

THE OPTIMIST : I'VE SEEN THE FUTURE - AND IT WORKS!

THE REALIST : I'VE SEEN A BIT OF THE FUTURE - AND QUITE A LOT OF IT WORKS PRETTY WELL

(FEEDBACK ON THIS SOON PLEASE - SEE SUMMER SCHOOL ORGANISATION ARTICLE)

OR : A SHORT HISTORY OF THE BIG FLAME SUMMER SCHOOLS (WARTS AND ALL) (Read Book)

We've been asked to write this "partly to explain the history and background of the Summer School (to help newcomers) make a more informed decision about coming, and so they can adapt more easily when they arrive; and partly to make the Summer School an appealing prospect for a political, educational 'holiday'". (Ben Lowe). So this document immediately takes on the form of objective history and propaganda. (Note particularly the inverted commas around 'holiday'). Having long ago discarded the bourgeois notion of objectivity, we can go at this task with marxian gusto. Mixed with gusto comes love and awe. Love, because the Summer School has been a very significant experience for us - something which has done more for our commitment to Big Flame and our friends within her than any other singly experience. Awe, because it is a monumental task running a successful Summer School. We were both deeply involved in the first two (1977 and 1978) and had we known then what we know now, Summer Schools might never have started. Now, however, the organisation has four years experience - and nothing can go wrong. Well, almost nothing.

### 1. What we are trying to achieve with the Summer Schools

We say "Summer Schools" because it is not a single experience. Only a handful of us have been to all four, but probably most people have been to more than one, and there's no doubt that you get more each time. You can see why if we take a chance and try and list what we're aiming at in Summer Schools:

#### 1. Socialist life (love and comradeship, trying now for a slice of the future)

It may well sound pretentious, but that is one thing which happens at Summer Schools, and everyone experiences it. Not every moment of the week, and you feel it less in the first day or two (if it's your first time) than in the last few days. But it's there. You can make real friendships, you can get to know people you've only seen at meetings, you can sort out old problems, you can meet and learn to enjoy other people's children.

And you can work out a lot of the problems of collective life. You find out how a mass kitchen works (feeding 100 people threetimes a day : is this the people's cafe?). You work out how to collectivise cleaning, washing up, looking after and putting to bed 30 children, running a bar - all the important responsibilities we have to each other. You see what happens when you cop out of those responsibilities - and if you don't see, it gets pointed out. It is no exaggeration to say that, if socialism means a greater degree of collective domestic life, then you can learn a lot about that at Summer Schools.

#### 2. Education

Less dramatically, we aim to learn more about socialist history and theory at the Summer Schools. So we have talks each morning, after which we have small group discussions and then if there's time before lunch we meet again and talk about the topic together. There is also lots of time for self-organised discussions about topics which appeal to the people who happen to be at the School. And it's not just talk - often practical workshops are organised to share skills.

#### 2: What do we actually do?

To be a little more concrete about how we set about these aims, we'll describe the best things that have happened (and point out some of the problems).

#### 1. Organisation

Much of the success of the Summer School depends on the thinking and organising which goes on months before. The first two were organised by two or three people and a lot of things were badly thought out. Read was accurately dubbed The Commissar at the first (no-one dared name him at the second) because he had A Plan and everyone else was in the way of its divine operation. The

fourth (1980) suffered from too little organising over the months before it, but was the best run during the actual week because a lot of people took responsibility, and several important changes were made to the "infrastructure". I imagine the 1980 pattern will be followed. It goes like this. On arrival you are assigned to a "work group" (chosen to balance sex and mix people from different towns) which you stay with all week. You meet with this group for your educational discussions, and it should act as a personal support group, especially for newcomers. Each day your group has a particular task: childcare (daytime creche); washing up; cleaning; putting to bed and baby-sitting; running the bar or some other equally important task.

Each of these has proved problematic in the past. Before we had such an effective system, "shit-work" became an oppressive hassle. Once when we paid more in order to avoid doing it, the paid workers felt put upon, and people felt it was wrong that we were being serviced. The creche has always been well staffed, but we have found that people sometimes had little experience of children and weren't very confident about playing with them and enjoying their time on the creche, even though Big Flame has spent a lot of money and effort building a large stock of toys, games etc for our creches. A big step forward was one person taking responsibility for the creche workers over the week: seeing that they met the night before, advising them on planning the days activities (which outings had already been done etc).

Another important factor in ensuring success is the morning gripe meeting. For half an hour before the educational session begins, there is a meeting at which problems are aired. The most persistent problem has been how the adults and the children get along outside the creche. There are problems about some kids having more money than others, about how non-responsible adults exert discipline over young people, about being unable to sleep because of the noise (not that that complaint is confined to children by any means!) We have never been wholly successful in involving the young people in these discussions, but something will emerge.

## 2. The education programme

This never meets with one hundred percent approval for the whole week. The first Summer School programme was hatched by Read and Roberts in a cold cafe in Barnsley (we'd been to interview a NUM militant for the newspaper. No, we didn't recruit him.) It proposed three sessions a day, each session on an aspect of the following themes: English working class history (1800-1977), International Revolution (Paris Commune to Cuba), and "great revolutionaries" (Marx to Mao). The kindest comment we received to this proposal was that it was an excellent programme, and the only thing missing was the compulsory cold shower at 6am. The final programme that year consisted of one 'talk' session in the morning (on five international revolutionary events) and organised practical sessions in the afternoons (on agitprop: cartoon drawing, street theatre, photography, newspaper layout etc). In 1978 we took a fairly random selection of topics, introduced by some fairly 'big names': British fascism (David Edgar) Labour Party (Leo Panitch) Marxist analysis of the economic crisis (Pete Burgess) Imperialism in Africa (Lionel Cliffe) Politics of food (agricultural group) and Sex and Class (Margaret Coulson). Space dictated that afternoons were entirely self-organised, and the weather dictated that people wrapped themselves in blankets and went to bed, or dashed to the nearest cafe.

The 1979 School saw Jane Barker on alternative technology, Carl Gardner on the media, Mick Carpenter and Nancy McKeith on alternative health and a couple of others which I've not recorded (I suspect one of them was Ben Roberts). The innovation that year was a day trip to Scarborough (where we lost our daughter for a terrifying half hour). Afternoons were self-organised, so far as I can remember.

Last year saw a return to the idea of a theme, whose precise name varied according to which minutes you happened to be reading. Basically it was around the idea "marxism - what can it do and what does it miss out", and we used home-grown speakers (there had been some reaction against "super stars") to look at the concepts of exploitation and oppression, marxism and women, marxism and race (this actually became an illustrated talk on

Zimbabwe) and another couple of talks which I can't recall. In the afternoons we went back to the idea of practical workshops - there was one on bicycles, and I demonstrated my devotion to the means of production (the duplicator) to a thronging crowd of three, and Islington Dave broke his back jumping on the kids' inflatable.

As important as all the things 'laid on' are the talks that people organise when they arrive. Almost nothing goes untouched (if you're very lucky). Workshops are organised on nuclear power, abortion campaigns, the Labour Party, Ireland... and there are a series of women's and men's meetings.

3. Entertainment

Evenings are devoted to yet more pleasure, but it is surprising how much argument they generate. Film fans always go haywire at Summer Schools. They always sneak onto the organising committee and inflict their personal fads on the rest of us. Roberts (my dear friend and comrade) once got me to book a pre-war soviet comedy called "Happiness". It did make the kids (the under ten's that is) happy ... Last year there was a raging argument about the political rightness or wrongness of showing "Morgan, a suitable case for treatment". When it comes to the crunch, most people are in the bar talking or singing right-on songs out of right-on songbooks, ably accompanied by sundry red musicians. But there are always some big successes in Summer School films (eg The Patriot Game), so no doubt they will continue.

Memories are made of this ....

Laurieston Hall 1977: an extraordinary mansion in Scotland, turned into a commune, where we ate rabbit food for a week and deposited in the toilets of England for a month afterwards ....

Holiday Fellowship Camp, Staithes, N Yorks coast 1978: wrapped in blankets in a terrapin hut watching Japanese peasants up to their necks in mud fighting Japanese police; outside our comrades wade knee deep in mud to the cold showers, fighting off the withering eyes of the mad methodists who run the place. "You have deceived me" says the mad methodist man at 12 o'clock one night, as we stand outside a hut in which a twelve year old is vomiting her fish fingers onto the floor, "I thought you were a bible reading group"....

Beechwood Hall, Leeds 1979: the relief of a place which is clean, comfortable and friendly, where they serve neither rabbit food nor school dinners, but a choice of meat or vegetarian, all wholesome and tasty (still the kids want sausages and beans). Donkey rides on the beach at Scarborough and Brenda eating her third wotile.....

So you want to come?

A good time is guaranteed, and we say that not as propagandists, but on the basis of four years research. The more you put in, the more you take out and if you have ideas about what you'd like to see happen at this year's Summer School, talk them over with friends and let the organising group know in good time. See you there ....

PS The "we" in this article is not the royal plural - I thought it was going to be a joint article with Steph Crook, but there were bits she would have put in (mainly about women) which I haven't mentioned, so she removed her name. So I carry the can for it all.