

# Oh, we *do* like to be beside the seaside

Smart parents will do almost anything to secure a place for their child at Brighton College, now Britain's leading co-educational light. Emma Hughes takes a tour

Photograph by Richard Cannon

**T**HE tower is the last thing—then, we'll have realised the vision,' Brighton College headmaster Richard Cairns beams. We're standing at the heart of his demesne, in front of the handsome cluster of flint-and-brick buildings that fronts the school's main quadrangle. Its architect, eminent Victorian Sir Thomas Jackson, was an Old Brightonian who went on to transform Oxford: Brasenose, Corpus Christi, Trinity, Balliol, Somerville and Lincoln colleges benefited from his attentions. He'd hoped the whole set-up at his *alma mater* would be capped by an imposing clock tower, but funds ran out, and his plan was never completed. Now, thanks to a £2 million donation, one will finally graze the sky, just as he intended.

Lofty heights are something Mr Cairns does rather well. Since arriving in 2006, he has presided over a period of growth unparalleled in the school's 167-year history, which has seen it leapfrog more than 100 places in the league tables to become the highest-ranking co-educational institution in the country. At the last count, 96.3% of pupils



Richard Cairns, Brighton College's inspirational headmaster

bagged A\*–B grades at GCSE and 96% managed A\*–A at A level. Brighton College has well and truly taken a seat with the greats—it was even voted UK Independent School of the Year at the 2013–14 Independent School Awards. Unsurprisingly, pupil numbers have almost doubled in the past decade.

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With his sandy hair and frameless glasses, the softly spoken 47 year old (*Tatler's* English Headmaster of the Year in 2012) looks extraordinarily boyish. From a distance, he might almost be one of the senior prefects. Yet he's a steely force to be reckoned with—you can see why MI6, which talent-spotted him after he left Oxford, beat a path to his door. But Mr Cairns had already embarked on a mission of a different sort. After a stint teaching English in a refugee camp on the Gaza Strip ('quite dangerous,' he admits), he climbed the professional ladder fast—head of history at Stewart's Melville College in Edinburgh by 25, then deputy head of Magdalen College School in Oxford, and finally to Sussex, to take over from another trailblazer, Anthony Seldon.

How has he done it at Brighton College? By turning the thumbscrews on existing pupils and refusing to admit anyone with less than stellar academic credentials, surely? Not so, he insists. No hothousing here. 'We haven't changed our entry requirements at all. But we feel very strongly that you should never, ever write off a child, and if you gently encourage the bottom quarter to do better, that has an impact on the next quarter.'

Our conversation turns to last year's remarkable A-level results—when Mr Cairns arrived, only 78% were achieving A\*–B grades. 'That extra 20% is the bottom one being looked after properly, rather than us



Above: All pupils study Mandarin up to Year 9. Left: The open co-educational atmosphere brings community spirit and other benefits to both girls and boys

pushing the top 20%,' he tells me. Shiny new facilities weren't at the top of his shopping list. 'They don't matter—it's about having each child feeling that every lesson is something worth getting up in the morning for.' To this end, he put the word out in Student Union bars that Brighton College was looking for energetic graduates and scrapped evening lessons. Now, come 4pm, pupils do music, drama, dance and art.

The staff took some convincing at first. 'Everyone said "Oh, the results will get worse". And I said "No they won't, because you're teaching them when they can learn".'

Before I set off for the coast, a COUNTRY LIFE colleague described Brighton College to me as 'a London school that's not actually in London'. I put this to Mr Cairns. 'Well, we're definitely a town school,' he says. 'And I like that. When I arrived, I got the impression that some of the prospective parents were thinking "Oh my God, where are all the fields?". But I went to a school that had 400 acres of land, and I remember being pretty unimpressed by that as a teenager. You could walk about a mile to one little post office, and that was the highlight.'

He insists Brighton's less salubrious side holds no appeal for his charges, who are kept wholesomely occupied in their free time (the school has its own Costa Coffee concession). 'I've never had to expel a child for drugs, and I've never seen a child smoking on site,' he states proudly. ➤

# Brighton College

Weekly boarding, where pupils (who can get from the King's Road to the school gates in little over an hour) spend Friday night at home and arrive back in time for lessons on Monday morning, has been another popular innovation. 'We're slightly overwhelmed by demand for it,' Mr Cairns confesses. 'When I arrived, we only had two boarding houses. Now, we've got five.' The newest of these is aptly named New House, where clean Scandinavian lines meet Sussex flint and red brick. 'If you're not careful, you can end up with something that looks like a Travelodge,' I'm told. I think back to the draughty dormitories and mildewed showers of my own schooldays. A Travelodge would have seemed like the height of luxury by comparison.

We're joined by two sixth-formers. Annie de Belder has the poise of a latter-day Darcey Bussell—in addition to being deputy head of school, she's a ballerina of considerable renown. 'It's an extremely accepting school,' she tells me. 'I've been able to dance every day here and still get 10 GCSEs and apply to very competitive universities.' She has an interview coming up at UCL's English department, and chats animatedly to me



The architect of the school's flint-and-brick Victorian buildings was Old Brightonian Sir Thomas Jackson

## 'I think it's important for international pupils to be in an environment that's predominantly British'

about Jane Austen. By her side is Alfie Laurence of the Lower Sixth, a boarder with ambitions to follow in Mr Cairns's footsteps. 'I'd quite like to come back here as a teacher,' he admits. But right now, his focus is on something closer to hand: Brighton College's own version of the BBC hit *Strictly Come Dancing*. Each year, six sixth-form couples foxtrot and quickstep competitively around the stage in front of their peers. Alfie, who looks as if he'd be handy in a scrum, is hopeful he'll make the cut—as, apparently, are many of the school's alpha males.

For Leah Hamblett, headmistress of the Lower School, this sort of open-mindedness is one of Brighton College's great selling points—and a direct result of the school admitting both boys and girls. 'I wouldn't go back to teaching in a single-sex school, nor would I want my daughter at one,' she insists. 'The pupils here are growing up together.' We're sitting in her office, which overlooks the Lower School's common room. Below, pupils aged between 11 and 13 are nattering away unselfconsciously in mixed groups. Mr Cairns

nods in agreement. 'What I hadn't appreciated before I came here was how much boys can civilise girls.'

To see how this works in practice, we look in on a Lower School Mandarin lesson—all Brighton College pupils study the language up to Year 9. A room full of 11 year olds is enthusiastically acting out the characters for various words. 'Imagine you're on top of a mountain!' their teacher instructs, assuming the pose of a Shaolin monk. Delighted grins all round.

The Mandarin programme has caught the eye of British diplomats in Beijing with school-age children. And, in fact, Brighton College is fast making a name for itself all over the world. The Swing Band has taken Switzerland's Montreux Jazz Festival by storm (master in charge Neil Carter's band 'opened for Queen,' whispers Alfie). Sixth-formers ballot to volunteer in Sri Lanka during the holidays. And there are two flourishing Brighton College outposts in Abu Dhabi. Back at home, some 10% of the school's pupils come from outside the UK. But Mr Cairns has no plans to increase the ratio: 'I think it's important for international pupils to be in an environment that's predominantly British, because that's what they're paying for.'

It's break time. A school shows its true colours in the gaps between lessons and I was watching carefully for signs of rest-

*Above: 'It's an extremely accepting school' which produces happy pupils. Above right: Pupils enjoy cafe culture at the school's Costa Coffee concession. Right: Hand in hand with academic excellence comes a supportive environment for other activities*

lessness, boredom or flagging morale. Instead, I encounter chipper Fred Watkins of Year 7, who tells me he's just started learning Russian. 'It's really not actually that hard,' he explains blithely. His father is based in Geneva, so he used to go to school in France. 'And French is almost the same as Spanish, so I thought I'd try Russian instead.' I nod dumbly.

Around us, groups of cheerful, cosmopolitan young people are making their way purposefully to the music studio, the workshops and the sports pitches. It's easy to imagine them sailing through any job interview. Or starting their own businesses. Entrepreneurship is taken seriously at Brighton College—each year, a school-wide challenge sees pupils developing business plans and pitching their ideas to an expert panel. The winner gets £10,000 to make their dream a reality. 'I think two or three have applied for patents in the past few years,' Mr Cairns mentions casually. Sir Thomas Jackson, that great stylistic innovator, would have been delighted. 🐦



### NEED TO KNOW

Brighton College, Eastern Road, Brighton, East Sussex, BN2 0AL  
(01273 704200; [www.brightoncollege.org.uk](http://www.brightoncollege.org.uk))

- Founded 1845
- Number of pupils 985
- Boarding fees £11,390 to £11,960 per term
- Day fees £4,710 to £6,800 per term
- Scholarships Available for pupils in all year

- groups and for gifted pupils in music and sport
- International schools Two in Abu Dhabi, plans for more worldwide
- Alumni Peter Mayle, Sir John Chilcot, racing driver Duncan Hamilton, journalist William Leith