

State Secondary School of the Year: Wilson's School, Wallington

Founded by the Crown in 1615 and now an academy, consistently high levels of attainment and a warm, inclusive ethos win Wilson's School in Wallington our title of Sunday Times State Secondary School of the Year. By Zoe Thomas



Leading the way: since 2013, Wilson's has ranked outside of our top five state secondaries just the once PETER TARRY/THE SUNDAY TIMES

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'I can spot mischief a mile off,' says Nathan Cole, headmaster of Wilson's School in Wallington, Surrey, as he pokes his head out of his office window to check on some boys walking between lessons. He need not worry. The pupils at this 1,200-strong boys' grammar on the outskirts of south London not only produce extraordinary exam results, they keep their top shirt buttons smartly fastened and stick to a polite decibel level, books under their arms.

Wilson's was founded at a point in English history when only the crown could establish a grammar school. King James I gave it her royal charter in 1615, making it one of the country's oldest state schools. It is also one of the most academically successful.

Since 2013, Wilson's has ranked outside of our top five state secondaries just the once. In third place this year, the school's highest ranking yet, it wins our Sunday Times State Secondary School of the Year award.

The school is ranked on its performance at A-level and GCSE, where results are simply outstanding. This summer's GCSE results saw boys record an 86% pass rate at A*/A or 9-7 overall: with 65.9% of all exams securing grades of A*, 9 or 8.

A-level results were even stronger: 96.8% of the exams taken by the outgoing upper sixth of 155 boys were graded A*-B – breaking down to 38.5% A*s, 42.4% As and 15.8% Bs. This year a record 31 boys received offers from Oxford and Cambridge universities, helped by individual coaching from subject teachers. "In the sixth form it just clicks and you see them leap," says Cole proudly.

With six-form entry in each year group, Wilson's is one of the largest grammars in the country, making the academic achievements of such large cohorts even more impressive. In years 7 and 8 boys are in classes of 32, allowing smaller class sizes from year 9 when exam teaching starts in earnest.

The 11-year-olds who join the school are a bright bunch, "probably in the top 15% in the ability range in the country". Cole estimates that Wilson's is more selective than a Kent grammar school. He is more interested, however, in the government's progress measures, which show that even from this strong base they make the highest level of academic improvement.

As for the secret formula for academic success, he reveals: "It's something really quite simple, not magical. It's very highly qualified and hard-working staff, who have great relationships with highly motivated and clever boys. And if you put those things together and you champion from the moment they walk in the door that their intelligence will get them so far but only hard work will take them the distance, that's how we get through."

Boys-only education nurtures a less self-conscious crowd, Cole believes. "To put it in simplistic terms, they stay younger for longer. And being happy and safe together is really important to me."



Entry to Wilson's begins with a first-stage eligibility test followed by a second-stage exam in English and maths PETER TARRY/THE SUNDAY TIMES

Wilson's offers an environment in which brainy boys can blossom. "We have a lot of potentially very shy, very vulnerable, very unusual children – quirky boys – who are allowed to continue being quirky. We have lots of boys who we know perform much better – and I mean in the widest sense of what that word means – for being surrounded by other boys that want the same."

When he meets parents for the first time, the head teacher tells them that while their son will have been lavished with praise for being clever at primary school, "he will never be praised for being clever here. To praise him for being clever would be like praising him for being male". Hard work and kindness are the attributes celebrated at Wilson's School. "And let's face it, if you're quite clever and you're a decent human being and you work hard, you're unstoppable."

Entry is hotly contested. The process begins with a first-stage eligibility test followed by a second-stage exam shared with nearby Sutton Grammar in English and maths. "Typically, 1,000 are taken through to the second stage, out of a pool of several thousand at stage one. It is worth remembering, however, that many of these children are applying for a range of schools," Cole explains.

Living nearest to Wilson's doesn't help anyone's application – curbing middle-class entitlement and local estate agency profits in one go. However, even without a defining catchment area, only between 2% and 4% of pupils qualify for free school meals in a typical year, compared with the national average of 12.4%. There are also boys from "exceptionally poor" families, the head points out.

Cole, 38, joined Wilson's as deputy head in 2006 from an Essex comprehensive, and is now in his fifth year in charge. Passionate, dedicated and a stickler for detail, he is also an inspiring A-level history teacher who gets five-star reviews on ratemyteachers.com and takes his turn on playground duty. He is the kind of head who knows how to twiddle the settings on the school boiler to shave heating costs and is a whizz at cross-funding, making the basic government allocation of £11.80 per pupil per day – less than the sum for comprehensive school children – go a long way.

"I'm not a mathematician by any stretch of the imagination but you have to be creative with the budget, instead of whining. I'd love more money but you've got to make it work. It's not the Second World War, the windows aren't falling out!" Families are invited to make a voluntary monthly contribution to boost the coffers and 70% pay what they can afford – from £5 to the suggested £60.

First established in Camberwell as Wilson's Grammar School, the move south to Wallington in 1975 avoided the then Inner London Education Authority's reclassification of grammars into comprehensive schools. The borough of Sutton was not only a haven of

continued 11-plus selective entry procedures but also offered ample space for purpose-built facilities and playing fields on the site of the former Croydon airport.

Every year group has a games afternoon and options are broad. Table tennis and badminton are strengths, alongside the traditional team sports of rugby, cricket and football. Wilson's boasts 12 all-weather rubber-crumb pitches, rented by Powerleague outside school hours for its five-a-side football business.

Drama productions are staged in the wood-panelled John Jenkins Hall, refurbished for the school's 400th anniversary in 2015. Wilson's boys play chess to a high level and every boy in year 7 learns a musical instrument for free, taking up a new one if they already play. They are taught in small groups, coming together as a whole year group band on Wednesday afternoons.



Sporting strengths include table tennis and badminton, alongside the traditional team sports of rugby, cricket and football PETER TARRY/THE SUNDAY TIMES

The combined cadet force was formed at the school in 1910 and remains hugely popular. Army and RAF cadets wear uniform to school for CCF activities on Tuesdays and a number of boys graduate to Sandhurst.

The mental health mantra "It's OK for boys not to be OK" is ingrained, and the school has a counsellor one day a week as well as a clinical psychologist once a month. Boys are encouraged to talk about things that are bothering them.

"That goes together with attitudes towards difference, and transphobia, homophobia, racism," says Cole. "I don't want anyone to just be tolerated here, who wants to be tolerated? I want everyone to be embraced for what they are, warts and all."

Ofsted last visited Wilson's in 2007, when inspectors remarked: "Students are articulate, responsible and polite and are a credit to the school and their parents. Their attendance is excellent and they enjoy coming to school because, as they remarked, 'School is fun. We meet friends and enjoy learning.'"

Of the teaching and learning provision they noted: "Teachers are passionate about their subject, demonstrate excellent subject knowledge, make very good use of the available resources and have very high expectations of students. They present students with real intellectual challenge that spurs them on."

The warmth from former pupils is palpable. Many have told Cole how the school provided a springboard to opportunity, beginning their anecdotes: "If it wasn't for Wilson's . . ." Cole says: "They feel so grateful to the place, because the kind of education that they got for free is phenomenal."

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