

Quakers in Yorkshire

Bootham School presentation October 2025

2024/25

The academic year 2024-25 saw a number of small improvements which amounted to a significant tuning up of the engine at Bootham. At the core of the school remains the Quaker ethos – and though most of our students are not from a Quaker background, all our families embrace the testimonies and recognise their value.

Several of our new initiatives stemmed from the Quaker testimonies. Over the past year, the College One programme for students in their first year of A-level saw every student able to attend a volunteering placement as part of their core curriculum, with one afternoon a week set aside for the purpose. Students have reported back how much they appreciated an opportunity that they might not otherwise have sought – the benefits of volunteering on the volunteer are often overlooked, with the focus more on the people or organisations being helped. Lessons have been learnt from last year and the start of the programme this year has been much smoother and swifter.

Students in Lower Senior – Year 10, the first year of GCSE – also had an adapted curriculum, with the innovative ‘Let Your Life Speak’ programme replacing their tenth GCSE. LYLS begins with a series of speakers who give lectures to the year group on careers, organisations and campaigns which have historical or present day links to Quakerism. Topics have included Climate Justice with Oxfam; Quaker Business Method from a professor of Ethical Business at the University of Northumbria; and the origins of humane mental health care and the ongoing practice of The Retreat.

The academic results this year were very pleasing with the A*-A percentage at A-level rising seven points to 46% and the percentage of GCSE grades 9-7 up six points to 58%. Students competed successfully for places at the most competitive universities, with several gaining places to study medicine and dentistry, and with four further students heading to Oxford or Cambridge. Our measures of added value place us among the top 20% of schools in the country.

Sport has been enhanced with the appointment of a new Head of Girls’ and Boys’ Cricket, and the number of fixtures has doubled. Our athletes achieved unprecedented success in the City Athletics Championships. The football, basketball and netball squads continue to punch above their weight in the local leagues. Bootham is gaining a growing reputation in the swimming pool and a Bootham team faced international competition at the World Schools’ Games at the Olympic Pool in London. Three of our students have qualified for the World Biathlon championships in South Africa – swimming and running, along with our Head of Swimming, Jacob Butterfield.

We are doing more drama than ever, with two major musical productions last year, a student-inspired Improvisation show and much success with LAMDA, where this year all the students achieved distinctions in their exams. This term we see a new additional venture, our first Greek play in several decades, Agamemnon by Aeschylus, while the major production will be West Side Story.

Music and art both continue to be strong, as anyone attending one of our concerts or exhibitions will testify. Of particular note is the support the students give one another – a real testament to the Quaker values in action.

The visit of the ISI inspectors in February allowed us to show them the school as it is and we were given a very positive write-up, within the strict parameters of their in-house style guide. The verbal feedback left us in no doubt that they had enjoyed seeing a school operating successfully in a style which was unfamiliar to them, but with many aspects I sense they wanted to reproduce in their own schools.

Financial

This year has brought the single greatest shock to school finances across the sector in my career (including the Covid years). An inflation-busting 5.5% pay-rise for teachers came immediately after the general election (which Bootham had aspired to match – and did) then 20% VAT was imposed in January, with the loss of Business Rate Relief and a hike in Employers' NI contributions following in April.

Fees were increased by 12% for parents in January as the VAT came into force – meaning the school effectively was subsidising most of the difference in these additional costs.

The increased cost to parents and the bad publicity surrounding the VAT policy has impacted on student recruitment into Year 7, with a small additional number of families citing cost as the reason for removing their children. The short-notice closure of Queen Margaret's in July has been to our benefit, with 21 students and 3 staff joining us in September. Overall, senior school numbers are down from 495 to 465 and juniors from 150 to 125. Given the context, we have done well to limit the financial damage to the school.

Staffing has been tightened – principally through natural wastage (i.e. not replacing departing staff in full). Budgeting for next year sees us looking at a small operational deficit versus the comfortable surplus we would have achieved, had pupil numbers remained static.

Charity & Community

For decades the quid pro quo has been that independent schools retain their charitable status (and the financial benefits that accrues) IF they engage in appropriate partnership work and other charitable activities.

The temptation would be to abandon all this and many schools are having to do so. At Bootham we are maintaining our role in the York ISSP – the Independent-State School Partnership founded in 2008, offering GCSE courses to children across the city, in Latin and Astronomy and providing staffing and facilities for a number of other masterclasses. I am chairing the ISSP this year and we will be looking still to enhance its activities.

We are also committed to our transformational bursary programme. Working with SpringBoard we now have four students who are from deprived backgrounds or in some cases are care-experienced. These are recipients of 110% bursaries, with the fees for a full boarding place covered as well as money for uniform, kit and any trips which are deemed essential to support their academic learning. We have been able to do this thanks to the Stacey Sisters legacy which is benefitting both our schools. We are committed to taking a further two SpringBoard students next year, but the ability to offer this for future students will depend upon ongoing fundraising activities.

Allied to this we are moving away from offering traditional scholarships that come with a reduction in fees – all such reductions will need to be means tested in future.

Charitable fundraising by students to external organisations remains strong. This year, the four houses, Pendle, Swarthmore, Firbank and Briggflats are each undertaking student-led fundraising for their own house charities. These will be nominated by students and will be discussed within house meetings prior to adoption. We are encouraging the support of charities across three bands: local, national and international.

Boarding

Our boarding offer is the best I have seen in 25 years of working in independent schools. We have 41 girls and 40 boys respectively in our two boarding houses, Rowntree and Fox, in which we do all we can to make it feel like home. Evening and Weekend activities keep them engaged and happy, and we continue our UK trips programme this year with a weekend in Cambridge this year.

Our third boarding house, Evelyn, which housed a dozen A-level students last year, has been repurposed to provide accommodation for groups of international short-stay students and also to

facilitate primary and prep school residentials in the heart of York, experiencing the city alongside school-led activities in science, history and sport.

International recruitment across the sector has been challenging, but a visit to the Far East at this time last year bore fruit with new relationships formed with schools in Nanjing and Suzhou in China, and connections remade with families in Hong Kong and Singapore.

Our ongoing relationship with Suzhou Foreign Language School (who brought 75 students for the day as part of their UK tour last April) join us with 20 students staying for 3 weeks in the Spring.

New developments for 2025-26

Oracy

This September we launched our oracy strategy. Oracy is the parallel skill to numeracy and literacy, focusing on speaking and listening. Many studies have shown that learning through oracy complements learning through reading and writing, and that appropriate questioning and discussion with others equally improves outcomes. This will be increasingly embedded in lessons over the next year.

We will also be offering several oracy-based activities with a particular focus on Year 8 and Year 12. Debating, poetry recitation, and presenting skills will be taught within the activity programme for our 12-13 year olds. The LAMDA public speaking award and workshops with a stand-up comedian will be offered to our College students

Conclusion

Bootham continues to be in good health, despite the financial challenges we face. We continue with the simple strategy of offering a first-class education in order to attract and retain. This includes the academics, where our results this year have been even stronger than previously, pastoral care which is rightly recognised across the city as a key strength and sport and creative arts which allow students to develop their passions outside the classroom and reach extraordinary levels.

Word of mouth is our greatest marketing tool – I ask for your support in spreading the word about both our Quaker schools – for families of all faiths – and commending us and all we do to friends and family.

Deneal Smith 10.10.2025