

For some boys, Common Entrance is an insurmountable obstacle.

SANDY MITCHELL discovers an extraordinary school that makes them think otherwise.



HE scene is a huge oak-panelled dining room bathed in the warm yellow light of many candles. Schoolboys of nine or 10 years of age in grey shorts, blazers and striped ties are noisily scoffing down supper, as a few slightly older pupils weave carefully among the packed refectory tables with bottles of claret in hand, ensuring the glasses of teachers and visiting parents are brimful.

Suddenly, a man in a black T-shirt—the school chef—strides in. 'Look out, boys,' he shouts above the din. 'There may be lead shot in your pheasant. It could break your teeth. But this is the last of the season's game, so enjoy it.'

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However, what really sets Bruern Abbey apart from traditional prep schools in the south of England is not the astonishing quality of the meals at these splendid weekly formal dinners (this writer leapt at seconds of pheasant pie), but the pupils themselves and the teaching they receive. All the children here have learning difficulties, such as dyslexia or dyspraxia and, simply put, that means many new boys joining the school at eight or nine years old cannot read or write. Yet the school aims to prepare them to sit Common Entrance by the age of 13, so they can then join mainstream public schools such as Stowe, Harrow or Winchester. The Abbey claims to be the only prep school of its kind in Britain.

'When boys arrive, their self-esteem is in pieces. If they have been at a traditional school where form rankings are read out every week and they are 14th

out of 14 again and again, it has an effect. So, first of all, you have to build up their confidence,' says Sterling Stover, the school's founder, over tea and cucumber sandwiches in another spacious oak-panelled room of the school, a somewhat austere 18th-century country house outside Bicester.

Often, he adds, it is not only the new boys' nerves that need steadying. 'You have certain fathers who have had plans for their son since conception: Eton, then maybe Oxford or Harvard, and he will float his first company by the age of 25. They have it all mapped out. And once it is announced that his son is dyslexic, he has trouble coping. His perfect

son is no longer perfect. Mothers, on the other hand, get on the internet and they become mini experts. So we have had the situation where the father almost cannot get out of the car when he drives up here the first time. And one has to deal with that self-esteem, and to assure the father that it is a normal school.'

Bruern's goal is exactly that: normality. So children are taught a curriculum identical towards the top of the school with any other establishment hoping to squeeze its pupils through the sieve of Common Entrance, and the boys compete in team matches on equal terms with all the top local preps such as Summer Fields or the Dragon.

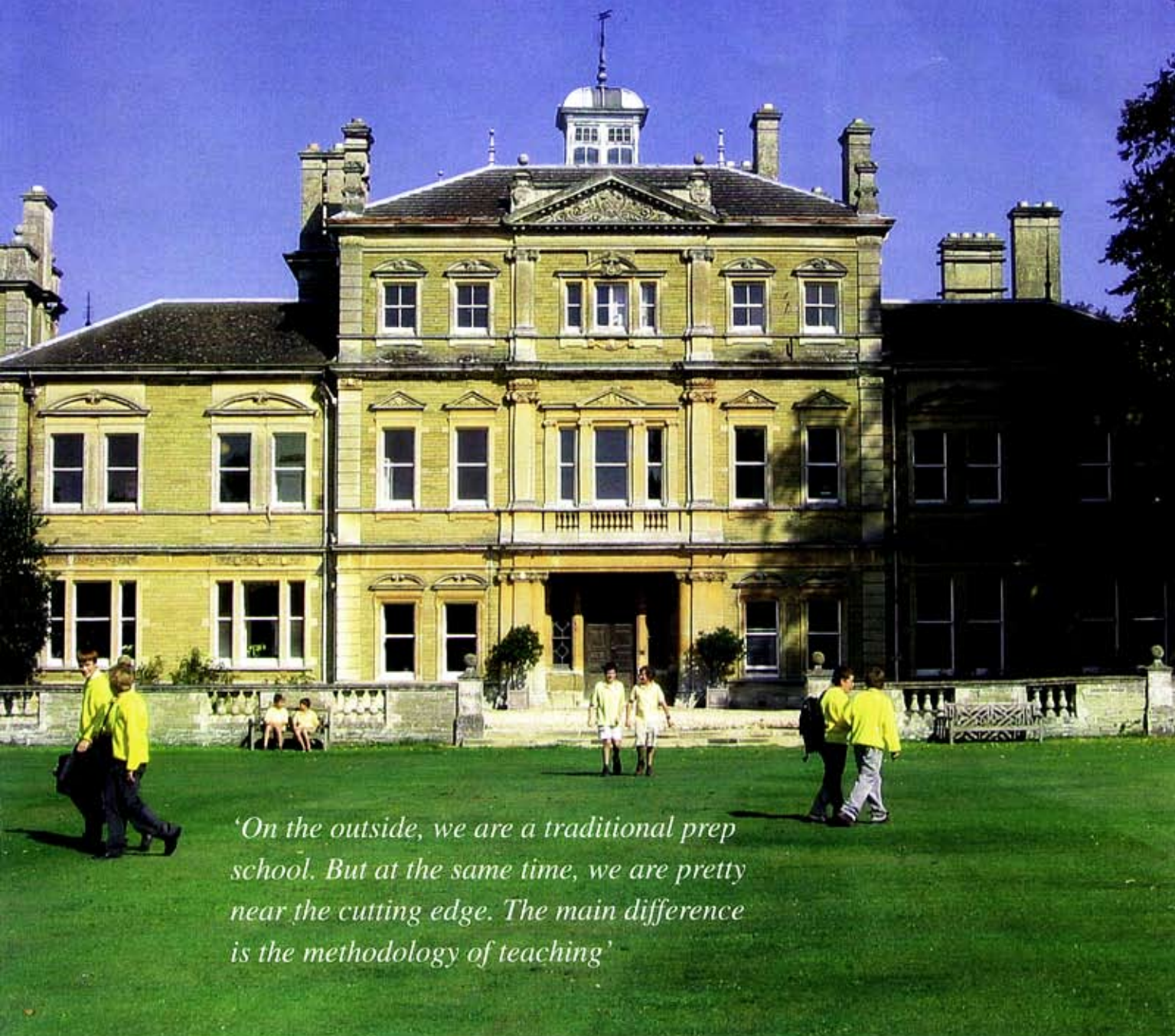
The ebullient headmaster, Philip Fawkes, leads me on a tour of classrooms where lessons are in progress. Boys in their daytime uniform of bright yellow sweatshirts spring instantly to their feet the moment the headmaster's toe crosses the threshold. 'On the outside, we are a totally traditional prep school,' explains Mr Fawkes, who could have been

dressed by a theatrical props department to play the traditional prep-school head, in his MCC tie, blazer and half-moon spectacles. 'But at the same time, we are pretty near the cutting edge. The main difference is the methodology of teaching. We use every possible technique to help boys engage and understand. So, as well as one-to-one tutoring with highly trained special-needs tutors, we make heavy use of computers.' All the classrooms are wi-fi wired, enabling the boys to connect to the internet instantly on the laptops they carry with them from lesson to lesson, and on which they are taught touch typing. The school has even gained special permission for its pupils to take Common Entrance exams on computers.

In one classroom, in a converted Cotswold-stone outbuilding, the students appear to be doing nothing more than playing a game of bingo, but Mr Fawkes quietly points out that their bingo boards are somewhat unusual: they are marked with combinations of letters to teach the students to hear phonics accurately.

With class sizes limited to 10, and the school to a maximum capacity of 70 pupils, fees are inevitably steep, although not all parents feel the pinch too badly judging by a boy we encounter on the classroom tour. His arm is in plaster, and he explains that he broke it when he fell from the windscreen of his father's airplane while helping to clean it.

So how effective are the school's methods? Consistent success in placing boys at mainstream public schools is one measure. But there is more striking evidence on view at a rehearsal for the school play (written, produced and directed by a certain P. Fawkes). Boys dressed in an hilarious array of jodhpurs, tights and khaki uniforms give performances that are so confident, word-perfect and riotously haphazard, that it was utterly impossible to tell these children had ever been



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Bruern Abbey School limits the number of pupils to 70 boys, ensuring concentrated one-on-one tutoring and attention

marked down as 'different' from those at mainstream schools.

Then it is on to evening chapel, held in a beautiful renovated stone barn. Here, two senior boys read lessons from the pulpit with no hint of a struggle, and the small choir leads the school in faultlessly warbled renditions of *I Vow to Thee, My Country* and *He Who Would Valiant Be*.

It is only afterwards that the headmaster points out in a private aside that the boys' hymnbooks have enlarged text to make them easier to read. 'And did you notice how the organist played a whole verse through before the boys started singing? That's so they can all really get the tune,' he adds.


A Bruern old boy named Leo Geddes, now in his mid twenties, took the trouble

to travel down from his office in London to meet me to pay tribute to the schooling he had been given at the Abbey. 'Before coming to the school, I was a day boy in London and very dyslexic. My behaviour suffered. I really didn't enjoy it,' he recalled.

Then I came down here and I remember the initial feeling of being so free. There wasn't the same pressure of work, and we were given the one-to-one attention that a lot of boys were craving, both educationally and emotionally. That was brilliant.' This would have been an impressive testimony coming from any grown-up old boy, but Mr Geddes is one of the bright sparks at the Foreign Office, which he joined after going on

to Eton and taking top degrees at Oxford and Cambridge.

On to dinner in the glowing dining room, where conversation at our table begins with a discussion of the headmaster's sermon in chapel, based on the theme that 'there's more in you than you know'. Mr Geddes proposes this should be adapted to make a new school motto: 'There's more in you than others see'.

At that moment, a boy of 11 or 12 years of age with dark hair and light freckles, who has been almost silent until then, puts down his fork on his plate. 'No,' he said firmly. 'It should be: "I am not a moron."' 

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