

Thrings meets...

Julian Thould, Head Master at King Edward VI School, Southampton



King Edward VI School has been at the heart of Southampton for more than four-and-a-half centuries. Outgoing Head Master, Julian Thould, reflects on his 16 years at the helm, and tells Thrings partner Mary Chant why the future – the school’s and his own – looks bright.

Were you always destined for a career in education?

No! My mother was an English teacher and the one thing I never intended to do was teach. I had ambitions to become a lawyer, but history was always my first love. After Oxford, I spent a year as an archaeologist in Peru, considered an MA in Anglo-Saxon but instead became a trainee manager at Bulmers PLC. But I really missed history and went into teaching.

How did you come to be Head Master at King Edward’s?

I had held positions at Westminster School in London, Cranleigh School in Surrey and King’s School Worcester. Although initially I hadn’t considered running a school, I’d been given a lot of responsibility and headship seemed to be the next step. When I moved to KES in 2002 it took a little time to adjust to leading so large a school but I’ve loved every aspect of the job.

I dare say KES has changed over the past 16 years?

I was young and ambitious when I arrived. I’m still ambitious. The school felt a bit tired and needed to rediscover its ‘can-do’ attitude. We’ve rebuilt the school, acquired a prep school and other facilities and reformed the curriculum. A now-retired teacher once said to me “although the ride was occasionally uncomfortable, thank you for shaking us up!”

How important is a rounded education?

Children thrive if they are stimulated – which might not always come from doing algebra on a Friday afternoon! We have 5,000 days a year out of school, often over holidays, taking children to local theatres and galleries, on sports, charity and cultural tours from the USA to Australia and even to do biological research in the Galápagos. We also have over 50 clubs, some quite eccentric such as bee-keeping, cactus growing and codebreaking.

What about the education sector as a whole?

During my 34 years in education, I’ve seen the professionalisation of schools. I’ve worked with some inspirational teachers and taught some exceptional pupils, but in the ‘80s saw too little focus on training,

performance management and planning. So that’s a fundamental change. Reassuringly, lots of things haven’t changed. School relationships remain very strong, pupils are full of energy but are respectful, creative and very community-minded. There’s certainly no sense of fear; pupils and teachers are united in wanting to achieve their best.

What’s gives you the greatest satisfaction?

When a pupil who has struggled does well. This year one pupil, who had to work really hard, achieved eight good GCSE grades; few would have predicted that with confidence five years ago. This can be life-changing.

And what of your own future?

This will be my final year at KES, and I’m stepping down while I’ve still some gas in the tank. I’m planning to do a masters degree in history and spend more time in Cornwall. My grandfather ran the Westminster Bank in Southampton, my father and aunt were brought up in the city and I’ve had 16 years at KES, so I won’t be turning my back on Hampshire anytime soon. ♦

