

First lady who is turning heads

Felicity Lusk made both headlines and history when she began her tenure as head of Abingdon Boys' School last September. Kate Green talks to her

WHEN Felicity Lusk made the announcement, in weepy tones, to her girls at Oxford High School that she was leaving them to become the first female head of a boys' public school, they burst out laughing and cheering, and began furiously texting brothers and boyfriends. At the other end, the news was received in stunned silence.

Whatever the Abingdon boys envisaged at that moment, it cannot have been Miss Lusk, with her spiky hair, stilettos and Kiwi twang. On the day of our interview, she's glamorous in a scoop-necked, aubergine dress with not a sensible shoe in sight; she's media-savvy yet spontaneous, and gives the immediate impression of being an asset at a party.

'Pretty radical!' the comedian David Mitchell, an old Abingdonian, wrote in *The Guardian*. But, he added: 'There are bound to have been gifted male candidates, and the governors would have had a quieter life if they'd appointed one of them, so I'm forced to the conclusion that Lusk was picked because they thought she was the best person for the job and institutional sexism be damned. Hooray for that.'

Now in her second term, Miss Lusk says leaving Oxford High School and her 'lovely girls' was 'like cutting off a leg', but the boys have been 'pragmatic' and she's enjoying 'the straightforward atmosphere'. Her innate rugby knowledge helps and she's introducing football 'because the boys want to play it'.

'I think what I've done is a bold thing, but I'm not daunted,' she says. 'At first sight, the staff common room seemed monochrome, but now I don't see it as a male-female thing, more as a group of likeable colleagues doing a great job. The boys are as witty and engaging as I expected, but what strikes me most is that they're all beautifully brought up. And, despite being 753 years old, it's not a snobby school.'

The daughter of a Battle of Britain pilot and Oxford-educated QC, Miss Lusk, an organist, was director of music at Wellington East Girls' College in New Zealand, where past pupils testify to the 'can do' attitude she instilled in them. A desire for English

On the record

Felicity Lusk, 55, was deputy head of Hasmore High School, London, and then head of Oxford High School for Girls from 1998 to 2010

Where is your favourite place in Britain? Port Meadow, Oxford

What is your favourite building? The Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford

What is your favourite book? *The Raj Quartet* (Paul Scott)—I like books about India

What is your favourite music? *Adagio* from Schubert's string quartet in C major

What is your favourite holiday? This year, I'm planning to cycle in Cambodia and Vietnam and walk in the Swiss Alps

Who is your hero? Sir Edmund Hillary, not only for Everest, but for how he lived his life after

tradition, fired by Enid Blyton's tales of high jinks at Malory Towers and by her father tearing pictures of the Cotswolds and Churchill out of the *Illustrated London News*, prompted her to leave home in 1990.

The Abingdon job popped up just as she was musing on her career. 'Oxford High was my great love, but I felt that I'd done what I wanted to do there and that I could become a bit of a nuisance, as heads can be if they stay too long. I knew this would be a radical departure, and being a first was certainly an attraction. I'm always preaching the need for women to challenge themselves, and I feel I've been given another chance.'

Miss Lusk, a divorcée with a 23-year-old son, says she's exhausted—'it's 24/7'—yet she's visibly enjoying herself. Her first major decision, after consultation with teachers, boys and parents, was to switch lesson times from 35 to 55 minutes. 'It completely alters the nuances of teaching; all I'd see when I looked out of the window were boys and



staff flying up and down the drive, and the reality was that some lessons were ending up as 27 minutes. Now, they're getting a fantastic amount of enrichment.' Miss Lusk has also created 'down time' in the middle of the day, for assemblies, eating, chatting and monitoring, and has, to unanimous joy, abolished Saturday lessons. 'I felt they were lacklustre and mucked up family weekends. Adolescent boys need to sleep, and now they can have more outings.'

She intends to set up a school council—'the boys wrote so sensibly in the consultation that I want to keep those avenues open'—and has appointed a school counsellor. 'There's a lot of pressure to be happy at school, but life wouldn't be real if there weren't periods of feeling low. It's important that the boys learn to talk to someone.' Miss Lusk keeps



Initially dubious, the Abingdon boys have been won over by their new head, Felicity Lusk

her own communication lines open with a daily blog, in which she discusses anything from a lack of Valentine cards to impromptu ping-pong. If Abingdon were to be summed up in a schools guide, she'd like it to say: 'Unstuffy, aspirational—and thoroughly nice.'

It should be added here that the school has a decent academic reputation, too—one parent describes it as 'an affordable Winchester', which Miss Lusk takes as a compliment—but she won't get excited by league tables. 'They don't measure a school's ethos, nor the breadth of education,' she says disapprovingly, 'and you can manipulate your place in the league by methods that are detrimental to children.' She's open to the A levels versus Baccalaureat debate, but

says: 'We're happy with A levels as it's great to specialise. But education isn't about an exam course. If I had my way, entry to university would be done after school and wouldn't be based on exams.' Miss Lusk is, however, understanding of parental anxiety about exams. 'By comparison, my generation [of pupils] had it easy—it was a smaller world, international crises impacted less, and lots of people didn't go to university and didn't feel they had to. This is a generation under stress, especially about the chronic job situation. But the pendulum swings, and if children can learn to stand on their own feet, they'll be okay.' It would be hard to think of a principal more qualified to ensure that independence. 🐦

NEED TO KNOW

Abingdon is a boys' independent school in Oxfordshire, with 860 pupils (about 150 board) plus a day prep school with 250 pupils

Academic record 99.7% pass rate at GCSE level and 100% pass rate at A level, with 70.4% gaining A or A* grades in 2010

Fees £9,505 (boarding), £8,195 (weekly), £4,635 (day), per term

Old Abingdonians Politician Francis Maude, actors Tom Hollander and Toby Jones, the members of Radiohead

Contact 01235 521563;
www.abingdon.org.uk