

Here come **THE GIRLS!**

Single-sex prep schools are a launch-pad for bright young women, says *ALICE SMELLIE*



PHOTOS: PEMBRIDGE HALL

Pembridge Hall

Eaton House The Manor Girls' School



The benefits of a single-sex school have always been clear: allowing girls to develop and work without the presence of the opposite sex, gives them a grounding and confidence that will stand them in good stead for the rest of their lives.

'Our girls are curious, ambitious, accept risk, take on challenges and as a result have very good resilience and self-esteem,' says Clare Strickland, Head of the Old Vicarage School, which is situated on Richmond Hill, near to the park and the River Thames as well as close to the centre of London. 'By not having boys in the same classroom you are removing gendered expectations and that can have multiple benefits.'

Research would appear to bear this out. The Girls' Day School Trust is a family of 25 schools that has examined the benefits of the single-sex environment finding that girls-only education leads to higher academic achievements and greater confidence throughout education and beyond, and the many excellent girls-only schools available agree wholeheartedly.

'I am a huge advocate of single-sex schools, especially at prep school level,' says Claire Fildes, Head of Eaton House 'The Manor Girls' School, a beautiful white-stuccoed building in the heart of Clapham, which takes girls from age four to eleven. 'I went to an all-girls' senior school as a timid 11-year-old who wouldn't say boo to a goose and whispered the entire time! However, through my years there, my confidence grew and the experience was embedded in me and took me into my future.'

But we have to be careful of stereotyping, she adds. 'At Eaton House, we concentrate on the individual potential of each child. An all-girls environment gives greater opportunities for things such as problem-solving and critical thinking.'

'It's not that girls differ from boys intellectually or cognitively,' she adds. 'It's that they need their own space to take risks.' Claire Strickland is equally wary of

stereotyping. 'We have all types of girls, and we focus on the individual needs of each. On the whole, girls are more mature and ready to learn.'

Very early on, girls can be held back by an almost unconscious stereotype, says Amanda McShane, Headteacher at Cumnor House School for Girls, which is set in the Purley area of London, within six acres of land, on peaceful Woodcote Lane, giving their pupils plenty of scope for sports and outdoor learning, access to sports halls and a swimming pool, as well as well-equipped classrooms. 'I feel that in an all-girls environment we are enabling them to develop the skills they need, be more confident in their approach to learning and more willing to take risks.'

McShane explains that in a mixed setting girls can be less likely to put themselves forwards and therefore let the boys take the leadership roles. However, in an all-girls environment there is no gender agenda, she says. 'Nobody is saying, 'girls can't do this' – they are doing maths, science, cricket, computer studies and debating without question or comment.'

And, she says, it's never been so crucial that girls can hold their own. 'More than ever, girls need to have their voice, to speak confidently and in an engaging manner. We need to teach them how to do that from an early age to be heard in this competitive world.'

In some cases, the girls are perhaps experiencing an even more diverse and varied education. 'We have a very varied curriculum,' says Louisa McCafferty, Head of Broomwood Prep – Girls, in South London. 'As well as music, drama and netball, children also enjoy state-of-the-art DT & Art facilities, a cookery school and a very varied sports programme including tag rugby, football, and cricket. Being single sex in no way narrows our offering.'

At Eaton House, they have a variety of clubs from STEAM to Entrepreneurs and Young Engineers – which might traditionally be assumed to be 'boys' interests', Cumnor House offers Lego club and Digital Leaders, and

at Pembridge Hall, in the heart of London, Head Sophie Banks points out that they have entrepreneurship, coding, engineering and design.

Adds Banks, 'We also took part in the London heads football match. I've never played before, and although our girls won their age group, I was beyond useless. I'm not sure how proud they were of me, but they needed to see that I gave it a go and that it doesn't matter if you don't score a goal. Which I didn't.'

How about hot-housing? Isn't there a concern that all girls together is likely to create overly intense competition? 'Quite the opposite,' says Clare Strickland. 'Girls can get anxious about putting their hands up and getting things wrong. Boys can be more prone to dominate discussions which can make girls reluctant to participate and express their own opinions. In a single-sex environment it can be more supportive.'

Amanda McShane agrees: 'The girls are unashamedly proud of achievements and being proactive learners, as well as supporting each other.'

'We aren't just feeding information, but encouraging them to reflect and refine. This can-do approach means that they're well supported.'

All agree that a key part of education is learning to fail and that this is as vital as succeeding – and that this is a safe space in which to do so.

'Academic girls can find failure challenging, and yet it's important,' says Sophie Banks. 'As a school it's important we encourage them to step out of their comfort zone, challenge them to take a risk. Girls are more comfortable to push themselves in an all-girls environment than in a co-ed school.'

The school has six values, all based around preparing the girls for life. 'We don't know what the jobs of the future are likely to be, but our values are based around ensuring girls are authentic; we ask them to Be Individual, Be Kind, Be Curious, Be Aspirational, Be Resilient and Be Responsible.'

'We help them to deal with falling down, getting back up and carrying on,' says Claire Fildes. 'It's a message that's firmly embedded within the school and runs through everything we do here.' At the same time, she reminds me that girls' schools excel as senior feeders. 'The calmly industrious atmosphere contributes to overall exam success.'

More tricky topics can be more easily and openly spoken about. 'We want girls to feel that they can go to anybody with questions,' says Clare Strickland. 'It's about creating an environment where girls feel that no topics

are off-limit'. 'We know that there's a rise in mental health issues such as anxiety,' points out Louisa McCafferty. 'We're able to offer specialised support, via counsellors or running groups or workshops targeting girls' friendships or anxiety. The reality is that most girls will find friendships hard at some point, and they need proper and active support to navigate these.' The right, careful support now can stand girls in good stead for the rest of their lives.

How about the concern that by separating the sexes you are creating (unnecessary) mystique around boys? This is definitely not the case, maintain the heads. For a start, although classes might be taken separately, many of the schools either have a counterpart boys' school, or have affiliations with local boys' schools.

'We very much have the best of both worlds,' says McCafferty. 'Broomwood has two single-sex prep schools which gives the children the opportunity to come together regularly in a co-ed setting to collaborate. They build new friendships across the two prep schools as well as retain many friendships from their pre-prep days.'

Sophie Banks points out that they have Wetherby School next door. 'We're looking to create more social opportunities for our pupils with them,' she says, and Eaton House has the boys' and girls' prep on the same 1.5-acre site, so there are opportunities galore for the children to mix – and a central drop-off point for convenience. At the Old Vicarage girls link up for activities with the local boys' school. 'Over the Christmas holidays there is a coding club and a film club, both of which are open to the girls and boys from both schools.'

Pembridge Hall has just launched a new project called Girls of the Future. 'This focuses on role models in the school community,' says Sophie Banks. 'We have some incredible female role models and invite them to speak about their journey to inspire the girls. In our recent open morning I could see that the parents were with me in wanting their girls to have a journey to the future.' What better start could there be? ■

COUNTRY ALL-GIRLS PREP SCHOOLS

Cumnor House School For Girls
cumnorhouse.com

Godstowe School
godstowe.org

The Granville School
granvilleschool.org

Hanford School
hanfordschool.co.uk

Holy Cross Preparatory School
holycrossprepschool.co.uk

Malvern St James Girls' School
malvernstjames.co.uk

St Catherines Bramley
stcatherines.info

PHOTOS: CUMNOR HOUSE SCHOOL FOR GIRLS, EATON HOUSE THE MANOR GIRLS



Cumnor House School For Girls

LONDON ALL-GIRLS PREP SCHOOLS

Broomwood Prep Girls
broomwood.com

Eaton House The Manor Girls' School
eatonhouseschools.com

Falkner House Girls School
falknerhouse.co.uk

Glendower Preparatory School
glendowerprep.org

Francis Holland Prep School (from September 2024)
fhs-sw1.org.uk/junior

Kensington Prep School
kensingtonprep.gdst.net

Old Vicarage School
oldvicarageschool.com

Pembridge Hall School
pembridgehall.co.uk

Queens College Preparatory School
qcps.org.uk

Sarum Hall School
sarumhallschool.co.uk

St Mary's School, Hampstead
stmh.co.uk

Ursuline Preparatory School
ursulineprep.org