

## **SUMMERHILL REVISITED**

By Angela Neustatter  
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If it hadn't been for Wendy Morley I might never have gone to Summerhill even though it might seem an obvious choice. After all it was my grandmother Lil, sister of Henry Handel Richardson, who had met the progressive pedagogue A.S.Neill, and been captivated by his ideas for starting a school where children could have enormous freedom. The ideas so captured Lil's imagination and passion to work towards human rights and freedoms, that she left her husband Otto Neustatter to share Neill's vision and to help him make Summerhill a reality. Neill joined her in Germany where - very generously on Otto's behalf - the two men became friends.

Neill and Lil were able to find a property in Hellerau, Germany in 1921 and began advertising for people who wanted an alternative education to the very authoritarian traditional methods being used at the time, for their children . When the school had to leave Germany and after that Austria, where they had gone, in 1924, it was Henry who found them a place in Lyme Regis in Dorset. They then had to evacuate to Wales during WWII, and Lil died there in 1943.

As Neill remained running Summerhill, and my father saw it as an extension of his family home, we made regular visits there, and it was on one such visit that I decided I wanted to go to the school.

I was 11 at the time, and with my parents and brother. We had parked in front of the red-brick Victorian house with its shawl of ivy festooned over the front. We were making our way up the path towards Neill's small private house, away from the main school building, when a girl, clearly a couple of years older than me, with a mass of shiny dark curls, a sweetly pretty face and wearing the softest pale blue angora wool bolero which made her look very huggable, attached herself to me. She asked where I was going and suggested I should let her show me the school. I was more than pleased to go with her and so Wendy marched me through the huge oak-panelled main room, pointing out the platform built near the ceiling, where the musical kids and formalised jazz bands would spend Saturday nights jamming. We climbed stairs winding up to the bedrooms, popped into the art room where people came and went as they pleased working at whichever easel was free. Wendy showed me the hockey field - not that anyone played hockey - where pupils were allowed to camp in summer and the best sport was chasing the bed-times officer, the person in charge of making sure the campers were in their tents by bedtime, until they collapsed exhausted and let us run wild. Wendy took me to sit together on the stone steps of a verandah looking out towards the sweeping drive curling up to the red-brick Victorian school building. All the while Wendy informed me what a wonderful place it was to be at school, and that I should really come.

And to think this place where children talked with delight about their school was the legacy of my grandmother. How proud of Lil I felt.

I hadn't particularly wanted to leave the day school I was at, or my home 200 miles away, until then, but Wendy's apparent desire for me to share the pleasure she took in Summerhill clinched it. I would persuade my parents to send me to Summerhill and Wendy would be my best friend.

Blind folly of course. Once I joined Summerhill the following September, as an unprepossessing new girl, the glorious Wendy had absolutely no interest in me

I remember being wildly homesick my first couple of weeks and my parents responded to my tear-stained letters saying I could come home and go to school locally any time I wanted. But somehow I knew very quickly that homesick or not I wanted to stay. And serendipity being what it is, another new girl, Suzie Jackson - also homesick - and I found each other and became the closest of supportive mates. We strutted around the grounds of Summerhill in the knee length loose knitted pullovers and skin tight jeans that were sort of the school uniform, although nobody would have actually prevented you from wearing a nice tweed skirt and cardie.

It did not take long to learn that you could have more or less as much time as you wanted doing what you wanted. The thing that outsiders always pick on is that lessons were not compulsory so what on earth would lead children to choose them over yet more play time? Neill's idea, supported with the huge energy Lil put into making the school work in the early days, was that given as much free time as they wished, children might well choose formal learning as something they wanted. And when, and if that time came, there would be

someone qualified and ready to teach you. The theory was fine but not always the actuality. I recall our English teacher Richard Tolson, a former probation officer, who threw a book so that it narrowly skimmed my head and certainly gave me a fright, when I wouldn't stop talking through the lesson. He told me: 'You don't have to come to class, but if you do, don't spoil it for everyone else.' That made absolute sense and I got a great deal out of attending to his first-rate teaching in future classes.

In fact I went to most classes and enjoyed learning and the practical application that came with some lessons. For example we learned about how the nearby Sizewell power station worked and what it could, potentially, do to the sea around it. Later Neill would lead us, like a pilot whale with its infants, biking to Sizewell to see the site for ourselves.

But Neill's choice of teacher was constrained, certainly, by the fact that Summerhill kept the fees very low because he was determined people of all classes and economic situations should be able to send their children to him. Even so he managed some spectacularly bad choices such as Peter the science master who imparted nothing of value that I recall, but he did walk along the corridors at night, with his dog on a lead, and stark naked.

The thing that really daunted me at first was just how much unspoken for time there was. Once lessons were over in the morning, there were sundry activities in the afternoon. Such as woodwork - I did that with Neil and made a three legged table – or time in the art room with art teacher Harry nominally in

charge. I used to hang for whole afternoons in the room of Ulla, our German teacher who morphed into sewing teacher after lunch. She was gruff, periodically moody but kindly and I did learn some useful dressmaking skills.

However these all finished at teatime and after that it was free time until we had supper and a bit later went to bed. That was not ideal for someone pitifully and pathetically shy as I was, so I didn't find it easy to just latch on to some friendship group, join a game of kick the can or tag or just go and start up a chat with others. The girls I shared a room with were friendly enough but had their own places to go, people to see, when we weren't tucked up under the covers. And Suzie and I couldn't be together all the time.

I spent many of the hours alone, reading, and so I learned that freedom to choose the books I wanted, for as much time as I wanted, to curl up under the eiderdown getting wholly engrossed in the characters, was just as good as if I had sat in the school library reading in the company of a teacher. From this I developed a lifelong passion for reading and to this day am so grateful that books offer another world to retreat into when the real world doesn't feel right.

Somehow, as time went on, I realised I had made friends. I found common cause and easy friendship with other girls and boys and melted into easy intimacy with most of them. I began writing plays for half term and end of term performances, coercing my school mates into taking part and I always had the director role. Michael, a red-headed fellow of considerable height and girth was supremely willing and dressed up in a tutu and wore a glittery headband as some

kind of transvestite fairy; for another he was a boover boy type. And we got great audiences and lots of clapping even if the whole thing was a shambles.

These days I hear so much about the bullying kids suffer in school; the sharp-elbowed competitiveness; the humiliation of failure or even not being seen to do your personal best. There is the ganging up against a chosen person to be the outcast, and so many more things that children do when they are driven by the need to be seen as important and powerful. There was probably some low-key bullying at Summerhill, and occasional ganging up against someone, but it was in small measure and did not seem to add up to much. That is the thing about freedom to be the individual you are, warts and all, and not the favourite, best, most looked-up-to , it de-activates that competitive engine that drives those who can never feel good enough perhaps because they have never been allowed to feel good enough.

By the time I returned from holidays for my second term I was well integrated except for one thing. Summerhill seemed to be fuller than ever of lithe pubescent girls who wore all kinds of inventive, highly stylised and sometimes super sexy clothes with great aplomb. Jenny, with whom I shared a wooden hut in the garden as our bedroom, waltzed around in full pleated skirts, long striped socks and a cowboy hat. Lee Rindert from Holland was an early onset fashion bee and arrived each term in whatever style of pants and tops were featured in Vogue and other such magazines. Came the hottest day of the summer and there she was supine on the back verandah in a teeny weeny bikini when the rest of us had only rouched nylon swimming costumes.

My nemesis was a gorgeous willowy girl with corn blonde curls and upright posture. She appeared at the beginning of one term in a pair of pale cotton boy's jeans with fly buttons, at a time when jeans were strictly made in male and female shape, stretched across her flat stomach and tiny bum. She looked so cleverly stylish, her body formed into such an enviable shape by the garment. I so so wanted to look like that.

So come the holidays I rushed off and bought boy's jeans with button front fly. The trouble was I had to buy a largish pair to pull on to my body with its over-generous *ombonpoint* and the result was my stomach bulging larger than ever with buttons on top like Smarties on a cake. The trouser legs flapped baggily down foreshortening my body. I quickly returned to my flared skirts and loose knit tops.

Greater confidence, and nobody telling me how I should do it led me to write and enjoy inventiveness without fear of being told what I did was right or wrong.

Unsurprisingly the biggest question that people who *knew of* Summerhill but not much *about it* either wanted to ask, or did ask, was did we live in a hot bed of sexual activity with all the freedom we blooming girls and boys had? When we said well no not really - the odd innocent "fancy" there was, where we walked around with our chosen, hand in hand and kissed goodnight before heading off to our own beds; occasionally an older couple would go in for heavy schmoozing and I remember a Swedish lad, of towering sophistication, who

came for a single term, teaching me to French kiss. But really when you live with people, rather as an extended family, it's not a great turn-on. For starters I was always struck by the gale of hallitosis that came from male morning mouths when we gathered at breakfast time; the bum-fluff on the boys' chins, the black heads on all of us; our ungainly limbs and gauche manners. It wasn't the stuff of romantic dreams. More an effective contraceptive.

Of course the tabloids didn't heed our telling them we were pretty chaste. The News of the World regularly turned up offering any of us chatting around the place £1 (huge money in the 1950s), to be photographed, boy and girl together in our pyjamas, in the bathroom. The price would have been higher if we'd been willing to strip off and share a bath, but one thing we knew was that the scandal that would cause might well get our school closed.

No I was far more turned on by the down-town boys who went to Leiston High for Boys and had a rough veneer of sophistication. I would put on my best full skirt with petticoat stiffened to an enormous size in sugary water, and skimpy top, and go with my mates to the local coffee bar where the town boys in their drainpipe trousers and velvet collared jackets stood around the juke box putting on Gerry Lee Lewis's 'Great Balls of Fire' and smoochy Pat Boone numbers. But although they probably would have fancied a brief roll in the hay with us, their true interest was the local girls with their magnificent beehive hair dos, pencil skirts with slits at the side and cute little dancing pumps on their feet. In fact whether it was puritanism or that self-respect thing agony aunts were so big

on, I remained, doggedly, a virgin until, age 19, I met my “true love” during my first job as a journalist and it all seemed very grown up and important.

I have often wondered how significant Lil’s role in Summerhill was. After all she was “just the wife”. As research for a book I am working on about Lil and Henry, I interviewed several old Summerhillians who had been there in her time. Mrs Lins as she was known (Lindesay was our middle family name) was charming, cultivated, a mover and shaker , and the powerhouse needed for Summerhill to survive and succeed I was told repeatedly. It was important to hear that because in my time at the school nobody seemed to know who she had been, nor care much. Summerhill was Neill’s school , he was the one who had the original ideas, wrote the books and made his gruff, grumpy, endearingly kind self available to us all as he pottered around the school, always dressed in corduroy jacket and pants and the square-toed shoes he had made for his overlarge feet. But those who knew Lil vouched alto voce for her powers as a mover and shaker, the perfect pairing for Neill’s ideology and philosophical thinking.

So here I am now looking back to that time, recalling parts like a very blurry photograph, others surprisingly vivid . And I ask myself the question so often put to me personally, and the stuff of writings by outside critics, was I glad I went to school there?

There are pluses and minuses and I have never pretended otherwise, but let's start with the positives. I think that being in an environment where the staff were on your side, with you not against you, and there to be approached when and as we liked, was hugely important. I believe it imbued a fundamental optimism, a belief that the world cared for and about you. Even though, of course, just how optimistic a child might feel depended a good deal on home life, their growing up environment and so on.

I believe the school meetings where the kids made some of the rules (not those to do with safety and legality) gave a real sense of having a voice that would be heard and a vote that mattered. It was the place we pupils as well as staff could bring up a child or an adult for bad behaviour and the school meeting would vote on how to deal with it - psychological help, punishment or nothing, so the staff did not have to have the hated authoritarian status of too many schools.

I remember being infuriated, and hugely protective of Summerhill, when one of the many academics who came to have a look and make judgements, wrote in a book that this was a place where the children might have a Utopian experience but none would be able to fit into the world outside. Those words still make my hackles rise as so many Summerhillians have done pretty damned well by conventional academic and career standards. That said I share with a number of ex-Summerhillians regret at not having had a more challenging and demanding level of formal education. I like learning and was wanting to learn and that is a precious state to be in, but instead I marked time too often sitting in badly taught lessons or lessons that were clearly hastily cobbled together by whoever Neill

had taken on for the subject. I remain convinced that this kind of progressive education needs top quality teaching as much as any other and Lil, an intellectual with a profound interest in academics, would I am sure have agreed.

This is the criticism I have made many times, but I need to add that in fact I have done as well as a good many other people in my career as a journalist, culminating in being a feature writer on the Guardian newspaper and continuing as a freelance, after having children, to write for most of the serious broadsheet papers. I have written 12 non-fiction books. So I think I can say I wasn't entirely unable to fit into the world outside Summerhill.

Most important, the Do-As-Yer-Like school, as Summerhill was known, was true to Neill's original philosophy for the school, and I would say the kids were largely happy and felt proud to be there. There were those who worked through some of the problems they brought, often from conventional schools, or from family problems. Some actively disliked it and wanted an altogether more conventionally organised schooling. Yet the amount of loyalty and affection for the school, felt by many has a striking testimony on the Face Book page celebrating Summerhill's 100th anniversary next year.

Meanwhile the school is still going strong with Neill's daughter Zoe Redhead now running the educational experiment she inherited from Neill and my grandmother.