

EDUCATION: School with a chapel and Aga

Pat Ashworth sees the Woodard influence at first hand



Ethos: the Revd Michael Price talks to a student at Bloxham. About half choose to be confirmed PAT ASHWORTH

IT IS entrance-exam day for 11-year-old hopefuls at Bloxham School. Small figures emerge at lunchtime, wielding their trays with unfamiliarity in the school's self-service cafeteria. If they get in, they will begin a school journey that Bloxham's headmaster, Mark Allbrook, likens to a gently flowing stream rather than the torrent of an academic hothouse. Most of Bloxham's 420 pupils will take A levels and go on to university, and the exam results are good: 97 per cent A-C grades at GCSE, and a 98.5 pass-rate at A level.

But in a school that Mr Allbrook describes as 'mildly selective' it is the holistic approach to education that is paramount. We're not seeking just to get boys and girls to pass their exams, but to provide a whole lot more that adds value- and values - to their lives as they move on from here, he says.

Half the pupils are boarders, and, perhaps surprisingly, most come from the north Oxfordshire area where the school is located. There are 35 boarders from overseas. Fees for senior boarders are £24,000 a year.

For professional parents who are both working, weekly boarding helps to create a stable family life. For the children themselves, it is a case of "the older they get, the more they board," Mr Allbrook says. They're going through adolescence; they want to be with their friends; so their reasons for doing it are largely social. Everything is here for them on this site. The day starts at 8.45 a.m., and doesn't really wind up until nine at night, with things going on all the time. They don't want to miss out..

Boarding acts as a staging post between school and university. Day-pupils have a base to which they can retreat, comfortable common-rooms shared with the boarders, and a bed if they should need to stay. There is no overseas boarding house, a deliberate decision to encourage English-speaking and to avoid establishing enclaves. The ratio of overseas boarders is capped at ten per cent.

Younger pupils stay in a cosy boarding house with bedtime toast from the Aga, a family dog called Barkeley, and what Nick & Nuala Irvine, houseparents for 27 years, describes as 'a chance to be children'.

The school is in a conservation village near Banbury. The mellow stonework of the original buildings has been replicated in new facilities such as the state-of-the-art Vallance Library. The 420 pupils are supported by 50 teachers, and by double that number of ancillary and maintenance staff.

THE Christian ethos underpins it all. Many parents choose the school because it is Church of England, and great respect is given to the ministry of the full-time chaplain, the Revd Michael Price, who is also head of RE. His background in inner-city and UPA parishes in Salford, Manchester, and

Dudley gives him a position in this traditionally liberal Catholic school to do the “niggling away” at the questions of ethics that pupils are encouraged to think about.

Every lunchtime, in the first-floor chapel, he takes a weekly ‘Pause for Thought’ session for each year-group. “It pushes them to think. They’re not answering back in that sort of form, but have five or ten minutes of quiet sitting in the chapel using meditation techniques so that they can actually reflect on something.”

The eucharist is celebrated twice weekly, once for the seniors and once for the juniors. About half the pupils opt to be confirmed during their school life, but Fr Michael, as he is known, will not encourage anyone to be confirmed if it is their parents’ choice: it has to be at the request of the pupil.

“The strange thing is that lots of them have come forward for confirmation,” he says. “I think it’s about the whole ethos of the place, and how they see Christianity as a central, vital cog of an entire lifestyle.

They see the institution as completely driven by this. And so they feel confirmation is a sort of inherent and intelligent response to the way they’re living, rather than an add-on to their life.”

Woodard’s boarding schools all have full-time chaplains, and see that as their most defining quality, “‘The glue that holds it all together’, Mr Allbrook says.

“It’s the sort of school where if you come and see the chaplain, that’s not weird, as in some places it would be,” says Fr Michael. “Here, it’s just an accepted part of life. Equally, people will come and sit in the chapel on their own and have a think, and there’s no stigma about it.”

The Christian ethos manifests itself in other ways, too: a peer-listeners scheme for sixth-formers uses an outside training organisation, and is always over-subscribed. “They are trained to be an ear for those not having a particularly happy time, or having problems at home. They all want to do it, and they take it seriously. We have 12 a year, and this time there were four applicants for every place,” Mr Allbrook says.

THERE is no complacency here: financial pressures on parents will certainly increase during a recession, although the schools have a good track record of helping out when a parent falls into difficulties. The independent schools acknowledge that there is some way to go before it is not clear how the Charity Commission’s new rules on public benefit are going to be interpreted, but Woodard believes its schools satisfy the conditions.

Bloxham benefits from being part of the Woodard family, in Mr Allbrook’s view. “We all feel that Woodard, the biggest educational charity in the country, hasn’t really had a voice yet throughout its existence because it is so disparate. But talented people at the centre are now beginning to evangelise about it, and it’s becoming a kitemark.”

The joint prefects’ training-courses, Oxbridge master-classes, heads’ conferences, and chaplains’ conferences, plus ‘a lot of advice and sharing of good practice’ are proving mutually beneficial both to the owned schools and to the affiliates.

When pupils from different Woodard schools mingle at events such as a concert performance at Birmingham Symphony Hall in 2008, any barriers are broken down. “If you take the pupils out of context, and put them together with something in common, you can’t tell them apart,” Mr Allbrook says.