

Summer 2019 Revisited

Generally we have 'something new' every year. This time, it was more like something new every day.

First of the new experiences was a new Course Manager for the first time in eleven years. Tom Goodwin's job teaching in the state sector meant that his holiday dates did not permit him to work with us full time. As he loves VacStuds and absolutely did not want to sever his connections, he came back mainly on social visits, but also in his role as 'Visiting Consultant'. I had assumed our new Course Manager, Clare Williams, would need some guidance. In fact, she was so thoroughly competent that she needed none. A former Deputy Head, Clare, put her own stamp on the Course and accommodated all the different and challenging aspects of the job with ease.

With her in the office and taking over as Assistant Course Manager in his nth year with us was Matt Debney who in many ways is VacStuds on legs.

On the teaching side in 2019 were Academic Manager Joe Wallis in his 14th summer with us; Bernardo Savill as Senior Teacher in his 10th summer; Sebastian Shead as Senior Teacher in his 2nd summer; Neal Caplin in his 6th summer now with the title 'Sports/Social Liaison'; Dale Ogilvy, Leonie Crowley and Rhodri Stratton in their 3rd year. New to us were teachers Laura Teape (our first second-generation teacher – her mum having been with us at Cheam 30 years ago), Lee Branagh, Charlie Whiteside, Max Travers, Anthony Miele, Ashley Simpson and Matthew Mullett. Each stayed the duration and brought his and her special skills to the Course.

Senior Sports/Social Organiser, Anders Strømme, was in his 4th and swansong summer known for his very personal leadership style and acute analysis of his team. He was ably assisted by Sports/Social Organisers Benedict Smith for Hawtreys in his 5th year; Lawrence Randle for Douai-Elstree in his 5th; Pablo Mol for Mary Hare in his 6th; Camilla Gottardi for Cheam in her 5th. Anders was also 'Leadership Mentor' and brought the concept of leadership into the programme so that everyone could see if they recognised this in themselves and, if they wished, develop it through the various positions of responsibility we offer.

Sports/Social Assistants were Paddy Douglass for Cheam in his 3rd summer, Alex Aparicio for Mary Hare in his 4th, my son, Lars, for Mary Hare in his 11th, Ángel Sanchez Cantalejo for Hawtreys in his 8th and John Bryer for Douai-Elstree in his 3rd.

Our first-ever male Matron was David Corral Fontecha back for summer number two, ably assisted by Carlotta Gottardi also Sports/Social Assistant for Hawtreys in her 5th summer. Former Matron, now Doctor Tanya Fernández Fernández, also came back to visit and see her protégé in action.

Apprentices in the first two weeks were Benedetta Magni back for her 6th year with Cheam; Amalie Lindstad (who also stayed on as Office Apprentice) in her 4th summer for Mary Hare; Christian Nicolas in his 3rd and swansong summer for Hawtreys; Ellyn Roberts in her 2nd summer for Douai-Elstree,

In weeks three and four, we had Leonor Silva in her 5th summer for Cheam; Louise Gogstad in her 4th for Mary Hare; Josep Aulet in his 3rd for Hawtreys and Rutger van der Peijl for Douai-Elstree in his 6th summer.

Qualified Lifeguards were Benedict, Alex and Lars.

Prefects were Alex Medin (Sweden); Charlotte Ehret (France, Germany and Dubai); Elie Nicolas (Lebanon); Adriana Tur Marí (Spain); Antonio Belli (Italy); Fran Martinez Quiles (Spain); Hugo Mullié (Netherlands); Lea Dalaaker Eckersberg (Norway); Sebastiaan de Vries (Netherlands) and Nils Euler (Germany).

The School Council was led by the capable and efficient Sebastiaan de Vries who succeeded in achieving a hotline to Mary Hare's estate manager who promised, inter alia, new mattresses and pillows on demand.

This year's Head Mentor was Elinor Tandberg. Several young people were considered suitable for and received Mentor support.

We have two prizes. The prize for Academic Excellence was awarded by the teachers to Annesofie Marquadt and for English Speaking to David Goldort.

This year's Board Meetings touched on various subjects. During the first week, I explored how much people knew about their fellow class-members. The answer was not only 'not much', but also showed that the majority were not particularly curious to find out. It was only when they became aware of just how different everyone's culture is that they started taking an interest. By the third week, depending on the level and the interests of the class we ranged on subjects as diverse as the meaning of existence and the expression of male and female emotions. By the time, the Public Speaking came along in the fourth week, almost everyone was communicating on a more-or-less profound level with many others. The topic, as usual, that entrants were invited to speak on for two minutes was 'What VacStuds has done for me'. To those who had put their names down for it were added several who came from the floor spontaneously, stimulated by the frankness of the first few speakers who had externalised with poignancy and depth of feeling the dramatic effect that the closeness of the relationships they had developed had on them. What came across was that every speaker spoke of how 'safe' they felt on the Course and how this made them want to trust their friends with feelings that has remained previously unspoken. More than this, people who had been strangers 26 days before, were standing in front of 150 people using a foreign language with confidence.

This year we were privileged to be addressed by two visiting speakers: Peter Gale (the Principal of the Mary Hare School) who spoke animatedly and with passion about why the School exists specially for deaf children) and Michael Vogelsang (a former student and Staff Helper) who read and spoke about his poetry.

This year's Masterclass sessions looked at rap lyrics, the practical criticism of poetry. Brexit, the nature of happiness and leadership. Those who had a particular interest were invited to take a Masterclass and this system works well.

Catering was in the hands of Mary Hare's Catering Manager, Hugh Robertson. His hotel background showed. Home-made soups were served every day. I even persuaded his chef that mushrooms at breakfast were good tasting of mushroom and didn't need garlic at that time of the day. There were innovations, such as a Chinese meal with chopsticks from a box and a cheeseboard, including Cornish Yarg wrapped in nettles. Whether it be 'Christmas Dinner', 'English High Tea', 'Valentines' or 'Halloween', we could rely on the catering staff to lay on a spread. In charge of Housekeeping were the superb and keen-eyed Sam and Patsy. Kevin Gardiner was our helpful day-to-day connection with Mary Hare, ably assisted by David Gibson. Paul Jackson remains our main link.

Like every summer, VacStuds 2019 has been exceptional. Unlike other summers, this has been exceptional in other ways. I have never before decided that three teachers were not

up to our standards. I also parted company with several of our young people. Removal is always preceded by events and is in itself an event that has repercussions, but the good of the Course is the important factor and this has been preserved.

Also exceptionally, our 4-yearly British Council Inspection took place this summer. The result will be published on their website in October. Every aspect of Vocational Studies was looked at. We do not need British Council Accreditation and I doubt if anyone comes to Vocational Studies because of this as it is our reputation that makes us the success we are, but it is a stamp of quality that I am personally proud of. The lead Inspector made two significant comments: 'Vocational Studies is unique' was one comment. Very true. The other comment (made to me) was 'Vocational Studies is you.' Also true.

For me, what started out as an English Language Course has become an experience for youngsters to grow up in and develop using English as a working language. The positions of responsibility that began with Tanya's Prefectship eight years ago have developed 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. The whole sports/social side of the Course hits the ground running from Day Minus-One. Vocational Studies is an institution that changes lives for the better. I have become this institution, but I am also human and I want it to outlast me.

At the final dinner, I announced that Vocational Studies had a second director, Lars Bentsen. Lars has subsequently decided that he will pursue his career in IT and that he would be unable to give VacStuds the commitment it needs and that he would wish to give it. I respect his decision and wish him well.

For me, the New Year is here. 2020 has its first students and some positions of responsibility are already being taken up.

My thanks, as always, to everyone who has entrusted me with what is most precious in their lives this summer.

Ian Mucklejohn – 4 August 2019