



Profile

In conversation with Alexandra Haydon

Born:

May 1977 in London

Married:

Yes – to Duncan, an equine vet

Children:

Two girls, one 14 and one 13

Schools and Universities attended:

Sherborne Girls, Durham University (BSc Zoology); Oxford University (PGCE and MSc); Bath University (PG Dip)

First Job:

Market research for pharmaceutical companies in London

First job in independent education:

Head of Science at St Mary's Calne

Appointed to the current job:

January 2024

Favourite piece of music:

Chasing Cars by Snow Patrol

Favourite food:

Squashed avocado on toast

Favourite drink:

Mojito (plus umbrella)

Favourite holiday destination:

Pembrokeshire (when sunny!)

Favourite leisure pastime:

Family walks with the dog

Favourite TV or radio programme/series:

Race Across the World – we were so inspired that we organised two of our own against another family. Last year we have raced from London to Dubrovnik and this year from Berlin to Istanbul – we loved every minute!

Suggested epitaph:

No thanks! I would rather be sprinkled...

Q You are now completing your second term of headship, having joined Francis Holland, Sloane Square, in January. What has been the biggest surprise to date?

A Each school has their own traditions, but I think the FHS school birthday was really something else! We were 143 on 1st March this year – the whole school put daffodils everywhere (including stunning daffodil-festooned hair dos for our younger girls). There was a Talent Show, exuberant school birthday karaoke, cupcakes in our school birthday colours and a joyous ceremonial cake cutting and performance of "Happy Birthday, Dear FHS"! It's an event that really epitomised the unrivalled sense of community and belonging we have here.

Q Your school was founded by Francis Holland, Canon of Canterbury Cathedral and Chaplain to Queen Victoria and Edward VII, but was really the brainchild of his wife, Sybilla. Is she a role model for today's pupils?

A She definitely is. One of our key aims is for pupils to learn not to fear failure and to stand up for what they believe, in order to achieve their fullest potential, realise their dreams and make a positive difference in the world.

When Sybilla Holland worked with her husband to found our school in 1881, she was the perfect example of this aim. She had a vision to empower young women with the knowledge and skills to change the world in a way their brothers hoped to. As well as personifying our values of love, compassion and service, she was not afraid to stand up for what she believed in and really challenge societal perceptions in order to make a difference.

This vision has been powerfully realised over the decades, and is evident every day in our school community. I've been so impressed by the number of student led outreach initiatives I have seen since starting as Head, as well as the many philanthropic endeavours of our staff, parents and alumni community. The girls learn to stand up for fairness, and emerge as young women that are strong, capable, and caring leaders who Sybilla Holland would be immensely proud of.

Q The school has a bronze replica statue of 'Fearless Girl' which you describe as an iconic image for girls' education. How so?

A The FHS Fearless Girl greets me every morning when I walk into school. Just like the original by Kristen Visbal in New York, our bronze replica captures the belief that young women should face challenge head on and use the power of their mind, voice and talent to make their mark in the constantly evolving world of tomorrow. And in this world, what could be more important?

This is such an iconic image for girls' education for many reasons. The importance of taking risks and learning from failure empowers pupils to push themselves, explore their interests and passions, achieve extraordinary things and grow into confident, empathetic and adaptable adults. It also helps us defeat the perfectionism that is so prevalent amongst high achieving girls, which is so toxic and can lead to years of self-doubt.

At Francis Holland, our pupils are constantly urged to 'do it scared', and the development of resilience has been behind the emphasis on courage, creativity, collaboration and curiosity. During initiatives such as our annual Expeditions Week, which takes place under canvas and on boats, bicycles, surfboards (the list goes on!) for all pupils to learn bushcraft and teamwork, girls are encouraged to step out of their comfort zones and learn from failures.

I see tangible evidence of the success of this approach during my chats at breaktimes and lunchtimes with our pupils, where again and again I see them boldly putting forward their ideas without constraints. They feel confident within their community, they feel known and they feel valued for their individuality – and that sense of security is so liberating.

Q Your background is in science teaching and in 2017 as Head of Science you led St Marys, Calne, to become the first school to receive the Platinum Science Mark. Two years later you won an award for innovation. How are you getting your girls as enthused about STEM subjects as you are? Do you still teach?

A We are so lucky at FHS to have a really brilliant STEAM programme (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and

Mrs Alexandra Haydon (MSc Oxon, BSc Durham) is Head of Francis Holland School, Sloane Square London. She was previously Deputy Head, Academic, at Millfield, Somerset.



Maths) led by dedicated teachers. This term alone has seen a trip to NASA's Space Station in Houston – where they had the unexpected bonus of seeing the total eclipse! – for Years 9 and 10, the 'FHS Earthshot Competition' which has been crafted for the girls to have a greater appreciation of the wider world and the environmental impact we're having, construction of a Greenpower Go Kart with 800 pupil-made components for our partner primary school, St Barnabas', and weekly STEAM 'Lunch 'n Learns' where we invite STEAM professionals and FHS staff to speak to pupils about exciting topics including the possibility of time travel, explaining why we got to see the Northern Lights, the realities of a career in medicine and the strategies needed in chess!

I don't have a regular timetable but I still do teach from time to time, which I love. The A in STEAM is really important to me – the skills that you learn in the arts subjects such as creativity, communication, analysis and argumentation are the skills that allow important ideas to be communicated, debated and understood. Next year we will be hosting a year long cultural event on Climate Change, showcasing the importance of interdisciplinary work in this area. I want girls to feel enthused by all the wonderful subjects we offer at the school and know that they are relevant and valuable beyond school.

Q As part of your MSc in Learning and Teaching from University of Oxford, you have published research on promoting students' questions in class. What was your key finding? How have you incorporated this into teaching practice?

A My research looked at the benefits of students asking questions for both teaching and for learning. In many classrooms, it is the teachers' questions that tend to dominate, but it is the questions from the students, especially the higher order thinking questions, that can really unlock a concept for both the individual and for the class, driving learning forward.

Sometimes we just expect students to know how to ask good questions, but this is often not the case. I looked at mechanisms to help teach

students to ask better questions in class as well as possible barriers to the students asking questions – the outcomes of the research became central to my work as a teacher, Head of Department, Academic Deputy and now Head. It has been invaluable.

Q As an alternative to the traditional exam week, in the summer Years 7 to 9 take part in TIPS (Thinking Innovatively and Problem Solving) week. What is the outline of the programme, and how do you measure effectiveness?

A TIPS Week (Thinking Innovatively and Problem-Solving) is a vibrant 3 day festival of workshops unique to Francis Holland which are specially designed for Year 7, 8 and 9 pupils. The workshops aim to challenge and inspire our girls to tackle a diverse set of problems in groups, and individually, with an emphasis on our 7 C's: Confidence, Commitment, Craftsmanship, Communication, Curiosity, Collaboration and Creativity.

Year 7 and 8 TIPS Week has been running for nearly a decade. Girls enjoy over 20 hugely varied workshops which vary year on year and in 2024 included Bank Heist Escape Room, Podcasting, First Aid, Self Defence, Minecraft Architecture, Dissection, 'Tik Tok, Gen Z and Happiness', Young Film Academy, Stage Make Up and Scottish Reeling! These encourage girls to be fearless and challenge themselves, discover new interests and develop the 7 Cs in all that they do.

TIPS Week has also recently been introduced for Year 9, in addition to an exam week, where girls present Earthshot presentations – in a UN style showcase asking a panel of judges for funding – and take part in a variety of trips and workshops which aim to further develop their 7 Cs and build on skills they have learnt in Years 7 & 8.

Effectiveness is measured in the quality of their outcomes (high!) during the week, the level of engagement during the activities and in their evaluative reflections that take place over the course of the week. The removal of exams and introduction of TIPS has correlated with improvement in GCSE grades. Whilst correlation may not be causation, removing exam pressure,

creating space for creativity and encouraging girls to take risks and have a go fosters a tangible culture of high ambition.

Q You are keen on preparing young women for working life in a fast-changing, technological world. Is such preparation different from that needed to get boys down the same road?

A Of course, each child forges their own individual path, taking away their own unique interpretation of their Futures programme, irrespective of their gender. However, speaking generally, we do find that the preparation needed for girls relates to self-belief and confidence in themselves, assertiveness to speak up, a sense of belonging, and a willingness to make mistakes, fail, and go again. All girls' education offers crucial opportunities for this, as it gives them space.

We find that girls are often excellent collaborators and team players and we look to nurture these traits in initiatives such as TIPS Week and Expeditions Week. Our Junior School is moving off site from September and a large portion of the resultant additional space will be turned into "The Collaboration Space". The creation of this new space is the first in a series of developments that will inspire our girls' natural creativity, increase their thirst for knowledge and further develop their skills, all so crucial in this age where versatility, innovation and the ability to connect and collaborate are essential qualities.

Q You also strive to encourage girls 'to make, and to be, the difference in society'. Is this a greater or lesser challenge in a single-sex independent school like yours than it would be in the less affluent setting of a maintained secondary school?

A I don't think it matters who you are, or what background you are from, or what type of school that you go to – we need our young people to have agency; to believe that when they speak up, people will listen, people will care what they say and that they can make a difference in the world.

Continued >

Profile

In conversation with Alexandra Haydon (continued)

At FHS I want all the girls to feel that they belong, deeply, in our community. If you feel that you belong, you are truly known and you are valued for your individuality, you will feel more invested in change for the future. I want the girls to have an opportunity to challenge and influence authority, and to experience careful listening and understanding from the adults in charge. If they learn that they can be the difference in school, then we are setting them up to be the change makers of the future – Fearless Girls, through and through.

Q As a Church of England foundation the school today maintains its Christian ethos whilst still welcoming students from all faith backgrounds. How do you ensure the religious aspects of the school are fully inclusive?

A Reverend van der Hart, our chaplain, supports girls of all faith backgrounds in our school community, as well as teaching about the Christian faith. She is a key member of the school's pastoral team and girls and staff members alike are invited to meet with her to talk, reflect on or pray about the challenges that life throws our way. We welcome those from all faiths or none and value a courageous, curious and respectful approach to the exploration of individual faith and the beliefs of others.

Inclusivity of pupils and staff of all faiths and none is encouraged in many ways, including active Jewish, Islamic and Dharmic Religious Societies. We also want our students to develop a strong understanding of faith that is different to their own. We have two equality, diversity, inclusion, and belonging (EDIB) Ambassadors and an Interfaith Ambassador in our Head Girls' Team, as well as two staff EDIB leads, all of whom promote inclusivity and orchestrate events to educate pupils and staff about important issues.

In our multicultural – and sadly often fractured – world, developing mutual respect, valuing difference and learning to communicate effectively with all people are foundational life skills – and ones that we seek to generate and model within our FHS community.

Q You have been involved with various partnership projects over your career, taking the lead on this when at St Marys. Can you outline one project which has been of greatest inspiration to staff and students?

A At Millfield I was a governor of a local primary school that needed support with play in the playground and with reading/ maths in class. I had a group of about thirty keen sixth formers who would go down to the school on a regular

basis, read to the students, help in class or get groups playing football and learning new skills at lunchtime. It was a wonderful project to lead as it was based on both real need and a real willingness to help. One girl ended up applying to train as a primary teacher as a result of her time volunteering there, which was the icing on the cake.

Q Who or what inspired you to get into teaching? If you hadn't gone into education, what else might you have chosen to do?

A My first two years in proper work after university were in London doing market research for pharmaceutical companies and in my third year I moved to Barcelona to set up an office for the company there. I learnt a lot but I realised when I was out in Spain that I really wanted a job that had a social purpose. It was my flatmate out there that encouraged me to apply for teaching!

If I had not gone into education, I think I would have ended up in something that is related to healthcare. I am so pleased I made the move – I genuinely think teaching is the best job in the world. Schools are such places and forces of positivity, community and belonging; there is intellectual challenge every day, the work changes every day and watching children grow into inspirational young adults is such a joy.

Education Summit

Over 300 educators from across the UK gathered at the eighth annual Education Summit which has taken place at Bryanston School, Dorset. This year's theme, "The Times They Are A-Changing: Future Proof Your Teaching," inspired by Bob Dylan's iconic song, focused on embracing the ongoing changes taking place in the education system.

Throughout the day, a series of talks were delivered by expert speakers and leading educators addressing the evolution of education in a rapidly advancing digital world, against more traditional teaching methods.

Speaker Mary Myatt, an education adviser, writer, and former teacher, delivered a talk on the intellectual power of narrative, presenting

evidence that simply reading well-chosen books to children in the classroom significantly enhances their reading abilities. She emphasised that curiosity is a significant motivator for learning.

Amjad Ali, an experienced SENCo, gave a talk on inclusive teaching. He stressed the importance of the language teachers use with children, particularly the need to avoid labels.

Dan Fitzpatrick, known as 'The AI Educator', set delegates minds buzzing with a live investigation of various AI tools that could reduce teacher workload and help engage and inspire pupils, even producing an AI rap describing the event!

Reflecting on the overall event, Bryanston's Head, Richard Jones,



praised the unity of teaching colleagues from primary and secondary, state, and independent schools, especially in the context of the forthcoming General Election. "It is crucial for us all to come together to improve outcomes in our education settings. I sincerely hope that

politicians recognize the strength of this collaboration, harness this collective strength, and allow us to continue building on the many successful cross-sector partnerships that already exist. The priority is, and must always be, to help drive standards across all education for children in the UK."

Pictured: Amjad Ali speaking at the Bryanston Education Summit