

FULL REPORT
ROEDEAN JUNIOR SCHOOL, BRIGHTON
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Our View

St Mary's Hall Junior School was newly built in 2006 across the drive from its long-established and now sadly missed senior school. Its inception was a sound move – build a feeder for the senior school – a bright, cleverly-designed modern pre-prep and prep – just what was needed. Sadly, whereas the junior school got off to a promising start, the senior school derived less benefit than had been hoped and numbers continued to slide.

The crunching of credit, the resurgence of Brighton College, the current delusion that it is more 'natural' to educate senior boys and girls together – whatever the evidence – all contributed to its demise. Hence the approach to Roedean and the proposed 'merger' in early 2009.

What remains is a re-energised Roedean which has acquired not only several St Mary's girls throughout the senior school but also, for the first time in its history, its own, purpose-built brand new junior school in the heart of Kemp Town. If you could fly over the top of St Mary's Hall you could see Roedean proper perched on its cliff – it's that close – about 4 minutes by car.

The junior school is one road up from the Brighton promenade, cool in the leafiest, quietest and most desirable bit of Brighton – an anchor's toss from the marina and fifteen minutes stroll to the pier. Roedean has also been left with, of course, the sorry husk that was the St Mary's Senior School and much discussion over how best – and when – to use it.

The Roedean Junior School is co-ed. It is an imaginative building on two floors. The nursery has its own separate entrance into a big light room – windows on three sides – and full of activities which made you want to be 3. It has its own outside space with a soft surface next to the main school playground. There is an inviting infants' library exhibiting, when we visited, an intriguing collection of musical instruments – maracas, tambourines, slide whistles and bells.

Reception similarly engaging with a 'word wall' showing new words in big blots – liked that. Also on the ground floor, years 1 and 2 – all in good, spacious accommodation with – so important – really nice loos.

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On the first floor, years 3-6 enjoy much architectural ingenuity with a super slanting ceiling and porthole for year 4s and an imaginative window onto the hall below – a good hall full of really good singing when we dropped in. Children here – well, their head was a professional – clearly really encouraged to sing out here – hooray! The choir was preparing for a tour of Bruges! An excellent music room.

Everyone learns a series of instruments here – by year 5 and 6 all are given free lessons – and instrument loan of violin or cello. DT is taught with an emphasis on learning skills – we loved the little slippers and were impressed by clever designs for chairs. Jolly nice art room though unnaturally tidy, we felt – and we liked the papier mache Roman bowls made by year 3 and year 6's Clarice Cliff-style teapots, inspired by a visit to Charleston, along with the comical 'junk' pictures made by year 5.

Very good library in unusually shaped room – dealing with a leaky ceiling when we visited – with 13 PCs, books and tables – not over-supplied with books but each classroom has its own store too. Lively teaching here.

Inspirational teaching evident, too, in year 6's work on WWII evacuation – children were writing evacuees' letters home and, even more imaginatively, letters from those who had taken in evacuees complaining about their charges! Excellent displays derived from teacher's own collection – gas masks, wartime radio, ration book, old money etc, making it all very real. High teacher:pupil ratio plus lots of classroom assistants.

Unlike the senior school the junior school is modern and can accommodate children with physical special needs – lift and so on. SENCo is in school 3 days weekly and runs diagnostic tests on anyone thought not to be thriving – close collaboration with parents. School has those with various dys's, mild sensory problems, wheelchairs. In class support and one-to-one – chargeable separately – but all children have their own IEPs, reviewed termly.

Outside is a good field; Mr May has upped the amount of sport done by all – at least an hour a day for years 3-6. PE mostly done in the hall but, of course, Roedean's sports facilities and specialist coaches now used by juniors. That and the access to the Roedean theatre and so on adds enormously to what the junior school can offer to its pupils and parents.

It's a good little school and it opens door to a good notable one. It is a gift if you are of the impoverished clergy. Worth getting ordained for.

Head

Since April 2007, Mr Huw May LRWCMD ADRWCMD PGCE MA Ed NPQH (fortyish, apparently, but we'd have guessed ten years younger). Those lengthy qualifications derive from The Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama where Mr May spent his student days studying singing. He began professional life as a counter tenor in Cardiff and fell into education – 'it was the last thing I wanted to do' – as a result of being asked to do a little singing teaching – 'then I really got into it'.

Disarming, engaging, entertaining, Mr May is an enthusiast. 'It was making a difference that I really liked. I had that feeling of, my god, they didn't know that ten minutes ago and now they do!'

He was appointed to the headship of the pre prep at St Aubyn's in Rottingdean in 2001 and went to St Mary's Hall as head of the junior school in all innocence six years on. Now, with smiling incredulity, he finds himself head of the new Roedean Junior School – a somewhat different prospect.

It was a measure of his impact on St Mary's and his popularity therein that there was never any question over his coming to Roedean, as part of the package, so to speak. When the news of the 'merger' with Roedean came he knew that, unlike the St Mary's Senior School, he and his school had 'dodged a bullet'. He is clearly energised by the challenge and the opportunity the 'merger' presents. 'I'm building a community.

The parents are a huge part of what goes on – making it more than just a school – much more a family in which we all contribute to the buzz of the place.' This approach makes Mr May the ideal man for the job – the job being to fashion a junior school to be reckoned with – a feeder for Roedean, of course, but a stunningly good little prep in its own right and one which this most attractive of Brighton 'suburbs' should take to its heart.

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Entrance

Taster days for nursery and Reception and teacher observation and 'assessment' as much as you can assess at this age. From year 1, non-verbal and verbal reasoning tests, taster day and assessments of their ability to socialise. Second taster day for those who impress on the first one. Reports from current school.

Previously, first come first served at St Mary's Hall. Mr May changed that even before Roedean loomed. At the time of writing, there are still spaces at each level, though a recent Open Day was packed out. Get Max in now and he'll be well prepared for whatever feels right when he's 11. Get Lily in now and you can relax till she's 18.

Exit

The hope is that all girls will go up the road and along the cliff to the Big Sister – of which, of course, by then they will have no fear as much PE, drama etc will have been done there for years.

Mr May is adamant that 'preferential treatment' has been agreed so that even if Lily performs poorly on the day of the entrance tests, he has leave to speak on her behalf to the senior branch. Those thought unlikely to thrive in an academic senior school will be warned well before and pointed at less demanding senior schools.

Boys will leave at 11 for wherever best suits them. Brighton College is the nearest and arguably the best local co-ed. Others likely to travel to Eastbourne College, Lancing or St Bede's.

For more information about Roedean Junior School go to:

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