



King's High School

THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE

KING'S HIGH REVIEW 2026

WHAT THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE SAYS



He is all smiles and affability, grabbing the teapot to pour as we chat in his study. 'We want this to be a happy, kind place,' he says

Head

Since January 2021, Dr Stephen Burley, previously deputy head academic, whose soft burr hints at northeastern heritage ('South Shields to be precise'). Educated at King's School, Tynemouth, where he developed a love for 'all things literary', leading to a degree in English lit from UCL, an MPhil in medieval and romantic literature at St Catherine's College Oxford, and a PhD in literature, politics and philosophy from Queen Mary University of London. The 'privilege of my education' fostered a desire to 'pay it back through teaching'. Completed PGCE at King's College London before bagging his first teaching post in Bogota. Back on home turf he spent two years at The King's School, Canterbury as English teacher and girls' boarding house tutor, moving to Sevenoaks as assistant head of English. A stint at St Dunstan's College covering maternity leave, then to Headington School, Oxford as head of English for three years, before joining King's High in 2017.

Hot-footing-it from Hamlet ('it's important to lead by example and stay connected to teaching'), he is all smiles and affability, grabbing the teapot to pour as we chat in his study. 'We want this to be a happy, kind place,' he says, proud of the '180-degree turnaround' in pastoral provision, simultaneously dispelling their erstwhile 'exam factory' reputation, yet 'retaining high academic standards'. The result? 'Young women who have agency and the confidence to make a positive difference, whether small, in the everyday or on a global scale'.

'He's a breath of fresh air,' say parents, 'instilling joy into education and a gentle, inclusive ethos.' 'Just look at his Instagram posts, they illustrate the inclusivity of King's High.' Pupils are similarly enamoured: 'He's so lovely' and 'really funny'. Lives in Oxfordshire with his wife, Alice, and two children.

Entrance

Selective entry into year 7 via interview and exam (English, maths, VR). Over 200 apply for 120 places, with children from Warwick Prep making up half the cohort. The rest from 50+ local schools. 'Occasional spaces and mid-year starters' in other years.

Around 25 newbies into sixth form. They need grades 6 or 7 in A level choices (depending on subject), plus personal statement and interview.

Exit

Post-GCSE exodus of about 20 per cent (largely to grammars). Exeter, Leeds, Durham, UCL and Bath the most common destinations for year 13s, with three to Oxbridge in 2025. Psychology and STEM popular (including two medics in 2025). Eight degree apprenticeships in 2025 – including JLR, HSBC, Kite Packaging. Testament to 'focused' careers provision, say parents (eg inspiring visits to 'old girls' at university for tours and 'lived experience', Festival of Changemakers).

Latest results

In 2025, 78 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 44 per cent A*/A at A level (71 per cent A*-B).

Teaching and learning

Students do well here, with an emphasis on value added, happy pupils and a fun environment. 'Academic achievement follows,' says head. Five classes average 20 pupils in year 7, dropping to 17 higher up and to nine in sixth form. French and Latin taught from the get-go, with Spanish or German option in year 8. Only maths is set – from year 7. Parents say the school is 'pretty adaptable', one telling us her daughter 'dropped a second language to take chemistry'. Another told us, 'School arranged lunchtime sessions so our daughter could take Mandarin GCSE.'

History and RS top the popularity polls from 21 GCSEs offered, with RS, history, biology and psychology doing best. Most take triple science in nine top-notch labs, although the double award is also available.

A groundbreaking scheme offers pupils coursework-based level 2 qualifications in place of a ninth or 10th GCSE. 'We've talked to universities and most only consider candidates' top eight GCSE results,' says head. Students choose from neuroscience, law, global citizenship, sustainable engineering, climate change, AI and data analysis, which head says 'instils meaningful skills and knowledge for our changing world'. Around 75 percent of year 10s currently take at least one of these qualifications. Level 2 BTECs now on offer too (sport, health and social care, applied science, food and nutrition).

One parent we spoke to was anxious that such a 'forward-facing' school may overuse technology, 'especially with a bring your own device scheme', but we found a good balance. Year 10 historians researched Russian farming methods with textbooks, writing up findings in exercise books whilst another cohort were knee deep in music technology in one of two well-resourced IT suites.

Homework 'seems standard', say parents, impressed they can see what's been set (and handed in) on school portal.

Inspiring and creative learning opportunities at every age and stage. We loved the introduction to engineering for year 7s. Rocket thrust requirements were calculated for a mission to Mars in engineering, following experiments on playing fields. 'I designed a prosthetic limb in my year' our guide reflected. We found politically motivated year 7s voting with their feet in the corridor, animatedly debating moral and legal perspectives of current affairs – a fully engaged teacher encouraging all the way.

Our lunch companions were hyperbolic about 'chilli and nachos, ooh and fish and chips', alongside salad bar and soup ('can you believe it's different every day!')

Pupils are sanguine on academic pressure, telling us 'the teachers are on it', running lunch clubs, clinics, study skills, one to ones. 'If anything, we put pressure on ourselves by competing.'

Sixth form

Psychology and biology are the most popular of the 27 A level options (which also include photography and medieval history). These are mainly taught in the purpose-built sixth form centre, shared with Warwick School. More like a swish university facility, it has meeting rooms, quiet study spaces, social areas and a café peeling off a gargantuan feature staircase (which doubles up as informal seating).

A smattering of A levels are taught co-ed with Warwick School and there are occasional social sports matches (eg girls vs boys netball) and Friday afternoon activities, but on the whole the girls 'cherish our independence and the option be separate, or not' from the boys. Uniform is a conservative array of 'informal work wear'. Enrichment includes Young Enterprise, EPQ and pathways in law, medicine, music.

Learning support and SEN

Head of learning support works alongside two part-time staff supporting the 20 per cent of pupils on the SEND register. Fifteen per cent receive curriculum support (most of whom are 'high functioning autistic, mild dyslexic or neurodiverse'). 'They are all bright children here – we don't tend to see EBSA (emotionally based school avoidance) or behavioural problems due to the academic pace.' Currently 1 EHCP and 34 EALs.

One-to-one or small groups meet in a dedicated space (shared with pastoral) or library. The Boost Scheme (currently for 30 pupils) sees external tutors support via lunchtime review sessions (for no additional fee). 'There's absolutely no stigma in seeking extra help,' parents say. 'Our daughter was concerned that dyslexia and slow processing would single her out, but she's one of a number who benefit from supportive strategies.' Open-door policy, termly parent meetings, emails or 'they're on the end of the phone', we were told. Parent workshops run in conjunction with pastoral (eg anxiety, neurodiversity), while coffee mornings enable shared experiences.

The arts and extracurricular

'Art is off the scale and on show at every turn,' said a parent. We agree – all born from an epicentre of three spacious art studios a ceramics space and darkroom. 'Masses do GCSE', with 21 currently taking A level. DT buzzes, tooled up with

lathes, laser cutters and a plentiful IT suite. GCSE students (currently 16) beaver over benches to finesse coursework (a clutch at A level too, currently seven). No enticing wafts from well-resourced food tech (regrettably) but GCSE set enthused about recently devoured yule logs.

'Music's the reason I came here,' a sixth former divulged, hinting at schools' renowned provision. 'The concerts blow me away – and somehow they keep getting better,' a parent marvelled. Music block boasts 13 practice studios, technical suite, percussion area and our eyes were on stalks at a full-size organ in the rehearsal room. Countless bands, ensembles and choirs. 'I'm in main choir, chamber, baroque, orchestra and a flute ensemble,' our guide reeled off. 'Oh and the school play band.' Head of department runs a music pathway to support talent development with Warwick School, a year 7 scheme, 300 individual lessons per week, informal concerts ('to build confidence') and 'professional standard' large scale performances. His 'legendary' hymn practices are 'uplifting and fun', we heard – 'so that everyone experiences musicality, sending them off to class with a spring in their step', eg All I want for Christmas is you or a gospel version of Amazing Grace.

Ebullient head of drama runs dynamic department (alongside three part-time staff) with two rehearsal studios. Masses do LAMDA and there are eight lunch time clubs (including performance in a foreign language). Pupils direct younger year's productions, run tech, front of house, create scenery and props. Three largescale productions annually (two with Warwick school) performed at Bridge House Theatre or Warwick Hall, recently Sweeney Todd and Henry V (in the round). Lower school's Beauty and the Beast upcoming. 'Productions are phenomenal,' a real 'cut above', say parents. Two GCSE groups total 25, and A level is popular with two classes of 10 (joint with Warwick boys).

Friday afternoon's collapsed curriculum sees the whole Foundation (from year 9) do a carousel of 80 activities, eg community volunteering, CCF, disc golf, Japanese. Other programmes offer awards and challenges (designing board games, inventions problem solving everyday issues). Over 250 clubs, including engineering and aviation (literally building and flying a plane), chickens, jewellery making, dance, bee keeping, polo, CAD. Invitational clubs stretch learning eg STEAM and 'highfliers'. And the trips! Puerto Rico, South Africa, skiing, west end shows, art galleries. Upcoming Kenyan expedition to build a school toilet block alongside local community.

Sport

‘Sport is whatever you want it to be,’ head of department encourages, with space to scatter across playing fields, netball/tennis courts, two Astros for hockey (another imminent), two indoor sports halls and fitness suite (open early mornings, lunchtimes, after school). An on-site swimming pool is shared with Warwick School and Prep.

‘We are a sporty school,’ say pupils – as the fixture list confirms (eg Bromsgrove, RGS Worcester, Rugby). ‘Loads to choose from and lots of movement – you don’t just arrive in the A team and stay there,’ said one. Competing possible at all levels too: A to D teams in lower years, academies, lunchtime clubs. Not all have weekly matches, ‘meaning pupils don’t have to specialise and can keep interests broad,’ says head of sport. Option to ‘play for fun’ too, eg Monday evening netball, ‘when we get over 100’.

While hockey, netball, cricket, athletics and tennis are the mainstays, there is plenty more besides, eg football, yoga, wellbeing walking, cross country, climbing. ‘We will try anything the pupils’ suggest,’ said head of sport. Some parents wish they could ‘keep the girls going for longer’ – school says a new Super Saturday programme is designed to address this with ‘a focus on inclusive sport and fitness for all’.

Noticeboard boasts extensive talent athletes programme (TAP), supporting and coaching pupils from swimming to skiing, fencing to Hoys horse show. PE GCSE (currently 20 pupils) extends to A level (uptake between five and 10).

Boarders

There has been an expansion to the small boarding contingent (situated adjacent to Warwick School’s boarding facilities), with spaces now available from year 9 (largely China and Hong Kong). Some up take on flexi/occasional boarding option.

Ethos and heritage

There were only 22 pupils in 1879 when King’s High opened its doors at Landor House, Smith Street, offering pupils ‘academic excellence and personal enrichment’. Over time, numbers swelled, with buildings and facilities springing up in the 1960s and 2000s. In 2019, the school moved to its £43 million, purpose-built site joining the other Foundation partner schools.

‘King’s High are thoroughly embedded’ on the immaculate 55-acre campus, says head. A pupil confessed with a wry smile that, ‘if anything, we get preferential treatment’. Shared facilities include swimming pool, sixth form centre, selected sports pitches, ‘sociable’ outdoor areas, use of Warwick Hall and Bridge House theatre - but the school is predominantly independent, allowing what the Foundation coins ‘the best of both’.

Aesthetically pleasing, the two-storey red brick building blends seamlessly with existing Warwick School and Prep. An air of calm purposefulness pervades, not least in reception (an inviting space with comfortable sofas) where portraits of female ‘changemakers’ watch over all who enter (to ‘inspire’). A quadrangle layout with voluminous windows overlooks covered cloisters (accessible from ground floor corridors and classrooms), and neatly clipped lawns. Broad corridors (named after Warwick streets, colour coded for ease of orientation) are divided by department – so roomy that one has become a sixth form study area. With countless curved bookshelves and tables for individual or group study, the library is swathed in the same Siberian larch that arcs over the enormous school hall used for assemblies, performances and public exams.

A cheerful dining hall teems with trestle tables and spills onto wide terracing chock-a-block with picnic benches for alfresco dining. Our lunch companions were hyperbolic about ‘chilli and nachos, ooh and fish and chips’, alongside salad bar, soup (‘can you believe it’s different every day!’) jacket potatoes, ‘grab and go’ sandwiches. Similar enthusiasm for tuck shop.

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

‘They talk the talk and walk the walk,’ say parents of the pastoral provision, which they largely attribute to the head and SLT who ‘exude such fun and enjoyment of their jobs, it filters out to staff and pupils’. One added that ‘teachers know if the girls are happy – and if not, they quickly find out why and do something about it’. Pastoral team includes two full-time non-teaching staff, so ‘there’s always someone to talk to’. Pupils are surveyed about wellbeing biannually and meet tutors one-to-one to ‘catch up’, ensuring ‘nothing slips beneath the radar’. Wellbeing week includes silent disco, helter skelter, ice cream van, doughnut sales.

We love the Oasis wellbeing sanctuary (and SEND office), welcoming visitors with piped music, floral fragrance, comfortable seating and soft pastels. Some clubs (eg neurodiversity) take place here. ‘They understand how pupils with neurodiversity can struggle and do everything they can to smooth their path,’ praised a parent. Medical centre opens daily with dietician and counsellor visiting weekly (no charge). We met Parsnip, one of two wellbeing dogs.

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The Peace Pod offers alfresco space for quiet reflection – and there’s a prayer room. Though founded in Christianity, school ‘welcomes and respects’ a wide diversity of faiths and cultures.

Inevitably, friendship issues crop up but ‘we can usually handle them ourselves’. On the odd occasion when intervention needed, ‘teachers look at both sides and treat everyone with respect and compassion’. Parents approve: ‘From the get-go it’s drilled into pupils to be kind and respectful so there are very few issues.’ LGTBQ+ society welcomes ‘anyone and everyone’ to join activities. No whispers of vaping, alcohol or drugs. ‘It’s not what we are about or interested in’ a year 12 said.

Mobile phone policy

A clear mobile phone policy is a really important part of modern schooling. This school has provided us with their policy.

Mobile phone policy

Provided by the school and not part of our review

We prioritise connection, belonging, and meaningful relationships so each morning, students in years 7–11 lock phones and smartwatches in school-provided, signal-blocking pouches. Sixth formers may bring in phones to use only in designated areas. We strongly encourage parents to delay buying their child a smartphone until at least year 10. If a phone is necessary for the journey to school, we recommend a basic model without internet or social media access.

Pupils and parents

‘Academics here are a given,’ say parents who are ‘delighted and relieved’ at the ‘inclusive, pastoral focus that envelopes King’s High’. ‘There’s such a positive buzz about the place - we looked at a few schools and knew immediately this was the one.’ Sage advice offered too: ‘If you’re concerned about whether your daughter could keep up, speak to the head or SLT. They reassured us our daughter was more than capable, supported her brilliantly through a couple of initial wobbles and she has flown.’ Minor niggles: ‘You’re lucky you didn’t come at drop off or pick up, it’s bedlam’ (a complaint levelled across whole Foundation) and uniform (rolled up or very short skirts, jewellery, make up) ‘could be tidied up’, although we didn’t spot any infractions.

‘Nippy’ minibuses zip through outlying villages and large coaches work the bigger conurbations. App, Zeelo, tracks location ‘and whether your child has got on or off’. Added boon of additional late buses after clubs. PA events, but there’s no pressure. A mix of parents but ‘it’s not at all snooty, everyone’s pretty down to earth’. Parents sum up girls as ‘a mix of allsorts - which is a great thing’, ‘nicely confident’, ‘kindhearted’ and ‘happy’.

Money matters

Up to 26 scholarships in year 7 (academic, music, sport, art, drama) with up to 20 per cent fee reduction. Four means tested King Henry VIII awards for CV34 postcode and 36 means-tested bursaries.

The last word

It seems academic excellence was once the sole ingredient at King’s High School. Now the recipe has been re-imagined with a large spoonful of pastoral care, heaps of brand new facilities and an innovative academic flavour - all of which is helping them to rise – but the happy, smiling faces of staff and pupils are the real icing on the cake.

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