



School's in

Lucy Elphinstone, head of Francis Holland, talks sustainability and the school's new bursary campaign, which will help even more girls fulfil their potential

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When I catch up with Lucy Elphinstone, head of Francis Holland School, the autumn term has just begun. “The girls came back two days ago – 700 girls came streaming in and the excitement has almost been off the scale,” Lucy says. “They just love seeing each other again.”

After Francis Holland's highly impressive GCSE and A-level results this summer, it's no wonder that Lucy is feeling upbeat about the year ahead. “I'm looking forward to it ever so much,” she says. “We're feeling very, very buoyant. Our results were just stupendous – they put us in the top 20 schools in the country.”

Lucy is particularly proud because Francis Holland is not, she says, a “highly selective” school. “We really celebrate different types of intelligence and neurodiversity and creativity and we have many children who aren't naturally brilliant at passing exams.

“But because of the atmosphere of building confidence and resilience and learning how to fail,

thinking outside the box and celebrating difference and individuality, they achieve so far beyond what their baseline data suggests they should achieve.”

Sustainability is integral to Francis Holland's ethos. “We have a switch-off culture, though not switch-off intellectually,” Lucy quips. “Just paying attention, a collective responsibility around the school to switch off lights.”

Everybody brings in their own water bottle, meat is only served six days out of 20 and any leftover food is donated to foodbanks and charities. The junior school recently won a Green Flag award, there are eco-champions in every classroom and pupils monitor a bird box and bug hotel.

Last term girls from year nine took part in David Attenborough and Prince William's Earthshot prize in an initiative with Harrow School, in which they won all but one of the categories. “When it came down to the science, the judge said they got it right,” Lucy says. “It was the quality and depth of their scientific research [that saw them win].”

During COP26 students wrote to world leaders urging them to take action and heard back from six, including President Xi of China. “It has helped them



BACK TO SCHOOL **Sophia Charalambous joins Francis Holland for its annual TIPS week**

Going back to school in your 30s is a daunting prospect. But when Francis Holland assured me there would be no maths tests involved, I was somewhat relieved. I was visiting for TIPS (Thinking Innovatively and Problem Solving) week. The girls took part in workshops that expanded the boundaries of the standard curriculum. As deputy head Rob Cawley said, "We've got to provide an education for the real world."

The three compulsory workshops were "make a film in a day", "creativity in English" and "architecture challenge". Watching the Year 7s build 3D structures out of bamboo was mesmerising; the future Zaha Hadid could well have been sitting in that room.

Although torrential rain put a halt to the survival skills class, there were lots of other options including one on forensics. The murder investigation Who Murdered Miss Pless? (the school lab technician) involved using microscopes and Bunsen burners to assess evidence; they could have given CSI a run for their money.

The desire to challenge students beyond the national curriculum is something every school should seek to do, and I was glad I got to go back to school for a day, and experience something familiar yet unfamiliar all over again.



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realise that their voice can be heard on a global stage," Lucy says.

With winter looming and an energy crisis to contend with, the coming months will be a deeply worrying time for many. True to form, Francis Holland is hoping to help by creating a "warm bank" managed by sixth form volunteers. It will provide a warm space for local people who need it.

"Ever since the school was founded in 1881, the vision has been to make a difference to society and particularly to the local community," Lucy says. "We want to give everything we can to help others."

To that end, Francis Holland has just launched the Promise Campaign, which is aiming to double the level of its bursary provision by 2032. The goal is to build a £15 million bursary endowment fund to provide 50 bursary places that are 100 per cent free.

"We are so privileged here with amazing resources and fantastic teachers," says Lucy. "We want to make sure that children who could never afford an education like this one have an opportunity for their promise to be fulfilled."

Francis Holland maintains close partnerships with several local primary schools and the Katherine Low Settlement in Battersea, which supports children and their families, older people, women and refugees.

The school has doubled in size during Lucy's tenure and last year opened its impressive new sixth form centre. The space will be used for community initiatives during the evenings, weekends and school holidays.

Lucy, herself a mother of four, began her career in publishing and then became a writer, before setting up a property business – renovating everything from castles to cottages – and running a small hotel. She went into teaching when she was nearly 40, discovered she "absolutely adored it" and has been head of Francis Holland for 10 years.

"I tell the girls you'll have many careers in your life," she says. "Women are flexible, we can reinvent ourselves as circumstances change. That's what we women are so good at."

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