

The Flatford Experience

In the absence of any sort of history of the Field Studies Council, I thought a few notes might be of interest. It all began nearly sixty years ago, so perhaps the Archives would be a suitable home!

I joined the staff at Flatford Mill in October 1955, as the Mill's first resident secretary. My only qualifications were a not-very-good degree in Economic History, and a good secretarial training. I had a 1947 Morris 8, and knew a little about the FSC - then called the Council for the Promotion of Field Studies. I had never visited any of the (then) four centres. . My sister's friend Peggy Lapper had had a spell cooking at Flatford - recovering from stressful jobs in sociology!. I wrote to Peggy for advice, and I still have the encouraging letter she wrote. She later went to Malham as Bursar, and met her Water-engineer-husband. On the strength of her letter, I wrote to A. G. T. Oakley to enquire if there were any vacancies.

At that stage, I don't think there were secretaries in any of the field centres - no spare money to pay for such luxuries! I think AGTO hoped to introduce them slowly, to take over some of the administrative duties, such as weekly returns for head office, handling correspondence, accepting bookings and coping with money. There was also the telephone, and some driving. I was summoned for interview by AGTO in his office in London Wall. He was then the Secretary/Treasurer of the CPFS, an accountant with a passion for the field studies ideal. He must have thought I might be useful, as he suggested I joined the head office staff for a few weeks, to learn something about how the organisation worked, I was living at the time with my parents in Bromley, so I was also able to spend some time with Francis and Eleanor Butler, living quite near in Keston. A truly remarkable couple, so important in the history of the FSC. Francis had a small printing press in his garage, and was responsible for producing a great deal of the printed publicity - programmes, posters, forms etc. Eleanor wrote and edited everything Francis printed, as well as keeping the records of membership. They were a charming and wonderfully capable pair with great vision, as well as playing a vicious game of croquet on their back lawn after tea! They taught me so much. (h)

At last, an offer came, and I was invited to Dale Fort. I am ashamed to say I did not follow it up. Whilst at head office, I had seen the effect ~~of~~ John Barrett's tightly hand-written memos had on the administrators, and wasn't sure that I was the right person to cope - and my complete ignorance about boats and sailing would surely be unacceptable! Then Flatford was suggested, and an interview arranged there with Jim Bingley. I drove down to Flatford in my old Morris, and met Jennifer Walker (Assistant Warden) and Faith Legg (Domestic Bursar.) Jim showed me round, including a hairy crossing of the old lock gates on the river - I think a sort of test run for me!

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d/ I joined the staff at Flatford in October 1955, and my bedroom was in the attic of the Mill House, with the water tank in the clothes cupboard, its own wash basin, and a view to Deham, over the mill race below. There was a 'secret' stair down to the kitchen, but that involved a cut through the Guest Bedroom, so care was needed. In addition to Jennifer and Faith, there was a resident cook and one local one, and during the season, two or three Dutch (or Swiss or Danish) nurses or teachers who came to work here to perfect their English. They did the domestic work, and attended English classes in Ipswich or Colchester. Then there was a Field Assistant (teaching) and Mr Gooch, who lived with his family in the bugalow near Willy Lott's House. The Warden n/ Jim and his wife Monica lived in Valley Farm, with their four children.

I spent four very happy years at Flatford I soon took on most of the paper work and money matters, and enjoyed contact with the students, especially on the adult courses. In the old days, the Warden sat at the head of the table for dinner, and the staff had their meals with the students. After dinner on Wednesday evening, Jim gave an introductory talk about the Mill and its history, then the study sessions began. It was ~~all~~ quite hard work! There was certainly no time to go up to the village,, and visits to the pubs were discouraged. Our neighbours included Mr Horrocks, who ran one tea room, and the rowing boats on the river, now Bridge cottage. Mr Richardson and his daughters ran the tea room opposite, on the right hand side of the lane. During the winter, Mr Richardson liked to flood one of his meadows to make an ice rink for the locals - great fun if it was cold enough. When his two daughters died, they left some of their land to the RSPB. They have now made this a small reserve, highlighting gardening with wildlife in mind.

In 1955, the Centre transport was a very old and rather uncomfortable Ford van, with no windows in the back, and only rough wooden plank seats. It was not a pleasure to drive, particularly with students in the back, but better than nothing. The Warden's car was an Alvis, Jennifer had a Jowett and Faith a Morris Traveller Jim had only partial sight and could not drive, so there was often a driver needed - and in the evenings, possibly a visit to the cinema in either Ipswich or Colchester. There were also concerts in the village, East Bergholt. Fortunately there was also a garage. Mr East not only provided a taxi service to Manningtree station, but also tended our old cars with much TLC!

Life at Flatford was simple, full, but fun. When Jean Mayhew arrived as Bursar, she ruled the kitchen with a rod of iron, and produced the lowest 'food costs' in the FSC. But we also fed very well. Her responsibilities included the welfare of the Dutch girls, and I suspect they all took home happy memories of their days in Suffolk.

It was difficult to take holidays during the season (February to November), but fortunately I enjoyed skiing. There was no spare staff to cover, though occasionally head office could produce a locum. The 'free' months in the winter were very full, withdecorating, repair, maintenance, researching new habitats, negotiating with neighbours etc.

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The painting courses at the Mill were always something of a challenge. In those days, we only had two single rooms, so fitting 'artists' into multiple rooms could prove hazardous. The staff were always most welcome - John Nash, Gilbert Spencer (brother of Stanley) Antony Atkinson, Max Brooker, Mary Grierson. My only regret is that I did not learn from them all!

At the end of each season, there was a staff gathering at one of the Centres. As the staff numbers were so small, the non-teaching staff were included in the invitation, and I went up to Malham Tarn and to Juniper Hall. In my last season, the gathering was at Flatford - a splendid opportunity for the staff to 'show off' their culinary and other skills. It was hugely enjoyable, an opportunity to put names to faces - or rather faces to names, and to meet others doing similar things in different places.

Finally, I decided to leave Flatford after four very enjoyable years, but where next? I went off to Australia as a £10 pom, their very generous attempt to increase their population. Since then, and when we moved to Suffolk, we have been back to the Mill for a variety of courses - East Anglian Railways, Windmills and Watermills,, the Natural History of the Stour Valley and others. There are of course many changes both within the Mill and other buildings, and in the locality. But the philosophy, the spirit, the enthusiasm and the scholarship remain. It is physically now much more comfortable, and is fit for 21st century service. There may be twice the number of staff, but they are coping with 50% more students than we could. I have enjoyed all my return visits, and wish everyone many more years of environmental enthusiasm.

Margaret Williams (formerly McDonald)
Flatford 1955 to 1959
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