

Hanford School

Headmaster

Since September 2014, Mr Rory Johnston, Mr J to the girls. BA Hons Cantab. He's a classicist, a good fit for a school which has always excelled at classics. He's also a chartered accountant, a good fit for a school whose finances needed some grip - he's already upped the numbers and restored balance. Parted company with the City after 20 years and followed the hunch of a friend who reckoned he'd make a good teacher. Head of classics & boarding housemaster at Horris Hill 2009-14. Wife Georgina, Mrs J to the girls, George to parents, works alongside him and heads up pastoral care. Very highly rated. Rory and George have two children.

Sarah Canning, daughter of the founders, head since 1959, handed over to a charitable trust in 2003. Her presence and influence lived on in the background, as also her legacy: this remains very much the school she made. Now in her 80s, understandably less in evidence these days.

Entrance

Informal and non-selective, girls can come at any time if there's room (lately that's a big if). Some at 7, most as 8 or 9 year olds, a few at 10 or 11. Locals, Wessex girls, Londoners (regular coach to Battersea) and numerous families posted or working abroad (especially popular with forces and FCO families). A smattering of Europeans from Spain, France, Poland, Belgium and Germany. Parents as ever unshowy and unsnobby, new money prefers anywhere blingier. Some bursaries and a good deal for forces families.

Exit

All over, most to boarding senior schools - Bryanston, Sherborne Girls, Marlborough, St Mary's Calne and Ascot, Downe House, Benenden, St Swithun's, St Mary's Shaftesbury, Clayesmore

Our View

Ask any former parent or pupil about Hanford and you'll be bombarded by passionate paeans in celebration of its glories: its quiriness, its changelessness, its quintessential Englishness. Evocations of Malory Towers, Enid Blyton and Harry Potter will ensue, together with a reverent inventory of the school's more bonkers traditions - the manners system which grades girls from Piglet to Royal Guest and the nutty names of the branches on a cedar tree. You'll get the sense of a school that has somehow lain undisturbed for aeons, a time capsule, a girly Neverland; a place of butter-coloured sunlight, blissful children, long shadows, honey for tea, the whole timeless-idyll schtick. And to be sure, all of this grabs you when you go and see for yourself. The school's location is paradisaical, the manor house beyond beguiling. Stand and be captivated by the genius loci. Blandings Castle must surely be on the other side of the hill.

The cold reality, back in the days before overarching regulatory frameworks, didn't fall far short of this arcadia. This was the school where Tara Palmer-Tompkinson remembers, 'After swimming we used to run naked round the gardens because it saved the bother of tumble-drying the towels.' But Hanford needs to keep moving somewhat with the times, you can't do that sort of drying-off thing any more. Your typical Hanford parent is change averse, though. They expect a head to be a worthy guardian of the Sacred Flame, bringing as much of the past with them as possible while at the same time enabling the school to earn its keep, propitiate inspectors and prepare girls for the world of things as they are. It's a darn difficult trick to pull off.

The problem is not aims, it's means. It always is. Mr J's mission statement contains nothing that Sarah Canning didn't also sign up for, which, actually, every school in the country signs up for - fulfilling potential, nurturing talent, all that caboodle. But here's the rub: how, in a changing demographic where parents' needs, expectations and above all values are moving on, can Hanford go on being Hanford?

Hanford has always had a free-radical feel to it. When the Rev Clifford Canning, newly retired headmaster of

Canford, and his wife, founded it in 1947, they decreed no uniforms and no prefects - which raised eyebrows back then. But the thing that's especially made the school brilliantly different is the spirit in which it's done things, with idealism, creativity and joy, wholly unselfconsciously. The name for this spirit is eccentricity, and eccentricity is hard to perpetuate in process-driven times. Well, Hanford's heritage behaviours are underscored by strong seriousness, they're integral. They're loveable but they're not cutesy. Any head who fails to understand this must answer to those who feel exceedingly strongly about this school, ie, every single person who's ever known it. In the short time he's been at the school Mr J is winning high approval ratings.

His fans like the way he has committed to ensuring that girls enjoy rich, low-tech childhood in the core heritage Hanford way, out in the fresh air, playing, riding their ponies, making up games, tending the chickens, climbing trees, looking after their gardens (they get around a square yard each). They like the way this builds self-reliance and develops friendships, the way it instils, as one parent put it, 'gumption' - these are decidedly not snowflake children. Hanford parents like the adventurousness and muddy knees. They want their daughters to enjoy what they call 'a traditional childhood' and that's exactly what they get, watched over at an unobtrusive distance, never fussily superintended. A notably horsey school from way back, pretty much everybody rides, but no worries if you don't. In the summer you can enjoy a gallop before breakfast. Ancient, lovely stables, Grade 1 listed - 'more listed than the manor', a groom told us.

Hard to say the same about the sports hall complex, performing arts centre, design tech centre or indoor swimming pool, all of which the school has not got. But it gets by very well with what it does have - a perfectly serviceable outdoor pool, for instance, a halfway decent gym and some terrifically nice grounds. Okay, so a couple of the classrooms have been temporary for the last 30 years; what matters most is who's standing in front of the girls. Hanford's triumphant lack of state-of-the-art facilities does not, mostly, denote a lack of anything indispensable to the raising of twenty-first century children; indeed, it very much reflects the unmaterialistic mood music here and effectively - to be brutal - deselects the wrong sort of parent. Mr J does entertain architectural daydreams, mind, but wants to build beautifully.

In the meantime, it's amazing what the girls achieve without benefit of stuff. By dint of excellent coaching and that indefinable Hanford spirit the girls are at the very least a match for the schools they play against with their fancy floodlights and their electronic scoreboards. All the usual sports here plus pistol shooting. Yes, pistol shooting. The time, though, has finally come to lay some Astroturf because other schools are reluctant to come and play any longer on Hanford's grass. So that's very much at the top of Mr J's shopping list.

Masses of music, instrumental and choral - especially choral. Almost everyone plays an instrument. Dedicated music block. Drama very strong as you'd expect of a school which sets such store by play and imagination. Annual homemade production every summer performed outdoors, everyone has a part, natch. Art another heritage strength, seriously good, very well taught. The teacher told us 'The girls are amazing, they just get stuck in to whatever I give them'. Well, uninhibited spontaneity is very much a Hanford hallmark.

Academically tip-top - 'excellent' as the inspectors express it. Recent influx of new teachers reckoned to be a shot in the arm. ICT now on course and high time too; next stop, please, design and technology and some engines to play with. The school bangs on an awful lot about scholarships won, around half a dozen a year, and hats off to that, fair dos, but what if your wee lassie isn't a likely Nobel shortlister? Our judgement: what the school is doing for the brightest it's doing for the rest. Just as the brightest are beneficiaries of extra attention (not special sets), so are the strugglers, because this is a very personal school. One parent who had switched her daughter here from somewhere glitzier described her learning as 'transformed'. Good library, newly beefed up. Around 10 per cent of the girls have a SEN and are attended to by specialists. Interventionist support given to anyone needing it as and when. Physical disability not easily accommodated here owing to the insurmountable architecture, wheelchair sadly a no-no. Not the right school for 'substantial' SENs.

If you want the full seclusive, immersive experience of Hanford - because shared experience and the joyous intensity of living together with your friends are what the school is all about - then you board, and that's what four fifths do. But boarding doesn't suit everyone, nor the fees, so some don't. They have a bed all the same and can stay overnight more or less at the drop of a hat for free up to 20 days a year. Day girls go home after prep at 6.35 pm. Dormitories are upstairs in the manor house, hugger-mugger, in rooms that adapt remarkably congenially to the purpose. They were once famous for their super-spartan furnishings and absence of lavatory doors, so we braced ourselves for a spot of memory lane and were almost disappointed to discover that they are cheery, snug and utterly unobjectionable even if, here and there, yes all right, a dab of paint wouldn't go

absolutely amiss. Okay, so one prospective parent said she wouldn't expect her pig to live up here, but that only goes to show how much she just didn't get it. Perhaps she had a very fastidious pig. Whatever, we pictured only happy faces having heaps of fun - and reflected on how self-selecting Hanford parents are. What did concern us were the perils of pressure-cooker factors - girls getting on each others' nerves and being beastly to each other. But the quality of supervision by Mrs J, the matrons, including gap year students, is, we find, up to the mark and quickly onto this. One girl (her Dad's in the forces) protested under strong questioning, 'I've been to several schools and this one's easily the kindest.' So there. Mr J is keen to integrate the boarding and teaching staff more closely. Yes, all for that. In Year 8 you graduate to a separate house, FANS, where you get tv and feel more grown-up. A recent visitor reckoned the showers there resembled 'a 1970s campsite block, complete with soggy towels left on the floor. The tack room in the stable is tidier.' It happens.

A lot of people think that Hanford is an alternative sort of school. Couldn't be wider of the mark. Kindness matters most here. Close on its heels comes old-fashioned courtesy, hence the quaint manners league where you begin as a Boa Constrictor and earn your way up through Squirrel, Primrose etc, but risk plummeting to Piglet. It's aspirational, so there's very little Piglet-shaming. By all accounts it works. The same goes for the committee system, which takes the place of prefects. It's designed to bring out the helpfulness in girls, not the bossiness. Mr J, having watched its workings in his first year, finds it works extremely effectively. Both systems contribute to what one parent described as the school's climate of 'support, positivity and warmth' - a place where 'no one thinks they're better than anybody else'. All agree on this but no one can give you the full formula. One teacher said 'We just don't know how it works'. Being single-sex has got to be a factor. That and the ban on mobile phones (but not email). Testimony to the extraordinary happiness of the place comes from the same parent: "I'm sometimes mortified by how keen they are to get back to school'. None of the potential competition issues you might expect from a school without uniform. Why not? A girl explained 'If you wear something nice, it's probably just going to get dirty.'

If Hanford merely recreated a (mythical) 1930s childhood it would be no more authentic than one of those living history tv programmes in the mould of Wakey-Wakey Campers. It's nothing like that. It has judiciously preserved all those abiding elements which nurture the wonder of childhood at the same time as giving girls a good academic grounding and teaching them how to behave. Sounds simple but who else does it this well? In a market where schools are increasingly differentiated by nothing more than geography, Hanford retains its measurable quality and its elusive magic. The Sacred Flame is alight and well.