



Blundell's

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about BLUNDELL'S



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The Good Schools Guide on *Blundell's School*

The Good Schools Guide is the UK's leading independent school review publication, trusted by parents for over 30 years to offer candid, impartial, and insightful guidance on schools across the country. With a reputation for honesty and rigour, it is the go-to source for families seeking the very best education for their children

Blundell's has been selected for review entirely on merit—no school can pay to be included. The Good Schools Guide team visited in person, interviewed staff and pupils, analysed performance data, and spoke directly to parents. Their aim: to cut through marketing gloss and uncover the true character of the school.

The result is a balanced, in-depth, and often entertaining portrait of Blundell's, informed by direct experience and trusted for its honesty.

This report forms part of the Good Schools Guide's extensive review process, which spans over 1,200 schools across the UK. It sits alongside expert commentary, parent advice, and data on thousands of other schools—making it a vital tool for families navigating the independent and state school landscape.

Renowned for its independence and integrity, the Good Schools Guide continues to be a powerful advocate for parents, providing authoritative information that supports informed, confident decisions.

Please note: what you'll find here is just an extract. To read the full review of Blundell's, we warmly encourage you to visit www.goodschoolsguide.co.uk, where the complete write-up is available to subscribers.

The Head Teacher

Bart Wielenga

Since 2018, Bart Wielenga BCom BEd, previously second master. Born in Holland, he was educated at an all-boys' state school in South Africa and the University of Natal, where he majored in economics. After an education degree, he taught at Ixopo High School and then Michaelhouse, both in KwaZulu-Natal Midlands. His first teaching post in the UK was as head of economics and housemaster at Wellington College, where he was mentored by the legendary Sir Anthony Seldon. 'Anthony says you've got to be brave as a head,' he told us. 'If you're brave you can effect genuine change. When you start to see that happening you grow in confidence and that feeds through to your leadership team and to pupils too.'

He arrived at Blundell's in 2012 and took the helm six years later. 'When I arrived I had a little blue book that I kept in my pocket where I made notes of observations,' he says. 'The top line was that Blundell's was a doing school, not a thinking school. It wasn't intended to be a criticism. It was just that the school was immensely busy, very enthusiastic, lots of stuff happening, but it wasn't always that joined up.'

Under his watch Blundell's has become 'a deeply thoughtful school', with a rock-steady senior executive team, a clear trajectory and, considering the school is non-selective, impressive results (the last two sets of A level results were the best in the school's history, with pupils gaining 0.8 of a grade higher per A level than the average for an independent school).

The head taught economics during his early years at the school but now teaches character to year 9s – a course he designed himself. Parents are full of praise for him, admiring his calm approach and his vision for the school. 'He's upfront, fair, honest and wise, the most straight-talking head I've ever met,' one parent told us. 'When you go into his study he has every book about education under the sun and when he does assembly the children really listen to him.' Another said: 'He's reflective and thoughtful – but fun too.'

At the start of term he tells the pupils that 'grades matter, but character matters more'. 'We talk a lot about it,' he says. 'Of course grades are really important. They open up doors of opportunity, so the better your grades, the more opportunity you have. But actually, your success in life will be determined far more by your character than by your grades. Your character will determine your contribution to society.' That said, the school expects pupils to work hard. 'We're very proud of the fact that the kids have an unbelievable work ethic without compromising on their sport or music or drama,' he says. 'The ethos is incredibly positive. When pupils leave Blundell's we want them to have a robust sense of who they are and to be passionate about doing something meaningful with their lives. We want them to be comfortable in their own skins and have a sense of purpose.'

The head has built a team of vastly experienced teachers (the longest-serving has been at the school for 36 years) and talented young teachers, some nurtured through the school's own initial teacher training programme. Some have overseas experience and others are career changers, including a former diplomat who teaches English and politics and a business teacher and head of PSHE who spent nine years running student support services at Oxford Brookes. Staff professional development is taken seriously, with teachers expected to do their own action-based research every 18 months.

He and his wife Lara, who's a dyslexia specialist at the school, have two teenage sons, one reading anthropology at the University of Bristol, the other a pupil in year 12.



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Entrance

Non-selective. The nursery, pre-prep and prep school take all comers, only turning away children 'who would not thrive in this environment'. Transition to the senior school is generally seamless. Main senior school entry points are year 7, year 9 and year 13. The younger pupils come from a mix of state primaries and preps like Exeter Cathedral School, St Peter's in Lymington, The Downs in Wrexham and Perrott Hill. Year 7 entry is via the school's entrance tests in English, maths and GL Assessment's New Group Reading Test while year 9 entry is by entrance tests in English and maths or via the scholarship programme. Around 30 a year join the sixth form – they need six grade 5s at GCSE and 7s in chosen A level subjects, plus a report from their current school and an interview.

Exit

Virtually all prep pupils head to the senior school, around a quarter with scholarships. The year 7 cohort of 60 comprises two-thirds from the prep and a third from elsewhere. After GCSEs, an average of 20 leave but their places are filled by new sixth form joiners.

At 18, almost all head to university. A handful to Oxbridge most years but none in 2024. Half to Russell Group. Cardiff, Loughborough, Newcastle, Edinburgh, Bath, Birmingham, Bristol, Exeter, Manchester, Nottingham and UCL currently popular. One medic in 2024, one scooped an academic scholarship to the University of Nevada and one progressed to an apprenticeship at a luxury boat building company in Falmouth.

Latest Results

In 2024, 57 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 49 percent A*/A at A level (80 per cent A*-B).

School	LA avg.	Eng. avg.
25%	14%	20%





Teaching & Learning

A Blundell's education is about far more than simply exams and results but pupils clearly knuckle down to their studies. 'They work hard and play hard,' said a parent. 'They definitely have the best of both worlds.' Most take nine or 10 GCSEs – maths and English language are compulsory and the majority take at least one language (French, Spanish or German) and either two or three separate sciences. At A level, 29 subjects to choose from, including economics, business studies, PE, psychology, photography and music technology, plus a BTEC in sport. Most start with four A levels and move to three once they've settled on their choices. A quarter complete an EPQ (recent projects include old and lost varieties of apples, gene therapy for acute myeloid leukaemia and a sustainable fashion show). The school conducts three-year reviews of its systems and has focused on the curriculum, pastoral care and years 7 and 8 in recent years. Setting for maths from year 7 and banding in English from year 9. Plenty of stretch for scholars, including a timed academic challenge and Phoenix society for 'the intellectually curious'.

Academic progress is overseen by tutors, who are based in pupils' houses and meet them at least twice a week. 'We get to know so much about these kids, their families and their interests,' a tutor told us. 'Tutors all do house duty. You are not just a chemistry teacher. You might be a rugby coach or a chess coach too.' A sixth former told us that teachers 'really care' and 'have a genuine desire for you to do well' while parents praised the teachers' responsiveness. 'You can email them and you get a response in an hour,' said one. The teaching we saw was lively and engaging – year 8 pupils busily using different chemicals to test for glucose and protein in food and year 10s discussing permafrost in colder environments. When the teacher threw a few impromptu questions at them, they all got the answers right first time.

Small class sizes – maximum of 16 children in the pre-prep and 18 in the prep. Refreshingly, the prep staff are 50:50 male and female teachers.

The prep teaches important study skills from early on – when we visited a year 3 history lesson, pupils were learning how to make notes about ancient Egypt while year 4s were getting to grips with 'good choices' and 'bad choices'.

Beautiful senior school library housed in an old school room with a high ceiling and wooden beams, its prep counterpart equipped with bean bags, sofas and thousands of books. At the time of our visit, favoured senior authors included Anne Tyler, Jo Nesbø and Tova Friedman while prep children enthused about Jacqueline Wilson, Roald Dahl, Pamela Butchart and Katherine Rundell. Plenty of stretch for scholars, including a timed academic challenge and Phoenix society for 'the intellectually curious'

Qualifications taken in 2024

- A level
- BTEC
- EPQ
- GCSE

Learning Support & SEN

Learning support is known as 'learning success' in the prep, which caters for needs such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, ASD and ADHD – either one-to-one or in small groups. In the senior school 15 per cent have support from a team of seven highly trained staff – mainly one-to-one. Help given for study skills and organisation – sixth formers who haven't accessed learning support before can drop in if they're finding things difficult. A mother whose child is dyslexic said she'd been very well supported and got 'staggeringly good results'

Arts & extracurricular

The Ondaatje Hall, the purpose-built theatre named after former pupil and benefactor Sir Christopher Ondaatje, is mainly used for drama, with three school plays (one musical) and several house plays every year. When we visited pupils were still talking about a rousing year 7 and 8 performance of *We Will Rock You* and planning forthcoming productions of *Les Misérables* and *Lorna Doone* (everyone who wants to take part gets a role, either onstage or backstage). The recently extended music department is top notch, with two composition suites, a recording studio and 12 practice rooms.

More than half of pupils take instrumental lessons, more than a quarter take music GCSE and there are myriad ensembles to join, including senior orchestra, big band, string orchestra, flute group and three choirs. Pre-prep and prep children are encouraged to play informally as well as at formal plays and concerts.

The art school is stunning, light and airy with everything from traditional oils and digital art to sculpture, ceramics and glasswork on view. Students love using 3D headsets to create works of art – last year a talented photographer created her own art gallery to walk through. 'They take it to the next level,' a member of the art department told us. At the time of our visit, 12 year 13s were taking fine art at A level, with five doing photography. Around 20 a year take art GCSE.

Extracurricular activities are a key part of school life. 'There is huge scope here for kids to find their niche or their passion,' a teacher told us. We admired the year 8 cohort's Steve Mault projects, named after a former DT teacher at the school and all created over the summer holidays – one learned to kickbox, another made a computer from scratch and a third created a go-kart. The prep is awash with activities too. Food technology (everyone has a weekly lesson) got a special thumbs-up from our guides. They cook dishes like pad Thai and sausage, mash and onion gravy from scratch and take the food home with them.

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Sport

Blundell's is famously sporty, with acres of pitches, both grass and Astro, and plenty of success at county and national level, particularly in hockey and rugby. More than 100 former and current pupils have competed at county level and above in the last five years. The boys' rugby team recently won the under-18 Rosslyn Park national sevens and reached the National Champions Trophy final. Not surprisingly, the school boasts a healthy rollcall of notable cricketers (including Dom Bess and Hugh Morris) and rugby players like Matt Kvesic and Jack Maunder.

Very sensibly, the school recognises that some pupils aren't so keen on traditional sports and runs alternative programmes for year 10s and above – known as SWEAT (strength, wellbeing, endurance, attitude and targets) for girls and games and fitness for boys – ranging from yoga, spin, CrossFit, Pilates and high-intensity training to running, five-a-side football, volleyball and benchball. Outdoor swimming pool used in the summer term and up to the October half-term (they're a hardy lot here) but year-round swimming takes place in the public pool in Tiverton. A few parents think some of the sports facilities could do with updating – 'but I'm nit-picking,' admitted one.

The Russell is one of the most eagerly anticipated events of the year, a gruelling, muddy, 10-kilometre cross-country race over neighbouring farmland and the aptly-named Heartbreak Hill (there's also a shortened fun course). Not surprisingly, given its proximity to Dartmoor, youngsters can take part in the Ten Tors challenge, trudging 35 or 45 miles across the northern half of the moors.

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Boarders

More than half board, whether they're full boarders, weekly or flexi. Ninety international boarders from all over the world. Some forces and diplomatic families too. Boarding from year 7 (no prep boarders), with years 7 and housed in their own boarding house. After that, there are five houses for years 9 to 11 (three for boys, two for girls) and Westlake, the ultra-swish co-ed sixth form house. 'It's the highlight of coming to Blundell's,' said one of our guides. Boys and girls live on separate sides of the house, with a shared common room opening on to a garden, separate girls' and boys' common rooms, study centre, kitchens and quiet room.

We visited one of the boys' houses - very wholesome and well-equipped, with motivating posters along the lines of 'be authentic, be yourself' and 'enjoy the journey'. 'Pupils here are well-rounded, open-minded and resilient,' said a housemaster who previously spent 15 years working in state schools. 'When I see our year 13s I think "the world is going to be all right."' Sixth formers get their own rooms while year 9s are in fours or fives and years 10 and 11 are in twos. Lots of weekend activities to keep boarders busy, including paintballing, wakeboarding and surfing at Bude or Croyde.



239	119	120
Total Boarders	Full Time Boarders	Flexi Boarders



Ethos & *Heritage*

The school bears the name of its founder, Peter Blundell, a wealthy cloth merchant whose will provided for the endowment of 'schooling for 150 protestant grammar scholars' in the early 1600s. More than 200 years later, the school moved to its present 100-acre site on the outskirts of Tiverton – a clutch of handsome Victorian buildings arranged round an immaculate green. Originally a boys' school, it went co-ed in 1975.

The prep opened in 1929 and moved to its current site, just a few hundred yards down the road from the senior school, in 2000. The prep, pre-prep and nursery have the best of both worlds – children have their own purpose-built redbrick buildings, with acres of space, including a mud kitchen and a greenhouse where they grow their own produce, but they get to use some of the senior school's facilities too. Each pre-prep and nursery classroom has an external door, with tiny pairs of wellies lined up in readiness for outdoor play. Parents praise the transition from the pre-prep to the prep. 'Everything is so well thought through,' said one.

Blundell's is very much a 21st century school but a few traditions persist to this day, including Latin Prayer, an assembly where notices are delivered and sixth form 'monitors' (prefects) read a Latin prayer at the end. Pupils start the day in the school's beautiful chapel four mornings a week. For years the school was known for its slightly old-fashioned brown tweed jackets for lower years and jazzy striped blazers for sixth formers who had gained their colours but there's now a stylish new uniform for all (including the sixth form). Sixth form monitors get the privilege of wearing different coloured jumpers and brown shoes.

Day pupils all belong to a boarding house. They can leave at 5.30pm, after activities, but can stay for prep and supper till 9.30pm if they prefer. Food is excellent, with lots of choice. The executive chef and his team cook 1,100 meals every day, invite year 7s into the kitchen to prepare a three-course meal and teach sixth formers to cook, ready for university.

The head is keen that Blundell's looks out to the wider world from its small Devon town and the student body is diverse for a school of its size and location. Community partnerships are important too – pupils visit care homes, teach French to primary school children, run rugby and cricket coaching sessions and work with local organisations.

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Pastoral care, *inclusivity & discipline*

The parents we spoke to praised the school's pastoral care, particularly in the aftermath of a shocking incident in 2023 when a boy attacked two pupils and a housemaster (he was later sentenced to life in prison with a minimum term of 12 years after being found guilty of attempted murder). 'You never know how your school or school community will react to the worst circumstances – but at Blundell's, we do know,' says the head. 'It was overwhelming. We received support from old Blundellians around the world, parents rallied around and the pupils were amazing. There was genuine shock and horror, but no rancour. The willingness to forgive, the genuine grace, the generosity of spirit were overwhelming and we're a stronger community for it.' Parents agreed with his words. 'There was no obvious textbook for something like this but the school was brilliant and offered support and counselling to everyone who needed it,' said one. 'They handled it really well,' said another. 'The thing about Blundell's is that it's very supportive. Everyone has got each other's backs.' Pupils are clear about where to go for help (tutors, housemasters and housemistresses are the first port of call) and there's a team of trained peer listeners. The school has invested in the STEER programme, a mental-health platform that enables teachers to measure, track and improve pupils' wellbeing. 'It allows us to have good insight and to be proactive,' says the second master. The need for discipline doesn't rear its head too often. As in most schools, vaping seemed to be 'a thing' three years ago but the school tackled the issue through PSHE and ramped up sanctions (pupils are suspended for a first time vaping offence). Fully-equipped medical centre in the heart of the campus provides 24-hour care when required. There's also a full-time school counsellor. Strict policy on mobile phones. The school prefers year 7 and 8 pupils not to have phones in school at all but if they do, simpler brick-like devices are advised.

Year 7 to 11 pupils hand their phones in at 8.25am and are allowed them back (but only in their houses) for two hours at 5.30pm. Sixth formers can carry their mobiles with them on the proviso that they set a good role model to younger pupils and don't use them around the campus. 'The children have really embraced it,' says the second master. 'They go back to their houses and sit and chat and play board games. It's made a remarkable difference in a short space of time.' Pupil voice is important from the start, with a school council in the prep and senior school. Sixth formers can carry their mobiles with them on the proviso that they set a good role model to younger pupils and don't use them around the campus.



Pupils & parents

Slightly more boys than girls. Weekly boarders tend to come from Devon, Cornwall, Somerset and Dorset while full boarders come from London, the south east and overseas, taking advantage of the speedy two-hour train from Paddington to Tiverton Parkway and the proximity of the M5 (the school is six minutes from junction 27).

Day pupils live up to an hour away – the school runs eight minibuses from places like Newton Abbot, Exeter, Barnstaple, Taunton and Sidmouth. There's also a Monday morning bus for weekly boarders from Kingsbridge and Crewkerne. Parents are an eclectic mix of farmers, people working in the agriculture industry, entrepreneurs and escapees from London and the south east who moved out to the country during the pandemic. 'It's a proper mix of families, very unpretentious and community-minded,' said a parent.

The school engenders huge loyalty – alumni return regularly, even in their 70s and 80s – and parents wax lyrical about the sense of community. Parents' tennis matches, coffee mornings, Christmas fairs and book clubs galore, even male and female touch rugby teams. Famous former pupils include Nobel Prize-winning physiologist AV Hill, RD Blackmore, who wrote Lorna Doone, and racing driver Ben Collins.

The *Last Word*

A big-hearted, busy school that turns out thoughtful, well-rounded, go-getting youngsters with a spring in their step and a clear sense of purpose. They study hard, throw themselves into the myriad opportunities on offer and clearly relish their time at Blundell's.





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