

From *the ground* up

What defines a place of learning? From campus construction sites to on-site museums and observatories, **Laura Sutherland** visits the schools laying fresh educational foundations

“It’s going to be more than a boarding house,” Bilton Grange Prep’s Headmaster, Gareth Jones tells me. “It’s going to be the key that unlocks the school’s full potential.” He’s not wrong – the Warwickshire school’s ongoing development – due to be open to students in April 2025 – is set to be a game-changer. It’ll change the way pupils move around the school, allowing for expansion and a higher intake, as well as freshly dedicated spaces for SENS, staff, gappies and changing rooms. It’s also going to be architecturally ambitious – the Rugby School Group – of which Bilton Grange is a part – tasked Oxford-based firm TSH Architects and construction contractor Stepnell with the job of creating an inspiring educational space that’s equal parts cutting edge, sustainable and sympathetic to the distinctively grand Pugin style of the school’s Grade II-listed main building and 90 acres of parkland. And it’s a brief that’s certainly being delivered on. Built into the topography of the grounds, all of the soil dug up will be repurposed in the landscaping of a large open-air amphitheatre. The new building’s doors will open on to a central courtyard on level one, while the lower ground level will boast a multipurpose dining hall with piano and cascading glass-walled communal spaces. Instead of replicating the Pugin architecture in the building’s structure, there will be decorative nods to Bilton Grange’s heritage in the interior choices, with the same Arts & Crafts wallpaper as the design lining the House of Commons. The community can also look forward to new music and art hubs, a screening area for boarders’ film nights and perhaps everyone’s most highly anticipated feature: a helter-skelter slide wrapped around the central staircase that will take ▶

The architects’ impressions of the courtyards of Bilton Grange Prep’s new building when it’s complete



Project Manager Eddie Cronshaw with Bilton Grange pupils on the building site

PHOTOGRAPHY: TSH ARCHITECTS

sleepy youngsters from dorm to a dining hall breakfast in a flash. “It’s inspired by our sister school in Thailand, which has one,” explains the school group’s Director of Estates, Judy Robinson. “Two parents have chosen the school on the strength of how excited their children are about the new developments, particularly the slide.”

Experiential education in practice

Rossall is also familiar with the lure of one-of-a-kind features. The all-through Lancashire school has been home to the UK’s only astronomy centre and observatory since 2008, a resource that has benefited local state schools, colleges, universities, the BBC and even the European Space Agency. Dr Nick Lister reveals “we offer the chance to learn about astronomy across all age groups and levels,” adding, “the observatory is a great way to inspire our students to learn about space – we end up with a thousand questions an hour once they get going!”

Fellow Lancashire school Stonyhurst also has a claim to fame – its museum, archives and historical library, which is packed with jaw-dropping exhibits. Curator Jan Graffius shares that the collection includes “350-million-year-old fossils, as well as ancient Egyptian, Roman and Greek artefacts – including mummies – and medieval materials,” and that a recent external loan being St Thomas Becket’s relics. She adds “A full-time Museum Education Officer incorporates these riches into all aspects of the college’s curriculum, including early years and the IB. In addition, we teach a unique programme called the Junior Curators.”

Back at Bilton Grange, while there’s much to look forward to about the new boarding house, Judy Robinson is keen to point out that the community is already being



Dr Nick Lister teaching Rossall students how to use the observatory’s equipment

A HELTER-SKELTER SLIDE WRAPPED
around the central staircase will take
sleepy youngsters from dorm to
DINING HALL BREAKFAST IN A FLASH



Bradford Grammar’s new open-air amphitheatre is part of a larger planned outdoor learning space

ALL THE WORLD’S A STAGE

Bradford Grammar’s Junior School’s newest development will inspire budding performers
The school has built an outdoor amphitheatre to create a vibrant performing space for children, encouraging creativity and self-expression. The open-air venue allows pupils to engage in drama, music and public speaking in a natural setting, fostering confidence and teamwork. The amphitheatre offers a unique, immersive learning environment, connecting pupils with nature and enhancing their educational experience.
Junior School Headmaster, Richard Ribeiro, said: “The amphitheatre forms part of a larger outdoor learning and play space being developed as we expand the Junior School to include reception and year one classes. It reflects the school’s commitment to holistic education, balancing academic rigor with artistic and social development.”



Thomas’s College in Richmond Hill will open in a former theological college building

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enriched as a result of Stepnell’s commitment to engaging with pupils. Having agreed to her request of 70 hours of social values engagement, the construction team has gone above and beyond to offer opportunities to learn beyond and in tandem with the school’s curriculum.
With Project Manager Eddie Cronshaw taking the lead, in partnership with Assistant Head of Teaching and Learning Nicola Sodhi, the initiative began with an assembly on health and safety as well as compound visits, taking groups of 30 of the pre-prep children at a time to a viewing site, where excavator, dumper and digger demonstrations would take place. “I was bowled over by Eddie’s enthusiasm,” Sodhi enthuses. “Experiential learning has very much been the focus and target for the year, so it was wonderful that we were on the same page about thinking outside the box.”
The rapport between construction site and classroom gathered apace, with the exciting arrival of the crane becoming the focus of a year eight SENS project – and fascinating Q&A, with Eddie fielding questions such as ‘how long does it take to get up there?’ and ‘how do you go to the toilet?’. Then, when Site Manager Luke uncovered an underground chamber, he presented the discovery to the oldest pupils on World Book Day, challenging them to write a mystery story about what it could be. The art department has even been aided in salvaging clay from the broken ground, so that children can mould masterpieces for the new boarding house.

Building towards future success

Similarly, the unique learning experiences offered by specialist settings can’t be understated – Dr Lister says: “in addition to be fascinating in its own right, astronomy’s a great vehicle for enthusing Rossall pupils about science and STEM subjects as a whole.” Graffius concurs, revealing that



Students on Stonyhurst’s Junior Curators course learn how to handle archive pieces

“a number of past Stonyhurst pupils have gone on to study art history and museum studies at the Courtauld, Birkbeck and Cambridge University”.
Bilton Grange’s real-life learning collaboration is also sowing vocational seeds, with the Sustainability Manager bringing a practical edge to year seven geography and Stepnell’s in-house architect Katherine Morton contributing to the PSHE curriculum with a presentation on women in the industry. “It’s been a real eye opener for pupils,” Sodhi says. “One of the pupils now definitely wants to pursue a career in construction. The moment he told Eddie that he wanted to be like him was truly magical. It really shows that there’s more than one path to success.”

BREAKING GROUND

- From refurbishments to new builds, here’s a roundup of all of the latest school projects...
- Francis Holland Prep will open the doors to its new home, the iconic Grade II-listed former Chelsea Library, this September – a move that will allow more than 100 more pupils to enrol.
 - Scheduled to open in 2026, Truro School’s new music centre, with facilities to inspire children from Key Stage 3 through to A-level, will enrich the musical landscape of Cornwall.
 - By transforming its existing Memorial Library into a contemporary learning and social space for its sixth formers, Malvern College will be demonstrating its progressive outlook.
 - Thomas’s College, Thomas’s Schools latest outpost, will open in the former Richmond Hill university campus, a Grade II-listed building originally built in 1842 by the Methodist church as a theological college.