



## *Cumnor 2020 and beyond*

### ***Purpose and Principles***

The abiding purpose of Cumnor is to provide the highest quality education for young children of up to 13 years of age in a co-educational environment with as broad and as deep an education as possible. The stimulation of contrasting nature (Maths followed by Swimming, followed by Music then Science) leads to greater enjoyment, greater flexibility and the potential to manage a longer day at prep school level than the 9 to 3 of a maintained sector school.

Happiness and security for a child, as a result of being known and being nurtured as opposed to being a school pupil who is tested and stressed and measured with relentless frequency, is paramount. One of the many advantages of carrying children through to 13+ is the ability to stretch childhood across a slightly extended canvas. There can be some time to spare, some time to experiment, some time indeed to stand and stare, before exams increase the work load between 11 and 13. Another important aspect of this period of time is offering the option to each child to board. On the one hand this forms part of their individual development as independent young people, and on the other it keeps so many more school avenues open; indeed, it maintains Cumnor with an exit list of 20+ schools each year. In this we are unusual.

We hope the Cumnor motto of 'Aim High, Be Kind and Dare to be Different' is telling us to seek the best in and for each individual child, both in their education here and hereafter; to reinforce as the core of all Cumnor life the virtues of treating others as you would want to be treated; and, in daring to be different, the school is reminding itself to treat each child with whatever degree of differentiation is appropriate rather than placing an institutional straitjacket on the child and saying 'This is what Cumnor does'; it is the place for a balanced, broad, happy education without sacrifice to achievement.

My final snippet of Cumnor philosophy might appear glib but I offer it nonetheless. At Cumnor children come first; all other constituencies are joint second.

### ***The Immediate Context***

Since 2001, Cumnor fees have risen, in line with leading preparatory schools, by an uncomfortable 90%. In the same period, the size of the school has grown to 385 (a growth of 45%) while the staffing numbers have gone from 29 teachers to 70 (141%), from a grand total of 50 staff to one of 108 (116%). The growth in numbers came as a result of identifying ourselves on the one hand as a predominantly local school, with boarding as an option for pre-teens, and also as stressing our country prep. school credentials to those looking to move from London whilst maintaining the chance to send their children on to the top schools in the country. Our staff/pupil ratio last year was 1:6.7 against a national average for equivalent schools of 1:7.6. In 2001, we gained 11 scholarships, whilst last year the number was 23 from a Year 8 of 42 pupils.

This growth permitted the opportunity to bring setting into the last three year groups of the school, allowing children to work at the appropriate pace in different subjects according to their own emerging abilities. Facilities built since 2001 include a new boarding wing, a classroom block of six classrooms and a DT centre, an indoor 25 metre pool, a 400 seat theatre, five new outdoor pitch surfaces for football, cricket, rugby or rounders, two new netball/tennis courts and a full size all weather pitch, bringing hockey as an option for both boys and girls. We have created the Music Barn and most recently, we have introduced a Nursery classroom to our school and built an outdoor classroom for the pre-prep.

The curriculum has expanded to include music, drama, PE and swimming lessons from the Early Years onwards. Design Technology begins at Year 3. Information Technology lessons, begun in Reception, lead

to iPads being used by children in Years 7 & 8, across a campus which carries wireless broadband. A Learning Support Department of one teacher in 2001 has developed into 6 staff and has turned into a core strength of this non-selective school.

### ***The Environment***

The environment surrounding Cumnor has evidently changed considerably in the last decade, most notably in the growing impact being felt by potential parents as the fees charged by independent schools have outpaced the standard income increases. We must work hard to moderate the pace of fee increases whilst continuing to deliver sustained value for the considerable investment made by parents in their children's education and development.

Meanwhile there is increasing uncertainty as to the political and social environment in which we find ourselves. We need a long term commitment to embed ourselves in our local community and to see ourselves as part of a national educational system. In the last decade, we have seen a distinct trend towards the absorption of small, failing prep schools into senior schools or, indeed, their absorption into larger charitable organisations or else for-profit organisations. We have also seen five preparatory schools shut down altogether in that period in this area.

We face a new challenge in the form of an increasing number of senior schools beginning their intake at 11+ and from the fragmenting of our time, attention and possibly even curriculum caused by larger numbers of pre-tests at 11+ and 12+. We are also vulnerable to the possibility of a sustained attempt to undermine our market by competitors with a range of feeder schools.

In the next decade, Cumnor must address the threats and align itself in relation not only to senior independent schools but also to the state educational system around it through its links to primary schools. Blinkers must be removed that would encourage us to see ourselves as an isolated centre of excellence. This is now indeed a contradiction in terms. We must be prepared to share, and indeed spread, excellence. This will involve working closely with local community schools and broadening access to our education with the support of the proposed Cumnor Foundation.

### ***Differing Routes***

Given the success of the school, it might be excusable to consider that the safest route forward would be to follow a 'steady as she goes' course; tempting but hardly practical. However, we want to avoid making the school much larger in terms of pupil numbers, thereby maintaining the sense that every child is known and every family matters. We should regard the hiring and retention of excellent staff as an overwhelming priority.

We should continue to link into the local primaries and, indeed, to forge links with local senior schools to promote our own Foundation. In seeking to broaden the nature of pupil entry into Cumnor, we should pause to think not only of free places to children from within the local community as earlier mentioned, but also of the limited degree of multicultural influence within the school. If we are preparing children for life in an unimaginably diverse future, should we not attempt to ensure more cultural diversity, albeit on a relatively small scale during their time here?

We should, perhaps, look to build on what has already proven promising. The opening of access to those boarders in the top two years should be improved through the offer of weekly boarding, and, if space allows or necessitates, the offer of night by night boarding...an empty bed serves no purpose.

Our future, therefore, should be one of continued independence, strongly built upon many links and many examples of mutual dependency that bind but do not constrict. The core of the Trust, its values and its objectives are strong. Through the retention and development of key staff, more is made possible.



### ***Specific Objectives and Key Actions***

In the short term, work needs to begin on our Cumnor Foundation. In considering our staffing requirements we must also review the balance of subject specialism and generalism, and we must consider both the quantity and nature of all the support staff. The one potentially new area for employment may be in the provision of a Development Office, which could have a role in supporting the Foundation, fund-raising and community links, for example. Having launched the Cumnor Foundation we shall look to move from our one or two initial scholarships to whatever we may think to be the optimum in each year group between Years 4 and 8, potentially as many as four. We shall also seek to develop diverse revenue streams.

In the long term, we must continue to seek the best possible facilities for teaching and learning for the children, and we must seek to employ and retain the best possible staff; those that offer both inspiration and perspiration and who cannot be regarded as journeymen or journeywomen filling in the 9-5 time sheet. We shall be uncompromising in the pursuit of sustained teaching excellence.

There is a need here to consider the role of technology in future plans: in terms of teaching and learning, administrative support and outreach to the market place. Our results and reports should, I would suggest, all be accessed by parents through a portal into our information management system. Finally, there is an as yet unrealised potential to use IT to communicate with and inform the parent body, and the potential parent body, on a daily basis.

### ***The Outcome***

The ethos of the school will be as recognisable as it is now or was in 2001. Its keenly child-centric spirit will be undimmed. Cumnor will be understood widely to be the pre-eminent prep. school of the south east; a school that supports each child's EQ alongside its IQ and one that recognises that many of the most vital aspects of education are to be found in areas apparently supporting classroom teaching and learning.

Continuing upon the considerable improvement of facilities since the turn of the century, we shall have moved forward again through our opening of a new Science Centre. A fresh and central Library will be in place. Our Nursery facilities will allow for a similar capacity to our Reception classes. The excellence of our catering will be supported by an extended dining room and kitchen space. Our Sports Hall will be re-clad and extended to provide a Dance Studio. Our All Weather Surface will be flood-lit. We shall find effective and, in part, remunerative ways to share these facilities with the wider community.

The heart of our offer, the staff, will be enriched by the creation of staff accommodation for families and singles on site. The primacy of excellence in our educational offering to children and their parents will be relentlessly reinforced. Cumnor is renowned for the breadth of experience offered to children. Our pupils will, as part of a Cumnor variation on the D of E scheme, share in activities with local primary children.

Our competitiveness in financial terms will be assured by a close level of attention to cost control. We shall seek new sources of revenue: these may stem from nursery offerings, professional external fund-raising and, indeed, more studied use of the current site during the holiday periods.

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