

Frequently asked questions (FAQs)

We hope that most of the information you need can be found on our website or in our prospectus. However we are often asked other questions (by parents and their sons) and hope the following may be helpful. If you can't find the answer to your question anywhere in the information we provide, please do get in touch with us: we will be happy to help. Parents often say to us, 'I know this is a silly question...' but when you are looking at an independent school - perhaps for the first time - then we know that every question is important to you.

Q: What if we don't know anything about independent schools?

Statistics collected by organisations like the Scottish Council for Independent Schools (SCIS) show that today, the majority of parents looking at independent schools for their children did NOT go to an independent school themselves. At Merchiston, we know that choosing a school for your child is an extremely important decision, and that you need as much information as possible to make an informed choice. Please don't hesitate to ring us to ask as many questions as you like, or visit us without any commitment on your part.

Q: How many boys are in the school?

Merchiston has approximately 430 pupils, of whom 330 are in the Senior School (13 –18 years). About 70% of the total are boarding pupils. Approximately 70 of the school's pupils are International students who come from about 20 different countries. Year group sizes vary: J4 and J5 may be up to 18 pupils, First and Second Forms are between 20 and 30, Third Form is about 40 pupils. Year groups in the Middle School (Fourth, Shell and Fifth Forms) are usually 60+ in number, and our Lower and Upper Sixth Form groups have 70+ pupils. Junior year groups have a higher proportion of day pupils, whilst our Sixth Form is usually made up of 80% or more boarding pupils. Our House system is 'horizontal' so that boys of the same age are in the same year group here. This means that our house rules, pastoral care and activity programmes can be tailored to individual year groups, rather than mixed age houses. Three Housemasters have overall responsibility for the Junior School (J4 – Third Forms), the Middle School (Fourth, Shell and Fifth Forms) and for the Lower and Upper Sixth Forms.

Q: How many terms are there in the school year?

A: There are 3 terms in the UK school year. The first (the Autumn term) normally runs from the beginning of September until the middle of December, and the second (the Lent term) from early January until late March. The third (Summer) term runs from late April until the end of June or beginning of July. There is a half-term holiday in the middle of each term, and also leave-out (exeat) weekends as well. (See 'What is a half-term holiday?' And 'What is an exeat?' sections below)

Q: Which boarding house will my son join?

This depends upon his age. Boys aged 8-12 (Years 4-8) join Pringle, our Junior House. Chalmers West and Chalmers East are for pupils aged 13+ and 14+ (Years 9 & 10). Those aged 15+ (Year 11) are in Rogerson East, whilst the Lower Sixth Form (Year 12 at 16+) and Upper Sixth Form (Year 13 at 17+) are in Rogerson West and Evans Houses respectively. From September 2008 our Sixth Form boarders will be resident in a new boarding house, and so the house system in our senior school will change quite a lot at that time. From September 2008, all pupils in our Fifth Form (Year 11) will also be able to have individual study bedrooms.

Q: Do all pupils have their own room?

A: In the Sixth form, all pupils have their own room, although we can arrange a double room if you really prefer to share. In Fourth, Shell and Fifth forms, pupils have a work and sleeping area of their own in a subdivided room. In junior houses pupils sleep in dormitories of up to 6 pupils.

Q: Can pupils stay at school during holidays?

A: The staff and pupils at Merchiston work very hard, and we feel it is important that they have some real breaks during the term. The school therefore closes for half-terms and for leave-out weekends.

Q: What is a 'half-term' holiday?

A: There is a half-term holiday in the middle of each term (about 10 nights in the Autumn term; 7 nights in the Lent term, and 4 or 5 nights in the Summer term). The school closes, and pupils go home, or to their guardians.

Q: What is a leave-out?

A: A leave-out (sometimes called an exeat) is a shorter time when boys leave school. The Autumn term has two formal leave-out (or exeat) weekends (1 before and 1 after half-term) when the School closes and all pupils go home, or to their guardians. Each of the other terms has one leave-out weekend for all pupils (and an extra one for Junior pupils only). If parents or guardians wish, boys can go home for other weekends, by arrangement with their Housemaster, and provided their sporting or other commitments allow.

Q: Are meals / tuition included in the fees?

A: Yes: Merchiston's fees include 3 meals (breakfast, lunch and tea) plus snacks for boarding pupils, and two meals a day (lunch and tea) for day pupils.

Q: Can you provide special diets?

A: Yes: our catering staff provide a wide variety of nutritious meals and can cater for a variety of special diets including: vegetarian; nut- (or other allergy) free; halal and kosher food.

Q: How can we meet or make contact with other Merchiston parents?

A: Merchiston does a great deal to promote contact between the school and parents, and between parents themselves. After you visit us to look around the school, we will offer you the opportunity to speak to some of our current parents if you wish.

Once your son becomes a pupil at Merchiston, you will find that there are parents' meetings to keep you informed about his academic progress, and a Parents' Forum which meets to discuss School issues. You will also be invited to concerts, plays, sports (and other events) in which your son may take part. We also hold many social events for parents: Ceilidhs (informal Scottish Country Dances); Year Group Parents' Dinners; drinks and supper parties; an annual Commemoration Ball; a Burns Supper; presentation evenings etc. Parents help with the organisation of these, as well as with the School Uniform Exchange, the Pipe Bands, with Sports and other tours and with fundraising. In the first term of each year we produce a Parents' Directory, which contains the names and addresses of parents (who have given us their permission) so that you can keep in touch yourselves with other families who live in your area. If you are registering your son for entry, and would be happy for your details to be included in the Directory once he joins us, tick the box on the registration form which gives us your consent.

In Pringle (our Junior House) parents help with Prep; transport; arrange social events amongst themselves; help with our 'Fruit Fridays' for the boys break time; and offer cooking lessons or arrange things like Road Safety Awareness courses (for cyclists).

Q: Who looks after pupils when they first arrive?

A: Your son's Housemaster is the first person who will care for him, with a team of house tutors. Pupils (especially younger ones) are very busy on the first night of term, so that they don't have too much time to miss being at home. The Housemaster may appoint a 'buddy' for your son, ie another pupil who will look after him for a while until he gets used to being here.

Q: How will I make friends at Merchiston / Will I have friends of different ages?

A: When you arrive at Merchiston you will have lots of people to look after you. Your Housemaster will ensure that you have a 'buddy' to look after you during your first days and weeks here. Our House system is also helpful when you are making friends. At Merchiston, all the boys of the same age live in the same boarding house (though there will be some older boys living there as prefects). Your year group may also take share weekend activities with another year group close to you in age. So, you will have a lot of opportunities to make good friends both in your own House, and in other Houses. We arrange lots of trips and social events here, and we run some special outings right at the start of the year to make sure all the boys in the House get to know one another really well as term begins. In our younger boarding houses, you may share an area or dorm with other pupils, and this can really help you make friends, even though you may be used to having your own room at home.

Q: Does the school have any special things or words it is helpful to know?

A: Yes: in every school there are some rather odd words which have just developed over the years, but Merchiston doesn't have too many of these. Sometimes you will hear staff say that Merchiston is an 'HMC' school. This stands for Headmaster and Headmistresses' Conference, which is the group of boarding schools which we belong to, and whose guidelines we follow.

You may sleep in a 'dorm' (dormitory) or a 'study', and you will also do prep in your study or the dorm (see also 'What is Prep?' below). The person who looks after you in the Boarding House is called a Housemaster, and there will also be Sixth Form boys in your house who will act as 'prefects'. They help the Housemaster run the house. In most independent schools, there are names for the houses you may live in or be attached to (eg Evans House or Pringle House), as well as a year group number (Fourth Form). Parts of the school grounds have particular names ('The Back Field', 'the West Gardens'; Gibson House), but you will soon get used to these. Other words include 'leave-out (or exeat)', which means a day or weekend away from school; 'half-term' (a short holiday in the middle of a term). At the beginning and end of the day (or if you have been out of school), the Housemaster or House tutor may hold a 'roll-call' when he or she will make sure that everyone is safely in the house.

Boys at Merchiston call male teachers 'Sir' (or Mr ***) and female teachers are called 'M'am' (or by their full name: Mrs ***, or Miss ***). This is just for politeness and, in turn, staff will call you by your first name and not by your surname (as you may have seen happen in old films or read of in books). Sometimes snacks (sweets, drinks and food which you buy yourself) are called 'tuck', and you can keep them in a 'tuckbox' or locker. (Merchiston sometimes also uses the word 'scran' for this).

As well as all the usual sports which we play here, there are a few whose names you may not know, for example Fives (a game which is a cross between handball and squash) and Swedish Longball (a really good fun game invented (so we say) by a member of staff).

If you hear any words which you don't understand, then don't be afraid to ask someone what they mean.

Q: What is 'Prep'

A: In some schools, including Merchiston, homework is called Preparation or 'Prep' for short. In each house, pupils have a set Prep time, though older pupils do more work outside these times. They may also have 'study periods' when they work on their own during the school day.

Q: Do boys have to play rugby?

A: Unless they have medical exemption, all boys up to Shell form (and most in the Fifth Form) play rugby and receive excellent coaching. Rugby is not compulsory in the Sixth Form.

Q: What is the weather like in Edinburgh?

A: The UK as a whole has quite a mild climate, and there is not a very great variation between the seasons of the year. The average temperatures in Edinburgh are: Winter +1° to +6° and Summer +11° to +18°. Edinburgh (on the eastern side of Scotland) also has quite a dry climate. Although we are quite far north, we don't get a great deal of snow (though the boys enjoy it when we do!). The summers are usually fine, though there is often a breeze (since we are near the coast) and sometimes in the late spring we get a sea-mist after a warm day.

Q: Is the school warm?

A: Yes. The school has an efficient heating system, and if you come from a warm climate you shouldn't be worried about keeping warm in school. The School uniform is also very sensible and warm, and if you wrap up well when you are outside you will be fine.

Q: Can my son learn a musical instrument?

A: Yes, he can either continue with an instrument he is already playing, or take up an instrument here. Music classes take place during the school day (or before or after school). There is an extra charge for music lessons.

Q: Can pupils wear their own clothes at school?

A: In the evenings and weekends, and at certain other times, pupils in all year groups are permitted to wear casual clothes of a tasteful nature. **ALL items must be named.** In addition to other items, **ALL** pupils **MUST** possess one pair of smart casual (not denim) trousers, and some collared shirts.

Q: Can I get help with buying Uniform?

A: Yes; if you are an International Student for example, and arrive at school on your own, or if you and your parents don't know Edinburgh, we can ask someone to help you buy uniform, either at our own School Uniform Exchange shop (which sells both new and second hand clothing); at the School's outfitters, or in general shops in Edinburgh.

Q: Will I have to wear a kilt at school?

A: All pupils at Merchiston wear a kilt for 'formal wear', at Sunday morning services, singing in the choir, for formal dances, and when meeting the public, eg at Information Mornings.

Q: Do pupils have to do their own laundry?

A: Some Senior pupils use the House laundry to do washing, and this is a good preparation for University life; but they don't have to. Each boarding house has a Housemother, who takes care of laundry, and she is responsible (with her team of house staff) for cleaning. Pupils are expected to make their own beds, and keep their area of the house tidy.

Q: What is a duvet?

A: We are sometime asked this by students coming from warmer countries: it appears on the uniform list under 'general items'. In Scotland it is may also be called a 'downie'. A duvet is a feather or fibre filled cover for sleeping under in colder countries. You can buy one easily in shops in Edinburgh, and you will need a 'single bed' sized one. Duvets come in a variety of weights, (called a 'TOG value' - which ranges from 4-15). The higher the TOG value, the warmer the duvet (about 12 or 13.5 is good for most seasons of the year). You will also have to provide 2 (cotton or other type of fibre) covers for the duvet, which are usually sold together with matching covers for pillows. The School can provide pillows, but you may like to bring your own new ones. The School will provide sheets for your mattress, and will send all your bedding to the laundry.

Q: Are pupils allowed to go into Edinburgh?

A: Edinburgh is a beautiful (quite small) and generally safe city, and boys from our Shell, Fifth and Sixth Forms (Years 10-13) are allowed to go into town on some Saturday and Sunday afternoons (depending upon sport and other commitments) and sometimes on our half-days. They sign out in a book kept in the boarding house, saying where they are going, and then have to sign back in again by a particular time. They normally travel by bus (the No 10 bus goes straight to the centre of town), and usually go in groups to be sociable. This means they can go shopping, or to the cinema (though there are organised outings as well), or they can just meet up with friends (or girl friends from our sister schools) for coffee or a chat. The housemaster regulates this privilege, which can be withdrawn if it is abused. Younger pupils (Fourth Form and below) do not go into town by themselves (though they may walk to the shops in Colinton village – 5 minutes away). Our Fourth Form (13+ boys) and younger year groups will have organised trips to Edinburgh (eg to do Christmas shopping, or to visit the cinema, theatre, 10-pin bowling, Pizza Hut, museums etc). The school has a very clear Out of School Code of Behaviour, which is included in our School Policies booklet.

Q: How will I meet girls at Merchiston?

A: The school arranges lots of social (and some academic) events in common with our 'sister' schools in Edinburgh, and beyond. These include debating competitions, Young Enterprise companies, dances (both discos and Scottish country dancing), drama productions, and other socials such as joint outings, barbeques, fun and sports days etc. Older boys are allowed to visit Edinburgh, and can meet up with girl friends there. Sixth Form boys can invite their female friends to visit them in the Sixth Form Club here in School.

Q: Is there Internet access in the School, in boarding houses or in bedrooms?

A: There are Internet and network points around the school, and in all the boarding houses although, at the moment, there are no points in individual rooms. Our new Sixth Form Boarding house (from September 2008) will have Internet access in individual rooms for senior pupils.

Q: Are pupils allowed laptop computers?

A: Yes, if you wish to bring a laptop, you are allowed to do so, though you should make sure you have insurance to cover its damage or loss, and that you keep it safe in school. The School's IT Department will configure your network card for the school's system, and ensure you have the correct virus protection and security software. There are lots of PCs provided in school which you can use if you don't have your own laptop.

Q: Does the school provide email accounts?

A: Yes, each pupil is provided with an email account. Some Sixth Form pupils use their own email addresses.

Q: Does the school provide transport to Edinburgh / to the airport ?

A: The School runs a mini-bus service from the centre of Edinburgh to school on Monday-Friday mornings, though we don't provide a return service because of the differing day lengths here for each

year group. There is a charge for the bus service (currently £2:40 per morning in 2008), and there are various pick up points on the way to school. The route changes slightly each year (according to what pick up points are requested). However, the mini-bus service has limited places and we regret that spaces cannot be guaranteed.

The school can help with transport to the airport at the beginning and end of term for boarding pupils (if your son's Guardian can't help). Senior pupils usually take (or share) taxis to and from the airport, which is only 20 minutes away.

Q: Can pupils bring their own pictures / posters from home?

A: Yes: and each boy will have a noticeboard in his room or area where he can display pictures and posters. However, posters are expected to be tasteful, and not to give offence to other pupils, parents or visitors. The Housemaster reserves the right to remove any posters or pictures which are not considered suitable. Boys also bring quite a few other items including (not always just in the junior houses) a favourite toy or teddy bear!

Q: Are mobile phones, iPods or Mp3 players allowed?

A: Pupils in the Senior School (Fourth Form (13+) and above) are allowed to bring mobile phones. The School has clear policies for how and when these may be used, which may be found in the School Policies Booklet. Mp3 players are allowed at the discretion of Housemasters. As a general rule, though, they are not allowed to be used around the School, nor in public places.

Q: How can pupils keep their belongings safe?

A: Merchiston is a happy and secure place to live, and everyone here is expected to respect the property, privacy and welfare of other pupils and staff. However, we also try to take general and internal security seriously. Arrangements vary from house to house. All boarding houses have secure keypad access, and pupils only know the keypad code for their own house entrance. Within the houses, there may be lockers which can be padlocked (each boy will have his own and he can also bring a tuckbox) to keep Tuck, mobile phones and other belongings secure. If older pupils have iPods, DVD players or other equipment, they may use a locker or choose to bring a secure box. We do not encourage students to bring very expensive items to school (though these can be covered either through your home insurance, or through the School). It is not a good idea for boys to keep large sums of cash in the boarding houses, and each Housemaster runs a House Bank in which parents or boys can deposit money to draw on and to keep it safe. There is also a bank in Colinton Village (with cashpoint) to which the School can provide a letter of introduction if boys wish to open an account there.

Q: Will my son develop a Scottish accent at Merchiston?

A: This is a question we are often asked by parents of International students, who may be concerned that their son will learn to speak English with an accent which won't be understandable back home. Merchiston has pupils (and staff) from all over Scotland, from England, Europe, USA, and from a host of other countries. International students here learn to speak English really well, and if they do develop a slight accent, it is a very attractive one.

Q: Why do International students need a guardian at school?

A: If you live outside the UK, and your son is a boarding pupil, then he will need a 'Guardian' to look after him during leave-out weekends and half-terms (when the school will close) if he is not able to fly home. A guardian may also help take your son to (and collect him from) the airport; look after him if there is any emergency; or may go to Parents' meetings on your behalf. A guardian can also come to school for social events, or to watch your son perform in concerts or plays if you aren't able to come yourself. Guardians may be family members or family friends. If you do not know anyone who can be a guardian for your son, the school can help you to find someone suitable who will do this for you. There is a charge for guardianship if the School (or a guardianship agency) provide the service.

Q: What religious denomination is the school?

A: Merchiston has a Christian heritage and ethos, though other religious faiths are respected, and provision is made for pupils from a number of differing cultures and beliefs. All pupils attend morning assemblies. There is a religious service each Sunday during term-time, either Whole School Services on Sunday mornings, which all boys are required to attend, or evening services, which boarding pupils attend. These are specifically Christian acts of worship of an interdenominational nature. Pupils of other faiths may be excused attendance on parental request and consultation, and provision can be made for these pupils to study their own religious beliefs during Service or to attend appropriate services outside school.

Q: Can someone help with translation if we visit the school?

A: Yes, we can help with translation of information into German, French, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, or Russian. If you require assistance with any other language, please get in touch with us.

Q: Where can we stay if we are visiting the School?

A: The school publishes a list of hotels and B&B establishments in Edinburgh, some of which are close to the school. Please see the section under Enquiries for further details.

Q: Does the school accept Euros / dollars / cash payment / credit cards?

A: The school accepts payment in British Sterling. Payments can be made by cheque, or by bank transfer, and the school's bank details can be found in the Fees section of the website. We regret that we do not accept payment by credit card.

Q: Do pupils need to have private medical insurance?

A: All boarding pupils are registered with the School's Doctor, and are therefore treated under the British National Health Service (NHS). Day pupils are treated by their family GP, but may visit the Medical Centre during the day if necessary. Parents who wish may take out private medical cover, which will cover treatment by the physiotherapist in School (which is not covered by the NHS), or to provide treatment at a private hospital where necessary. The school also offers private dental insurance, which covers emergency dental treatment only.