

Breckenbrough School Report for 2024-2025

Breckenbrough School is a grant-maintained special school for boys and young men who are neurologically diverse, mainly autistic, and with average or above academic potential. Quaker governors are appointed by Quakers in Yorkshire.

The school is located near Thirsk between Topcliffe and Northallerton, the main building dating from the late nineteenth century. There were 70 students on role during 2024-5, predominantly from the Yorkshire area with a few coming from further afield. The age range is from top Juniors through to Sixth Form.

Class sizes are small, five being usual. Students are taught by subject specialists with support from Learning Support Assistants. There is also a team of therapists.

The number of residential students has significantly declined in recent years. During 2024-5 there were seven such students who were weekly borders. In 2025-6 there will be only five residential students. It is quite possible that Breckenbrough will not have a residential provision in the future due to declining numbers. This will be reviewed during the forthcoming academic year. Whilst we would like to maintain our residential provision it is increasingly uneconomical to do so.

Breckenbrough had a full Ofsted inspection during 2023-4 when it was rated as 'Good'. The three action points have now been implemented. In February this year there was a Social Care Ofsted inspection (which looked at the wider school, not just the residential provision and the work of the Social Education team). The school was given the grade of 'Outstanding' and no recommendations were made, a very rare occurrence!

Whilst offering an academic curriculum, life and social skills underpins what the school offers to students. I have observed this in my role as Teaching and Learning Link Governor when accompanying an outdoor education group. Students were learning appropriate skills for negotiating routes at Brimham Rocks, but at the same time were developing the ability to communicate, work as part of a team and to solve problems. It was explained to me later this is what the Outdoor Education curriculum is really all about: preparation for life beyond school. Whilst there are no Friends on the staff the ethos is very much a Quaker one, for example encouraging respect through example and dealing with behavioural issues in a non-confrontational way.

The teaching staff form three distinct but cooperating teams: academic, special educational needs and Quality of Life. Teaching is underpinned by recent research, for example retrieval practice and the development of robust assessments. Staff work in conjunction with our therapy team, for example liaising with Speech and Language and Occupational Therapists. An example of the latter is the identification and use of worksheets and other resources copied onto a coloured background for specific students. The Quality of Life initiative was commenced in 2022. The Quality of Life objectives for 2024-5 were to work collaboratively with the Special Needs Coordinator and academic team to increase attendance and engagement; to support staff needing guidance around target setting; and to produce and analyse data from Quality of Life surveys to evidence students' progress. The team work in conjunction with a school in Oxfordshire which has a similar clientele and will be making a presentation to the Autism Europe Conference in September 2025 in Dublin. The school now has an independent visitor who visits unannounced twice a term, looking at various aspects of school life and reporting to the school and governors.

An issue for Simon, our headteacher, is the number of tribunals he has to attend each term regarding potential new students. Whilst these are now held remotely rather than face-to-face this is a big draw on his time. It is a symptom of a wider crisis in special education provision which is exacerbated by some parents hearing of our reputation and provision and then naming Breckenbrough as their school of choice without making any contact with us.

The school welcomed Matt Halifax as deputy head last September, taking over from James Shutt who commenced his headship. Matt brings a wealth of experience to the school and is working with other members of the senior management team to develop recording and curriculum balance. One such initiative being developed is recording of student engagement in addition to attendance and academic progress.

Previous reports to Quakers in Yorkshire highlighted the development of the therapeutic hub which provides rooms for the therapy team, along with a climbing wall, storage for outdoor education equipment and a board room for us governors and review meetings. The big development during the past academic year has been the construction of the Breckenbrough Woodlands Centre at Skutterskelfe, a location in the Great Ayton area. This was achieved through cooperation with local benefactors. Governors visited before the March board meeting when it was very much still a building site. The building is now complete. A centre manager and administrator have now been appointed. The centre will provide an alternative educational provision for some of our students and there will be opportunities for local authorities to buy in short-term placements for non-Breckenbrough students. At Breckenbrough we do not like to stand still- a possibility for the future is the development of a much-needed girls' provision. This could not be accommodated at Breckenbrough due to the limitations of the site but we anticipate that this would be somewhere in the local area.

As far as governance is concerned, we are in the process of changing our Articles of Association. This will result in the chair or deputy chair of governors not necessarily being in membership of the Religious Society of Friends, but being in sympathy with our values. Governors attend termly board meetings and serve on committees, also termly, namely Education, Resources and Strategy and Development. Governors also take on additional responsibilities, for example Health and Safety checks and Safeguarding. They are also involved in 'one off' visits such as investigating the 'Through Curriculum' from Primary to Secondary, one of the last full Ofsted inspection's action points. Two governors attended the residential conference for Quaker Governors at the University of Warwick last September.

Yesterday was the end-of-year Breckenbrough fete and presentation day. Attending this as a Breckenbrough governor is my motivation for my service to the school. The head summarises the achievements of each school leaver in turn who then have the opportunity to make a speech. It is inspiring to hear from students who were failed by mainstream education who, after settling into Breckenbrough, became academic and social successes, leaving school to go on to the world of work, university or further education courses. All students who spoke yesterday did so saying how much difference being at Breckenbrough had made to their lives, thanking all concerned.

John Margham, Breckenbrough School Chair of Governors