

Family run prep schools may summon up an image of days of yore but in fact their values, emphasis on the child, wellbeing and the holistic education they have long championed ensure they are very much in the vanguard of the latest educational thinking.

Whether they remain true to their original status, have become a trust or expanded, it is clear that a central philosophy at their core drove their foundation and still sets them apart.

Parsons Green Prep in south-west London was set up by Proprietor Lucinda Waring in 2001. Its Head, Dr Pamela Edmonds, says the school's origins imbue it with 'an enduring sense of family values' which appeals to parents.

'This is a very family orientated school,' says Edmonds. 'There is an absolute focus on the school's values which is important to parents and children.'

She adds: 'The school has a family feel because it is run by someone who does what she thinks is best for the children. Parents appreciate this ethos.'

With 140 pupils, almost all local, Edmonds says that sensibility extends into the strength of the parent body. 'We are small enough to be tailored to our cohort which is really important but large enough to get that wonderful interaction.'

A similar philosophy drove the proprietor of the Gardener Schools Group, Maria Gardener, to launch the group's first school – Ravenscourt Park Prep in west London – back in 1991.

A dedicated teacher who started private tuition lessons with her husband, Edward, to make extra money, she soon hired a church hall as their popularity grew.

Gardener says: 'Parents were desperate for me to start a school. There was such a need because our philosophy was so different to what was on offer. In the old days, you delivered your child to the school door and, if you wanted to see a teacher, you had to make an appointment. I believed in parents working in partnership with us, coming in to see the teacher and coming in to see me.'

She also firmly believed creative subjects were the most important for a child's development.

Her second prep school, Kew Green Prep, was launched in 2004 and today the group also has two secondary schools, Kew House and Maida Vale, plus a new nursery.

But Gardener remains at the heart of the group and is as driven today by her desire to place children at the centre of education, a philosophy which has now become mainstream.

'I have always had the same ethos – education should be designed around your children. For me, creative subjects like drama and music also should have the same respect in schools as other subjects.'

At Kew Green, Headteacher Sasha Davies endorses that vision. 'At the heart of this school is that family feel. Maria champions the fact that the child is an individual.'

'We want the best for the children and you can feel the energy here. Our parents are investing in this school because we have that tailored approach and knowledge.'

Over at Ravenscourt Park, Head Carl Howes, says Gardener's ethos has remained strong with the school maintaining its open door policy and being non-selective. Howes says: 'Lots of schools say they have got it but we had it from the early '90s. We are keen to let the parents over the threshold, not just keep them at the school gate.'

'I am on the gate every morning so, if there ever is an issue, we have had a huge amount of common time. The parents know you and hopefully trust you.'

Encouraging core values and reassuring parents



Sunningdale School, Berkshire



Kew Green Prep Headteacher, Sasha Davies with Reception class children



Parsons Green Prep School, London



Pupils at Cottesmore School enjoying time with the dogs



Thomas's School pupils rowing

that their children are part of a wider family is also a vital part of life at all-boys' Sunningdale School in Berkshire.

Education runs in the blood at this boarding prep where Tom Dawson, who took over the headship in 2005, is proudly following in the steps of his father and late uncle, who bought the school in 1967.

Alongside Dawson is his wife Elisabeth who teaches French at the school. One of Dawson's three sisters also works at Sunningdale as Head of Boarding and Head of Art.

He believes that 'having a family feeling around the school' builds trust with parents and that, although parents may not originally come to the school because it is family run, it soon resonates with them.

'Prospective parents may come and see us without necessarily knowing a whole load about us,' Dawson explains, 'and certainly not knowing how it feels – and they can walk around and get a sense of that.'

'There are only 110 boys so there is an incredible sense of togetherness and community and a strong sense of family; the feedback we get from parents is that they really do love that. Their child is treated as an individual and we look after them as if they were part of the family.'

Dawson points out: 'We did some market research about four to five years ago and we found that, for parents, the biggest thing about the school was family.'

'For me, the advantage of a family run school is the personal touch. This is our home. This is our business. This is what we do.'

Thomas's in London was also started with a vision which Ben Thomas, Principal of Thomas's London Day Schools, says is still at the heart of the school group, which now has more than 2,000 pupils across its schools at prep and senior level.

His actress mother, Joanna, and father, former Gurkha officer, David, founded what would become the first prep in the group in 1971.

What was a small playgroup in a church hall grew into their first school, explains Thomas. 'They had no educational background but were largely driven by their own experience of schools in London in the 1970s. They found education very dry and very much reading, writing and arithmetic, and single sex.'

'Mum thought there should be a lot more music, drama and art in the curriculum and Dad wanted there to be lots more sport.'

He adds: 'Their original vision remains the same. To this day we still talk about a strong set of values, a broad curriculum and academic success.'

The school is now 'a second generation family business' with external investment but Thomas is adamant the group has not lost 'the family philosophy that people still value in the schools'.

At 210-pupil co-ed Cottesmore School in West Sussex, Head Tom Rogerson is proud of the school's family heritage. Despite a burning desire to be a rock star while at Eton, Rogerson 'always knew he would be a teacher'.

His grandfather Michael bought the school in 1939 and it has passed through the generations. His wife, Charlotte, is currently Principal of the Pre-Prep and Registrar.

To Rogerson, a family run prep is 'everything and nothing' but its strength is in what it brings to the pupils.

'It's all about the children and what they are getting. I think parents also feel very warmly towards the idea but, while they may not become because of it, when they find out about it – they love that continuity and that thread through time.'

Rogerson, who has hit the headlines for Cottesmore's focus on technology, believes the strength of the traditions of the past enable the focus on the future.

'I am forward thinking and like to shine a light on the future and where we are going. I am happy to