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Schools in Focus: Rochester Independent College

Alternative methods, old-fashioned rigour

The garden shed at Rochester Independent College is innocuous enough. Maybe a little better-kept than your average model, with its fresh coat of paint and impeccably clean windows, but otherwise much the same as any other. But inside there is not a pot plant, a trowel or a bag of compost in sight, just a few desks, some piles of books and papers, and a blackboard. This is in fact no ordinary garden shed, but the Garden Shed Maths Suite, where senior students come to grapple with complex equations and formulae.

Nothing is what it appears at Rochester, the 250-student ISA co-ed boarding school for 11 to 19-year-olds. Situated just minutes from the Kent town's train station, from the outside the college bears none of the hallmarks commonly associated with a school. There is no school gate, no imposing sign, just row after row of residential flats. Inside, there is little more evidence of the building's true purpose. The halls and stairwells are not cold and austere but carpeted and homely, and at no time does a bell ring to signal the start and end of lessons. Even inside the classrooms themselves, there is little sign of the formality normally associated with such a setting. Dressed casually (there is no uniform), talking in first name terms with their teacher, the pupils do not sit at rows of individual desks but gather around one table, in the style of a university tutorial.

Appearances can be deceptive, though, as one of the school's three principals, Alistair Brownlow, points out. "There are superficially cosmetic differences at the college, such as no school uniform, teachers and students on first name terms," he says. "There is a sort of institutional informality, but that co-exists with a traditional approach to teaching. At Rochester, underneath the kind of trappings perhaps more associated with alternative schools, there is a rather old-fashioned academic rigour."

Take the Garden Shed Maths Suite. The fact that lessons in Further Maths take

place in such an unconventional environment does not denote some sort of disregard for the subject. In fact, it is the most popular subject at A-level, and pupils appreciate the chance to study it at advanced level in peaceful surroundings. Then there is the round-the-table teaching model, which has not been introduced simply for the sake of being different. According to Mr Brownlow, the seating arrangement is "all about ensuring the students are treated as individuals". He adds: "A student in a more formal setting might be inclined to sit in the back of the school and not be engaged. It is wonderful for their confidence to be so involved in every lesson, it is very good for their communication skills."

The ethos of involving students goes further. When new rules are introduced, students are presented with the rationale for them, and they also help to draw up their own codes of conduct. Again, though, the principal is keen to stress that there is nothing too radical in this. "We try to avoid petty rules, but we are a very long way from the kind of approach where you let students decide whether they want to go to a lesson or not. Things like attendance and homework are treated in a very traditional way."

Students also have a big say in what goes on outside the classroom. In terms of sport, Rochester may not have the state-of-the-art hockey pitches or swimming pools of other schools in the sector, but it makes sure students have plenty to choose from, even if they have to travel a little further for the privilege. Mr Brownlow says: "We are not famed for our sporting prowess, but they have gone skiing, played golf, done some trampolining, rock climbing, canoeing. Rather than telling them 'this is what we do in sport', they decide.

"It goes back to this idea of listening to students and treating them as young adults," according to Mr Brownlow. "It is through them having a voice that creates that sense of involvement. They are great evangelists for the school. We genuinely want them to enjoy coming to school. We want the exam success to be there, but we want these results almost to be incidental to the experience they had here.

"From our school days we remember the trips and visits that left an impression on us, and those special teachers. We are helping to create memories and helping them make rather big decisions about their lives. That's also why they're encouraged to respect the buildings, learn about their history."

There is plenty of evidence that the college has been successful in creating that lasting impression. Last year saw Rochester celebrate its 25th anniversary, and there was no shortage of former pupils in attendance, as is the case at any of the reunion parties. Enough time has now elapsed for the students who attended the college in its early years to be contemplating sending their own offspring to start year 7 at Rochester. Among the current staff, a number are alumnae of the college.

Despite the challenging economic climate, Rochester's popularity continues to grow, allowing it to freeze its fees for the past three years. Mr Brownlow admits that one of the biggest challenges is allowing the college to grow, while ensuring it retains the small, close-knit feel so central to its identity. One way this continues to be achieved is by breaking the college into small units according to subject. Even the role of head teacher is broken down, with three principals taking equal control. The rationale is that, aside from the companionship it provides, it also allows each of the three to continue to teach and to concentrate on separate areas of the college.

Unsurprisingly, Rochester takes as its mascot not an emblem of classical myth but a flying pig, a riposte to the cynicism which greeted the college's chances of success when it was founded in 1984 by Brian Pain and Simon de Belder. The many hundreds of students who have passed through its doors and the outstanding grades so many have achieved have long since successfully proved those cynics wrong.