

12 February 2010

## TO THE PARENTS OF ALL THIRD YEAR BOYS

Dear Parents

### PREFERENCE FOR FOURTH YEAR SUBJECTS for September 2010

The purpose of this letter is to explain the curriculum which your son will be following in his fourth and fifth years in the school, culminating in the main GCSE examinations in the summer of 2012. The curriculum contains both compulsory and optional subjects. On the basis of the information in this letter and discussions with your son, you need to choose your son's preferences for languages, the sciences and optional subjects.

All Third Year parents will be emailed with a link to an online form. Please complete this online form by **Wednesday 3rd March**. The online form provides room for you to comment if you wish. The Parents' Evening on Tuesday 23rd February will provide an opportunity for you to discuss your son's preferences with his teachers.

In a nutshell, your son can express a preference for either three or four optional subjects. If he selects four optional subjects he has to study the sciences on a more limited basis leading to **dual award Science** GCSE. He would still study all three sciences separately but gain two GCSEs. This combination is likely to appeal to pupils who are more inclined towards the arts side, though it might also be the case that a broad arts-based curriculum is ideal at GCSE level for someone who will later turn out to be a devoted scientist. Alternatively, your son might express a preference for three optional subjects, and pursue the three sciences to GCSE as separate subjects. It is worth stressing that, if at this stage, your son intends to take two or more sciences throughout the sixth form, he would be advised to take advantage of the three separate science option, though there may be exceptions to this for boys who are particularly able. Further detail regarding science options is given in the Middle School Curriculum booklet referred to below.

We expect to offer more than one dual award Science set. The two, or more sets, would be set by ability, based on pupils' end of year Science exams. The subject with which your son **must** combine the dual award Science choice can be either History or Geography.

Please contact me if you would like further information, or if you wish to discuss your son's choices. We are always willing to consider variations to the usual pattern when they are clearly in the interests of a pupil. On the other hand, you will appreciate that we offer over 150 pupils a large number of different possible subject combinations on only three or four blocks of time. In two or three cases a year we have to ask third formers to choose again; that is why we call them 'preferences' rather than 'choices'. Perhaps I could also emphasise the importance of letting me know **directly** of any changes at any time after the form has been submitted. The new combination of subjects might prove impossible to arrange.

A thirty-page booklet on the 'Middle School Curriculum 2010' is available to download at <http://www.abingdonschool.org.uk/curriculum>. It gives, among other things, a detailed description of each Middle School subject. A summary is given later in this letter.

### COMPULSORY SUBJECTS

**English** (4 lessons a week). All pupils study towards two IGCSEs in English and English Literature. We follow the IGCSE specifications as we believe that they offer our pupils the

strongest and most suitable experience of English in Middle School years. During these two years, pupils are taught by one English teacher in classes that are streamed according to pupils' abilities as English students.

**Mathematics** (5 lessons a week). All sets take iGCSE at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> Year. Students are entered for the International GCSE examination provided by Edexcel (4400H). Assessment consists of two written papers, of two hours each, which are taken at the end of the course. The requirements for this examination are comparable to GCSEs offered by other boards. All boys will be entered for the Higher Level of this examination, which means that the highest grades are accessible, in principle, to all. Top sets will be entered for Additional Maths provided by OCR (6993). This consists of a single 2 hour paper.

**Sciences** All boys are taught physics, chemistry and biology. They either aim for a three GCSE qualification (four lessons a week for each science) or a two GCSE qualification which I will refer to as dual award (on two or three lessons a week for each science). The dual award Science option allows boys to pursue four optional subjects. If dual award Science boys ultimately decide to take up one or more of the sciences for A level, they may be asked to work through a 'conversion pack' during the holidays before they begin the sixth form course.

**Modern Language:** All boys must study their main modern foreign language (French or German) to GCSE level.

**Religious Education** (2 lessons a week).

**Physical Education** (1 lesson a week) and **Year group games** (2 lessons a week in the fourth year).

## OPTIONAL SUBJECTS

All pupils study three of the following, or four of these subjects if they have opted for dual award Science. Each is taught for 4 periods a week. Where "or" is used below you may only choose one of them.

Geography

History

Latin **or** Classical Civilisation

second languages (you **must** be already studying this language in Third Year)

German, French, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese and Greek

Electronics

Music

Art & Design (mixed media) **or** Drama

Art & Design (graphics)

Design & Technology

Drama

## **ART AND DESIGN (mixed media) or (graphics)**

An enthusiasm for the subject - an enjoyment in making and learning about art of all kinds - is the best recommendation for choosing art for GCSE, whether mixed media or graphics.

The main 'mixed media' course, taught in two double periods a week, allows pupils to develop work in a variety of media through a range of different approaches including drawing, printmaking, painting, sculpture and computer graphics, informed by the example of other artists. The graphics course is taught in a block without two double lessons and focuses on producing work in illustration and advertising graphics using skills developed in computer graphics, printmaking, drawing and typography. If the graphics course is oversubscribed priority will be given to those who are unable to choose the main 'mixed media' course because they have chosen Drama & Theatre Arts.

The courses are challenging and should not be seen as an "easy option". They are marked using the same criteria and while they differ in media used, 60% of the marks are gained in coursework produced over the two-year period, so a willingness to make use of the art department outside lessons is vital if top grades are to be achieved. Both courses are essentially practical aiming to develop students' visual skills and understanding. Nevertheless, learning about contemporary and historic artists and designers, through gallery visits, workshops and personal research is an essential element of art and design GCSE and as a result students' written response and evaluation of their own and others' artwork is an important part of the work assessed, although essays are not required.

Those thinking of careers in the creative industries - areas such as architecture, design (interior, product, graphic, fashion etc) and fine art - should seriously consider choosing the subject. Art staff are always happy to advise about choices if asked. Further information about art department trips, workshops and artists visits can be found on the school website: [www.abingdon.org.uk/art](http://www.abingdon.org.uk/art)

There is a charge of £20 made each term to cover some of the costs of art materials and portfolios used on the course.

## **CLASSICAL SUBJECTS (Greek, Latin, Classical Civilisation)**

Boys may continue with **both** Latin and Greek until GCSE. The aim is to have completed the language element of the GCSE syllabus by the end of the fourth year. In this year, each set also begins to read real Latin and Greek literature, in preparation for the literary part of the GCSE. The final exams are split 50% on language and 50% on literature. There is no coursework in Latin or Greek: both are tested entirely by exams taken at the end of the fifth year.

Classical Civilisation may be taken as an **alternative to Latin**, and is open to boys who have not studied it in the Third Year. The syllabus focuses on Greece in the Fifth Century BC. For the written exams we study Athens, its culture and religion, Sparta and the Spartan system, and Homer's *Odyssey*. In addition there is a controlled assessment module (worth 25% of the whole), in which candidates usually study the ancient Olympics, before producing a piece of written work on a particular aspect of them. This is done at school under supervision and marked internally: it is best understood as being similar to old-fashioned coursework, but done under exam conditions.

## DESIGN & TECHNOLOGY

During the fourth year the boys undertake many small practical projects designed to give them experiences in a wide range of material areas, along side developing their graphical communication and computer aided design skills. This provides them with valuable knowledge for the examination and also helps them decide what materials they may wish to incorporate in to their coursework. Projects include Ipod speakers, contemporary trophies and more traditional projects in wood and metal.

One major coursework project is then completed in the 5<sup>th</sup> year, this is an important part of the subject, being worth 50% of the GCSE mark. The project will be chosen by the student from some broad contexts and will include, identifying a need and researching the problem through to generating initial ideas and developing a chosen solution, planning for construction and finally product manufacture. The design folio is primarily completed using various ICT packages.

The exciting course aims to encourage students to develop their own innovation and problem solving skills, creativity and design and technology capability. The GCSE course will suit those who are creative, have enquiring minds, enjoy challenges and those who have the motivation to work consistently throughout the design and manufacture of their coursework piece. It aims to increase the knowledge, understanding and skills of design production processes within all of the three main groups of materials: woods, metals and plastics as well as foster awareness amongst boys, of the need to consider sustainability and the environmental impact of their designing.

Pupils are charged £15 per term on the school bill, to cover materials throughout the year and for their practical piece which they then get to keep.

## DRAMA AND THEATRE ARTS

This is a two-year course that leads to the AQA GCSE qualification in Drama. It primarily involves the practical study of drama and theatre, but also requires students to know, understand and employ a body of dramatic and theatrical theory and terminology. Students must also develop critical skills, and the ability to evaluate their own and others' work. Themes are explored dramatically, and plays are studied from the point of view of an actor, director and designer. The course seeks to develop acting, improvisation and devising skills, alongside an awareness of the technical side of the theatre - lighting, stage design and so on. The initial units involve the assessment of at least two practical performances. Usually, one will be a piece of drama devised by the students from a variety of stimuli, and the other will be a performance of part of a published play script. The last section of the course is assessed in a ninety minute written examination in the summer term of the 5<sup>th</sup> year in which two questions - each in at least two parts - must be answered. Pupils must answer one question on some of the practical work they have undertaken during the course, but for the second question they can choose to write about their work on a specific play or their study of a live theatre performance they have seen during the course. Termly visits to the theatre form an essential part of the course, often outside normal school hours, and the costs of these are charged to parents' end of term bills. Pupils should also be prepared for additional after school rehearsals as practical assessments draw near. The subject is taught in the Drama Studio, the Ingham Room, the Charles Maude Room and the Amey Theatre. The GCSE course is explained in more detail in the Middle School Curriculum Document. Please note that the heavily practical nature of the subject means it is unlikely to suit pupils with a particularly retiring nature. **All boys wishing to pursue Drama at GCSE level will be asked to attend a brief audition to determine their aptitude.**

## GEOGRAPHY

The Geography syllabus (iGCSE Edexcel) begins in the third year and the fourth year builds on this foundation. This modern course includes many contemporary issues that are becoming increasingly relevant and important: geography is uniquely placed to give pupils an insight into these issues which will affect them in the future.

The course is divided into three sections:

- The Natural Environment and People: (River Environments, Hazardous Environments and Coastal Environments)
- People and Their Environments: (Economic Activity and Energy and Urban Environments)
- Global Issues: (Fragile environments, Globalisation and migration and Development and Human Welfare)

Assessment is by one single-tier final examination. There is no coursework or controlled assessment requirement. This releases a considerable amount of teaching time to allow for deeper exploration of other geographical themes, thus allowing for a better and more rounded geographical education in the middle school.

We currently run a one-day field visit to Bristol during the fourth year that meets both content and technique requirements for the urban unit. Other field work activities are arranged in the Abingdon area during the course.

## HISTORY

GCSE history, an optional subject at Abingdon, is a two-year course in the **fourth** and **fifth years**. The syllabus (Edexcel IGCSE), is examined in **one two and a half paper**:

- The paper is a single paper with three sections:
  - a) Themes section-Germany 1918-1945 and Superpower relations 1945-62
  - b) A depth study on Russia in Revolution, 1914-24
  - c) A study in change section, Conflict, crisis and change: The Middle East 1919-1973
- An optional trip to Germany in the summer half term of the fourth year will help to bring to life elements of Hitler's rise to power as well as introducing boys to some of the key elements of the Cold War (focused on events around Berlin) that they will also study in the fourth form.

We are fortunate in having excellent resources for the GCSE course. The main text, B. Walsh, *Modern World History* is supported by a number of topic books and ICT resources and a rich variety of DVD and video materials. Once again, the boys benefit from the use of the ICT Centre close by and the use of data projector and interactive whiteboard materials in the History classrooms. The students also subscribe to *Hindsight* magazine throughout the two years, which is also a helpful resource.

It is our intention that the range of history topics offered in the Middle School at Abingdon should provide many insights into the essential underpinnings of the world in which we all live. Furthermore, the skills of argument and critical evaluation developed during these key years contribute significantly to individual academic development, irrespective of the path a boy chooses to take in the sixth form.

## **MODERN LANGUAGES**

Apart from their Main Language (French or German) boys can study a second modern foreign language (or occasionally three if they studied three in the third year) and we encourage them to continue with the language that they started in the third year. The course builds on previous work, and develops their ability to understand, speak and write in the language. Boys will be offered the opportunity to take part in one or several of the exchanges with Bielefeld, Aix-en-Provence, or Santiago de Compostela. Any pupil who wishes to take GCSE in a language without having studied the same language in the third year may only do so in exceptional circumstances.

## **MUSIC**

Boys should discuss their suitability for Edexcel GCSE Music with a member of the full-time music staff. This course is designed to provide opportunities for boys to study Music in greater depth, both from a theoretical and a practical standpoint. All boys who take this option will be practising musicians who are of a minimum standard of about ABRSM grade 4 on one instrument. Boys will listen to, and may be analytical of, a wide range of music, classical, folk and popular, together with composing and performing both as soloists and as part of an ensemble. All are expected to do some singing to help develop their aural facility - attendance at the Choral Society rehearsals are therefore seen as an obligatory part of the course.

## **ELECTRONICS**

Pupils will be given a broad understanding of the fundamental aspects of electronics. In the fourth year they are taught basic electricity, timing circuits, digital logic, and use of semiconductors. The fifth year syllabus covers sequential logic, microprocessors, amplification systems, and communication systems.

Electronics is a practical subject and practical work is given a strong emphasis throughout the course.

There is a practical project that is worth 25% of the overall GCSE grade. In this project, the pupil should identify a specific, applied electronics problem to be solved. He should consider alternative solutions and give reasons for selecting the chosen solution, conduct background research, devise appropriate circuit diagrams, construct and test the system, suggest suitable modifications, and produce a report which details all stages of the development.

Although the basic electricity taught in Physics underpins Electronics, most of the subject content in Electronics is unique and not part of the Physics syllabus. Electronics is, in essence, an engineering subject and not a science. Its emphasis is, therefore, much more on practical application.

Electronics is suitable for candidates from a wide ability range: for some, the summit of achievement may be to construct and describe simple circuits, while others may gain sufficient depth of understanding to design systems to solve original problems.

Do contact me if you wish, by phone or preferably by e-mail. You may wish to discuss matters further on Parents' Evening.

Yours sincerely,

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