

I Have Come to Say You Goodbye

*A History of The School of English Studies, Folkestone
1959 - 2017*

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*I'm sad to say I'm on my way
Won't be back for many a day
My heart is down, my head is turning around
I had to leave a little girl in 'Folkestone' town*

*Sounds of laughter everywhere
And the dancing girls sway to and fro
I must declare my heart is there
Though I've been from Maine to Mexico*

The word 'Mexico' was sung with special emphasis by the Mexican students, while other nationalities substituted their own countries. The final song was always *Auld Lang Syne*. Everyone linked arms in a circle and when the singing stopped, the students collapsed, weeping into each other's arms. This formula was repeated at the end of every term and as a small child it mystified me. Why were these grown-ups crying when, just moments before, they had been singing with such joyful enthusiasm?

Another popular Option was 'Decorating-Flowergate-Common-Room-for-the-Friday-night-School-Party', although this was only an option three times a term. The SES dances were legendary but, as with everything Peter did, they weren't designed simply to be fun; they were also meant to teach students about English life and customs. In the early days of SES, when my parents were still renting Pembury Lodge from Mr. Boiardini, they would hire the ballrooms of once-grand hotels in town. My favourite was the Hotel Continental Wampach. Charles Constant Barthomu Wampach arrived in

Folkestone from his native Luxembourg in 1875 and worked as a chef in local hotels before taking the lease on 33 Castle Hill Avenue. The Wampach was the first hotel in the area to have electric lighting and was *extensively patronised by the nobility and gentry*. The building, which was eventually demolished in the 1980s, featured two brass lions that stood guard at the top of a flight of marble steps. It was the Venetian ballroom, however, with its alcoves and chandeliers, that was the Wampach's centrepiece, and it was in this room that our students danced to the music of Franki Valli and The Beach Boys in the early 1960s.

Once we moved to Grimston Gardens in 1963, the dances were held in Flowergate, where we had our very own oak-panelled ballroom, otherwise known as The Common Room. Everyone was invited – General and Keyman course students and their host families, the teaching, office and maintenance staff and their families. Those aged sixteen and under had a 9pm curfew. On arrival, guests were greeted by Mrs O'Connell, who sat behind the Reception desk in the hall, ladling punch from a bowl. The recipe was Mr. O'Connell's own and consisted of white wine, lemonade, soda and a generous slosh of brandy. At eight o'clock, Peter and Lea would climb the oak staircase to the landing, from where they greeted their guests and declared the dance floor open. Ladies were reminded that stilettos were not permitted in the Common Room because they ruined the oak floors and smoking was forbidden anywhere but in the bar area. David Milne, as Master of Ceremonies, always began the evening with a *Snowball* dance. He invited a single couple onto the dance floor and, after 30 seconds, the music stopped and each person would choose a new partner from those standing in the circle.

The cycle continued and one couple became two became four became eight. The *Snowball* offered a swift and easy passage from the punch bowl to the dance floor and provided shyer students with an opportunity to dance alongside more confident ones. The *Ladies Excuse Me* was also popular, for the same reasons.

In 1970, John Buss took over the role of in-house DJ. A man with an encyclopaedic knowledge of popular music, he was uniquely qualified for the position. In 1973 he managed to convince Peter to upgrade from a small gramophone to a more sophisticated sound system, which included speakers and twin turntables. John recalls that he was free to play any discs of his choosing during the course of the evening, but always felt obliged to indulge Peter in his request for Acker Bilk's *Stranger on the Shore* as the last dance. Like Dad, I loved this song. I was fascinated by the Moon Landings and the crew of Apollo 10 had chosen this piece when they went to the moon. The haunting, mournful sound of Bilk's clarinet will always remind me of being a teenager in the 1970s and the inevitable departure of yet another young man with whom I had fallen in love. By sleuthing my way through nominal roles and class lists, I could discover a boy's age, his nationality and the name and address of his host family. I would then adapt my own story and age accordingly, never of course disclosing that I was the boss's daughter. Sometimes I told a boy I was Swiss and sometimes I chose not to contradict his assumption that I was the daughter of a host family.

My father imposed certain ground rules on the dance floor and would patrol the room to ensure that they were being adhered to: girls were not permitted to dance together and physical contact between couples was limited to shoulders and

waists. If a boy and a girl breached this rule, Mr O'Connell would intervene with a tap on the young man's shoulder, a habit I found increasingly embarrassing as I got older. Once I was no longer included in the 9pm watershed, my father taught me an important lesson. He explained that I didn't have to dance with everyone who asked me. However, if an elderly Frenchman invited me onto the dance floor and I said no, I could not then say yes to a handsome young Dutchman. The solution was to accept the Frenchman and then excuse myself after one dance so as to be available for the Dutchman. It was a diplomatic strategy and ensured that, as a family, we were never accused of favouring one nationality over another. My own game plan was to navigate a path that ensured I was dancing with my favourite young man for the final three songs of the evening. These were always slow numbers and generally included Herb Alpert's *This Guy's in Love with You*. My enduring hope was that the song would inspire Robert or Carlo or Gert Jan to whisper something similar in my ear, always assuming, of course, that Mr. O'Connell was either on the other side of the room or enjoying a glass of wine in the bar.

The singles, purchased over the years from Folkestone Records, were catalogued and stored in long, wooden boxes in the Linen Press, a behemoth we had inherited from Mr. Edlin. On closing the enormous double doors, you could hear and feel the pressure of air being expelled. Moths had no chance. I used to imagine that, just like Lucy in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, I could pass through the back of the Linen Press and step into a snowy forest, reminiscent of our winter holidays in Switzerland, where Mr. Tumnus would be waiting for me by the lamp post and take me home for tea. In 2017,

The School of English Studies relocated to Oxford and I had no choice but to sell the larger pieces of furniture. As I watched two men from Folkestone Auction Galleries begin the process of dismantling the huge wardrobe, I had a sudden change of heart. I had been told that the piece was worthless, but might sell for £20 to the right person. At the last minute, I decided to keep it. The Linen Press will remain where it is, at least for as long as Flowergate is part of my family.

The record collection of 1,700 discs, however, did go to auction and a few weeks later, I received an email from Joy Pascoe, who had also DJed at SES:

I got them! It was the only bid fight of the afternoon and the elderly couple bidding against me got rather cross. When I went to pay, the man's wife accosted me.

Wife: Why did you want them?

Joy: I wanted them because I used to DJ with them and I couldn't face the idea of them disappearing.

Wife: We were here for over an hour and that record collection was all we wanted.

Joy: I was here for over two hours and that record collection was all I wanted.

Wife: So, what are you going to do with it?

Joy: I don't know. Treasure it and remember the good times I had DJing at The School of English Studies.

Wife: Well, we would have enjoyed it more than you.

A few months later, Joy wrote to me: *Having these records has made me even more aware of how much SES meant to me.*

Joy's parents lived in Cornwall and whenever they visited her

in Folkestone, Peter would invite them to the school dances. *He treated them like visiting royalty*, Joy recalled. *They were thrilled with him and fascinated to mix with so many foreigners. One group of Japanese students subsequently visited my parents for afternoon tea at their home in Falmouth. In those years, few foreign tourists travelled as far as Cornwall, so the neighbours were very impressed.* Mr. and Mrs. Pascoe acquired the reputation of being highly sophisticated and international people.

The school dances had seasonal themes, and offered students, especially those from non-European cultures, an insight into British life and customs. There was the Valentine's Day dance, the Easter Bonnet parade and the Halloween fancy dress party, which included apple bobbing. Those who had made hats and costumes got dressed on the first floor and, when the emcee called their names, they would walk slowly down the sweeping staircase to be admired and clapped by the crowd standing in the hallway. Prize winners received a book token and an enthusiastic round of applause. The jewel in the crown, however, was the Christmas party. My mother always insisted on a live tree that stood tall and proud in the entrance hall of Flowergate. She considered the English custom of tinsel and electric lights to be the height of bad taste and her tree, which stood at least ten feet tall, was always beautifully decorated with real candles and red and gold Christmas ornaments brought over from Switzerland. Following the traditional glass of punch, Lea would ceremoniously strike the first match to light the candles on the Christmas tree. This invariably created a moment of visible discomfort amongst those, primarily my father, who harboured grave concerns about live flames in oak-panelled

rooms filled with large numbers of people. However, as long as my mother was at SES, the tradition continued and no amount of talk about fire risks could persuade her to abandon it. One year, my mother's clothes did catch fire while she was lighting the candles on our family tree but fortunately my father was right there and he put out the small fire with a fire extinguisher. The Swiss students, in particular, loved the *Weihnachtsbaum* and, as they prepared to return home, either for Christmas or for good, it must have reminded them of the things they cherished about Switzerland, alongside all the things they would miss about Folkestone and the School of English Studies. Once the candles were burning, the lights were switched off and we all sang Christmas carols, the words to which were displayed on the wall by David Milne with his slide projector.

When the students tired of dancing and for those who had little interest in the Beatles or the twist, there was the under-whelmingly named Room One, where guests could enjoy a drink and practise their English conversation skills. Room One is in fact a very handsome room leading into a pretty Victorian conservatory with black and white floor tiles. For more than twenty years, wine and beer were sold at cost price from a makeshift bar. It was not until the 1980s that Tony Denne, a newly-qualified teacher and former solicitor, pointed out that we didn't have an alcohol licence and were thus breaking the law. As we lived in a residential area, it was clear that the Council would never grant us such a licence, so Peter hastily introduced a voucher system. Students would henceforth receive coupons, entitling them to two alcoholic drinks on the house; after this they would be offered coca cola, lemonade and orange juice.

This was an expensive solution for the school but it avoided the need to go teetotal at parties. The 'Free Alcoholic Drinks' policy, rather like the move from Options to Electives, did not transition without some difficulty. The Arab students, whose religion did not permit them to drink alcohol, either gifted their vouchers to non-Islamic friends, or cashed in their complimentary tickets on the basis of *When in Rome* This had unfortunate consequences. As I recall, behaviour was more gracious when students had to pay for their own drinks than when SES was footing the bill. From a young age, barely in double figures, our two daughters, Polly and Lucy, loved to help behind the bar, pouring glasses of wine and cracking the caps off beer bottles. I suspect this practice of eleven and twelve-year-olds serving alcohol to adults would have been a further liability had there ever been a police raid on Flowergate.

When the clock struck eleven, the party was over and Mr. and Mrs. O'Connell took their places by the front door to shake the hands of all the guests as they left the building. Dad told me that he had learnt this custom in America. When he was a dorm master at Groton School in Massachusetts, the boys lined up each night to shake his hand before going to bed. I visited Groton in 2017 and when I said goodbye to the Headmaster, I reached out to shake his hand. He was delighted but surprised and made the observation that few people these days practise the art of hand-shaking. I told him I had learnt it from my father, who had learnt it at Groton in the 1950s.

In the early days of SES, Peter's memory was impeccable and he knew the name of every student in the school. 'Goodnight Agnieszka. Goodnight Guadalupe. Goodnight Majid'. No one could duck out of the O'Connell farewell and the rogue and

the ignorant were politely, but firmly, sent to the back of the queue. Even I had to shake my father's hand and wish him goodnight. Embarrassingly, he would then ask me where I was going and when I was coming home. This tended to blow my cover, so Dad agreed that he and I would negotiate the answer to these questions under less exposing circumstances.

11 pm was of course far too early to go home to bed, and students, chattering like noisy starlings, would head through town and down to the harbour where the party continued at La Gruta Restaurant. La Gruta was in the basement of the Gran Canaria hotel on Marine Parade and wasn't in fact a restaurant at all. Like the School of English Studies, La Gruta had managed to circumvent the law by offering each guest a free bowl of spaghetti. This successfully transformed what was essentially a dance hall into a restaurant. As far as I know, few people cashed in their pasta vouchers but at least the owner could be confident that his legal bases were covered.