

What The Good Schools Guide says

Principal

Since 2010, Christine Cunniffe BA MMus MBA. Read music and history, then a master's in music performance from Reading and an MBA from Leicester. Began a career as a musician before moving into teaching in 1994. Dived straight in as head of music, first at a Stevenage comp, then St Bernard's, a selective co-ed grammar school in Slough. Joined LVS Ascot as ambitious director of music in 2003 (school, which had no choir when she arrived, was performing Vivaldi's Gloria at Eton College chapel just two terms later). She served as assistant head pastoral, and then academic, before becoming headmistress of the senior school in 2010 and principal of the whole shebang in 2015. Married and lives on site; all three of her now adult children attended LVS.

Keen on innovation and keeps an ear to the ground for changes afoot. 'I've never been so excited about education,' she tells us, mentioning blended learning, fewer desktops and LVS Ascot children all having their own devices. 'IT enables differentiated learning. Before Covid our IT was a bit antiquated; now we're ahead of the curve.' LVS was made a Microsoft Showcase School in 2023. Junior school children use Microsoft Surface Gos; Surface Pros from year 5 upward. There is now a whizzy new VR classroom with 20 headsets, mainly used for history and geography. Proud that the school was on the 2022 shortlist for the National School Awards EdTech Innovator of the Year.

Nothing stuffy or teacherly about her, Mrs Cunniffe is at home speaking to pupils, parents, charities, education bodies or even the national press. More of a strategic guru than a traditional school master. Indeed there is a dash of Anthony Seldon in her enthusiasm for innovation and recognition for her school. Hot on putting LVS forward for oodles of prizes, from sport to wellbeing. A regular on ITV commenting on education and parenting, she gained notoriety for confronting Education Secretary Gavin Williamson on This Morning over the government's chaotic approach to A-level results during Covid. A keen reader, she published a book on Transforming School Culture through Lesson Observation in 2021 and is currently working on a psychological thriller. ISI inspector for Quality of Education and hon. treasurer of the Society of Heads. Still plays piano ('badly', she says modestly) and runs a parent-staff choir. An executive in the Licensed Trade Charity – 'We'll never starve,' she jokes.

Entrance

Proudly non-selective and a genuine all-through school. No entrance exams, but they do ask for school reports and an interview. Children may enter at odd times and the school is happy to work with parents in most situations, so long as they are up front. 'A place can be withdrawn if parents are not honest.'

Most junior school children join in reception (one form), year 3 (two forms), or year 5 (three forms, mainly owing to arrivals from Windsor's middle school system in which primary ends at age nine). Ninety-five per cent of children in the junior school continue into year 7 (no need to reapply for senior school). They are joined by a roughly equal number of newcomers, adding up to around 100 max in years 7 and 8. Numbers increase to 136 by

year 10. Sixth form entry requires five GCSEs grade 9-5 (higher for those wanting A level maths or similar).

Exit

Around a third leave after GCSEs. Most sixth formers proceed to university, with economics, business, media studies, sport and criminology popular, alongside some interesting vocational courses, eg air transport with commercial pilot training and cloud software development. Massive breadth of university destinations from Imperial and UCL to Winchester and Buckingham New University. No medics in recent years.

Latest results

In 2022, 36 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 21 per cent A*/A at A level (47 per cent A*-B). In 2019 (the last pre-pandemic results), 33 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 16 per cent A*/A at A level (35 per cent A*-B).

Teaching and learning

Individualised, but not hippy dippy. The school caters well to a wide ability range, so there's setting in maths, English and, later, science. All other subjects mixed ability. Average senior school class sizes are 13-15 students – though this may rarely go up as high as 24 in a top-set English or maths class. Every child has their own Microsoft device, and homework is set on Teams, though the assignment may be online or written.

Good choice of GCSEs and IGCSEs, eg photography, media studies, business studies, PE, food preparation and textiles. Single sciences or combined (triple) science available – no dual award. A GCSE-equivalent BTEC is offered in sport. Pupils we spoke to particularly praised GCSE drama. A level options are even wider with some appetising offerings like product design, criminology, textiles, philosophy, media studies, politics, economics and computer science plus BTECs in sport and in creative digital media production. Particularly well kitted out for DT and product design with five 3D printers. French and Spanish offered through GCSE only. We are unable to comment further on individual subjects as the school declined to provide us with exam results by subject, only broad summaries.

EPQs are also on the menu; recent titles have included 'How social media damages young teens' perception of happiness within their own skin', 'To what extent is increased Chinese investment into Africa a mutually beneficial strategy or a reflection of neo-colonialism?' and 'Are domestic animals more susceptible to respiratory problems than wild animals?' School also offers a one-year pre-sixth form course, mainly for international students. Is approved to run a one-year university foundation course (NCUK) with two strands: business, maths & economics, and art & design – may expand these courses to other subjects, so watch this space.

Leith level 3 extended certificate in professional cookery course offered – a potentially useful avenue for the children of families in the licensed trade. Pupils told us the careers advising was good and very helpful in finding work experience relevant to career interests. 'I worked in a care home with dementia patients,' a pupil told us.

Learning support and SEN

Neurodiversity Centre sits at the heart of the school and has eight full-time staff. Management is keen, however, that LVS not be pigeonholed as a special needs school. 'For many, the smaller classes here can be all the help they need,' says the principal. Last ISI report noted 214 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities; none statemented. The school also prides itself on stretching the highly able through differentiated work and workshops and other opportunities – we certainly met some high flyers. Plenty of EAL available for the international contingent.

The arts and extracurricular

Extracurricular activities get the same focus as academics. 'Not everyone is going to Oxbridge,' joked a teacher. Music, dance and drama are on the timetable from reception through year 9 under the oversight of the head of performing arts, who works across the whole school, all ages. Senior school children have a two-hour weekly period for music, dance and drama and can then opt to specialise in drama or music at GCSE (dance too if there is sufficient demand). We looked in on a fab class dancing to music from Hamilton. Nine peripatetic teachers visit LVS Ascot to offer music and LAMDA lessons. Over 200 children had music lessons last year. Key stage 3 music has been beefed up and now includes musical theatre and editing alongside having a go on different instruments. No orchestra, but there are several choirs, a rock club, a band club and hopes of reviving the jazz club that was a casualty of Covid.

There are two big school productions per year ('ultra-phenomenal', said a parent) which take place in the 300-seat theatre. The backstage club runs lighting, sound, sets and costume. Taking an imaginative and egalitarian approach, the school ran two casts of its recent production of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. The same group of actors appeared in each, but each child learned two roles and their characters swapped.

Loads of clubs run before, during and after school, including DofE (all year 9 students have a go starting the bronze award) and Arts Award (DofE for the arts with similar bronze, silver and gold sections). All children are encouraged to take part in something during their daily 'enrichment' slot. Pupils tell us there is plenty of cross-year-group engagement, eg for house sports, in performing arts, and during school elections.

Sport

PE twice a week taught in co-ed groups with weekly fixtures from year 3 upward. Saturday morning training or fixtures. Main sports are football, rugby, hockey and netball. Trailblazers in the art of 'teqball', a new, 'inclusive' football-based game played on a curved table. LVS has invested in five spanking new teqball tables. School hosts an annual ISA girls' U11, U13, U15 football tournament (and last year held a boys' version as well). Swimming big, particularly for junior pupils who have lessons in the school's beautiful 25m indoor pool and compete against other schools and nationally. 'Enthusiasm is the main thing,' says the principal. Top sportsmen and women can switch their PE lessons for extra elite coaching in their specialist sport.

In addition to the pool, there is a large sports hall, full-size Astro pitch, fitness centre, netball court, four tennis courts and masses of playing fields on the school's 25 acres. Games fields

butt right up against the school proper – in some places it is possible to step straight from class to pitch. We heard a few grumbles from younger end of senior school about lack of choice in sport, but options blossom from year 10.

Boarders

Boarding now starts from year 6 (will consider year 5 boarders from Forces families only). We were heartbroken to find that boarding houses are no longer named after drinks companies! Goodbye Bass, Carlsberg, Guinness and Gilbey. Hello dreary Kew, Osborne, Hampton and Blenheim. Houses all in very good nick – ‘little palaces,’ says the principal. Boys and girls each have their own sixth form houses now. Younger boarders usually four to each very tidy room; older kid in double rooms. Sixth form prefects get their own rooms, and there are three single girls’ rooms available at a premium rate. Years 7-11 bustle off to school in the morning and are not allowed back to house until the end of the school day. Sixth form can come and go at will. After school, it’s free time from 4pm to 5.50pm (usually a club or, for year 9s up, going into Ascot), then dinner, prep and finally an hour more free time before winding down for bed at 9.30pm. Saturday sports and plenty of outings.

Effort made to mix nationalities – the flags next to the pupil names on each door give you an idea of their homelands. Some come for one year, particularly from Europe. Boarding numbers down a bit, reflecting current political bother with Russia and China. The principal travels to education fairs abroad to reach out to ‘emerging markets’. Unusually, boarders have only one compulsory exeat a year – a big selling point for many international boarders. We spoke to the parent of a girl who described her daughter’s boarding experience as ‘fantastic’. Another told us her daughter was an occasional boarder two or three nights at a time – ‘wonderful to have on tap’.

Ethos and heritage

Has one of the quirkiest origin stories of any school in this Guide. The school was founded in London in 1803 by the Society of Licensed Victuallers, now known as the Licensed Trade Charity (LTC), a sort of guild charged with looking after people from the licensed drinks trade. Methodist temperance reformers these were not. In 1922, seeking fresh air and greenery, the school relocated to Slough. In 1989, it moved to its current site, formerly home to Heatherdown, an upper-crust prep school and David Cameron’s pre-Eton alma mater. LVS sold its Slough site to Tesco for a pretty penny and a commitment that the national supermarket chain would help design the school’s new premises in Ascot.

‘The Street’ at the heart of the school is the clearest example of the school’s late-eighties supermarket aesthetic. Originally imagined as a row of shops for the boarders (stationer, uniform, tuck etc), it is now used for offices and classes. Wisecracks aside, it’s a very useful design indeed, closer to a high-power US high school than a classic British public school in appearance, with its rows of lockers and spotless, purpose-built look. No unsightly prefabs or random mess. Children and staff can walk from one end of the school to the other, all under cover, including the junior school.

‘No snobbery, no elitism – you get a private school education without the price tag,’ a grateful parent told us. The vibe for this understated and unpretentious school is set at the entrance. We drove by its metal gate twice before realising that what looked like the entry to a building works was actually a school (plans have been approved for a grander wooden

entrance with living wall). Attractive sixth form centre, light and airy library ('learning resources centre,' says the school). All ages, from little tykes up to strapping sixth formers, eat at the open, round tables in the beautiful school canteen. Halal meat, vegetarian and pasta options plus a jacket potato station. The senior school day ends at 4pm and pupils can stay on site for activities or in the library until 6.45pm. The junior school runs free after-school care, available until 5.30pm and, for a small fee, they can stay until 6.15pm and have supper too.

Despite being one flowing campus, the junior school has its own distinctive atmosphere: sweet, safe, nurturing. When we asked these youngest scholars what they liked best about the school they solemnly replied, 'learning'. 'Roast dinners' came second. They have their own cheery assembly hall and numerous play areas. Years 5 and 6 use senior school facilities so the later transition to big school is easy.

LVS received a warning from the Dept for Education after a 2020 inspection identified several requirements as 'unmet'. These have all since been rectified.

An interesting and varied list of alumni includes Simon Cowell, Tracey Ullman, Capital FM DJ and presenter of Global's 'Official Big Top 40' Will Manning, singer-songwriter and producer Adam Argyle, serial entrepreneur Graham Boshier (founder of Graze, Tails.com and LoveFilm), co-founder of Not on the High Street Holly Tucker, former Secretary of State Lord Moore, and English professional footballers, brothers Connor and Lewis Hall, currently playing for Chorley and Chelsea. WWE professional Eddie Dennis taught maths at LVS Ascot before swapping the school bell for the wrestling ring in 2017. The Queen was the school's much-loved and valued patron from the time she ascended to the throne in 1952 until her death 70 years later.

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

All children allotted to one of three houses – identified by house tie for boys or blazer badge for girls. Plenty of house competitions and rivalry. Within the house team, every child has a tutor and a tutor group with which they gather twice a day. Vaguely Christian ethos but (very) non-denominational. Semi-religious assembly ('we sing hymns!') once a week in main sports hall.

Wellbeing centre provides a safe place to talk, a garden and space for counsellors to visit twice a week. A more traditional school sanatorium sits on the other side of the building. 'Parents want their children to be safe and happy, which means wellbeing and pastoral support,' says the principal. Mrs Cuncliffe's own non-traditional experience informs her view of the school's mission. 'I had to leave the grammar school at 14, having been coached through the exam. My mum pulled me out and put me in a model comprehensive school. That's when things turned around and the light came on again.' At LVS Ascot the light stays lit.

Behavioural issues were beginning to creep in when the principal laid down the law in 2021, and fifteen year 10 children were given warning of looming expulsion for illegal substances or other antisocial behaviour. Only a few survived the cull. 'It was the hardest time I've ever been through,' said the principal, 'but it was the best thing we ever did. We're so busy in year 10 now.'

Inclusiveness a priority, with the wide range of ethnicities, races, nationalities and social backgrounds here. There is the now-obligatory LGBTQ+ club and a new uniform was introduced in 2020 which includes a trouser option for girls. The school has supported a couple of gender non-conforming children.

Pupils and parents

Bright-eyed, smiling and chatty children whom we very much enjoyed meeting. Licensed trade families now account for only about five to eight per cent of pupil numbers. 'They used to be virtually all related to the industry, but there are fewer pubs now, the trade is more corporate. We might now have the child of head of corporate for Nairobi,' explained the principal.

Boy heavy, especially among boarders. The mix of boys and girls can also be uneven within year groups. One pupil spoke of 70 boys and 28 girls in her year group, creating some strains in PE, which is mixed.

Day pupils come in from around Bracknell, Lightwater, Woking, Egham and Windsor, with smaller clusters from the villages and towns in between. Good web of minibus routes extend out to eg Chiswick, Kingston, Farnborough and Maidenhead.

UK boarding pupils are spread across London and the south, from Dover to Cardiff. Sizeable Gurkha community owing to Forces discount. At least 60 per cent of boarders come from abroad. Biggest numbers still from Russia and China, but increasingly from Germany, Spain, Nigeria, Ghana, Brazil and Argentina.

Money matters

Economical UK day and boarding fees include food, books, exam fees and even counselling sessions; fees a bit higher for international pupils. School offers a massive range of truly arcane scholarships and bursaries, many of tremendous value.

First, and core to the school, are LTC bursaries which can cover 100 per cent of day fees and LTC scholarships for academic, creative or sporting hotshots. Anyone who has worked in the licensed drinks trade for five years or more – selling, serving, brewing or distributing alcohol – may apply.

Second, come the Frank Brake Trust and the Worshipful Company of Innholders (WCI) scholarships. These are awarded to pupils entering year 12 who wish to pursue a course of study in hospitality. 'We don't get a lot of take-up for these,' confides the principal.

Third, we have the Spirit of LVS Ascot awards of between 20 and 50 per cent for children entering years 7 and 12. Year 7 awards are for performing arts, sport and art (in the broadest sense – could include creative writing or app development). In year 12 they can be awarded for genuine excellence in almost anything.

Next come a slew of work-related discounts. So, fourth on our list is a 20 per cent discount for those who work within the licensed trade. Fifth, a massive discount of up to 50 per cent for those employed by the Licensed Trade Charity, the organisation that runs the school.

Sixth is a 10 per cent discount for Forces and diplomatic service families (15 per cent in the junior school). Seventh is another favoured profession, teachers, but only if they are 'in senior positions at other schools and universities'. These get a 20 per cent discount if they live or work within an eight-mile radius of LVS Ascot (elsewhere the school specifies a five-mile radius).

Eighth come sibling discounts: ten per cent off for third child onwards (discount applies even if first or second subsequently leave). Ninth is a 10 per cent alumni discount – not one we've ever seen before. And last, and probably least, are a range of financial incentives: discounts for advance payment, staying on to year 7 after attending the junior school, and for staying on to sixth form.

The school also accepts childcare vouchers toward the boarding element of school fees until the end of GCSEs, and as payment toward extended day sessions and after-school clubs.

The last word

A useful, modern, egalitarian school making waves in a sea of pomposity. The antidote to hothouse education. Tiger parents look elsewhere.