NEW LIFE FOR A VENERABLE OLD NEIGHBOUR

Westminster Cathedral Choir School is opening a brand-new pre-prep in a once-Franciscan friary on Francis Street, SW1. Lucy Auger, the Director of Admissions, explains all.
If you’ve wandered past the building known as the Friary, behind Westminster Cathedral, on 47 Francis Street, you might be wondering what all the shouting is about. This tall, gracious, Grade II, nineteenth-century building – once an orphanage for the children of guardsman in the Crimean War, and one-time home to Franciscan friars – is being reincarnated: this time as a pre-prep for Westminster Cathedral Choir School. The first thirty Reception-age boys will join the pre-prep in September 2017; by 2021 it will house one hundred and twenty boys, age four to eight.

A choir school? With a pre-prep? How does that fit, when choristers don’t start singing until eight? Founded in 1902 by Cardinal Vaughan to provide boarding choristers to sing the liturgy in the new cathedral, Westminster Cathedral Choir School’s original purpose remains intact. Each year, six eight-year-old boys, known as probationers, join a choir of twenty-four nine to thirteen year olds, and a team of professional musicians known as lay clerks, to begin an extraordinary five-year musical journey. Under the tutelage of the Cathedral’s brilliant Master of Music, Martin Baker, the choir’s repertoire is strikingly like that displayed in the music lists for the first week of the Cathedral’s opening in 1902: Palestrina, Byrd, Tallis and Victoria are as familiar now as they were a century ago. And the dedication and commitment needed to create Westminster Cathedral Choir’s unique, bright, continental sound is every bit as unqualified.

But while the musical tradition at Westminster Cathedral has remained constant for over a century, things at the School have changed a little. Once exclusively for boarding choristers, and staffed largely by clergy and nuns from the Cathedral, since 1976 Westminster Cathedral Choir School has been lay-run, and has admitted day boys from all over central London. Today, over 84% of the one hundred and eighty boys in the School are day boys, from families living within forty minutes of Ambrosden Avenue. Some are brilliantly musical, some a little bit, some not at all.

What attracts them to Westminster Cathedral Choir School? Principally, it is the School’s reputation as one of central London’s leading academic prep schools. Boys receive not only a broad, liberal education, with a vigorous grounding in English and mathematics, they progress to the leading independent schools in the country at 13+: Westminster School, St Paul’s School, City of London School for Boys, King’s College School Wimbledon, and Dulwich College in London; Eton College, Harrow School, Winchester College and Tonbridge School beyond.

Why then has Westminster Cathedral Choir School decided to open a pre-prep for boys age four to eight? The answer lies in wider changes in the independent schools’ landscape in London. For generations, privately-educated boys in London would have started their education at an independent (and often family-owned) pre-prep school from age four to eight. They would then have moved up to an independent prep school from age eight to thirteen, before joining a senior school (also independent) from age thirteen to eighteen. A typical journey might have been from, say, Eaton House Belgravia (4-8), to Westminster Cathedral Choir School (8-13), to St Paul’s School (13-18). These transition points – at ages eight and thirteen – are grounded in human realities: they accurately match boys’ intellectual and physical development, as transfer at ages four and eleven does for girls.

In recent years, this pattern of independent pre-preps, feeding independent preps, feeding independent senior schools has broken down. Many independent schools in London now have linked pre-preps and preps, offering parents provision for their children from age four through to eleven or thirteen: Wetherby School, for example, or Knightsbridge School, or Eaton Square School, or the Hampshire School, or the several schools in the Thomas’s group in central and South-West London. In a very recent development, many of these schools – some run by capital groups and all operating as commercial ventures – are even extending upwards until age eighteen. Vertical integration is becoming the norm, and any school
dependent on pupils entering at age 7+ or 8+ could easily find its supply drying up, and so becoming – in the management jargon – discombobulated. Why move your son 7+ or 8+ if he’s happy?

It was for this reason that when 47 Francis Street came onto the market, the School (gently) urged the Diocese to buy it. A thriving pre-prep for Westminster Cathedral Choir School will ensure its long-term future both as a top academic prep school for day boys, and as the school for the choristers of the world’s greatest Catholic choir.

And what are we doing to the building? Essentially we are creating eight glorious, spacious, modern classrooms. Bathed in natural light because of the building’s gracious proportions, large windows and slender width, each classroom will be fitted with bespoke furniture, and finished in a boy-friendly blue-and-white colour scheme. Both Reception classrooms will have their own decking areas for outside learning, water and sand, and every classroom will have a comfy corner with beanbags and soft seating for quiet reading. Brand new interactive whiteboards and LCD touchscreens will compliment traditional teaching and learning, and there will be newly-restored wooden floors, specially-designed acoustic ceilings, and recessed lighting throughout. The unusually spacious and bright lower ground floor will also provide a huge area for eating, indoor PE and assemblies.

For any central-London school, a playground is a special blessing. For a boys’ school it’s a must!

Westminster Cathedral Choir School's new pre-prep opens in September 2017 with thirty spaces for Reception boys, age four. Boys are assessed before entry, which is not as forbidding as it sounds! The School is looking for potential rather than attainment and, most importantly, for boys who will thrive and be happy at the School. To be assessed for admission, boys will do activities in groups, involving imaginative play, finding patterns and sequences using LEGO and DUPLO, and activities to assess whether they can co-operate, share and take instructions. Parents will also meet me and the new Head of Pre-Prep, Charlotte Blenkin, who joins us from Eaton House, The Manor.

Westminster Cathedral Choir School offers families outstanding independent education for their sons from four through to thirteen. If you’d like to come and see us, drop me a line or give me call.

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And if you pass the playground, listen carefully. We hope you’ll hear St Francis’s voice anew among the boys.

‘Praised be you, my Lord, through brothers wind and air, And fair and stormy, all weather’s moods, by which You cherish all that You have made.’

Lucy Auger is the Director of Admissions at Westminster Cathedral Choir School.