

What The Good Schools Guide says

Headteacher

Since September 2021, Sarah Forster, previously deputy head at Valentine's High School in Ilford, London. Studied psychology at Nottingham Trent, PGCE in social sciences from Keele. MA in leadership from UCL. Began her career as a psychology teacher at Dame Alice Owen's School, Potters Bar. Over 20 years' experience across comps and grammars. First headship.

A champion of gender equality in education, she introduced boys into the sixth form in September 2025 and told us she is committed to giving both boys and girls 'the confidence and skillsets they need to thrive in today's highly competitive world'. She explains, 'While great results will get you an interview, it's the self-esteem, positivity, confidence, determination and resilience that will get you the job.' The girls both in sixth form and lower down the school are intelligent, she adds, 'and we want them to leave recognising how amazing that is, with the character development and maturity to make them best placed to smash through glass ceilings'.

Armed with a strong senior leadership team, she is able to focus on the strategic and financial management of the school, 'which runs like a well-oiled machine', according to parents. With several layers of dedicated staff, management are very 'on it' in terms of day-to-day issues, they told us. 'She leads in a very different, holistic way, keen to develop the whole child and above all, to fuel curiosity and a sense of belonging,' we heard. 'Not heavy handed, she knows the girls well,' agreed another. Girls say her hot chocolate sessions with pupils are popular.

A strong, impressive woman, born and raised in Yorkshire, she enjoys family life in Torquay, where her son attends one of the local primary schools. Dog walks with the family's Cocker spaniel serve as downtime out of school.

Entrance

Selection via two 11-plus exam papers, with 192 places for those with the top grades, irrespective of proximity to the school. Competition is high and tutoring is commonplace. School says girls who gain places equate to those performing in top 25 per cent at primary school.

Around 18 external students join the now co-ed sixth form (a handful of boys so far) from other state schools – they need 36 points from their best six GCSEs including grade 5s in English and maths.

Exit

A quarter leave after GCSEs, usually to shorten their commute. Most of these to Exeter College. Post A level, 70 per cent go to Russell Group universities – Cardiff, Bath and Plymouth most popular. Usually a few to Oxbridge, though none in 2025. STEM degrees very popular – including 10 medics in 2025 (there's an excellent dedicated programme for this). Occasional students to university overseas.

Latest results

In 2025, 58 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 93 per cent 9-5 in English and maths. At A level, 39 per cent A*/A (72 per cent A*-B).

Teaching and learning

Unashamedly single sex (until sixth form), which school claims gives girls 'the freedom to be themselves and develop their voice in the classroom' without being isolated ('there are 1,000 boys within walking distance at the boys' grammar next door'). A very academic school, girls told us 'the pace is fast and standards are high, but it's not a grade machine'. They added that 'everyone is treated as an individual' and 'the staff are all incredibly approachable and just want the best for us'.

Atmosphere is described by parents as 'healthy pressure as opposed to undue pressure'. In fact, end of year exams have been abolished in years 7 and 8 for this very reason. 'The girls are encouraged to be curious beyond what is required to pass exams,' approved one parent.

Girls like the long (55 minutes) lessons – there are five of these a day with five-minute movement breaks in between. Class sizes up to 32 in Key Stage 3, moving to between 20-30 at GCSE. All take French or Spanish from the off and around 80 per cent take a language at GCSE (Spanish considerably more popular). German being phased out. No setting, except in maths from year 7.

Humanities strong, STEM even stronger - bright girls and outstanding teaching in maths and the sciences proving a winning combination. In a year 10 chemistry class, we thought the teaching phenomenal - engaged pupils switched on and thirsty for knowledge. 'It's easy to understand why chemistry is such a popular subject,' piped up one of the girls. In maths too, we observed energy and enthusiasm, as well as strong teacher-student relationships. Around 60 per cent take triple science and most do further maths – bringing the typical number of GCSEs up to 10 for most. These are also the subjects that do best. Pupils said they feel very well prepared for exams through a combination of supported revision, 'morning mastery' and guided learning.

Homework 'not over onerous', say parents – and they like that it's set on an app which they can monitor. A few would like more contact with teaching staff although school points out it provides 'well above the statutory face-to-face time'. All say teachers go the extra mile and are grateful for them putting in copious hours outside lessons, eg DofE sessions and trips.

Lots of enrichment. 'Confidence-building public speaking and debating' popular in Key Stage 4 – as is the careers evening and work experience.

Sixth form

The first sprinkling of boys joined in September 2025, mainly we hear, due to subjects not offered at their school, eg history and physics. Pastoral care a further draw for the first brave male pupils who appear relaxed and happy with their move.

The small size of the sixth form and class sizes (between 10-25) is a further boon. Pupils say positive individual relationships are forged with teachers and fellow pupils – 'preferable to moving to a larger sixth form college,' said one. The outstanding relationship between teachers and students evident in the lessons we observed.

Twenty-one subjects on offer – psychology, politics, media studies, biology and chemistry are the most popular. Most are taught in the modern sixth form centre which also offers a cafe serving barista-style coffee and refreshments, along with light and bright study areas and a large library. We enjoyed a tasty lunch of healthy wraps and sandwiches with friendly sixth formers who pay by thumb print or debit card.

Good on enrichment – pupils keen to tell us all about medsoc, along with law and politics societies, and one was preparing a talent show for the nearby Rowcroft Hospice for her EPQ (around 40-50 per cent take-up for EPQ). They also spoke of the 'outstanding' university and careers advice – with pupils encouraged to 'become trailblazers' and 'make an impact' in their chosen fields.

Leadership roles include mentoring and wellbeing ambassadors for the younger years. Sixth formers also run many of the lunchtime clubs, including drama. The experience of directing a play or organising a musical performance with the use of the school's recording studio are 'great opportunities to build skills and experience', said pupils.

We liked the dress code: 'dress for a day in not for a night out', which sums up the sensible but not dogmatic approach the school employs.

Learning support and SEN

Seven per cent of pupils are on the SEN register, with a further 30 per cent monitored. Two EHCPs when we visited. Autism is the biggest need, then ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia and dyspraxia. The support team - comprising full-time SENCo, assistant SENDCo, SEMH lead and autism lead - are trained as mental health first aiders and ELSAs. They are 'excellent', according to parents, one telling us they were 'particularly fantastic at learning to read my daughter's moods and responding to her needs, handling her autistic overload with incredible flexibility'. Others commended the school's 'inclusivity' and small group interventions.

Praise too for the 'gradual and gentle' transition, which involves all children with SEN being visited in their primary schools. One child with severe anxiety was 'amazed' at how well the school had managed this period, as was the mother of a child with Tourette's. Pupils are

offered a 'soft' start to the day where needed in one of three dedicated spaces – there's even a special SEND assembly for those that want it. Intriguingly, AV1 (avatar) robots are on offer to provide a 'physical presence' in the classroom for pupils unable to attend school due to long-term illness or mental health issues – innovative. The only negative we heard was a slight grumble about 'the occasional disconnect between the department and teaching staff who may not always have been totally on top of the SEND plan'.

The arts and extracurricular

Creative subjects are 'well taught', 'therapeutic' and 'fun', according to girls. Evident both in the lively drama practice and eager preparation of Calzone pizza that we saw on our visit.

The drama block is a hive of activity. Great acting and teaching at the Performing Shakespeare Club where rehearsals were underway ahead of a national competition. Students from TGGs are invited to support productions at the neighbouring Torquay Boy's Grammar School, recently *Into the Woods*. LAMDA popular, and sixth formers run dance and drama clubs, although surprisingly no GCSE or A level.

Music perhaps not the strongest department, some parents feel, although we did hear from pupils that music lessons are fun, and the 'house shout' competition is taken very seriously. Music lessons timetabled up to year 9 – and around 17 take the GCSE (no A level currently). Around 16 per cent learn one of 12 instruments via the visiting peris and there's a choir, string groups, jazz and numerous bands though no orchestra, to the disappointment of some.

Lovely bright space dedicated to art, where we saw an impressive display of clay insects which formed part of the year 10 3D experience. Popular at GCSE - around 50 do fine art, 16 or so continuing to A level.

Over 55 clubs run at lunchtimes – sporting clubs are most popular, along with knitting, coding, cake decorating and school magazine. Some wolf down their lunch in morning break so they can focus entirely on their hobbies. Nothing after school as most pupils get the bus home. DofE and Ten Tors both popular, as is Model UN and debating with girls doing well in national competitions. Joint musicals, discos and charity events enable contact with boys - the best of both worlds.

Trips are a rite of passage at TGGs. Good balance of local curriculum trips and pastoral residential trips that support team bonding and wellbeing. Recent trips further afield to Iceland, France, Belgium, Cern in Switzerland, as well as expeditions to Borneo and Kenya.

Sport

High profile and inclusive - from county players to classroom to 5km club at lunchtime organised by senior girls. School does particularly well in netball and hockey, reaching recent southwest finals for both - athletics also shines. Lots more on offer including rowing, indoor cricket, football, rugby, gymnastics and yoga. In earlier years, sport twice a week; from year 10 pupils can choose - badminton and the well-equipped fitness suite are the most popular options. Facilities include field, multi-purpose Astro (used by the wider community), tennis

courts, indoor sports hall, gym and dance studio. The large sports court has recently been upgraded. GCSE and A level PE both popular. House competitions attract huge participation and there are many, many sports clubs.

Ethos and heritage

The school has been in situ and held in high local esteem for over 100 years. However, parents note the 'refreshing down-to-earth' ethos of the school. No impressive architectural frontage, although the pre-war buildings and more modern additions are all fit for purpose, well-equipped and nice and bright. Highlights include the sparkling sixth form centre, sports hall and music and drama block. Outside, it was pleasing to see huge allotment areas, wildlife pond, a walking track and even a bandstand. The pupils are proud of the school, showing us every nook and cranny. School is a member of the South West Academic Trust, in association with the University of Exeter.

Students up to year 11 eat in the large dining hall or pick up 'grab and go' items from the deli to enjoy indoors or at the many outdoor tables available. Copious choice of tasty food. The benefits of a good diet seen as an integral part of the healthy, productive school environment. Pupil feedback encouraged - chef attends school council meetings and a suggestion box in the sixth form cafe. Dietary needs well catered for including gluten-free, vegan and other restrictions. There is a large uptake for the regular themed meals, and students were excited about the international three-day menu for Cultures Week.

Charitable giving plays an important part in the school's ethos – and student voice too. Girls recently engaged with local MPs on topical issues both in the southwest and further afield. TGGS girls even led a local working party to determine a workplace charter in Torquay.

Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

'As you grow, the school grows with you.' A profound comment from a year 10 pupil. Mirroring the view of her peers, she felt the school never feels too big or scary – helped by separate assemblies for the key stages and mentoring of younger ones by the older ones. All the girls told us they feel well supported by a bigger pastoral team post-pandemic. Parents told us staff are not only quick to respond to individual needs but proactive in dealing with mental health issues. For example, a recent well-attended talk on self-harm, while a PHSE session we observed on euthanasia was handled extremely professionally and sensitively with girls animated and engaged, keen to air their views. Good to hear too of trips being increased for year groups that missed out during the pandemic to boost social skills.

School counsellor and external educational psychologist both on hand and well used. Girls we spoke to described them and other staff as 'approachable, interested and supportive'. Strong on safeguarding too, including anonymous forms available to report incidents. Pupils told us they 'can talk to any adult about anything' and that they appreciate the sixth form 'wellbeing ambassadors'. Little talk of behavioural issues or bullying, rather of kindness and friendship – with parents also satisfied that the rare disciplinary issues are dealt with effectively.

Attendance levels way above the national average – and we heard how a pupil with SEN was dealt with in a 'non-accusatory and genuinely supportive and concerned way with a reduced timetable provided'.

Not too much ethnic diversity, reflective of the area, with some different nationalities represented, mainly from Europe. LGBTQ+ club well attended. The school has a broadminded stance on gender issues. Neurodiversity is celebrated through displays on school screens and assemblies and ensures that national events such as Autism Acceptance Month are marked through the spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) programme which celebrates diversity both within the curriculum and via regular assemblies. The annual Cultures Week is led by student council with the whole school enjoying the 'walk around the world' as well as the creation of a visual school map celebrating the diversity of the whole school community.

Pupils and parents

Parents describe the girls as 'empowered', 'bright' and 'not frightened to speak up and challenge'. We found them intelligent, friendly and vocal. School clearly meeting its aim for them 'to be at the forefront of change, urged to have a voice' – and parents are delighted that younger ones still feel comfortable enough to play 'hide and seek' and 'chase seagulls' at breaktime. They come in from far and wide – increasingly so, according to parents, who say that some years see those from Exeter outnumbering the ones from 'the Bay'. Transport mainly by bus or nearby train station. Parents are supportive of the school and feel the privileged and those less privileged all come together harmoniously. Currently five per cent of pupils are eligible for free school meals – given Torbay's high child poverty rates, we were pleased to hear the school is making some inroads into increasing this.

The last word

Torquay Girls' Grammar School is ideal school for bright, ambitious girls (and now boys in sixth form) who enjoy a dynamic, fast-paced environment and are prepared to work hard. Also stands out for opportunities outside the classroom and for its kind, supportive environment.