



# Bright futures

Alexandra Haydon, the headteacher of Francis Holland School, Sloane Square, on educating the next generation of girls, the school's new reconfiguration and embracing challenges

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Alexandra Haydon is nine months in to her role as headteacher of Francis Holland and she is relishing every moment. "It's been amazing, it's been extraordinary," she tells *Belgravia* magazine. "Sometimes you go to places and children don't look you in the eye properly, but that's never ever the case at Francis Holland."

With a mother who was a Montessori teacher, Alexandra has been around education her entire life.

Often helping out at her mum's school, handing out biscuits or reading stories, she was aware from an early age how these experiences can shape a young mind. "It was not childcare – it was a really thoughtful approach

to children, it doesn't matter how little they are. It's about always setting the bar high and seeing how high they can jump."

This is the approach she is bringing to Francis Holland as the overarching headteacher of the junior and senior schools. With the school turning 150 in seven years' time and an impeccable reputation to uphold, she realises it is about maintaining this reputation while also moving the school forward.

"The world has changed from even three years ago and so we have to future-scope a little bit as to what the girls need to have, but really centring on happiness, and much more than that, belonging, because every girl needs a friend. If you walk into a classroom and you feel like you belong in that classroom, you can concentrate."



With Francis Holland Junior School moving off site to its own separate location – an iconic Victorian Grade II-listed building on Manresa Road – and expanding to 280 pupils by 2026, it has allowed a pastoral hub to be created so all pastoral staff are together in one place.

“You can sneak in there as a child, there’s a beautiful sofa area, a place to have a hot chocolate and things like that. No one can see you from looking in, so if you’re having one of those days that is too overwhelming you can go there. The right people are there to help you and you have space to be emotional without doing it in public.”

The second change is to create a “collaboration space” for years 7 and 8 (the years 9 and 10 space is to come) for breaks and lunchtime, where girls can find chess, Jenga, colouring and fruit bowls – and a member of staff to lend an ear.

“It’s allowing them to be a community,” Alexandra says. “We keep on saying to them that we want them to support each other and to be nice to each other, to build each other up – this gives them the space to do that and that’s really important to me.”

Alexandra went to a girls’ school, and she also moved her children from a co-ed to a girls’ school in year 9. “My children don’t go to school with me because that would be cruel,” she laughs. “There are limits and they’ve had me for a long time now, they don’t need me any more – they go to another girls’ school.

“A few weeks in I was having a chat with my eldest and asked what she noticed and she said, ‘Mummy, we get so



much work done’. Girls and boys are different and they go through puberty at different times and their emotions are different and the way they operate friendships is different.

“Everything we do at Francis Holland is about the girls and what is right for our girls, and I love that.”

Alexandra believes that girls’ schools are quite possibly more relevant than ever. “Discrimination obviously existed before. Now it still exists, it’s less obvious but it’s still there,” she says.

Navigating challenges and rising to them is part and parcel of being at the helm of a school, and there are more to come, with the government’s changes to VAT on independent school fees. “We’re doing as much as we can to support our parents,” Alexandra says. “Obviously, we’re contributing to all the consultations, we’re a community and it’s going to be difficult for us and other schools.”

It is as if Alexandra has been inadvertently preparing for this role her entire life, but asking her if she ever thought she would end up as a headteacher, she replies: “100 per cent never! When my mum asked, after I left university, if I had thought about teaching I said, ‘I can’t believe you could even ever say that, that’s so ridiculous’. And then about three years later I said, ‘Actually I think I might do teaching’, but then I was determined I wasn’t going to do anything near tiny children so I did secondary straight from the beginning.

“Although I was head girl at school, so it was probably always in there somewhere!”

### Alexandra’s favourite Belgravia spots:

#### For eating

“There are so many really nice places round and about; on the square where the Mozart statue is [there’s] The Orange Pub & Boutique Hotel.”

#### For drinking

“I really like the Thomas Cubitt pub on Elizabeth Street. The places in Eccleston Yards are always fun too.”

#### For shopping

“Just anything along Elizabeth Street – beautiful.”