

Summer 2017 revisited

Generally, after a Course with weather that hasn't been brilliant, the blue skies open up and the sun comes out the day after everyone leaves. Not so this time. The weather just got worse with two full days and nights of continuous rain that would have challenged even our talented sports crew. Freed from my responsibilities and having newly-planted trees at home, I have to say I relished not having to put the hosepipe on at night.

Tom Goodwin was back as Course Manager for his 10th summer. His marriage to Veronica Martins who was a student and then staff member takes place Estoril, Portugal on 2 September 2017. This would have been my own parents' 78th wedding anniversary. 'Come to VacStuds and change your life.'

On the teaching side in 2017 were Bernardo Savill back for his eighth year; Summer Wood for her fifth; Neil Caplin for his fourth; Kelly McEwan and Rebecca Berchtold for their third. Rhodri Stratton and Leonie Crowley had their second summer with us. Newcomers were Louise Kennedy and Angela Hunt.

Joe Wallis was back for his twelfth as Academic Manager with James Hearsey as Course Tutor and, armed with his MA in Linguistics sponsored by Vacational Studies, back for his fourth. In a combination of roles as Office Manager and Assistant Matron, Matt Debney was back for his nth summer. It is hard to quantify the number of summers as he has been with us as he has been on the staff and just visiting on so many occasions I have lost count. No doubt he will read this and tell me. Tanya Fernández Fernández was back for her twelfth and last summer as Matron, having started with us as a small Spanish student. Tanya is a walking example of student progression and was our very first Prefect. As Senior Sports/Social Organiser was Tom Dell back for his seventh summer having worked his way up from UK Rep. In charge of Hawtreys was ex-UK Rep Darcey Daniels in his third year. In charge of Douai-Elstree again was Pedro Mol now in his sixth year. In charge of Mary Hare was James Steel in his fifth year and Marcus Bell was in charge of Cheam in his fourth summer with us. Assistants were Benedict Smith (Hawtreys) in his third year; Anders Strømme (Cheam) in his second; Pablo Mol (Mary Hare) in his fourth and Lawrence Randle (Douai-Elstree) in his third. James Guest (last year's SSSO) was a welcome visitor.

Apprentices were Camilla Gottardi (Cheam); Carlotta Gottardi (Hawtreys); from 8 July – 22 July Thomas Lacquet (Douai-Elstree); Max Mengue (Mary Hare); from 23 July – 5 August Annabelle Eccleshall (Douai-Elstree), Helen Veit (Hawtreys) and Will Tremelling (Mary Hare).

Prefects were Marina Antonetto, Isabel González-Fierro Piñero, Angel Sanchez-Cantalejo Hevia, Hendrik Euler, Alejandro Aparicio de la Lastra and Ana Seremet. All rose to and enjoyed the position of responsibility in their very different ways, some centre-stage, some working in the background as happens in real life. The Testimonials I am able to write if asked will assist them.

House Captains were Rutger van der Peijl and Nora Floeng Schiefloe (Douai-Elstree) Jaime Martin-Borregón and Leonor Silva (Cheam); Ana Sofia Silva and Alfonso Vandekeybus (Hawtreys); Amalie Lindstad and Christian Nicolas (Mary Hare). All were hard-working team leaders.

Sub-Prefects were Zoé Battaglia and Leonhard Munsch who gave support in and out of the classrooms.

The School Council comprised: Louise Gogstad (Head of Council); Maya Nedivi; Celine Ottersbach; Jonathan Lindefjeld; Carmen Gómez Pacheco; Adriana Tur Marí; Ángela Fernández García; Sævar Thordarson; Albert Lalonde; Jaime Martin-Borregón; Wangzishuo Li; Philip Groenemeijer; Elinborg Weihe Thomassen; Sigrid Holm Bic. They discussed various matters, minuted them and publicised

their conclusions. They invited two of the catering staff to discuss (and praise) the catering, deciding that more fish should be included on the menu. For what it's worth, I agree and shall request this for 2018. As a result of the meetings, fresh fruit became free-of-charge during the day.

Mentors were: Angel Sanchez-Cantalejo Hevia (Head Mentor); Benedetta Magni; Louise Gogstad; Rutger van der Peijl; Thea Moarbes; Sofia Martínez-Villaseñor Piñero; Nora Floeng Schiefloe; Jaime Martin-Borregón; Carmen Gómez Pacheco; Ksenia Koptyaeva; Maya Nedivi; Gustavo Vandekeybus; Elinborg Weihe Thomassen; Antonio Belli; Adriana Tur Marí; Fran Martinez Quiles. Various youngsters were helped as a result of their meetings.

Ambassadors were Louise Gogstad (Norway); Benedetta Magni (Monaco) and Albert Lalonde (Quebec). This was a super chance for our young visitors to know more about countries they are unlikely to know much about. For the ambassadors themselves, it was a chance to look closely at their own country.

We have two prizes. The prize for Academic Excellence was awarded by the teachers to Ivan Kuznetsov and the Prize for English Speaking to Zoé Battaglia. Both are remarkable young people whom we would like to develop.

In addition to the Public-Speaking competition on the theme 'What VacStuds has done for me' which had far more entrants than ever before (many of whom would three weeks earlier never have dreamt they would be standing in front of 100+ people in English without notes and from the heart), we had 'An audience with...' afternoon. Most of those with us have interesting backgrounds. This time I asked Anders Strømmen to talk about his experience in the Norwegian Army which he has just left to pursue a degree course the University of Durham. He touched on the nature of leadership, a subject he has adapted for his talks to various groups at Vacational Studies this summer. Louise Kennedy is a trained singer as well as being an English language teacher. She spoke about how she realised and cultivated her talent with some hilarious examples of situations she found herself in.

Last year I took a few sessions aimed at the more advanced learners. We looked at some seventeenth century metaphysical poetry. I enjoyed it and those in the class told me they did, too. Masterclass this year became a no-cost option and almost 40 were signed up for it. I chose the post-afternoon sport slot of 16.30 and then the even more post-afternoon sport slot of 17.15. Still the excitement of matches that went on and on, washing off paint from Crazy Games and many other alternative activities got in the way. Several other staff took Masterclass, riding hobby horses of their own ranging from rap lyrics to the British political system. It was a pity that some of these well-prepared sessions were thinly attended. So, to separate Masterclass from any form of sport/social activity, the 'Homework' session will be replaced by an after-lunch 'Digest' which teachers will use as they wish and during which time one or more 'Masterclass' sessions can take place.

Jonny Hayes took a 'Theatre and Mine' option during the first week of the Course and ended with a performance to the whole school on the grass in front of the conservatory. Several showed remarkable acting skills and I even wrote fan e-mails to parents.

Catering was once again in the capable hands of Mary Hare led by Paul Leverton. Whether it be 'Christmas Dinner', "English High Tea'. 'Valentines' or the 'International Meal' we could rely on the catering staff to lay on a spread. In charge of Housekeeping was the superb Pam Swift. Kevin Gardiner was our enormously helpful link with Mary Hare.

After every summer, Tom Dell sends me a message with his feelings about the Course gone by. He started as a UK Rep aged 16 and this year was SSSO at 23. His message this year sums up the many developments that have taken places in Vacational Studies during this period: *'We speak a lot at Vacational Studies about the developmental process of our students, and I think this is a very important element of what you do. To work with and influence the lives of young people is a great privilege. It also dawned on me too the huge journey that I've been on over the past 7 years and I can*

say, without shadow of a doubt, that your organisation has improved me as a leader, a communicator and a person. My confidence has been built and my sense of self been moulded at VacStuds, and I am very proud of this. There is no place in the world I am happier; your organisation is vibrant and free, filled with beautiful and interesting people from all over the world and an environment that can't quite be put into words to anyone apart from those that 'know'.

What started out as an English Language Course in which young people grew up and developed has become a Course for youngsters to grow up and develop using English as a working language. The positions of responsibility that began with Tanya's Prefectship six years ago have grown into a progressive structure that is inseparable from the Course itself, resulting in every member of the Sports/Social crew being a former VacStuds student.

All of this can be traced back to the decision Cheam School's governors made in 2010 when they thanked me for the last 39 years, told me they no longer needed to rent and said goodbye. Yes, it was that blunt. From being a commuter between schools, I was thenceforth based at The Mary Hare so I could look more closely at the nature of the Course and the generally very talented and capable youngsters who come to it. For those who remember, the competition that Sports Day engendered with visiting schools getting off their buses to the various chants really galvanised each school into a community, so I looked at recreating this via a 'House' system. It took a while to take off, but it has become an integral part of the Course with a fierce but good-natured loyalty even better than the inter-school rivalry pre-2010. Getting to know our young visitors better enabled me to see their skills and how these could be fostered to help them and others on the Course, hence Prefectship. I looked at the younger ones and could see how responsibility could be a progressive advancement.

So I should thank the Cheam School governors for inadvertently precipitating a change that has been hugely beneficial. I should, but I won't.

'How do you get such nice people?' I was asked this summer. 'Not by accident' was my reply. Vacational Studies 2017 was born out of Vacational Studies 1973 onwards. 'Pas comme des autres' was a throwaway line from Christelle Boisson at a meeting in Monaco some years ago, but it resonated. There are 'autres' as any Google search will reveal. There is nowhere like Vacational Studies. With its many second-generation students, huge number of returnees, staff who come back and back, sports crew who can build on previous successes and my own 45 years in the driver's seat, Vacational Studies is as unique as the passion it generates.

More important than my words are the words of those who have experienced what I have planned for them. Rather than be embarrassed by the praise - which is, of course, more for the staff than for me - I have included these in a separate page: ['Days I'll remember All My Life'](#).

My thanks to everyone who has entrusted me with their children this summer.