

State Secondary School of the Year – 2016/7 – Dame Alice Owen’s School!

Thanks to The Times/The Sunday Times for their permission to reproduce this article which appeared in their Parent Power Section of The Sunday Times on Sunday 27th November 2016, awarding us State Secondary School of the Year.



At Dame Alice Owen’s students learn to grab opportunities and get over setbacks! In and out of the classroom, Owen’s teaches pupils to not give up and to develop self-belief!

Every year on the last day of the summer term pupils at Dame Alice Owen’s School receive a small amount of “beer money”. The gift, usually spent on ice cream or chocolate, marks its long association with the Worshipful Company of Brewers which has supported the school for more than 400 years through the legacy of its founder.

In the mid-16th century, Alice Wilkes, a teenager out walking with a servant, was watching a cow being milked in a field outside the village of Islington. Alice wanted to try it herself, but as she stopped a stray arrow struck her hat. She was uninjured – and vowed that when she was rich enough she would do something of lasting value for others to show gratitude for her narrow escape. Fifty years later, in 1613, she was a rich woman, having been widowed three times by a brewer, a mercer and Judge Thomas Owen. Her servant reminded her of the vow and she established a school in Islington for 30 boys.

Today Dame Alice Owen’s School is a voluntary-aided, co-educational secondary in Potters Bar and proudly upholds other long-held traditions, from the wearing of carnations on prize-giving day to its outstanding record for academic excellence.

On average, 90% of students go on to higher education, two-thirds to Russell Group universities, including 14 to Oxbridge this year. The record is 30 in a single year.

"We have an incredibly hard-working, academically rigorous environment which encourages intellectual curiosity," says head Hannah Nemko, who took charge in September following the retirement of Dr Alan Davison after his 11-year tenure. She had been second-in-command for a year.

"The students are proud to be part of that and want to live up to the name that is Dame Alice Owen," adds Nemko. The school has 900 applications for 200 places each year with 10 students vying for every external place in the sixth form.

"It is a school where it is cooler to be seen revising at break time than it is to not do well in your test," says Nemko. "The students just rise to the challenges we set them. They aspire to do well for themselves and aspire to be the best they can be."

This summer, 82% of A-level papers achieved at least a B grade while more than half — 55% — gained an A* or A. Pupils put in a stellar performance at GCSE, with 68.6% of entries reaching the top two grades.

These results, propelling Dame Alice Owen's School into the top 40 AMC pse check from 58th position last year in our league table, are all the more impressive for the fact that the school is only partially selective.

Our State Secondary School of the Year selects just 65 pupils out of 200 year 7 places each year on academic ability and 10 on musical aptitude. In keeping with the school's founding principles, 10% of places are reserved for children from Islington. The remaining 62.5% comprise siblings and children from the catchment area.

Dame Alice Owen's, the first non-grammar school to win our award since Parent Power began in 1999, is comfortably ahead of the highest ranking fully comprehensive school.

"It does not matter how you got into the school," Nemko says. "We try to do the best by every single child. We have fantastic teachers. They feel the responsibility for every child in their class."

Most teaching is in mixed-ability classes, although within lessons tasks are differentiated so that students can be stretched while others can be supported.

The top 250 state secondary schools
Ranking based on 2016 examination results with A*-B grades at A-level double weighted

| 2016 rank | 2015 rank | School | Admissions | A-level A*-B (%) | GCSE A*/A (%) | 2016 rank | 2015 rank |
|-----------|-----------|---|---------------------|------------------|---------------|-----------|-----------|
| 1 | 2 | The Henrietta Barnett School, London | Selective | 95.9 | 96.1 | 126 | 91 |
| 2 | 1 | Queen Elizabeth's School, Barnet | Selective | 98.8 | 89.4 | 127 | 133 |
| 3 | 3 | The Tiffin Girls' School, Kingston upon Thames | Selective | 95.7 | 91.1 | 128 | 91 |
| 4 | 5= | Wilson's School, Wallington | Selective | 95.3 | 88.7 | 129 | 139 |
| 5 | 10= | Tonbridge Grammar School | Selective | 91.5 | 89.5 | 130 | 101= |
| 6 | 7 | St Olave's Grammar School, Orpington | Selective | 94.1 | 83.7 | 131 | 154 |
| 7 | 4 | Reading School | Selective | 89.7 | 90.4 | 132 | 138 |
| 8 | 15 | Kendrick School, Reading | Selective | 89.4 | 89.0 | 133 | 195 |
| 9 | 5= | Pate's Grammar School, Cheltenham | Selective | 90.4 | 86.9 | 134 | 119 |
| 10 | 9 | King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Boys, Birmingham | Selective | 88.2 | 89.6 | 135 | 110 |
| 11 | 10= | Altrincham Grammar School for Girls | Selective | 90.4 | 80.4 | 136 | |
| 12 | 14 | King Edward VI Grammar School, Chelmsford | Selective | 89.5 | 81.2 | 137 | 122 |
| 13 | 23 | Chelmsford County High School for Girls | Selective | 85.2 | 88.5 | 138 | 106 |
| 14 | 17 | The Latymer School, Edmonton, London | Selective | 87.8 | 82.0 | 139 | 145 |
| 15 | 34 | Nonsuch High School for Girls, Cheam | Selective | 87.0 | 82.9 | 140 | 158 |
| 16 | 28 | Colyton Grammar School | Selective | 90.1 | 75.8 | 141 | 127 |
| 17 | 26 | Dartford Grammar School | Selective | 91.1 | 73.4 | 142= | 152 |
| 18 | 13 | Colchester Royal Grammar School | Selective | 89.7 | 76.0 | 142= | 167= |
| 19 | 22 | King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Girls, Birmingham | Selective | 85.3 | 84.0 | 144 | 159 |
| 20 | 18 | Tiffin School, Kingston upon Thames | Selective | 87.3 | 80.0 | 145 | 108 |
| 21 | 8 | Colchester County High School for Girls | Selective | 82.9 | 87.6 | 146 | 140 |
| 22 | 19 | The Judd School, Tonbridge | Selective | 85.7 | 81.4 | 147 | 78 |
| 23 | 27 | Sutton Grammar School | Selective | 88.3 | 76.1 | 148 | 107 |
| 24 | 46= | Wallington High School for Girls | Selective | 84.1 | 81.5 | 149 | 157 |
| 25 | 12 | St Michael's RC Grammar School, Finchley, London | Selective | 81.2 | 85.3 | 150 | 185 |
| 26 | 30 | King Edward VI School, Stratford | Selective | 88.0 | 74.6 | 151= | 131 |
| 27 | 46= | The Skinners' School, Tunbridge Wells | Selective | 87.6 | 65.2 | 151= | 20 |
| 28 | 37= | Tunbridge Wells Girls' Grammar School | Selective | 80.7 | 78.9 | 153 | 13 |
| 29 | 25 | The Liverpool Blue Coat School | Selective | 80.7 | 77.9 | 154 | 15 |
| 30 | 54 | Sutton Coldfield Grammar School for Girls | Selective | 82.4 | 74.6 | 155= | 1 |
| 31 | 20 | Wallington County Grammar School | Selective | 83.6 | 71.7 | 155= | 1 |
| 32 | 24 | Dr Challoner's Grammar School, Amersham | Selective | 82.4 | 73.4 | 155= | 3 |
| 33 | 83 | Torquay Girls' Grammar School | Selective | 81.7 | 73.2 | 158 | 1 |
| 34 | 48 | Dr Challoner's High School, Little Chalfont | Selective | 81.7 | 73.0 | 159 | |
| 35 | 65 | King Edward VI Five Ways School, Birmingham | Selective | 80.0 | 74.5 | 160 | |
| 36 | 16 | Stratford Girls' Grammar School, Stratford-upon-Avon | Selective | 75.7 | 82.8 | 161 | |
| 37 | 32 | The Rochester Grammar School | Selective | 81.0 | 71.0 | 162 | |
| 38= | 58 | Dame Alice Owen's School, Potters Bar | Partially selective | 82.1 | 68.6 | 163 | |
| 38= | 44 | Rathmore Grammar School, Belfast | Selective | 84.5 | 63.7 | 164 | |
| 40 | 39 | Sir Thomas Rich's School, Gloucester | Selective | 81.3 | 68.0 | 165 | |
| 41 | 33 | South Wilts Grammar School for Girls, Salisbury | Selective | 76.8 | 76.8 | 165 | |
| 42 | 45 | Rugby High School | Selective | 74.8 | 79.9 | 166 | |
| 43 | 52 | Wolverhampton Girls' High School | Selective | 73.0 | 81.3 | 166 | |
| 44 | 42 | Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Knock, Belfast | Selective | 78.5 | 69.6 | 167 | |
| 45 | 35= | Sir William Borlase's Grammar School, Marlow | Selective | 77.8 | 70.6 | 167 | |
| 46 | 35= | King Edward VI Handsworth School, Birmingham | Selective | 79.1 | 67.1 | 167 | |

“We try to take the students from where they are and help them get better,” says Nemko who teaches maths to a group of students who find the subject challenging. Maths is set after year 7.

Experienced staff teach across the ability range while nurture groups, homework clubs and maths and English breakfast clubs help boost students’ confidence and skills. Enrichment activities — from visiting lecturers to maths and science competitions — also develop confidence and intellectual curiosity.

Ten places each year are reserved for children who demonstrate musical aptitude

Inspectors described Owen’s as “outstanding” in all areas in their report in 2009, praising the school for its “exceptional” commitment to the personal development of both students and staff.

In his letter to students, reporting inspector Brian Cartwright said: *“There is a buzz about the school because your hard work is rewarded, and nobody is left behind.”*

Offering opportunity for all, seeking excellence in everything, encouraging students to never stop learning and providing a supportive community is the Owen’s way.

It also applies to teachers, who are on their own journey to self- improvement. Staff work in learning communities to continuously develop themselves and each other and are also involved in development networks with other schools.

“They are always reading something new or sharing ideas,” says Nemko, former deputy head of Yavneh College in Borehamwood, which she helped establish in 2006. *“I knew what an exciting, forward-thinking educational environment it would be to work in,”* says the mother of two, who had been involved with the school through its Advanced Learning Alliance (<http://www.advancedlearningalliance.co.uk/>).

Owen’s, an academy and a specialist in languages, science and music, offers opportunities and facilities many other secondary schools can only envy.

The school opened on its current site in 1973, set in 34 acres of land, boasting its own lake and extensive playing fields. Recent additions to the estate include the Sir Alan Parker Building for drama, languages and learning support, opened last year by the film director and old Owenian. A new science block was unveiled by the fertility expert and Labour peer Lord Robert Winston in 2014, with funds partly raised by the school’s 400th anniversary appeal.

Each year Dame Alice Owen’s benefits from more than £900,000 in extra funding from the Worshipful Company of Brewers, which goes towards building projects, IT upgrades, keeping the enormous sports grounds in tip-top condition and funding support programmes and extracurricular enrichment.

Pupils represent the school at district, regional and national level in sport, which is an integral part of life at the school. There’s something for everyone with options ranging from football, rugby and netball to orienteering, athletics, and gymnastics.

Art, drama and music are also part of the rich learning experience. More than 300 students receive instrumental lessons in school, and extracurricular activities include four orchestras and bands, five

choirs, chamber music and an annual musical production. Earlier this month the school's senior strings opened the Music for Youth Proms at the Royal Albert Hall.

There are three drama productions a year and myriad clubs and societies including producing the school magazine, The Arrow, computing, debating and chess.

Opportunities such as these teach pupils about resilience, patience, focus, to be part of a team, that practice makes perfect, says Nemko. *"They can find what they are good at, and do what they are good at, and get better and better at what they are good at, because that helps improve their self-esteem and helps them become more confident and well rounded."*

In and out of the classroom, Owen's teaches pupils to not give up when the chips are down and to develop self-belief. Personal wellbeing and academic success are nurtured by a pastoral care system which includes form tutors, heads of student progress and assistant heads.

"We do lots around resilience," says Nemko. "To help a child grow into the best person they can be it is not just about their education, it is their attitude to themselves. We try our very best to prepare students for the real world, to be successful adults. What you need to be a successful adult is the capacity and ability to learn and to deal with setbacks."

Beyond the school gates, assorted trips locally and overseas add to the Owen's experience with opportunities to travel to destinations from Spain and Russia to China and Tanzania, where students visit a partner school and help the local community.

Pupils fondly remember their days at Owen's, as was evident in the turnout at the 400th birthday celebrations at the Royal Albert Hall, featuring performances from Old Owenians Gary Kemp, from Spandau Ballet, and former band member Steve Norman, young classical and jazz musician Tyler Rix, and soprano Susanna Hurrell.

Nemko is excited to be leading Dame Alice Owen's into the school's next chapter of life. *"I am fortunate to work with outstanding parents and students who are both interested and interesting; supportive trustees and governing body, and the most dedicated staff I have had the good fortune to work with,"* she says.

"I look forward to developing all that is good about Dame Alice Owen's: our unashamedly academic values, our pursuit of excellence in the arts, music and extracurricular opportunities and our emphasis on personal development, social skills and moral values to ensure that every child leaves being the best person that they can be."