




# SUMMERHILL

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SINCE 1921



*“Summerhill is a real place, not a utopia. Living in a community of around one hundred people is not always easy. Everybody is learning about themselves, and on a bleak January day, with the east wind blowing, things are sometimes not wonderful! But Summerhill in summer time is lush, green and not unlike never-never land. It is more of a family or a tribe than a school – full of companionship, laughter and real feelings. For many Summerhill pupils it becomes the most meaningful experience in their lives.”*

*— Zoë Readhead, Principal of Summerhill*



1921–2021

# CELEBRATING A CENTURY

A.S. NEILL'S  
SUMMERHILL SCHOOL







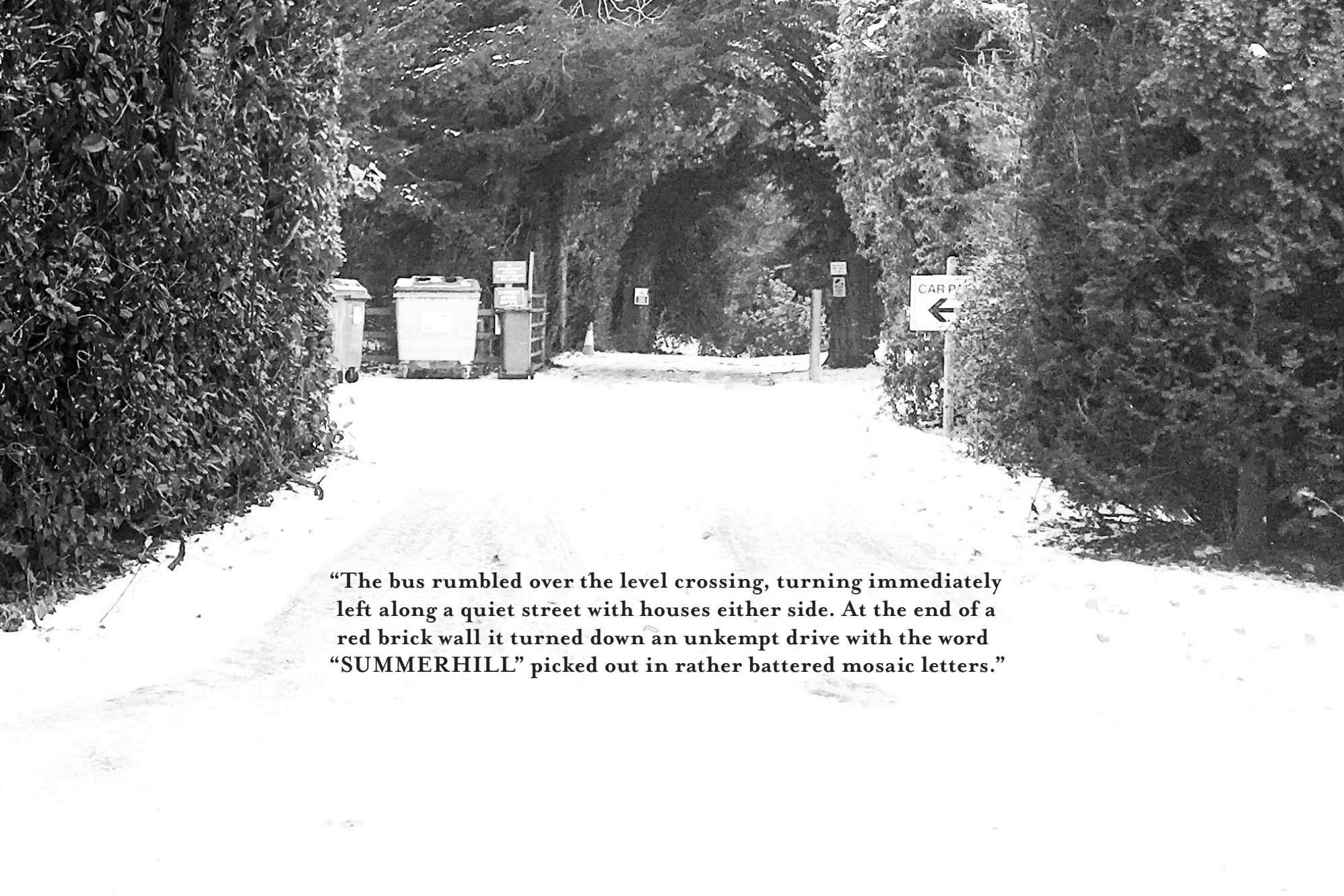


**BEWARE!  
CHILDREN  
PLAYING!**









**“The bus rumbled over the level crossing, turning immediately left along a quiet street with houses either side. At the end of a red brick wall it turned down an unkempt drive with the word “SUMMERHILL” picked out in rather battered mosaic letters.”**



# WELCOME

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Summerhill is as unlike a conventional school as it could possibly be. Founded one hundred years ago to provide a space where children can grow in a 'free-range' environment.

A.S.Neill, founder of Summerhill, set out to make a school that would fit the child rather than forcing pupils to do what parents and educators thought might be best for them.

# FREEDOM NOT LICENCE

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**“It must be emphasised again and again that freedom does not involve spoiling the child. If a baby of three wants to walk over the table, you simply tell him he must not. He must obey, that’s true. But on the other hand, you must obey when necessary. I get out of small children’s rooms if they tell me to get out”**

—*A.S.Neill*

A particular criteria for us at Summerhill in this modern age where both individuals and society as a whole very often refuse, or seem unable to take responsibility for their own actions, is to follow the basic philosophy which was one of the school’s founding principles. That is of **FREEDOM NOT LICENCE** – or freedom with responsibility.



Summerhill’s aim is to allow children to grow naturally, to experience personal freedom, to play and develop at their own pace and to go in their own direction whilst taking responsibility for their own actions and the community around them.



# SELF GOVERNMENT

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**“Self-government at Summerhill is a well-oiled machine, having been in operation since the school began in 1921. Each child coming into the school joins the machine and begins, from the first day, to learn the process of democracy and decision-making. This ensures that there is no sense of lawlessness or anarchy but a safe, structured environment governed by adults and children alike.”**

— *Zoë Readhead*

The school is democratic – each person having an equal vote in the school meetings and an equal right to be heard.

It is not unusual for this group of adults and children to make their

own rules and decisions. Three times a week the Summerhill community meets together for an hour to discuss issues, hear grievances and mete out sanctions (known to us as “fines”) to those who are “brought up”.

From this experience children learn to be self-confident, tolerant and considerate, being accustomed to hearing the other person’s point of view.







**“You cannot have freedom unless children feel completely free to govern their own social life”**

*—A.S.Neill*



# SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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**“Summerhill is a happy and caring environment, but it recognises the importance of expressing emotions and learning through feelings. There is a general openness and honesty among the community members”**

*— A.S. Neill, who believed Summerhill is the most sincere place in the world.*

By far the most important aspect of life at this remarkable school is that everybody lives together in a community of mixed ages, genders, personalities and nationalities. Most of the time we just get on with the daily life of running a community

with all the trials and tribulations that go with it. Almost all of the pupils and adults live in the school for three terms each year, though there are always a few ‘day’ pupils, usually in transition to boarding. Boarding at Summerhill is seen by the pupils

as a really positive thing. It gives them, not only ownership and a deep love for this community that will be with them for a lifetime, but also independence and possession over their own childhood.





**“You cannot have freedom unless children feel completely free to govern their own social life”**

*—A.S.Neill*





Living in an environment where everybody has equal status, and where honesty and open emotion are the everyday norm, pupils naturally acquire a high degree of emotional intelligence, or EQ, which is most sought after in many work environments. They leave the school with outstanding personal skills and the ability to communicate, negotiate and compromise, three important basics needed in life, whatever the road that is taken. As well as this, Summerhill pupils develop, through living in the community as they do, a powerful sense of understanding and compassion for the problems of others.

The weekly meetings enable them to appreciate the importance of themselves as individuals and how their involvement can impact upon the picture as a whole.









The adults in the community are, of course, in a caring role and take that responsibility very seriously – but work hard to ensure that it doesn't affect the equality in their relationships with the pupils. It is this real equality that assists the pupils in the development of their own self confidence and feeling of self-worth. Summerhill pupils interact with everybody as complete equals, whatever their backgrounds or role, while retaining the ability to listen and learn through honest, heartfelt discussion both among themselves and with the adults in the school.







# PLAY

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**“Arrive on any day at Summerhill and the first thing you will see are children playing. Spontaneous, wonderful play. They play indoors, they play outside, they play the right way up and they play upside-down. Some games are sensible and seem to have a point, some are totally silly in every way. Playing is what Summerhill children do, like kittens tumbling out of a box.”**

— *Zoë Readhead*

When you tell a visiting child the basics of Summerhill, the first thing they say is, “You mean I don’t have to go to lessons?” and then they run off and start playing...

Watching them, free-range children doing what children are supposed to do, is one of those

epiphany moments. The capacity for it and the need for the company of other children is amazing. How on earth do children in conventional situations ever manage to control this all-pervading, powerful urge?

At Summerhill, play belongs to the child. We do not dress up learning

situations so that the play will be ‘productive’, we do not look on and evaluate what they might learn from this or that game. Our children just play – and they can do it pretty well all day if they want to.





Of course sometimes things go wrong during play. Sometimes people get into conflict. This is part of being a child. There are structures in place that protect the rights of each of us and there are big kids or adults who

can help you out if needed. You are also encouraged to deal with a lot of it yourself. You cannot always have a 'nanny' to look after you and solve your problems in life.







Sometimes play can lead to other interests. You might start off by making a sword in the woodwork and then decide that you want to make something more... you may mess around on the old school piano and then find that you want to make music... you might help out with the Class One shop and find that you want to learn more Maths, or make a big bang in Science and then sign up for Biology. There are so many areas for inspiration and enjoyment.



That enjoyment will last you a lifetime – if you have never had bad experiences of learning, then you will become a lifelong learner and take joy in what you do.

Whichever way you look at it – at Summerhill, play means play and it belongs entirely to you.







# LEARNING

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**“Educating a child at Summerhill is a long-range project, and parents need to have great faith, not only in the school, but in their children. They must, of course, wholeheartedly believe in our system.”**

*— Ena Neill*

While Summerhill children have personal freedom to follow their own needs, a professional staff of around seventeen house-parents and teachers provide, what is in effect, a bespoke education. The pupils have absolute freedom to attend classes or not.

They can prepare for and sit GCSEs (the UK national examinations) or concentrate on other passions such as art, woodwork, science, music, or just play outside in the rain.

There is a conventional and accepted way that children throughout

the world are schooled. We all know this process for most of us have been in an ordinary school.

What we have discovered at Summerhill, over the last hundred or so years, is that learning need not work the way society expects it to work.



In conventional schools children enter at around five and spend every school day in class learning things until they take their exams or graduate

at sixteen. However, at Summerhill we see a different process. Although some children will follow a fairly conventional path, occasionally, some

do not attend classes for a very long time, so they can reach the age of twelve or thirteen with pretty minimal skills in a conventional sense.



*“My first encounter with most international students is more a game of charades than anything else but by the time they leave school, we know each other very well and we enjoy engaging in long conversations. It is that personal connection we develop over the years that makes my teaching experience at Summerhill so unique. Teaching English as an Additional Language (EAL) at Summerhill School turned out to be the most wonderful adventure of my life.”*

*— Szilvi (EAL Teacher)*

*“As an art teacher at Summerhill I have felt my own creativity enriched through collaboration with the community and this is by no means exclusive to lessons. I am privileged to work in a place that trusts me to try things out, to make mistakes, to be myself and to be genuine with the kids.”*

*— Lyndon (Art Teacher)*









*“Students are never forced into the classroom, and as such they are not places associated with coercion. Students, even those who have previously had a negative experience at other schools, come to see classrooms as positive places to explore a subject and learning in general rather than places to begrudge going to!”*

*— Owen (Music Teacher)*

At some stage, pupils will start to think about the future, about what they plan after Summerhill. They will stop wanting to play all day and start to get down to work. This is what we call self-motivation.

The moment when you realise that you have to get on and learn stuff if you want to know it. And this is the time that you figure out it is your own responsibility to learn, not for somebody to teach you.



It can be a difficult time at the start. Of course, in the school community you will have experienced compulsion in various ways. Things you can't do because they are against

the school laws, such as playing computer games before three in the afternoon.

Things you must do like getting up in the morning by 8:30 or going

to bed at bedtime. So the concept of having to do something is quite familiar. But having a schedule of classes takes a bit of getting used to.



*“Summerhill gives me the freedom to explore and develop my own interests in the Sciences, while also allowing me to deliver interesting and exciting science lessons outside of the constraints of the national curriculum.”*

*— James (Science Teacher)*

*“When you allow children of all ages to work at their own pace and explore the potential of Summerhill’s modern, well equipped workshops ... that’s when the magic happens!”*

*— Will (Wood and Metal Workshops)*





The main thing is that children DO get used to it, they DO learn, they DO pass exams, and the experience is an enriching one for them as they learn about their own ability to achieve for themselves and how to overcome difficulties with hard work and dedication. Naturally, there are some pupils who prefer not to go along the academic route but decide to do something else instead. As we have no criteria for success, all our pupils are valued equally, whatever their chosen path.

So, Summerhill is not just a great big play-pen. It is a planned and structured system which allows the children to be kittens while they are young and then gradually take an active part in both their community and in their own learning and preparation for life after school.

M. BERNAL 1932

# EX-PUPILS

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*“People always ask how former pupils get on. By getting on, I presume they mean, are they making money? Do they have a car? Are they keeping up with the Joneses, and all that? Why people are so concerned with this I’ll never really know. It is enough for me to get a child of ten who is filled with hate and fear and in five years to see him go away a happy and wonderful person. That is enough. I have no worries about that person in later years. So, three are university lecturers, one is a barber, two own pubs, one is a potter, some are engineers, a few are musicians, two are actresses, one is a ballet dancer, two are nationally known painters, one is a top poster illustrator in London, but so what? What is getting on? ... So far we have produced no geniuses. One book review said Summerhill children are not ambitious. It is possibly true. They’re not ambitious to make money, but they are ambitious at their own jobs, and that’s enough. They are not ambitious to own a big house or a Cadillac to impress people. They go far beyond that. And another thing they go far beyond is snobbery ... Free children have a scope that others do not possess.”*

— A.S. Neill

*“I firmly believe that Summerhill, a place where all ages interact, is a space for personal growth. I was able to experience much of the “independent life” at a young age; one of the greatest assets that a school can give.”*

— Pit

Michael Barth  
53-63  
3

*“I believe I gained an immeasurable amount of things from being a Summerhillian. Perhaps the most important ones I use every day are, empathy for anyone I meet, an ability to appreciate the magic of great friends and trees.”*

— Georgia

52

*“To be a student at Summerhill was more like joining a family than going to an educational facility. When a student wants to learn they learn at an incredible rate. The independence and communication skills that are the trademark of all Summerhillians is a personal pride of mine.”*

— Emile

F. Green  
45

# RHODA<sup>72-83</sup>

*“Summerhill connections will always run deeper. It’s a different kind of love and I can’t even describe it.”*

— Jasmine

*“Summerhill gives freedom and trusts pupils to make decisions for themselves instead of adults creating things for them. It didn’t give me pressure to conform to anyone’s ideas of growing up so I was constantly encouraged to do what I love doing and follow my inclinations.”*

— Yusuke

*“It was and always will be my favourite place on earth. It really fuelled my passion for music. I still think about Summerhill every day and I still love everyone there like they are family.”*

— Oscar

*“Summerhill taught me to be sensible, to think outside the box, to apply myself, and to respect myself and others. That’s why my life of total contradictions works so well. So, cheers, Summerhill!”*

— Rachel (Tink)

*“When you are allowed to be emotionally free and independent from the age of 6 rather than 18, in a safe and comfortable environment, it teaches you a profound understanding of the way you feel and how to react to that feeling in any given situation; essentially just the ability to take care of and understand yourself.”*

— Lasse

*“Without really dreaming of becoming a teacher, I have enrolled and almost completed my PGCE teacher training simply because I want to become a teacher like the ones at Summerhill — open minded, hard-working, passionate, honest, and down-to-earth.”*

— Pera

*“Having been granted the freedom to explore my creativity in and out of lessons during my time at Summerhill has permitted me to find my passion for filmmaking, and to ultimately end up getting into the university I’ve always hoped for. The social life and freedom of Summerhill has also helped me greatly in terms of adapting*

*to the bigger world, boosting my confidence, independence and attitude to the rather daunting adult life after it. And that’s not something most schools can prepare you for.”*

— John

*“Summerhill has taught me so much, being open to different opinions and how to look at myself objectively.”*

— Kanon

*“The friendships I made and the warm feeling I get from thinking back on some of the best years of my life truly make Summerhill a very special place to me personally and many of those who have also attended Summerhill School.”*

— Hil

*“I believe life at Summerhill made me a calm and unruffled optimist.”*

— Toshi

*“Summerhill is a place in the world where you can follow that little inspiring thought you had only two moments before and see that thought flourish into unexpected, but truly wonderful experiences.”*

— Surya

89-01  
Nathan.C.

JOSHUA 03 - 17

# THE EARLY DAYS

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Summerhill was founded in 1921 in Hellerau, a suburb of Dresden. It was part of an International school called the Neue Schule. There were wonderful facilities there and a lot of enthusiasm, but over the following months Neill became progressively less happy with the school. He felt it was run by idealists – they disapproved of tobacco, foxtrots and cinemas – while he wanted the children to live their own lives. He said:



“I am only just realising the absolute freedom of my scheme of Education. I see that all outside compulsion is wrong, that inner compulsion is the only value. And if Mary or David wants to laze about,

lazing about is the one thing necessary for their personalities at the moment. Every moment of a healthy child’s life is a working moment. A child has no time to sit down and laze. Lazing is abnormal, it is a recovery, and therefore it is necessary when it exists.”

Together with Frau Neustatter (later his first wife and known at Summerhill as Mrs Lins), Neill moved his school to Sonntagsberg in Austria. The setting was idyllic – a castle on top of a mountain – but the local people,

a Catholic community, were hostile.

By 1923 Neill had moved to the town of Lyme Regis in the south of England, to a house called Summerhill where he began with 5 pupils. The school continued there until 1927, when it moved to the present site at Leiston in the county of Suffolk, taking the name of Summerhill with

it. Neill continued to run the school with Mrs Lins who played a crucial role in both the formation and the running of Summerhill. She was a warm, outgoing, talented musician and teacher who also possessed



valuable practical and organisational skills. Her gregarious nature enabled her to protect Neill from the more unwelcome visitors the school attracted whilst her patience and kindness ensured that problems

presented by both children and staff were handled with tact and sureness. She had enormous respect for Neill as he had for her and she took over in Neill's absence. The war required evacuation of the Leiston house and the school moved to Ffestiniog in Wales. Mrs Lins became

ill, requiring constant nursing, and eventually died in April 1944. She was loved by many and sadly missed by Neill, whose tender obituary clearly revealed her importance to Neill himself and to Summerhill.



Neill later married a staff at the school, Ena Wooff – who had helped to nurse Mrs Lins as well as cooking and being a housemother at the school. After the war they returned to Leiston to a dilapidated Summerhill

which had been used by the army and left in a poor state. Neill referred to this for many years afterwards, having to put much work into restoring the buildings and cleaning them up.

The school continued to be

controversial, being depicted in the press as the “Do As You Please” school. Neill, however, did have the respect of many educationalists and well-known personalities such as, among others, Bertrand Russell and Henry Miller.

Pupil intake fluctuated over the years before taking a final dive in the late 50s. Things were looking black as the pupil numbers reached around 25. However, at that time Neill was approached by Harold Hart, a publisher from USA, who wanted to publish a compilation of Neill’s books. Together they put the book ‘Summerhill – a radical approach to childhood’, on the market. It was an instant hit in the USA rising to the number one non-fictional best seller nationally. It was soon published in UK and many other countries and things began to take a turn for the

better at Summerhill. Pupil numbers went up, many from the USA; interest in the school bloomed bringing in many visitors, to the dismay of the kids. At times there were coach loads. After a time both Neill and the community became tired of the attention and withdrew into a time of comparative quiet.

Neill lived out his days taking a less active part in the school but keeping in touch with what was going on. In 1973 his health declined and he was admitted to Ipswich Hospital. Later he was taken to the small local hospital where he died peacefully on

September 23rd 1973. Five days later the new term started at Summerhill with Ena Neill now officially the principal. In reality though, Ena had been running the school with Neill's blessing for about three years prior to Neill's



death. Those three years plus the fact that she had first come to work at Summerhill during the Second World War meant that she was more than qualified for the role. She clearly understood the difference between

freedom and licence and was always ready, if it was necessary, to make it clear to the kids in no uncertain terms what that difference was. Ena Neill presented a formidable figure but the tough exterior masked



a person with considerable compassion who was often called upon to be a mother to both kids and staff.

Ena had a practical 'no nonsense' approach to life and to the running of the school. She took over at a difficult time. The mid-seventies and early eighties were a period when the economies of the rich nations were in a recession. This, coupled with the fact that Neill's ideas were not as popular as they were in the 1960's meant that there were fewer students. It required a strong, determined person such as Ena to keep the school running through this difficult period.

Ena Neill continued to run the school until her retirement in 1985 when Neill and Ena's daughter Zoë, the current principal, took over.



## ZOË & TONY

Zoë Readhead, Neill's daughter who was born and educated at Summerhill, took over the running of the school in September 1985. It was a time when big changes were coming to the world of education; the founding of Ofsted in the UK in 1992 and a massive increase in government regulation being just one of many.

In addition, the world was about to witness a technological revolution in the form of the internet and in a comparatively short time the school went from having one television and one video player in 1985 to a school today where everybody carries around their own 'television and much more' in their back pocket!

Over the years Zoë has guided the school through these many changes, always staying faithful to

her father's vision laid down in the 1920's of creating a school that fits the child rather than making the child fit the school. This, together with her deep, innate understanding of



children and childhood has ensured that today, under her guidance, the school continues to thrive. Zoë is not only a mother to four children, a grandmother to four grandchildren

but also a 'mother' to every single child (and indeed member of staff) that has crossed Summerhill's threshold over the last thirty or more years.

If it has been Zoë's role to lead the school into the 21st century, it has been Tony Readhead, Zoë's husband, who has shouldered the burden of putting the school onto a firm financial footing to enable an infrastructure to be created which is worthy of the 21st century. It was a task which required Tony to utilise to the full his extensive business experience and his business acumen and, at the same time, continue to run and develop the family farm.

Together, Tony and Zoë have ensured that Summerhill School continues to be a source of inspiration to educators throughout the world.

## WILL & HENRY

Will and Henry Readhead are totally immersed in Summerhill and have been from a very young age. As sons of Zoë and Tony and grandsons of the founder of the school they were, like their older sister and younger brother, educated at Summerhill.

Today they co-lead the school community with Zoë and have their own particular areas of expertise, which they lead on in their own right.

Will is in charge of the busy and popular Woodwork and newly established Metalwork areas. Will is a very talented craftsman and his work

can be seen on [\(link to his web page\)](#). He also takes the lead on Health and Safety, liaising with outside agencies to ensure that the school meets the requirements of national legislation.



Henry is responsible for developing the bustling and vibrant music department, which offers a wide ranging provision of vocal, instrumental and

technological opportunities. He is also Summerhill's ambassador, spreading the Summerhill message nationally and internationally. Henry has spoken at conferences, given

lectures and led workshops in many places around the world.

With the support and energy generated by the third generation of

the family Summerhill continues to grow and develop. Building on its firm foundations and upholding its values yet meeting each new situation afresh and with an open mind.

# FURTHER INFORMATION

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## Books

Most of A.S.Neill's books are out of print but some can be obtained from libraries (in the UK) and also online. The best known is 'Summerhill – A Radical Approach to Childrearing'.

We strongly recommend the most recent book – 'Summerhill and A.S.Neill', published by Open University Press and Edited by Mark Vaughan.

## Contact

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If you are interested in visiting or if you are thinking of sending your child to the school, then please contact the office on +44(0)1728 830540 or [office@summerhillschool.co.uk](mailto:office@summerhillschool.co.uk)

The Summerhill Website has a lot of information about the school and its origins:

[www.summerhillschool.co.uk](http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk)

We are also very active on social media.

[fb.me/asneillsummerhillschool](https://fb.me/asneillsummerhillschool)

[instagram.com/Summerhill\\_School](https://instagram.com/Summerhill_School)

[youtube.com/fjshifugsidf??](https://youtube.com/fjshifugsidf??)

[fb.me/summerhillwoodwork??](https://fb.me/summerhillwoodwork??)

## **A.S.Neill Summerhill Trust**

The A.S.Neill Summerhill Trust is a registered charity (no. 1089804) whose purpose is to promote the educational philosophy, ideas, life and writings of A.S.Neill, and to provide bursaries or other forms of financial assistance to school pupils. For more information about the Trust, visit the Summerhill website.

## **100 Years of Summerhill**

In 2021 Summerhill School will be celebrating a century of life, a century of A.S.Neill's philosophy in practice. We intend to use 2021 as a global celebration of the inspirations A.S.Neill has given people within education, whatever their practice. If you have been inspired by A.S.Neill's writings and work and would like to be involved email us at: [100years@summerhillschool.co.uk](mailto:100years@summerhillschool.co.uk)

## **Credits**

Words: *Zoe Readhead.*

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SUMMERHILL



SUMMERHILL



SUMMERHILL

REMEMBER  
YOU  
PLEASE



LA  
ANGELES

Emmeline

1921  2021



**100** CELEBRATING  
A CENTURY  
OF A.S.NEILL'S  
SUMMERHILL  
SCHOOL

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**“The future of Summerhill itself may be of little import. But the Summerhill idea is of the greatest importance to humanity. New generations must be given the chance to grow in freedom. The bestowal of freedom is the bestowal of love. And only love can save the world”**

*— A.S. Neill — Founder of Summerhill School*





SUMMERHILL

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