

It was the Fearless Girl that first caught Alexandra Haydon's eye. The small but striking statue, a replica of the famous bronze figure that stands in the heart of New York's financial district, depicts a girl with her hands on her hips, looking up with a clear sense of determination and purpose.

"It's a girl standing with her shoulders back and looking directly in the eyes of whoever's challenging her,"

Alexandra says of the work, which was donated to Francis Holland by the Sarria family. "When I first saw a photo of it on the school website I thought, that's a really iconic image for girls' education.

"And then when you read around it, it's not just an image – it's something that the school is really achieving for the students, with the huge variety of programmes they offer but more than that, in their approach, which is really genuinely about the individual child.

"It's more than your standard teaching offer – it's an incredibly caring environment. It's a school that gets under the skin of the children and really cares about each and every one of them. Girls come out of the school with strong self-esteem and self-confidence and that gives them higher aspirations, a resilience that is all about, 'I know who I am and what I can do.' And you know, girls in the world need really good self-confidence."

Warm, enthusiastic and engaging, Alexandra's deep understanding of the ethos and values of Francis Holland, the independent girls' school on Bourne Street that she is set to join in January as its new head, shines through during our conversation. Equally impressive is her long and successful career in teaching, which is dotted with awards and achievements.

After gaining a PGCE teaching qualification from Oxford university, she joined Graveney, an Ofsted outstanding-rated state secondary in south-west London. She then took a teaching post in Bristol while gaining a master's from Oxford in learning and teaching.

After eight years in that role she was appointed head of science at St Mary's Calne, an independent girls' boarding school in Wiltshire, and went on to become senior teacher. "That was a really important time in my career, because I was



A class act

Francis Holland's new head, Alexandra Haydon, tells us why she's looking forward to joining the esteemed Belgravia school

WORDS: KATE WHITE

really able to be creative and take the department forward,” she says.

On Alexandra’s watch, St Mary’s became the first independent school to be awarded the Platinum Science Mark, a quality standard that recognises outstanding practice in school science departments. She was also named the winner of the highly prestigious i25 award, which celebrates innovators and influencers in the independent education sector.

In 2019 she bid farewell to St Mary’s to become deputy academic head at Millfield, the largest co-educational boarding school in Europe, where she has spent four happy years. And, to top it all off, she is halfway through a doctorate in education with Bath university. “So, I’ve been quite busy!” she laughs.

It was during the interview process for the role of head at Francis Holland – a position previously held by Lucy Elphinstone – that her impression of the school as a highly nurturing, caring environment was cemented even further. “I was interviewed by a little panel of students and they really backed up everything the school says it does,” she recalls. “They said, ‘We feel really cared for here.’ One of the sixth form girls said, ‘I don’t feel there’s a single moment where I haven’t really been fully supported by the school.’”

“Of course, that doesn’t mean that you haven’t had hard times, and it doesn’t mean you haven’t got some things wrong. But it’s that feeling of, ‘OK, I’m learning who I am, I’m working my way through it but underneath me is this really strong network of support and I feel that people are really rooting for me.’ Wouldn’t it be amazing if all young people could go through school having felt like that?”

Francis Holland’s pastoral care is second to none, with a six-person counselling team based in a wellbeing suite in the heart of the school. It offers a drop-in service open to all girls and a one-to-one service where ongoing support is provided. A crucial seventh member of the team is Kanga, the Hungarian vizsla therapy dog, who draws in girls who are less sure about accessing the service.

Academically Francis Holland sits within the top echelon of UK schools, with girls consistently achieving excellent results at GCSE and A-level. Despite the exam regulator Ofqual’s much-publicised tightening of grades to counter grade inflation, this summer Francis Holland’s A-level students achieved another stellar set of results, with 62 per cent of grades A* or A, 97 per cent A* to C and a 100 per cent pass rate.

But what also sets the school apart is the way it excels in so many other areas that are becoming increasingly important in the modern world. “It’s a really, really fantastic school,” Alexandra says. “The programmes they have got for creativity, for entrepreneurship, for innovative thinking, they are strong.”

It’s something she hopes to build on as head, especially with the much-discussed rise of artificial intelligence. “People are saying that AI will be more profound for the advancement of humanity than fire and electricity,” she says. “Schools can’t carry on churning out the same kind of intellectual and cultural curriculum that has been going on for the last 40 years. We need to do things differently.

“The skills I think are on the rise are things like creative thinking, genuine problem-solving and curiosity and having a lifelong approach to learning, because people aren’t staying in



FROM TOP: SIXTH FORM STUDENTS; GUYS AND DOLLS AT RIVERSIDE STUDIOS; STUDENTS WITH KANGA THE THERAPY DOG
OPPOSITE PAGE: ROOF GARDEN



the same career for 40 years any more.

“It’s about learning about leadership really deeply. Learning about social influence, how you impact on others and how others impact on you both positively and negatively and really understanding that.

“Social media is not going away, we can’t ignore it. But we need to understand that and we need to be confident with it and we need to know how we can really use that in a positive way.

“There are other aspects of social influence too, such as the way you are and your effect on the people around you. Being an activist for positive change, that’s incredibly important. I think understanding the nature of truth with the rise of AI, that is going to be really key.

“A lot of these programmes are there at Francis Holland but I think they’re going to become even more important and we can’t just sit by and say that what we’re doing now is good enough. I really passionately believe that an

independent school has a duty to show the world how things can be done differently. We need to be constantly innovating, testing and working things out and saying, ‘Right, this is what we’re doing. This is where it didn’t work, this is where it did work, this is something that could be done in a different way.’

“The school has got a lovely phrase, it says that young women leave Francis Holland knowing they can become the leaders, thinkers, innovators, designers, entrepreneurs and gamechangers of tomorrow. Which I think is a really lovely thing, but that’s what can happen at school as well, so not tomorrow but today. What impact can you make on the world as a 14- or 15-year-old? Probably more than you think.

“The future is really unknown, so it’s about preparing girls to know themselves in the wake of uncertainty and to be strong, wonderful women going out there.”

The future may be unknown, but one thing is for sure: with Alexandra at the helm, Francis Holland is in very safe hands.



ALEXANDRA HAYDON
TOP: FRANCIS HOLLAND GIRLS ON A SKIING TRIP