

# Ashram Experience 2019

*Trevor Lewis*

For this year's Ashram Experience (formerly the Gandhi Summer School/ Gathering) we returned to the St Christopher School in Letchworth Garden City. Our accommodation is in the block that is usually occupied by the sixth-form students. As our numbers were reduced compared to previous years, partly due to last-minute cancellations and sickness, we had a wide choice of rooms, one or two of which have en suite bathrooms. Traditionally we daily take part in *shramadana*, in other words performing cleaning and cooking, and other tasks, for the benefit of the community. However as the school provides paid staff to do the cleaning, and there were no opportunities to do gardening, etc. we were left with meal preparation and washing-up as our only *shramadana* duties.

Often we have been fortunate to have among us someone skilled in demonstrating yoga, and so there has been an opportunity for people to have an early-morning session of communal yoga. Unfortunately this year we had no such person, so it was not available.

## **Morning Sessions**

In our first morning discussion session, i.e. on the Sunday, Graham Davey outlined changes in the UK and in the wider world that he would like to see, then we had a wide-ranging discussion on those topics, and they were added to by other participants. By general consensus we decided that the highest priority and most urgent topics were the reversal of processes that contribute to climate change and also the reduction in inequality both in the UK and across the world.

On the second day, Monday, our discussion started by considering three questions:

- i) can education bring about the change we want to see?
- ii) does education exist to pass on human knowledge or to develop character?
- iii) Gandhi said that the purpose of education was to instil values and develop character. Is this still true?

We all contributed to this discussion, starting with our personal experience of school and college/university education, either private or state school, etc. By consensus we decided there should be much more emphasis on vocational education, as it is at least as worthwhile as academic education, and indeed essential for providing a skilled workforce. Also, that teaching of moral philosophy and life skills should be expanded, at all stages of learning.

Our third session, on the Tuesday, focused on the media, and the way they shape our ideas of events. In our definition of media, we lumped together newspapers (in print and digital form), television, and social media e.g. Twitter, Facebook et alia. It was pointed out that we are totally dependent on these for our knowledge about the world, and that these media channels are not as neutral as perhaps we might like to think. In particular the BBC is notably biased and susceptible to influence by outside bodies.

On Wednesday we turned to changes we would like to see in our political system, both at local and national level. We were agreed that a clear priority is to move away from a first-past-the-post system, and have some form of proportional representation instead. Another aim, to reduce inequality in UK society, is to firstly remove charitable status from public schools, and ultimately to abolish them altogether.

In Thursday's session we considered which organisations we are involved with and/or support. They included Greenpeace, The Green Party, Amnesty International, Democracy Now, LendwithCare, Peace Direct, The Scouts movement, CND and several others. We agreed that it was normal in the past that in order to bring about change one would become a member of one or more suitable organisations, and join in their activities. Now there is often no need to pay something to join: often one can take part via social media. We also agreed that it is much less common for people to join any organisation. Friday morning was the occasion for our final session, where we had a discussion about changes in our lifestyle we had individually made, or were considering making in the future.

Our morning sessions were notably more interactive than they have been in previous years, which was generally considered to be an improvement.



Trudy Lewis, Mark Hoda, Graham Davey enjoying the sun at Ashram Experience 2019

### **Afternoon Sessions**

In the afternoons, we traditionally try to engage in some creative activity. For the first time we had a small amount of equipment with which we could practice some circus skills. Some of us needed more practice than others !

### **Evenings**

On each of the first two evenings we watched a documentary made by *Heaven on Earth Creations*. One was *Gandhi's Gift* and the other was *Gandhi's Awakening*. A few years ago the Gandhi Foundation made a donation towards the cost of making the former film. Each has been shown numerous times on PBS in the United States.

We played games on several of the other evenings, i.e. Uno, Consequences, Boggle, Banagrams

On the final evening, instead of our traditional party we had a session of dancing to 5Rhythms music.

## Future

The Ashram Experience 2020 will again be held at St Christopher School, Letchworth. The theme for 2020 is *Finding Principles to Live By*.



Part of St Christopher School, photo taken by Graham Davey