



Bruern Abbey

The school with a distinctive USP

Bruern Abbey prepares boys with dyslexia, dyspraxia or dyscalculia for entrance to mainstream senior schools. **Emma Lee-Potter** reports

Bruern Abbey does things differently to other prep schools. Its 157 pupils, all boys aged eight to 13, have 11 English lessons and eight maths lessons a week, nearly twice as many as they'd get in other schools. Reading is taught as a curriculum subject, laptops are used in most lessons and classes are small – 11 pupils on average.

The school, set in 19 picturesque acres in the Oxfordshire village of Chesterton, has a distinctive USP. Its whole raison d'être is to

prepare boys who have dyslexia, dyspraxia or dyscalculia for entrance to mainstream senior schools. Most of its teachers are dyslexia-trained and the maths staff have expertise in dyscalculia.

John Floyd, who has been headmaster of Bruern Abbey for eight years, is adamant that learning difficulties should not preclude children's academic attainment. "We provide a tailored education in beautiful surroundings and maintain high expectations for their

academic future," he says. "We aim to enhance boys' self-esteem, in the firm belief that confidence is the key to academic success."

Mr Floyd identifies closely with the pupils at Bruern Abbey because he is dyslexic himself. His desk is meticulously tidy and he explains that if he doesn't keep his papers, phone, wallet and car keys in set places he can't remember where he left them.

"I was diagnosed by an educational psychologist when I was eight or nine," he ▶

recalls. "I memorised words as pictures and I wrote from right to left, so if I wrote my name I'd start with the 'd' of Floyd. In those days you could supposedly be 'cured' so I went to see an educational psychologist and was taught how to write. It was only when I handed in my university dissertation that my tutor said: 'Oh my God, your dyslexia is horrific.' I said: 'No, I don't have it any more. I'm cured.' And he laughed a lot and said: 'You can't be cured.'"

After university he trained as a teacher with Teach First, teaching geography at Crown Woods in Eltham, the largest comprehensive school in London at the time. He trained as a SENCO (special educational needs coordinator) at Westminster Cathedral Choir School, where he was also deputy head, and became head of Bruern Abbey in 2011.

"We all have some kind of homing pigeon capacity so when this job turned up, I thought 'yes'. I'm certain that dyslexic teachers naturally think and empathise more easily with dyslexic boys because they 'get' it.

"We're not a de facto special school. What we're doing is taking the boys who have been struggling because of their dyslexia and sorting them out to get them back into mainstream schools. We teach them



Bruern Abbey has 45 BMX bikes



The school is "very outdoorsy", says headmaster John Floyd



At Bruern Abbey laptops are used in most lessons

"I'm certain that dyslexic teachers naturally empathise more easily with dyslexic boys because they 'get' it"

to understand their difficulties and find strategies to get around them."

Pupils from more than 100 schools across the UK and around two-thirds board from Monday to Friday. School starts at 9am on Mondays and everyone goes home for the weekend at 3.40pm on Fridays. "Boarding here is a pragmatic solution to commuting, not some ideological stance," explains Mr Floyd.

Around 120 boys are dyslexic while others have dyspraxia or dyscalculia, or a combination of these. Places are filled on a "case by case" basis – families visit the school and then boys are invited to an assessment morning. They join at any point between the ages of eight and 12. Only one has joined in

year 8 in Mr Floyd's time. "There's got to be a pretty epic reason to bring someone here for just three terms," he says.

Many of the boys at Bruern Abbey have high IQs, yet their processing speeds (the speed at which the brain receives, understands and responds to information) may be slow. When the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) visited in 2017 it commented on the boys' rapid progress and the way they "develop their skills in literacy and numeracy because of well-planned, creative, cross-curricular topics and timely interventions that directly meet individual needs."

"What we really like is a boy who is bright but way behind their potential," says Mr Floyd. "We ask questions like: Do we have the skills to help them? Do they need to come here? Do we think they'll like it here? This is definitely a country prep school and we are very outdoorsy."

The boys at Bruern Abbey seem to have a whale of a time (*The Good Schools Guide* described the school as an “earthly paradise”). There’s no homework (everything is done during the school day) and outside lessons they climb trees, dam streams and ride BMX bikes through the woods. The school has 45 BMXs so there are plenty to go round. There’s lots of sport and music, activities like gardening and carpentry, and pupils and their parents get the chance to attend formal candlelit dinners on a regular basis.

After Bruern Abbey the boys head to a host of schools, everywhere from Bryanston and Marlborough to Rugby and Gordonstoun. Mr Floyd advises parents on pupils’ next schools, often guiding them away from places that pre-test at the age of 10 or 11.

“A lot of these children are late bloomers and will not pass tests in year 6,” he says. “Many of them go to schools that pre-test in year 7 or to schools that we know and are willing to look at them later – once we’ve done a decent job on their literacy and numeracy skills.

“It’s not that we’ve suddenly invented a new method of teaching dyslexic pupils but more children are getting diagnosed earlier and pointed our way ever younger – which is why the school has doubled in size in the last eight years. A lot of other schools are less dyslexia-friendly because they are constrained by more assessment at a younger age.

“When people ask me to sum up Bruern in a nutshell I say it’s a garage that cheers up and sorts out dyslexics. The cheering up is a big part. Before the boys come here a lot of them felt like they were the odd one out, or they’ve been struggling, or their academic self-esteem



Headmaster John Floyd with Bruern Abbey pupils

has taken a bash because they’ve been told by their teachers that they need to try harder or do stuff faster. We’re really good at cheering up and sorting out the boys whose reading, writing and spelling is behind where it should be and where they’ve struggled as a result.”

■ **Stop press:** *Buern Abbey is a boys’ school but plans are underway to open a separate girls’ school nearby*

What is dyslexia?

In 2009 Sir Jim Rose’s report, *Identifying and Teaching Children and Young People with Dyslexia and Literacy Difficulties*, gave the following definition of dyslexia: “Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling.

“Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities.”

Dyslexia is estimated to affect around 10 per cent of the population, including high-achieving people such as Albert Einstein, Agatha Christie, Steve Jobs, Steven Spielberg, Richard Branson and Keira Knightley.

Indeed, when Julie Logan of London’s Cass Business School surveyed a group of entrepreneurs, she found that 35 per cent of them were dyslexic.

A 2018 study by EY and the charity Made by Dyslexia reported that dyslexics have a unique set of skills that will be vital to our future workforce.

Steve Varley, EY’s UK chairman, said the report showed that “dyslexic individuals already have some of the skills that will be in high demand in the future; among them, creativity, complex problem solving and programming.”

My child has a learning difficulty. What should I do?

John Floyd, headmaster of Bruern Abbey, offers the following advice to parents

- Try not to panic. Your child could be having a bad day/week/term, or not naturally gel with a particular teacher.
- Talk to your child’s current school and ask them to be frank with you in return.
- If the school feels there is merit in it or your instincts as a parent are unassuaged, seek out some form of assessment to try and decipher the likeliness and extent of any learning difficulty. Many school SENCOs are trained specialist assessors so while they are not de facto qualified educational psychologists they will be able to use screening toolkits to assess your child in-house.
- If the initial assessments and discussions highlight grounds for genuine enquiry, my advice would be to get an educational psychologist to assess your child. An educational psychologist will be able to see how big a disparity there is between your child’s potential and how they are currently performing. They will also make some suggestions as to what might be the cause and what could be done to better support your child.
- As a parent you have got to be very aware of the environment that your child is in. One child’s “literacy issues” in a highly academic, fast-paced school may not be seen as a problem in a more inclusive educational setting.
- Think very carefully before you jump to a new school. Educational psychologists’ reports often read in a forensic way and, when parents get the report, they sometimes start to flap. As a first step it’s much better to work with your child’s current school. They know your child and their strengths and weaknesses, and keeping the same friendship group, teachers and commute at this stage is often preferable to changing schools.
- But go back to the school in a year’s time and ask: “How are we doing now?” If a child’s self-esteem is going down or if their literacy or numeracy skills are continuing to flatline or go backwards, then it might be time to choose a new school.”