



# Rushcliffe School

Everyone at Rushcliffe School will be given the chance to shine brightly

---

Really early. He was always exceptional. Of course, it wouldn't have taken a great shift in personality for him to have just been an eccentric madman. But he was so talented: he knew how to do everything, he was so visionary. What's interesting is that he didn't come out of nothing: his father, Aleksey Mikhailovich, who no one has heard of now, had similar interests and qualities.

**Much has been made of Peter's court's decadence. How essential was it to his rule and success?**

I'm not sure that it was really necessary! It was totally bizarre. There were naked old men walking around with dildos, dancing dwarves, giants. His was a carnival court. But it was useful because it meant that his barons, counts and generals were all terrified of him. He would turn in a moment from being playful to accusing them of corruption or treachery. Often his dinners ended up as mass brawls: one of his top ministers stabbed someone to death with a fork and was never punished. What it was really about, I think, was showing that the tsar was a monarch of exceptional and extraordinary gifts, blessed by god, who could do anything he wanted in the world. But it was also a lot of fun for him!

**What's your take on Peter's relationship with his wife, Catherine?**

It's an amazing example of his supreme power: that he could just take this promiscuous peasant girl and literally make her an empress. There's no other example in European history of someone going that far, from camp follower to legitimate crowned empress in their own right.

**What was Peter's greatest legacy?**

The battle of Poltava against Sweden in 1709. It made Russia an empire, and meant that it got the Baltic. It changed the shape of Europe: it made everything possible for Russia, and made the nation a military power. It was one of the great decisive battles in European history.

**Another famous figure is, of course, Catherine the Great. What were her greatest strengths?**

She was possessed by all the great qualities of a ruler. Her only disadvantage was that she was a woman in a male-dominated era. She couldn't beat people up or command armies, but she was a master of everything. She was supremely intelligent; totally charming; very manipulative, obviously; absolutely ruthless when she needed to be. But she was essentially decent, although that sounds contradictory. She really tried, whenever possible, to be humane in a way that nobody in Russia has really much bothered to do before or since.

And as for the rumours about her sexual appetite, the key thing about her is what she said herself: that she had to be in love every minute. She took beautiful young men of 20 years old because she could, and they all wanted to be in that position. But walking around behind an old lady all day while surrounded by beautiful ladies-in-waiting led to great unhappiness. In the end they all ran off, but she was always incredibly generous and never took revenge.

**Moving ahead to the 19th-century reign of Alexander II, how far can we see this as a beacon of liberalness?**