

Suburb News *in conversation with...*

...Robert Lobatto

Terry Brooks chats to the Head of King Alfred School

Suburb News visited Robert Lobatto, who has been Head of King Alfred School for the last two years, to talk about him and the school.

King Alfred School is one of the few schools developed from the late nineteenth century idea of progressive education. The school in North End Road sits on the boundary of the Suburb, and there are always a number of Suburb children among its pupils.

Robert comes from Cockfosters and a Jewish family, which, over a couple of generations moved there from the East End via Golders Green. In fact his mother went to Henrietta Barnett School. Educated at Haberdashers and reading History at Oxford, he decided upon a career in teaching as an act of rebellion.

He now lives in Crouch End with his family, and has two daughters: one at university and the other a sixth former. In his spare time he enjoys reading, and is clearly fit as he cycles to work despite the hills.

He had been expected to become a lawyer or accountant but after a successful stint teaching English as a Foreign Language while at university, he went for education instead. The route that took him to King Alfred's makes for an interesting and surprising story; before arriving at KAS his only teaching experience was in state schools.

Robert started as a history teacher in East Barnet before going on to lead the humanities department in a school in Islington. He moved on to become Deputy Head at the Lister Community School in Plaistow, which at the time was a school in need of improvement.

He said he found the job there challenging, and difficult in some ways, but after seven years he decided to up the stakes and take on the headship of Barnhill Community High in Hayes. Robert is certainly not afraid of a challenge and is also capable of meeting one. As is shown by the school, which has over 1,400 pupils, becoming one of the 100 Most Improved Schools during his eight years as head.

However by 2012/13 he found himself becoming more and more disillusioned by government changes to education, which he felt bordered on reckless and to be capable of creating chaos. One of the results was that accountability was shifted so that decisions were being made in the best interests of the school rather than the child.

Then in 2015 he saw an opportunity and King Alfred's appointed him their new head so he found himself not only in private education but also in a school well-known for being different. It was a chance for him to shed some of the recent restrictions placed on schools

by the state and to have more freedom.

The School believes strongly in what it is doing and the education it provides for the children in its care. But teachers, parents and children sometimes find it difficult to come up with a simple answer when asked, "What makes King Alfred's special?" and Robert has set out to come up with a coherent response.

It is not just things like the lack of uniform, the use of first names, the role of students in the decision making process, or the annual year 8 self-governing village project that make it different.

King Alfred's stresses the importance of educating the whole individual and preparing for the good life. The answer to the above question takes ideas from classical philosophy and positive psychology to describe what KAS seeks to achieve, and goes on to look at how to achieve it.

Robert has helped to distil philosophy, history and psychology to understand and articulate what King Alfred's does; and then to use this model as a means to try to inspire and influence others. Always ambitious, Robert would like to make the special better.

As part of the school's vision of a flourishing and compassionate society, he would like to have a good relationship and be better connected to the local community. At present there is

an annual tea where students and members of the elderly community meet, with entertainment provided by some of the school's many talented musicians.

There is a quote from John Russell, who was Head from 1901 to 1920, which the school likes to use in its literature, "Our aim is to train up our scholars in the way of the good

life, to help to fit them for effective work in the world, for effective sympathy and for effective joy." The language is of its time but it highlights the breadth of the KAS vision **S**



HGST WINTER LECTURE

Poundbury – an Experiment in New Urbanism

This year's HGST Winter Lecture will be delivered by Simon Conibear, who was Estate Director for the Duchy of Cornwall in Dorchester and is now Poundbury Development Consultant.

Join us for some light refreshments and learn all about the design principles and development of Poundbury, the urban extension to Dorchester, built to the architectural principles of H.R.H. The Prince of Wales.

Monday 4 December 2017 from 7pm for a 7.30pm start in the main hall at Henrietta Barnett School, Central Square.

Please book your place: mail@hgstrust.org / 0208 455 1066.



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