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A CHANCE TO SHINE

At a boarding school in Surrey, lessons are not only for the sons and daughters of the wealthy but for also disadvantaged and vulnerable children. **Caroline Scott** meets the boarders who have been given a rare opportunity to improve their lot. Photographs by **Polly Braden**

It is 6.50am and alarms are going off across nine boarding houses at the Royal Alexandra & Albert School in Reigate, Surrey. For Sarah Bingham, the head of Rank-Weston Junior House, the next hour involves shepherding 55 sleepy little bodies from bed to bathroom and into 55 sets of pants and socks. By 8.10 the day children have arrived; they have been to the dining hall for breakfast – bacon, toast, non-sugary cereals – and Bingham is perched on a bookcase, conducting roll call: 'Bess!' 'Yes, Ma'am.' 'Tom!' 'Yes, Ma'am.' 'Poppy! Have you got your book folder? Then go and get it.' And to a tiny, crestfallen boy: 'Anmar, sweet pea, mummy's emailed about lots of things you've lost.'

The Royal Alexander & Albert School (Raas) is the largest of 35 state boarding schools in England and Wales – 400 of its 820 pupils are boarders – and the only one to take children as young as seven all the way through to 18. Tuition follows the national curriculum and is state-funded, with parents paying £3,995 a term, about the same as an independent day school, for boarding. (Marlborough College is £9,415 per term, Eton College £9,954 per term, Wellington College, £9,596 per term.) Day pupils arrive before breakfast,



and do not leave until after prep and supper in the evening, choosing from a raft of activities – horse-riding and swimming through to Chicken Club (venue: the chicken run) and Raas the Roof – run by the drama teacher for budding stand-up comics. It makes the school a popular choice for working parents, who pay £1,315 a term for the extended day. In the past 10 years, the head, Paul Spencer Ellis, has brought the school from special measures (38 per cent A-C GCSE pass rate in 2000) to outstanding; last year 80 per cent of children gained five GCSEs at A*-C. Impressive for a school that is not only non-selective, but that goes out of its way to seek out disadvantaged children who may benefit from the respite boarding can offer.

About 60 children, known as foundationers, come here free of charge, referred by primary school teachers and social workers, their fees paid by social services, or the school's own trust, topped up by a number of charities. Their identities are not widely known – many staff proceed on a 'need to know' basis – but foundationers form a core here, reflecting not only continuity (the school was once

an orphanage) but Spencer Ellis's own closely held beliefs. The son of a country vicar whose 'classic public school education' was paid for by a supportive head teacher, he is positively evangelical in his desire to inspire and cajole children who would not otherwise get a chance to excel.

The school itself consists of a series of purpose-built boarding houses and low-slung 1950s buildings, not quite disguised by clever planting, set inside Gatton Park, 260 acres of Capability Brown-designed parkland complete with a lake, serpentine and its own Palladian mansion. By day it is like any other school, except class sizes are small – about 25 – and discipline seems unusually tight.

Spencer Ellis, a voluble man in his early fifties, puts the school's previously dire results down to poor teaching and a lack of aspiration. 'It is totally wrong to say, "Sort out the behaviour, then I'll teach", which you hear weak teachers say. No. You teach properly and the children will follow.' After a series of firings, or, as he puts it, 'invitations to move on', he has 65 teaching staff motivated not only by a desire to teach but also by the very real

School sports day provides a chance for the pupils of the Royal Alexandra & Albert School in Reigate to show off their skills. Activities such as horse-riding are offered

benefits of working here – free accommodation on site and a significantly enhanced salary in return for 15 extra hours a week. Just before GCSEs, a five-hour maths revision class was running on Sunday afternoons – and was highly attended. There are now six applications for every place and the school will be ‘creaking with pupils’ this September. Admissions staff hoot at the lengths parents will go to to shoehorn their child in. ‘They phone to say he’s gifted and talented and a fantastic sportsman...’ None of which cuts any ice, since both boarders and day pupils are selected on the basis of proximity. The boarding industry no longer wants to be associated with the paralysing grief of separation; next year, Raas plans to adopt the term ‘flexi-boarding’. It means boarders who live less than an hour away can go home after morning school on Saturdays and day children will be allowed to stay at school up to 10 nights a year. Many don’t want to go home at all because there is so much going on. I watched one mother screech up in her 4x4 late one Friday night, hand a bulging Sainsbury’s bag of tuck to her teenage daughter – ‘Oh, cool! See ya, Mum’ – and speed off again.

Over lunch (French onion tart or pork satay, green beans), Paul ‘Benny’ Jones, head of Gloucester Boys House, refers to ‘the constant reservoir of company’ that boarding brings. ‘I can’t be their mum and dad, I look after 40 of them! It works both ways, mind. I can only give them a 40th of a bollocking.’ Edward, a sensitive boy of 14, whose father is in the forces, looks as though he needs a hug, not a bollocking. His shoulders are rigid from the effort of holding everything in. ‘Worst case of homesickness I ever saw,’ Jones says. Edward describes it as ‘a physical pain’. His hand flutters across his throat. ‘It starts here and goes to your tummy and you can’t breathe, you can’t think. It’s getting better. I don’t know what else to say.’

All potential boarders are interviewed, to ensure they will cope. ‘Children aren’t “sent” to boarding school nowadays,’ Spencer Ellis insists. ‘It’s an intelligent decision shared between parent and child. Some have said to me privately, “I can’t do this.” And then I say to the parents, “Your child does not want to board and therefore I am not going to offer him a place.”’

He admits he was initially dubious about the ability of the smallest children to understand. ‘I’ve interviewed a lot of children as young as seven and it’s taught me that we grossly underestimate children of that age. Generally, the little ones are boarding for a reason: parents may have super-demanding careers and we do a better job than a series of au-pairs. Or they just can’t be looked after at home. Even the smallest are capable of coming to their own conclusion. They don’t use these words, but what they convey is, “My heart says I want to be with mummy and daddy but my head can see the logic in staying here.”’

Rank-Weston Junior House, 4pm. Michelle McLaughlin – ‘Mrs Mac’ – is conducting another roll call as children head off to activities. Bowls of apples and bananas are laid out and a sixth-former is sloshing icing on break-time buns to re-present them for tea. ‘Jono – football. Max – Screen Club [TV and Game Boys]. Grace, have you had a snack? Because you’re holding up

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proceedings.’ They are surrounded by the paraphernalia of home, yet it isn’t home. The carpet-tiled floor is lined with prep-drawers. Bedrooms, through a series of stairs and fire doors, resemble a basic B&B. On Saturday nights children watch a film together while their heads are trawled for nits and their toenails cut. ‘Some manage beautifully, some crash halfway through term,’ Bingham says. ‘We’re very open about the fact that it will come.’

Bingham has been here 15 years and her own daughters have grown up here. She prefers to know ‘bare facts about children, not detail’. She points out a little girl who had been excluded from her independent school for poor behaviour. ‘She was seven and a half! She’d lost her mother, her father

couldn’t cope and “I’m a naughty girl!” had somehow become ingrained. But she’s a little star. The first time I said “good girl!”, the look on her face told me she hadn’t heard that much before.’

Paul Spencer Ellis has worked in the independent sector (Uppingham) and a top-end French boarding school in Normandy. There is a hysterical moment when he recognises our photographer. ‘I was your head of house at l’Ecole des Roches,’ he yelps. ‘I knew where you hid your Baileys! Polly shrinks back to her 15-year-old self, drawing up her knees and mumbling, ‘Er, he was very nice... very fair.’ He mentions being offered an eye-popping salary to head an independent school, but stays, ‘because this school can do so much for so many

Top Paul Spencer Ellis, the head, has taken the school from ‘special measures’ to ‘outstanding’ in 10 years



children. There's an opportunity to turn lives around here.' He believes Raas is 'truly comprehensive'. 'I've got parents who struggle, who are not having holidays or renewing the car. The MoD pays 90 per cent of the fee for military parents, but if you're a sergeant and you've got three kids, you still have to find a lot of money.' He is aware few are likely to plump for Raas on the basis of its lofty social connections – he chortles over a nugget of unprintable headmasterly gossip. 'There's an awful lot of that in the independent sector. But look. I've got parents who could afford any boarding school in the country, but choose us because it's a better training ground for real life.'

He is keen to stress that foundationers are no more difficult than anyone else. 'They're just children who have difficulties in their lives.' So who are they? 'How long have you got?' he sighs. 'There are so many stories. And he reels off a list of feckless, alcoholic fathers and hopeless, negligent mums. Their children are here. Happy, well-fed and tucked up under Bratz duvet covers. Some are able to go home in the holidays, others go to relations and guardians. Many have been scooped up just before they hit the care system and he is proud that Raas is helping to keep fragile family units together. Most stories involve teaching's unsung heroes. 'A primary head phoned recently about an eight-year-old whom the school had in effect "adopted". The mother kept being evicted. The little girl came to school in a taxi paid for by the local authority, that was the stability in her life, staff would keep her until 6pm, then drive her home. We now have her in boarding. She's stopped worrying about her mum and she's able to be a child.'

Megan, 14, who struggles with anorexia, has an invalid mum and a brother with ADHD. 'I had no childhood,' she says. 'And I still feel angry about that.' She looked up the school on the internet and said to her dad, 'You've got to let me go.' Katie, 15, is predicted straight As at GCSE. 'Home,' she says, looking at her shoes. 'Was, um, awful. Me and my mum lived in a tiny flat and there was shouting the whole time. Coming here was just the biggest relief. I love everything about it.' Spencer Ellis compares it to being thrown into a fast moving river. 'One year we did a statistical check and we found foundationers were three times as likely to win a prize on Founders Day and twice as likely to become a prefect. I think that reflects an understanding: "I've been given an opportunity and I'm not going to let this go."' A report in 2008 by Royal Wansstead Children's Foundation backs this up. It found that 39 per cent of cared-for children who had been to a state boarding school for more than three years became star performers and 60 per cent exceeded the average of their peers (only 11 per cent of children in care obtained five good GCSEs last year, compared with 56 per cent of all children.)

Most independent boarding schools offer foundation scholarships to a handful of pupils – but they tend to be of Oxbridge ability. Spencer Ellis describes a current year 10 pupil. 'Sam. Lovely boy. Clinically thick. But I'll keep him on in boarding because if I put him out on the street at 16, he'll end up in the youth courts.' What he is doing is remarkable on a number of levels, not least financial: it costs £12,000 a year to keep a child at Raas as opposed to £126,000 in a children's home. 'And

'HOME WAS AWFUL. COMING HERE WAS JUST THE BIGGEST RELIEF. I LOVE EVERYTHING ABOUT IT'



£400,000 a year to bang them up in a secure unit, when they go completely off the rails.' Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education, has said the Government is keen to expand state boarding to take in more of the 50,000 children in the care system, and provide vital places for those at risk of going into care. But only three new academies (in London, Lincolnshire and Wiltshire) have so far announced tiny boarding facilities (50 boarding places per 1,000 pupils) for this September. The Department for Education has no clear remit and there is a reluctance on the part of local authorities to grasp the concept. It is partly ideological – boarding is perceived as elitist; partly financial: once a child is in local authority care, funding is

compulsory. Raas's approach involves local authorities putting forward discretionary money to rescue children before the situation at home becomes untenable. 'It's an absolute no-brainer,' Spencer Ellis roars. 'It's intelligent, child-centric forward thinking and it's not as common as it should be.'

Tobi Seriki, now 22, came to Raas as an 11-year-old. The summer she was 13, she simply refused to go home to a mother who abused her physically and mentally. 'People never understand that if you tell someone your mother is beating you, the beatings just get worse.' She shakes her head, aghast at the inability of adults to see things from the child's point of view. Spencer Ellis drove her to the police station, social workers were summoned, but Tobi



Sarah Bingham, the head of Rank-Weston Junior House, has been 15 years at the school, where her own daughters grew up

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***THE INSERT HOUSE

dug in her heels. It was decided she would live at school full-time with the bursar, Diana Bromley, her husband and two small sons, then six and nine. ‘I was not a model student. I was a naughty child,’ Tobi says. ‘They had every reason to expel me, but they fought for me and that meant so much.’

No one expected Tobi to pass her GCSEs. ‘I’m not smart. I was a headache.’ She did. Followed by 2 As and a B at A-level and a law degree. The Bromleys are now paying for her to do her masters. ‘They don’t have to do that, they do it for me,’ she says, tears streaming down her cheeks. Later, Diana Bromley, a woman not given to emotional outbursts, admits that she rarely keeps her composure when talking about Tobi. ‘I remember the first time we took her on holiday to Cornwall, my husband taught her to fish, she was open to every opportunity. We let her know that our home was hers. She’s a very special member of our family.’ Does this happen often? ‘From time to time,’ Bromley says vaguely. ‘Other members of staff have their Tobis.’

The day the girls in Cornwall House were told that Frances Hartigan – or ‘Mummy H’ – was going to be their house mistress you could hear the screams over in Alex. Four girls lolling on the sofa watching *Friends* try to sum up why they love her. ‘She never gave up on me,’ one says. ‘I’m really dippy. And she’s showed me a way to be.’ Anna, 15, whose mother died when she was four, says simply, ‘This is my home.’ Upstairs, it is all Robert Pattison posters, Impulse body spray and stashes of Haribos. Downstairs, Hartigan does her best to dress the municipal rooms with home comforts – and she always makes house breakfast, complete with



homemade jam, ‘because if I didn’t, some girls wouldn’t eat for the day’. For this she trawled charity shops, buying every knife, fork, spoon and plate she could find. She scoots around the concept of ‘correct contact’. ‘The girls will say, “Ma’am, Ma’am, I need a hug!” And they get one.’

Both day-children and boarders do prep together in their houses. Afterwards, two 11-year-olds, Beth and Katie, linger at the Stables, round the back of the Bothy Music Centre. ‘If we help, we get an extra ride,’ Katie says. Nearby, a group of Year 9s attend Allotment Club; the boys have found the foundations of a Victorian greenhouse and are waist-deep in mud. One pitches into the hole head-first. ‘Ma’am. Look! I’m digging to Australia!’ In the distance, kayaks are being launched on the main lake while pigs graze in the Japanese garden.

Spencer Ellis is fond of the term ‘fresh start’ and uses it frequently in his discussions with children. ‘You can be whatever you want to be here, which is why it works for Tobi and others. It isn’t tattooed

anywhere on you: “I live in a five-bed detached house in Cheam”, or “I live in a council flat in Chertsey”.’ And if some have a wobble just after getting back from the long holidays, this does not apply only to foundationers. ‘The child who doesn’t go to bed till 3am because mum doesn’t know where he is and doesn’t care is exactly the same as the child with a PlayStation in his room – arguably a form of neglect – who is allowed to stay up till 3am at the family villa in the Algarve.’

State boarding is fast becoming a popular half-way house between home and university, with some schools reporting as many as five applications for every sixth-form place. (Sixth-formers here must manage an allowance for food and laundry.) A further 42 boarding spaces will be available at Raas this September in its new sixth-form block, and if Spencer Ellis had the capital he would add 84 more, with some of those reserved for foundationers.

By 9pm, supper is over and the little ones are asleep. Enormous boys are being coaxed away from Pot Noodles and TV and steered towards showers. Spencer Ellis is hopping about the grounds, attending a raucous prize-giving in Kent House, ushering the odd teen to bed, unable to draw himself away. He is there because he wants to be, and children sense that. As I leave, I am cornered by Renice, a foundationer, who wears a fluffy dressing-gown and a businesslike expression. ‘The teachers here really, really care,’ she says. ‘They make you want to do well. Have you got that down?’ Then, gathering herself. ‘It’s just one big sleepover. Like it says in the brochure. Now. What else do you need to know?’

Names have been changed. raa-school.co.uk

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