

meet the headmaster

“Ask anyone whose school this is and some will say the governors’ or the headmaster’s, but once outside school the children will always refer to it as ‘their’ school and I try to enforce that.” Smart-suited and wearing a subtle Saints Football Club tie, Headmaster **Stephen Symonds** of Boundary Oak School sat comfortably in the office he has occupied since 2008. “The school council does have a say in the running of the school and to get on the council the children have to apply, be interviewed and work to get the job; it is a life skill and if they do not make it through the selection process then we explain why and encourage them to apply again next year.”

words • david rose-massom

If it was not for the casual but efficient manner of the school’s headmaster that last statement could well have seemed a little harsh, but the moment Stephen Symonds begins talking about the school and his charges nothing but happiness and contentment shines through. “Maybe it is necessary to describe the school and its first impression to truly reflect its character. Drive off the busy Wickham Road after leaving Fareham and dipping under the M27 and there, almost hidden among the trees, is a grey turreted gatehouse, a fortress protecting those beyond. Pass through its narrow entrance and the world the other side opens out into lush fields and farmland. A huge spreading cedar tree dominates a field lined by woodland and at the top of the drive is a wonderfully haphazard building with one part of the main house of Roche Court dating from 1280 while its extensions boast Tudor builders. The school and its collection of outbuildings offer an amazing and welcoming home for education, development and growth. It is a beautiful house in a stunning setting. The school has 135 students aged three to thirteen and any growth in that number, according to the Headmaster, must be a gentle move forward. “The joy of a smaller school is we get to know the children.” As we walked around the nursery, classrooms and corridors Stephen instantly knew every child in his charge by first name. “I was a primary school teacher before and the skills learned there I have now brought here. All the teachers here have wonderful standards and when you have classes of just sixteen you get to know the children. If there is a common theme here it is that the parents want the very best for their children and so does the school.”

As he talked of the school his smile broadened and the pride in his expression became even more apparent. “This is not a job – this is a way of life,” he said. “If you want a nine to five existence then this job is not for you; being here is about so much more. My family lives on site, my wife Amanda works closely with me as we have both been house parents and my two sons also attend here. You do not take a job like this without it becoming a way of life for your family.

“What we have here is a nurturing environment. All the staff and everything we do here as individuals have an impact on what happens in the school,” Mr Symonds continued. “I enjoy being a teacher and always wanted to be a school head as there were things I wanted to do within education.”

With a serious world on the other side of the gatehouse is there a danger that children can grow up too quickly? “Helping them become rounded individuals is our aim; something I believe in strongly is that we keep children as children for as long as possible but instil them with confidence. Many children are desperate to get older and they miss out on childhood. Children should be happy and nobody has the right to make them unhappy.”

Education through application seems to be the way of Boundary Oak School and as we toured the facilities every lesson seemed to be linked with not just finding solutions but the application of those solutions. The children in their uniforms were smart, apart from the odd twisted tie and shirt tail hanging out which gave them individuality, but all were proud to be in those uniforms. They were polite and confident and whether working with a team member or let loose on an assignment they all had a solid work



ethic. But the biggest thing that came across was happiness; throughout the whole school there were smiles and happy voices, and not just from the children either! “The children here thrive within their own abilities and we are always quick to praise. Praise them for one thing done well and other things drop into place. We find the best in the children and discover what they are good at and work with that,” he said. “We have enough experience here and see enough different children coming through and we have a real mixture of backgrounds, so we have a broad spectrum of activities both in and outside the curriculum. Eventually, because of how we do things, the child’s strengths soon show through. It is not just about achieving their best but also about having pride in what they have done.” Boundary Oak School moved to Roche Court fifty years ago and it exudes solidity and protection, yet it also produces happy well-educated children who have become well-rounded individuals who can move easily on to the next part of their education and growth. The happy faces were not put on because there was a visitor at the school – they were all genuine smiles on people who enjoyed being at the school – and the young pupils were just as happy about being there as well. What better sign could a parent have that their child is in the right place? ●

For details of Boundary Oak’s history, curriculum, activities and fees go to www.boundaryoak.co.uk
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