

The essence of a school

Mary Henderson, Dec. 23, 2010

Parents nowadays have such a wide choice of schools, and I am aware that it must often be quite daunting.

Here at Westonbirt School, as in all other schools, the academic performance of each pupil is at the core – every girl should achieve her academic potential. This is balanced by the ‘big four’ – art, drama, music and sport – all of which flourish at Westonbirt. Music, one of my particular favourites, is exceptionally strong and two-thirds of the girls enjoy singing in the Choirs and Chamber Choir as well as playing instruments; from the piano and the flute to our very own School Samba Band!

However, the ‘cement’ that binds all of these elements together and makes us what we are is the spiritual dimension of the school. We are a Church of England Foundation, formed in 1928 by the Martyrs Memorial Trust and three of our Governors still represent this Trust and are responsible for the spiritual wellbeing and development of the school. We have a full-time Chaplain and are very fortunate to have a beautiful school chapel in the grounds. This was the former village church, owned by Robert Holford who built Westonbirt House in 1856 and designed the neighbouring Arboretum. The chapel was given to the school in 1997 by the Diocese of Gloucester.

The spiritual ethos of the school is understated, yet ever present. Although Christian, all other faiths are welcomed (we have girls of other religions from a variety of countries) and it is very much left to the girls to decide on what they wish to believe; but I think it is important that each girl has at least an awareness instilled in her of something greater than herself. This awareness is intrinsically linked to a moral code of behaviour and values which encourage strong friendships and mutual respect.

The services we hold here are both formal and informal, from the weekday and Sunday services in church, the traditional Vespers and Confirmation, to the more relaxed year group assemblies in the Great Hall. The girls enjoy all of these acts of worship and it is not uncommon for Old Girls to return to the school for our services of Vespers on Tuesday and Thursday evenings, and particularly our candlelit Christmas Vespers; some also return to get married here in the Church. Even if some of the girls are not sure what they believe spiritually, the music and sense of occasion and community at our services add something very special and it would be a great loss not to have them at the school.

In an age where we are so consumed with our i-Phones, latest Apps, social networking and the latest reality TV sensation, it is important to maintain a balance and for us all at Westonbirt to have some time to reflect and think about spiritual values and our own beliefs.