

The Good Schools Guide

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Shapwick School

Linked to Shapwick Prep in the Junior section

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Pupils: 82 boys, 24 girls (59 boys board, 23 day boys; 16 girls board, 8 day girls) **Ages:** 13-18. **Size of Sixth Form:** 20

Religion: Non-denominational

Fees: Day: £4,834; Boarding: £6,950

Independent.

Open Days: 3 times a year: October, March and May/June. Usually held over 2 days.

Joint Heads: A veteran team comprising director of studies since 1983, Mr David Walker BA CertEd (fifties) educated at Keele University and Mr Jon Whittock CertEd (forties), pastoral head since 1981. When David Walker began teaching science at a comprehensive he noticed 'bright' pupils (one boy was a county chess player) dropping off the academic radar because of poor reading and spelling. Robust with a soft centre, he is seen as 'strict but fair' by pupils and has demonstrated long-term commitment to helping children overcome dyslexia. A former rugby club captain and veteran of five marathons, he is married to Annette who teaches maths at Shapwick. Jon Whittock, a PE specialist, is married to Sandra with four children from two to 20, has been here since the school's inception. 'The most important thing here is the positive peer support,' he explains. Also a former rugby captain and member of Somerset County RFU as well as leading adventure expeditions of all types. Both men hugely respected.

Academic Matters: Percentage of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at grade C or above has risen from forty to sixty-nine per cent over last four years. A tremendous achievement with so many statemented SpLD pupils - eight per cent above the national average. Figures including maths and English are less impressive and have actually worsened over the same period though pupils are entered in years 9 or 10 for maths if they are ready to achieve grade C or better. GCSE English remains the battleground for these pupils and recent reductions in proportion of coursework in the syllabus (with a corresponding increase in functional skills and technical accuracy) have made things

even more difficult for dyslexics. A good reason for staying here beyond 16 is to have a second or third crack at GCSE English – with some success it seems. No setting in English throughout school ensures mixed literary abilities though ‘word attack’ (spelling) groups are set. CReSTeD Category A (the highest level of provision) for the last ten years. All new pupils are assessed for both occupational and speech and language therapy in first term. ‘Parents are glad when they hear that there is something we can fix,’ explained guardian angel and senior therapist, Cynthia. Health Professions Council (subsumed RCSLT with whom Shapwick was only UK school to have accreditation) ‘has already praised school’s degree of ownership of language problems,’ she added. Tip top therapy Centre is very much at core of school’s success: four speech and language plus three occupational therapists. THRASS picture chart used throughout the school to reinforce spelling. Lots of cross-curricular work and encouragement of joined-up thinking. SCAEP (social competence enhancement) introduces pupils to problem-solving and negotiating skills. Emphasis given to improving short-term memory. Tremendous range of help in public examinations: pupils often able to request amenities they know and virtually all receive extra help of some kind. School has own consultant educational psychologist. All LA funded pupils are statemented. Pupils take core science in year 10 and additional science in year 11. Most take four of five optional GCSE subjects: resistant materials technology combines with product design and engineering to provide two GCSEs. Surprisingly, no food technology but geography, drama, photography and art all do exceedingly well with 80 per cent of grades at B or above. Lots of ICT and most pupils have own laptops provided by LAs. Maths taken 18 months early – 70 per cent achieve grade C or above. Traditional boarding timetable: nine thirty-five minute lessons per weekday, two supervised preps and no escape from lessons on Saturday mornings. Until three years ago, post-16 students simply stayed on for re-takes or moved away to sixth form colleges. Without continued specialist support even those who had done brilliantly at GCSE floundered or panicked and fled – ‘crash and burn’ in SEN-speak. Scheme between Bridgwater College and Shapwick has created a dyslexia-friendly sixth form, which enables pupils to have all the advantages of the wide choices offered for A level and GNVQ by a large college without losing the multi-sensory teaching and speech and language therapy back at their familiar base where they still spend two days a week. Learning to get the correct bus and find their way round Bridgwater prepares them for life in the world outside Shapwick.

Games, Options, The Arts:

Sport compulsory for all until sixth form. County level players in badminton, athletics and rugby. Semi-finalists at ISA rugby sevens tournament. Walled garden has been converted to provide floodlit, all-weather surface. More than adequate sports hall is well used with extra facilities (including swimming) available at Strode College in nearby Street. Teams play state and private schools. D of E generates much enthusiasm and bronze awards. Annual ski trip to France combines junior and senior schools; improves co-ordination, listening, confidence, high-level organisation while they learn to bum-board, snow board and ski. Recent art trips have included to Egypt and Normandy.

Stunningly lively art studio run by charismatic HOD who masterminds Summer Arts festival – local artists workshopping tapestry, painting, willow-weaving etc. Pottery and photography particularly strong. Drum, guitar and keyboard taught to a handful but no music classes in senior school as 1:1 tuition has been found to work better. Pupils

showcase talent at end of year concert. Loads of activities (from potholing to go-karting) every day after lessons. Ten Tors challenge and D of E ever popular. Fleet of five minibuses to shuttle pupils between outlying houses and Manor. Year 10 have work experience at end of year; good careers database and links; mock employment interviews for year 11.

Background and Atmosphere: School motto: 'The same road by different steps' says it all. The sense of relief (at having gained a place here) amongst these dyslexic pupils is almost palpable: 'I have to pinch myself to be sure I'm here,' said one. One teacher we met said pupils 'we're a pleasure to be with and a pleasure to teach.' Staff are hugely experienced and many come from state sector. Shapwick Manor, owned by Lord Vestey, is the hub of the school and dates from sixteenth century. Fifteenth century dovecote sits rotundly on front lawn. Tuscan style stables have been converted into therapy centre but retain their unique external appearance. Shared foundation with Millfield - remained in ownership of Atkinson family until Easter 2008 when it passed to Kedlestone UK who currently own four specialist schools in UK. No town distractions here to detract pupils from work: school sits comfortably in this quiet, pretty village. Has retained former Millfield model of outlying boarding houses including The Lakes (currently houses 24 boys) in Meare and sixth formers on prep school site in Burtle. Originally a boys' prep school, has grown into a co-ed senior with an expanding sixth form (about 50% stay beyond 16). Classrooms and laboratories (biology was the largest and pleasantest we saw) are scattered around split site with DT centre in old village school. Pleasant dining area: food is generally given thumbs up by pupils.

Pastoral Care and Discipline: Tutor groups based on three houses. Mentoring system for incoming year nine pupils works well. School council meets regularly with senior management. Small boarding houses run by houseparents (some even cook for pupils at weekends). Games room beside sports hall provides on site space for relaxation with pool tables and easy chairs. Some year 11 pupils act as prefects and have separate room in the Manor. Staff bring a new meaning to the word dedication - many have family members and children who have suffered with dyslexia or dyspraxia, so their compassion and zeal does not stop when the bell goes. School offers parents opportunity of up to twelve meetings a year with staff and 'we can ring any member of staff at any time,' said one mother. Strong parental involvement contributes to its success. Discipline is firm but fair with well established procedures for bullying (virtually none here) or drugs which rarely have to be activated.

Pupils and Parents: All pupils are severely dyslexic/dyspraxic - come from all over UK and a few overseas. Many arrive feeling 'crushed' but soon begin to flourish here. Uniform and boarding standards come as a shock for many: 'None of our pupils are natural boarders,' says Jon Whittock, 'but they generally cope better with boarding than their parents.' Percentage of girls has crept up and they seem to fit in well. School prides itself on close contact with parents through e-mail and up to twelve parents' meetings throughout the year. Summer Diary has replaced newsletter and is published annually to illustrate breadth of activity here. One mother told us that 'the difference it makes to our whole family's life is incredible.' For day pupils, another parent said, 'It's no problem now getting them to school.'

Entrance: Two-thirds of younger pupils either have or are in process of seeking LA financial support. Process usually takes up to eighteen months; nearly all applications

from state schools pupils go to tribunal and can involve costs up to £10K (though occasionally more). One third of pupils are privately funded. School offers 'taster' days or even 'taster weeks'. Open Days generally spread over Friday and Saturday and include opportunity for applicants to be assessed to ascertain level of need. No admissions allowed after first term of year 10.

Exit: About fifty per cent stay into sixth; remainder go mainly to variety of FE colleges.

Money Matters: Statemented pupils exempt from fees and this includes therapy sessions. Parents pay for trips and uniform but everything else is included in fees.

Remarks: Parents full of praise: 'Staff are miracle workers,' says one. 'Our son is a different child,' confirms another. No doubting benefit for dyslexic boys and girls whose self-confidence grows by leaps and bounds here. We encountered a staggering volume of positive testimonials from parents past and present who had given up hope for their children until they discovered Shapwick.