

Summer 2014 revisited

It was a glorious summer – boiling hot day after day with just an hour or two of torrential rain to freshen the grass – which ended just as the Course finished with a chilly autumn setting in earlier than I can remember.

Tom Goodwin was Course Manager again for his seventh year with us. As Academic Manager, Joe Wallis, was back for his ninth summer, ably assisted by Chloe Huelamo, Senior Teacher and ACM, back for her eighth. She also helped with office administration as did Matron and ex UK-Rep and ex-Assistant Becky Cadman. Back for year number five was Matt Debney as Senior Sports/Social Organiser. In charge of Mary Hare House was Lewis Weaver (again ex-UK Rep and Assistant) now in his sixth year; in charge of Cheam House was Yannick Mol in his sixth year; in charge of Douai-Elstree House was James Guest (ex UK Rep and Assistant) in his third year; in charge of Hawtreys House was Tom Dell (ex-UK Rep and Assistant back for his third year after a gap year at Geelong in Australia. Sports Assistants were Tanya Fernández Fernández (Hawtreys) back for her ninth summer and also Assistant Matron; ex-student and Apprentice Pedro Mol (Douai-Elstree); ex-UK Rep and Apprentice Marcus Bell (Cheam). Apprentices were Frederico Silva (ex-student for several years) at Cheam; Lawrence Randle (ex-UK Rep) at Hawtreys; James Steel and Alice Guest (ex-UK Reps) at Mary Hare and Katharine Ronaldson (ex-UK Rep) at Douai-Elstree. Everyone on the non-teaching staff had plenty of VacStuds' experience and they all worked together from day one. They had a great time, all told me they wish to return and I think they put on a splendid programme for our students. As Yannick wrote to me afterwards 'I've just watched 'Cheam 2009 All Over Again' and I have to say, the events have become more professional since then.' My reply was 'Experience counts.'

This was a very experienced sports/social team and I cannot imagine anyone getting a better thought-out programme anywhere else. The teaching team were just as experienced. Bernardo Savill was back for his fifth year, Thomas Olszewski for his fourth and again i/c computers, Katy Hubble came back for year four, Alastair Cockburn for his second after a year as a Assistant, Philip Davies was back for his third summer with us and is now embarking on a DELTA course courtesy of Vocational Studies. Neal Caplin, Vanessa Jelbert, James Hearsey, Summer Wood and Nick Shatti were back for their second summer.

So many returnees is a phenomenon that has happened only once before, in 1976. With such experience on the Course, it is not surprising that everything worked so well. There were complaints that we dropped a few items from the programme that were missed, like Mr and Mrs Mary Hare, but sometimes there needs to be change for the sake of change and we also nowadays have to consider that the photos and videos of youngsters doing teenage things in their teenage years may hang around forever on the web and return to haunt them.

Catering was by The Mary Hare staff once again. There was something for everyone and one could have eaten very healthily indeed if one chose the fresh produce on offer for each meal. I had every meal with the students over the four weeks, getting to know them, and was struck how many of them, faced with a huge choice, chose the most unlikely combination of foods, such as pasta and potatoes, choices that were plainly wrong. It is not incumbent on the catering staff to choose the combinations for them. I can only say that excellent meals were available at every serving. The kitchen staff once again went to great lengths to make the special dinners, like Valentines and Christmas, very special indeed.

As the nightly 'Club' discos have such sophisticated gadgetry and talented DJs, there was no need to import anyone from outside.

There was a huge variety of trips this year. Inside Buckingham Palace, inside the Houses of Parliament (a trip I could not resist accompanying), inside 'Downton Abbey', the 'Heroes at Highclere' (commemoration of the centenary of the First World War), the International Farnborough Airshow, as well as visits to 'Matilda the Musical', 'War Horse' and 'The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time' were all included.

It was my visit to the Houses of Parliament that made me decide that all the trips in 2015 will be optional extras. I saw how much an accompanied group was gaining from the experience and made contact with Tour Guides Limited through whom I shall arrange small trips in London and other specialist organisations through which I shall arrange visits to other parts of the UK. These will be publicized as and when tickets become available.

The Trinity Examination in spoken English taken by 50%+. For the first time, not all candidates were graded. Seven did not achieve the grades they were entered for. Joe Wallis has written a rationale for each ungraded candidate. As before, he and Chloe organised special preparation classes for those who wanted them. Most of the ungraded candidates did not attend these sessions. The examiners' comment was this is a 'candidate-led' conversation and some candidates did not lead.

Board Meetings in 2014 took as their theme 'My Passion' on the basis that everyone talks best and most willingly about what they feel a passion for. This time I found so many aspiring professional volleyball players that the Meetings quickly reverted to their original theme – how our students feel the Course is benefiting them and how they think they are changing because of the international surroundings. The board meetings again ended in a Public Speaking Competition on the subject 'What it's like to be...' Those who stood on the stage in front of an audience of their peers and talked for two minutes on the subject did remarkably well. The judges decided that Antonio Garre's talk on what it's like to be him was the best combination of an excellent speech and entertainment.

I asked the Norwegians if they wished once again to remember the events in Oslo and on Utøya on 22 July 2011. We held a brief commemoration and laying of flowers in water just as was happening in Norway that day. A moving tribute was given by Matilde Huseby. We remembered the 77 killed that day, most of them a similar age to our own young people also on a summer camp. Matilde also explained to us why a summer camp had been targeted. After the plane crash a few days later, another commemoration was held. Sadly and, I have to say, quite incredibly, the feeling was created among some that Vacational Studies favoured these nationalities over others by allowing them to hold commemorations. To avoid any such feelings, I think it best that these commemorations be discontinued.

The idea of communicating with parents via photos and film clips of their children having a great time that I introduced in 2009 was continued with the enhancement of trying to show this great time while it was being had, so day and night my computer uploaded onto Shutterfly the daily photos and videoclips from my Sony RX100 III. The response from parents to this daily update has been very positive and reduced the number of calls from those concerned, although we do have some children who prefer to avoid the camera.

The professionally edited 'VacStuds All Over Again' series of DVDs will be discontinued as the takeup is too small to justify the cost. The ubiquity of the internet means that parents can revisit many areas of the Course on the Vimeo area of www.vacstuds.com, so it can be relived All Over Again through my videoclips. As I have often said, eventually everyone sees the Course through my eyes. It's good to see some of the students also interpreting the stills and videos and putting the results on YouTube.

I put even more information in this section this year. In 2015 all information for parents and students will be disseminated by means of clickable links.

This year, more than half the teaching programme was devoted to the film project and the remainder of the time to more conventional teaching often incorporating the interactive whiteboards that are a part of every Mary Hare classroom. The class films have been uploaded to Vimeo. Joe Wallis and the teaching staff were quite prescriptive as to subject matter and the quality of the films is now excellent.

Only one UK Rep was chosen for 2014 after a rigorous interviewing session at Norwich School by the Trustees of the Vocational Studies Foundation. Darcey Daniels did a super job and has already asked to be considered as an Apprentice in 2015. In future, interviews at Norwich School will be offered to a shortlist vetted by the School and conducted by me via skype. As in 2014, 2015 UK Reps' first week will be considered as time 'on approval' and the probationary period will extend for the remaining three weeks, just in case they think their places are secure and they can take it easy. There will no longer necessarily be four UK Reps. Some of their roles will be taken on by 'Apprentices' and 'Prefects'. 'Apprentice' posts are available, in theory, not only to UK Reps, but also to ex-students with superb English. They, too, may be considered for sports staff posts. The problem in 2015, if all the 2014 crew return, is that there will be no posts to offer.

As promised, the post of Prefect was monitored and Prefectship was removed if needed. In the end, we had seven Prefects: Boudewijn Vroom, Xavi Renieblas, Carlos Cunha, Pim Bergsma, Jaime Blasco and Joost Sluijmer. Martijn Mullié was Head Prefect. During the Course three Sub-Prefects were appointed. These were: Madalena Tavares, Carmen Sanchez-Cantalejo and Sabrina Russo. Students over 16 can apply to be a House Captain. There will be a male and a female House Captain for each House. They will liaise with the Senior Sports/Social Organiser and take a lead in organising House events. House Captains will be able to use a room in 'the Snug' near the Crew Room with its own TV. Students may find House Captaincy a useful addition to their CV. House Captaincy was removed, if necessary. The House Captains in 2014 were Alexander Mullié and Josh Mendes (Cheam); Boudewijn Vroom and Cornel Munsch (Douai-Elstree); Simone Gradogna and Matilde Huseby (Hawtreys); Nacho Aguirre and Luca Parisi (at Mary Hare).

The competitive 'League' matches in a variety of sports with each side dressed in their House colour ensured that the House system continued to work well, as did Sports Day. The House Captain of each House choreographed a dance as well as a performance of the Hous

What most of our young visitors see of the UK is the south and London. There are other areas of stunning splendour. I shall be arranging a three-night visit to the Lake District and Scotland as an optional trip with boating and orienteering activities as an option.

Another change will be the complete banning of water balloons, possession or use of which will be an expellable offence.

To all the parents who have entrusted me with their most precious possessions; to the students who let me organise a huge chunk of their summer holiday; to the staff who worked so well and had such fun; to The Mary Hare School staff who made us so welcome yet again; to all the past parents and students who have told their friends and family about us and have given us such great young people to work with.

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