

Celebrating 125 years



Birmingham's King Edward VI High School for Girls is

celebrating its 125th anniversary this year with several events. With applications on the up, **Helen Kaut** looks at what makes the school so popular with Birmingham's parents

THE KING Edward VI High School for Girls (KEHS) was founded in 1883 and is located in Edgbaston, Birmingham, next to the King Edward's School for Boys.

KEHS is built to accommodate up to 530 girls, who are of "good academic ability." During this academic year, the school has held a lot of events to celebrate the 125th anniversary. These included a gala concert in Symphony Hall, an exhibition for the summer term, the launch of the KEHS Bursary Appeal, and a book charting the 125-year history of the school.

Despite the current economic climate, KEHS has actually seen an increase in applications: of 355 girls, who applied this year, 343 sat the test and 87 were accepted. Last year, 312 applied and the year before 293.

How does Sarah Evans, head of KEHS since 1996, explain the school's popularity?

She told me: "I think people value education very highly and see it as something which is worth making lots of sacrifices for. I think they see this as being the leading school in the Midlands and they look at it as an example of where the social diversity of the Midlands coheres extremely harmoniously and that's seen as a great strength of the school."

Another reason is the high success rate in A levels that the girls achieve at this independent school. In 2007, 100 per cent of all the pupils passed their A levels and 90.5 per cent of them achieved grades A and B. Over 50 per cent of the girls achieved four or more grade As. The school was ranked sixth for A levels in the league tables for independent schools last year.

KEHS offers a broad curriculum, which is focused on academic studies and also on creativity. The girls learn Latin and Ancient Greek, as well as modern languages such as French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish.

The curriculum also includes subjects such as economics and business studies, psychology, theatre studies, and art and design. Critical thinking is a short



Happy birthday: King Edward VI High School for Girls celebrates its 125th anniversary this year. Pictured is head, Sarah Evans, with some of her charges, while the school is also shown (below)

course and part of general studies, which all 6th-formers take. It teaches them how to think, reason and write coherently and logically. This course is especially useful for those girls who want to study medicine or law, as the tests for admission to medical schools and law courses involve an element of critical thinking.

PE includes a wide range of sports from hockey and rugby to gymnastics and athletics. Music plays an important part at KEHS and the school provides plenty of opportunity to learn instruments. Furthermore, KEHS participates in exchange visits to places such as Australia, New Zealand, France and Africa.

KEHS offers a wide range of extra-curricular activities. The girls can participate in the school's orchestras and bands, join drama clubs and choirs, dance workshops and sports clubs. They can also write for the school's magazine, *Phoenix*, work for the school's own radio station, or join one of the many societies.

Community service plays a very important part at KEHS. The girls organise fundraising events for different charities such as Macmillan, World Aids Day or Breakthrough Breast Cancer. They also help out in local nurseries, infant and junior schools, schools for disabled children, and older people's care homes.

"The girls themselves come from a hugely diverse range of backgrounds and I think the community service work allows them to both contribute to the wider community and to continue to learn more about that community," Ms Evans continued.

Prospective pupils have to pass a demanding entrance test to be accepted into this school. KEHS is looking for bright young girls who are quick-thinking, have a thirst for knowledge, and are excited by new ideas. Past achievements are not as important as potential. It therefore proves rather difficult to

prepare for these exams, which test how girls respond to information they may not familiar with. The school discourages coaching or tutoring and instead advises parents to talk to their children, encourage them to read a lot and be interested in what is going on in the world around them.

Teachers like Chris Hosty appreciate the freedom they are given at KEHS. Ms Hosty has been teaching maths and general studies here for 20 years. She thinks the good pupil-teacher relationship at this school is the main reason behind its success.

"Most of the teaching staff here are passionate about their subject and the life of the mind. And we are very lucky in that most of the little 11-year-olds who start with us come in bright-eyed and shiny and keen to learn," she explained.

"And as staff we respond to their enthusiasm. By the time they get to the middle years, where some of them maybe going through difficult teenage phases, we've already established this family relationship. We are a small school and they are almost like our own children. They do know that we love them."

Sending your child to KEHS is not cheap – the school charges £8,850 per year. However, parents coming less than £65,000 a year can apply for a means-tested bursary, which is largely funded by the Kind Edward Foundation.

Bursaries are mainly awarded to girls who join when they are 11-years-old. A small number of girls join the 6th form. Out of about 80 girls, probably 15 are awarded a bursary. Widening access to higher education at a much earlier age is important to the school.

"If we want these girls to go to a top university, we need to start that process at the age of 11," Ms Hosty said, and although Oxford, Cambridge and other leading universities are working hard to bring in bright



children from disadvantaged backgrounds, she believes that by 18 the culture and general knowledge gap is enormous.

"It's very hard for an 18-year-old to start in an Oxford college from a school where they never had any of this kind of background. Here we take them at 11, they mix with a wide range of backgrounds."

"We've got children from consultant surgeons alongside children whose parents are unemployed. They learn from each other and they learn from us. They don't feel they are lacking this social background," she added.

For the future, KEHS, jointly with the boys' school, is planning a new performing arts centre. The staff is also looking at new ways to develop the curriculum and is currently working on the AQA Baccalaureate for the 6th form, which will allow girls to research and write individual projects. **See 6**

• Helen Kaut is a freelance education journalist.

Further information

www.kehs.org.uk