



RATCLIFFE  
COLLEGE

The Good Schools Guide Review, 2024

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THE  
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SCHOOLS  
GUIDE



# WHAT THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE SAYS

## Head

Since 2017, Jonathan Reddin, previously deputy head. Studied sports science, PGCE and master's all at Loughborough.

Drawn to teaching as a result of coaching football in the US.

Started his career at Kimbolton School, where he appreciated 'the privilege of moulding young people's lives', thence to LVS, Ascot, before moving to Brentwood School as Director of Sport.

Describes moving to Ratcliffe as a happy coincidence that he was in the 'right place at the right time, doing a good job'.



A devout Catholic, his faith is front and centre to everything he does: 'I'm a great believer in teachers modelling the behaviours that they want to see in their students.' Down-to-earth, calm and earnest, parents say he is 'very sincere about the student voice' and 'always present and happy to listen'. Students describe him as 'firm but fair', which pleases him. Says he wants them to leave with a 'strong sense of who they are and their place in the world' and a 'role in their local community'. Worries about the pace of change through advances in technology and its impact on young people.

We met him in his traditional, rather sparse office with dark wood panelling and the most ascetic desk we've seen. Keeps his cards close to his chest, but cites his hobbies as keeping fit, although 'I'm too old for football now'. Runs the school's golf society, taking students on the annual tour. His wife teaches French, and their two daughters have been through the school.

Head of Prep since 2022 is Siobhan Minford, popular with parents and students. She comes from a decadelong headship at Holy Cross Catholic Primary School.

# ENCOURAGING BIG IDEAS

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## Entrance

Main intakes are into nursery, reception, and year 7. Typically a dozen join in years 9 and 10. Occasional places in other years, with waiting lists for younger years. Catholics and siblings given priority. A stay and play session, plus reference from current school or nursery, for entry into early years, with assessments in English and maths for years 2-6. Exams in maths, English and science from year 7, plus interview with the head and school report. Around 25 join from local independents and academies at sixth form; the school has a talent scholarship that attracts pupils. Applicants need a grade 6 at GCSE in their chosen or related subjects, with a 7 to study maths, sciences, languages or English lit.

## Exit

Unusual for more than a few students to leave after year 6, with entry to senior school automatic, although students sit the same 11-plus papers as the 30 to 40 externals that join in year 7. Just over a third leave after year 11, usually to local colleges. Most sixth form leavers to university, over 90 per cent to Russell Group and two students to Oxbridge in 2023. Oxford Brookes perennially popular, alongside Durham, Leeds, Loughborough, Leicester, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool. One medic in 2023, plus two overseas - to the Netherlands and the US. Apprenticeships have become more popular.

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## Latest Results

In 2023, 46 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 32 per cent A\*/A at A level (61 per cent A\*-B). In 2019 (the last pre-pandemic results), 47 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 33 per cent A\*/A (63 per cent A\*-B).

## Teaching and Learning

'Encouraging big ideas' is the stand-out approach here. Parents say children are encouraged to 'have visibility of the wider world and its challenges' and 'form their own opinions'. We witnessed calm classrooms with engaged students working independently or in covert huddles, many planning presentations. Students say teachers are 'very accessible' and parents comment on 'low staff turnover' which they feel 'speaks volumes to the culture'.

Maximum class sizes recently increased to 20 in prep and 22 in senior; eight in sixth form.

***Parents say there's a 'loving feel' and the consensus is that whatever track your child is on, they will be supported. Pupils mention not feeling pressured or compared to others.***

The different age groups are housed in close proximity, meaning that as children progress from nursery through to sixth form, the groundwork is laid for easy transitions and a sense of familiarity. This starts right from nursery, a modern single-storey building with dedicated outside space where tinies zoom around the race tracks and which is open from 8am to 6pm. They, and pre-prep, join years 1 and 2 for weekly assemblies, themed days and visits. Learning at this stage is very much hands-on, and children are encouraged to muck in: building, making, and exploring. We loved the outdoor obstacle course and children's chalk drawings of stick figurines sprawled across the playground.

The modern prep school flows around a central courtyard, with its own sports hall and brightly decorated library. Children were confident and happy to chat, telling us how the school awards 'wow moments' and 'star of the week'. Core subjects are taught by class teachers, with specialist teaching in music, art, languages, drama and PE. In year 6, a third of the timetable is taught by senior school staff. French is taught from reception, with Italian added in year 3, Spanish in year 4 and German in year 5. Latin from year 6.

The GCSE programme runs over three years, starting in year 9, with emphasis on enrichment trips as a core part of the curriculum. Students select 10 GCSEs. A language (except for SEN or EAL) and RE are compulsory, with games, ICT and PSHE continuing on the curriculum for all.







At sixth form, A levels are mainly traditional, along with food science and nutrition and media studies – complemented by BTECs in sport, business and IT. Students start with four subjects, dropping to three in year 12, and have a third of their time dedicated to private study. The expansive, staffed sixth form centre is a popular space – and we were impressed to see lots of silent learning. Students can also access sports facilities, such as the fitness suite, to burn off energy between lessons.

Excellent preparation for life after school, say pupils, and not just Oxbridge and medical routes. Lots of guest speakers, including one recently on formation flying – ‘helps to light a flame in them!’ Old Ratcliffians provide mock interviews and CV reviews. Annual competition for year 12s to pitch for a share of £1,000 career development funding.

## Learning support and SEN

Twenty-three per cent of pupils (mainly dyslexic, but also some with ADHD and autism) are on the SEN register (higher than national average), supported by a SENDCo and head of learning support, both fulltime. Plenty of cosy break-out spaces (decorated with cuddly toys, cushions and lighting to enhance emotional wellbeing and to calm anxiety for younger ones). Parents spoke overwhelmingly about the ‘positive support’, calling it ‘flexible’ and ‘tailored’. Around 60 have small group timetabled lessons; one-to-ones also available (costs extra). Emphasis on multisensory teaching to include specialist resources such as laptops, coloured overlays and visual timetables. There are also daily drop-in sessions at lunchtimes. Three EHCPs when we visited. EAL programme provides group lessons or personalised sessions, as required.

## The arts and extra-curricular

School is well known as an ‘all-rounder’, with the co-curricular offering, as they now call it, including the ‘big six’ of sport, music, drama, CCF, DofE and chaplaincy, which all students participate in. The head describes it as ‘very much the lifeblood of the college’. Pupils say they are ‘never bored’.







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The multitude of clubs (before, during and after school), range from coding, touch typing and adventure training through to knitting and Warhammer. 'It's bonkers how much there is to choose from, you can fill every day of the week 10 times over,' said a parent. The academic year culminates in activities week, when trips take precedence – including an annual pilgrimage to Lourdes. Lots of day visits too - year 7s recently visited the Warner Bros Studio Tour in London.

Music is massive – both a popular curriculum subject and masses of bands, choirs and ensembles (brass, woodwind, swing and string most popular), plus senior orchestra, whose vast number of performance opportunities include weekly informal performances, assemblies and an annual picnic concert. Most of the teaching takes place in a grand music hall and there's plenty of private practice space for the 35 per cent of pupils who learn an instrument. Trips vary from classical instrumental concerts to musical theatre and jazz and swing performances.



Drama felt by some to be the poor relation to sport and music. But there are annual whole-school productions (recently *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Ratcliffe Towers*), theatre in assemblies and hotly contested house competitions. Plus clubs for drama and musical theatre, along with LAMDA and theatre trips.

Judging by the sheer volume of sculptures, drawings and paintings dotted all over the school, art is taken seriously. These include wonderfully riotous displays of colour and texture that feel anything but mundane. We saw students working on their sketchbooks – all laser-focused (think experimental and abstract art projects, character-filled portraits and embroidered faces of female artists). Prep runs an annual art week and corresponding award, with year 6s using senior school facilities including a film and photography studio. Art trips are organised annually for years 11 and 13.





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Impressive facilities include 25-metre pool, floodlit courts, athletics track, fitness suite and pitches as far as the eye can see.







## Sport

Sport remains as popular as ever, no doubt helped by head's strong background in this area. Fear not if your child isn't a natural on the sports field, though – parents say that while 'there are lots of options, it isn't laser-focused on sport' and that the ethos is 'inclusive', with every child from year 4 representing the school in fixtures. Good breadth too, with the main sports of netball, hockey, rugby, tennis, athletics, football and cricket complemented with extracurricular options in fencing, equestrian, cross-country, basketball, squash and more. Strongest results in hockey (regional and national), swimming, triathlons, and cricket. Since 2019, the school has been a partner of the Leicestershire County Cricket Club, accessing expert coaching support and offering opportunities to be scouted. It's obviously paying off as girls' cricket is thriving. Impressive facilities include 25-metre pool, floodlit courts, athletics track, fitness suite and pitches as far as the eye can see.

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## Boarders

Although predominantly a day school, parents describe boarding as the 'heart and soul' of the school. Available from year 6, around 100 students board – two-thirds boys. Vast majority (about 85 per cent) are full or weekly, although flexi is becoming more popular. Around half are international (including expats), with EAL immersion taster courses running throughout the year, along with a summer school, to aid with integration.

Homely prep and common rooms are shared between sexes, but accommodation (in the midst of a five-year refurb) is separate, located upstairs in the main school. Younger pupils share up to three a dorm, while sixth formers have their own rooms. Rooms (and beds) can feel a bit small for the gangliest of the senior boys. Boarders need to be organised – only sixth formers can return to their rooms in the day.

Weekends can be quiet, but a busy activities schedule includes brunches, local shopping and social events, with Sundays for trips, eg city visits, paintballing, theme parks, seaside, Christmas markets etc. With the campus quite secluded, these activities are particularly appreciated. Students also appreciate the access to school facilities, notably the music department, pool, library and gym. They order in occasional takeaways. Supervised prep for younger years; older ones allowed more independence.

New houseparents recently appointed, and each boarder has a mentor to review their progress. Parents say their boarding offspring are 'happy' and that it's 'easy to talk to the head, deputy and head of boarding – and there is communication between all of them'.



## Ethos and Heritage

While handily located down its very own junction off the busy A46, the school's imposing red-brick facade feels a world away from the hustle and bustle of normal life, with the impressive and ancient building (once a seminary) sitting in an expansive 200 acres of grounds, including a tree-lined driveway leading up to its Gothic frontage. The best of both worlds, then.

Facilities blend the traditional and modern. Newest is the English centre, the school's first carbon-zero building complete with sedum roof and solar panels. Quite a contrast to the main building with its wide echoing corridors, wood-panelled rooms and mullioned windows. The traditional refectory has long flags depicting the four houses hanging from the ornate woodwork ceiling – here we found the food tasty and wide-ranging. Children and staff sat at opposite ends of the hall in groups, both chatty. Sixth form has its own premises, including a recently created café, complete with barista service. Lockhart Garden, at the heart of the senior school building, must also get a mention – a great source of pride for the head, the garden was created in 2019, with the design mirroring the shapes of the mullioned windows. But while it's supposed to be a place of quiet contemplation, not all the kids on our visit seemed to get that memo.

Founded in 1847 by the Blessed Antonio Rosmini, Ratcliffe is a school where traditions matter, and the Catholic ethos is unashamedly integral. The 1960s chapel, surprisingly light-filled with modern stained-glass windows, dominates as a focus for the school's activities. Charitable initiatives are deemed important, eg recent food bank collections and a programme that sees sixth formers taking up voluntary posts as carers for people with disabilities on a pilgrimage to Lourdes every summer – described as a 'profound, lifechanging experience'. Nearly a quarter of the staff are Catholic, but non-Catholic families say they feel welcome. 'It's not overbearing, they've got the balance right,' said one. Heaps of sixth form leadership opportunities, with a competitive application process.









## Pastoral care, inclusivity and discipline

Pupils say the school is close-knit, although a few later joiners said they felt 'awkward' and found it harder to fit in (open communication with teachers helped, they added). Bullying rare and dealt with 'quite quickly', say pupils. Pastoral system is well-developed, including teaching staff, chaplaincy team, in-house counsellor and medical nurses. Sixth formers act as student listeners for younger ones. The gritty topics of emotional health, wellbeing, anti-bullying, e-safety, alcohol and drug awareness sessions all covered. Children say they feel confident to express emotions. Parents talk about the 'nurturing' and 'supportive environment'.

Between lessons, teachers monitor corridors to ensure appropriate behaviour, resulting in a calm and quiet atmosphere. Great emphasis on positive reinforcement over punishment also helping. Some students wish there was less priority given to the neatness of uniforms. Recently there's been more of a focus on celebrating diversity, including culture week to encourage students to share elements from their own backgrounds.

## Pupils and parents

Pupils we met were down-to-earth, confident and chatty – even the quieter ones were eloquent at expressing themselves, including their aspirations. Around a quarter are Catholics, most hailing from the villages along the Fosse Way between Leicester and Newark. Many rely on the school bus service that includes later options for those staying on for clubs. 'We've got people from all over - we know, because we have to travel a long way for parties!' said a parent. Mainly a mix of professionals (lots running their own businesses) and farming families. Active PA and alumni. Good ethnic diversity.

## Money Matters

Scholarships from year 7 in academic, sport and arts, with up to 50 per cent fee remission. Bursaries available for up to 90 per cent (100 per cent for exceptional circumstances).

## The Last Word

A secluded Catholic school where many spend their whole childhood. But far from feeling like a bubble, leavers come out well-rounded and more than prepared for the real world, as well as having met their potential. 'It's got a loving feel,' adds a parent.







# RATCLIFFE COLLEGE

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01509 817072



[admissions@ratcliffecollege.com](mailto:admissions@ratcliffecollege.com)

Ratcliffe College, Fosse Way, Ratcliffe on the Wreake, Leicester, LE7 4SG

