



PORT·REGIS

Talk Education Review 2024

“This burgeoning country prep school is firmly on an upwards trajectory”

Our View

There’s such a happy vibe at this dynamic school in rural Dorset which has become the talk of the town, thanks to its strong vision and energetic staff who always go above and beyond for the whole school community. Bucking the nationwide trend, numbers are growing and the future looks bright. It might be set in the heart of rolling countryside but if you’re expecting a sleepy country school, prepare to be blown away.



Where?

With its grand driveway slicing through a glossy five-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, which includes a new playground, has everything a little one could possibly wish for. It’s all set in beautiful 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 goats 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.

He's also dedicated himself to trying to 're-articulate values and vision', focusing on less tangible aspects of the school such as spirit and warmth and introducing five intrinsic values at the school, with joy at the heart of them. He feels strongly that children should 'not hurry – or be hurried – through their childhood'. Over the last four years, he's made brilliant hires and the whole staff, including his lovely wife Jemima who is a much-loved part of the school community, all share a united vision that is already paying dividends, with numbers rising across the board (the September 2024 intake was the largest it's been for 12 years).

Admissions

Demand for places is ever-increasing, and with two-thirds of pupils living within a 20-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 entry assessments, 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.



The school offers means tested bursaries to benefit families who would not otherwise be able to educate their children at the school. They also offer two transformational fully funded places for gifted children identified in conjunction with the Royal National Children's Springboard Foundation.

Academic and Senior School Destinations

Port Regis' impressive academic heritage continues apace. Many teachers come from senior schools and so provide a specialism that, says Mr Mills, gives the school 'oomph with academics'. This is a truly all-round school, though, 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 resides in a magnificent area in the main mansion (Mr Mills tells us he wants pupils to feel happy and proud to be there). French or Spanish are compulsory, but keen beans can also do Italian on top of Japanese or Mandarin too – and, to keep things relevant, littlies learn coding and artificial intelligence with a specialist computer science teacher, and from Year 7 upwards pupils use devices in class.

Saturday mornings are devoted to Port Regis Plus, where pupils attend workshops (some run by parents) and learn skills such as cheesemaking, entrepreneurship and gardening. Port Regis Plus is compulsory from Year 5 upwards, but the number of Year 3s and 4s who opt to attend attest to its popularity with pupils. These kids aren't afraid of hard work, and the school's 100 per cent CE success



rate (pupils sit all subjects except humanities) 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 30 different senior schools each year – last year 24 left with a scholarship in hand, including nine academic scholarships to schools such as Marlborough, Wycombe Abbey, Radley and Wellington.

Co-curricular

Sport is soaring – the pupils are especially strong in swimming and athletics – and head of sport Jack Humphrey pours his boundless energy into striking that perfect balance between inclusivity and competitiveness. 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 cricket, rugby (girls play both too), football, athletics, hockey, tennis, netball and lacrosse. Golf is mega, 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 – 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, Cunningham. It's a staggering sea of colour and excitement, and head of art Lucy Tabberer is inspiring with her creativity and enthusiasm. The massive art room is a real draw for pupils and she is often there at break time with 30 or so children quietly applying themselves to a creative project. The work that's on display could easily pass for GCSE or even A-level standard – among them some extraordinarily good pop art-style self-portraits. There are separate workshops for woodwork, technology (check out the 3D printers and laser cutter), art, craft, design and more. Of particular note is the ceramics room – pupils are taught by specialist teachers and as part of the school's green initiative the clay is recycled. Unsurprisingly, such specialised tuition bags bucketloads of art scholarships every year.

The music department is similarly impressive, with a fantastic concert hall looking out over a landscaped lake, complete with ducks and a spouting fountain. Pupils learn the recorder, toot and ukulele as well as composing in the music tech room where creative jingles, film scores and complimentary raps are created. More than half of the pupils learn an instrument with many learning two, and there are orchestras, a jazz band, flute quartet, an advanced piano ensemble, djembe drummers, a guitar group, rock band and more – so there are plenty of opportunities for all. Drama is similarly inclusive, and pupils stage ambitious performances of crowd pleasers such as their own adaptation of *The Greatest Showman*, and *Bugsy Malone*.

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, debating, boxing, and stage makeup and props. The school also has its own radio station, with staff being interviewed for a *Desert Island Discs*-style podcast.



There's plenty to coax them outside, too; gardening, pond dipping and den building. We're big fans of the new shepherd's hut, known as the 'Ecology Hut', which is frequently used for outdoor lessons and the ecology club's new meeting point (it's even got solar-powered CCTV directed into a nearby bird box) – and cycling around the grounds is hugely popular.

Boarding

Boarding is popular with 71 per cent of children doing some sort of boarding - flexi, weekly or full; 45 per cent are full boarders, with around 14 per cent of those from overseas and 17 per cent from forces families. In Years 3 and 4, the day pupil fee includes two nights per week – a brilliant way for younger pupils to dip their toe in. By Years 7 and 8, more than 80 per cent board.



New head of boarding Madeleine Handaji runs the Year 7 and 8 girls' boarding house, and a raft of houseparents and housemothers (souped-up matrons) add an extra layer to the rock-solid pupil support network. Boarding houses also have a gang of bright-eyed gappies filling a vital big brother or sister role.

Junior boarders are all based in the main mansion, a big, homely space with bright, airy rooms and plenty of space for games of laser tag in the corridors. Senior girls have 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, with around 80 to 90 pupils staying. After PR 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 Sunday outings twice a term.

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, and year group reps to enhance communication between school and home. The new deputies have also introduced a new timetable to help knit the school together even further, helping with things like sibling pick-up times. We were impressed by the forward-thinking workshops for the Year 8s on gender equality, too, and the fact that staff get training on dealing with gender issues. There are also teen-tips and wellbeing hubs, which are used by pupils, staff and parents alike, and plenty of 'wellbeing' dogs on site – you'll often find one snoozing in the corner of a classroom.

The school is committed to becoming more sustainable: investment in solar power is charging ahead and the head's wife Mrs Mills has spearheaded a Green Vision – now headed up by Mr Pope and Mrs Tabberer - which has seen the whole community – pupils, catering staff, governors, the grounds team – getting involved in environmental and sustainability work with working groups on biodiversity, recycling, plastic, energy and communications. She also runs charity and community events.

The school community, an eclectic mix of local families, bankers, diplomats and forces families, are very active; recent events include a dog show and an 80s disco. More and more Londoners are choosing the school now, 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, too, and visiting parents from overseas can rent one of the cottages in the school grounds.



And Finally...

This burgeoning country prep school is firmly on an upwards trajectory. Numbers are booming and academics continue to soar, but not at the expense of the school's truly special nurturing environment – under the passionate leadership of Mr Mills, pupils are well and truly kept inside the warm embrace of childhood.