

A PILGRIM'S LIFE

Tom Burden, head of boys' preparatory The Pilgrims' School in Winchester, argues that parents wedded to London schools should not ignore the holistic education given by a country boarding school



Winchester Cathedral is just a hop, skip and jump away from Pilgrim's School

The dishwasher, telephone, London Underground and loo paper had all been invented before the Elementary Education Act of 1880 made it compulsory for children to be in school until the age of ten. The aspiration was to create a workforce that had a grasp of reading, writing and arithmetic.

Our educational aspirations these days go far beyond these basic aims, of course. If I were to stand before prospective parents and proclaim, 'Boys in my school can read and write and add up – what more do you want?', they would think that I was being ironic at best. The modern world demands a more varied set of skills. The first iPad was released in 2010 – just imagine what the world will be like when today's prep-schoolers reach middle age. Interpersonal and creative talents are now more important than ever – the 'three Rs' are nothing more than the simplest blocks at the bottom of a skyscraper.

And yet league tables have driven us back to thinking all that matters is exam results. Of course, academic achievement is essential because it accesses the next stage of education. In most professions, qualifications open the door, even though it is the

sum total of a person that secures a particular job. Academic work may be the cake, but a good school will add an inch of icing, and it is that topping that makes a difference.

I wonder if you can see where this is leading. It may be at this point that you glance up at the byline and see that I am headmaster of a boys' boarding prep school in Winchester.

What it does not say is that I used to be headmaster of a Hampstead prep school. I enjoyed London and was very proud of our academic record. Given the terms of the debate, the battle for recruitment was nearly won if I could evidence an impressive percentage in Year 6 and Year 8 exams. It was all about the cake. I was rarely pressed about the icing which encompasses all those extra-curricular and character-building strengths that are the norm in schools (particularly boarding schools) outside of London.

It is probably the words 'outside of London' that make a Londoner's fingers twitch towards turning the page. But there is no need to uproot from the great metropolis to access a country education that matches the best in London academically and brings a host of other character-building advantages. Many schools offer escorted travel, like our popular Pilgrims' Express to Waterloo, as well as full, weekly or flexi boarding.

Boarding? Perhaps another finger twitch? An image of metal beds and open windows? Not quite – modern boarding in the Skype age is warm and friendly, a world of cosy dorms, after-school clubs, homework assistance, bonding activities with friends and regular contact with home. The hectic day-to-day of family life is eased; gone is the relentless pressure of the traffic-jammed school run, supper, prep and bed. Time at home becomes quality time, contact time, shared time.

In many, if not most, schools outside the capital, playing fields and a swimming pool are seconds away. Here in Winchester, for example, the town centre is five minutes in one direction and open countryside five minutes in the other. River swimming, sailing, fishing, golf, forest school, camp building, as well as sport, music, art and drama provide icing as thick as the cake it covers. Boarding schools build both team spirit and independence; we develop the resilience that prepares for the challenges that a complicated lifetime will bring.

But surely this is a distraction from the 'essentials'? Quite the opposite. At Pilgrims, 20 academic, music, or sports awards to senior schools were won by our 37 leavers in 2016.

I suppose it comes down to what we mean by education. If it simply means to provide schooling, as it did in the 1880 Education Act mentioned at the beginning, then it really is all about English and Maths (and, dare I say, thinking back, verbal and non-verbal reasoning). But if education means to lead towards and prepare for adulthood, then the classroom is only one part of that – and my belief is that a rounded education is more often found outside of the greatest city on earth.

London parents: it is possible to have the cake, icing included – nay, icing is the vital ingredient – and eat it!



Boys board away from
the rat race of London