

Summer 2026 Revisited

'I'm writing this email to thank you, Paddy, Tom and all of the staff for the past four summers you've given me the possibility to spend at Vacstuds.

When I arrived in my first year, I could have never imagined the huge impact Vacstuds would have had on my life. This place is really special and it has been like a second home for me.

Unfortunately, as they say, all good things must come to an end, and my journey as a student there has indeed ended, but I will always be grateful to you and Vacstuds. It has helped me in so many different ways, from improving my English to becoming a better person.

I made incredible friends and met some of the most important people in my life and I will miss it every day.' (An Italian student)

'I would like to express my most sincere and heartfelt gratitude for everything you have done for X, and for the help and support you have so generously given us this year.

X has told me that this has undoubtedly been his best summer at Vacation Studies, and perhaps even the best summer of his life. I have read the T-shirt signed by his fellow students with great emotion, and I am certain that the values he has learnt, the friendships he has made and all the wonderful memories he has created there will remain with him throughout his life.

I have always been convinced that Vacation Studies has contributed enormously, year after year, to X's personal development, not only academically but also in terms of the values that are helping to shape the person he is today. This year, more than ever, that experience has been possible thanks to you. Your help, trust and generosity have meant more to X and to me than I could possibly put into words.

As his mother, there are things I will never forget: the way you have treated us, the trust you have placed in X and the generosity you have shown towards us. I will always be deeply grateful to you, and I will make certain that X never forgets it either.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for having played such an important part in making this summer so special for my son and for everything this experience has meant to him.

With the utmost respect and gratitude.' (A Spanish parent)

'We want to warmly thank you and all the staff for the special summer you gave to our children once again. They came back happy, grown up and with wonderful memories shared with their friends. Thank you for the wonderful work done and for taking such good care of them.' (An Italian parent)

'Thank you so much for taking so good care of our daughter and giving her the best summer experience ever. She absolutely loved it!!! We really appreciate all the time and effort you have put into this. We had no experience with VacStuds ourselves, and are extremely impressed by everything.' (A Norwegian parent)

'He had a great time, thank you. Vacation Studies always manages to deliver unforgettable summers, and for him this is a summer that will live in his memories forever. Thank you for giving him the opportunity to experience what I did 29 years ago.' (A UK parent)

'Spending the summer at Mary Hare is always incredible, but this year in particular is one that I will keep in my heart with even greater affection. This has, by far, been the summer I have enjoyed the most. I have truly felt like a full part of the team, and I have felt that, beyond being colleagues, as I said in the public speaking, we have also become a wonderful group of friends, a family that has done nothing but laugh together and make the most of every single moment of this month.

Thank you for making it possible for both me and the rest of the students and staff to continue enjoying experiences like this every summer. Thank you for allowing me to meet such wonderful people, who I hope will remain part of my life for many years to come. Thank you for allowing me to learn how to work as part of a team with the rest of the staff, and thank you for giving me independence and confidence in myself.

Even if I thanked you a thousand times, I know it would never be enough to compensate for the enormous impact that VacStuds has had on my life. It is a debt I do not think I will ever truly be able to repay, because I genuinely believe that VacStuds has done more for me than almost anything else in my life.

As people say, this month is one of those days that I'll remember for the rest of my life. I am going back home feeling sad because it is over, but also happy to have been there for another year and extremely grateful for the outcome of such an incredible month.' (A Spanish staff member)

There are many, many more...

So how can I retire?

Nevertheless, all good things come to an end and this has been our last summer at Mary Hare. After 44 years, this has been quite a wrench and I know that the Housekeeping and Catering staff are sad that they won't see us in the summer. I have their cards with messages. Nevertheless, faced with rising rental charges and facilities under repair, I made the decision to move back to Cheam where we have been from 1975 to 2010

Along with the rest of Europe, we sweltered in unbroken heat and sunshine. Although not reaching the regular 40°+ of our continental neighbours, we saw weeks of heatwave conditions and grass like straw. For the first time we actually wanted a rainy day.

In charge again as Course Manager was Tom Goodwin in his 18th summer with us. Tom's family is a living embodiment of how VacStuds can be so much more than a month in the summer.

Alongside him in the office was Paddy Douglass now as ACM in his second year in the role and his 8th with VacStuds.

Almost all the staff returned from the previous summer. Our Academic Manager again was Joe Wallis in his 19th summer. Senior Teacher, Stephen Luff, was in his 3rd and was in charge of the 16 Prefects – a record number, but they worked as a team and there were no divisions. Neal Caplin returned as Teacher/Sports Social liaison for his 12th season with us. Teachers Beata Kucharska-Pik and Owen Braithwaite came back for their 4th summer and Jacob White returned for his 3rd. Josh Gray was with us for his 2nd time as a teacher and 6th summer overall, Rebecca Berchtold in her 4th and Weronika Pik was with us for her 2nd as a teacher and 4th in total.

In charge of the Sports/Social programme was Adriana Tur Mari in her 12th year who has worked her way up from student days.

Sports/Social Organisers were Lars Mucklejohn in his 14th year (Cheam), Madalena Valente (Douai-Elstree) in her 7th, Felix Hunter (Mary Hare) in his 4th, Haakon Lindstad in his 6th (Hawtreys). Assistants were (for Cheam) Luca Trucco in his 7th also DJ, Stella Haagensen in her 6th and Sebastian Hunter in his 1st (for Douai-Elstree), Julius Baumüller in his 4th and Sophie Duns in her 1st (for Hawtreys), Alejandra Romero Haltermann in her 5th and Eyze Eenhorst in his 5th (for Mary Hare).

Matronal affairs were in the capable hands of George Willingham in his 1st year.

The native-speaking 'UK Rep' was Seth Taylor, our first second-generation UK Rep. His dad, Michael, was a UK Rep at Mary Hare in 1997.

The prize for English speaking was won by Dalia Proietti and for academic excellence by Liv Hartmann.

Head Mentor was Tilla Sofie Aanestad who experienced her first foray into chairing a meeting.

Senior Prefect was Anna Schwarz.

Catering was in the capable hands of the remarkable kitchen staff, this year lead by Kat Evans and Rob Greenwood, who have risen each year to every special occasion from Christmas to Valentine's. Housekeeping again was overseen by Sam Worthy and Patsy Barrett.

Ian Wright was on hand to help with day-to-day issues concerning maintenance as was David Gibson. Paddy's primary year-round contacts were COO Peter Robson and his assistant, Amanda Checksfield who arranged the price increases to us since 2023.

There were several Masterclasses. A few were run by me along traditional lines. We looked at Shakespearian sonnets and at examples of more modern works. Others were run by Stella Haagensen, Neal Caplin and Paddy. This time, many of the slots were taken by Prefects who ran a succession of discussions/debates on topics ranging from national stereotypes to first impressions. All were chaired with panache and excellent English and were well-attended.

'An Audience With...' was presented by Eyze Eenhorst and Vittoria Pisapia about 'The Vacational Studies Association' which was created in Den Haag in October 2025 and will have its first get-together in Naples this October. This is a way to enable everyone who has ever had any connection with VacStuds to retain this contact.

This year's hoodie is in maroon – a fashionable colour choice, but one that presented a challenge to The Mary Hare laundry. Jules and her team did their very best with them, as always.

Post-Brexit what was easy and logical became almost impossible and frustrating. We used to have our best former students come back first as Apprentices to make sure they were suitable and then as Sports/Social staff. Now we are not allowed to employ non-UK nationals except graduates whom Immigration may allow a visa as a 'skilled worker.' They may not. Their decisions can be arbitrary. That we think those who have worked their way up the student progression ladder have special skills and knowledge of how to provide a great extra-curricular programme to those young people who come to us is irrelevant. We are told by civil servants with no knowledge of our work and who want no background

information that we have no need for these people. We are, however, allowed via The Vacational Studies Foundation, a charity registered with the Charities Commission in 2000, to recruit 'volunteers' who can be paid expenses provided they are not given sole responsibility for anyone. We can comply with this, so we have talented former students once again.

As ever, the questionnaire at the end of the Course indicated that not having a mobile phone was not an issue. It is, of course, a huge benefit as we provide real, not virtual, experiences which are valued as such. One of the Prefects' Masterclass sessions elicited that many spend five hours a day 'doom-scrolling' on their phones and all saw that this was a waste of time. The two 'Telephone Sundays' were from 10.00 to 13.00 only and were on trip days when mobiles are permitted anyway. After 53 summers, we do know what we are doing and there are good reasons for having phones available only on occasions. There are also good reasons that Course is for four weeks. For those new to us, real progress takes place after week 1½. Those who came for a shorter period missed out on the benefit of the experience.

We retained the two changes to the rules of behaviour in the dormitories introduced last year. Anyone caught outside at night will be held responsible for any unattributable damage caused on the basis that staff can oversee the school while they are awake, but cannot be expected to while they are asleep. Also anyone found in anyone else's dormitory uninvited, will be held responsible for anything that happens in that dormitory whether they are responsible or not. This may have deterred some nocturnal movement. There was a huge demand for sleepovers, especially from those in single and double rooms. Togetherness will be more widely available in Cheam next summer.

On the 'Parents' Page', I have included an information sheet headed 'Last Minute Essential Information' with links to everything we could think of that might help facilitate arrival and departure from packing essentials in hand-baggage in case a suitcase is lost to photographing the passport to enable the return check-in. It was easy to identify those who hadn't read it. Everything we can think of that we have ever been asked over more than half a century is on the web site. Those who prefer to send a question via e-mail rather than read the instructions tend to receive a link to where the information is.

This year, I said that I can't retire or die more than once. If there is a year when I can't say it, then I might do one or the other. In the meantime, my thanks to those who have entrusted my organisation with what is most precious in their lives.

Ian Mucklejohn – 17 August 2026