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# Ten out of ten

Vivienne Durham, outgoing headmistress of Francis Holland Regent's Park, tops our list of turbo-charged headmistresses

By **Amanda Constance**

**S**he may only have months left in the hot seat but as far as turbo-charged heads go, Vivienne Durham is the benchmark. Winner of *Tatler's* Best Head of Public School last year, she has presided over Francis Holland Regent's Park for 11 years and parents drool with praise. A people person: warm, brilliant and ballsy, Durham is a petite powerhouse, oft commented on for her wardrobe – the Good Schools Guide describes her as ‘infuriatingly svelte and chic’ and well as “deservedly one of the most popular heads in the business”. She is retiring in January 2016 to spend more time with her husband, Kenneth Durham, previously head of University College School, who has been unwell. She will leave behind some very small, very expensive shoes to fill.

We happen to meet on the tenth anniversary of 7/7 – the school is just yards from Baker Street station and was in the thick of the emergency ten years ago. Durham was coming to the end of her first year as head and it was

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“an immediate test” she says. With no Facebook, Twitter, or news of any kind, she had to rely on her gut instinct and she knew “something awful was happening”. She gathered her staff and by 10am a special assembly of 500 pupils and 70 staff were massed in the school hall. “I stepped on to the stage having no idea what I was going to say, but I knew it was an emergency and I was going to keep them safe.” Within two hours, she had the whole school evacuated (one parent managed 10 pupils in his open top sports car). It was only that evening that Durham realised what had been happening so close to her school.

The anecdote reveals what a strong

leader Durham is. “I’m always best in a crisis, because I’m not thinking about myself,” she says. On 7/7, she says: “We had procedures but it’s how you implement them – that’s why you are paid to be a leader.” She is generous as to why she does it well: “You must have good people around you – I believe in the team and being collaborative. On a day like that, 70 people made it work.” But mostly it reveals her commitment to her job.

“This job matters to me every day of my life. It would probably be better if I cared less sometimes,” she says. On her very first day as a newly qualified 23-year-old, she says, “I remember thinking I hope I don’t ever get dull and lazy and complacent”.

Durham’s teaching career started in the early 1980s at Haberdashers’ Aske’s for Girls. She read English at St Hilda’s, Oxford and entered teaching despite being offered both a place at law school and a place on the local paper (as we said, she’s a powerhouse). Her second job was at Godolphin & Latymer where she was offered head of Year 8 within two months of starting. “I wouldn’t be here



Vivienne Durham talks to some of her pupils

now,” she says, “if it wasn’t for Margaret Rudland (then head of G&L).” Perhaps surprisingly for someone so outwardly capable, she describes sometimes stopping her car to vomit with nerves on the way to school in her G&L days. And she admits that she still has a ‘dark night of the soul’ at the end of every summer holiday thinking “Can I really do this again?”

After a role as Head of English at Guildford High School she was Deputy Head at South Hampstead High School for seven years. It was here that she realised what a tough job it is to be a head – “as deputy you are the heartbeat of the school but you are not in charge”. She says she owes her career to “inspirational heads: Margaret Rudland (G&L), Penelope Penney (Habs) and Sue Singer (Guildford High) who all encouraged and inspired me.”

Now she tries “to be a headteacher who still knows how demanding being a teacher is.” She wants the profession to regain its kudos and attract the best to its ranks. “Teach First is the best initiative that ever happened in this country,” she says.

The role of the modern head has never been more demanding, she says. “The skills you need are moral, spiritual, legal,

financial, educational ... there are so many strands I defy anyone to do them all well.” But that is itself why the job is so great, as it is endlessly new and challenging; at the end of the day “you are dealing with young lives and it never gets any easier”. She laughs and says she wants the epitaph on her grave to read ‘never knowingly in a tribunal’ – today’s heads must pick their way through litigious minefields on a near daily basis.




## THE WORST THING YOU CAN DO IS BORE A CHILD - IT'S TOXIC

Durham wants her school to be ‘academic and kind’ – pupils scored a mighty 86.7 per cent A\*-B grades at A-level last year – and she takes an enormous interest in each pupil, interviewing each 11+ entrant individually.

Parents of a Year 8 pupil say: “Our daughter has never before been celebrated like this and we’re delighted to see her thriving. All the girls at FSH are confident and care for each other and their teachers.”

“My big ethos,” Durham says “is that the worst thing you can do as a teacher is bore a child – it’s toxic.” Her commitment to educating girls for the real world runs to her core. “I’ve never run it as a girls’ school,” she says. “I’m sorry, I’m not a feminist. I believe there is a glass ceiling – if we tell them there isn’t one, we are telling them a lie. Women still have to plan for a biological fact – ie motherhood.” Durham took a conscious decision not to have her own children. This was partly because she knew she couldn’t commit to a family and her job but also, as the daughter of a professional woman, “we had a housekeeper and the people who had the best of me were those doing the washing when I came home at 4pm.”

Susan Hamlyn, Director of the Good Schools Guide Advice Service says: “Vivienne is an incredible role model for a girl. She gives you the impression that there’s nothing you can’t do but, for all her energy, elegance and eloquence she is the most compassionate and supportive of heads. If I have to find a school for a girl with a troubled history and who needs a safe place and nurturing, I call Vivienne first.”

Durham is taking up a part-time role at Knightsbridge consultancy Enjoy Education to allow her to change down a gear. She will be much missed, but one can’t help feeling she won’t be gone for long. 

*See overleaf for the best of the rest*