

Branching Out

Once head at a London prep school but now Headmaster of The Pilgrims' School in Winchester, Tom Burden believes that children, just like trees, need space to grow



TOM BURDEN



There are good reasons for believing that London is the world's greatest city. It is Europe's most visited city – and second in the world. It is arguably the most energetic, and the most creative, and the most fashionable and iconic. It is probably the most multicultural. And it trades more dollars than New York.

It is wonderful to have the centre of such a magnificent city under an hour away if you live in Winchester, as I now do, as Headmaster of The Pilgrims' School. This is not an article extolling the virtues of moving to Winchester (or anywhere else), though it was capital of England when London was a mere trading centre, has a longer cathedral than any in London, and was called "practically perfect" and named the best place to live in England by the Sunday Times 'Best Places To Live' Guide in March 2016. With boarding as an option, and a weekend return shuttle service offered by an increasing number of schools within easy reach of London – Pilgrims' included – you don't even have to move.

I am certainly not arguing that London doesn't have great schools and I thoroughly enjoyed being Headmaster of Hereward House, a successful prep school in

Hampstead. It is true that a certain type of child flourishes in the London system: high-IQ, stellar-CV types who will do well anywhere and have no problem bagging a St Paul's place after playing first team games for their prep school. However, I believe that even these superstars would be better off outside the metropolis, even if only by a short bus ride.

London prep schools have to be academically strong because of the enormous pressure they are under to deliver. In particular, they must deliver at 11+, which means a diet of English and Maths and Reasoning – all meat and no veg, one might say. And even then, limited senior school capacity means failure can follow failure, especially for boys, for whom there is no single co-ordinated exam. The schools into which we feed are more likely to consider potential and character rather than draw a line on a list of names ranked by exam result.

Having seen both sides of the fence, I firmly believe everyone would benefit from education outside of London. Everyone benefits from having playing fields and a swimming pool a



Above
A game of tug-of-war

Left
Headmaster Tom Burden

Far Left
On the run



A highly academic London prep school delivers a diet of all meat and no veg



few seconds away (no buses involved). Everyone benefits from – in the case of The Pilgrims' School – having open countryside five minutes in one direction and a town centre five minutes the other. Everyone benefits from a rounded curriculum and character-building clubs and activities such as river swimming, sailing, fishing, and golf, as well as all the usual sport and music and art and drama. Everyone benefits from being in a school that, for example, allows boys to build a scooter track and race around it, or a school that promotes camp building and raft construction and forest school. This summer, just for example, we have had boys complete the Three Peaks Challenge, others swim the Channel (in distance, that is, over time: 21 miles), others sail across Poole Harbour, and others cycle The South Downs Way (all 100 off-road miles with 12,000 feet of ascent). Our boys are not wrapped in cotton wool; instead, they are wrapped in experience.

Does this mean compromise on standards? Quite the opposite. 20 academic, music, or sport awards to senior schools were won by our 37 leavers this summer.

Boys and girls have one chance to enjoy being young and to build the character and skills that enable them to flourish for a lifetime. Personally, I do not want to engineer carefully-cultivated bonsai trees. I want to encourage the growth of free-growing, strong oaks. And oaks grow better outside the greatest city on earth. 