



PORT·REGIS

Talk Education Review 2022

Before the Easter break, journalists Nicola Cunningham and Emi Thorburn, from the publication Talk Education, spent a whole day here. Having experienced as much of school life as they could, and drawing on their discussions with pupils, parents and staff, they have written this glowing report which we believe encapsulates the distinctive spirit of Port Regis.

“Parents’ biggest gripe about Port Regis? Finding a senior school that lives up to it.”

Our View

Don't be fooled by the turreted façade of Motcombe Park, Port Regis' magnificent Victorian red-brick home: this is no draughty, creaky old school. It's a place that shimmers and shines; hot on manners, hard work and integrity, yet dynamic and progressive. Brilliant new head Titus Mills arrived last year, tasked with reinvigorating Port Regis – if you're expecting a sleepy country school, prepare to be blown away.

With its grand driveway slicing through a glossy nine-hole golf course and a spread of large, shiny buildings, Port Regis looks and feels like a big-guns senior school. The blend of tradition and modernity rather sums up the Port Regis way; the architecturally beautiful

19th century main school's a mishmash of wood panelling, roaring fires, high ceilings and carved balustrades, and big and bold extensions with gleaming glass walls, spacious classrooms with dogs snoozing in the corner and the beyond impressive STEAM centre bursting with state-of-the-art gadgets. The stunning pre-prep sits in the estate's former stables, with its own driveway and beautiful old courtyard. Pre-prep pupils use lots of the prep's facilities (they come up for lunch each day in the main dining room), and the lovely outdoor play area has everything a little one could possibly wish for. It's all set in the heart of rolling Dorset countryside, with thumping great 150-acre grounds and world-class facilities to boot. Shaftesbury is two miles away, and it's an hour's drive to the coast.



Head

Titus Mills arrived in January 2021 from peppy Hampshire prep Walhampton – where, during his headship, he skyrocketed the school into the 21st century. A charming Old Etonian with an extraordinarily broad CV, he's taught at schools as far-flung as Uganda and also done a tough but rewarding stint at a state primary in Lambeth. It's fair to say that Mr Mills is one of the most passionate and genuine heads we've met. Championing a truly joyful childhood



sits at the top of his agenda, and he's started as he means to go on, removing hedges to make the campus feel more connected, bringing chickens and sheep into the grounds for children to feed and play with and encouraging inter-year friendships by introducing regular playtime for all on the front lawn. Shortly after he arrived, he helped children and staff plant 6,000 bulbs along the drive to soften the school's approach. His lovely wife Jemima is a much-loved part of the school community too, busy running charity and community events (when we visited, she was gearing up for a family dog show that weekend), teaching art (we loved the colourful parakeets and butterflies adorning the walls and bannisters, all created in Jemima's art activity club) and helping out in the girls' boarding house. The couple also have three young sons.

Admissions

Demand for places is ever-increasing, and with 80 per cent of pupils living within a 10-mile radius of the school, a lovely local feel permeates throughout. After the nursery, the main entrance point is at 7+, with lots of children defecting from super nearby primaries for a piece of the Port Regis magic. Everyone entering the prep school sits verbal and non-verbal reasoning assessment papers, and there's an informal chat with the head. Stacks of siblings follow on, but entry isn't automatic: academics punch high here, and it's important to check everyone's up to it. It's always worth enquiring about the school's generous bursary scheme – the school is very conscious of affordability and will help out where it can.



Academic and Senior School Destinations

Mr Mills is passionate about building upon PR's already impressive academic heritage and last year's scholarship record was the school's best ever. Standards of teaching are high yet this is a truly all-round school, with pupils shooting for success both in the classroom and out on the sports field, on the stage and in the thriving music and art departments too. Potential scholars follow their own accelerated learning programme to really flex their academic muscles, while the well-resourced SEN department has been recently relocated from a dreary upstairs room to a magnificent area in the main mansion (Mr Mills told us he wants pupils to feel happy and proud to be there). French and Spanish are compulsory, but keen beans can tack on Japanese or Mandarin too – and, to keep things relevant, a specialist computer-science teacher has been brought in to teach littlies coding and artificial intelligence. Since Mr

Mills' arrival, Saturday school has been scrapped to make way for Port Regis Plus, a morning of enrichment activities ranging from philosophy to bushcraft. These kids aren't afraid of hard work, and the school's 100 per cent CE success rate tells us all there is to know. Pre-test and interview preparation starts nice and early in Year 5, and every two years the school flings open its doors to host a senior schools fair, inviting registrars from the UK's top senior schools to come and answer parents' questions. As a truly independent prep, pupils hop off to up to 25 different senior schools each year; heaps to West Country stalwarts including Bryanston, Sherborne, Canford and Marlborough, and plenty to Eton, Harrow, Winchester and Downe House.



Co-curricular

Sport is soaring, thanks to the recent arrival of a new director of sport, and opportunities are endless, with every child taking part in competitive matches. Everyone gets a solid foundation in gymnastics (good for strength and stability), then it's full throttle with football, cricket (both firmly co-ed), rugby, athletics, hockey, tennis, netball and lacrosse. Golf is mega (a swanky swing-analysis machine helps pupils hone their technique), rifle practice takes place on the school's own range, there's an impressive swimming pool and not one but two slick sports halls complete with a smart viewing gallery and cafe – opened by the Queen, no less. Dance is hugely popular as well, both for grades and just for fun. Creative arts and STEAM subjects are all taught together in one mind-blowingly impressive building known as the Boiler House (Cunningham).

It's a staggering sea of colour and excitement – hugely passionate head of Technology Mr May has been here almost two decades, and the work that's on display could easily pass for GCSE or even A-level standard, while incredibly specialised tuition bags bucketloads of art scholarships every year. There are separate workshops for ceramics, woodwork, technology (check out the 3D printer and laser cutters), art, craft and design and more – all overseen by resident parrot Azul. The music department is similarly impressive, with a fantastic concert hall looking out over a landscaped lake, complete with ducks and a sprouting fountain. Pupils beaver away on their own scores in the music tech room; almost everyone learns an instrument; and there are bands, choirs and orchestras galore. The new



head of drama is making an impact too; we were lucky enough to watch Year 5 and 6 rehearse for their upcoming production of Treasure Island, complete with a 40-foot ship on set and two full-size casts so that everyone has a chance to shine. A full programme of clubs and extras keeps boys and girls busy well into the evening (wraparound care runs until 6pm, even in the pre-prep). Children are encouraged to try something new each term, be it circus skills or fencing, beekeeping or soap making. There's plenty to coax them outside, too; gardening, pond dipping and den-building. We're big fans of the brand-new shepherd's hut, coined the 'Ecology Hut' which is frequently used for outdoor classes and the ecology club's new meeting point, complete with solar powered CCTV into a nearby bird box – and cycling around the grounds is hugely popular, thanks to the school's perfect long drive to practise on.

Boarding



There's been significant investment in boarding lately; not just the facilities, but the all-important staff as well. New housemothers (souped-up matrons) have been introduced, adding an extra layer to the rock-solid pupil support network, and a gang of bright-eyed gappies fill a vital big brother or sister role. Boarding is flexi, weekly or full, and in Year 3, the day pupil fee includes two nights per week – a brilliant way for younger pupils to dip their toe in. Almost half the school board in some capacity, rising to more than 80 per cent in Years 7 and 8. Junior boarders are all based in the main mansion, a big, homely space with plenty of space for games of laser tag in the corridors. Senior girls get the best deal, with their own smart little pods with sliding doors to sleep in, a funky double decker

sofa in their common room and a fab retro caravan outside with funky toadstool seating – a great hangout for catching up and swapping gossip. Senior boys have their own kitchen, common room and games room. Year 8 pupils often pop over to Mr and Mrs Mills' house for supper on Tuesday nights. Weekends are typically busy and after Port Regis Plus, parents are invited in for assembly and a slap-up lunch (restaurant-quality calamari when we visited); a really special time for families to relax together. Pupils are also treated to themed evenings, discos and outings, and the school never closes at exeat – something overseas families particularly appreciate.

School Community

Port Regis quite rightly believes that a happy child is a productive one, so as well as form teachers and house parents, pupils also have their own tutor to add another layer to the pastoral system.

The school community here is an eclectic mix of locals, bankers, diplomats and forces families. More and more

Londoners are also catching on, thanks to the handy exeat and half-term minibus service to Richmond Old Deer Park. Each year group has its fair share of international students and visiting parents from overseas can rent one of the cottages in the school grounds.



And Finally...

Parents' biggest gripe about Port Regis? Finding a senior school that lives up to it.