

# The Good Schools Guide Review of

## St Ambrose College, Hale Barns, WA15 0HE

Pupils: 950; all boys; 200 in sixth form; day only.

Ages 11-18 RC State (Trafford LA)

### Our View

St Ambrose College is a RC Boys' Grammar state funded academy school with pupils selected by entrance exam. In 2016, it celebrated its 70 year anniversary making it as relevant to the members of its active and vibrant Old Boys' Association (SAOBA), some of whom remember those early days, as it does to the boys currently using its leading edge technology and top class facilities.

The College is part of the global network of 'Edmund Rice Schools', which has schools on every continent, and closely follows the 'Eight Essentials' of its Christian Brother philosophy. Recent Ofsted and Catholic Diocesan reports rate it 'Outstanding' and being over subscribed every year might indicate that this is a school that needs no further recommendation. But St Ambrose is clearly and demonstrably not 'just an exam factory' and places as much emphasis on 'Compassion for those in Need' as it does to 'Striving for Excellence'. This is certainly evident in how it assists boys in becoming active and contributing participants of society.

Lately, there has been a re-calibration of its academic purpose. Yes, it still produces higher than average marks in Maths and Computer Science, (for which it awarded specialist status in 2005) but the creative subjects - art, music and drama (now back on the curriculum for 'A' Level) enjoy equal prominence and commitment.

This school consistently attains higher levels than the national average in all official measures but St Ambrose College is far more than the sum of these figures and its appeal to parents is also in how it develops its pupils in become outstanding adults.

### Principal

James Keulemans, a graduate of the universities of Coventry (BSc Hons) and Sheffield (PGCE), was appointed Principal in September 2015. Capped at international rugby for the Netherlands, James also taps into a Dutch lineage that advocates the encouragement of the individual and always seeks to help those less fortunate. To his peers, he is highly regarded as a modern educationalist and having succeeded in transforming schools with less resources and dealing with difficult social conditions, he applied for the role to see how he could improve an already highly regarded and successful school.

Dedication to learning eclipses personal ambition and he operates by the maxim of "What am I doing to make a difference?" He manages through 'shared leadership', measuring success by the confidence he places in his colleagues and in their abilities to ensure he doesn't become 'indispensable'.

In this age of increasing and vociferous secularism, James confidently affirms a Christian belief and ethos that determines both his approach to life and his philosophy of education. A man with progressive ideas with the confidence to implement them as long as they mean the school stays relevant to its immediate community. He is supportive and encouraging to staff and boys alike. The long-term aim for the boys, he says, is to prepare them for life beyond school but also to ensure that, long after they leave, they continue to live by the school values actively making a difference where they can. Eighteen months in, it is clear he is having a positive impact on the school and staff and pupils hold him in high regard and affection. His 1<sup>st</sup> team rugby playing days may be behind him but he occasionally takes a flanker position in the scrum of school life by teaching Year 7 classes.

### Academic Matters

There is a very strong sense of personal and academic motivation supported by extra curricula clubs, clinics and one-to-one tuition sessions. The emphasis is to achieve as high as you can. A great camaraderie was on display between boys actively encouraging and helping each other. The rebalance of the curriculum was reflected in the 2016 'A' Level results which recorded the same average grade for Art as for Further Maths – A; with the identical result at AS Level too. Overall, 'A' Levels attained 69% grades A\*-B and are consistently in the top rank of comparative schools across the country. Boys sit a minimum of nine GCSEs in Fifth form and results are trending upward with the latest showing a very impressive 61% in A\* or A grades with the extended pass rate, A\*-C, at 98.3%. English results also scored highly in national tables and Biology, Chemistry and Physics all registered above 90%. As of 2017, there are 950 pupils on the school roll, of whom 200 are in Sixth Form.

Trips to France and Spain are available throughout the school years supplementing the learning of the languages as well as providing the opportunity to experience the respective cultures. From the fourth year on, pupils get the chance to live with Spanish or French families and Sixth Formers are offered work experience in Málaga or Caen – muchas gracias and merci beaucoup frequently heard in response.

While the school genuinely believes all of its boys are talented, support in more challenging work is offered to pupils who demonstrate higher academic achievement. In the Sixth Form, it provides an Oxbridge recruitment programme, which includes visiting speakers, mock interviews and advice from former pupils now studying at those universities. There is also additional support for boys wanting to pursue medical or dentistry careers including work experience placement in local hospitals and GP practices. Teachers did express some concern that the school should do more for other subject vocations and improve advice and guidance in the area of apprenticeships. The Principal also identified this and is hopeful of addressing this shortcoming soon.

The College has also introduced online mentoring for Sixth Formers to communicate directly with undergraduates about revision techniques, university life and to make the transition from school to university as seamless and stress free as possible. The Common Room and study areas provide pockets of sanctuary for private study and wider subject research.

## **Games, Options, the Arts**

Traditionally, St Ambrose has always encouraged pupils to participate in sports and over many years earned an enviable record in competitions, especially in rugby. It also excels at cricket and athletics in local, divisional and national competitions.

The new building boasts some very impressive facilities, including badminton courts, a fully equipped fitness suite and, the jewel in the sporting crown, a 25metre swimming pool. Outside, facilities include three rugby pitches, an all-weather 4GL pitch, two artificial wickets, a 7-a-side all weather football pitch and three full sized tennis courts. Many Old Ambrosians have gone on to play rugby representing England and Scotland sides, and as professional footballers, (Domaine Rouse at Bury FC and Alex McQuade at Shrewsbury). Former pupil, Ciaran Murphy, is on the list of English athletes to run a sub four minute mile.

Senior sports students have visited Barbados, South America, South Africa, Australasia, USA and Canada. Juniors have enjoyed visits to Ireland, France, Italy and the Netherlands.

On the school walls are displayed some high calibre artistic exhibits, a testament to the encouragement the college gives its more creative pupils and those who aren't really interested in being "rougthy, toughy rugby players", as one mother observed.

Music is on the curriculum at both GSCE and 'A' Level and enjoys extra curricular life in a thriving orchestra, 'School of Rock' and various choirs - all with busy and rewarding schedules. Instrument tuition is offered 'one-to-one' from specialised teachers.

Each year, pupils perform in the school musical – "an extremely rewarding experience for all involved." The highlight of the school diary however, is the annual speech night at The Bridgewater Hall that includes a comprehensive musical programme.

## **Background and Atmosphere**

Although part of the Trafford Education Authority there is no official catchment area and boys come in from areas across Cheshire and Greater Manchester including Warrington, Wilmslow, Knutsford and Didsbury. However, the emphasis is on ability and active participation, irrespective of background or how affluent your parents might be.

Boys start in 1<sup>st</sup> Year, a nod to the original form numbering system rather than Year 7 as used in most other schools. The uniform is unashamedly traditional although this doesn't mean boaters and gowns. Black blazers with badge, school tie and plain black shoes being the standard with Sixth Form ties denoting their year group or Prefect status.

There is a vigorous policy of encouraging pupils to take a full and active interest in wider society and boys engage in the Youth Parliament, debate current affairs, discuss issues of the day and everyone gets the opportunity to join a Retreat throughout their school years. The Catholic faith is both a spiritual and literal presence in the daily life of the school and amidst the bustle of break and meal times boys can take time for refuge for prayer and quiet reflection within the Chapel built in the school atrium and the very heart of the school. "I've never known it to be locked during all my time here." according to the Head Boy.

The College is twinned with its namesake in Sierra Leone for which pupils raise funds and resources and make regular trips to this academy. In 2016, pupils and their families raised £10,000 through a sponsored walk for the Sierra Leone school and are hoping to reach this figure again this year. The school is perhaps proudest of the help it provides for those on its own doorstep by helping out at 'Cornerstone', a service for homeless people and 'Revive' in Salford, a refuge for asylum seekers.

## Pastoral Care and Discipline

The College prides itself on being a well-ordered, caring environment where high standards and good manners are expected. Boys are rewarded with house points for sporting, musical and dramatic activities and enough points earns the chance to go on annual reward trips, such as Alton Towers.

Responses to poor behaviour include a quiet word, written work or a task commensurate to the offence. More serious or persistent misbehaviour can lead to involving the parents, detention and in rare instances, temporary or permanent exclusion. A Behaviour Support Mentor is employed at the College to intervene when behaviour is not of the required standard but such occasions are rare and commitment to the school's ethos is reflected in the very low percentage rate of unauthorised absence. One boy with a reputation for mischievous behaviour early in his school life went on to successfully fill a senior position in the Sixth Form leadership team.

The layout of the school also makes it easier for pupils to approach teachers and mentors if they feel it necessary to discuss issues or problems. Teachers are visible even when working in office spaces. An Achievement Mentor works with pupils to help them overcome difficulties and support is also available from a Sixth Form Mentor who very often is able to offer practical advice gained from similar experiences. The school House system encourages the formation of wider friendship networks as boys mix with other year groups half an hour each day.

## Pupils and Parents

The boys need little encouragement to learn and are provided with a wide range of resources and support to ensure they are encouraged throughout their entire time at school. Parents value the Catholic moral standards of the school as much as they do the academic achievements. "It's not the building that attracted me but the ethos and pastoral care" said the mother of a 1<sup>st</sup> Year pupil. "The school's helped make my son become 'a nice young man.'" One dad liked how "keen the College is in keeping him on board at all stages of his son's progress through school." The school is well supported through the work of a robust and enthusiastic Parents' Association (SAPA) and all of its parents are involved through regular on line updates and a college email communications system.

The social mix of boys does seem to facilitate a greater understanding of the complexities of society especially in compassion for its less fortunate members. Generally, the boys are level headed and fully aware they occupy a privileged academic position but don't exhibit any sense of self-entitlement and it was gratifying to hear them speak with gratitude and appreciation of their time in school – "teachers know what they're doing and give you the time and tools to succeed."

The school is well settled into its new home and after five years has become accustomed and comfortable in its surrounding but still appreciative of the facilities it provides. Built as a Celtic Cross with class rooms and study areas located around the head of the cross, the building is stunning not just architecturally but in how it manages the free movement of personnel around its floors, corridors and staircases. It is "very cool and inclusive" said one boy, "the old place felt like it was everyman for himself but here, not just with the facilities and technology, but how the natural light actually helps me study. Wow, I'm going to miss this place for being so student friendly" said one Sixth Former, a little wistfully.

St Ambrose's most famous Old Boy is probably Lonnie Donegan, the inspiration behind the Beatles and Rolling Stones, who was a pupil in 1945. Others include Graphic Designers Malcolm Garrett and Peter Saville, portraitist Keith Breeden and Sir John Pethica, Professor of Material Science at Trinity College, Dublin. A number of Old Boys went on to ply their trade as Men of the Cloth while a handful of others have been elected to another, more temporal House as MPs.

## Entrance

Entrance is via exam for Year 6 pupils comprising tests in English, Maths and Verbal Reasoning. However, the school's admissions policy determines entry should the number of applicants who attain the highest mark exceed the number of available places. There were over 500 entrants who sat the last exam so inevitably some parents will be disappointed. Yet, the current school roll is not exclusively Roman Catholic and as there are other schools in the area who hold similar exam entry systems, St Ambrose is competitive but accessible.

The Sixth Form usually has between 180 and 200 pupils with a high percentage coming through the school although places are only guaranteed if the student has five GCSEs (A\*,A or B) or (grades 6-9) with at least a grade B or 6 in the subject studied at 'A' Level and at least a 5 in Maths and English. Progression from Lower to Upper Sixth is dependent on appropriate progress in all subjects, high levels of attendance and a positive attitude to learning. In the past, new boys have settled in quickly, made friends and become integral and active contributors to school life. Leadership opportunities are available to Sixth Formers and all are encouraged to be excellent role models and to mentor younger pupils in the school.

## **Exit**

Although most stay onto Sixth Form, some new boys replace those who leave at 16. At the end of their time at St Ambrose many are well prepared to go onto Russell Group universities, including Oxbridge, with such numbers increasing year on year. Among the subjects applied for last year were Chemical Engineering, Medicine, Law, Robotics, Astrophysics, Modern Languages, Art & Design and Music. For one pupil it was winning a much coveted place at RADA to study Drama; a reflection of the broad range of high quality education St Ambrose consistently and successfully provides for its pupils.

## **Money Matters**

Pupil Premium Funds are available to help pupils of low income families in order to help raise achievement and improve outcomes for the target pupils identified. Bursary funds are also available to pupils who meet the eligibility criteria.

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