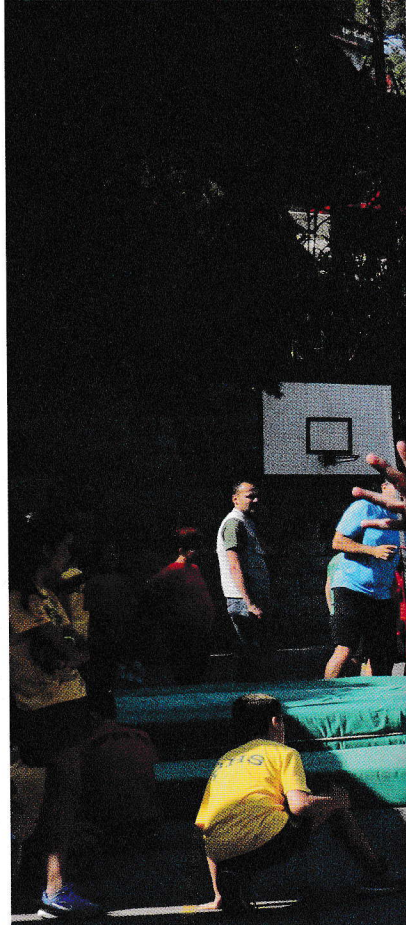


Home delivery: Sarah Barrett on Brummana High School in Lebanon

'This much-loved institution has survived countless wars, occupations, crises and tragedies.'



In the late nineteenth century, US and then British Quakers supported the founding of two Quaker schools in the Middle East. These continue to thrive today, despite regional turmoil and instability.

Brummana High School (BHS) in Lebanon is owned by British Quakers and has 1,285 students. Ramallah Friends School in the West Bank/Occupied Palestinian Territories, which is owned by Friends United Meeting (FUM) in the US, has 1,460 students. Both schools are fee paying and co-educational, with enviable reputations for the quality of education they provide. Each has a local board of governors and takes local students aged three to eighteen, from a variety of backgrounds. The focus for British Quakers is BHS, through the Quaker International Educational Trust (QUIET), and mutual support continues between FUM and QUIET.

British Quaker involvement in a Middle Eastern private school may sound questionable, and BHS is part of the colonial legacy. But that is not necessarily a bad thing: BHS came into being because education was not available to many people in the region at the time, and there is no UK-style state education in Lebanon. Under-resourced government schools do exist, but most provision is fee paying. Fortunately, bursaries are available at BHS when families need help, thanks to the generosity of old scholars, Friends and friends.

BHS is unique in Lebanon, both for its Quaker ethos and as a 'British school'. There are eighteen religious sects in the country, but vanishingly-few Quakers, which is why the BHS community values its links with

British Friends. These links help ensure that the school maintains the ethos that has been key to its longevity and success.

In his seminal book *Orientalism* (1978), the late Palestinian-American intellectual and activist, Edward Said, demonstrated the damaging and lasting impact of the colonial era. The west dominated by promulgating spurious knowledge of itself as superior and 'normal', and 'Orientals' as inferior and 'different'. Imperialist attitudes continue to divide, dehumanise, and justify injustice and cruelty, especially in the Middle East, as current events demonstrate. By contrast, BHS embodies the ideal of 'seeking that of God in everyone'. The child-centred, holistic approach is unusual in the region, and it helps students build a positive vision of themselves and others, of the environment on which we all depend, and of future possibilities. Quaker values are evident in: respectful relationships; the focus on carrots rather than sticks; high expectations; an international outlook; a broad curriculum and extra curricula activities; and opportunities for autonomy, creativity and group work in, for example, research projects and community service, as well as sport and the arts.

Interestingly, BHS does not include religious education in its curriculum. Instead, dialogue around different beliefs and ideas is encouraged wherever it emerges, and students from a variety of backgrounds learn to live together and appreciate each other in a way that is hard to imagine in a sectarian context.

As in any school, a sense of belonging to the community is important, but for BHS it is especially so. The school motto is 'I Serve' (the community), and



BHS is commonly referred to by staff, students and old scholars as 'my second home'. This much-loved institution has survived countless wars, occupations, crises and tragedies, and is much more than a collection of buildings. It provides security, calm and continuity amid insecurity, and the opportunity for an excellent education that gives young people choices, hope, and

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the determination and grounding to make a positive difference in the world.

Since 2019, BHS has operated amid some of the most challenging circumstances in its history. Lebanon's ongoing economic and financial

crisis, described by the World Bank as among the most devastating the world has seen since the nineteenth century, was exacerbated by the impact of the Covid pandemic, and the massive explosion at the Port of Beirut in August 2020.

Last year marked the school's 150th anniversary. There were signs that better times were ahead, until the impact of armed conflict nearby delivered another heavy blow to the Lebanese economy, especially tourism, the service sector and agriculture. Nonetheless, the school continues its mission undimmed, as the following examples demonstrate.

BHS Academic Fair is a popular annual event at which many small groups of students present research projects on a wide variety of topics, to their peers,

staff, parents and other school visitors. This experience gives individuals opportunities to develop the complex social skills necessary for working with others and communicating with a varied audience. Students of history, for example, organised and executed a very successful formal debate on the effects of imperialism. The discourse was clear evidence of the power of collaboration and the intellectual exploration that is encouraged.

International Model United Nations (MUN) is another important annual event in the BHS calendar. In 2023, students from Oman and Sidcot School in the UK joined the conference in Brummana. At MUN, students roleplay as UN delegates in simulated committees, and learn about diplomacy, world issues and international relations. They also develop skills for: leadership; research; writing; speaking and listening; problem solving; conflict resolution; negotiation and cooperation.

The BHS Botanic Garden is a new project that includes an expansion of the collection of native Lebanese plants throughout the school campus. It serves to highlight these plants' natural beauty and promote their ecological importance. The site also now has several educational gardens, themed plant trails, and a miniature desert biome, which is the first of a series to demonstrate various habitats. All serve as immersive outdoor classrooms to inspire students and visitors to engage with and learn directly from nature.

Brummana High School really is a Beacon of Hope. ●

Sarah is a trustee of QuIET.