

Welcome to Clare Wagner new Head of HBS

KATE WEBSTER

The Henrietta Barnett School welcomed a new headteacher at the start of the new school year in September. Clare Wagner arrived at HBS following a successful and varied career in teaching and school leadership in and around London. Graduating from Bristol with a degree in History, she initially taught English in Austria, before qualifying as a History teacher in England via her first post at a grammar school in Slough. She is familiar with north-west London having held senior posts at both North London Collegiate School and South Hampstead – no doubt there will be readers who remember her from when they were pupils or parents at one of these schools! Clare comes to HBS from the headship of West London Free School and whilst she has enjoyed teaching in more than one co-educational school, she is clearly delighted to be back in a single-sex girls' school.

As one would expect, given much of her background and her new appointment, Clare is highly committed to girls' education and believes that there continues to be a place for girls' schools in the on-going quest for full parity and equality for women. Whilst society has come a long way since the early 1960s when it was still a requirement for women to resign their posts in many areas of work on marriage (including teaching and the civil service), women are still underrepresented in many areas of public and commercial life, particularly at the highest levels, such as FTSE 100 boardrooms. Even where progress has been made there is still a massive gender pay disparity, not to mention subtle (or not) glass ceilings.

There is considerable evidence that in girls' schools, students are less likely to make gender stereotypical choices; a cursory glance at the examination results on the school's website shows that STEM subjects are hugely popular whereas co-ed schools can struggle to overcome the perception of these as 'male' subject areas. Girls' schools also provide important role-models for their pupils of women in leadership.

Clare's MSc in Learning and Teaching from Oxford enabled her to look in depth at girls' oracy and research into areas which can prevent women (especially, but not exclusively) from performing to their best advantage in high pressure public settings. She is now putting into practice some of this learning and expertise as she

teaches every class in Year 7 (that's the first year for everyone who predates the National Curriculum!). Not only will this enable her to get to know every new entrant to the school (and they her), but she will be concentrating on developing their skills and confidence in public speaking. She believes passionately in giving girls as many opportunities as possible but also in removing (or at least making them aware of) the invisible trip-wires which can inhibit progress. Many women will be aware of and may well have experienced 'imposter syndrome' (I confess!), but Clare will be doing her best to ensure that no HBS alumna will find herself fronting a press conference or addressing a large audience without having learnt and practised the presentation, skills and body language of a confident, assured public speaker.

Clare is delighted by the young women she has met since taking up her headship. She finds them "hugely intelligent, polite and friendly" and "intellectually curious" and of course, after the Covid disruptions of the last two academic years, there is a real excitement to be together again and the hope of a 'normal' year ahead. Just as the school has high expectations of the students, they are also keen to have their voices heard and to share in the leadership of the school. Readers of Suburb News who have followed the recently introduced Youth Pages will not be surprised that there is an appetite to engage with current world issues and problems and to hear and learn through opportunities such as podcasts and speaker programmes from and about women's journeys, including women of colour.

Before visiting, I had wondered if the influence of Henrietta Barnett would still be as evident at the school as during my time teaching at HBS in the late 1990s. I knew that her portrait still watches over the Hall but a century on, would she still be an inspirational figure for 21st century young women? On entering Clare's office, the evidence of her summer reading was immediately apparent in the various biographies of Henrietta, as well as histories of the school and Suburb. Having researched Henrietta Barnett myself in order to lead Heritage Walks for Proms at St Jude's in the Suburb and Whitechapel, it was immediately clear that Clare has absorbed and shares many of the passions and motivations of Henrietta Barnett and truly believes that these should be at the heart of the school's mission today.

Clare describes HBS as "a beautiful school in a beautiful area." She is aware that there may be a perception of a 'town and gown' division between the school and the local area, but is clearly sincere in wanting the school and local community to be on good terms. She would love more local girls to come to the school and hopes that residents are proud to have such an outstanding school at the centre of the Suburb.

As with all state schools, governors must observe education law in framing their Admissions Policy. The school is (and has been at the very least since the 1944 Education Act) academically selective; this means that girls have to sit an entrance examination. However, once the top 300 have been identified, preference within that cohort is given to girls who live within three miles of the school ('looked after' children and 'pupil premium' students who fulfil the selective criteria are also given priority). With over 2000 applicants, reaching that top 300 is clearly a challenge, but the distance criterion does give a geographical advantage to those living close to the school. This relatively new flexibility allowed by education law hasn't always existed and it is a credit to the school that this has been adopted.

Life as a headteacher is not without challenges, of course! As former headteacher myself, I am perhaps more attuned to current media reports of lack of money for school building repairs, so I was not surprised that Clare mentioned that finances are tight and maintaining a listed building of historic and architectural importance can be costly.

Clare believes that Henrietta Barnett would be 'immensely proud' that the school which she fought to establish is regularly the highest achieving state school in the country. At that time, although women could study at Oxford and Cambridge, they could not be awarded degrees (this only changed in 1920 and the late 1940s respectively), so Henrietta would no doubt be delighted that more than 30 girls regularly progress to Oxbridge every year (as well as numerous others to medicine, dentistry and veterinary science elsewhere). Always innovative and an innovator, Henrietta Barnett was inclusive in her approach to class and faith, both in Whitechapel and in Hampstead Garden Suburb. She remained deeply involved in both the Suburb and the School until



Clare Wagner
(Photo: Richard Cain)

her death; the school which bears her name (albeit not so named by Henrietta herself, I'm pleased to say) was an integral part of her vision of HGS. She described the school as 'the child of my old age' – no doubt an indication of the importance and affection with which she regarded it.

Covid has interfered in many aspects of local life, but audiences at the Proms at St Jude's were delighted to be back in the Hall at

Henrietta Barnett for the Lit Fest and family concert. Meanwhile, in the online world HBS students were able to continue to contribute to Suburb News' Youth Pages and HBS A Level historians worked as interns with the HGS Virtual Museum. As Clare Wagner settles into her new role, we look forward to getting to know her and to opportunities for collaboration between the School and Suburb organisations.

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