



## **The Good Schools Guide**

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## **REDCOMB COLLEGE**

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**Pupils:** 270 pupils: 55 boys board; 90 day boys; 45 girls board; 80 day girls. **Ages:** 11-18. **Size of Sixth Form:** 65

**Religion:** C of E

**Fees:** Day £4,337-£5853, boarding £6,053-£7,848

**Independent**

**Open Days:** Late September, February and early May

**Head Master:** Since 1999, Mr Gerry Holden (fifties) educated at St Augustine's High School, Edinburgh then St Andrew's, where he read history before PGCE at Oxford. Grew up in Edinburgh as one of four working class boys: 'my primary school teacher would never have imagined me here,' he smiles wryly. Started career at Wolverhampton GS for Boys then head of history at Forest School. Ran large department at Millfield before promotion to deputy headship at Frensham Heights. Turns his hand to most things: cooked breakfast when school was snowed in; did a job swap for a day with head of maintenance ('I got all the rotten jobs but it did wonders for staff cohesion.') Knows everyone by name and clearly loves the place. 'Very approachable,' say parents. Qualified soccer referee – takes an interest in all sport and latterly a convert to real tennis. Churchwarden in Cirencester. Enjoys teaching PSHE classes. Head of smallest HMC school, has edited four lively publications for SHMIS and chairs that organisation's professional development committee. Married to friendly Liese, who looks after marketing in the school and helps out with riding. Son Alex was at Rendcomb before reading music at Cardiff University. Avuncular and unpretentious; goes down well with everyone it seems though pupils rib him over his penchant for corduroy trousers.

**Academic Matters:** Consistent if not trail blazing results in recent years. Small numbers overall but 66 per cent A\*-B at GCSE and 78 per cent grades A or B at A level still creditable. May not match high flyers in Cheltenham but delivers as much if not more than Rendcomb parents generally expect. Small groups at GCSE a definite advantage; some tiny ones at A level may be viewed differently by some. Wide range of subjects made possible by part-timers offering psychology, business studies etc. alongside traditional subjects. Art shines at both GCSE and A level with a regular crop of top results. A third of each year group takes double science instead of single GCSEs. Versatile D & T department is drawing more pupils into its stimulating environment. We witnessed some effective lessons in English, maths and theatre studies: lively discussion in sixth form groups and hands up everywhere in lower years. Pupils assessed for effort and achievement every three weeks. Library a good place to work (complete silence when we visited) but looking a bit tired we felt.

Support for mild dyslexia and a range of other mild specific learning disabilities: all pupils screened after entry and help offered either on 1:1 or 1:2 basis. Pupils needing support are generally withdrawn from tutorial lessons rather than main curriculum. Director of studies looks after most able with encouragement to participate in maths Olympiad, other similar national competitions as well as relevant talks, visits etc. Parents say that school is good at celebrating any success (single or multiple) achieved by pupils. Two EFL teachers support regular batch of overseas students, including five annual Japanese students. End of the school day is blurred, making it easy for day pupils to slide into prep alongside the boarders.

**Games, Options, the Arts:** School is a six-day a week – long days too – some potential parents may be put off but for others it's just what they want. Fifty or so, mainly sporting, extra-curricular activities on offer – most take three or four but two is the minimum. Sport is a big deal, enthusiastically supported by staff and pupils alike. School teams generally play 'one down' when they face numerically larger schools but otherwise 'punch above their weight.' Facilities are excellent, with grass pitches and Astroturf, squash and badminton courts, a heated outdoor swimming pool and a large sports hall. Team competition only on sports day though 'this might be extended,' we were told. Individuals regularly make it to the county teams. School offers traditional country pursuits of clay pigeon shooting (highly successful to national level), riding and polo. 4 hole golf course on site, while the nearby Cotswold Water Park hosts windsurfing and fishing. National small schools' lacrosse champions.

Indoors, art is very popular and run by an extremely enthusiastic head of department. Most play a part in annual fashion shows, almost all at least embark on individual music lessons and the choir is highly rated. Ambitious in-house productions performed in the school's theatre, once the orangery of the Victorian main house, include large scale musicals – most recent was 'We Will Rock You'. Lower School pupils recently staged 'The Demon Headmaster' and there are also regular performances by GCSE and A level drama students. MAD (music, art and drama) festival at end of summer term includes professionals and a whole range of activities ranging from circus skills to mosaics. Music department is very strong: eighteen peripatetics, one girl currently in national youth choir and five students working beyond grade 8. Variety of ensembles and choirs as well as rock and contemporary music group (whose recent concert featured John Cage's 'Water Music'). School hosts popular world music day for local junior and prep school pupils. 'Performing arts centre is top of my wish list,' says head. Recent visits have included art students going to Barcelona, geographers to Iceland, a battlefields trip and regular local trips by minibus.

**Background and Atmosphere:** Rendcomb College was founded in 1920 when a member of local, land-owning (fags-to-riches) Wills family bought this vast Italianate pile after the First World War from its previous Jewish owners whose legacy (a rather large and incongruous statue of Saul) greets visitors on arrival. Impressive parquet flooring in main house and gracious 'reading room' provides an elegant backdrop for many a function. Noel Wills was inspired by the notion that 'the only aristocracy is the aristocracy of brains and character,' offering an antidote to traditional public schools of the time (a wreath laid annually on founder's grave in Miserden churchyard honours his memory). School has kept aspects of its original philosophy though current market forces operate here at least as much as anywhere else. Rendcomb committed itself to building a one school ethos since the opening of the junior school in 2000. 'Facilities generally not very swish but natural setting provides wow factor,' explained one mother. No CCF and a lack of strong inter-house rivalry hark back to the idealism of the founder. School Council has increasingly given pupils' a greater say in decision making and is listened to by head. If ever there was a 'school with a view' this is it: looks out over rolling greenery in all directions. Victorian main house sits cheek by jowl with the junior school enabling lots of positive interaction both formally and informally. Sixth form and other boarding houses are separate as is the stable block which has been modified to provide a range of laboratories and classrooms.

Shared bedrooms of younger boarders have refreshing air of light and space, while seniors' rooms are bright, compact and practical. High standard of cleanliness and orderliness reflect well on pupils and boarding/domestic staff. The grounds spill seamlessly into the village of Rendcomb – the village post office (school was at forefront recently of saving this threatened local facility) doubles as the school tuck shop; village church and its incumbent also double up though post was vacant when we visited. Old Rectory provides great boarding house for boys in years 7 and 8. Large, well equipped games room can transform into cinema with projector and screen for favourite movies. Girls' equivalent (Godman) has a pink, fluffy common room complete with disco lights. Friday night challenges (e.g. building the tallest paper tower with help from sellotape) popular with 11-13 year olds. Events for this age group have included a 22 mile cycle tour, a big sister evening and an adventure weekend – a tremendous programme rolls out week after week. Boarders move on at 13 to more senior accommodation. Boys' and girls' common room is a refurbished stable (named 'the barn') – just right for this age group. All sixth formers have their own study bedrooms in dated but flexible co-ed house. Take-aways are restricted during the week; seniors make good use of own kitchen facilities especially after prep. At weekends, boarders can taste town life in Cirencester provided they are back on time. Flexi-boarding is popular with day pupils who like best of both worlds.

**Pastoral Care and Discipline:** All staff appear in school photo: from the head to the maintenance team (who run some sports activities as well as keeping the grounds beautiful). School succeeds at being inclusive. 'Any instances of bullying are dealt with impeccably,' said one parent. Real sense of caring abounds with a quarter of staff living on site. Seasoned house parents on hand for support as well as medical staff and part-time counsellor. Achievement, whether good results or a small kindness, rewarded by praise in assembly or commendation from the head. Rules enforced vigorously by deputy head. Smoking is forbidden but treated more as a problem than a crime. Sixth form 'cellar' club operates within law and serves food plus alcohol carefully regulated by senior staff. Rendcomb's experiment with independent living - via sixth form house in village where a single sex group of pupils lives for a week, manages a budget, cooks meals etc – has drawn national media interest.

**Pupils and Parents:** Low density of pupils of all ages on such a vast site makes for an unusually civilised atmosphere for a school. Pupils grow to be all-rounders; family feel (enhanced by growth of junior school) attractive to prospective parents. New uniform and sixth form dress

code 'will smarten pupils up' we were told. 'Not too much,' we hoped. Most boarders as well as day pupils come from within a thirty mile radius. Unexpected contingent (20+) of Americans from Fairford now part of special link with US defence department. Not swamped by overseas pupils: a few Chinese and German pupils and its annual quota of Japanese in third form only. Children are smiley, polite and quiet. Staff skilled at 'raising the bar' in all areas to avoid excessive cosiness. 'Rendcomb has found my daughter,' said one satisfied mother who was not at all put off by higher proportion of boys: 'relationships tend to be fraternal,' she concluded. Formerly a secluded bastion for farmers' sons and Services' children, now there are many more 'first-time buyers' discovering the school via much improved road link between Gloucester and Swindon. 'Many parents sacrifice holidays abroad to send their children here,' says head. Meaningful and well-established link with Lords Meade Vocational College in Uganda: school has been helped with whole range of projects with visits by ORs etc. – opening privileged eyes to need in developing countries. Lively, glossy magazine splurges pupils' doings in colour photos across its 100 or so pages. Pupils really committed to greening the school across the board from recycling to tree planting. Not many big names amongst alumni - jockey Richard Dunwoody is best known.

**Entrance:** Selection by own examination at 11 and/or common entrance at 13. Interview, report and GCSE grades at 16. Majority from own junior school though good numbers from Prior Park and other local preps at 13. School considers each application on individual basis. Not solely concerned with exam aptitude but also ability to try hard and function as part of a team.

**Exit:** Most get into university of choice across HE spectrum – art, acting as well as academic subjects. Generally one a year to Oxbridge.

**Money Matters:** Good value, particularly boarding. Almost everything included in price. Individual music tuition extra but ensemble lessons free. EFL teaching and learning support are charged to parents. Generous academic, choral, music and art scholarships on offer. Bursaries supported by Wills family and Dulverton Trust, plus Noel Wills full bursary annually to one local state primary pupil.

**Remarks:** Developing the junior school has brought real benefits: numbers have risen overall and the interaction between older and younger pupils seals the family atmosphere. Never an academic hothouse, Rendcomb offers a complete education whilst ensuring that pupils achieve their best academically. A good place to make friends for life.