

Swainswick Primary School

Georgette McCready visits one of Bath's smallest schools, nestled within the Swainswick Valley



It's natural for parents to wish their children the kind of childhood they themselves wanted. Days spent playing happily outdoors, walks through wildflower meadows, building dens in the woods and enjoying communal cook-outs over fire pits. Add to that the desire for children to be able to grasp the nuances of grammar, take an interest in global issues and be both confident and kind to others, and you've pretty much got the childhood experience that Swainswick Church of England Primary School offers its 84 pupils.

The original Victorian school building is perched on a hillside overlooking the Swainswick Valley in an idyllic rural setting. It's tucked away down country lanes, but it's testament to the special community that has been grown here that so many parents from nearby places, including Lansdown, Batheaston and Larkhall, choose to send their children here.

Head teacher Grant Swarbrooke joined the school three and a half years ago, during which time many improvements have been made. But he is quick to say, "Schools are always on their own little journeys and I want to stress that this is not my school, it is our school. It has a

strong sense of community at its heart. That is what is important." And true to his word, this head is very much part of the teaching team, as well as helping with school dinners and maintaining a supportive presence throughout.

A smart new classroom building with a covered side play area provides light and airy accommodation for all kinds of activities, from phonics to music Tuesdays, when everyone plays together. On the day of our visit, a group of children are excitedly handling an emu egg,

comparing it to a hen's egg and watching delightedly as the egg is cracked open.

In the old school building – soon to be upgraded to create better use of space – children are working in small groups around tables in the main hall. Because the school has fewer than 100 pupils, different year groups work side by side and there's a sense of friendship and support that runs through all ages.

Head outside and you can see why playtime is so popular. Beyond the playground is a magical semi-wild space with trees, twisting



paths and grass that allows young imaginations to grow. This additional outdoor play area was created thanks to a previous vicar allowing the school to take over part of her garden. There are children grubbing about happily in the earth, playing in the mud kitchen and using a boat for all kinds of adventures.

At the top of the natural area lies the school garden, created and supported by The Eco Club, set up by parents. Here the children are growing beetroot, kale and

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potatoes, and are clearly proud of their gardening knowledge. The Eco Club also works actively to reduce the amount of plastic used in school and has set up a car share scheme.

An outdoor classroom offers far-reaching views across trees and farmland. Many of the school’s clubs are held here. It’s a popular spot for art, mindfulness and yoga. In addition, every Friday is forest school time, and children leave the



school campus to head for a wood in the valley where there are yurts and fire pits.

Grant is full of praise for the Friends of Swainswick School. “We are delighted that our parents are so committed to the school. They come in to school to help, they are fantastic fundraisers and they run a lot of social activities which really add to the sense of community.”

The next imminent improvement at the school will be the addition of a dedicated library.

Swainswick also welcomes regular visitors to broaden the children’s outlook on the world. These include visits from Amnesty International, a producer from *The Blue Planet* series and parents

who come to talk about their jobs. A mass tree planting will help focus minds on caring for the planet for future generations.

The school is built on Christian values and this is reflected in conflict resolution, where both parties are brought together for reflection and to apologise and move on. The whole school regularly sets out to walk across the fields to Woolley church for services, the journey itself being an important part of the outing.

Someone has left a coat out in the playground, with the threat of rain hanging in the air. A boy picks it up, unbidden, and recognising it, goes to find its owner. It is gestures such as these that convey the nurturing atmosphere in this unique community. It’s no wonder that so many parents have chosen the school for their children to start in September, with word of mouth spreading and adding to Swainswick’s growing popularity. ■



Swainswick C of E Primary School

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All of the superb photos in this piece were taken by Anna Barclay