

Summer 2022 Revisited

I couldn't wait to get started again after two horrible years in the wilderness. The Head at Mary Hare wrote to me in 2020 to say 'Now you will, at least, know what July looks like.' I did – and I didn't like it one bit. VacStuds is what I love and will carry on doing until the end.

I told everyone that VacStuds 22 would be the best ever and I would say it was. Weather-wise, it was even drier than the previous driest summer of 1976 and hotter than any year recorded – so hot that a red warning was issued for the first time ever. As red warnings had been introduced only the previous year, this was not quite the Armageddon that the press would have had us believe and the Course activities carried on as normal. Nevertheless, England's green and pleasant land turned to straw.

First a few words from those who receive what it has taken me the previous year – and the fifty years preceding it – to achieve:

'I have had a life-changing experience on the course. My own mother, who attended the school several years, had told me about the wonders of Vocational Studies, but I could have never imagined how astonishing the experience was until I took part in it. I believe that the main aspect that motivates me to write this letter is the love I have for the whole place, experience and people.' (A student)

'It was my first time and it was truly the experience of a lifetime. It showed me how to be more mature, independent, and to be able to connect through my English with people that now I couldn't imagine not forming part of my life. I loved every moment being in Vocational Studies.' (A student)

'I wanted to thank you very much for the incredible experience that (my children) have had at Vocational Studies this summer. They really enjoyed it very much! And this is the first time after a camp that they already asked us to repeat next year. Thank you again! (A parent)

'I really enjoyed my time at Vacstuds, way more then I would've ever expected.' (A student)

'I think I have significantly developed in many ways. My leadership skills have improved throughout the course, but more importantly, I feel I have been able to support others in their work and self-development in various ways. The ability to work out issues both within yourself and others at the course is a skill I find essential, and it is one of the most difficult skills to develop. However, I think this year has led me to truly appreciate the challenge and reward that comes with putting on an event for fellow youths, supporting ungdom finding it difficult to adjust, as well as being a part of a winning team dynamic. With the encouragement and support I have received at VacStuds this summer, I hope to further develop them in the future. This year has been like no other, I have never once been left with this much self reflection, joy and awe as I have after this month at Vocational Studies.' (A student)

'Both (my children) had a magnificent time - it was for them a fantastic month meeting so many positive-energy people from so many countries, great activities, staff, and on a fantastic place. Epic. They are still intensely in contact with their international friends now.' (A parent – and former student)

'T has had the most incredible experience at VacStuds 2022. He has surprised us all and most certainly himself. He hasn't stopped talking about all sorts of experiences and the wonderful people he met.' (A parent)

'V came back enthusiastic, grown up, matured, happy. Not that I had any doubts but...one never knows: we are all different. His first phrases when back were: "it was the best month

of my life” and “I want to go back”. As parents I cannot think we could ask for more. This is the Magic of VacStuds all over again.’ (A parent – and former student and staff member)

‘He is absolutely happy and his English has clearly improved. He has already decided that he is going to return next year, so you can count on him.’ (A parent)

‘We would like to let you know that I came back very happy from VacStuds. She enjoyed very much the activities, the trips, the friends, the hot chocolate. And says she wishes to come again next year. Thank you for having taking care of her. It was not easy for her to be away from home but the experience was very good. She progressed a lot in English. The note in the parent's page about homesick was VERY useful for us. You have used the perfect words. In fact, everything is perfect in VacStuds. Since the first email to the last document we just received about I. You are doing an amazing job - The stamps are just beautiful. We are very impressed by the way everything is organised. Tomorrow we are going to Monaco and will have dinner with F. It will be the occasion for I to share this fantastic experience she had in Mary Hare with a former student...’ (A parent – and friend of a former student)

‘Thank you so much for the best summer ever, friends for life, experiences, knowledge and important lessons.’ (A parent)

There are, of course, more. These tributes are straight from the heart and are the reactions. Now to the Course itself:

Back in charge as Course Manager was Tom Goodwin in his 12th year with us. Tom has a special blend of humour and common-sense that epitomises the ethos of the Course. At the final dinner, he spoke of how VacStuds had changed his life.

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

In charge of the teaching side in 2022 was Academic Manager Joe Wallis in his 15th summer with us. There was also Neal Caplin in his 7th summer now with the title ‘Sports/Social Liaison’. Neal wrote to me: ‘With the enforced break meaning returning students were at a minimum, I wasn't entirely sure how this year would compare with the previous ones but it was incredible. The young people seemed to absolutely love it, and almost every single one of them that I spoke to told me they plan to come back again next year. I also felt this was the most cohesive and unified the teachers and sports/social staff have been in any year since I started in 2013. Having a group of teachers who were so willing to be involved in the sports and evening events was fantastic - not just as extra help for the staff team but for the perception the students had of the course. It created a sense of community between everyone, regardless of who they were or what their role was. 2023 is already up and running online and as always, I'm already looking forward to it. So, thanks again, and see you back at Mary Hare in 11 months.’ As teachers, Ashley Simpson returned for his 2nd year. Newcomers were Nathan Gillbanks, David Barker, Stephen Luff and Lotte Peten. Each stayed the duration and brought his and her special skills to the Course.

Senior Sports/Social Organiser, Paddy Douglass, was in his 4th year with us now having risen to the top. His dad, Willie Douglass, who was with us for many years in this capacity in the 1980s would have been so proud to see both his sons in action. Toby Douglass was our sole UK Rep this year. He tells me: ‘I had the best summer of my life and I am counting down the days to VacStuds 2023. At the start of the Course I was very anxious about meeting loads of different people, however my perception quickly changed. Throughout the course I made lifelong friends and I will never forget the people I met at VacStuds and my time being UK Rep for VacStuds 2022. I would like to thank you for giving me this amazing

opportunity.’ Paddy was ably assisted by Sports/Social Organiser/Teaching Assistant Benedict Smith in his 6th year; Sports/Social Organisers Louise Gogstad (Mary Hare) in her 5th year with us; Sebastiaan de Vries (Douai-Elstree) in his 3rd; Ellyn Roberts (Cheam) in her 3rd and Sports/Social Assistants Rafael Martínez Quiles (Mary Hare) in his 6th (now our qualified lifeguard) and Adriana Tur in her 7th; Alice Nnene (Douai-Elstree) in her 3rd; Sofia Martinez-Villaseñor (Cheam) in her 5th and Joshua Gray (Cheam) in his 2nd and my son, Lars, for Mary Hare, in his 12th.

Returning after five years was Matron par excellence, Madalena Tavares, who dealt with any number of young people needing daily medication, far more than in the past. I sense that we are seeing one of the consequences of the pandemic and lockdowns. Former Matron, now Doctor Tanya Fernández Fernández, also came back to visit and see her in action. Doctor James Steel, former UK Rep and staff member, also paid us a visit as did former students and staff members Rutger van der Peijl, Tom Dell and Lawrence Randle,

As a result of the pandemic and the number of those with us in 2019 who rolled forward to 2022 getting older and older in the process, the only Apprentice, too senior even for the ‘Older Students’ group, was Nyame de Vries (Netherlands). In the ‘Older Students’ group, who distinguished themselves by being perfect classroom and sports/social events helpers, were: Paula Zanti (Spain), Andrea di Liddo (‘I’m not a typical Italian’ Italy), Valentijn Nooij (Netherlands), Julius Baumöller (Germany – and also i/c the new drone), Vilém Bacher (Germany - and i/c making reluctant compatriots love the Course), Cris Pumarola (Spain), Toby Douglass (UK) and co-opted Prefects Stella Haagensen and Josefine Gogstad (both from Norway).

The School Council was led by the capable and efficient Cristina Gobej (Romania) who succeeded in achieving a hotline to Mary Hare’s estate manager who promised, inter alia, new mattresses and pillows on demand. She also suggested that the Volleyball rules be followed more closely. One of Cristina’s intricate and tiny pencil drawings – of the conservatory in front of which so many activities take place - now graces the mantelpiece of the boardroom.

This year’s Head Mentor was Stella Haagensen. 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 Beatrice Bastidas Castillo and for English Speaking to Stefano Natalucci.

This year’s Board Meetings touched on various subjects and again I discovered how incurious our young visitors were about each other. I encouraged them to find out about such mysteries as where the Faroe Islands are, why Monaco is run by the Society for Sea Bathing when there isn’t any to speak of and what the fictitious and unenforceable Janteloven is that so guides Scandinavians in their daily lives.

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 didn’t realise how much there was to find out 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. Some discovered that verbalising powerful emotions is too emotional for words. What came across was that every speaker spoke of how they were happy to want to trust their friends with feelings that had remained previously unspoken. People who had been strangers 26 days before and now seemed to have been friends for years, were standing in front of 120 people using a foreign language with confidence.

Having conducted Masterclass on Zoom since May 2020, I saw several whom I met in person for the first time, but already knew rather well for two years, as old friends. This year's Masterclass sessions looked, inter alia, at the practical criticism of poetry, rap lyrics (from Neal Caplin) and the psychology of language (from Josh Gray). For me a special moment was when, having looked at a scene from 'Macbeth', I said to two who had not been to a Masterclass before 'so you like the language of Shakespeare, do you?' 'Was that Shakespeare?' was their reply. They had no idea that they were reading – and understanding – his actual words.

Catering was in the hands of Mary Hare's Head Chef, Nick. He and his staff put on special meals at a moment's notice and almost everyone loved the food. My favourite dish was Nick's fish and chips with the chips triple-cooked and the fish battered with carbonated water and beer. 'Please' and 'thank you' were words often used. Nick spoke to the whole school complimenting them on their manners. This was echoed by every member of the catering staff.

Kevin Gardiner, in charge of maintenance at Mary Hare, also spoke to the everyone thanking them for the way they were behaving. Those at the School could not have been more helpful. Sam and Patsy on the domestic side told me how much they had missed us during the covid years and how happy they were to see us back. This was a view echoed by my main contacts with the School, Louise Gore and Peter Robson. They know the place their School has in the hearts of those who visit during the summer. Louise asked me if she could share my pictures with the children who are at the School during the year and I was happy to agree.

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. Vacation 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.

My son, Lars, has become a director of the company. While he wishes to pursue a career in journalism, the time may come when he sits in my seat. I have assured him that this may be many years away and who knows who else may express an interest?

For me, the New Year is here. 2023 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 – 17 August 2022