

interview





‘This is a great opportunity for us to play a meaningful part in the local community’

It’s an important year for Bryanston School, with a new prep school on board and an ambition to set a new standard in gender equality education.

Headmaster Mark Mortimer fills Jo Golding in on the details

Bryanston School has to be one of the independent schools undergoing the most significant changes this year. The large boarding school in Dorset has merged with a local prep school that it has worked with for many years, enabling it to offer an all-through education for the first time in its almost 100-year history. Consequently, the school has more pupils now than ever before – and interestingly, it’s an even gender split of 402 boys and 402 girls.

With so many pupils’ education in its hands, Bryanston is rolling out a new gender equality programme this year, which will bring conversations around gender stereotypes and gender-based violence to the forefront across the whole school.

On an unusually hot September day – the second day of the new school year – I spoke to headmaster Mark Mortimer. He has 20 years’ experience in schools, three as the head of Bryanston, and much experience working in the independent sector.

On our Zoom call, he sits in his office and seems

LEFT: Mark Mortimer is the seventh headmaster at Bryanston School
ABOVE: Bryanston School is located in Blandford, Dorset

full of energy. As I soon find out, he has been invigorated by the return of whole-school assemblies.

“Yesterday morning at assembly, for the very first time in 18 months, we were able to fill the school hall. It was genuinely remarkable,” says Mark.

“I can’t go into that hall without remembering all those times in the winter when I was in there with just a cameraman. It was cold. And I was talking knowing that people were watching – well, hoping people were watching – but I had nobody actually in front of me. To have everybody there was tremendous.”

He tells me that everyone is “on good form” and parents are pleased their children are returning to school without Covid-19 restrictions.

“We’ve allowed parents to go into the boarding houses for the first time in a long time and I think they really appreciate that sense of normality.

“Inevitably, there is some anxiety, but I think parents trust us to put pupils at the heart of our decision-making and act in their best interests. That’s what we’ve done, and will continue to do.”

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ABOVE: Natasha Eeles, founder of Bold Voices, met with A2 pupils at the end of the last academic year to talk about university and gender equality

SHATTERING STEREOTYPES

The autumn term marks the beginning of a new major programme at Bryanston that aims to set a new standard in gender equality education and address broader societal issues in connection with gender-based violence.

Mark was inspired by the Bold Voices social enterprise, which is led by a former pupil of his at a previous school, Natasha Eeles. The organisation provides schools with workshops and talks that challenge the attitudes, actions and cultures that fuel gender inequality and sexual violence.

He was also influenced by a TV programme that showed there were gender stereotypes around jobs and colours, for example, amongst pupils as young

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as six (No More Boys and Girls: Can Our Kids Go Gender Free? BBC) “That got me thinking that if the stereotypes are starting to be ingrained that young, then in some way by the time pupils get to senior school, it’s too late,” says Mark.

When Everyone’s Invited happened, it added another aspect to the discussion, Mark says, with incorporating conversations around gender-based violence becoming especially important.

Natasha and Mark discussed the programme they wanted to build and how they could work with other members of the Blandford Schools’ Network, which includes eight local primary schools. The programme needed to be far-reaching, they decided, empowering not only pupils and staff at the school, but also parents, neighbouring schools and the local and wider community.

One crucial element, they agreed, was for it to be led by pupils. “Far more powerful as role models for younger pupils than the headmaster or teachers are older pupils,” says Mark. They aim to have 10 pupil ambassadors per year group – 50 in total – who will take the lead.

The first term will see the school identify and train the ambassadors, define what their role will





be, the topics that will be covered and why these topics need to be covered, as well as think about how they will work with primary schools to bring younger children into the conversation.

The school will also hold a 16-day-long activism event, which will bring together different communities within the school to hear from diverse voices and those who have been affected by gender inequality or violence.

In the second term, pupils will begin their discussions about gender inequality and gender-based violence, facilitated by the ambassadors, producing small projects in groups. The third term will see the school hold its own equality festival, with a host of different workshops for pupils to get involved in.

"It can't just be cosmetic or something we do to tick a box," explains Mark. "It has to be embedded within the school. We have to give it the time and the resources it needs to be meaningful and effective.

"What this mustn't ever become is people feeling uncomfortable, unable to talk or feeling that they're being attacked, criticised or marginalised, or that a wedge is being driven between the boys and girls at the school."

While the programme isn't all planned out yet, it will evolve and develop according to the needs of students, and will be a permanent feature at Bryanston. "This is a great opportunity for us to play a meaningful part in the local community, and to have a really important impact on a local level, but about a national issue," says Mark.

BROADENING EDUCATION

This year there are many more pupils to think about at Bryanston, as it formally merged with local pre-prep and prep school Knighton House in September. Mark says the addition of renamed Bryanston Knighton House means they can now offer an education from 3–18, which he →

LEFT: The school was founded in 1928

Mark on... changes in the sector:

"I think the biggest change I've seen is the vastly improved relationships between state and independent schools. One of our biggest frustrations as heads, both state and independent, is that doesn't seem to have got through to many MPs or newspaper editors. The reality on the ground is often very different to what we read in the press. I can't remember the last time I had significant ideological differences with a member of staff in a state school – we all believe in pupils and we all believe in education – and we are so much better now at working together for the good of children."

On working together with heads:

"We have to support each other and stick up for one another, and I think that Covid has improved that. With the number of schools put into a remarkable crisis-management situation, I got the impression that heads became much better, on Zoom or Teams, at talking to one another, supporting each other and offering advice. That's a great development in a short timeframe. Let's keep that going and build on that."

On the evolution of boarding houses:

"I went to boarding school and left in 1985. If someone got in a time machine in 1885 and came to 1985, I don't think they'd see much difference in the boarding house. The last dormitory I slept in, there were 15 of us, no curtains, wooden floors and big iron beds. Everything changed between 1985 and 2000, when I started teaching, and that's a good thing."

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ABOVE: Mark supports the return to exams next summer

says is an "important thing for a school to be able to do".

He adds: "From a historical point of view, it's lovely to have it back as it was part of the estate. We're keen to make sure that we have a pipeline of pupils that we offer a broad education to. Like lots of schools, we looked at the idea of schools abroad, but we felt that from a business point of view, but more importantly from an educational point of view, this made sense."

Bryanston Knighton House is a mile away from the main Bryanston site, but both schools have shared resources for many years. Mark is excited to have the school fully on board but insists that this will not mean the end of relationships with other prep schools.

“Schools aren't about facilities and buildings, they're about people and relationships”

"We're surrounded here by good prep schools, and we have relationships with prep schools all over the country; this is in no way designed to weaken those relationships," he says.

With mergers becoming more and more common in the independent education sector, Mark says Covid-19 has "accelerated conversations" that were already under way before.

"I think it is possible that 5–10 years from now, there will be far fewer standalone prep schools," he predicts. "Until recently, if a senior and a prep school started having a conversation, parents might assume this was the last-chance saloon, but actually what I think we're seeing is more and more schools talking about working together, and I think that's really important."

FOCUS ON PUPILS

Plans for how GCSE and A-level exams will be graded in 2022 are imminent. But how does Mark think they should be handled?

"The government, and HMC's, view is that, given the

way the curriculum is currently set out, a return to full exams in 2022 is the best thing; I agree with that. The real challenge is we've now got three different benchmarks from 2019, 2020 and 2021.

"What we can't have, in terms of standards, is anything that's more generous than 2021 but equally we can't suddenly penalise the current upper sixth because that will have a knock-on effect in terms of them getting into universities. I'm very glad that I'm not responsible for that at a national level, because that is not easy."

Mark warns that if there are further school closures then quick government action will be needed. "If we do have more closures, we need a rapid Plan B from the government.

"One of the problems last year was that we didn't have a rapid Plan B and information tended to be drip-fed. It was often contradictory and that helped no one, making the job incredibly difficult for schools. We can't have that again."

Mark shares his hopes for the school year ahead: "I really hope that we can have a proper school year that focuses on the pupils and their education. That's desperately what every school in the country wants.

"Remote learning was OK and has shown that schools can adapt quickly. But it's also shown that schools aren't about facilities and buildings, they're about people and relationships.

"Nothing beats being in that classroom and face-to-face."

The first few days back have reinforced to Mark why working in a school is "the best job in the world", as he puts it. "Working with young people, their positivity and enthusiasm stops you becoming cynical or bitter," he explains.

"Walking along the corridor the last couple of mornings and hearing the buzz as I got close to the dining hall just makes me smile. That's the beauty of working in schools. It's just wonderful to be back and up and running without restrictions; long may that continue." ■