

# MEET THE HEAD

*Bridget Galton enjoys a tour of Sarum Hall where Victoria Savage took over as headteacher in September*

Step through the doors of Sarum Hall and you are greeted by the school motto; Security Happiness, Success.

It's a modern mantra for a forward-looking Prep school that is equipping pupils with the resilience and "moral compass" to achieve a bright future.

Despite being founded in 1929, the school on leafy Eton Avenue, is housed in a very modern building, all wide, airy corridors and hot pink walls.

Gorgeous smells are drifting up from the food tech kitchen, there's a lively music lesson on the go, and signs advertise "meat free Mondays" and a "Rebel Girls Club".

A quick tour takes in a comfortable library, an enviable science lab, and a playground with sports courts and a fun-looking climbing frame with slide.

Headteacher Victoria Savage has only been at the helm of the 184-pupil school since September, but while "keeping the essence but managing progress" she's already made a few changes.

Among the first was the admissions policy: removing the catchment criteria and reinforcing a straightforward ballot with preference to siblings or parents who are ex pupils.

"We are truly non-selective. To be true to the school's philosophy of Education for All, of developing an education for each individual pupil, every child should come here with an equal opportunity."

A Royal Academy-trained pianist, Savage taught music at Garden House in Chelsea and The Dragon in Oxford, before becoming deputy head at Newland House School in Twickenham.

"I've always wanted to run my own school," she says.

"It's exciting to be able to steer things in a direction that matches your vision for the future, to lead a school forward."

She adds: "I have always prided myself on being very organised and efficient, sometimes you can be frustrated by an infrastructure if you are not leading it – if parents raise something I believe in quickly responding back so they know they have been heard."

She adds swiftly that the previous head left things "in brilliant shape."

"What's going on is already good, but



Victoria Savage with some of her 184 pupils at Sarum Hall in Eton Avenue, Belsize Park.

equally the school is ready for change and has the flexibility and willingness to move forward, to respond to changes in education and to the needs of the children."

That includes extending girls' horizons about careers and giving them a set of skills across a variety of subjects.

"I want to make them feel they can do whatever they like, if they work hard – you still have to have that work ethic, but it's vital to provide them with opportunities to explore everything – to try dance, music and art along with STEM and Design Technology so they think that a whole range of careers are the norm."

In March, pupils are coming off timetable to celebrate the achievements of women around the world – Savage is hoping a few inspirational working mums can take part.

Elsewhere, Year 6 have been building fairground rides using knowledge of electrons, an opera singer performed at a recent assembly and there are plans for debating and fencing competitions.

Savage is realistic that she is preparing the girls to feed into local senior schools and says the "scaffolding of the curriculum allows for a natural academic progress".

"While all the evidence points to girls' accelerated learning in a single sex environment, sometimes they can be

afraid to try something new or give up if they don't get the right answer."

Cross curricular teaching and spice challenges – where pupils choose hot medium or mild tests – place the emphasis on problem solving. "If they don't get the right answer they have to work it out."

As for the whole child; yoga and nutrition are taught from nursery upwards, and instead of a school nurse there's a "health and wellbeing coordinator" to look after pupils' every need – from anxiety to a scraped knee.

"External pressures on children have increased since my childhood," says Savage. "We encourage open discussion to get them to talk and share their problems."

Asked how she wants children to leave the school, she says: "A happy child with a strong moral compass who is able to excel in whatever area they choose."

"A huge part of their education is their place in the world, it's more important than ever to teach them strong citizenship, their responsibility for their community and their planet."

Every morning Savage greets pupils at the door to welcome them into the school.

She adds: "Our staff work so hard so that every day, children want to come in and learn and see their friends. If I had to choose a punchline, it would be to give them an all consuming love of learning." ■