

An Educational Pioneer

Bryanston School has always been an educational trailblazer and its Head, Sarah Thomas, combines this forward-thinking with a strong sense of community

WORDS: Ron Dyson

Blending both the new and the old in keeping with its underlying ethos and school motto *et nova et vetera*, Bryanston is one of the country's most distinct and respected independent schools. Founded in 1928, the school's 400 acre estate on the outskirts of Blandford is renowned as a fertile environment for creativity. Previous alumni include Lucian Freud, Emilia Fox, Sir Mark Elder, and Sir Terence Conran.

As Head of Bryanston, Sarah Thomas has overseen many significant initiatives to help the school build on its core philosophy and reputation for creating a sense of family and belonging for everyone connected with it. It also has a considerable impact on the local community, not only with how it shares its facilities with other local schools, but also as one of the largest employers in Blandford area – the current staff headcount is approaching 600.

Sarah is due to retire at the end of this academic year. An ideal opportunity to reflect on the changes this award-winning teacher has seen during her time at Bryanston. An Oxford-educated classicist, Sarah Thomas's childhood was spent on Merseyside, where she attended Birkenhead High School. She was appointed Head at Bryanston in 2005, attracted by the school's "immersive and refreshing educational philosophy and the openness and transparency of both governors and children".



ABOVE: Sarah Thomas, Head of Bryanston School

RIGHT: Blandford Choral Society performing in Bryanston's concert hall



Photo: Ash Mills



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ABOVE: Former Bryanston student Ben Fogle, giving a talk to a local primary school

And she immediately fell in love with Dorset.

Astute staff appointments and a determination to provide pupils with the opportunities and personal tutoring to excel have helped the school's continuing development. An award-winning science building and a music school, with professional recording and performance facilities, were introduced a few years ago. And a major sports development programme, aimed at encouraging an "affectionate connection" with sport for all pupils and to provide dedicated support for elite young athletes, is now nearing completion.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Such facilities are also made available for pupils from other local schools and regional events – such as the Dorset School Games - as well as other young achievers, amateur enthusiasts and professionals from the world of music, drama and sport. The school continues to work closely with the Richard Ely Trust and the concert venues and music studios are used regularly by the community choral society, the Dorset Music Service and Dorset Opera. And all Science Society lectures are open to staff and students from other local schools.

Indeed, Sarah has continued to foster close links with schools right across the county. The relationship with Blandford School is particularly strong, with regular workshops and careers events as well as outreach support. High profile speakers at Bryanston's annual Education Summit also attract very high attendance from teaching staff across the region. And Bryanston is now acting as a champion for LGBT+ engagement and understanding among schools all over Dorset, having recently secured the Stonewall Gold Champion Award.

'Bryanston is renowned as a fertile environment for creativity'

There's Fruit Salad, a thriving Saturday drama club, as well as a Junior String School for local children, and regular drama, dance and equestrian sessions are held for children with a range of learning difficulties. Neighbouring schools are regularly invited to one-off events, such as some pupils from Durweston CE VA Primary School who recently met TV presenter, adventurer and former Bryanston pupil, Ben Fogle. Outside of term time, public events recently held at Bryanston include professional concerts featuring The King's Singers, Liane Carroll, and the BBC Symphony Chorus, as well as performances by Dorset Opera and the Starlight Dance Academy.

While steering a course that is wholly consistent with the spirit of the school, Sarah Thomas has certainly stamped her mark on Bryanston and, two years ago, she was named 'Best Head of a Public School' by Tatler. Sarah is quick to emphasise, however, that the school's continuing success is as much a reflection of the passion, determination and expertise of her colleagues as it is her own leadership.

As she prepares to hand over responsibilities in September to Mark Mortimer (the current Head of Warminster School), it is clear that Bryanston is not only building on its education heritage. It is also continuing to develop its connections and engagement with communities across its home county. ♦

BRYANSTON SCHOOL

Bryanston School is an independent boarding and day school for boys and girls aged 13 to 18, set in a 400-acre site near Blandford in north Dorset. Founded in 1928, the school aims to develop the all-round talents of individual pupils. A broad, flexible academic and extra-curricular programme is offered and each pupil benefits from considerable one-to-one help and guidance from a personal tutor, subject teachers and housemaster/housemistress. *Find out more at bryanston.co.uk.*

