

**INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS COUNCIL**

**(ISC)**

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**INSPECTION OF**

**POLAM HALL SCHOOL**

**By the**

**INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS INSPECTORATE**

**(ISI)**

**On**

**January 23<sup>rd</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup>, 2006**

# INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS INSPECTORATE

## INSPECTION REPORT ON

### Polam Hall School

Full Name of the School	<b>Polam Hall School</b>
DfES Number	<b>841 6000</b>
Registered Charity Number	<b>527369</b>
Address	<b>Grange Road, Darlington, County Durham, DL1 5PA</b>
Telephone Number	<b>01325 463383</b>
Fax Number	<b>01325 383539</b>
Email Address	<b>head@polamhall.com</b>
Headteacher	<b>Miss Marie Green</b>
Chairman of Governors	<b>Mr C D W Pratt</b>
Age Range	<b>3 - 18</b>
Gender	<b>Ages 3 and 4 mixed, 5 – 16 girls, 16 – 18 mixed</b>
Inspection Dates	<b>January 23<sup>rd</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup>, 2006</b>

This inspection report follows the framework laid down by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI). The inspection was carried out under the arrangements of the Independent Schools Council (ISC) Associations for the maintenance and improvement of the quality of their membership. It was also carried out under Section 162A(1)(b) of the Education Act 2002, as amended by the Education Act 2005, under the provisions of which the Secretary of State for Education and Skills has accredited ISI as the body approved for the purpose of inspecting schools belonging to ISC Associations and reporting on compliance with the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003.

The inspection was not carried out in conjunction with the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) and the report does not contain specific judgements on the National Minimum Boarding Standards. It comments on the progress made by the school in meeting the recommendations set out in the most recent statutory boarding inspection and evaluates the quality of the boarding experience and its contribution to pupils' education and development in general. The full CSCI report can be found at [www.csci.org.uk](http://www.csci.org.uk).

The inspection does not examine the financial viability of the school or investigate its accounting procedures. The inspectors check the school's health and safety procedures and comment on any significant hazards they encounter: they do not carry out an exhaustive health and safety examination. Their inspection of the premises is from an educational perspective and does not include in-depth examination of the structural condition of the school, its services or other physical features.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### Characteristics of the School

- 1.1 Polam Hall School is a day and boarding school serving Darlington and the wider area. The school was founded in 1854 as a Quaker ladies' finishing school and moved the following year to its present location, Polam Hall, a Georgian mansion set in 19 acres of parkland on the outskirts of Darlington. It has evolved from a predominantly boarding school for girls to one where the majority are now day pupils. The school maintains a strong Christian tradition but welcomes pupils of other faiths. Polam Hall was incorporated in 1938 and became a registered charity in 1964. The present head has been in post for two years, following the long illness and death of her predecessor.
- 1.2 There are currently 414 pupils on roll, 48 in the Nursery and Reception classes, 143 in Years 1 to 6, 180 in Years 7 to 11, and 43 in the sixth-form. There are 47 boarders. The Nursery is mixed, but from the ages of 5 to 16, Polam Hall accepts only girls. The sixth-form is co-educational, though the number of boys is small. Some 35 pupils are in the government funded Nursery scheme and 14 are supported by the Ministry of Defence or the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Most day pupils come from Darlington and the surrounding areas. Just under 10 per cent of pupils come from minority ethnic groups, mainly Chinese.
- 1.3 Standardised test results indicate that most pupils are of above average ability. Therefore, where pupils are performing in line with their ability, their results in public examinations are expected to be above those achieved by maintained schools. Four pupils have statements of special educational need and a further 45 are on the school's register of special educational need, most of whom have specific learning difficulties, e.g. dyslexia. The proportion of pupils who join the school having learning difficulties has increased significantly in the last four years. Thirty-two pupils have English as an additional language (EAL) and 25 receive support.
- 1.4 The school ethos is that of a caring supportive community to which all contribute, where individual achievement is valued in whatever sphere, and where service to others, both practical and through fund-raising, is of prime importance. The principal aims are the following:
  - inspire pupils to appreciate learning for its own sake, encouraging them to discover their own abilities and develop them to their own individual potential;
  - offer a safe, responsive community where self-confidence flourishes and the individual is valued, supported and feels known;
  - develop the widest possible range of skills and achievement in sport, music, art, drama and as many extra-curricular activities as time and space permit;
  - provide pupils with opportunities to show leadership and to take on responsibilities;
  - develop the skills of communication, tolerance and care so that pupils can begin to understand the spiritual and emotional needs of themselves and others.

- 1.5 National Curriculum nomenclature is used throughout this report to refer to year groups in the school. The year group nomenclature used by the school in the Junior School is that of the National Curriculum. The year-group nomenclature of the Senior School and its National Curriculum (NC) equivalence are shown in the following table:

School	NC name
Lower 4	Year 7
Upper 4	Year 8
Lower 5	Year 9
Middle 5	Year 10
Upper 5	Year 11
Lower 6	Year 12
Upper 6	Year 13

## 2. THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION

### The Educational Experience Provided

- 2.1 The educational experience offered by the school is very good and reflects very successfully the aims and philosophy of the school. It provides a wide variety of curricular experiences in which pupils' intellectual, personal, physical and aesthetic needs, interests and aptitudes are well catered for. Since the last inspection, the curriculum has been further improved by the formal introduction of personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE) across the school, by increased support for pupils with learning difficulties and by greater emphasis on the application of information and communication technology (ICT) to the curriculum. Enrichment activities, including visits, speakers and projects and an extensive programme of extra-curricular activities make a considerable contribution to pupils' educational experience and growth.
- 2.2 At all stages of their education, pupils experience a rich curriculum which develops and supports effectively all aspects of their learning and contributes to their personal growth. In the Foundation Stage the curriculum is designed to help pupils achieve and progress beyond the early learning goals and is enriched by the addition of French. Reception class pupils were seen engaged in a good variety of creative and language based tasks as they explored their topic about winter.
- 2.3 From Years 1 to 6 the curriculum includes all National Curriculum subjects together with dance, French and PSHCE. The richness of pupils' experience extends well beyond the range of subjects studied. High quality, vibrant displays covering a variety of topics, exciting projects and visits, and imaginative creative work enrich pupils' learning experience in many subjects. As part of their English and ICT work, Year 4 pupils visited a local newspaper and set up and printed their own front pages using professional equipment.
- 2.4 The breadth of the curriculum is generally well maintained in the Senior School; provision for modern languages is very good, but that for design technology is more limited. The extended core curriculum in Years 10 and 11 ensures that all pupils have a broad experience. The possibility to choose their first foreign language, or to opt for separate sciences as opposed to double-award science, increases flexibility for pupils. The range of optional subjects is sound and includes business studies and physical education. A comprehensive PSHCE course contributes well to pupils' personal development. At sixth-form level, pupils have a wide choice of both traditional and newer subjects for their advanced studies, though many of the groups are small.
- 2.5 Two features stand out in the educational provision: enrichment of the formal curriculum through visits, speakers and projects; and the very wide range of extra-curricular activities on offer to both juniors and seniors. Both pupils and their parents expressed their appreciation for the opportunities provided. Year 3 pupils' study of Ancient Egypt was very much enlivened when they created a life-size mummy (using an art technician as the subject), and the entrance to their classroom was transformed into the entrance of an Egyptian tomb. A local theatre group came into the school to lead a workshop for senior pupils on performing Shakespeare. Sixth-form scientists were able to take part in a debate between 'Darwinists' and 'Creationists' acting in role. Work in art is enriched by workshops led by visiting artists. Each year pupils take part in a range of cultural and sporting visits abroad.
- 2.6 The range of extra-curricular activities is particularly wide. These range from bridge and ballet to music and fencing and from Year 1 'claytime' club to drama rehearsals for the school production of the musical 'Little Shop of Horrors'. The quality of the activities is high and most pupils participate; both pupils and parents expressed their appreciation of the

- opportunities available. In arranging activities, the staff are responsive to pupils' needs and wishes. Latin is offered as a club but pupils are able to take the subject at GCSE. An impending visit to Italy led to the setting up of an Italian club. Arrangements for a group to study the Russian Revolution were made in response to a request from a Year 9 Russian girl who wanted to know more about the history of her family's country of origin.
- 2.7 Very good provision is made to ensure that pupils feel secure and make a confident and smooth transition as they move from one section of the school to the next stage of their education. At each transition point, pupils have a taster day where they meet their tutors and those who are going to teach them. Key staff liaise very effectively on both curricular and pastoral matters.
- 2.8 Preparation for higher education and future careers is thorough and well-developed through a carefully planned programme. Pupils feel well supported with advice on higher education. Careers education is an integral part of the PSHCE programme and includes work experience for Year 10. In addition, the school organises options evenings and an evening devoted to preparation for university entrance. This year, the visit and talk by a university admissions tutor were particularly helpful. The annual careers convention is especially encouraging for the pupils, as many of those giving advice are former pupils themselves.
- 2.9 The curriculum is well planned and the balance of time between subjects is appropriate. Schemes of work are well developed; they take account of previous learning and subsequent stages and, whilst remaining focused on the requirements of the National Curriculum and external examinations, they take a broad rather than a narrow view of the particular subject. As a result, continuity of the curriculum is preserved and all pupils are able to make good progress in the acquisition of knowledge understanding and skills.
- 2.10 Excellent provision is made for pupils with special needs to enable them to access the broad curriculum. Learning support and EAL provision are of high quality. Provision for gifted and talented pupils is in its early stages. Pupils with physical disabilities are well supported. Individual education plans are detailed, informative and regularly updated. Formal and informal contact between learning support staff and other teachers is frequent and effective.
- 2.11 The school meets the regulatory requirements for the curriculum [Standard 1].

### **Pupils' Learning and Achievements**

- 2.12 In keeping with a philosophy which values and aims at high standards in all areas of activity, pupils achieve good and sometimes very good standards not only in academic subjects, but in music, drama, sport, the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme, and, outstandingly, in fundraising for charity. Since the last inspection, academic standards have been maintained or improved; the greatest advance has been in pupils' achievements in all other activities.
- 2.13 By the end of the Foundation Stage (Nursery and Reception classes), all pupils have achieved the early learning goals and most have made very good progress and started the Year 1 programme of the National Curriculum. Progress is particularly strong in personal, social and emotional development; the children are confident, independent and relate well to each other. Their language development is also very good; they are articulate, have a good vocabulary and speak confidently to adults.
- 2.14 Standards in Years 1 to 6 are good in most areas and very good in English. As the school does not use National Curriculum tests, it is not possible to make comparison with national standards. However, the school's own analysis of work and of Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS) tests, suggests that standards in mathematics are not as high as in

- other subjects. Although lessons were differentiated, opportunities to apply problem solving skills were not always used effectively and the work sometimes lacked variety and challenge for the more able. Work of a high standard was seen in ICT, history and science, where pupils are skilled at conducting investigations, analysing the results and drawing conclusions.
- 2.15 Over the last three years, GCSE results have been well above the average for all maintained schools and good in relation to pupils' abilities. The proportion of A/A\* grades is more than twice that of all maintained schools. The strongest performance is in modern foreign languages, mathematics, geography and history. The school has identified a relative weakness in sciences, due in part to a limited range of teaching techniques and the overuse of work sheets. Nationally standardised measures of progress indicate that in almost all subjects pupils make good and sometimes very good progress. Pupils with learning difficulties and those for whom English is an additional language achieve very well. At A level, results are also well above the average for all maintained schools, but the numbers of candidates in each subject is too small for reliable statistical analysis. These results enable the vast majority of pupils to gain places on courses at the universities of their choice.
- 2.16 At all stages and in most subjects, pupils are knowledgeable and are able to apply their knowledge and skills in new situations. Year 2 pupils were able to make up healthy lunchboxes after a visit by the education officer of a leading supermarket chain. After researching Henry VIII using ICT, Year 5 pupils wrote letters of proposal to Anne of Cleves, setting out the advantages of the alliance. Year 7 pupils planning a day out with their exchange partners used their map-reading skills to plan the route, and used the internet to check the facilities and opening times of possible places to visit.
- 2.17 Pupils are highly articulate, and this was particularly evident in a school council meeting where they were able to produce coherent and logical lines of reasoning and to think rapidly 'on their feet', and in the interviews where they expressed their opinions clearly and confidently; they are never afraid to risk an opinion. The standard of pupils' writing is high, whether as personal accounts, persuasive letters to the mayor, sensitive poetry or well-argued analytical essays in the sixth-form. The school magazine is particularly good. Good note-making was found in the sixth-form but elsewhere the development of this skill is often hindered by the excessive use of worksheets, many of which offer insufficient challenge and restrict pupils' opportunities to organise their own work, be creative and explore their own potential. The presentation of written work is almost always impeccable.
- 2.18 In most classes, mathematical skills are applied confidently and competently across the curriculum. Pupils are confident in handling data, manipulating formulae and producing appropriate graphs. Pupils have good ICT skills which they use mainly for word processing and desk-top publishing. The 'newspaper' front pages produced by Year 5 were particularly good. Pupils use the internet for research in history and geography and some were seen manipulating images in art. However, very little use of ICT was seen in mathematics and science in either the Junior or the Senior School.
- 2.19 The school's aim of developing the whole person, encouraging breadth of interests and setting high expectations results in high standards in a range of sporting and cultural activities, particularly given the size of the school. In the last year, two girls have gained national selection (for fencing and golf) and a further 20 have represented the county or district in lacrosse, hockey, athletics and netball. The junior running club with 50 members dominates local competitions and is unbeaten. In music, some 20 pupils a year achieve Grade 5 or above and at least two achieve Grade 8. More than 30 pupils a year take London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA) examinations in reading, acting and verse speaking, with six to nine gaining the gold award. The recently formed junior bridge club exemplifies the search for excellence, winning the first tournament it entered. The success

rate in the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme is high at all three levels, including the difficult gold award. In fund-raising for charity, the school sets high standards, £15,000 being raised in the last academic year.

- 2.20 Pupils of all ages and aptitudes are keen and interested in their work; they are well organised, settle quickly to their tasks and show impressive powers of concentration. They listen carefully and respectfully to each other's views and opinions; they share ideas and help each other but are capable of working independently. Their behaviour is exemplary.

### **Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development of Pupils**

- 2.21 Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. Throughout the school, pupils demonstrate outstanding personal qualities, encouraged and developed by an ethos which emphasises personal responsibility, self growth, strong moral values, concern for others and involvement and achievement in all the activities that the school offers. Within a safe, friendly environment they are encouraged to develop spiritually, morally, socially and culturally. This is a great strength of the school. Provision since the last inspection has been improved by the introduction of a comprehensive and well implemented programme of personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE).
- 2.22 Pupils' spiritual awareness is very strong. In assemblies and in religious education and through wall displays, pupils learn about world religions; they discuss matters of faith and are encouraged to develop their own response. In PSHCE, the discussion of social, health and emotional issues further contributes to the pupils' understanding of who they are and what they stand for. In lessons and in assemblies, they are constantly encouraged to reflect not only about themselves but about the situation of others. In a senior assembly where pupils had been asked to identify issues important to them, their perspective was changed when they were read extracts from the letter of an African girl, whose issues were not the environment or climate change but walking ten miles to fetch water for the family. Pupils are valued as individuals; the encouragement they receive to participate to the best of their ability in all activities and the public recognition they receive for even the smallest achievement, whether in or out of school, make a great contribution to their sense of self worth and to their sense of identity, as an individual and member of the school.
- 2.23 Pupils develop strong moral values; they are presented with a clear moral code. They are set a good example by staff, and are well able to distinguish between right and wrong. No opportunities are missed to raise moral issues wherever they occur in the curriculum and to help pupils to form their own view. Year 5 pupils discussed the values in Victorian society and why they were not always acceptable today. In a discussion in PSHCE, Year 8 pupils learned that rights also brought responsibilities and Year 13 biologists discussed the moral implications of gene technology. The school has a clear code of conduct, which pupils understand and respect, and the rare misdemeanours are dealt with sensitively. At all times, pupils are encouraged to think of the effect of their actions on others.
- 2.24 Pupils' social development is a strength of the school and stems from the many opportunities they are given, or create for themselves, to co-operate and take responsibility. In class they work well in mutually supportive groups; they organise imaginative and thoughtful assemblies, for example, in a Junior School assembly a small group of pupils planned and delivered very confidently a presentation about pen-friends; and the great number of activities and visits give them valuable opportunities to establish new relationships and assume leadership roles. The peer mentoring scheme provides approachable young adults to whom younger pupils would be prepared to turn if the need arose. The confidence they acquire in this way encourages them to exercise their initiative. The idea of Friendship Friday, where pupils are encouraged to make new friends, came from pupils in the junior

council. A sixth-form pupil organised her friends to pack bags at a supermarket in order to raise a considerable sum of money for the Asian Earthquake Appeal. The PSHCE course gives pupils an insight into different aspects of society and the Junior and Senior School councils give them practice in democratic decision-making. The more recently formed junior council is outstanding. Pupils are encouraged to participate because they know that the senior management takes them seriously and they can bring about change. Influenced by the caring ethos of the school, the pupils demonstrate their awareness of the privileges they enjoy through service in the community (mainly under the auspices of the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme) and through fundraising for charity on a considerable scale.

- 2.25 Pupils enjoy a rich cultural experience throughout the school. The knowledge that they gain from their study of history, geography, literature and the arts is enhanced by visits to the theatre, galleries and other places of interest. For example, a Year 6 group studying the Romans in Britain visited a Roman fort where they spent the night and imagined life as a legionary. The PSHCE programme gives additional information about contemporary life and institutions. Through the well-organised mock elections, with manifestos, canvassing and hustings, senior pupils gained a valuable insight into the political process. The junior council learned about the workings of local government when they were able to hold one of their meetings in the Council Chamber at the Town Hall in the presence of the Mayor. The school is very outward looking and many pupils have the opportunity to travel abroad and mix with young people of other nations, for instance the World Challenge Expedition to Africa. Throughout the school, pupils are very aware of difference and diversity in their own country; they learn about other faiths and visit their places of worship, for example a Mosque and a Sikh temple in the last year. In school, pupils from minority ethnic groups are well integrated and accepted; each year there are celebrations for Diwali and the Chinese New Year. Some of the charities supported are in the economically less well developed world and pupils responded generously to the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami disaster by contributing to the building of a new school.
- 2.26 The school meets the regulatory requirements for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils [Standard 2].

### **The Quality of Teaching (Including Assessment)**

- 2.27 The quality of teaching across all years is good and sometimes very good. It supports the school's aims and contributes effectively to pupils' good attainment and progress throughout the school. The quality of teaching has improved significantly since the last inspection. More than three-quarters of the lessons seen were good or better, and one lesson in five was outstanding; very few lessons were unsatisfactory and they had no common features. At its best, the teaching is exciting and enriching, expanding pupils' horizons and setting them imaginative challenges. Nevertheless, in a small but significant proportion of lessons, the teaching was narrowly focused and the tasks repetitive or mundane, leading to pupils making less progress than they might. This is at least partly responsible for the relatively small proportion of A\* and A grades in GCSE sciences. The school is aware of the problem and is addressing it. For the most part, however, the teaching enables pupils to make good or very good progress, particularly those who have learning difficulties or for whom English is an additional language.
- 2.28 Teaching encourages pupils to have an interest in their work, whether intellectual, physical or creative. In the best lessons, pupils are made to think for themselves, and appropriate challenges are set to allow pupils to progress at their own rate. Lessons take place in a relaxed but purposeful atmosphere and behaviour is exemplary. The excellent relationships between pupils and teachers create a supportive environment in which pupils respond readily

- to questions and, where given the opportunity, they are confident to offer their own ideas and suggestions and to take risks. In a Year 13 drama lesson, for example, they were willing to evaluate and to criticize their own and each other's performances. Pupils feel comfortable admitting to difficulties and are confident that teachers care and will offer additional support.
- 2.29 Teachers are well qualified in the subjects they teach; they use their knowledge well and in the best lessons their enthusiasm is inspirational. Teaching is well and sometimes imaginatively planned. Learning objectives are made clear, lessons proceed at a brisk pace and at the end teachers review how much has been learned. Teachers have a good knowledge of their pupils' needs and abilities and make good use of individual education plans (IEPs) to support those with learning difficulties. They are, however, less good at catering for the needs of the most able by providing specific tasks for them, though there are areas of good practice. In a Year 11 music lesson, able pupils were challenged when discussing cultural awareness in film music and in orchestral scores, and they produced their own imaginative compositions at different levels. In a Year 7 history lesson, 'hot-seating' of a very able girl as the contestant in 'Who wants to be a millionaire?' game, with the rest of the class as her 'phone a friend' support, enabled all pupils to be actively involved. In less successful lessons, teachers used more limited strategies, relying on exposition followed by questions and making too great a use of unimaginative worksheets which allowed pupils too few opportunities to contribute their own ideas.
- 2.30 The provision of resources is adequate to support the curriculum and the teaching and they are generally well used. ICT resources have improved since the last inspection and are now satisfactory. Overall, not enough use is made of the equipment, though there were examples of good practice. In modern foreign languages, teachers used music and the interactive whiteboard to good effect, preparing lively presentations which engaged all members of the class and ensured a positive learning environment. In a Year 5 history lesson, pupils researched Henry VIII on the internet and used an interactive whiteboard to simulate a situation in Henry's court where they had to fetch a writing case for the King, and in so doing had to obey all the conventions of the court. In the Senior School the limited ICT facilities in the science laboratories limits its use within lessons. Other resources are adequate and, in the Junior School in particular, teachers are inventive in using them imaginatively. For example, the transformation of the entrance of a classroom into the entrance to an Egyptian tomb and the high quality of the display enthralled the pupils and inspired their learning.
- 2.31 Teaching includes regular assessment of pupils' work but the quality and consistency vary. It is very good in the Junior School and in the sixth-form and sound in the rest of the school. Assessment in the Foundation Stage is very thorough; every day, children are assessed on their progress in each of the six areas of learning and the results are used to inform planning for the following day's activities. Record keeping is meticulous. In the Junior School, assessment is thorough in English, mathematics and science but more informal in other subjects. Pupils commented on the quality and helpfulness of the marking during their interviews - they enjoyed the fact that they could reply to the questions posed about their work. Teachers make good use of published tests to check progress and to inform planning. In the Senior School, the detail of marking and assessment policies is left to the discretion of separate departments. Practice is best in the sixth-form, where pupils' progress is monitored closely, and in English, ICT and art, where marking is analytical, with suggestions as to how the work can be improved. Elsewhere, inconsistency within and between departments renders marking less effective than it should be. Some teachers' marking consists of just a grade with few, if any comments to help pupils improve the standard of their work

- 2.32 In the Junior School, pupils' performance is evaluated using standardised tests produced by Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS) project and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), the results of which are analysed to identify weaknesses and guide planning. In the Senior School, a baseline is established in Year 7, using standardised tests produced by the Middle Years Information Service (MidYIS) in order to establish the progress made to the GCSE examinations. Again, results are analysed carefully to guide future planning. However, in Years 7 to 9, internal assessment is not related to external standards and this leads to some exaggeration of performance, followed by a puzzling (to the pupils) drop in marks when attainment is measured against GCSE criteria in Years 10 and 11.
- 2.33 The school meets the regulatory requirements for teaching [Standard 1].

### **3. THE QUALITY OF CARE AND RELATIONSHIPS**

#### **The Quality of Pastoral Care, and the Welfare, Health and Safety of Pupils**

- 3.1 As at the time of the last inspection, the quality of care for the well-being and development of all pupils throughout the school is excellent; it is backed by clear and effective policies and structures. Staff know their pupils very well and good relations and a caring atmosphere prevail throughout the school. Arrangements to secure pupils' welfare, health and safety are very good and are kept under constant review. Analysis of the questionnaires completed by pupils and their parents and discussions with pupils themselves indicate a very high degree of satisfaction.
- 3.2 Throughout the school, teachers have a detailed knowledge of their pupils and are skilled at nurturing their individual talents and personalities; they are supportive and deal with problems very speedily as they arise, ensuring that whatever action is taken is reported to all concerned. Pupils, in their turn, are happy to talk to their teachers if they have problems. The support and care for pupils is enhanced by very good communication and recording systems and, more generally, by the effective pastoral arrangements. Problems are aired and dealt with at weekly staff briefings; and regular meetings of the pastoral team and between pastoral staff and the PSHCE co-ordinator all add to the store of knowledge. Meetings between the head of boarding and tutors ensure that information concerning boarders is quickly shared. Pupils' records, which are stored securely, are comprehensive, containing not only a pupil's academic and pastoral history but also his or her achievements.
- 3.3 The quality of relationships throughout the community is high. Pupils mix well with their peers. They are kind and helpful to each other and spontaneously celebrate their personal and team achievements. Pupils are confident that there are many adults to whom they could turn if the need arose.
- 3.4 Levels of attendance are high. Procedures for registration, the registers themselves and the admission register all meet regulatory requirements.
- 3.5 The school's procedures for promoting good behaviour are very clear and are known to and respected by the pupils themselves. Parents and pupils agree that standards of behaviour are very high and that high-level sanctions are rarely needed. Rules are understood and seen to be reasonable. Sanctions are fairly imposed and the reward system further encourages good behaviour and the right attitudes. In the Junior School, 'Buttercup Awards' and the Headteacher's Awards are much prized. The reward system is more successful in the Junior School than in the Senior School where not all pupils are aware how it operates: the awarding of house points was seen by some pupils as inconsistent. Measures to counteract bullying are thorough and most pupils thought that the rare incidents that occurred were dealt with swiftly and effectively.
- 3.6 Effective child-protection measures are in place. The headmistress is the designated child protection officer and her training and that of her staff are up to date. The head of the Junior School is the deputy designated protection officer and she is shortly to complete her training. The Senior School deputy and head of sixth-form are also undergoing child-protection training. Medical provision is very good and is overseen by the matron. All staff have undergone basic first aid training and three have completed the full first-aid course. Matron dispenses any medication but the procedures to apply in her absence are not clear enough. Checks have been carried out on all staff with the Criminal Records Bureau.

- 3.7 The school takes its health and safety responsibilities seriously and sets high standards. Policies and their implementation are overseen by a sub-committee of the governing body. The school has employed an external agency to carry out a health and safety audit and has followed up all the recommendations. The firm's representative sits on the health and safety committee. The local fire service has checked for fire safety and the school carries out regular fire drills. Procedures for organising off-site activities and the accompanying risk assessments are detailed and clear.
- 3.8 The school meets the regulatory requirements for the welfare, health and safety of pupils [Standard 3].

### **The Quality of Links with Parents and the Community**

- 3.9 The quality of links with parents and the community is excellent. Parents are highly satisfied with the quality of education their children receive. The quality of reports is good but could be improved. The quality and amount of information that parents receive have improved significantly since the last inspection and parents are much more involved in the life of the school. The already good links with the community have been strengthened.
- 3.10 The level of parental response to the pre-inspection questionnaire was high, almost two-thirds, and the views expressed were overwhelmingly positive; more than 96 per cent were pleased or very pleased with the education their children were receiving. They singled out for praise the values promoted by the school, the personal development of their children and the level of pastoral care. They were also very pleased with their children's progress and the quality of the curriculum and extra-curricular activities. The one area where there was any significant dissatisfaction (10%) was the involvement of parents in the life of the school (this was a criticism at the last report). The inspectors agree with the positive views but find that parents have very good opportunities to be involved in the life of the school; in addition to the links which normally exist, the school has instituted a drop-in centre where parents can take problems before or after school; the headmistress holds regular focus group meetings with parental class representatives and publishes the minutes and the school's responses on the school's website; parents are also involved in a working party set up by the governors for strategic planning.
- 3.11 Parents have very good opportunities to be involved in the life of the school and in the work and progress of their children. In addition to the features mentioned in the previous paragraph, parents attend consultation meetings and meetings for transition, options and careers/university entrance. They come in to school to talk about their work, some offer placements for work experience and, together with former pupils, take part in the annual careers conference. Parents attend events and provide help on visits; some help in the Nursery. The active Parents' Association organises educational and social events and joins in fund-raising activities.
- 3.12 Parents are provided with a wealth of information about the school and its activities. The main vehicle for transmitting information is the comprehensive and well designed website, which has sections for parents and former pupils; it also publishes the minutes of meetings. The very well produced newsletters are published on the website as well as in hard copy. The quality of the reports which are issued twice a year is uneven. Senior reports are encouraging and contain information about the work covered but comments are not always sufficiently precise about weaknesses in performance and how it can be improved. Apart from those for Years 10 to 13, targets are not clear enough. The same criticisms apply to the Junior School reports and, in addition, they do not contain information about the work covered. A useful improvement has been the invitation to parents to respond to the report;

the school is also exploring ways of including reports on pupils' other achievements in the reporting process.

- 3.13 The school's arrangements for handling parents' concerns and complaints are comprehensive and fully meet regulatory requirements. In recent years, however, they have not been needed; 95 per cent of parents think that concerns are handled promptly and well and that the responses have improved considerably in recent years. All letters are answered promptly and the correspondence is logged and retained.
- 3.14 Links with the community are very good and improving. The school has gone out of its way to reach out and establish links with local and regional press, and professional, industrial and commercial organisations, and one company currently sponsors a place at the school. Pupils' participation, often with considerable success, in local and regional sporting and cultural events, improves the school's relations with the community and makes a valuable contribution to their personal development. Pupils also work hard to raise money for local as well as national charities. Through work experience placements and community service as part of the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme, pupils have further opportunities to be involved with and contribute to the local community. The holiday club for children, 'Funzone' is open to the community as well as Polam pupils, and the school theatre and gymnasium are used regularly by local groups.
- 3.15 The school meets the regulatory requirements for the provision of information and the manner in which complaints are to be handled [Standards 6 and 7].

### **The Quality of Boarding Education**

- 3.16 The quality of boarding education is excellent; the combination of comfortable accommodation, caring staff, a strong boarding spirit and a varied range of activities in the evenings and at weekends contributes to an experience which is valued by both the pupils and their parents. The standards noted at the time of the last inspection have been maintained or improved.
- 3.17 Relationships between the boarders and the boarding staff and among the boarders themselves are excellent. The members of the boarding staff create a warm atmosphere in which each girl feels valued. They are aware of their role *in loco parentis*, so that they set clear boundaries while remaining motherly and approachable. The boarding house staff monitor carefully the behaviour and development of the pupils; they liaise regularly with form tutors and the head of the Junior School so that issues arising in the boarding houses can be followed up in the main school, and *vice versa*.
- 3.18 The boarders themselves are from a variety of backgrounds and nearly half come from the far east, most of whom are in the sixth-form. All are well integrated and the mutual respect and friendship between the overseas and British pupils is a model of what a global community should be. The celebration of the Chinese Moon Festival and the candlelit Christmas service provide valuable cultural exchanges at a personal level. The creation of two houses for the purposes of competitions and to bring about greater integration of pupils of different ages came from the pupils themselves, and it was they who chose the house names - Peace and Harmony – which sum up the atmosphere of the boarding houses and echo the ethos of the whole school. Mutual support is evident; older pupils help younger ones; British pupils give language support to those in the early stages of learning English.
- 3.19 Boarders have a wide range of activities both after school during the week and at week ends. After school and prep, pupils take part in sporting activities such as volleyball and basketball. In the evening they have monitored access to the small computer suite in one of the boarding

houses, and several times a week there are quizzes, competitions and other activities. Many of the ideas and much of the organisation come from the pupils themselves, reinforcing the spirit of enterprise which runs through the school. The head boarder, her two deputies and the two heads of house form an organising committee and prepare a programme of events. These include house competitions, impromptu concerts, origami (where some of the Cantonese pupils act as tutors), and cookery master classes which are popular and international. Each boarding house organises a major event to which parents, staff and non-boarders are invited. Grange House organised a cheese and wine evening and the Junior House held a Teddy Bears' Picnic in the summer term. At weekends, many pupils are involved in matches or other school events and overseas pupils are often invited to the homes of their British friends. For others there is sport and cycling in the extensive grounds. The house staff organise shopping expeditions, visits to local places of interest and theatre and cinema outings. Pupils interviewed said that they did not have time to be homesick or to be bored.

- 3.20 The boarding houses are comfortable and spacious, with good facilities for recreation. The standards of furnishing, decoration and maintenance are good. Pupils' rooms are personalised with pictures and toys. A major improvement in the last year has been the boarders' ICT room, which they use in the evenings and at weekends.
- 3.21 Issues raised at the time of the last boarding inspection in 2003 were found to have been thoroughly addressed at the follow-up visit two years later. Boarders interviewed at that time all felt that boarding provision had improved considerably.

## **4. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT**

### **The Quality of Governance**

- 4.1 The quality of governance is very good; the governors provide very effective oversight and guidance to the school and their stewardship ensures that the school's aims and objectives are met. They are well organised and know the school well. They are effective in determining the overall strategic direction of the school and are rigorous in holding it to account.
- 4.2 The structure and remit of the governing body are clearly defined. Management arrangements are good and all meetings are well documented. For greater efficiency, the governors have set up a number of sub-committees and strategy groups and these make significant contributions to specific areas; the Health and Safety Committee, for example, has been very effective in monitoring and responding to the many changes in legislation in recent years. One governor is specifically responsible for child protection. The governors have a broad range and great depth of expertise and experience. They are dynamic and their involvement in the life of the school is increasing.
- 4.3 Governors are fully aware of their responsibilities and play a very significant role in financial and strategic planning, in drawing up the school's development plan, in marketing and in ensuring that regulatory and legal requirements are met. Aided by a very efficient bursar, they have managed the school's finances very well, ensuring that the school receives good value for monies spent. The governors have a lower profile and less direct involvement in matters of educational policy and planning where both the headmistress and the governors themselves see the governors' role primarily as facilitators enabling the headmistress to fulfil her professional responsibility in her leadership of the school's educational development. Nevertheless, all new policies are subjected to their rigorous scrutiny before they are adopted.
- 4.4 Very good communication between governors and the school ensures that in addition to formal reporting at governors' meetings the governors are kept fully informed in various ways about the life of the school. They are regularly briefed by the headmistress, they receive all editions of senior and junior newsletters and attend school functions. A recent valuable innovation is 'Governors' Open Day' offering governors the opportunity to spend a day in school and share its normal working environment. Governors found this a useful and very enjoyable experience.
- 4.5 The governors' commitment to the school is evident and they give very generously of their time and expertise. They provide very strong support for the headmistress and her senior management team and to the whole school community.

### **The Quality of Leadership and Management**

- 4.6 Leadership and management are good, and sometimes very good, throughout the school. The headmistress, strongly supported by the head of the Junior School, provides clear and decisive direction in all aspects of school life. The school's aims are clear and, as a result of very good leadership and the commitment of staff, they are being achieved. Standards are rising, not just in terms of academic results but in all spheres of activity; the provision for personal development and pastoral care is outstanding. In the two years since her appointment the headmistress has consulted widely, established priorities for improvement and moved forward rapidly but at a pace that others can sustain. The senior management

- team is effective and energetic but the roles and understanding of heads and co-ordinators of subjects are less well developed.
- 4.7 The development plan is comprehensive, clear and accountable, taking into consideration the strengths and weaknesses of the school, and of educational and regulatory developments. The staff and governors have been fully involved in the process. However, the priorities for action are not always clear enough, senior management is not monitoring sufficiently the interim progress of those actions which are spread over several years, and it is not evaluating the outcomes at the end of the process. At the level of individual subjects, development planning is relatively weak as it has not been part of the culture of the school and staff have not had sufficient training to manage the process.
- 4.8 In the two years since the head's appointment, virtually all policies have been updated or revised and many are forward-looking in areas which have not previously been formalised, for example, the policy for the identification of and provision for the gifted and talented. The implementation of these policies is, however, uneven and is not being monitored well enough. For example, assessment policies have been improved but inconsistencies remain and are not always identified. Although co-ordinators have job descriptions their understanding of their monitoring role is limited and any monitoring is done by senior management; in the case of the Junior School, almost all of it is done by the head.
- 4.9 The management and development of staffing resources is good. In each section of the school, teachers are well qualified and experienced; they are well deployed and classes are small enough to ensure that pupils receive personal attention. Teachers work hard and are strongly committed to the welfare and development of the pupils. All teachers have job descriptions but apart from those for senior management, which are specific, most are generic and do not identify particular responsibilities. In part at least because of the relatively small size of the school, the management structure is flat in that, outside the senior management team, there are few promoted posts and none in the Junior School, though a number of teachers have subject responsibility. As a result, the line management structure is unclear and subjects tend to work independently of one another. To combat this isolation, senior management has instituted and is encouraging the sharing of good practice through teachers observing each other's lessons. This is a precursor to the introduction of a formal staff appraisal scheme which is in the process of consultation. Communication and consultation are both very good. Regular, minuted meetings are held at all levels and working parties are set up to ensure that all staff have an opportunity to contribute to the development of policies. Staff development, through in-house or external courses is playing an increasing part in updating staff and preparing them for change.
- 4.10 At a whole-school and strategic level, the bursar and the finance sub-committee of the board of governors have a good grasp and control of finances and secure appropriate resources for pupils' learning. At departmental level, however, the three-year development cycle is incompatible with the one-year budgetary cycle, encouraging a short-term rather than a long-term view with consequences for efficiency. Non-teaching staff are sufficient in number and are well deployed. They form a loyal and experienced team, well managed by the bursar, who do much to provide for the needs of both teachers and pupils, and to maintain the very good condition of the buildings and facilities. All staff are checked through the Criminal Records Bureau, or its overseas equivalent, before appointment.
- 4.11 The administration of the school is efficient and it runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis. In particular, the school office gives an excellent service to staff, pupils and parents. Admissions and the introduction of parents to the school are very well handled. Teachers receive a great deal of support for their day-to-day work, and pupils who may be ill, injured or in any difficulty are looked after very well.

- 4.12 The school meets the regulatory requirements for the suitability of proprietors and staff and for premises and accommodation [Standards 4 and 5].

## **5. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS**

### **Overall Conclusions**

- 5.1 In most respects, the school meets its aims and aspirations to a high degree. It has maintained, and even improved academic standards whilst making great strides in broadening and enriching the experience of pupils in other areas of activity, sporting, cultural and social. The result has been to raise their confidence and sense of self-worth. Provision for personal development, pastoral care and welfare is outstanding. Pupils leave as well rounded individuals with high personal standards and a practical concern for those less fortunate than themselves; they also show an unusual degree of initiative and enterprise. Communication and links with parents and the outside world have all improved considerably. The school is a warm, friendly and supportive community, which is lively and buzzing with activity. Pupils and parents are rightly very pleased with their school.
- 5.2 Improvement since the last inspection is not easy to comment on. The school has passed through a difficult period because of the long illness and death of the previous headmistress and an inevitable loss of momentum. The last two years have been a period of adjustment and changing culture. That so much has been achieved is due to the vision and energy of the headmistress and the senior management team and the commitment and willingness to adapt of the staff. Through its own self-evaluation, the school is aware that more can be done to raise the attainment of the most able, to improve the consistency of assessment and reporting and to increase the effectiveness of monitoring through the development of the role of heads of department and subject co-ordinators.
- 5.3 The school meets all the regulatory requirements.

### **Next Steps**

- 5.4 None of the following recommendations is major; they represent refinements and extensions of existing actions.
1. Provide more open-ended and challenging tasks for all pupils, but particularly the more able, and reduce the use of limited and unimaginative worksheets.
  2. Refine assessment and reporting in Years 7 to 9, making more use of external and objective criteria so that there is greater continuity of assessment from Years 7 to 11.
  3. Complete the introduction of the staff appraisal scheme, paying particular attention to the role of the head of department or subject leader.
- 5.5 No action in respect of regulatory requirements is required.

## 6. SUMMARY OF INSPECTION EVIDENCE

- 6.1 The inspection was carried out from January 23rd to 26th, 2006. The inspectors examined samples of pupils' work, observed lessons and conducted formal interviews with pupils. They held discussions with teaching and non-teaching staff and with governors, observed a sample of the extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection period, and attended registration sessions and assemblies. Inspectors visited boarding houses and the sanatorium. The responses of parents and pupils to pre-inspection questionnaires were analysed, and the inspectors examined a range of documentation made available by the school.

### List of Inspectors

John Marshall	Retired HMI (Reporting inspector)
Jill Moore	Retired senior teacher, GSA junior school (Assistant RI)
Lindsay Jane Griffin	Retired headmistress, GSA school
Helene Huber	Deputy head, GSA school
Linda Hunter	Junior school co-ordinator, GSA school
Bill Ibbetson Price	Headmaster, IAPS school
Janet Limrick	Director of studies, HMC school
Jane Moss	Retired head of pre-prep, IAPS school
Jonathan Varcoe	Retired head of department, HMC school