

The Rise (and rise) of the Mixed Sixth



Right: a production at Stowe that went co-ed in 1974

Below left: the new architect-designed Stephen Perse Sixth Form College



Shrewsbury, that bastion of maleness is at it. So is the academically renowned Perse School for Girls. **Anna Selby** reports on the growing trend of mixed sixth forms

Sixteen is a dangerous age. Many teenagers feel all grown up and independent one moment and the need for reassurance and guidance the next. GCSEs are out of the way and the bigger challenges of A-levels and university await. But there are often more changes on the cards and it is the moment that many teenagers, especially girls, decide it is time to move on to pastures – or schools – new. Often this isn't simply a personal choice. Half of the schools in London and the Southeast that lack a sixth form are girls-only institutions and so their pupils must choose between the only remaining alternatives. They can start afresh at a sixth form college, join one of the highly competitive independent girls' schools that do have sixth forms or join a mixed sixth form in a boys' school. And this last option has become such a popular move, more and more boys' sixth forms are turning co-ed.

One such is Halliford, a small (400-strong) independent boys' day school in Shepperton who will be taking their first intake of girls into the sixth form this September. Their Chairman of Governors, John White Jones explained their thinking. "We had a consortium with a local girls' school, St David's, and we shared certain subjects, bussing people back and forth. It meant we could offer more choice and it was good for drama and music and, of course, social life – we always had a joint Sixth Form Ball, for instance. But we got to the stage that it didn't really work practically – because of timetables and traffic – and when Philip Cottam, our Headmaster, suggested the idea of a co-ed sixth form, the whole board was behind him. Our long-term aim is to get 20-30 girls in and we've just started that process."

In fact, by January – four months before the closing date – there were already 16 applications from girls, so the aim may be achieved sooner than they think. The move has been widely welcomed by parents.

Suzanne O'Callaghan, has a younger son, William, already at Halliford and has enrolled her daughter, Rose, for the first intake in the lower sixth. "At the moment," she explained, "Rose is at St Catherine's Twickenham and they don't have a sixth form. We're delighted Halliford is opening up to girls because William's done so well – he's had a turnaround in confidence, doing rugby, basketball and putting his hand up for everything. I've got no qualms about her being part of the first intake – Halliford has a clear ethos and a positive attitude – and she's confident and makes friends easily. I think it's a healthier environment than single sex and we both like the fact that it's small and all the kids are known by name. We both preferred that to a huge sixth form college."

Shrewsbury is another boys' school that will be opening the doors of its sixth form to girls in 2008. Sara Hankin is the new girls' housemistress. "We're a 700-boys boarding school, established in 1552, so a real bastion of maleness – we're really starting afresh by introducing girls. A lot of people may cynically assume we're short of pupils but that's not true. Personally, I think it's an anachronism now to keep them separate at that age. It works when they're younger but we will be helping them to

and Sara Hankin is planning shopping trips with them to choose all the furnishings together for the newly built boarding house. "Girls like to make a change at 16," she says. "They've often been at the same school since they were three and they want to be in a bigger pond. So we're a stepping-stone between the very protected environment of a single sex school and university. They'll still be looked after, but it's a bit rougher round the edges!"

"Security is a big issue and we've improved the lighting all around the campus and we've got rules about who's allowed in each others' houses. But it's the culture, too. The common room is not all beer and post-rugby sweat, more Costa coffee and upmarket wine bar. We've already done that for the boys and it's been a great success."

For some schools, co-ed sixth forms are not a new idea. "We went co-ed in 1974," says Anthony Wallersteiner, Headmaster of Stowe. "We were one of the first by default with daughters of staff and it was all pretty unplanned. Eventually we adapted a boarding house for girls – now we have three with 111 girls in the sixth form out of 309 and we're going gradually co-ed all the way through. It's been very popular with siblings – it makes sense

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The response has been overwhelming. They've had applications from over 60 girls for 30 places and they've come from 40 different schools. 70 per cent of them will be boarders

if parents have one set of rules, term dates, sports fixtures."

But isn't this trend for co-ed sixth forms flying in the face of the league table evidence that girls do better academically in single sex schools? "Alan Smithers, Professor of



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Shrewsbury (above) and Halliford (below) will be opening its doors to girls in the sixth form this September 9

Education at the University of Buckingham wrote a paper about this,” Wallersteiner replies, “and concluded that it’s all down to academic selection in the first place. Good teaching is important but the standards of common rooms in good schools are pretty similar. So it all comes down to the raw material and pass mark at the point of entry.

“But it’s not just exams parents care about. It’s about emotional intelligence. Most of our children here are thankfully colour blind and that’s how it’s becoming with gender. I’d be lying if I said there were never any problems with relationships but I think girls in single sex schools spend more time thinking about the opposite sex than they do here. Ultimately, I don’t think there are any downsides and they all remain good friends.”

One pupil who would certainly support that view is Stowe’s current head girl, Monika Jurcic. “I was at the local comprehensive school three miles away and, due to lack of teachers, I had to teach myself science from textbooks – which was important to me as I want to study medicine. I did a Roxburgh [all-rounder] scholarship and got in. I’ve made friends for life. It’s not just posh rich kids on a different wavelength – which was what everybody told me. In fact, the opposite is true and I’ve got some really close friends. Academically, it’s exceeded all my expectations.”

Unfortunately, not every girl has quite such a positive story to tell. One very bright young woman who is now at Cambridge went to one of the capital’s top boys’ schools for her A-levels and did not have a happy experience. “I’d been at the same school since I was five and I had itchy feet. When several of my friends decided to move, I did, too. After an all-girls’ school, we felt like a tiny minority and the boys set up a website of the girls with their photos and gossip

about them. It was called the Hottest List. The school did nothing about it and I found it very difficult. Having said that, there were fantastic facilities and opportunities and I think boarding was a big factor – a lot of girls who did board had a good time and got to know people better.”

Nevertheless, the trend seems to be relentlessly in favour of co-ed sixth forms and it’s not only boys taking in girls; the traffic is flowing the other way, too. At Perse School for Girls in Cambridge, a school with stellar examination results in all the league tables and an impressive Oxbridge entrance, they are launching their own sixth form college – the Stephen Perse Sixth Form College – on a modern, architect-designed site to accommodate an eventual 200 students.

Naturally, they are hoping many of their existing girls will be there but they are opening their doors to boys, too. Daniel Murton, the school’s Marketing Director, explained, “In Cambridge, we have very unusual local conditions in that we have extremely good independent schools plus two very successful local state sixth form colleges, which are, of course, mixed. We felt our own co-ed college could offer something different. We’ve had lots of our own girls looking at the new site and quite a lot of boys, too. We don’t expect it to be 50-50 for some years but we are the first independent school in Cambridge to offer the IB and many boys have found this appealing. Of course, we offer A-levels too – it’s a matter of individual choice.

Mike Buchanan, Head of Ashford School in Kent, oversaw Highgate School going co-ed and is now changing a girls’ school around. “We did a survey of staff, parents and pupils asking them to rate the most important factors for a successful school,” he says. “Teaching, the happiness and confidence of the children, a

challenging but supportive environment came top. Exam results came fifth or sixth and single sex did not feature at all.

“We’ve just started with boys in the lower sixth for the first time this year and they make up 40 per cent, which is fantastic. I teach the lower sixth physics and those lessons are different – the boys question and test hypotheses more and the girls are picking up on that. On the other hand, the boys are learning from the girls’ better preparation. Academically, they’re rubbing off on each other and the vibrancy of the whole school has increased.

“Girls-only schools tend to lose a lot of pupils in the sixth form and though we retained around 70 per cent we weren’t prepared to watch them just drift off. Last year a few parents took their girls to single sex schools. But for most it’s just not an issue any longer. My biggest worry was there’d be only a handful of boys but with 30 that’s not a problem. We haven’t recruited particularly hard but our registrations are currently for more boys than girls. We’re no longer perceived as a girls’ school that takes boys in the sixth form but as a proper co-ed set-up. We’ve got fantastic art, science, music and maths and plenty of sporty alpha males doing things like karate and tennis. In a few more years, we’ll have the team sports fizzing, too.”

The mixed sixth form is clearly a trend that’s here to stay – whether the move is made because of academic choice or as a social stepping-stone en route to university. And in a culture that has lost most of its traditional ways of marking life’s major turning points, the move at sixteen to a different and more adult environment is becoming a 21st century rite of passage. ■

