

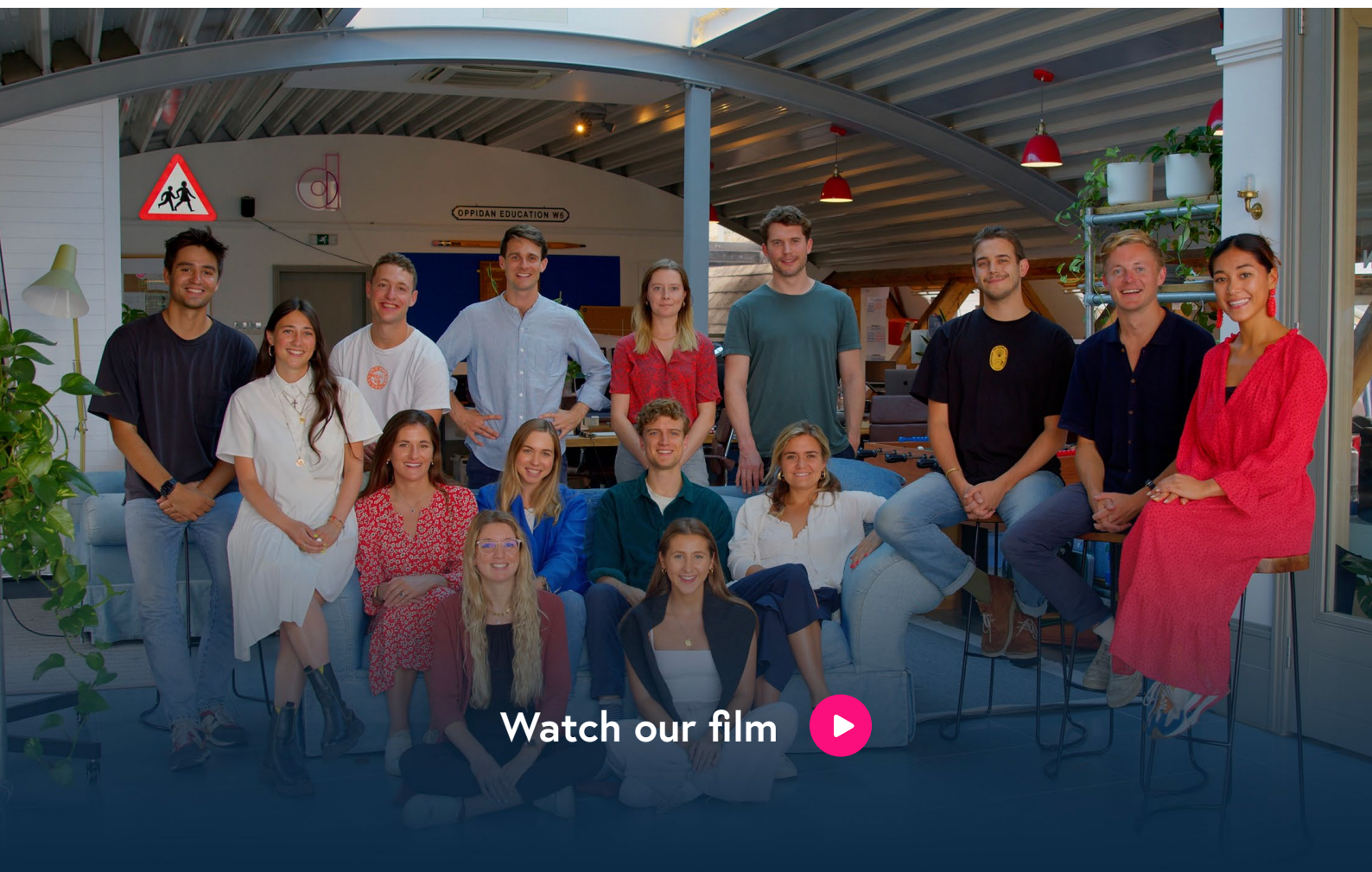


A guide to the top independent schools 2023/24

Introduction to Oppidan Education

Before you dive into this guide, allow us to introduce ourselves. Oppidan Education was founded in 2016 by Henry Faber and Walter Kerr in response to the hothouse tutoring industry. We now support children across the UK and abroad through one-to-one mentoring and in-school programmes.

We believe that a good education starts with a focus on confidence and resilience, and that every child should benefit from mentoring. It's all made possible with a team of over 200 inspiring mentors; a network of game changers who dedicate themselves to positive growth of young people.



Watch our film



About this guide

With the 11+ process endlessly looming over parents with children in Years 4 and 5, we sat down with our schools expert, Cat Sutherland-Hawes, for her insider take on some of the UK's independent secondary schools and their unique admissions processes.

This list is non-exhaustive and of course there are plenty of schools that aren't currently mentioned in this guide. However, it represents a good sense of some of the independent senior schools on offer for different types of pupils and families around the UK and abroad. On the whole, admissions information outlined in this guide refers to entry at 11+ and 13+.

If you'd like to know more about your child's secondary school options, you can book a free 15-minute conversation with Cat Sutherland-Hawes by clicking [here](#).

All views expressed are the personal and professional views of the author, and not directly the opinion of Oppidan Education.



About the author

Cat Sutherland-Hawes started her career in the House of Commons before moving into the education sector as Director of Admissions at Latymer Upper School in Hammersmith.

After 14 years there, she moved to Wycombe Abbey as Director Admissions before joining Oppidan Education as Schools Advisor in September 2022. Cat also works for RS Academics as a Senior Consultant, advising schools on admissions strategies and carrying out recruitment.

Cat is a Governor of two London schools – a prep school and a state primary, and is a Trustee of Forces Children, Scotland.

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City of London School for Girls

London Girls Jenny Brown

Cat says:

Set in the middle of London, they're strong on drama and it attracts independent minded young women. They have a high academic standard, and lots is done with City of London Boys. For a city site, facilities are impressive. Girls are independent-minded with a broad outlook on life.

Admissions

For entry at Year 7, pupils will be invited to City to sit a one-hour computer-based test, designed by CEM, assessing numerical, verbal and non-verbal skills. In mid-December, pupils who have been successful in the first assessment will receive their invitation for a second assessment. Interviews also take place in January.



Eton College

Berkshire Boys Simon Henderson

Cat says:

Still very traditional, Eton is one of three remaining all boys boarding schools. It's academic, with a strong house system. There's a big family tradition alongside bursary provision and massive drive to widen access and diversify the school community. It's a strong sporting school and they have their own admissions test. Eton supports Holyport College, a nearby state school with boarding provision, alongside a number of programmes to widen access and diversity in private education.

Admissions

About 250 boys join per year. Boys sit the ISEB Pre-Test and then are invited to Stage 2 for the Eton List Test and interview.

- Boys with birthdays between September and the first half of December will be assessed in late January/early February
- Boys with birthdays between the second half of December and March will be assessed in late February/early March
- Boys with birthdays between April and August will be assessed in late April/early May

Fettes College

Edinburgh Co-ed Helen Harrison

Cat says:

Fettes is the Edinburgh school of choice and alma mater of Tony Blair. Their academic results are good and talk a lot about valuing the individual. They've got a huge campus in the middle of Edinburgh, though it doesn't feel like it's in a city. They place lots of emphasis on culture and a big bursary provision, and provide lots of outdoor activities including Munro bagging!

Admissions

Applicants take either the Fettes College Entrance Examinations or ISEB Common Entrance in Year 7. The former is sat on site and includes two short interviews with senior members of staff. The latter is completed at their current school and an online interview is arranged.

Godolphin and Latymer

London Girls Dr Frances Ramsey

Cat says:

Academic girls school located in Hammersmith, offering IB and A-Level. It attracts sporty girls despite not having massive facilities on site. Their rowing is becoming very strong. They have a great new(ish) music building, and music generally is strong. Hugely popular with West London families, lots of outreach done to local primary schools and charity work – they mean it here.

Admissions

Candidates sit the London Consortium Test and are subsequently invited to an interview.

King's College School

London Co-ed (Girls at 6th Form) Dr Anne Cotton

Cat says:

Based on Wimbledon Common, it's very academic and offers IB at sixth form. SEN provision and sport are both really strong. A keen competitor with St Paul's and Latymer for local boys. The location provides lots of space and feels very open for London.

Admissions

Entry to King's at both 11+ and 13+ is via competitive tests and interviews which take place in Year 6, though it is not possible to apply for both 11+ and 13+ entry. All boys are assessed in Year 6 and then offers for both the 11+ and 13+ entry points are made in February of Year 6.

Manchester Grammar School

Greater Manchester Boys Martin Boulton

Cat says:

Founded in 1515, it's the largest boys' school in the UK. They're massive on bursaries and place lots of focus on community outreach and partnerships. Academic results and sport are very strong, with the latter being centred around cricket.

Admissions

11+ applicants attend an assessment day, where boys are engaged in various activities including a math lesson, a topic-based lesson, group activities, and creative writing. In January, boys attend the Entrance Examination Day where they sit two English papers and two arithmetic papers. In the afternoon, they participate in activities that showcase the opportunities available at MGS.

Merchant Taylors' School

Middlesex Boys Simon Everson

Cat says:

Merchant Taylors' is a great all-round school, with a strong international influence and focus on sport and academics. The setting in Northwood is lovely, combining a city feel with large, rolling hills. The music department is very good and there's lots of involvement in the local community.

Admissions

In September or October of Year 6, 13+ applicants undergo an online interview assessing communication, intellectual curiosity, reasoning and extra-curricular commitment. The next step involves the main Qualifying Examinations in December of Year 6, consisting of English, mathematics and an MTS General Paper.

North London Collegiate School

London Girls Hazel Bagworth-Mann

Cat says:

Located on the outskirts of London, the school offers ample space and draws a diverse intake of bright girls. With its own junior school starting at age four, it's popular among West London families and the local community. The institution is renowned for high academic standards, fostering well-rounded girls who engage in diverse and interesting pursuits.

Admissions

For entry at Year 7, pupils are invited to sit an entrance exam consisting of written papers in English and maths. The examinations are held at the school and separate from those of the 11+ London Consortium Schools group. Interviews are in mid-January.



St. Paul's Girls' School

London Girls Sarah Fletcher

Cat says:

St. Paul's Girls' School is the most successful academic school in the country with a great music department. The intellectual environment may not be suited for everyone, however. It boasts a vibrant event line-up and influential speakers. There's a strong parent network; notable alumni include Rachel Weisz and Harriet Harman. Efforts are being made to enhance bursary options for wider access.

Admissions

For Year 7 entry, all candidates are asked to sit an online test to identify cognitive ability. Successful candidates are then invited to sit the school's own test in January. There are three papers in English, Maths and comprehension skills. Subsequently, successful girls are invited to an interview of 20-25 minutes long which is academic in focus. Results are posted in February.



St. Paul's School

London Boys Sally-Anne Huang

Pupils here are exceptionally bright and hardworking. They've got their own test and they're big on bursaries. It's particularly strong on rowing, music and drama. Pupils are slightly more 'down to earth' and tend to come from families with professional services backgrounds.

Admissions

Boys join at 13, with about 175 boys taken, from both St Paul's Juniors and other schools. All registered candidates are required to take the ISEB online pre-test in October or November of Year 6.

Boys selected to move to Stage 2 are invited to sit maths and English papers at the school in early January. If successful, boys are then invited to an interview which will take place between January and June of Year 6. Boys meet two members of staff who spend around 25 minutes each talking to each applicant about their interests. Applicants are then offered one of two types of place: Main List and Reserve List.



Winchester College

Hampshire
 Co-ed (Girls at 6th Form)
 Elizabeth Stone

One of the oldest and most traditional schools in the country, Winchester is now taking girls in 6th form with a view to being fully co-ed in the future. They've got their first ever female head and their busary provision is improving. They have 'DIV' – supra-curricular classes – that, alongside the grounds, lends a monastic feel. It sets itself apart in tradition and chapel, with a strong music department. It's the former school of Rishi Sunak.

Admissions

Pupils sit the ISEB Common Pre-Test and then may be invited for follow-up interview. In May of Year 6, the Housemaster or Registrar will email you with the result. Once offered a provisional place, boys then sit the Winchester Entrance in the summer of Year 8 to confirm their place.



Wycombe Abbey

Buckinghamshire
 Girls
 Jo Duncan

Cat says:

Glorious setting with an inspiring head taking it forward whilst keeping the traditions. They have very clever girls and are very strong on sport. They are outward looking for university destinations with a high number going overseas. They are really impressive for art, music and drama as well as academics. It's very popular with families based in London.

Admissions

Stage 1: an online Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT4) taken during a ten-day window in November.

Stage 2: Assessment Day where candidates will have an individual interview with a member of staff and will take part in small group activities. Entrance examinations in English and mathematics.

Offers are then made in December preceding the year of entry.

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Benenden School

Kent Girls Samantha Price

Cat says:

The school is really pushing forward and making a name for itself. There is an increased focus on diversity as a result of their local bursaries scheme. They've recently started taking day girls and their pupils do a lot of social activities with the boys at Tonbridge down the road.

Admissions

Entry is possible at 11+, 12+, 13+. The first stage is a Preview Assessment Day which provides candidates with a visit to the school during which they have a taste of academic and co-curricular activities, as well as having informal assessments in English and maths and an interview. Firm offers are made on the basis of performance in the ISEB Common Pre-Test, reference, interview and activities during the Preview Assessment Day.

Bryanston School

Dorset Co-ed Richard Jones

Cat says:

Bryanston has a lovely down-to-earth feel and is really forging ahead as a school. They offer outdoor swimming and sport is particularly strong. The school is increasingly popular with London families and pupils can sit the IB.

Admissions

Offers are made following successful performance in CAT4 tests and at interview, together with receipt of a supportive reference from the pupil's current school.

Gresham's School

Norfolk Co-ed Douglas Robb

Cat says:

Set in the beautiful market town of Holt, it attracts a fairly localised population. They've got a big link up with one of the livery companies that provides bursaries. They've got a brand-new science building provided by James Dyson, a former pupil. It's an unsung hero with a very down-to-earth Head. The school is doing very well.

Admissions

There are six entry points to the school – Nursery, Reception, Year 3, Year 7, Year 9 and Sixth Form. For Year 9, entrance assessments are in maths and English and include an interview.



Downe House

Berkshire
 Girls
 Emma McKendrick

Cat says:

This home counties boarding school is a strong option for London families. They're very good at music, academics are strong and a new deputy head is really making his mark. It's traditional but looking to the future, with lots of recent work to school buildings. Girls form lifelong friendships here and Year 8 students are offered the chance to spend a term in France, which is very popular.

Admissions

The school conducts assessments for 11+ and 12+ candidates one year prior to entry. Girls attend an Assessment Day where they participate in various activities, interviews and writing tasks. After the Assessment Day, girls are required to take the ISEB Common Pre-Test and should be completed by November 30.

For 13+ candidates, the assessment process starts with the ISEB Common Pre-Test followed by an assessment day at the school, including interviews and creative or persuasive writing tasks.



Harrow School

London
 Boys
 Alastair Land

Cat says:

One of the last remaining all-boys boarding schools, Harrow is a traditional institution set on the hill above London. Plenty of 'old-style' elements with big focus on drama, sport and music, as well as strong academics. The house system plays a central part and pupils are at their house for most pastoral elements.

Admissions

Boys sit the ISEB Common Pre-Test and, if successful, the Harrow Test. Candidates are then given one of the following offers:

A1 List - the offer of a place at the school in a specific house.

A2 List - the offer of a place at the school with a house to be confirmed later.

B List - the offer of a place on the waiting list.

C List - no offer.

Offers are subject to satisfactory performance in Common Entrance.



Marlborough College

Wiltshire
 Co-ed
 Louise Moelwyn-Hughes

Cat says:

Marlborough has a big international population and very strong exam results, with A-Levels offered alongside IB. It's located in the middle of the beautiful town, boasting a glorious chapel at the heart of it. It's popular with families from local counties, as well as a good proportion of families based in London.

Admissions

Boys and girls are invited to an assessment day which takes place during the Lent Term of Year 6 (or the Lent Term of Year 7 or Year 8 for later applications). There are two short writing tasks, an interview with a Housemaster or Housemistress, an interview with a boarding house tutor and some informal group activities.

As a result of the current Head's reference, ISEB Pre-Test and the assessment day and interviews, confirmed list and waiting list offers are made towards the end of the Lent Term of Year 6 for most applications.

Oundle School

 Northhamptonshire  Co-ed  Sarah Kerr-Dineen

Cat says:




It's a traditional school for boys and girls that's becoming increasingly popular. It's a well-rounded establishment, with a new sports centre and theatre, as well as other buildings scattered around the beautiful town. They promote Christian values and cater for a huge number of societies and activities.

Admissions

Children entering at 11+ sit the Entrance Examination, which includes papers in mathematics, English, science and a Cognitive Ability Test. Those sitting the papers at Oundle also have an informal interview.

Students joining at 13+ sit the Common Entrance at their current school unless it is not offered, in which case the Oundle Entrance must be sat and an interview held.

Shrewsbury School

 Shropshire  Co-ed  Leo Winkley

Cat says:

A good all-round school that's popular with local families from the Midlands and Wales. They're strong on drama, music and sport, in particular rowing. It's rounded, down-to-earth and they are building lots of new facilities. Their bursary provision is strong and continues to grow. The current Head is very popular and is really moving the school forward.

Admissions

Candidates sit the school's own examinations in November or February prior to entry at 13.



St. Edward's Oxford

Oxfordshire Co-ed Alastair Chirside

Cat says:

It's really good all round, with a great theatre North Wall Arts Centre, lovely Oxford location and a great new headteacher who came from Harrow.

Admissions

Approximately 155 pupils are accepted into the Shell Year (Y9), aged 13. Children at prep schools come via Common Entrance or the Prep School Baccalaureate. Children who are not at prep schools take an online verbal and non-verbal reasoning assessment in November of Year 8.

Pupils applying from overseas whose first language is not English can submit a UKiset test before registration.

Uppingham School

Rutland
 Co-ed
 Richard Maloney

Cat says:

The school is an unsung hero; very energetic and strong on creative arts and sport. Students get involved in local community through their "Make a Difference" programme, whilst families are supported with a growing bursary programme.

Admissions

Candidates must complete the 11+ Common Pre-Test in Year 7 and are then invited for a 20-minute interview with a member of staff, followed by a 30-minute writing task. In Year 8, prospective students must obtain a 55% pass mark at Common Entrance, or if their school does not offer Common Entrance, they sit Uppingham's non-common entrance papers.

Wellington College

Berkshire
 Co-ed
 James Dahl

Cat says:

Wellington is a great all-round school set amongst spacious grounds in Berkshire. It's loved by London families who consider it down-to-earth and comfortable in its own skin. It's very sporty with a huge focus on drama and music as well. Boarders have it all on their doorstep. Their head is a former teacher and Head of Admissions there, and parents and pupils love him.

Admissions

Candidates sit the ISEB Common Pre-Test. Selected pupils then attend an assessment morning or afternoon at Wellington, consisting of a series of collaborative lessons and problem-solving activities. Pupils will also be interviewed by a senior member of staff. Offers are made in the Spring of Year 6.

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Bradfield College

 Berkshire  Co-ed  Dr Chris Stevens

Cat says:

It's a mixed boarding school with a sporty reputation. They have a fairly localised and London intake. A really good all-round school with wide array of different activities to choose from.

Admissions

Candidates will be required to take the ISEB Common Pre-Test in Year 6. Admissions assessments then take place, including a 20-minute interview to evaluate the fit of the candidate at Bradfield, followed by another short interview with a Housemistress or Housemaster, and finally a problem-solving challenge to assess broader attributes such as interpersonal skills, resilience, innovation, and reflection.

Haileybury School

Hertfordshire Co-ed Martin Collier

Cat says:

Haileybury is a mixed set in Hertfordshire with beautiful grounds and easy access. It's boarding and becoming increasingly popular with London families in particular. The hockey and rugby are strong. It's an all-round school making a name for itself.

Admissions

Pupils must sit an online cognitive abilities test (CAT) as well as written papers in maths and English. They then come for an interview at Haileybury and are accepted following a satisfactory report and reference from the candidate's current school.

RGS Newcastle

Tyne and Wear Co-ed Geoffrey Stanford

Cat says:




A leading independent school in the northeast of England. Fully co-ed, it's a big school with 1300 pupils. It's strong on sport and music, and pupils can do CCF.

Admissions

Year 7 applicants will take an online aptitude test and a written English paper. A number of children are invited back for an informal group activity and then offered places.



Millfield School

 Somerset  Co-ed  Gavin Horgan

Cat says:

Millfield is known for its elite sports programme with top of the range facilities and over 50 dedicated coaches. Despite this, the school performs well academically and is a popular West Country choice for a wide variety of parents and students.

Admissions

Students have an entrance interview with a senior member of staff and also sit a computer-based verbal and non-verbal reasoning assessment. These assessments allow the school to confirm student places 18 months prior to entry.



Sedbergh School

Cumbria Co-ed Dan Harrison




Cat says:

Sedbergh is a great all-round school, boasting glorious settings between the Lake District and Yorkshire Dales. Their sport is strong – rifle shooting and cross country in particular – and CCF plays a big part. There are plans for new buildings to celebrate their 500th anniversary in two years' time. The majority of students are full-time boarders.

Admissions

All applicants are interviewed by the Headmaster or a member of the Senior Leadership team and will take an aptitude test. Those applying for entry to Year 9 will either take the ISEB Common Entrance exams, or Sedbergh's papers in maths and English.

Shiplake College

 Oxfordshire  Co-ed  Tyrone Howe

Cat says:

It's co-ed and recently day and boarding. The music is strong – everyone gets involved in singing – and they have a huge photography studio.

Admissions

Applicants sit short English and maths assessments. There is also an informal interview with a member of staff.

St. Leonards

 Fife  Co-ed  Simon Brian

Cat says:

Located in St Andrew's in Scotland, St. Leonards offers the unique opportunity to run on the beach, swim in the North Sea and play the world famous local golf course. They attract a wide international population, have their own prep school and only offer IB exams.

Admissions

After completing an application and paying the fee, parents need to provide the last two school reports, a personal statement, following which your child will be invited to sit entrance tests. The selection procedure is based on ability and aptitude, and for Years 7 to 13, the CAT4 is used.

Surbiton High School

London Girls Rebecca Glover

Cat says:

Girls school in South London with a massive number of sports on offer: cricket, gymnastics, skiing, hockey, football, netball, rowing and tennis to name a few. They enjoy regional, borough and national sporting success every year.

Admissions

Girls school in South London with a massive number of sports on offer from cricket to gymnastics, skiing, hockey, football, netball, rowing, tennis. Regional, borough and national success every year.

Whitgift School

London Boys Chris Ramsey

Cat says:

Located in South London, Whitgift is home to well-rounded boys with good academic performance. The sport is very strong, as is their bursary provision with almost half of all pupils receiving financial assistance.

Admissions

Pupils sit entrance exams in English, maths and critical thinking skills (age-related). Successful pupils are then invited for an interview. The interview is followed by a short meeting with parents/guardians with the same senior member of staff.

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Bedales School

Hampshire Co-ed Will Goldsmith

Cat says:

Bedales is a truly unique school in beautiful surrounds in Hampshire. Their creative arts is their strong point, with pupil wellbeing placed at the forefront of everything they do. Their current head, Will Goldsmith, is very inspiring and a true educationalist.

Admissions

For 13+ entrants, there is a residential three-day assessment that includes maths, English and an online ability test together with interviews. Students also have the chance to show their skills in co-curricular activities such as art, drama, sport and outdoor work.

Alleyn's School

 London
  Co-ed
  Jane Lunnon

Cat says:

Alleyn's is a co-ed London day school with local intake from all parts of Southeast and Southwest London. They're particularly strong on drama and academics, though otherwise well-rounded with a down-to-earth feel. They're far ahead on bursary provision.

Admissions

The ISEB Common Pre-Test will not form part of the 11+ process for entry in September 2023. Instead, and except for candidates based overseas, all candidates will attend Alleyn's in early January for written assessments in reasoning, English and maths. Successful candidates are invited to attend a group activity and one-to-one interview.

Hurtwood House

 Surrey
  Co-ed
  Cosmo Jackson

Cat says:

They've got a standalone reputation for performing arts which is well deserved. Based in Surrey, they advocate a passion for creativity. If drama is your thing, this is the place.

Admissions

Applicants are asked to send through present grades, interests, subjects they wish to study at A-Level, as well as why they'd like to attend the school. The Headmaster then invites successful applications for an interview. Selection is based largely upon the impressions formed during the interview and on the reference provided by your school.



Glenalmond College

 Perth and Kinross  Co-ed  Mark Mortimer

Cat says:

Glenalmond is set in the middle of the breathtaking Perthshire countryside, yet is close to both Glasgow and Edinburgh. The school is traditional, with Christian chapel every day, yet has a liberal feel. There is a new warden moving things forward. The music department is strong (including a pipe band), as is the sport provision with plenty of outdoor activities.

Admissions

Students applying to Glenalmond College will undergo assessments in maths and English. These assessments are not entrance exams, but rather a tool to assist in preparing your child for school life. Additionally, a face-to-face interview with the Warden will be arranged to further understand your child's background.

Latymer Upper School

London Co-ed Susan Wijeratna

Cat says:

A co-ed school firmly rooted in the future, it is switched on and focussed. Their intake is dominated by West London families and their bursary programme is massive. Not for a shrinking violet, students do well academically and kids are comfortable in their own skin.

Admissions

Latymer Upper School sets its own papers in English and mathematics. Selected candidates will be invited back to school for an interview and group assessment.

Stowe School

Buckinghamshire Co-ed Dr Anthony Wallersteiner

Cat says:

Set amongst outstandingly beautiful grounds, there's something for everyone at Stowe. It's increasingly popular with good academic results and an art festival every year.

Admissions

180 students are admitted at 13+. Applicants have a private visit and interview at Stowe (or remotely for overseas students), before sitting the ISEB Common Pre-Test and acquiring a satisfactory reference or report from the candidate's current school.

Need more help finding the right secondary school?

If you'd like to discuss your child's school choices, you can get in touch with Oppidan Education's Schools Advisor and author of this guide, Cat Sutherland-Hawes. To book a free, 15-minute call with Cat, please click [here](#).

Alternatively, we are able to support during the entire 11+ process with one-to-one academic mentoring. For more information on our 11+ Journey, please click [here](#).