

## The 21st Century

Andy Schofield first came to Varndean, from Falmer School, in 1996 as second Deputy Head, following Tony Garwood's appointment as Head of Marina High (of which, more later). Like Pam Bowmaker, he was a Geographer. He wrote regularly, both for the TES (Times Educational Supplement) and, maybe more unexpectedly, for Brighton & Hove Albion's Magazine. Indeed, we soon learnt of his passion for football, especially for his home team, Manchester City, and his adopted side 'The Seagulls', but also for the staff football team! Was it just coincidence that the popular 'Fantasy Football League' "kicked off" soon after his arrival?

When Pam made the decision to move on, Andy applied for and was appointed to the vacant post.

His Headship was marked by three major issues - achieving specialist status, PFI, and the fight to help CoMART. The latter two moves were certainly controversial, but Andy did not hesitate to put his head above the parapet and be counted. He left in 2008 to become firstly Principal of the newly formed Wellington Academy and now Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Winchester. Mark Whitby, Head of ACE (The Alternative Centre for Education), became Interim Head until a permanent appointment could be made.

In January, 2009, Varndean welcomed William Deighan, who came from a deputy headship in London, not to mention an earlier career as an opera singer and horn player with many prestigious companies and orchestras.

### **Technology College Status...etc.**

Varndean began its bid for Technology College status in 1997 and achieved it the following year. The chief architect within the school was...Andy Schofield! The school had had to produce a plan and secure business sponsorship. This released a package worth half a million pounds over 3 years. A further boost came from Capital Challenge Funding, won by the Council, enabling them to install a high speed network for the schools in their area. Benefits soon began to be reaped as it had a major impact on the development of the school, especially, but not solely, for I.T.

We last encountered I.T. before the millennium with just one classroom! Now the library was extended to take 14 computers and the I.T. department moved next door. Over the following years, several computer suites were developed, culminating in the adaptable teaching spaces on the ground floor of the new library, opened in 2008.

Two other areas particularly benefitting were Maths and Science, both getting new equipment, extra staff and, in the case of Maths, more workstations. To help numeracy and literacy, a software package called 'Successmaker' was introduced for use by small groups of Year 7.

The increasing use of computers also meant an internet policy was needed on the proper use of email and the internet.

One requirement of TC status was that links were forged with local schools and the wider community. A couple of examples will have to suffice. Improved IT facilities were used to help local primary Schools, including Balfour, Downs and Hertford. IT courses were provided for parents in the evening and an Internet Café ran on Monday evenings. (Remember, this was before the majority had a home computer.)

Another benefit of the new status was the setting up, by two former teachers, John Burton and Andy Leggett, of Varndean E-Learning in partnership with the school. The company produced and sold I.T. courses, especially for GNVQ, to hundreds of other schools. Originally based in and paying a portion of the profits to the school, the company eventually went its own way.

Far from resting on its laurels, Varndean looked for other ways to improve and to contribute to the education scene. Beacon School status - incidentally, the only school in the authority achieving this at the time - granted in 2000/1, gave extra funding of £39,000 a year to work in partnership with underachieving schools. Varndean began working with Portslade Community College. The Governors' report for 2002 noted that a DfES official had written this project up as "a case study of good practice for their website". A few months later, there was even a visit from a Russian delegation, including two Ministers for Education, to examine the scheme.

'Leading Edge' replaced Beacon Status in 2003 but membership was not automatically transferred. 500 schools applied nationally. Varndean was one of only 103 who succeeded. This brought in £60,000 a year for 3 years to develop innovative ideas in teaching and learning with in the school and with others, including contacts at Sussex University

The scheme, now called the Specialist Schools Programme, offered 10 other areas where 'curriculum excellence' could be achieved. Varndean went on to gain two of these - Music in 2006 and Applied Learning the following year. As a result of the former, the Music department was able to get a £60 thousand upgrade of equipment. It also allowed the development of partnerships, locally and internationally, with Red Zebra and Bellville School, of which more later.

These laurels, once achieved, cannot be 'rested on'. Varndean, like all the other schools, has had to reapply for these designations every few years and has been successful.

Technology College Status and Beacon College status allowed Varndean to work with other schools too. Varndean was already supporting Falmer School as part of the East Brighton Action Zone (EAZ), set up in 1998. Falmer's results rose by 7% in 2002, partly because some senior students were taught an I.T. GNVQ course once a week using Varndean's new facilities. By this time, discussions were under way to offer similar assistance to CoMART (East Brighton College of Media Arts). The scheme was re-created in 2004 as an 'Excellence Cluster' forming part of the 'Excellence in Cities' programme, which had to include a Beacon School.

Over the decade, Varndean had also been awarded 'Investors in People' status (2002); become a 'Healthy Eating School' (2007) and risen through the levels of Artsmark to achieve Gold level (2008) for the outstanding nature of Art, Dance, Drama and Music in the school and a Green Flag gold status Eco-School.

### **The SAGA of PFI**

PFI (Private Finance Initiative) seemed an excellent idea at the start of the millennium and was strongly promoted by Government. Private firms would invest money in schools to provide new and update old buildings and facilities which the local authority couldn't possibly afford to do. In return they got a 25 year contract allowing them to earn income from maintenance

and lettings. Any scheme would also attract regeneration cash from central funds. In Brighton, 4 secondary schools (Varndean, Dorothy Stringer, Patcham High and CoMart) were to join in a consortium. After extensive discussions with the LEA, the Governors reported that they “had not seen anything in the plans that would not make us want to be a part of the LEA’s PFI venture.” By 2002, Jarvis Construction UK had been awarded the contract; attracting £27 million Government funding towards an estimated spend of £105 million. Construction soon began at all the schools. In Varndean’s case, this was to be mainly for refurbishment of some parts of the building and a new extension providing Drama and Technology rooms. Jarvis’s Chief Executive commented that “This partnership is an example of how our projects bring value for money to the community as a whole”. The Drama department was not so sure when they took delivery of rooms with no furniture, so had to construct this from scratch themselves!

This is not the place to discuss the pros and cons of PFI or to look at what was happening at other schools. Suffice it to say that the first hint of trouble at Varndean came when construction work was 6 weeks late starting. By the beginning of the Autumn term, 2002, building work was still unfinished. Andy Schofield had no choice but to postpone the new term, despite realising the problems this would cause parents, commenting that “We do expect a professional service. I am not supposed to be spending all day walking around a building site”. The new buildings did finally arrive, but quality had suffered and several rooms, as we have seen, had not got the promised equipment. The latter was partly due to the Council negotiating away equipment to bring the project in on budget after Jarvis had underestimated the cost.

By October, the school had “that awful sinking feeling” that the project was not going to be a “happy experience”. The relationship between the school on one hand and Jarvis and the Council on the other began to deteriorate. Several Head Teachers felt that the Council was not being supportive. Indeed, at one point, the Council threatened to cut the school’s electricity off! It was not until the end of 2003 that the Council also began to express concern. Chief Executive, David Panter, apologised for the problems at the Year 11 Award Ceremony and promised to look into the debacle. Jarvis itself claimed it had gone beyond its obligations in putting a roof on Varndean’s (phantom) swimming pool!

In January 2003, Jarvis had also taken over management of the facilities including caretaking, cleaning and canteen provision as well as Health and Safety. Cleaning was inadequate, despite a monthly bill of £28000. Requests for caretakers to do jobs took two phone calls - to the Jarvis Help Desk and from there to the caretaker - even if the caretaker was standing next to the work!

The problems with PFI and, specifically, with Jarvis, were now being felt nationwide. Brighton’s experience was often cited in local and national newspapers, radio and TV, with Andy Schofield making clear the frustrations, describing the situation to BBC South East with words like “shabby, filthy” and “outdated”. Jarvis, itself, was now in trouble, having lost £283 million, and, in 2004, sold its contract on to SMIF who promised “to transform the way the schools were run”. Unfortunately, they proved reluctant to spend money on development. Furthermore, Jarvis still continued to provide the actual services.

The situation then began to seem more promising with pressure on SMIF to improve and an agreement to pay compensation of around half a million

pounds to the schools involved. But, at this point, SMIF sold out to Land Securities Trillium, who demanded the compensation figures be checked. An independent auditor ruled that nearly half the award had been given 'incorrectly' and ordered that the money, which the Council had already passed to the schools, should be repaid. Andy commented "This situation is just so depressing - it's so bad it defies description."

To bring the story up to date - in 2009, Land Securities sold the Trillium branch of their business to Telereal to form Telereal Trillium, now called Semperian. However, for the purposes of their contract with Brighton & Hove Council, they are known as Brighton & Hove School Services. Jarvis were then contracted to run the PFI contract on Semperian's behalf. When Jarvis went bankrupt in March 2010, Semperian decided to run the contract themselves directly. They still own the lease on the land, which will expire in 2027. Semperian are in the process of forming an arm's length company so the division that is running the contract is distinct in financial terms from the parent company.

However, following extensive negotiations between the Council, the schools, Semperian and Jarvis, it was agreed that the 'soft services' would come back in house - essentially cleaning, catering, caretaking and grounds maintenance. Therefore, the PFI contract now only includes buildings maintenance and is about 25% of what it was previously.

### **CoMART**

The schools of East Brighton had long suffered from serious problems, not least their low examination success rate when contrasted with other local schools. One aspect of Technology College and Beacon/Leading Edge status, as we have seen, has been to front projects with other schools so they could also benefit from Varndean's improved facilities. This responsibility was put to the test with the saga of CoMART.

CoMART's troubled journey from Stanley Deason School via Marina High need not be charted here. Many solutions were tried to help this failing school, but to little avail. The Council eventually started to consider closing the school, despite this entailing a compensation payout of £4.5 million to Jarvis for ending the PFI contract. Key Varndean staff spent time teaching English and Media Studies at CoMART. From Autumn 2003, Karen Lees, one of Varndean's Deputy Head Teachers, was seconded there as the on-site Head of Education, working under the overall supervision of Mark Whitby, Head of ACE. Some upper school students also came to Varndean for English and IT lessons. This was seen as part of a 2 year programme to improve results. That plan was a success in that CoMART had its best ever results in 2005. 43% of the final Year 11 gained 5 or more A\* - C grades, which was an improvement of 300%, making it 7<sup>th</sup> out of the 10 B & H comprehensives and making it possibly the most improved school in the country. But, by then, it was too late as the decision had been taken the previous year to finally close it. Andy Schofield was the only Head to speak out against this. The aim now was to ensure a smooth transition for existing pupils as they were absorbed into other schools. Year 9 students started at Varndean, Longhill and Hove Park in the May half-term of 2004 so they would be settled in before the start of their GCSE courses. Here, they formed a complete class, with David Fouracre, one of the teachers who had taken lessons at CoMART, as a form tutor.

Perhaps this is the moment to pay tribute to Karen Lees (Deputy Head 2000 - 2007), an outstandingly gifted teacher, whose premature death in 2007

robbed education of a great talent. The celebration of her life in Rottingdean Parish Church was literally 'standing room only'.

### **Structure of the Day and Subjects**

Mr Schofield was determined to make Varndean a 'vibrant learning community' as OFSTED would recognise in 2007. VS2002-5 Innovation Strategy had been set up to achieve this by deploying strategies designed to motivate and engage students so they developed as independent learners. It led to several changes, beginning with Year 7 in 2002. The introduction of 2 hour lessons intended to allow in-depth study with the added bonus of reducing movement around the building. Other initiatives were an 8 week modular system for the Humanities, Performing Arts and Art, and the new lesson of Independent Learning, designed to explore topics across the curriculum. Assemblies and Tutor time (including Friday 1:1 and 1:7 sessions between the Form Tutor and students to look at progress in more depth, with the other students allowed to leave early) were moved to the end of the school day and times adjusted accordingly. To facilitate the new atmosphere, lesson bells were abolished.

This system was reviewed the following year and changes were made including replacing Independent Learning with longer homework assignments. The strategy was then rolled out across the entire school with the introduction of 100 min lessons for all and the extension of the Module system to Years 8 & 9. 'The sound of silence' mainly stayed, except for three warning bells. Tutor time and Assemblies, however, reverted to the start of the morning, although the staggered Friday afternoon finish stayed for a little longer. The end of the school day was moved back by 5 minutes to 3.05.

One of William Deighan's first innovations was to introduce the 'long winter term' from November 2009 until February 2010. This aims to ensure learning continues without the usual winding down at Christmas followed by an uphill struggle in January. Staff plan units of study across the holiday so that "assessment and review are the themes that sandwich the Christmas break".

2010 - 2011 heralded a move from three 100 minute lessons to a more flexible combination of this and six 50 minute lessons in a weekly timetable. Practical subjects can still benefit from the longer lessons, whilst those, such as Languages, can follow 'best practice' for them of shorter but more frequent learning sessions. Key Stage 3, traditionally Years 7 to 9, will now end after Year 8. Many students will now be able to forge ahead with their GCSE subjects much earlier and loss of enthusiasm will be reduced. There is also greater flexibility for extra Literacy and Numeracy training where needed.

Subjects continue to work hard to bring content up-to-date and make it more relevant to today's needs. To take Humanities as an example; History has embraced many more 20<sup>th</sup> century topics, such as The First World War, including the role of Indian soldiers and their connections with Brighton; 20th century dictatorships, the suffragette movements; WW2 and the effects on Brighton; the Holocaust and the War on terror. Geography has focused more on environmental issues across the globe like Climate Change and energy consumption; water resources; household consumption and recycling; deforestation and sustainability. New Options have been introduced at Exam level such as Media Studies; Psychology & Philosophy, BTECs in P.E. & Dance, not to mention work related courses.

Innovations have come particularly in the form vocational studies. A GNVQ course in I.T., starting in Year 7, was introduced. A later introduction was the Diploma, where Varndean worked with other local educational establishments to address future needs for skilled workers and deal with the city's, 'rocketing teenage drop-out rate'. Its fate, under a new government, was sealed! Starting in 2015, students have completed the European Driving Licence to secure another level 2 qualification to prepare them for their future.

An exciting initiative is the introduction of Year 7 'Specialist Schools' which will see the year group pursuing a personal area of interest for one afternoon a week. The four themes will be Creativity (e.g. writing, food); Leadership (sport); Discovery (e.g. maths, science and astronomy) and Expression (performing arts, ceramics).

### **Examinations**

The publication of examination tables became increasingly widely used in the new millennium. Target setting was, perhaps, the main trend of this time. SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-related) targets were set by discussion between students, teachers and (via Student Review Days from 2002 onwards) parents. These were then recorded in student planners. Results were now also interpreted in terms of Value - added to show progress from the ages of 11 to 14 and then from there to GCSE. This made Varndean 85<sup>th</sup> out of 3000 schools nationally in 2003. Maybe this is why the BBC chose the school for its Breakfast and News programmes on results day that year! Varndean's results remained good and, sometimes, were outstanding. Another benchmark was the use of the strangely named Fischer Family Trust Data, to inform staff about how well their students were performing so they could then take appropriate action, if required. In 2006, Varndean came top out of all the Brighton and Hove Comprehensive schools.

### **Inspections**

As the 2001 Inspection loomed, the Governors reviewed progress since the previous one. They were confident that the issues identified at the time had now been met. But they were aware of new challenges surrounding the structure and content of the curriculum; the monitoring of teaching and learning and the issue of underachievement by girls (counter to the national trend).

The Inspection found a "very good school with standards well above average". Only 3 action points were made, the most significant of which was the greater use of student data to set whole school targets, an issue we have already noted has been and continues to be addressed. OFSTED's Annual Report listed Varndean as one of only 82 outstanding secondary schools in the country inspected in the previous year. Mr Scofield was invited to a reception hosted by the Prince of Wales at Highgrove to celebrate successful schools. The Parent/Carer Newsletter reported that, "the Prince of Wales was engaged in conversation by the Headteacher on the subject of hostas, slugs and the general unpleasantness of the grey squirrel."

Move on 6 years and the next Inspection was due. Varndean received an overall "good" grade. It was described as "a good school which provides value for money. It is a vibrant learning community, eager to embrace innovation and change to reach its goals".

By now, the long drawn out inspection process had been replaced with a shorter, sharper version with only minimal notice being given. Whether this was better or worse for the nerves is a matter of individual opinion!

One of Mr Deighan's early challenges was to lead the school through the October 2009 Inspection. Although only 6 inspectors came for 2 days, this was one of the first inspections under the recently tightened up rules, so no one was quite sure what to expect. In the event, Varndean did well, being categorised as a "Good school with outstanding features". The lead inspector wrote to all students explaining the recommendations for 'continuing improvement':

"We have asked your headteacher to make sure that:

- all teaching is as good as the best, with all teachers expecting high standards from you and teaching in a way that helps each of you fulfil your potential, whatever your style of learning
- marking of work balances encouragement with guidance on how to improve.

You can help by doing your best not to miss days at school and being punctual to lessons."

### **Links with Other Schools**

If the 1990s had been the time of Romania, the 'noughties' saw a new and exciting link with South Africa, newly emerged from apartheid. In 2003, two staff visited Cape Town: Andy Schofield went as part of a Specialist Schools Trust delegation looking at putting IT into township schools; Robbie Mitchell (Head of Performing Arts) was taking part in the 'Dance for Life' project with Red Zebra to fight the AIDS epidemic in Africa. One result was a link with Bellville High School. Situated in an industrial suburb of Cape Town, the school took the majority of its intake from the nearby black township and was, perhaps unsurprisingly, given South Africa's history, run down and lacking facilities we take for granted. Various staff visited over the next year, including Robbie spending a term on secondment to the school. Money for equipment was also provided. The Head Teacher of Bellville, Mr Fester, visited Varndean in 2006. Sadly, the link petered out, despite the best efforts of Varndean and Robbie in particular.

Overseas links, a Varndean tradition down the years, have continued in other ways. The Fiankoma Project, launched in 2004, was a 3 year project linking schools in this country with those in Ghana through use of media, such as video conferencing. The then Education Secretary, Charles Clarke, came to see the Teacher Project, shared by Varndean, Hove Park and Patcham Schools. Students have visited from various countries, including Japan, China and France.

### **Charities and Community Service**

Raising money, helping the community and understanding the problems of poverty have had an even higher profile in this most recent decade. If we look at events in 2003, we have the long-running Elderly People's Tea Party, Jeans for Genes Day, Children in Need, Comic Relief and Race for Life. There was an emphasis on third world development, starting with support for Belleville and participation in the 'Dance for Life' project. Varndean joined wider efforts (which including support from Lenny Henry) to help one of our cleaning staff, Zen Getachew, raise £4000 to provide a water supply for her village, Cherye Ager, in Ethiopia.

A new, if sad tradition also developed as Varndean raised money to support and later commemorate one of its own students. Josh James developed a very rare form of cancer. Money was needed to send him to the USA for a specific treatment. £12000 was collected in a variety of ways by the school and the local community. He even got a hug from Katie Price (Jordan)! Sadly, before treatment could begin, Josh died in August 2004, just after his 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. Varndean held a fundraising afternoon the following summer, which has become a regular feature of the calendar. The first was attended by celebrity Zoe Ball, who had got to know Josh during his illness. Money has since been donated to cancer charities and also to Hurstwood Park Hospital in memory of another ex-student, Max Weston, who died from head injuries in 2007.

Since 2010, CHOCS (Children Helping Other Children Smile) has been the in-house organisation deciding which charities to support and how best to raise money. Support has gone to such organisations as Shika, which aims to create opportunities for the poorest people in Tanzania through education, Afrikids and CCHF (Children's Country Holidays Fund), which provides holidays for deprived children in Britain. With the introduction of the four school system, each school now selects a charity to support annually and has its own student charity committee leading their fundraising initiatives.

### **Student Participation**

The new millennium brought greater student control to the School Council. Form groups were allocated time in their PSE lessons for a Class Council. Issues of concern were discussed and taken by two representatives to Year Councils, now run by prefects, instead of teachers. Here, two items were chosen to be taken to the renamed Student Council by four democratically elected students from each year group.

This structure proved too cumbersome and led to an overlap of issues being put forward. 2003 therefore saw a major overhaul of the system. In place of the Year Councils, three sub-committees, each run by two senior students, were set up - on Curriculum, School Ethos and the Environment. The aims, apart from greater efficiency, were "to make the council more student-focused and lead it to be more involved in the decision making and evaluation of the school." One success, after many years of Council pressure, was the introduction of the new, supervised toilet block in 2005. The Council had been consulted over the design and colour scheme ("a complementary mix of blues and greens...with chrome fittings....clean, fresh and calm to visit"). Despite all the good will, the Council began to flag and a new start was needed.

Autumn 2009 saw the launch of the Student Cabinet.

This comprises a group of elected students, four from each year group, representing the student body. It is run like the government cabinet, so, as well as being a whole group, there are smaller offices such as The Office of Justice. Elected students are attached to the office they think they can best contribute to.

A further pioneering move was the involvement of students on the Governing Body. Students, usually from the Council, had been welcomed as observers for several years. In 2003, the law finally changed to allow students to be Associate Governors, but without financial responsibilities or the right to vote. Varndean immediately took advantage of this, being the first school nationally to adopt this. The Governors' report of 2004 lists the seven students taking on that role. The Governing Body stated it was "keen

to build a wholly inclusive school community and our students have much to contribute in helping us to achieve this goal”.

There are also two student associates on both the student management and quality and standards committee.

In 2011, candidates had to make a one minute film, which is then shown to all students before they vote. The Prefect system has continued under the title ‘Senior Students’. The selection process is now closely akin to a job application in later life, aimed at choosing the best candidates. Interested Year 10 students have to apply in writing. Moving one step further up to the school officials (Head Boy and Girl, Deputy Head Boy and Girl), interviews were held before the successful candidates were selected. These are very responsible jobs, not only representing the entire school, but also managing up to 80 senior students. This academic year (2015-16), a new role of Student Headteacher was introduced for a candidate who showed an outstanding performance in the interview process.

### **Houses and Schools**

At the start of the academic year 2009, Varndean reintroduced the house system, last used in 1966. The concept is that smaller units are better able to cope within a larger school, containing a wide range of abilities and needs. Instead of 6 ‘forests’, 4 dolphins were used - Boto, Irrawaddy, Risso, Tucuxi, each with its own colour, Head of House (Staff) and House Captains (students). The impact was intensified from Autumn 2012 with the move to 4 schools, similar in size to a primary school, within the main school (Angelou - after American Civil Rights activist, writer and educator, Maya Angelou; Ellis - after the Head Teacher who moved Varndean to its current site, Miss Ellis; Russell - after the philosopher, Bertrand Russell; Turing - after the wartime Code Breaker, Alan Turing). Each has its own Head, under the overall control of William Deighan. Student leadership in each School is provided by a Head Boy and Girl, each with a Deputy.

### **Parent Staff Association**

As we have already seen, parents played a key role in many school developments. Money raise went to improve the school and to help the TC bid, to which they donated £19,000

### **PSA 2**

In 2000, the PSA became more informal and was renamed ‘The Friends of Varndean’. It still raised money to help the school, but it wasn’t the vibrant force it had been. This led some parents, especially those on the Governing Body, to press for a more formal PTA again. As a result, ‘Varndean Links’ was launched in 2007 as ‘a radical and new’ organisation. Its initial aim was to ‘provide workshops and invite guest speakers to address topics pertinent to secondary school students and those who care for or teach them’. An informal register of the various skills parents could offer the school was also planned. Since then, a wide variety of meetings has been held such as on exams, homework, Learning for Life Programme, the Health Drop-in Clinic and chances to talk with Heads of Department. Of course, these all sit alongside the traditional provision of refreshments!

### **In Conclusion**

We think of history as being in the past. However, it is always being created. Varndean’s history will continue to be made. In 25 years, hopefully another person will take on updating our story.