

Summerhill News

First Edition – Dec 2006

A.S. Neill's Summerhill School; a co-educational boarding school in Suffolk, England, is the original alternative 'free' school. Founded in 1921, it continues to be an influential model for progressive, democratic education around the world.

Welcome to this, our very first e-newsletter, delivered to your door via the superhighway, or good old fashioned Royal Mail.

My name's Steve Fawdry and I'll be bringing you up to date with what's been happening at Summerhill, past, present and future. I'll also be keeping you in touch with other organisations doing great work in education, along with the valuable work of the A.S. Neill Summerhill Trust. In this edition, you'll read about Robert Townshend, most likely the oldest ex pupil still alive and you can also get a flavour of how it was to be at the 85th Reunion in August this year.

It's not all down to me though, I've enlisted some help from the kids, ex pupils, staff and parents like myself. So, if you want to get involved we'd love to hear from you.

85th Birthday Reunion

In the past I have been a bit pissed off when everybody stayed only in their own groups because it felt as though they were just using the school as a meeting place, which could have been done in London or anywhere else. But this time there was a real sense of togetherness.

It was a bit basic in the catering department - but most people managed to survive on the (really good) ploughman's lunches and the (home-made with love by Carmel) soups for supper. We had intended to do pasta with Ena's sauce - but there was so much soup left over that we thought we would be better to adapt it instead - so we had an Italian style soup on Saturday evening.



The bar was pretty basic too - just cans of lager and glasses of wine - but they all went down pretty well and on the last night of our licence the bar closed with a box of wine and a tray of lager - but somebody came along and bought both of them - so we finished just right! It had been a nightmare buying in stock without knowing how many people were coming (yes, that is a bit of a dig - some of you were very naughty about not telling us!)

On Saturday the live music was fantastic! Very varied too - jazz, blues, all sorts ...and a particularly mind-

blowing performance by Warabe - with his baby son in his arms all the time - now that's versatility!

The Gram was played throughout by 'DJ RED FOX' our Old-Summerhillian DJ. He had spent a lot of time during the preceding week downloading so as to have a good variety of stuff. I think some people were angry that the gram stopped so early - I did mention in the meeting that we have to keep an eye on our neighbours and their relationship with the school. It was only two weeks before that we had a live outside music event and then the EOT party - which now goes on all night. So we thought we better tread carefully. Anyhow, it was good to see people up and about the next morning!



Al Lamb and Popsy chatting with Olly, ex pupil and the longest serving member of staff (Carriage house parent) to have worked at Summerhill.

There were so many people who helped us that it is difficult to thank them all -both the "team" and casual helpers like Geoffrey Knights who got up early so started picking up litter, and June who called in on Sunday morning and cleared the whole place before 7:am! And I thought the fairies had been Others helped in the kitchen and the bar - so thanks Guys, it was great.

There were several events over the weekend. The shop which Lenka had put together so well in the Art room was open a lot of the time. We had gram on Friday night with the Bar open, a Meeting (of course!) on Saturday at 2:pm. After that I read a few passages from the new Summerhill book over in the theatre. There were loads of people there and I, for one, thoroughly enjoyed it.

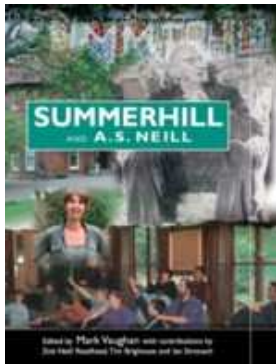
The party on Saturday night was a really good one - unfortunately I hit the wall metaphorically at about 10:pm so I missed the dancing until 2:am - shame!

On Sunday morning there was a Tibetan Overtone chanting workshop with Mark Vaughan (whose brother Paulie was the one who fell out of the Big Pine and cracked his head). I was there and it was hard but really enjoyable. I never knew that people could make those sounds!

Well, that's about it. Keep the first weekend of August 2011 free because we are already thinking about the next one . . . xZoex

THE NEW BOOK

'Summerhill remains unique and different...its underlying principles and its founding beliefs have informed and influenced generations of teachers in both sectors. It will continue to do so.' Prof. Tim Brighouse, Commissioner for London Schools.



This statement is at the start of a new book on Summerhill being published by the Open University Press this spring. As well as the introduction by Prof. Brighouse it has chapters by Zoë Neill Readhead, the current principal of the school, Prof. Ian Stronach from Manchester Metropolitan University and a classic text from Neill's seminal book 'Summerhill' from the 1960s.

There are also question and answer sections.

The new book, titled 'Summerhill and A. S. Neill', has been edited by Mark Vaughan OBE, a former Summerhillian and also the last journalist to interview Neill before his death in 1973. It brings the story of Summerhill up to date and provides remarkable insights into the oldest children's democracy in the world.

Commenting on the education system in Britain today, Zoë Neill Readhead said: 'This country is still being run as GB plc. Children are still being churned through education as a workforce rather than being allowed emotional growth and the right to choose how and what they learn in their education. The importance of play and emotional growth as a vital part of the whole educational process cannot be over-emphasised and the Summerhill experience has a lot to offer the state sector in this respect. Lots of people say that Neill and Summerhill had a great influence on the liberal atmosphere of the British primary school that evolved in the 1970s – well, we can forget that now in today's climate of testing, selection, league tables and an examination dominated national curriculum. It's very good that this new book can bring the educational world up to date with what we do at the school.'

'Summerhill and A. S. Neill' Open University Press. 208 pages. ISBN 0335 21913 6 price £17.99 (plus p+p). Available from Summerhill School office.

HUMAN SCALE EDUCATION?

Human Scale Education's new 'Human Scale Schools Project' was launched in January 2006 with the overall purpose of creating a network of schools which are committed to human scale practice. It is a major new project which will involve 30 state secondary schools over a three year period. The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation has made human scale schools one of its major priorities for 2006 with the intention of establishing a solid core of schools in this country committed to human scale values and practices. Schools taking part in the project will be encouraged to restructure into small learning communities and develop innovative approaches to teaching and learning in order to appeal to greater numbers of students and broaden the base for their achievement.

Human Scale Education was set up in 1985 with the aim of promoting small, human scale learning communities within the state maintained and independent sectors of education. Human scale learning environments can foster the positive relationships that enable teachers to know their students well and make possible a more holistic approach to learning that engages the whole person, something we've been doing for a while at Summerhill.



The founding of Human Scale Education was inspired by E.F. Schumacher's book Small is Beautiful which advocates small scale working units as a means to personal fulfilment, environmental sustainability and productivity. As Schumacher placed people at the heart of economics so Human Scale Education places children and young people at the centre of education.

Crucial to the transformation outlined in the Human Scale Schools project is the design of school buildings. The radical design of Bishops Park College – the first school in the UK to be purpose built as three small schools within a school – reflects the intention to reconstruct the school experience on a human scale. The Building Schools for the Future programme intends to rebuild or refurbish every secondary school in England over the next fifteen years and the Human Scale Schools project will provide examples of schools where school design contributes to a new vision of teaching and learning.

Reproduced with kind permission from Human Scale Education. For further info' Tel/Fax: 01275 332516, E-mail info@hse.org.uk, or visit www.hse.org.uk

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN SCHOOL

In late November, I met up with Maximvs, a strapping 14 year old who'd been at Summerhill since around 2002. He had recently moved up to the Carriages and quickly realised that most people were disgruntled with the state of the kitchen.



Looking around I could see what the problem was. No table and chairs, not a cooker in sight and an absence of electrical goods, including the all important toaster for those late night munchies. Even the paintwork seemed a bit dull. "I used to come in here when I was younger, it was a very social place", said Maximvs. "It was where the 'big kids' hung out".

Following a suggestion by school inspectors, the kitchen was in fact refurbished a few years ago but has since fallen into disrepair through lack of use. In a Meeting some time ago, the community agreed that the contents should be removed – hence it looking rather bare.

So, last month, the Carriage crew got together, discussed how it could be improved and Maximvs asked the Meeting for £150 from school funds towards the revamp which was agreed. He's also hoping to make a table next term, as well as fit new cupboard doors. We'll be catching up with Maximvs in the next issue to see how things are coming along.

The A.S. Neill Summerhill Trust

Briefly, the A.S. Neill Summerhill Trust was created for two purposes. The first is to raise funds for assisted places so that a wider range of pupils can benefit from being at Summerhill. Over the years the school has unofficially managed to help a number of children, but this has been at the expense of other important things.

The second aim of the Trust is to promote the extensive writings and work of A. S. Neill and the present day practices of Summerhill School. There is an on-going need to promote Summerhill's international and historical importance on the world education stage. We are currently looking at offering trainings and placements at Summerhill for teachers and others to learn from the 'Summerhill experience'.

Thanks to you, the Trust has been able to help a number of families who have needed financial support during the last twelve months. Your donations have helped to ensure that a child is not needlessly removed from Summerhill but gets the education they need and deserve. You'll be pleased to hear that in some cases, your generosity has been matched by that of other grant making trusts who believe in Summerhill and what it has to offer.

“Without this money, Summerhill would have remained a dream”.
Summerhill Parent.

A big thank you is due to Geoffrey Knight, ex pupil and now living in Canada. Geoffrey travelled across the Atlantic to join us for the 85th Birthday Reunion, and in between picking up litter and catching up with old friends, he pledged £1,000 per year to the Trust for which we are very grateful. “Returning to Summerhill after some 70 years has enabled me to gain perspective and has helped me to realise the contribution it made to my life, even though I was only there and at Forest School for a few years”, said Geoffrey.

Last year, Steve Fawdry joined the Trust as a working group member after agreeing a reduction in school fees in exchange for fundraising expertise. Over the last twelve months, Steve has been contacting ex summerhillians with a view to publicising the new newsletter and updating the school database. “I'm very grateful to Zoë and Tony for this opportunity”, said Steve. “We could never have afforded the fees but they've made it possible. It's a privilege to be involved with the trust and Freddie is really benefiting from being at Summerhill, he's a different kid these days – much happier and able to be himself”.

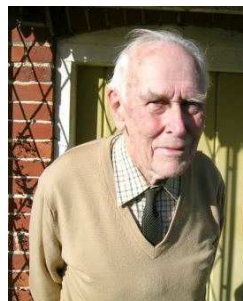
Over the next year Steve will continue to edit the newsletter (with help from anyone who has a few hours to

spare) as well as launch the 2007 ‘Sponsor a Child’ Campaign. In between times, he'll be researching Major Giving and Corporate sponsorship so if you know of anyone who might enjoy a relationship with Summerhill, or has power and influence in the business sector, then please get in touch.

Ron Bailey (Summerhill parent of day-kid) has got involved during the last year and is keen to make a difference. Ron works for Charter 88, a very successful political campaigning organisation which runs campaigns in order to get bills through parliament. Ron will be researching those Trusts that may be willing to support the democratic angle of Summerhill by funding projects which spread the word. “Politicians of all parties have expressed alarm about what is called democratic disengagement”, said Ron. “There is a crisis in our democracy. Yet day in day out, week in week out, Summerhill kids live participative democracy – and it works. I am sure we can raise money to promote this fundamental value of Summerhill and in so doing promote and raise money for the school”.

Ex Pupil Spotlight

I first met Robert Townshend at the 85th Birthday reunion in August. Having spoken to many ex pupils over the last year, it struck me that Robert was most likely one of the oldest ex pupils still alive and so, needless to say, I was chuffed when he agreed to be interviewed for the Newsletter earlier this month.



I arrived in Middleton on a typically sunny Suffolk morning and first saw Robert sitting by the front window doing what looked like a crossword puzzle. As he answered the door, the first thing that struck me about him was that he looked much younger than his years, a slim, handsome figure of a man, dressed in a cloth shirt with tweed britches tucked into his knee length socks. He ushered me through to the living room where we carefully positioned ourselves around the two bar heater. As we made ourselves comfortable he asked me about Freddie and how he was getting on at Summerhill but the conversation very quickly returned to Robert who was keen to declare that he had felt very lucky to have gone to Summerhill.

Born in a Twilight Sleep clinic in London during the Great War, Robert and his brother Patrick (three years older) were raised mainly by their mother whilst their father served as a Major with the Royal Berkshire Regiment. As soon as they were old enough they were sent away to Abbey School, a very strict boarding school in Beckenham, Kent. After being subjected to a brutal regime of bullying and canings, both boys became very unhappy and so their retired uncle Frank (Chief Engineer to a major Army Corp) was despatched to find a more humane school in-between his glamorous travels around the world. Lo and behold – Summerhill. Patrick was first to join Neill at Lyme Regis in 1924 and on his ninth birthday in 1926, Robert followed in his footsteps to the newly named Summerhill after it had relocated to Leiston. “I remember a chemistry master called George Corkhill”, said Robert, “he used to organise mixed sex hockey games which I thought were delightful.

We played against the local grammar school and Southwold Town and we often put staff members in the Summerhill team and won”!

Reflecting on this, I asked Robert what else he’d enjoyed about Summerhill and of his memories of Neill. “I don’t have any criticisms of Summerhill, there wasn’t anything I didn’t enjoy”, said Robert. “Not having to fit in with a regime was great and so was the freedom to learn from your own mistakes”.

“Neill had a great sense of humour and was a very kind man. He was very unusual to have such a belief in freedom. He had real status as an M.A. and was well equipped to defend himself against the government. We both liked working in the workshop, though Neill was more interested in metal than wood. Later in life I remember Neill remarking that as we get older we tend to make smaller things, repetitively, it happens to creative people in old age”!

Robert left Summerhill around 1933 but was a frequent visitor, travelling from London to Leiston for weekends on his Cotton motorcycle, famous for its triangulated frame. It was during one of these visits that he met Eva Moiseiwitch whom he would later marry during the war and have three sons with.

With a keen interest in wood working, Robert went to the London School of Arts and Crafts where he learnt to make machine made furniture. However, it wasn’t long before war broke out and after a brief spell at a preparatory school for the Navy (which he wasn’t eventually accepted for due to medical reasons), Robert went on to work for Marconi and become a radio officer in the Merchant Navy. “I remember volunteering to take a cargo of TNT to Mermansk”, said Robert. “It was very dangerous and we were all jolly scared but I felt that it was very worthwhile mission”.

On the day the war ended he resigned from Marconi and went to work as a student with Edward Barnsley, renowned furniture designer and maker, based at Froxfield, Hampshire. “I realised that I hadn’t enjoyed my time at the London School for Arts and Crafts. It was Harold Hutchison, a Summerhill parent who recommended Ed’ Barnsley, and so I did an apprenticeship for two and a half years”.

It was in 1948 that Robert and Eva brought a house in Middleton where they went on to raise their three sons, Jules, Athelmy and Richard. All three went to Summerhill and have since had children themselves. Over the years, Robert worked from home, making individual furniture pieces in a makeshift workshop at the end of the house. It was during lean times that they dipped into the £10,000 gifted to him by his grandfather, Earnshaw Howell at the age of 21. “Six hundred pounds a year was enough for you to be able to run a car and have somewhere to live”, said Robert.

As we neared the end of our chat, Robert asked if we would be much longer as he had a prior dinner engagement. With Eva having died back in January 1980, I was curious as to whether he had any lady friends. “Oh yes, I have a few”, said Robert. “And how do you manage to stay so trim”, I asked. “Well, I cycle most days, have a salad at least once a day and during the warmer months, I swim in the sea”. Respect! Robert was interviewed by Steve Fawdry.

Births, Marriages and Deaths

Courtesy of www.old-summerhillians.co.uk & written by Zoë.

Ruthie Spiero has sent me pictures of her new daughter born on 3rd November 05 - her name is Raquel.

Kevin Latham has recently got married and has left UK shores to live in Canada. He is going to miss the August reunion but sent his love to all that he knows.

Judy Cook is in the USA and can’t come to the reunion- but says she will visit one day and sends her love to all who remember her.

Hylde Sims reports that she has a new grandson, Rom’s second, Remus, born 11-11-05. Her book of poems and songs, ‘Sayling the Babel’ was published in March by Hearing Eye. See www.fourthfriday.co.uk for details of poetry & acoustic music event she runs monthly in Covent Garden.

Dane Goodsmen (Shand) recently held her 50th birthday party in London. It was good to see some old faces there - Nona Shand, Garrow Shand, Albert Lamb, Nicky Barnett, Camilla Falconbridge (now Scaiff) and her husband Martin who was a house-parent & teacher here. Sue, an ex-San housemother (who I had passed by in a plant nursery near school a few weeks before, thinking: “I’m sure I know that person -how rude!), Harry and Jessie (of course).

Naoko Hori has had a baby girl, Iris, in August 2006. She had thought it would be fun to come to the reunion even though she was so close to the birthday - maybe she could have had the baby at Summerhill!

Andra was unable to come to the reunion but she sent me a nice piccy of herself and her little boy, Jake.

So, there we are folks - hope you enjoyed it. Please do get in touch if you’d like to contribute an article, or if you have any feedback which may help to improve the Spring issue.

Merry Christmas from us all here in Suffolk.

**Steve Fawdry
Editor**
