

What is the secret to school's long list of successful alumni?

Cast your mind back to your own school days. Do you remember anyone in your year who had star potential? Did any of your former peers go on to do anything big, or make a name for themselves?

For most of us, probably not. But if you were a pupil at Thomas Mills High School, it could be a totally different story.

The Framlingham secondary school and sixth form has an unusually high number of famous alumni – with many excelling in the arts and entertainment field.

This includes – and is not limited to – the likes of Keane bassist Jesse Quin, singer-songwriter Tom McRae, jazz singer Polly Gibbons, actress Naomi Watts, artist Jelly Green, concert pianist Beatrice Nicholas, acclaimed photographer and designer Zak Walters, composer Matthew Sheeran, and of course most famously of all, international superstar Ed Sheeran.

But what is it about the school that makes it such a hotbed of talent?

One man who has seen his fair share of superstars come and go is Richard Hanley.

Director of music at the school, Richard has been working there for over three decades – and has helped foster and harness the talent of some of the country's biggest stars.

"I've been here since 1989, and I suppose one of the things about teachers here at Thomas Mills is that they stay for a long time. That's been a feature of a lot of the staff in the art, music and department departments, and I think that's important and part of the reason why there's been such a successful number of alumni,

Framlingham's Thomas Mills High School has produced a high number of talented former pupils – but why? **Danielle Lett** explores

particularly in the arts, at this school," he explains.

The arts are well-cherished discipline at the school, and while many educational establishments often don't appreciate the importance of subjects such as music and art, Thomas Mills proudly encourages its students to chase their dreams.

"The arts are valued as a subject here in the school, and have been for a number of years. They're a core part of our curriculum," he says.

"I also think that because of where in the world the school is, a lot of parents are involved in the arts themselves, and that filters down to their children."

At GCSE, pupils can choose to study media studies, music, photography, drama, and art. For anyone who progresses to A-Level or joins the school during sixth form, students can opt to further their studies with art & design, drama & theatre studies, music, or photography.

Subjects aside, the school also prides itself on a number of extracurricular activities that pupils can immerse themselves in.

"We always have lots of school productions on, gallery visits, music masterclasses, and lots of orchestras, bands, and choirs. Having a rich extracurricular life is so important in helping young artists develop."

And as you make your way down the school's hallowed halls,

you won't struggle to see (and hear) pupils taking advantage of the range of facilities on offer. "We've got a performance studio, a drama studio, a music room full of Mac computer and music technology, five practice rooms, and a photo lab with a dark room. We're very well-resourced.

"There's often sixth formers practising their craft or using the facilities in their free time – just earlier today I walked past the main hall and there was a group in there setting up a photoshoot. There's always something happening here – there's a really nice buzz and atmosphere about the place."

Seeing the success stories of many former pupils has helped the school's reputation far and wide – and around 40% of the students are out-of-catchment, according to Richard.

"The key thing for all of our students is that we give them the opportunity to perform, paint, or exhibit their work. It's not so much just down the teaching, but I suppose the fact we give them these chances to be creative and realise their potential to specialise in whatever field they're passionate about."

In Richard's three decades of teaching at the school, he's seen his fair share of performances and concerts – and he can easily spot a superstar in the making.

"We have our big concerts at Christmas and Easter, and a number of students have performed with their bands, or have asked if they can play something they've composed. When they get up on stage in front of lots of people when they're young, you do think to yourself, 'oh, they might have the ability to go all the way'. It's just amazing, and it's one of the reasons I've stayed here for so long. There are so many children who keep coming through and going on to do great things – it's a constant conveyor built."

Regardless of whatever creative path the schools' former students find themselves on, one thing is certain – and that's the fact they never forget their roots.

"A few of them have come back to visit," says Richard.

"They still have fond memories of their school days, and want to



Ed Sheeran inspiring young musicians at his former school during a workshop at Thomas Mills High School in 2014

keep in touch. We also have a strong alumni association."

For instance, singer-songwriter Tom McRae visited his former school back in 2010, to give a talk to GCSE media studies pupils about the music industry and the dilemma of illegal file-sharing.

At the time, he told the East Anglian Daily Times: "It's very weird to be walking about with my shirt not tucked in and thinking of excuses like 'The dog ate my homework. I'm 12 again, walking through the door, with all that fear and tumultuous emotions you're dealing with at that stage in your life. They come flooding right back – and I love moments like that, because they're moments you thrive on. That's what you want out of life and art: you want things that come at you in a rush; so this flash of emotion stays with you."

And in 2014, Ed Sheeran popped back into the very same classrooms he was once taught in to give pupils a music masterclass, hoping to inspire the next generation on musical talent.

"Ed was here for a number of years of course, and music was his life even then. He used to spend a lot of time in the department with friends, in practice rooms or in the recording studio, making music, composing his own stuff – even at that age,

and was here breaktimes and lunchtimes," explains Richard.

"One of our former students, concert pianist Beatrice Nicholas, has also been back to do piano recitals. And during lockdown, she gave us access to online concerts, and did special deals for the students to watch them at reduced prices."

With an impressive roster of talent attached to Thomas Mills' – who does Richard think has star potential for the future?

"The band Ikarus are one to watch," says Richard.

Comprised of current students Tom Turner, Hunter Goddard, Hayden Peasey, and Archie Lucas, the indie/pop foursome have already played a handful of shows and recently released their debut EP, 'Time To Play Outside'.

"They're currently making a name for themselves, and I'm sure they'll go on to do great things," he adds.

"There's also a number of year 10 pupils who are excelling in the arts. There's a boy called Acer Smith who is a very talented classical musician. I'm sure great things will happen for him as well."

With a never-ending pool of talent growing at the school, it's exciting to see who else emerges in the coming years. Watch this space...



Head of music Richard Hanley. He has taught the likes of Ed Sheeran and Jesse Quin
Picture: CHARLOTTE BOND



Above and below, artist Jelly Green
Picture: NICK ILOTT



A quick look at some of Thomas Mills' alumni...

Ed Sheeran

Since leaving Thomas Mills, Ed has gone on to become one of the world's biggest pop stars. With four number one studio albums under his belt, and a slew of top-charting singles, Sheeran has reportedly sold around 150 million records worldwide - making him one of the planet's best-selling music artists.

Matt Sheeran

An award-winning composer, Ed Sheeran's brother Matthew has also carved out a name for himself in the world of music. Just some of the productions to his name include *With Love From Suffolk* (2016), *Viking* (2016), *The Third Date* (2017), and *The Haunted Hotel* (2021).

Jesse Quin

This multi-instrumentalist attended Thomas Mills (his mum Charity actually taught Ed Sheeran how to sing!) before making it big with the indie band Keane. Touring aside, Jesse also owns *Old Jet* - an arts centre that allows creatives to flourish in the heart of the Suffolk countryside.

Jelly Green

This talented 29-year-old artist attended Thomas Mills for seven years, and since leaving has since won the praise of other established artists in the field such as Maggi Hambling.

Tom McRae

Singer-songwriter Tom McRae attended Thomas Mills, and since leaving has released a whopping nine studio albums and a number of singles and EPs. Tom's music which has been used in a number of films TV shows, including *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, *Skins*, *Kyle XY*, *Without a Trace*, *Rescue Me*, and *Six Feet Under*.

Zak Walters

One of the world's most recognisable photographers, Zak has snapped gone on tour with and snapped the likes of Ed Sheeran, Lewis Capaldi, Anne-Marie, Snow Patrol, Zara Larsson, James Bay, and One Ok Rock.

Polly Gibbons

One of the country's most respect jazz singers, former Thomas Mills student Polly

Gibbons has been twice nominated as 'Best Jazz Vocalist' by the BBC and Jazz FM. She has also performed at the prestigious Montreal Jazz Festival and New York's Birdland.

Alice Russell

Soul songstress Alice Russell once attended Thomas Mills - and has since gone on to make a name for herself in the music world. At the age of nine, she began taking cello lessons and sang in choirs before moving to Brighton to study art and music.

Beatrice Nicholas

An incredibly talented pianist, composer, and arranger, this former Thomas Mill student has played in some of the biggest venues around the world including Royal Festival Hall, Royal Opera House, London Coliseum, Berlin Konzerthaus.

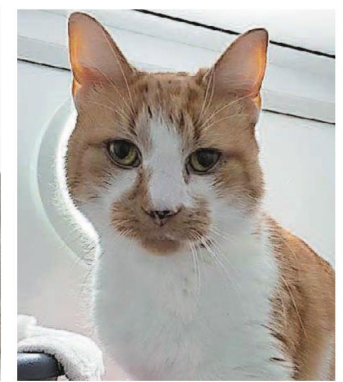
Naomi Watts

The award-winning film actress spent her early years moving around a fair bit, and spent time living in Suffolk where she attended Thomas Mills for a brief stint in the late 1970s.

we need a new home...



Abbie, left, and Jackson need a home



Pictures: RSPCA SUFFOLK CENTRAL

Abbie and Jackson are domestic short-haired cats who are nine or 10 years old.

Abbie and Jackson came into the centre after a change in circumstance for their previous owner.

When first at the centre both cats seemed to be a little shy but with the right time and patience both have really started to show their true characters. Both cats enjoy company from their human companions.

Abbie was born with one of her back paws missing but this

doesn't affect her life and she moves around just as easily as a cat with four paws. Abbie and Jackson love sharing their space so are looking for a home that they can share together.

Do you have room for this lovely pair of friends?

If you think you can give Abbie and Jackson a home, or any other pet in our care, then please get in touch with our reception team by emailing info@rspca-suffolkcentral.org.uk or by calling 0300 999 7321 between 9am-4pm and we will be happy to help.

ask the vet

Nina Downing, PDSA veterinary nurse



How can I keep my pets away from our leftover Easter chocolate treats?

Chocolate contains something called theobromine which is life-threatening for pets - especially dark chocolate or anything coated in it. We recommend that you store chocolate the same way as you'd store medicine - well out of paw's reach! It usually takes 4 to 24 hours after eating chocolate for your pet to display symptoms and signs to watch out for include excessive thirst, vomiting, a tender tummy, drooling and restlessness. If you want to show your pet how much you love them, we recommend a low-fat treat like a small piece of carrot. Alternatively a new toy, a nice long walk or even an extra-long play time are great ways to show your pet some love.

I like to let my rabbit run around the garden sometimes so he can get out of his run, but I'm worried he might eat some of my flowers. What can I do?

You could plant some suitable vegetation especially for your rabbit, but it might be a good idea to fence off any plants and vegetables you don't want him nibbling at. By nature, rabbits love to dig, chew and graze, so ensure that any plants he can access are safe for him to eat.

Some rabbit-friendly vegetation includes camomile, lavender, yarrow and sunflowers - or if you're good at growing vegetables, they also enjoy munching on cabbages and herbs. Avoid using any harsh chemicals such as pesticides and weed killers if you're bunny is spending time in the garden, as they can be very dangerous to our furry friends.

I want to start going on long walks as the weather gets warmer; but how can I protect my dog from the sun?

Heatstroke is a serious problem for our pets and can even be fatal. Any dog can develop heatstroke, but flat-faced dogs are most at risk because they struggle to cool themselves down easily. Try to avoid going on walks during the hottest part of the day, and always bring a water bottle and bowl to keep them hydrated. It's a good idea to use a harness, especially if your dog is flat-faced, but remember they legally still need to wear a collar and tag outside the house. Never walk your pooch on a surface that is too warm for you to place your hand on comfortably for seven seconds. If your dog has a heavier coat, you could consider having it clipped in the warmer months to help them regulate their temperature.

Nina Downing is a veterinary nurse at the PDSA, answering questions on pet-related concerns

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