



TS visits the UK's first marine academy – and discovers a school that is using its natural environment to raise both achievement and aspiration in its students...

**W**hile the good ship Britain may have been battling to overcome a tidal wave of economic problems recently, three-year-old Marine Academy Plymouth has been quietly navigating its way to a future buoyed up with success.

The smell of fresh paint and newly laid carpet hits you as you walk in – it's quite a contrast to the salty air that greets you as you step out of the car – and you can sense immediately that this is a school that means business, with the reception staff all wearing uniform blouses or shirts, proudly bearing the embroidered Marine Academy Plymouth logo, and Year 7 students on hand to greet visitors to the academy, to help sign them in, guide them to where they need to be and announce them, as part of the school's Student Ambassador scheme.

There really is a freshness about the place, created not just by the tang from the nearby sea but also by the enthusiasm of staff and students alike; the state-funded specialist secondary school (MAP for short) is the UK's first marine academy – sponsored by Plymouth University, Cornwall College and Plymouth City Council.

The marine environment is both MAP's greatest natural resource and central to its ethos. It's used to both teach and inspire students. You can see this as you step over the threshold – from the marine themed artwork and pictures to the huge contemporary, illuminated plaque presented to the school by Plymouth University that adorns the reception walls.

Every day the academy uses the plethora of opportunities afforded by the uniqueness of its region to get pupils out of the classroom and into that environment – for example onto boats, where they learn about everything from literacy to numeracy and physics to history, while simultaneously developing leadership skills, teamwork, self-confidence and resilience.

Principal Helen Mathieson, a commanding figure in her own right, explains further: "The marine theme is not just about marine science," she points out. "All the careers that we currently pursue from a land-based concept can feasibly be accessed in association with this region, the sea and marine; careers in areas such as engineering, tourism, design, public relations and marketing, medicine, catering, building and agriculture can all be associated with the

sea – and much of it concerns new knowledge. The academy's focus is to help to prepare and develop the students' career opportunities – for today's traditional jobs and for those that we don't yet know about."

Perhaps unsurprisingly it was round-the-world yachtsman Sir Robin Knox-Johnston who was chosen to officially open the academy in September 2010. MAP replaced Tamarside Community College, which was in the National Challenge programme for schools with low exam results and, in fact moved into the National Challenge Severe category. Just 15 per cent of pupils went on to university and the majority of those staying on after age 16 were not doing the kinds of high-level courses they needed to take a degree; the majority of those post-16 students at Tamarside were taking Level 1 and Level 2 courses.

"Pupils had low aspirations as their families endured generation after generation without jobs," observes Helen. "Many were the third generation of jobless – the decline of the nearby dockyard simply added to the problem."

Helen Mathieson was chosen as principal of the new academy for her track record in tackling the problem of children not going on to education, training or employment and her proven drive and innovation. Passionate about giving pupils hope, her close ties with Plymouth University soon started to open youngsters' eyes to many possibilities, even going to university. "There is a real danger for the young people in our communities of being left without aspiration, of being imbued by a sense of hopelessness, a sense of being always left behind," she says.

Incredibly, by the time they join MAP in Year 7, many students have not even visited Plymouth Hoe – a mere two miles away, and the place where Sir Francis Drake played bowls while the Spanish Armada approached. In fact, when the very first Year 7 group was taken to the Hoe a survey revealed some 84 per cent of them hadn't been there before, along with the widely-held belief that such places were for 'other people', not them.

Helen, who was head teacher at Treviglas Community College in Newquay, north Cornwall, sees the same sort of thinking towards jobs in St Budeaux and suspects it is a real characteristic of coastal schools. "As a result of being detached from the national hubs, from a sense of being remote, some youngsters in rural coastal towns and cities are unable to imagine being in aspirational, long-term work and

seem to conclude that 'success is not for the likes of us,'" she muses.

Today, local businesses are heavily involved in MAP, offering work experience and visiting the academy to inspire its young people. Teachers can show students the range of jobs available on their doorstep by bringing in a steady stream of visiting artists, sailors, chefs, linguists and scientists. "The experience of 20th century education, where children went from school to university to a job, have gone," Helen admits. "Now, at Marine Academy Plymouth, students should and must experience learning in all its forms. There's no point in preparing children for jobs which have ceased to exist or soon won't exist."

Julie Fellows, Director of Marine Specialism at the academy, maintains that children who sometimes don't do well in traditional classrooms often thrive within a marine environment. "Sometimes you get students who are not that attentive in class but go fishing with their dads," she comments. "So they've got a vast range of knowledge and skills which mark them out in a different environment. Outside the classroom, confident in their own abilities and knowledge, they go from being the one in class who doesn't say very much to being a student who has a lot of information to share. Often something very exciting happens."



"Part of what we are trying to do is raise aspiration – to engender that sense of self confidence that often marks out students from very different schools"

Julie Fellows,  
Director of Marine Specialism

