

When two heads are better than one

The role of headmaster can be lonely, but Ludgrove has a tradition of sharing. Kate Green meets the present pair

IT'S arguably the quintessential English boys' prep school, and Ludgrove's reputation is synonymous with feeding the major public schools, commanding the utmost respect on the games field and presenting a comforting atmosphere of unselfconscious, understated charm. Former Ludgrovians include a Prime Minister (Alec Douglas-Home), dukes (of Kent and Devonshire), princes (William and Harry), a marquess (of Bath), plus author Osbert Sitwell (albeit for four terms only), the distinguished journalist Paul Foot, writer William Fiennes, explorer Bear Grylls and captains of industry. 'Ludgrove is a big name and we have never sought to aggressively push the school, but we can't afford to be complacent either,' says joint-headmaster Sid Inglis, which is perhaps why he and Simon Barber, a fourth-generation head, have agreed to a rare journalistic visit.

They took over in 2008 from Nichol Marston and Simon's father, Gerald. The latter clocked up 35 years, with his wife, Janet, and, it's universally acknowledged, are a hard act to follow. However, the almost identically dressed duo—Mr Inglis says people often remark on their similarity (even their labradors are litter sisters)—still look reassuringly energetic and optimistic. They are following in a long tradition, which began in 1901 with G. O. Smith and William Oakley, two former England football captains, who took over on the death of the school's founder, Arthur Dunn. 'Ludgrove has always had two headmasters—one to concentrate on the pastoral side, 'upstairs'—and do bursar-type duties, which is me, and Sid drives the academic side,' explains Mr Barber. 'I deal with Eton entrance; he's a big Radleian. We've been good mates for a while and we've gone through a lot together over the past few years. We're good at talking to each other.'

Both have young families and Mr Barber's lives, as he did as a small boy, in the main house. Ludgrove, cushioned from the suburbs of Wokingham by 130 acres, is not a mini country house; instead, it's more comfortable Victorian family home, to which the school, part of which is set in the old farmyard, is audibly adjunct. I am escorted around by Hugo, Harry and Archie, who are

unfazed at entertaining a stranger and, it must be said, foregoing double science. They do Ludgrove credit; the tour is comprehensive, confident and lively, via friendly staff, impressive arts, music and sports facilities, sick bay (mercifully devoid of patients) and even the best dormitory, 'where they can't hear you talking'.

'We're an intentionally small school (190, all boarding), because the better you know the boys, the better you can run it. We're never going to replace home, but you can do the best you can,' says Mr Barber. 'The boys work hard, but they have a lot of fun—it's important in this modern world of testing that they have an all-round education. And, with the economic situation and parents reassessing what they want their children to get out of school, that's become especially important. Every prep school thinks they've got the X-factor, but I really think we do.'

Simon Barber

Age 40

Married to Sophie

Dog Black labrador, Bumble

Educated Horris Hill, Eton and Durham University

Route to headmaster Stockbroker, five years' teaching at Ashdown House, then returned home to Ludgrove in 2002

Teaches Maths and Latin

Sports Football, Eton fives, cricket

Simon Barber briefly flirted with a City career before the prep-school pull kicked in. Anxious to preserve Ludgrove's family tradition, the governors quietly asked him if he would be willing to come back. 'The City was great fun, but I'd always aspired to have more of a family life, and I realised that I loved teaching.' (He recounts a recent Bible session: on asking what was the name of the 'lovely place God created for Adam and Eve', a small hand shot up. 'Hyde Park, sir?') He describes it as 'a wonderful way of life', but admits: 'It was a daunting proposition. There was never any suggestion that it was a God-given right and, whatever my family history, I am still accountable to the governors.'

Nothing changes about boys' prep schools, and yet everything's changed. 'The



education system has metamorphosed and exploded, and there's so much more paperwork. My parents never gave me advice formally, but they did say "never lose sight of the boys—if you have happy boys, you will have a happy school", and that's where they majored. But you can only really learn to be a headmaster by being one.

'We're slowly changing some things and some things *have* to change; you've got to embrace technology, but you've still got to let an eight year old play in the woods. We now run something called "Ludgrove's Got Talent"—anything from juggling to five of our toughest rugby players doing a Diversity-style routine. My grandfather would probably turn in his grave.'



Keeping several balls in the air: Ludgrove's two headmasters, Simon Barber (*left*) and Sid Inglis, who share the responsibilities evenly

Andrew Inglis (Sid)

Age 38

Married to Olivia ('Ollie')

Dog Black labrador, Otter

Educated Abberley Hall, Radley and Newcastle University

Route to headmaster Two years' teaching in Chile, completed a PGCE, then arrived Ludgrove in 1995

Teaches Latin plus a little Greek

Sports Rugby, cricket

At first, Sid Inglis assumed he'd move from Ludgrove onto a public school, 'but somehow, I found it very hard to leave'. He says: 'I knew when I left Radley that I didn't want to be in

an office. I absolutely loved my schooldays: Abberley had a similar ethos to Ludgrove—I worked quite hard and I also made camps in the woods. I think the only difference now is that parents expect to see their children more.' Like Simon, he is a product of the all-boys, all-boarding system: 'Gerald Barber employed staff who understood and backed the boarding ethos, that 4pm–8pm is as important as 8am–4pm, and that it's a good thing if boys see you in a different light.'

His wife, Olivia, has a marketing background. 'Sophie [Simon's wife] has the "mummy role" and Ollie knows she's not that, but she plays a huge role in seeing things from

a distance: what needs smartening up, who we should be talking to. I'm a bit more detached than Simon—this is his home and his whole being, and he's more in tune with the business side—but I like to think I've brought in fresh ideas. I feel I know prep and public schools well and I do a lot of talking to people about what parents want from a school. The family aspect is, of course, important, but another eye is, too. Other heads say how lucky we are to have each other. We can both take sport, we both teach, and we both sing—rather badly—in the choir. It's lovely to sit down in the evening with a good friend who shares the same vision.' 🐣