development planning, are formulated at senior management and other committee meetings.

The governing body provides effective challenge and support. It has a good grasp of the school's strengths and weaknesses and has appropriate influence in leading its development, with a clear focus on improving provision, for example in boarding. The governing body is well organised into four main committees whose governor members represent a broad range of professional expertise. The full governing body meets four times each year and in addition has a strategic planning meeting every alternate year. The governors meet staff and pupils for social functions two or three times a year and also have more formal presentations from them at governing body meetings. The governors have an effective relationship with senior staff. The headmistress meets with the chairman of governors once a month to discuss management issues and is appraised by the governing body.

The school is well led by the headteacher, effectively supported by the senior and extended management team at all levels, both academic and pastoral. Systems for monitoring the work of the school at all levels are thorough. A strong sense of community and common purpose is evident and keenly fostered through the boarding houses. The wide range of pupils' achievement, including the creative and sporting, is openly acknowledged and valued. The academic success, very good teaching, and the high quality of pastoral care given to individual pupils, testify to the success of the schools governance and management.

The school's strategic development planning is well established and reflects its aims and values. The plan for 2004-2005 clearly identifies the priorities for improvement and these are shared with all staff. However, the plan does not make clear enough how the identified priorities are to be achieved and the costs involved. More detailed planning does take place through senior management team meetings and committee meetings, which could usefully be incorporated into a working document that focuses

on the current year. Departmental development plans follow the whole school model and whilst thorough in terms of reviewing the previous year's work, they lack the necessary detail on which to base their short term planning and spending decisions. The current system for allocation of funding is largely historical and is not sufficiently linked to raising standards across subjects. However, no departments are adversely affected by a lack of funds.

The previous inspection in 1999 made three recommendations related to the timetable, accommodation at Hermitage House and the registration of day pupils. All these have been successfully tackled. Routine administration and organisation are both effective and efficient. The administrative and bursarial staff (including other support staff) provide high quality assistance to the girls and academic staff at all levels. The communication systems within the school and communications with the wider community work very well. The systems for day-to-day financial control are exemplary and help to ensure that girls continue to benefit from the high quality resources provided.

ACHIEVEMENT AND QUALITY IN SUBJECTS AND ACTIVITIES

Achievement and Quality in Subjects

English

Pupils achieve high standards throughout the school and their attainment in national examinations is good in relation to their abilities. Results in GCSE English and English Literature over the past three years have been above the national average for maintained selective schools; at A-level, results have been well above the national averages for maintained selective schools with almost every candidate achieving an A or B grade.

Pupils' attainment in lessons and their work on paper reveals high levels of skill and knowledge. They can articulate ideas fluently and with style. Skills of evaluation and analysis are developed at a young age, reaching high standards in Years 10 to 13. Pupils respond well to challenging tasks. In a Year 9 literature lesson, for example, they produced detailed work on Nicholas Nickleby. Pupils' very good language and creative skills are well represented by the prize winning poems (collected and published) in the school poetry competition.

The progress of pupils is rapid in Years 10 and 11 and good in all other years. In a Year 11 class pupils quickly mastered the poem Poplar Field through focussed analysis of the language and style used by the poet. Developments in knowledge, skills and understanding tend to reinforce each other. As pupils move up the school, written work increases in quality and depth and ICT is used effectively in homework and coursework.

The quality of pupils' learning and behaviour is very good. Learning is underpinned by the excellent motivation and very good concentration of pupils. Independent learning skills are developed early, and effective, independent note-taking is routine in lessons from Year 10 onwards. Relationships between pupils are very constructive, with plenty of examples of very good collaborative working, for example, in a sixth form lesson the students led a detailed analysis of the respective merits of critical judgements on Othello by FR Leavis and AC Bradley. Staff and pupils work together very well in the pursuit of knowledge and skills, a relationship based on mutual respect. Folders of work and exercise books are very well organised and presented.

The quality of teaching is good overall and at times it is very good; all lessons are conducted in an orderly manner. Very little of the teaching is less than sound. Teachers are aware of the range of ability in classes and in some lessons challenging extension exercises are available for the more able, though some of the worksheets used are not sufficiently demanding. Usually, teachers have high expectations of their pupils and the lessons that are very good are characterised by a fast pace and intellectual challenge. Reinforcement of learning is frequent, effective and sometimes highly

imaginative, as in a Year 10 class's lively performance of Valentine's Day radio broadcasts, reworking the love sonnets they had been studying. The subject knowledge of all teachers is very good and is conveyed with enthusiasm. Communication between the English department and the EAL and LSD departments is effective, supporting pupils where necessary. At GCSE and A-level, teaching is closely related to the examination requirements. In the small number of lessons where teaching is less than good, lessons lack pace and intellectual challenge, with teacher talk dominating at the expense of pupil involvement. As a result, pupils' progress is slowed. Marking of pupils' work is mainly appropriate and constructive, though sometimes comments lack the direction and advice needed for future improvements.

Pupils experience a range of tasks in the classroom but the use of ICT for teaching is limited; internet-linked computers in the classroom would allow lessons to incorporate a wider range of information and approaches.

The department is effectively managed. It is well organised and has a clear sense of purpose; specific policies and a shared philosophy of teaching have been developed through regular formal and informal meetings. Successive development plans have identified areas for expenditure, for example the very successful Literary Festival, initiated last Spring. However, closer attention needs to be paid to identifying, in the development plans, particular educational outcomes that the department wishes to achieve, and the ways in which success will be measured.

In terms of the life skills developed and the wide-ranging issues explored, as well as through examination success, the English department contributes greatly to the personal development of its pupils.

Mathematics

Pupils achieve good standards in Years 7 to 11 and high standards in the sixth form. Pupils' attainment in national tests is good in relation to their abilities. GCSE performance in the last three years in mathematics has been above the national average for maintained selective schools. During this time all pupils have achieved a pass grade, and in 2004 all reached grades A* to B. Pupils in the highest division of Year 11 are given the opportunity to take (Advanced) additional mathematics. In 2004, four out of every five pupils were successful in the examination, some reaching the highest grade. Students' performance at A level over the last three years has been above the national average for maintained selective schools. In 2004, almost all A-level passes were at grade A. In further mathematics all pupils over the last three years have been awarded grades A or B.

Pupils' attainment in mathematics lessons is high in the sixth form and good in Years 7 to 11. This standard is uniform across all strands of the subject, including the limited amount of investigative work seen. Pupils write accurately and with depth of thought and breadth of understanding. By Year 9 they are able to draw a straight line using its gradient and intercept or by calculating the coordinates of points on it. By Year 11 pupils are able to summarise the results of their investigative coursework by suitable algebraic formula, as they recognise patterns and trends. Sixth form students are able to derive the Cartesian equation of the parabola from its geometric definition.

Pupils' progress in mathematics is good overall and sometimes rapid. It is aided by the setting arrangements and the additional help given by teachers outside class time. From Years 7 to 11 pupils' work in exercise books and folders shows continued progress in depth and quality. Pupils requiring extra support make good progress and the more able are extended by harder examples and mathematical challenges. Between Years 7 and 9 pupils move from forming and solving simple equations using a balance diagram to the more formal solution of simultaneous equations. In a Year 11 lesson, pupils soon became confident with the concept of direct proportion and were able to suggest methods of solving problems. Sixth form students were able to apply their knowledge of differentiation to finding the equation of a tangent to a curve at a specified point.

The quality of pupils' learning and behaviour is good and sometimes very good. Pupils are motivated to learn. They maintain concentration throughout the lessons and establish good relations with their teachers. They are prepared to ask for further clarification when necessary. Pupils strive for accuracy when working in their exercise books, and are prepared to write their solutions on the board. In the sixth form pupils respond well, discuss topics maturely with the teacher, and offer sensible suggestions for the method of solving problems.

The quality of the teaching is good in Years 7 to 11 and in the sixth form it is very good. Teachers have a detailed knowledge of their subject. Lessons are well planned and conducted in a very friendly manner. In the best lessons, teaching includes a brief review of earlier work before new learning is introduced and this is followed by time for reinforcement and evaluation of what has been achieved. Teachers' expectations are high. Clear explanations and the effective use of questions encourage pupils to think mathematically and become involved for the whole lesson. Assessment is mainly good and teachers' marking includes helpful suggestions for improvement. Marks are recorded and compared with pupils' prior attainment to ensure effective progress. However, closer monitoring of marking is required as occasionally work in pupils' exercise books is being left unmarked.

The mathematics department is well led and effectively managed. The very detailed schemes of work are constantly being reviewed in light of syllabus changes. Good use is made of ICT. Displays of pupils' work and posters in the mathematics rooms provide an attractive and welcoming environment. In 2004, over three hundred pupils participated in the junior, intermediate or senior Mathematics Challenge, with all groups attaining bronze, silver or gold awards.

Science

Pupils achieve good standards and their attainment at GCSE is high in relation to their abilities. Results at GCSE in 2003 were well above the national average for maintained selective schools for Double Award science and for biology and physics. They were above average in chemistry. The results for Double Award in 2004 were outstanding. Students' performance at A level over the last three years has been consistently above the national average for maintained selective schools for each of the three sciences, physics, chemistry and biology. AS examination results show a similar pattern.

Pupils' attainment in lessons is high at all ages and across the sciences. Calculations in chemistry and physics show good understanding of the underlying principles. In biology, Year 11 pupils coped confidently with the letter codes for amino acids.

Pupils' progress is good overall, though they make more rapid gains in their written work than during lessons. This applies to pupils at both ends of the ability spectrum and across the age groups. The practical skills of pupils develop rapidly during Years 7 and 8. Pupils master more difficult concepts each year and so by Year 9, in chemistry for example, they are successfully drawing diagrams of ionic and covalent bonding. By Year 11 pupils have mastered the genetic code, simple mole calculations and radioactivity. Students in Year 12 quickly adapt to advanced level work. In biology, students were able to use their GCSE knowledge of the structure of the heart as a starting point for more detailed study of heart function. Physics students were able to calculate capacitance after only a short introduction.

The quality of learning and behaviour is good. Pupils are competent learners who respond positively in lessons. They are well motivated and cooperative, forming good relationships with their teachers and with each other. In a Year 7 science lesson on forces, pupils became enthusiastically involved and worked well together. Self motivated Year 13 biology students showed excellent attitudes to work in analysing the results of recent fieldwork. Year 12 chemistry students listened carefully to each other during a class discussion on geometric isomerism. Behaviour is excellent in most lessons and falters from this only slightly on the few occasions when the pace of a lesson is too slow.

The quality of teaching is sound overall, and sometimes good, across all three sciences. A well planned Year 11 physics practical lesson gave pupils the opportunity to arrive at a counter intuitive

conclusion about the thermal conductivity of water. In a Year 10 lesson on transpiration, pupils worked in pairs on a difficult manipulative task. In a small number of lessons, teaching is unsatisfactory because the approaches used offer too little challenge for pupils and lead to a slow pace of learning. The quality of marking varies considerably from teacher to teacher and between the sciences. It is at its most thorough and helpful in biology, where subject specific criteria augment the school criteria. Constructive written comments on pupils' work are less common in chemistry and physics. Monitoring of the quality of marking is carried out regularly in physics and biology but is rarely completed in chemistry.

The separate sciences of biology, chemistry and physics each have an autonomous head of department. All lead by example and with enthusiasm. Management of biology and physics is very good. The handbooks and schemes of work are comprehensive and helpful. Those for lower school science are excellent. Informal lesson observation is successfully used in biology and physics to encourage and share good practice. Management of chemistry is good. The scheme of work is an expanded programme of study which, whilst working well for the present experienced team, would not give sufficient guidance for a less experienced colleague. The head of science provides very good support to each of three separate science departments, directs the work of the coordinator for lower school science, and provides some coordination of work across the three departments. However, the present arrangements reduce the effectiveness of this role and make it difficult to ensure consistency of approach across the sciences. Better coordination of the schemes of work, for example, would reduce some duplication of work for pupils. The responsibilities of the head of science should be reviewed in order to improve the interaction between the separate sciences and so provide the most effective provision for pupils.

Four technicians provide excellent support for teaching and learning. The science club is a popular activity that gives Year 7 pupils an opportunity to widen their experience of science by carrying out interesting and unusual experiments that extend beyond the work done in class.

Art (including History of Art and Photography)

Pupils achieve high standards in all years and their attainment in public examinations is good in relation to their abilities. In the last three years the number of A*/A grades have been above the national average for maintained selective schools. A and AS-level art results for the same period have been equally high with all candidates achieving a pass grade and almost all at grades A or B. Results have also been good in photography, with the exception of some poor AS results in 2003. In art history all candidates achieved a pass grade, though with fewer gaining the highest grades A and B than is common for other subjects in the school. The art department has earned a reputation for good quality and photographs of GCSE work have been used as exemplars of good practice by the examination board.

Standards of attainment in lessons, folders and on display are good in Years 7 and 8 and high from Year 9 onwards. Pupils use a variety of media in two or three dimensions. The course provides for both the less able and the more gifted and talented to produce highly original work. Contrasting examples of diversity and excellence were seen. Year 9 gave a lively and exciting fashion show, with clothes made from paper towels, and Year 11 produced some forceful and dynamic figure drawing. Mature and involved debate on contemporary artists was heard amongst the sixth form art historians.

Progress is equally rapid for all abilities, with extension exercises for the gifted built into the courses. Surrounded by current and past work on display and spurred on by high expectations pupils develop quickly and their progress is evident in portfolios and work books.

The quality of learning and behaviour is very good. Pupils are intelligent, cooperative and keen to learn. A feature of the department is the very good relationships amongst pupils and between staff and pupils. Learning is encouraged by the introduction of work books from Year 7. Pupils of all ages work sensibly and unsupervised in their own time.

The quality of teaching is very good in the sixth form and good lower down the school. Teaching in history of art is excellent. Teachers work well together as a team and work hard; they represent a good balance of youth, gender and experience. Teaching is based on secure subject knowledge and obvious enthusiasm. Lessons are well-paced and have a clear sense of purpose and direction. However, the use of work sheets in Years 7 and 8 is of little educational value and places unnecessary constraints on pupils' learning. Marking, assessment and recording is highly structured and thorough.

Accommodation is barely adequate and precludes the making of large scale 3D work and extending the use of ICT. Overcrowding, especially in pottery, has implications for health and safety, and storage is a particular problem. More electrical sockets are needed in the main studio for batik sessions and better ventilation during oil painting is desirable.

The department is well managed, with an excellent handbook containing full health and safety policy and risk assessments. Teachers have a good record of in-service training, though it is not yet firmly linked to appraisal which has only just begun. The use of a departmental technician for only four hours a week is insufficient to properly support the subject and more hours are needed. Staff commitment enables a variety of activities to be offered beyond the curriculum and excellent advice is available to pupils on careers and art college choices.

Display is of good quality in the department and, wherever possible, throughout the school but there is no central display area and little art work is found in boarding houses. The department has yet to realise the full potential of ICT as a creative medium.

History

Pupils' attainment in history is good. Results in national tests at A level over the last three years have been above the national average for maintained selective schools and are good in relation to students' abilities. In the 2004 examinations all students gained an A or B grade. Results in GCSE over the last three years have been slightly above the national average for maintained selective schools, though a little lower than would be expected in relation to pupils' abilities.

In lessons, pupils' attainment is good. Pupils are able to extract evidence to construct an explanation and display the skills required to analyse source material. In a Year 7 class pupils worked confidently extracting information to make judgements on Henry II and Thomas Becket, and a Year 8 class used a variety of images of Henry VIII to question the purpose of royal Tudor portraiture. Pupils' written work shows a sound depth of knowledge and understanding of the topics covered in lessons. Their study of the origins of the Cold War shows an understanding at the level required for GCSE. The level of accuracy in written work is good. Sixth form students have a strong command of the topics they have covered.

Pupils of all abilities make good progress in history. In Years 10 and 11, pupils' analytical skills and their understanding develop well over the course. In the sixth form, the oral contribution made by students reflects very good progress, though a few need greater encouragement to participate confidently.

The quality of learning and behaviour is good at each stage in the school. Pupils are well motivated, competent learners who show an interest in lessons and apply themselves to the task in hand. Most pupils concentrate well and develop sound skills of research, evaluation and source analysis. Pupils have good relationships with their teachers and co-operate both with them and their peers.

The quality of teaching is good; it is based on very good subject knowledge and confident approaches. In the best lessons, good planning, good resources and clear learning objectives enable pupils to make very good progress. In the minority of lessons where teaching is satisfactory but not better, pupils are prevented from using their initiative and learning independently because of the directed approaches used. This slows the pace of learning. Work is marked regularly and comments give guidance for further improvement.

Effective use is made of ICT in a few lessons but it could be more fully exploited, for example, in using prepared databases to aid pupils' independent research and to enhance the variety of approaches to teaching.

Management of the history department is good overall and day-to-day organisation is efficient and effective. The departmental development plans are written in accordance with whole school policy and are of reasonable quality, though they do not indicate clearly enough how the outcomes will result in improvements to educational standards or how the success of initiatives might be objectively evaluated. The schemes of work are well matched to the syllabus requirements and offer scope for a variety of approaches to teaching, although they do not give sufficient guidance to staff on how to cater for pupils' differing learning styles and needs.

Modern Foreign Languages

Pupils achieve good standards in modern languages. Pupils' attainment in GCSE and at A level is good in relation to their abilities. In 2003, results at GCSE were above the national averages for maintained selective schools. In 2002 and 2003 results at A level were well above the average for maintained selective schools for French, German and Spanish and above in Italian. In 2004 all candidates entered for A level languages obtained an A grade; a significant achievement.

Pupils' attainment in lessons is good at all ages. They use the language effectively in writing and in speech and are able to complete successfully listening and reading comprehension exercises. They are able to recall previous material, can identify grammatical patterns and demonstrate a strong awareness of the need to be accurate. Pupils in Years 10 and 11 demonstrate increasing confidence in their use of the language. In the sixth form, students show that they can write about and discuss literary texts and explore in depth contemporary themes of significance. A German class worked successfully upon the subject of the developing world, television was the subject of work in Italian and a novel stimulated analysis in French.

Pupils make sound progress in Years 7, 8 and 9 and good progress from thereon. The pupils develop effectively the main skills of listening and reading comprehension, and of speaking and writing. They are able to use previously learnt and new material with increasing success. In a Year 9 German class, the pupils used new vocabulary to offer opinions about school subjects. A Year 7 French class had made good progress in assimilating the structures and vocabulary necessary for accurate prepositional use. In Years 10 and 11, pupils use more complex grammar with success. The students in Years 12 and 13 demonstrate the language skills of advanced learners.

The quality of learning is generally good. The pupils are motivated, willing to attempt answers and show a desire to learn from errors made. They ask for clarification of something they have not understood, are cooperative towards each other and value academic endeavour. In most classes there is a very positive rapport with the teacher and thus the language. In a few lessons pupils lacked concentration.

The quality of the teaching is sound in Years 7, 8 and 9 and good in the later years. Very little of the teaching is unsatisfactory. Planning allows pupils to make progress and to consolidate their knowledge and skills. Previous attainment forms the basis for future planning. Lessons include a variety of activities with clearly stated aims.

Teacher use of the relevant foreign language predominates. In the most successful lessons, an integrated approach to the four principle skills is clearly effective. The consolidation and extension of the knowledge of the language worked with greatest impact where linguistic form combined with the need to communicate messages linked to a specific topic. Where teaching is weaker, the use of the foreign language does not always promote similar use on the part of the pupils. At times English interventions diminished the integrity of the use of the relevant language. Evaluation of pupil responses is usually effective but occasionally there was no immediate review of the lesson plan in

order to revisit material that required reinforcement. The application of the school's routine assessment procedures is uneven and in some classes little formal marking has been carried out.

In practical terms modern foreign languages is run as two departments, French and second languages. The head of French is also the designated coordinator of some routine administrative matters. Whilst this arrangement works well in some respects it also creates inconsistencies which weaken management. In terms of strategic planning, it is not always clear how the outcomes of the departmental development plans are to be achieved or evaluated. The independence of the two departments reduces the effectiveness of the dissemination of best practice. The closer linking of the two parallel management structures would enhance the overall coherence of planning, implementation and review.

Physical Education

Pupils achieve good standards at 13 and 16 years of age and high standards at 18. Pupils' attainment in A-level examinations is high in relation to their abilities and over the last three years results have been well above the national average for maintained selective schools.

In lessons, pupils in Years 7 to 11 achieve well at every stage and good standards are attained in lacrosse and netball. They develop good skills and can apply rules and tactics in games. By the age of 18 pupils' attainment is high in relation to their varied abilities in a range of activities. They can select known skills and principles of games they have played and transfer them to new games and situations most successfully. In A-level lessons, pupils' have extensive knowledge and understanding of exercise physiology; they know about the components of recovery and apply this very well to the practical investigations they undertake. In swimming, they analyse performance and use the information to greatly improve the stroke, racing start and tumble turns of others. Attainment in teams and as individuals is high. Many pupils go on to county, regional and national representation.

The progress of all pupils is rapid in Years 12 and 13 and good in the rest of the school. Progress is best across all years when pupils are acquiring new skills. Throughout their time in the school they show an increasing understanding of how to warm up effectively. Older pupils make rapid progress in linking the theoretical aspects of the subject to their practical work.

The quality of learning is very good at every age. All pupils are well motivated and enjoy their lessons. They are competent speakers who respond well in discussion. All work well on their own, in pairs, in groups and competitively in teams. Older pupils take responsibilities as captains and all pupils respect the decisions made by officials.

The quality of teaching is good overall and very good in Years 12 and 13. All teachers have extensive subject knowledge, which they use to plan lessons where pupils of all abilities are challenged. Teachers know their pupils well and have very good relationships with them. The best teaching uses perceptive questioning to determine what pupils know and understand.

Leadership and management are good. Routines are well established for smooth running of the day-to-day activities. The team of specialist teachers and coaches share high expectations and have the expertise to deliver them. Assessment procedures follow the whole school policy but are not used to best effect. Attainment on entry is not clearly known and assessment information is not routinely used to help in planning the curriculum. The lack of a dedicated teaching space for A-level restricts the development and use of ICT and hampers the progress the department can make on this important area.

The quality and range of provision for extra curricular activities is excellent. Participation rates are very high. Strong social and moral aspects are fostered by ensuring pupils know sporting etiquette and fair play. The house competitions have been introduced to help ensure that all girls get the opportunity to take part in competition. The competitions are well liked by the pupils and contribute greatly to the life of the school.

Short Subject Reports

Short subject reports contain concise evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning and of provision in the school.

Classics

Three lessons were observed, one each in Years 10, 11 and in the sixth form. A discussion was held with the head of department. A sample of pupils' work was scrutinised.

The quality of teaching was good. Lessons were well planned and the objectives made clear. A positive rapport existed between teacher and pupils, creating an atmosphere which promoted learning, academic enquiry and interest. A good balance was struck between teacher support and independent learning. In a lesson on Greek art and architecture, focused questioning allowed the pupils to draw appropriate conclusions and to recall previous knowledge. Encouraging comment, explanation, reformulation of questions and high expectations instilled confidence.

The pupils were well motivated and keen to be accurate. Pupils were willing to try out answers in order to explore the material covered. In a Greek lesson, good discussion was stimulated by a comprehension exercise.

The subject is well provided for in terms of resources, accommodation and curricular time. Small teaching groups demonstrate the commitment of the school to the subject.

Drama

Three lessons were seen, an interview was held with the head of department and a quantity of written work, along with departmental documents, were scrutinised.

Teaching was very good. Teachers were secure in their knowledge of the subject and taught with enthusiasm and energy; expectations of pupils were high. Lessons were organised to incorporate variety of task, though sustained performance was also encouraged. Carefully chosen material was appropriate to the mixed ability classes and positive interventions were appropriately made. Teachers encouraged a high degree of independent management of learning from pupils.

The quality of learning was very good overall. Pupils displayed well developed performance skills, and were constructively self-critical. They exhibited trust in their teachers and used extremely good collaborative skills, often in challenging intellectual and physical situations. Pupils were highly motivated: their commitment to their work was evident when they worked unsupervised and when they discussed ideas with their teachers.

The new Performing Arts Centre is an excellent resource and is contributing fully to the teaching and learning of drama. The department is well resourced in other ways, with good rehearsal and studio space and plenty of textual and critical material.

Design and Technology (including Food Technology)

Four lessons were observed, one in food technology and three in design and technology. Work on display was seen, pupils' folders were scrutinised and discussion was held with the head of department.

In all the lessons seen pupils were well motivated and enthusiastic about their work, encouraged by the good teaching they received. Teaching gave clear guidance and individual support to pupils and ensured they made good gains towards completing their work. High expectations of pupils in a Year 8 food technology lesson enabled all of them to produce a good lunchtime meal in a short time. Information technology was competently used during graphics lessons and in prep assignments. Behaviour was always exemplary and relationships were good.

The subject is well resourced, which adds much to the quality of learning. More use of computer-aided design is planned when appropriate software is purchased. The curriculum includes resistant materials, graphics, food and textiles. The Leith's Food and Wine award is a successful and popular course for sixth form students.

Geography

Four lessons were observed, two in the lower school, one in the middle school and one in the sixth form. A discussion was held with the head of department. A small number of pupils' books were scrutinised.

The quality of teaching at all stages was good. Teaching was confidently based on secure subject knowledge. Lessons were well planned and prepared. Objectives were made clear to pupils and varied tasks offered scope for them to develop their skills and challenged their knowledge. In one Year 9 lesson, different tasks allowed pupils to choose according to their own interests and strengths. Relationships between students and staff were cooperative. Pupils worked with interest and their motivation and concentration were good. Marking was clear and consistent and in accordance with the school and departmental policy. Sixth form files in particular, contained notes that were detailed and included informative guidance on examination technique.

The department's documentation is very good. The subject is well resourced and draws on ample material to enrich each topic. Lessons were enhanced by effective use of teaching aids, such as an interactive whiteboard. Very good quality display work made a valuable contribution to pupils' learning.

Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

Four lessons were observed and a range of pupils work was scrutinised. .

The quality of the teaching was good, and in one lesson it was very good. Teaching was based on sound knowledge and followed detailed schemes of work. Pupils were well managed and lessons were well planned to meet the needs of all pupils. Those requiring extra support were effectively helped and additional research topics were given to pupils who completed the initial task quickly.

Pupils' response in lessons matched the quality of the teaching. In Year 7, pupils enjoyed project work on the phonetic alphabet and were very proud of their achievements. A small group of sixth form students gave up their break time to make an early start to the lesson. A friendly but purposeful atmosphere prevailed. Pupils readily worked independently and gladly supported each other when necessary.

The school has made the development of ICT a priority in recent years and has two dedicated ICT rooms which provide spacious accommodation. The department has produced helpful and detailed suggestions for the use of ICT across the whole curriculum. Work with ICT is ably assisted by the IT support department, who respond to immediate needs as well as providing strategic back-up. All pupils up to Year 11 have specific lessons in ICT where their skills are systematically developed, though the time allocated in Year 9 is too little to sustain the pace of learning. Provision improves again in Year 10, when pupils follow either a short or full GCSE course. The subject is also offered at A level.

Music

Four lessons were observed and four extra-curricular activities were seen, including a lunch time concert. Individual instrumental lessons were visited. Pupils' work was scrutinised and discussions took place with staff and pupils.

The teaching was good in class and excellent during many of the practices. Lessons were effectively planned and organised. Pupils were given good support and guidance, all abilities were well catered for, and the natural enthusiasm of the teaching was infectious.

Pupils' attitudes to learning were good. They were highly motivated, enthusiastic, and applied themselves well when doing theory, in individual practice lessons and as members of choirs and orchestras. For all that the music department deservedly enjoys a reputation for excellence it was good to see the less gifted singers of Year 7 simply having fun in the Remove Choir..

The department operates on a very wide scale, involving large numbers of girls throughout the school; over 400 individual instrumental, singing or theory lessons are timetabled. More than 100 Associated Board examinations were taken during 2004. With five full time music teachers, one part time teacher and thirty visiting teachers, the staffing is generous and routine organisation benefits from the presence of a departmental administrator. A wide variety of musical concerts and events are frequently advertised and performed.

The department presently lacks space for rehearsal and some teaching and its popularity means that further resources are needed to improve the library stock, the quality of ICT and the means to develop a proper recording studio.

Religious Studies

Two lessons were observed, one in Year 7 and one in the sixth form. A discussion was held with the head of department and a sample of pupils work was scrutinised.

The quality of teaching was good. The lessons were well planned with clear objectives. A variety of activities were included in the teaching and an encouraging, positive atmosphere was combined with high expectations.

The pupils were well motivated and competent learners. In the sixth form, students used mind mapping techniques to revise topics covered recently and they engaged in stimulating debate upon aspects of religious belief. In Year 7, enthusiasm was in abundance as pupils consolidated knowledge of the way in which significant individuals have shaped the belief and practice of world religions.

Proposed changes will enhance curriculum provision in Years 10 and 11 by including RS as part of the option block for GCSE choice.

Social Sciences

Four lessons were observed, two in economics and one each in business studies and politics. Discussions were held with the head of department and a small sample of students' work was scrutinised.

The quality of learning and behaviour was good. Students were interested and concentrated well. They joined readily in discussions with their teachers and with each other when, for example, analysing a newspaper.

The quality of teaching was good in two lessons and sound in the others. Newspaper articles and outline notes were made available to stimulate discussion. The better lessons were characterised by brisk pace, variety of approach and firm command of the subject. A novel technique, using heaps of beans, was effectively used to help the students quantify their opinions during discussion.

The department has good resources, particularly of books, and easy access to the ICT department for internet work.

Achievement and Quality in Activities

Provision for extra curricular activities is excellent. The school provides a rich and diverse programme of activities which is appropriate for the ages, aptitude and abilities of the pupils. The wide range and quality of the extra-curricular activities are a major strength of the school and are much valued by the pupils. High achievements are made at all ages and in many spheres including sport, music, drama and art.

The school is aiming to appoint a full-time director of extra-curricular activities to oversee the organisation of the programme. Many of the activities have been directly asked for by the pupils themselves and the breadth on offer provides opportunities for pupils of whatever ability to find something at which they can excel. Some of the many activities in which awards can be earned are the Duke of Edinburgh award programme, scuba-diving, ballet, modern dance, jazz, and tap dancing. In mathematics, over 300 pupils have taken part in the National Maths Challenge and last year achieved 18 gold, 38 silver and 64 bronze awards. In ceramics pupils achieved bronze medals in the schools outdoor sculpture category at the Henley show. Certificates celebrating achievement are awarded' either in assemblies or in houses.

The numbers of pupils taking part in activities and the extent of their involvement makes a considerable contribution to their educational experience. A large number of teaching and non-teaching staff add to the programme and are efficiently deployed.

Opportunities for musical participation take place in every area of the school and the music department contributes fully to the school community. It has its own internal competitions four times a year for the piano, singing, strings and wind instruments and holds a variety of concerts and individual performances at home and abroad. A large number of musical events take place each week, including choirs and orchestras, and pupils have an impressive range of associated Board examination success. Fifteen musical events (including two lunchtime concerts) practices and rehearsals (mostly for different groups) were offered during the week of the inspection and twelve featured in the list of regular activities.

Drama provides exciting opportunities for a very large number of girls to participate in workshops and performances. Students are prepared for LAMDA awards. The house drama competition is, in particular, an exciting and important part of the lives of the pupils who speak enthusiastically about the event. Art students use their talents to paint murals and contribute to drama productions.

Physical education and games feature prominently and offer a range of activities to suit all ages and talents, including galas, regattas, family tennis tournaments and sports days. The inter-house netball, house field competition took place during the week of inspection; over 100 girls took part and they were enthusiastically supported by a large number of other pupils, house staff, tutors and PE staff. The event created a great atmosphere, was truly competitive and enormous fun.

Subject departments and house based societies, trips and events help to promote cultural and intellectual life and opportunities are offered at home and abroad to enhance personal development. The term in the Dordogne, the Outward Bound experience at the end of Year 11 and the Year 7 Wild and Wet adventure are good examples of the way in which the school works tirelessly to enrich the lives of the pupils in its care.

SUMMARY OF INSPECTION EVIDENCE

The inspection was carried out from February 7th to 11th 2005. All subjects of the curriculum were inspected and almost all members of the teaching staff were observed teaching. However, the size of the team did not permit all subjects to be reported on in full. The following subjects do not have full reports in Section 8: classics, drama, design and technology, geography, ICT, music, religious studies and social sciences. The inspectors visited 126 lessons or parts of lessons, examined extensive samples of work by pupils of different abilities in each year and held formal discussions with these pupils as well as informal discussions with other pupils. They attended three assemblies and ten

registration sessions. They observed thirteen extra-curricular and sporting activities. They held discussions with 61 teaching and non-teaching staff at various levels in the school. They made visits to all the boarding houses and to the sanatorium. They analysed the responses of 222 parents to a questionnaire distributed in advance of the inspection. They examined a wide range of documentation made available by the school.

List of Inspectors

Christine Ryan	Reporting Inspector
Tim Borton	Head of Year, HMC School
Brenda Garrard	Former headteacher, GSA School
Michael Hornby	Former director of studies, HMC School
Katherine Macdonald	Head of 6 th form, GSA School
Philip March	Teacher, HMC school
David Stockwell	Former head of department, HMC School
Glynis Yates	LEA education consultant