South Devon Steiner School Association
Minutes of the Annual General Meeting
17th May 2017

Present:
Trustees: Mark Drewell (Chair), Edwina Ratcliffe, Christopher Cooper,
Co-opted Trustees: Almut Woolard, Caroline McDonald, Joshua Malkin
Association members: Mark Jefferys, Elizabeth Elsholz, Rowena Norris, Marcus Link,
Andrew Stanton, Becky Morrow, Julia Troy, Paul Evans, Anja Toddington, Anne Acland,
David Howard, Lisa Platt,
Guests: Tara Davis, Petra Brown, Colin Brown, Graham Weston Lake, Coralie Naughton,
Polly Kirby

Apologies: Juliet Crittenden (Trustee), Jonathan Liddle (Trustee, currently on sabbatical) Michaela
O'Sullivan, Selby Thomas, Jim Pilkington, Marion Rudd, Rita Meszaros, Angela Martinot, Martin
Levien, Ruby Starheart

1. The meeting opened with a welcome from the Chair and a verse by Rudolf Steiner.

2. The Minutes of last year's AGM held on 18 May 2016 were agreed and signed.

3. Chairman's Report of 2015/16

One day short exactly from 12 months ago we held the 2016 AGM of our Association.

I found it informative to review the remarks that I made then, when preparing what I would say this
year. A great deal of water has flowed off Dartmoor since then and under the Staverton Bridge
which I drive over twice each day when dropping off and picking up our children at the school.

The world has changed a lot in that time, too. Cameron and Obama are now Trump and May. Truth
is officially no longer important.

At our school, we do not live in a post-truth world, but we live in a world that is, like everywhere
else Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous. It makes both governance and leadership
challenging and if there is one thing I have learned personally in the past year, it is to be less
categorical in my statements about the future.

Last year I commented that 2015 was a tumultuous year out of which we emerged stronger and
fitter. We are stronger and fitter, but I should have added that we still need more time in the gym.

I reported extensively on organisational matters including appointments in the administration, the
establishment of a School Management Team, the re-forming of the College as the heart and soul of
the school and the work on health and safety. I described it as organisational plumbing and re-
rewiring and stated that this work was well over 50% complete. That may have been a little
optimistic.

I also talked about the shadow side of change and how much hurt and pain it causes – it certainly
does and has continued to do so this past year.

I talked about how the new building, “the bunkhouse” was going to become a community centre
with a couple of classrooms upstairs.
For those of you who came to the opening of what is now Hood Barn, last Saturday, you will already know that the building will now be the heart of our new South Devon Steiner College opening in September, allowing us to finally fulfil a 35-year-old dream to be able to offer a Waldorf education from kindergarten all the way through to eighteen. This is the first moment to record an enormous vote of thanks to all the people that have been involved in the creating of this building. It was a nine year project from the first conversation until today so there are too many to name even if I did know all of them. So instead I extend thanks to everyone through the names of Dave Chapman from the beginning, through Alan Houston who has contributed throughout the journey, to Andrew Stanton who today still allocates his Thursday evenings to work hands on in the building. The spirit of volunteering they all represent is one of the very best aspects of the community of parents and friends who support this school.

So what was the story of the past year?

Well, shortly after the AGM we reached two major conclusions:

The first was that, while we had done much good work, we still faced a systemic gap between our income and our expenditure.

The second was that there was a disconnect between what we aspired to deliver by way of a continuously improving educational offering and what we were actually delivering.

We concluded that we needed to find ways of doing not more, but doing what we do better and we needed to do it with less.

Everyone who works at the school has subsequently been involved in working out how we do this.

It is very much a work in progress though the results to date (phrased with my newfound caution) are promising.

A key development was the decision to dissolve and restructure the learning support and staff development functions and to transfer accountability for work in these areas into the school’s three main departments: Kindergarten, Lower School and Upper School. This has not only saved costs but is also improving our ability to meet the differentiated support needs of the children in our care and the professional development needs of teachers. It is early days but the signs are positive.

Beverley Powell, who until recently carried both the teacher development and learning support portfolios, has left the school and I would like to take the opportunity to publicly acknowledge and thank Beverley for the many roles she has played as a stalwart member of the staff for so many years.

We also have had significant changes in the Upper School. Ian Powell’s departure last summer was not an easy process for anyone involved, especially as Ian had been such a central figure in so much of the school’s life for so long. Ian’s vision and work over many years was the foundation to turn a dream of a full upper school into a reality. I would like to recognise that work in this forum, just as we did last weekend when we formally opened Hood Barn and to thank Ian on behalf of the whole association for everything he has done for the school and which informally and indirectly he continues to do.
It is exciting to see how Upper School teachers are developing new ways of delivering a full Waldorf curriculum free from the constraints and prescribed outcomes of the GCSE exam-based approach. Existing and newly appointed teachers are working together to create and deliver an exciting programme where young people can continue to thrive and develop their interests and passions.

As I mentioned earlier and we promised last year, we are opening Class 11 in September 2017.

One of the major realizations during last summer was that we needed to focus more firmly in our decision-making on what was in the interest of the children and the educational offering. This may seem obvious—but sometimes our desire to serve our community has, in my view, resulted in that focus being blurred a little.

This new-found focus led us to the conclusion that the best use of our new building was as the centre of the new secondary educational offering.

So, the Bunkhouse became Hood Barn (so-named by our Student Council).

It will now serve as the home for our Upper School which has also been renamed the South Devon Steiner College.

I am pleased to report that we already have at least six students plus two visiting students who have made the decision to progress from Class 10 to the new Class 11.

After the opening last weekend and the launch of the website for the College, we are starting to announce our offering out into the world. But already now, our numbers compare well to the Norwich Steiner School.

Having a daughter in Class 10 who is going on to Class 11, I can personally observe developments in our Upper School. As most of you will know, we are offering the New Zealand Certificate of Steiner Education as a rigorous alternative to GCSEs and A-levels and the International Baccalaureate.

We also now know, through evidence from the two other UK schools that already offer the Steiner Certificate, that our students will be able to apply to all UK universities through UCAS on the strength of their results under this system.

In line with this, our current Class 10 will be the last cohort to take GCSEs at our school.

Again, we are not stepping into the unknown as, for example, the Norwich Steiner School has already made this decision and found that the educational advantages are significant.

Our College will initially be able to accommodate eighty students over the four years of 9, 10, 11 and 12. Around 32 places will be assisted and there will be additional openings for international students.

Presently, 13 teachers make up the faculty, many with extensive Steiner teaching experience from across the world and holding advanced degrees including PhDs.

This capacity is important to note as with the departure of some of the longer serving teachers.
during this period of transition, a member of the Association asked ahead of this meeting whether we have the staff we need to implement our upper school plans.

We have looked at this carefully and are satisfied that we do have the staff and that where and when they are needed, we will be able to bring in new talent. This will not be easy but that is nothing new.

The same person asked the Council to share what we had learned from these departures.

My answer is that each case is very different and the reasons why anyone leaves an organisation are often multi-layered and complex. What is clear is that working conditions in terms of low salaries in part-time roles are an important factor.

Overall, our aim is to increase the number of staff who work full-time rather than continuing the historical approach of having the majority of teachers working part-time. Having more upper school classes will help us to do that.

Full time is important because it not only means more money, but more quality time to think about and do what is needed in addition to preparing and teaching in class, without it becoming burdensome.

There are so many wonderful aspects of what we are now able to offer in the upper school that I could talk for a long time on the subject, but I will highlight three.

The first is the way in which the framework allows the student to express ability and passion for aspects of a subject. For example, in mathematics you can demonstrate brilliance in algebra even if you are not strong or have no interest in other aspects. This is just not possible in a one-size-fits-all GCSE and A-level system.

The second is the flexibility to easily combine and do well in humanities, arts, crafts and science subjects at the highest standard.

The third is the way in which the Steiner Certificate allows every student to be assessed in ways which both show their capabilities and also stretch them. How many people in Britain and around the world have had their life choices ruined because, even if they were brilliant at something and loved it, they could not express that effectively in a 60-minute written exam?

Let me turn to the school’s finances. In accordance with our articles of association, the annual accounts for the financial year 2015/16 are tabled at this meeting.

Formally they are approved by the trustees but in tabling them, the trustees welcome any questions of concerns from members of the association.

Total income last year was unchanged from the prior year at £1.22 million. Within this number there was an increase in donations which offset a small decline in fee income.

The donations, which were mostly one-off in nature, included a bursary fund, a grant from Die Freunde to pay for the new bridge outside the Greenwood Hall as well as donations for Hood Barn and the recovery of Gift Aid for three years. The fee income dynamic I will address shortly.

Until very recently, every weekly School Management Team meeting since November 2015 has
been dominated by financial concerns, decisions and processes. Without it, as Council, we do not believe that our school would have survived, let alone been in a position to open Classes 11 and 12 next year.

Reserves fell to a historical low of £8,465 at the end of the reported accounting period (2014/15 £32,944). This figure was well below the buffer that we believe is ideal which is in the region of £150,000. As a result of the restructuring that we have undertaken since last summer, reserves are starting to recover and we anticipate being able to show an improvement at the end of the current financial year.

As Council, we monitor the bank balances weekly and can see that they are on a positive trajectory.

We continue to manage the school’s finances with a focus on careful cost control and on improving the timeous collection of fees.

Fee collection has undergone a major transition and we have significantly changed the way we make and uphold financial agreements.

By way of reminder, our past practices included:
- deferring school fees at a substantial level every year,
- allowing school fee related parent debt to mount to over £1,000,000
- not always pursuing the debt effectively
- whilst also not writing unrealistic debts off.

All this meant that often in the past we achieved an apparent surplus on paper, we did not have the cash-at-bank to go with it.

These practices evolved because one way or another, we made it through. But the world has changed and we have been forced to take extensive action to set us on a firmer footing.

Our approach is now as follows:

Where it is not possible for families to meet their agreement because their circumstances have changed, we have been accommodating as long as we were able to come to a mutually acceptable agreement.

Where families are unwilling to communicate, meet or otherwise adjust their agreements in a mutually acceptable way, we have moved to debt collection and court action.

At one stage we had a debt collection agency dealing with 37 families on our behalf. This is now down to 15, as 15 are now in agreements and repaying monthly, 4 have made full payments and 3 have been written off. The balance will be reviewed in the summer. We have had to go to court on four occasions and have so far won 3 court cases, the 4th is ongoing and a 5th case starts on Monday.

Of course, when people decide not to pay the school what they owe, we are often accused of a lack of communication and the refusal to pay may also be justified with claims that the education delivery was substandard. This is not unusual – it is a pattern experienced by all private schools.

However, the court case judgements are illuminating. Our communication process in the court's
eyes offer plenty of time and opportunity for meetings, and the judgements make it clear that any concerns and complaints around the educational offering cannot be resolved through non-payment. They also confirm that notice periods are not negotiable and that the terms for giving notice stand.

This has not been pleasant, but we are rapidly moving to an environment where everyone understands that financial agreements are upheld. We are aiming to get to the position where any culture of non-payment will soon be a thing of the past. Such work will then no longer be needed.

In accounting terms, we also realistically write off debt that may not be recoverable. And, crucially, we have made sure to learn a lesson from the past and to avoid exposing larger numbers of families to debts which they will clearly be unable to repay in an acceptable timeframe. This also requires that we have a stringent process to make sure families are keeping on top of their payments.

At this point I would like to say a special thank you to Tara Davis who has done extraordinary work to bring us to this point. For the first time in our school’s history, we have accurate financial information available on a daily basis, realistic (and useful!) forecasts available twice per term and every department able to see its own budget and expenditure on a monthly basis. This financial information is also taken into, and worked with, in department meetings - this gives teachers a stronger informed voice in decision-making around expenditure and is another example of how the organisational changes which have taken place are bringing about positive results.

Our need to correct the financial situation through firmer engagement with those who don’t fulfil their commitments had contributed to a three-year decline in pupil numbers. But it was not the only factor. I believe that four other factors should be considered:
- The presence of TOPS as a perceived alternative “alternative”.
- Fallout from the financial uncertainty in 2015/16 prompting some parents to go elsewhere over concerns about the school’s viability.
- The fact that we have not been as effective in dealing with parental concerns and complaints as we should have been.
- Unrealistic expectations from some parents who believed our school could be a panacea for all the dilemmas and difficulties they or their children had experienced elsewhere.

Clarity on our offering and the expansion to a complete secondary education means we now present a clearer choice beyond being just another alternative school amongst many in the area.

This year we have put in place a clear structure of accountability to address complaints and concerns and are steadily improving our ability to respond to issues timeously and ensure that parents do not reach a point where they feel the need to look elsewhere.

We are also putting a stronger focus in the admissions process to avoid setting up expectations that we cannot meet and likewise, we are being clearer with parents about the school’s expectations.

We had reached a low point in numbers of 231 excluding visiting students in February 2017. Since then, we have made progress and the rising student numbers confirm this. As of today, excluding visiting students, we have 240 students.

Our visiting student programme has gone from strength to strength this year, with visiting students across the school from Kindergarten to Upper School. Currently, we have sixteen overseas visiting students who contribute to our income as well as to the life of the school.
The outlook for our summer language school this year is also looking positive and it is expected to make a useful financial contribution of in the region of £45,000 to £50,000.

Looking at next year, the incoming student pipeline is encouraging. We are expecting three full Kindergartens and a full Class 1. In addition, as we start to make our College more visible we expect that we will attract people into the school in higher classes.

We are, however, being financially prudent and are not budgeting for larger numbers next year. Interestingly, smaller classes are not always a bad thing. They often allow us to improve the education we deliver and to reduce costs as they need fewer support staff.

Accordingly, we are reviewing what we consider an optimal balance and so do not necessarily plan to grow student numbers to previous levels where we were perhaps risking being too big to provide a more customised offering and too small for mass education.

Smaller classes can also result in lower levels of expenditure in other areas of the school and generally improve the quality of delivery of education. This is the big legacy issue our school has. We are not of the mind that we have to increase to previous levels of pupil numbers for the sake of it. What matters is a healthy balance.

We continue to strive for inclusiveness and have maintained the target level of fee reductions that we have at 25% of our potential fee income. In addition, we are exploring the possibility of a scholarship programme in the College and increasing the bursary offering in the lower school.

Looking ahead, we do have a number of exciting projects which we will complete as and when the funding becomes available. These include a new hall, science laboratories, arts and crafts facilities, additional classrooms, a permanent parents room and more. We know that our beautiful grounds and our buildings could handle more activities beyond our educational offering and we are starting to consider how to do that. Hood Barn will be available for rent for workshops and meetings during the weekends and in the holidays – starting this coming summer when our own summer language school will make extensive use of the building as will the traditional summer event, Tango Mango.

On the governance front, we continue to invite applications for association members to become trustees and to look beyond our association membership. In the past twelve months, we have considered three possible new trustees, two of who we have decided not to proceed with for now, while a third is at the stage of us completing the statutory reviews required.

A concern was raised by an association member that the council should be a fuller, more diverse group to ensure objectivity and expertise. The member expressed a disappointment that the trustees have no suggestions to bring to this meeting. The member asked that the association takes a more active part in nominating candidates. As the Council, we would welcome that.

The same member surmised that we turned down one prospective trustee because we are reluctant to listen to other points of view in case they are critical. This is not my experience. Our trustees are all independent minded and frequently voice criticism.

I do know again that we are not alone in finding that it is not easy for people to step forward to become trustees of organisations.

The increasing statutory requirements for what is a voluntary activity often mean people find it
preferable not to take on the burden but to remain offering their perspectives from the side-lines.

The life of the school is going through renewal at many other levels. Our Parents and Teachers Association (PTA), now just about 18 months old, is starting to find its feet, taking a particular focus on pastoral care and looking again at our summer and advent fairs as well as engaging in a project of parent education. It has also initiated a weekly parents’ group meeting on a Friday morning.

The teaching body meets weekly in Collegiate, now ably chaired by Anne Acland, with the brief to develop the detail of pedagogical matters and to continue exploring what it means to be a Steiner Waldorf teacher in South Devon in the 21st century.

The School Management Team now has representation from all parts of the school. It is the body that carries formal delegated operational authority from the Council and on behalf of the Association I would like to thank Marcus Link, Elizabeth Elsholtz, Anja Toddington and Christine Cook for the work they do to make operational decisions which balance the needs and resources of the organisation now and in the future.

In addition to the restructuring, a major focus has been to ensure that the school is ‘inspection-ready’. This is being embraced as an opportunity for improvement rather than an unwanted imposition of external authority. It is a great example of how one can, with the right mindset, jujitsu something that can easily be seen as a burden into an illuminating opportunity. Parent-volunteer Caroline McDonald is supporting this process, bringing her skills and experience as a former trustee of a London Steiner School - and it is very much appreciated.

Last year I ended my remarks with a verbal picture of what I encounter in our school through my children.

This year, I would like to offer a picture of what I hope to be able to share in twelve months’ time. It feels that we are standing on a threshold, a feeling that was so strong at the opening of Hood Barn last week.

In twelve months’ time my wish is:

- We will have a vibrant Class 11 about to start Class 12.
- Our finances will be stronger and we will have attracted philanthropic support on a larger scale.
- There will be a growing body of teachers who love what they do and feel fully supported and able to do it well.
- We will have created a little more room to breathe in every part of the organisation.

And above all else our school will be full of wonderful children and students learning, growing and standing tall as they move through childhood with grace until they are ready to go out into the world resilient and having had a full opportunity to explore who they are, no matter what our volatile uncertain, ambiguous and complex world throws at them.

That is why I am here and I suspect that is why so many of us love this school, so very much.
Council have previously approved and signed off the accounts. There were no questions, the full document is available on the School's website.

5. **Mannington's** were unanimously reappointed as the Auditors for an estimated fee of £6,000.

6. **Election of Trustees.**
Christopher Cooper and Juliet Crittenden stood for re-election following the rotation procedure laid out in the Articles of Memorandum. By secret ballot, the results were as follows:

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7. Closing comments thanking everyone for attending were made by the Chair and the meeting closed with the verse.