

School life

Old Buckenham Hall, Suffolk

Co-ed, day and boarding

'OBH' promises an education that blends 'Swallows and Amazons with the iPad' and the setting—80 acres with woodland to explore, a cycle track and a lake—certainly lends itself to that creed at this often-garlanded school. The OBE (Old Buckenham Explorers) programme breaks down into skills (first aid, map-reading), physical and community. There's a notable emphasis on food policy: a three-course lunch always includes homemade soup.

Parsons Green, London SW6

Co-ed, day

Every week, the children at this oasis on the Fulham Park Road are posed a 'Thinking Friday' question, with responses stuck on a board. It's part of Philosophy for Children (P4C), which is taught throughout the school; mindfulness sessions have been introduced this term. Another distinctive feature is that chess is part of the school day for Years 3 to 6 (there's a Chessings club for Years 1 and 2, too)—pupils learn algebraic notation to record moves. STEM subjects are also prominent and there are lots of clubs, such as ballet and fencing.

They have their quirks and languages, which is a lovely thing for a child to hang on to,

The Pilgrims' School, Hampshire

All boys, day and boarding

A Pilgrim can be an artist or an actor, a sailor or a quizzier, a chess player or a karate kid, according to outgoing headmaster Tom



Burdon, but whatever the interest, he will be immersed in it. Certainly, most pupils are musical; the school, which enjoys an atmospheric, Roman-medieval setting in the cathedral close (the Pilgrims' Hall is a major tourist attraction), supplies choristers for Winchester Cathedral and Winchester College, all of whom board and are on a 40% bursary. After-school activities, which are known as Commoners, include Winchester Fives, fishing and pasta-making.

Walhampton, Hampshire

Co-ed, day and boarding (weekly and flexi)

Many prep-school surroundings are spectacular, but Walhampton has an edge: a coastal setting in 100 acres on the edge of the New Forest where imagination can take flight. There are lakes, ponies, bees, swans, sailing and kayaking, a shepherd's hut, the Faraway Tree and Curly Wurlly Mountain, plus enough space to host athletics championships. The Walhampton Express—a minibus service to the Brockenhurst-London Waterloo train—makes it handy for city-based weekly boarders, too.

Windleham House, West Sussex

Co-ed, day and boarding

Windleham is one of the oldest prep schools, founded in 1837 on the Isle of Wight; it was the first to admit girls, in 1967, and

unusually, has no uniform. Its 19th-century headmaster Henry Maldon was one of the architects of today's football rules and its chapel, which was originally doomed for demolition in Oxford, has moved with the school in all its incarnations. Today's setting is a delight, in a Queen Anne house amid 65 acres on the South Downs. Windlesham aims to be the antidote to urban hot-housing, yet still boasts academic excellence and myriad extra-curricular activities, such as clay-pigeon shooting, polo and textiles. It has a strong ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) department.

Woodcote House, Surrey

All boys, day and boarding

The *Good Schools Guide* describes this most charming of preps as a 'dying breed—the thriving family-owned school', 'idiosyncratic' and 'unapologetically focused on doing its own thing'. Its success and singularity lies in its manageable size (about 100 pupils) and the unfussy, homely atmosphere that produces first-class results. There are many dogs and sometimes pigs and chickens; its 30 wooded acres has an Elephants' Graveyard and a rope assault course, an outdoor wood-fired oven for cooking pizzas and a dungeon. Boarders can use Skype, but must still write a proper weekly letter home. Boys in the senior boarding house, Dominies, can cook Sunday breakfast and watch Sky Sports. 🐾

