South Devon Steiner School Association
Minutes of the Annual General Meeting
18th May 2016

Present – Trustees: Mark Drewell (Chair), Edwina Ratcliffe, Christopher Cooper, Jonathan Liddle
Present - Association members: Eloi Cardon, Mark Jefferys, Elizabeth Elsholtz, Rowena Norris, Duncan McCanlis, Sue McCanlis, Marcus Link, Andrea Link, Michaela O’Sullivan, Caroline McDonald, Andrew Stanton, Yolande Drewell
Present – guests: Kaycee Fordham, Tara Davis

Apologies: Juliet Crittenden (Trustee), Laura Stoddart

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 17 April 2014 were agreed and signed.
3. Chairman's Report of 2014/15

35 years ago this Association was formed by an enthusiastic group of parents and teachers with the ambition to:

"promote and provide for the advancement of education of the public in the teachings of the late Dr Rudolf Steiner and in connection therewith to conduct in the United Kingdom any boarding or day school or schools for the education of children."

Those dry words which can be found in our memorandum of association expressed the desire to create a school which would provide an answer to a deeply felt sense amongst the founders that the mainstream of education in this country was not delivering the kind of education which they felt would serve their children. So they started on an entrepreneurial journey to create a school.

As our opening verse so eloquently says. In their heads, the power of faith, in their hearts the might of love, and in their full human being, all sustaining hope.

And here we are, 35 years later still on that journey. And what an exciting year it has been since the association’s last AGM. There is an apocryphal Chinese curse "may you live in interesting times". Over the past year we have done just that.

I should add since we are in an educational context that there is apparently no such Chinese saying and the nearest is "宁为太平犬, 莫做乱离人" (nìng wéi tàipíng quǎn, mò zuò luàn lí rén), which is usually translated as "Better to be a dog in a peaceful time, than to be a human in a chaotic period." – but I digress …

In this report I would like to share impressions of the last year and a sense of where we are going.

2015 was a tumultuous year out of which we have emerged stronger and fitter

Looking back, I would like to invite you to join me in a series of images which I hope will capture both the sense, and some of the substance, of what has definitely been an interesting year.

Shortly after our last AGM we enjoyed an Independent Schools Inspection service inspection carried out according to Section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008. With sterling work and all hands to the box-ticking pump, we were assessed with the following opening phrase:

The overall quality of education is good.

The report went on to highlight the Kindergarten as outstanding and overall in our school there was a huge sense of relief. Having sat through the feedback session I was left with the clear sense that the inspectors did an excellent job of fitting our round peg into their square set of assessment holes with a goodwill and creativity that was commendable.

The report also gave us some specific pointers on things to work on and as such, we have chosen to utilize it as an empowering resource for our continuous improvement rather than as another
example of the challenges of delivering education that makes sense in Britain today. So we all sped off into the 2015 summer holidays with that work done. However under the surface it was becoming clear that urgent action was needed to address our finances. Our efforts to replace Mark Ayers had stuttered along with a combination of what proved to be a short lived successor combined with contractors making it exceptionally difficult to get a clear picture of where we stood. Along came Tara Davies as our financial manager. On the one hand we finally had a picture of where we were. On the other the picture was not good.

Under Marcus Link’s leadership as the then Council Chair we initiated a series of communications and implemented emergency measures to turn around what at best was a dangerous situation, and at worst, was perilous. I do not think it is worth dwelling on the detail but suffice to say that in six months with a combination of staff and parental commitment and the adoption of a rigorous financial management system, we stopped the rot.

In working with this challenge, we also came to the conclusion that we needed to further develop the school administration and bring in new management with a wider remit.

We knew that finding someone with the capabilities of servant-leadership needed, within the price bracket we could afford, in the time-frame that the urgency of the situation required and given the fragility of the organisation was an exceptionally difficult task.

At this point, the Council realized that we had someone in our midst who just might be persuaded to take on the challenge and who had the necessary skills and understanding of our situation to hit the ground running…

And so in November 2015 Marcus Link relinquished his role as Council member and Chair to take on the role of School Administrator. As a result, I was appointed Chair of Council. Council’s decision to appoint Marcus to the role of Administrator, albeit on a one year contract, caused considerable disquiet amongst the school community. The sense of how people should be appointed into roles in the school was informed first and foremost by the idea that such things should be done in an open transparent way with a job advert, shortlists, interviews amongst possible candidates and then an appointment.

As Council we fully support and endorse this principal, but also recognize that there are circumstances where another approach may be needed. This was one of them.

At the 2015 AGM Council reported that we had put in place a new management structure. A College was re-established after an absence of a number of years and an operational executive called the School Management Team (SMT) was formed. The latter comprising the administrator and two teachers. That triumvirate is now Marcus Link, Elizabeth Elsholtz from the lower school and Anja Toddington from Kindergarten. It has become the rock around which we are building an effective and more efficient way of running our school. I would like to take a moment to appreciate their work and dedication.

One of the things that happens when you start turning over stones, is that you often find things that are not always pleasant under them. The way the SMT, as chief stone turners, have shouldered the responsibility to move things forward has been remarkable, and as a community we are truly grateful.

Their work has been enabled by the College, which is now fulfilling its role as the beating heart of our school.

A key challenge that has in my view been largely overcome in the past year was a pattern where within the social dynamics of the school, the act of raising a concern, even without offering an alternative solution was sufficient in many instances, to prevent progress. Together we have come to recognize that good decision making in community is not always about everyone having to agree – it is also about clarity and being willing and able to empower people to act in our collective interest. So I have talked a lot about organisational matters because these have needed much attention. This is like the plumbing and the wiring of a building. If it works well you never really notice it but the effort to fix it when it is broken is expensive and disrupts everything.
Another area we have tackled is Health and Safety where we have appointed excellent outsourced contractors. They give us the systems and expertise we need at considerably lower cost, while simultaneously reducing the burden on staff. The effect has included for the first time in some time, a happy insurance company comfortable that our systems are up to scratch. The same approach is a work-in-progress in Human Resources.

**Overall, our organisational re-wiring and re-plumbing is now well over 50% complete and we can see what is still to be done.**

On the physical infrastructure you will have seen ample evidence of the overhaul that is underway. Many have commented on the effect of taking down the dilapidated marquee. This was the work of some 20 parents and staff who put aside their Good Friday to get the job done. There is the beautiful new bridge into Greenwood Hall which by the way was paid for thanks to sterling fund raising efforts by a small group of parents and staff approaching Die Freunde in Germany for funds and receiving a wonderful gift of some twenty two thousand euros. And then next to the marquee the long, low shed full of building timber, broken bits of market stalls, a long dead photocopier and some mouldy gym mats has all gone – shifted in a single work day.

And if you have a chance to go down to the gardens you will experience how our dynamic new outdoor learning teacher Mark van Vliet is bringing Dutch efficiency to replace André Tranquilini’s Brazilian flair. And by the way, is rapidly proving to be as equally loved by the children – not least because of his skill in basketball which he can be found playing with children before school and in the breaks on the now open space where the old marquee used to be.

Meanwhile work on the building formerly known as the bunkhouse has continued within our financial constraints. Here again, every Thursday a dedicated group led by parent Andrew Stanton have brought their trades skills and willing hands to move things forward. I will talk more about that building later.

We also have a new Parent Teachers Association. As its first act it initiated the creation of the seed funding for a bursary fund. To date it has raised raising some £10 800 and the funds continue to grow.

All this is being made possible because there is a new energy in the school. And of course there is a shadow side - change is never easy and there have been many circumstances of hurt and discomfort amongst the progress. Notable in this has been the difficult decision to have families leave the school who were unable to fulfill their commitments financially – in some cases large and in some small. Looking to the future we are moving in that regard to a much simpler more consistent approach rather than having every family on a unique arrangement.

On the governance front, Ian Powell has stepped down from Council and we thank him for his service. He has been replaced as the staff representative by the equally experienced Jonathan Liddle. We have also worked on the development of the Council, recently running a governance workshop to which we also invited the SMT, chairs of the Kindergarten, Lower and Upper Schools as well as the chair of the PTA.

All of this matters, but none of it is the reason why we are all here.

**I cannot speak for others but perhaps personal impressions speak more than numbers and statistics when it comes to the real reason – our children.**

For myself I have experienced our class 8 son coming home from a 3-week class trip to Germany, Switzerland and France long enough overnight to put his clothes through the washing machine and head off the next day to his 5-week exchange in southern Austria. He came and went with the fierce joy of a 14-year old for whom life is full of excitement and new experiences. For whom, thanks to our school, Europe is not a vision of bureaucratic bungling in Brussels, but a living reality of friends, cultures and languages of which he feels an integral part.

I notice my class 9 daughter ploughing through mountains of homework everyday in the upper school and loving the intellectual learning that Waldorf education brings in the upper school at the
time when the children are ready for it, not when some standard test says they should be. And then I notice her and her friends stop in the playground and spend time talking with their young class 2-ers – such a wonderful sight when teenagers are supposed to be too cool to notice the little ones. And I see her and her class-mates flying up the main road on their bicycles in training for their 3-week cycle trip around Brittany after half term. They get fitter and more confident in both their cycling and map-reading skills every day.

I think of the way before Easter, so many parents stepped forward to host a whole class 8 of German students for 5 days when they visited the school from Nurtigen. And how some of those who stepped forward to host were parents who only have children in the Kindergarten.

I think of my 12 year-old daughter who, outraged by learning at school about the plight of refugees demanded over dinner one evening that someone kills David Cameron because he clearly doesn’t care and therefore has no right to live. After a little family discussion that passion turned to a sponsored silence where she and friends in her class raised money for refugees from residents in their villages.

And I watch my class 4 child being so excited by the Dart Walk next week that he packed his back-pack two weekends ago. And how his greatest pleasure is having me come up with complex maths calculations to do in his head at bedtime.

And I am brought almost to tears when I hear a parent in a class 8 parents evening when asked to share why she chose Waldorf education, talk about the way her daughter who has now left the school has matured into such a confident, self directed and wonderful young woman.

That for me is the reality of our school that is why we do this.

**The year ahead is about growth and development**

So what’s coming next?

Well a great many things, all of which are informed by the new strategic plan which was also developed in the past year. It was created by the SMT and involved workshops with staff and parents. The finished article is now approved by Council as a living document to guide the school’s development. It will be available to read on the school website shortly.

We are on track to launch class 11 in September 2017. We are rolling out the Steiner School Certificate (SSC) and the more we see its power, the more excited we become about it.

This past week we have had visit from both the overall SSC coordinator from New Zealand and the newly appointed UK coordinator of the programme. Two children from two separate Waldorf schools have become the first UK students to apply to University under the SSC and received conditional offers based on their projected SSC results in class 12. This bodes extremely well for the acceptability of what in my view is a significantly superior alternative to A levels.

We will complete the new building and plan to open the ground floor in September as a shop and community café. This is exciting as it represents a platform for both community outreach and for an income stream to support the school. This requires seed funding and we welcome expressions of interest from Association members to support this. The name of the new building is being worked on by our newly formed Student Council with representatives from every class from class 6 upwards.

Beyond that we are looking into establishing a Community Interest Corporation so we can raise funds beyond those that will fund a private educational initiative and envisage expanding our ability to use the schools physical assets for workshops both of our own, and for others to rent the spaces we have. The shop and café can also form the basis of a business selling produce from our gardens. They are also a great opportunity for applied learning, amongst especially our upper school children. Expanding our income streams from other sources will enable us to both better resource our school and increase the extent to which we are able to be inclusive.

Upstairs in the new building – increasingly becoming known as The Hood, we will have classes 9 and 10 during 2016/17. This will give us a year to renovate and refurbish the current upper school spaces ready for the start of class 11 and then a year later, class 12.
In our strategic plan we also have a new hall to replace the marquee and the creation of an Arts and Crafts Centre that can serve both the school and potentially, a wider offering. Within the school there are also plans for next year to expand aftercare and a breakfast club so that it is easier for working parents. Our recent open day suggests that our expanding offering will increase our ability to grow our school.

**In conclusion I want to thank everyone who is involved in our school - parents, all staff, families and friends.**

Together, I believe that in these extraordinarily uncertain times we are building something special which will continue to deepen and grow the fulfillment of our mission.

Rudolph Steiner is quoted as saying:

> “Receive the children in reverence, educate them with love, let them go forth in freedom.”

This is what we do. - Mark Drewell, Council Chair

4. **Tabling of Accounts for year-ending 31 August 2015.**

Council have previously approved and signed off the accounts. The Chair gave a brief summary: Debt levels are improved but also well documented. There is now regular and accurate reporting to the main bodies of the school. The expectation for this year is to break even. We may need to utilise business reserves to achieve this.

Work is ongoing to ensure that next year the school runs in a more effective way. A conservative estimate of pupil numbers is 250. Funds for infrastructure development are not expected to come from fees and therefore will need to be raised from other sources.

The Summer Language School numbers are improved on last year with more than forty students expected.

5. **Mannington's** were unanimously reappointed as the Auditors for an estimated fee of £6,000 approximately, this is lower than the last two years, when they have had to do excess work during changes in the school’s financial personnel.

6. **Election of Trustees.**

Mark Drewell stood for re-election following the rotation procedure laid out in the Articles of Memorandum. Jonathan Liddle stood for election for the first time as a new Council member. By secret ballot, both were elected unanimously by the 16 Association members present.

A question was raised about the number of Trustees. The chair responded that the aim was to raise the number and approaches are being made a number of potential candidates and the Council welcomes expressions of interest from others.

7. **Questions from the floor.**

There was a question regarding screen and internet safety. Jonathan Liddle assured the meeting that policies regarding this were well on in the process and would be published soon. These have been devised by the Safeguarding Team. It was also noted that the School's Safeguarding Policy has been fully consulted upon and will be tabled at Council's next meeting for ratification and then put on the website. Edwina Ratcliffe is the Trustee for Safeguarding. A suggestion to look at the approach adopted by KEVICS was welcomed.

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