



British International School Riyadh

Summerhill School & 'do as yer like' kids

When it opened 90 years ago, lessons were optional and the children made the rules. A radical alternative to conventional education – or anarchy? Former pupils look back

Earlier this month, seven generations of past and present pupils gathered to celebrate the 90th anniversary of [Summerhill](#), our progressive, [controversial alma mater](#). The school was set up, in a rambling Victorian house in Leiston, Suffolk, by AS Neill, a teacher who so loathed the strict discipline he was expected to impose on pupils that he came up with a radically different method of education – to allow children as much freedom as they pleased.

For me, it was also a celebration of my grandmother's legacy, for in August 1921 Lilian Neustatter co-founded Summerhill. The genesis was an invitation to tea. Lilian had sent my father to the co-ed [King Alfred School](#) in Hampstead, where Neill was a teacher. She invited him to their house and was captivated by the gangly Scotsman's dream of a school where pupils could make their own rules.

My grandmother had no formal background in teaching, but she was well-educated, and a skilled linguist and musician, and together she and Neill decided to start Summerhill. In 1927, she divorced my grandfather and became Neill's wife (she was always known as Mrs Lins from Lindesay, her middle family name). She died as I was born, but we used to visit Summerhill and in 1954, aged 11, I decided to go.

I was homesick at first, and shy, but I knew Summerhill had something special and I wanted to stay. So I became one of the "do-as-yer-like-kids", as the local town called us, imagining the anarchy that must rule inside our brick walls.

Sometimes it did. I remember Angus Dudgeon, who arrived just into his teens after being kicked out of [Harrow](#). Gobsmailed by the freedom, he ran around screaming, talking "inappropriately" to the girls and finally breaking 23 windows over two days. As he lifted a stone to break another, Neill, spotting him, picked up one himself and broke the 24th window before Angus could. Angus broke no more windows, quietened down and became one of the sweetest members of the community. He also went on to produce records for Pink Floyd.

Our peers in orthodox [schools](#) could not believe we would choose to go to lessons if we didn't have to. But as many who came discovered, after plenty of time scrambling in the big beech tree, building dens or sitting in a field of wildflowers reading quietly, formal learning was surprisingly enjoyable. Even so, I got a book flung at me for talking in class by our inspirational English teacher, an ex-army man. "You don't have to come," he said, "but if you do, you must not spoil it for others."

The teaching was patchy. When teachers had good skills and were in tune with Summerhill's philosophy, their lessons were wonderful. Ulla – we called teachers by their first names – combined sewing lessons with teaching her native German. I went on to make my own clothes and pass A-level German with distinction. But wages were low and Summerhill wasn't every teacher's dream school, so some who were hired frankly didn't have a clue.

What we did get was a valuable education in democracy. At weekly school meetings, attended by anyone who wanted to come, issues were raised – a child destroying property, or a teacher talking in a way someone considered hurtful – and everyone had an equal vote on the appropriate punishment. These varied from losing your puddings for a day to being banned from Neill's expeditions to the sea.

Inevitably there were salacious questions about boys and girls living in such unbounded proximity. News Of The World reporters would visit and offer us a pound to spill the beans about the lurid underage sex they wrongly imagined took place. Tabloids reported staff in flagrante on the front lawn. There wasn't a front lawn.

In its 90 years, Summerhill has at times teetered on the brink of survival, with pupil numbers low, sensationalist documentaries painting a distorted picture of cruelty and anarchy, and Blair's Labour government in 2000 trying to close it. Zoe Redhead, Neill's daughter, who runs the school now, fought and won the court case against them.

So, back for the celebrations, should I be proud of what my grandmother did? To this day even simple maths defeats me, but I have not fulfilled the gloomy predictions of academics who declared this "Utopian" school would leave us all unable to fit into the outside world. Instead I've had a fulfilling career and overwhelmingly, the thing Summerhill gave me is optimism and pleasure in just being.

Ishbel McWhirter, 84



An artist, [McWhirter](#) lives in Wales with her partner Reg. She has two children by a previous marriage.

Ishbel McWhirter's mother read *That Dreadful School*, Neill's book about Summerhill, in one sitting and sent her daughter, aged 12. Ishbel loved it immediately. "Neill filled the school with his positivism and humour, and Mrs Lins was very cultured and warm to all the pupils.

There were few rules, but he warned us if we swore outside the school people would be shocked. We didn't want to let our school down, so we were very careful."

A number of pupils, including McWhirter, wanted more learning than was on offer but Neill believed in the importance of free time, so Summerhill usually finished lessons at lunchtime. At a special meeting, called by the pupils, it was decided an extra lesson would be added to the curriculum so children could be prepared for the School Certificate, a precursor to O-levels. Neill was dismayed – he was not keen on the pressure exams create. "Neill's way of instilling learning was to paste up originality tests which took the form of jokey questions. We were supposed to answer in the most outrageous way possible. We thought Neill didn't have a clue about choosing teachers. They seemed to be selected for bizarre reasons – they read the right newspaper or had the right neuroses."

But McWhirter enjoyed working with Robin Bond, a young art teacher who took a great interest in her work. He showed her art to the Austrian artist [Oskar Kokoshka](#), who offered to teach her once she left Summerhill, so from the age of 19, McWhirter spent several years under his tutelage. Today there are portraits of [Melvyn Bragg](#), [Tom Conti](#), [Lord Scarman](#), [Germaine Greer](#) and [Neill](#) in her catalogues. Reflecting, she says: "I suppose the downside is that I didn't have the confidence I saw in some people who knew their education was as good as anybody's. But Summerhill gave me a different kind of confidence, to like being myself, and I see now that is a very big thing."

John Burningham, 75



An illustrator and author of children's and adult books, [Burningham](#) lives in north London with his wife, the artist [Helen Oxenbury](#). They have three grown-up children.

John Burningham went to 11 different schools – his father was a salesman and they moved around a lot – before his parents chose Summerhill in 1948. He was 13 and stayed for five "very happy" years.

"But the fact that the school was always very hard up definitely affected us having a broad education. There was a limited range of subjects on offer and the sports facilities were hopeless: a tennis court with weeds growing in it, fields too bumpy for football and so on. I don't think that was just money, though. I believe Neill associated sports with a public school system where you were hammered to run on freezing mornings with raw knees, and a competitiveness that made kids no good at it very unhappy."

Art was a passion from the start and although Burningham went to other lessons, only French and literature stick in his mind. "People outside thought we'd find it hard to earn a living, but among my peers are professionals and academics, as well as batty artists like me."

There was a benign moral education, too. "A couple of us had got hold of the keys to the main food store and for about a term we'd been taking things. One day I was with Neill and he suddenly said, 'Some bugger's stolen the key to the food store. I don't suppose you know where it is?' It was alarming the way he could see through people. No matter what you said, you knew he knew the truth. There was nothing to do but go and get it for him."

Nathalie Gensac, 44



Gensac runs an educational [charity](#) raising money to help women and children in the developing world. She lives in Santa Barbara, California.

Until she was nine, Nathalie Gensac was home-schooled by her parents while they were travelling the hippy trail to Morocco. "Then they heard about Summerhill and it absolutely fitted their ideas," she says.

Living in a small, inter-related community "means you have to take responsibility for your own actions, and that means everything from the clothes you wear to how you treat others. All that decision-making can be hard at times. Neill's bottom line was that you could have freedom, but not if what you did interfered with others' freedom."

Gensac mostly went to lessons but remembers missing a couple of science sessions, then apologising. "My teacher said, 'It doesn't matter but it's your loss.' That really made me think." She left Summerhill at the age of 15 with nine O-levels, including three science subjects.

Taking A-levels wasn't really an option at Summerhill because there weren't enough teachers to offer a wide enough variety of subjects, so Gensac went elsewhere. "There were people at college who disapproved of me because they thought I must have grown up with no discipline. One A-level teacher rounded on me when I disagreed with something he was saying and shouted: 'I suppose you are the kid from Summerhill.'"

Caspar Walsh, 44



Author of a memoir and a novel, [Walsh](#) runs creative writing lessons for young people in prison and has set up a [charity](#) for young people at risk. He lives in Devon.

"I went to Summerhill at the age of six for two years. I climbed trees, invented games and burrowed around in all the open space. If I was hungry, I'd go to cookery class and make cakes. If I wanted a sword, I went to woodwork and made one. I was in my element

because I could just be a child doing natural things, whereas I had to fit in with my dad's life at home. He was a career criminal and my family life was very disruptive – emotionally as well as physically."

Walsh's chaotic background meant that he relentlessly tested the boundaries of Summerhill's freedom: "I stole, did bad things. One time I set fire to the head of a large teddy bear and chucked it out the window."

The final straw came when he broke into a football club next to the school and took the store of sweets there. He was instantly expelled. "I was devastated. I can see now that I was looking for someone to control and contain me. But the point of Summerhill was that you had to learn to impose your own boundaries. I wouldn't say the school was irresponsible to expel me – I had committed a criminal act – but I think they were extremely harsh, given how young I was."

Walsh is one of few pupils asked to leave Summerhill and his life went steadily downhill afterwards. His father was sent to prison and Walsh became heavily dependent on drugs. But by 21 he was clean. "Recently I came across a photo of Neill," he says, "and realised how much I wish I could have stayed at Summerhill. His ideas on helping people find their own direction by being on their side have definitely influenced me."

Nadia Hartmann, 42



Hartmann is a dentist who lives in Belgium with her husband and two daughters.

Nadia Hartmann's mother had a very strict upbringing and she didn't want the same for her daughter. On the strength of Neill's autobiography, "Neill! Neill! Orange Peel!", Hartmann was sent to Summerhill in 1975, aged five.

"I had no difficulties going so young. My mum died when I was nine and Summerhill became like a family for my brother and me. There wasn't much bullying, but with some friends, I did bully one girl. We put snow in her bed so that she would think she'd peed, and daddy-longlegs into her cooking ingredients. We were brought in front of the weekly school meeting and there was a lot of disapproval from the other kids. We were banned from the swimming pool and going down town. That was a really big punishment and we never did it again.

"I went to lessons when I was small, but when I reached 10, I stopped and spent a couple of years climbing trees, swimming, knitting, playing with friends. Then when I was 13, I decided I wanted to do dentistry and needed to learn, so I began lessons again. I had to work hard to catch up, but classes at Summerhill are very small, so you can get a lot of individual tuition.

I left at 15 and at college I had to work even harder. But I'd had valuable years of freedom and after three years of intensive study, I got the same marks as those who had been at that college for 13 years."

Hartmann and her husband plan to send their own young daughters to Summerhill soon.

Nathan Clutterbuck, 26

A graphic designer, Clutterbuck lives in London.



Nathan Clutterbuck's parents wanted him and his brother to have an alternative education, so he was sent to Summerhill at the age of four. He stayed until he was 16.

"I hardly bothered with lessons until I was 13," he says. "My friends and I would muck about in the woods – creating dens and castles – or play informal team games in the grounds. I spent a fair amount of time in the art and woodwork rooms, and also in the theatre. We would make up plays and then perform them for other students."

Eventually, though, Clutterbuck felt he'd had his fill of "messaging about" and was ready to buckle down and study. "I don't remember learning to read and write," he says, "but for most of us it was something we just learned intuitively. I'm still not a strong reader, but I did a degree in graphic design and now work with an up-market travel company developing books and one of the first apps for the iPad, so it clearly wasn't too much of a handicap."

Summerhill, he says, wasn't a happy experience for everyone. "Some children don't handle having so much freedom and do better with rules telling them what to do."

As for him: "I think Summerhill made me a diplomat. From the age of 12, I was mediating disputes between kids, trying to understand two sides to a problem. Later, I was suspended three times for drinking and smoking weed. I loved being there, so being temporarily kicked out was bad. My parents gave me a pep talk, checking I knew the severity of the situation, but far worse was the talk I got from my peers, warning me that I was putting the school in jeopardy. I knew they were right."