

Summer 2015 remembered...

Generally after the sort of indifferent summer that this summer was, the sun comes out as soon as our young visitors return home. Not so this time. We had mild (at least for we northern Europeans) temperatures and a few sunny days interspersed with a few wet ones, but after the Course finished it just became progressively worse. The jet stream was in the wrong position, we were told.

In fact, the weather made not a jot of difference and no one complained. The programme was so engaging that no one noticed.

'A had a wonderful time at Mary Hare 2015. She told me "this year was the best year"! Last year she told me exactly the same' (a Dutch parent); 'Thank you very much for your hospitality, your care and your passion for making these days unforgettable for her' (a German parent); 'She was all smiles and did not stop telling about the wonderful time she has had' (another Dutch parent); 'We've just picked him up at the airport, in very good shape! He had a splendid time at Mary Hare for which we would like to thank you very much, you and all the staff' (a French parent); 'Elle est bien arrivé , elle était très contente de son séjour. Merci à toute l'equipe et à l'année prochaine pour inscription pour 1 mois' (a Monegasque parent); 'She likes the days she had spent at your school and she is expecting the next study in 2016! We can feel the progress she has made. We appreciate the efforts made by you and your team to present the children an unforgettable experience' (a Chinese parent); 'He slept for 17 hours' (a Portuguese parent). And there are, of course, plenty more.

So what was special about the Summer of 2015? Do read on...

Tom Goodwin was back as Course Manager, fresh from teaching in Botswana and as bearded as Ben Gunn. This was his eighth year with us. Joe Wallis was back for his tenth as Academic Manager with Chloe Huelamo back for her ninth as Senior Teacher. Becky Cadman was back as Matron/Office Manager for her fourth year in various incarnations as was Senior Sports/Social Organiser, Yannick Mol, for his seventh. Tanya Fernández Fernández was back for her tenth summer as Assistant Matron. In charge of Mary Hare House was Lewis Weaver (again ex-UK Rep and Assistant) now in his seventh year. In charge of Cheam House was Marcus Bell in his third year. In charge of Hawtreys was Tom Dell in his fourth year. In charge of Douai-Elstree was James Guest in his fourth year. Assistants were Pedro Mol (Douai-Elstree) in his fourth year; James Steel (Mary Hare) in his third year; Frederico Silva in his sixth year. Apprentices were Pim Bergsma (Netherlands - Mary Hare); Jaime Blasco (Spain - Cheam); Darcey Daniels (UK - Hawtreys).

The number of years speak for themselves. This was a very experienced team led by a most experienced SSSO. The inspectors noted the efficiency with which all the events were planned ahead and analysed afterwards. Everything was polished and delivered with pride. Yannick who, like all the crew, holds Vocational Studies in great affection, created a *modus operandi* for future years. I wonder how many other organisations have a sports/social programme with as much expertise and goodwill. We also had a long visit in a working capacity from Matt Debney. He loves the Course so much that, even though he now has a full-time job, he can't stay away. It's the full-time jobs that eventually come into their lives that oblige our wonderful sports crew to leave us. Some years we lose more than in other years and several are unsure what life holds 11 months down the line. It may well be a swansong year for two or three.

On the teaching side were Bernardo Savill back for his sixth year; Thomas Olszewski (also i/c IT) for his fifth; Alastair Cockburn for his third; Summer Wood for her third; newcomers were Isabel Trew, Kelly McEwan, Sean O'Neill, Kathrin Weers and Rebecca Berchtold.

Catering was once again in the capable hands of Mary Hare led by Paul Leverton. In charge of Housekeeping was the superb Pam Swift. We were helped at every point by Estates Manager, Andrew Haslock.

The innovations for 2015 worked. The link with Monaco Arts et Danses and the MAD programme resulted in visits from Magali Fiori and Fabris Kinsch who taught a varied programme of dance and fitness in their different ways. Magali left in floods and wrote to me: 'Thank you again for everything. It was a very very good experience. Everything and everybody was perfect. This camp is magic. See you next year.' Fabris took part in 'An audience with...' and was clearly moved by being with us.

The 'An audience with...' was my idea so I did the first one and enjoyed it. Several staff appeared and also a student who spoke with gentle self-deprecating humour about his times with us. This idea will also be continued.

I came to know all the students via the board meetings and through the various meetings. The House Captains' meeting gave them the chance to justify their existence as a House Captain after four days with Yannick giving his opinion on how well the job was being done. Several were reinforced in their opinion that they were doing well. One accepted our opinion that a change was needed and was given reasons for this which were accepted graciously; another was reassured that her own negative opinion was incorrect. A new House Captain was appointed at this meeting. There was a similar meeting with the Prefects. There were four at the start with a fifth coming for the 'Lite' last two weeks. All the Prefects worked well – Alexander Mullié, Emma Vroom, Ola Pretka and Joan Carbonell. David Garcia Garcia joined for the last two weeks. All of them knew exactly why they were with us, all did well in the classrooms and in the extra-curricular programme, enjoyed being Prefects and felt the taste of responsibility had been good for them. The Testimonials I am able to write if asked will also assist them. The number was perfect. If I take more in the future, I may well reduce at a 'justify your existence' meeting after a few days

New this year was the Mentor post. It was a real success. The existing hierarchical structure worked so well that I wanted to give younger ones who wished the chance for a taste of responsibility. We started with a handful. When we had a Mentors' Meeting, those interested were invited to come along. This number doubled after a week or so. In this respect, being a Mentor is different from the other positions of responsibility which can only be applied for at the time of application. Our youngest Mentor was 11 and he did a super job taking boys his age under his wing. It was a suggestion from the Prefects that made me decide on Angel Sanchez-Cantalejo Hevia as Head Mentor. I let him chair the meetings. So many Mentors expressed thoughtful opinions on how others could be helped and these suggestions were put into effect.

The students were splendid. No one was expelled and everyone left a positively favourable impression. I now know from my son, Lars, that there is a period of mourning after everyone leaves. Already 2016 is taking shape with most of the Prefects' posts taken.

This being the fourth year since our last British Council Inspection, we had the pleasure of welcoming the inspectors again. They were not with us to make suggestions, but those they offered were constructive and will be implemented. Parents will already have noticed one of them. The Certificate of Attendance/Final Report is very different in its format. They liked the way the Progress Report was set out, grading according to various criteria, and thought the Final Report could be similar with a useful suggested CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) grade. The 'tick-box' and the mentality that goes with it is not my preference, but Joe Wallis, our long-serving Academic Manager liked the concept and the teachers were delighted that their prose-style would not be tested, so it was adopted. The assessment of behaviour and social progress will remain in continuous prose - a human way to describe a human process, I think.

The other suggestion was the extra lessons that Joe gives as preparation for the Trinity Examination should be included for everyone in the regular teaching programme whether they are taking the examination or not as they are so useful. The examination tests ability in spoken English and practice in this is certainly beneficial. This will happen. The Trinity examination is a useful goal to aim for at the end of the Course and I recommend this for every student. It is not an examination to be afraid of. The examiners are perfectly pleasant British people.

There will be one other development on the teaching side. This was also suggested by the inspectors, although I have to say I had already identified this and externalised it. We have many who are very competent in English, but I find I have to change my internal wavelength to understand them as their mother-tongue accent is so strong. My externalisation was to one of the staff, Tanya. She accepts that this is something that should be addressed and has researched it and sent me her findings. It's all about seeing words as groups that need to be expressed together using the tone of the native-speaker. We shall include pronunciation as a concept in the 2016 teaching programme.

It is not because of the inspectors' comments that there is a new website, although they told me the last one was too (how shall we put it?) 'self-indulgent'. I was challenged to find certain pieces of information and did so quite easily. Nevertheless I hope the new site is easier to navigate. When Yannick asked me why the 'Summer remembered' piece was absent, my response was that I thought it was part of the self-indulgence. 'That's why I enjoyed it,' was his reply. So here it is.

The reports are written. These and the Trinity certificates have been posted. The 2016 website has been launched and 10% of the places in 2016 have been applied for. September is just two days away. So the memorable summer that was VacStuds 2015 has drawn to a close and just one last task remains – to reunite lost property with its owners. Named items will be sent back. One of the staff has lost a pair of Oakley sunglasses and dark blue swimwear from Quebramar. If anyone knows where they may have been left, please let me know.

And finally ... my thanks to the staff who helped create days our students will remember all their life and to everyone who trusted my judgement this summer in giving me the privilege of looking after their children. I am aware of the trust placed in me and hope I have justified the confidence.

*Ian Mucklejohn – 30 August 2015*