

Stephen L. Eckard, ASL's founder and headmaster, accompanies students on a 1952 field trip to the Cadby Hall ice cream factory in Hammersmith.

The Knowledge: How ASLers learn from London

"London was more than a resource. It was a wealth of teaching material when other resources were scarce." HARRY HURTT (ASL 1957–85)

A is for 'orses, B for mutton, C for yourself ¹

From the School's beginning, with a handful of students in a Knightsbridge flat, an ASL education has always included experiencing firsthand all that London has to offer. Teachers today will attest that London continues to be an invaluable resource to inspire students and provide context and meaning.² The city is ASL's extended classroom and campus.

"We talk about the Great Fire of London in class and then we go to the corner where the fire started," says Grade 7 team leader Traci Tucker. "From the top of St. Paul's Cathedral, we can imagine how people then watched the city burn. We read the death registries for the Plague, how people lied about the cause of death and wrote 'swallowed a bad case of ginger beer' so the family wouldn't be

quarantined. The kids are shocked not only by how many died, but also that people would lie in official records."

"The Fire and Plague Walk is great," agrees Grade 7 teacher Colin Bridgewater. "It brings history alive for them. You can see it in the kids' faces; their eyes shine."

"Teaching British history in London was an incredible experience," reflects former Grade 7 and 8 team leader Chris Bright (ASL 1993–2001). "You walk through what you teach. It defines hands-on, experiential learning."

These Grade 7 teachers share with all their ASL predecessors an enthusiasm for some of the essential building blocks of an ASL education: active learning experiences, field trips and project work.³ In a year when the School revisits and redefines its mission, the School continues to value those firsthand experiences found in London and farther afield.

"We have an incomparable opportunity at ASL to use London to vivify and extend learning. Excitement abounds!" says Head of School Coreen Hester.

H before beauty

Stephen L. Eckard, the School's founder and headmaster from 1951–71, insisted that "in order to take advantage of the cultural wealth of London, weekly trips for each grade were mandatory to places or events supportive of the courses of study."

Mr. Eckard kept ideas for field trips in a cardboard file box. Hundreds of cards, indexed by subject, offered inspiration to all new ASL teachers, who were instructed to use the file to find something that cut across what they were working on in class. "It wasn't enough just to go and visit, it had to be relevant," recalled former ASL teacher and administrator Harry Hurtt (ASL 1957–85), who spoke about the importance of these weekly trips in a 1991 video interview with Glenn Miller Wolfe from media services, and again, in 2008, in conversation with Rebecca Moore, associate director of development for communications.



A 1999 Middle School trip to the National Gallery

"London was more than a resource," says Mr. Hurtt. "It was a wealth of teaching material when other resources were scarce." Without a well-stocked library or multimedia access to curricular material, field trips were essential to illuminate learning. This approach to teaching ignites and is led by student interests and continues a dialogue between teacher and student.

Mr. Hurtt took his Grade 5 students to the British Museum to study Aztecs and the discovery of the Americas. When learning about William Penn, a lecturer from the University of London met them at Friends House. Afterwards, one student was delighted to find the irregular spellings in documents on display, exclaiming, "William Penn couldn't spell either!" which led to a discussion on how many ways Shakespeare used to sign his name and how spelling developed from phonetic to standard conventions.

O for the rainbow

Mr. Eckard had been a teacher at The Allen-Stevenson School in New York City. He came to the UK with the Red Cross during World War II and stayed on afterwards, working as a producer for the BBC until he was convinced by a group of Americans living in London that a good, independent American-curriculum school was needed.

The ASL curriculum that developed from 1951 had, at its core, two aims, as described by Mr. Eckard in a document he wrote on his retirement, the Potted History: "American curriculum and sports, and American college preparation." Added to that which distinguished ASL from most UK schools was a commitment to class sizes of no more than

20. A school philosophy of education was a sense of shared purpose before it was formally written down. When Jack Harrison, who succeeded Mr. Eckard as Head of School, came on board in 1971, he asked for a written philosophy with stated goals and aims.

The curriculum that developed at ASL was a synthesis of attitudes and trends in progressive and project-based education that had begun in America, inspired by the work of educational philosophers like John Dewey and Francis Parker, which came to the UK in the 1920s and gave rise to schools that sought to develop and teach the whole child in a community context. Ann Curry, one of ASL's early teachers, was the daughter of Bill Curry, the head of Dartington Hall,

for master teachers with deep experience, who have continued their own professional development, who have a big heart for kids and a passion for their subject."

As an independent school, ASL decides what and how to teach, and agrees upon standards and benchmarks to establish goals for learning. While evaluations by professional bodies are made, the classroom experience is defined and shaped by the teachers. The School provides the tools and resources for professional growth; the teachers together build the curriculum.

Q for a bus

HS social studies teachers Roger Corrigan and John Wilson both joined ASL in

Without a well-stocked library or multimedia access, field trips in Mr. Eckard's day were essential to illuminate learning, but they also set the tone for instruction at ASL.

a progressive coed boarding school in Devon where children were called by their first names and learned crafts. Ms. Curry had been evacuated to the US and educated at the U. of Chicago. "Ann set the tone of the School," said Mr. Hurtt.

"Stephen Eckard built the School in terms of curriculum," continued Mr. Hurtt. "He brought in teachers with experience in progressive British primary schools and who wanted music, art and drama to be integral to the program. He also hired teachers from the US, like Mary Bradley, Head of English (ASL 1953–71) who had 20 years of experience teaching in the NYC public school system and was renowned for her high standards. Ms. Bradley also proofread everything Mr. Eckard wrote and chased up any teachers who hadn't taken their weekly field trip.

ASL teachers have always come from diverse backgrounds and from a range of schools, but they share a creative approach to teaching and a desire for their students to connect with the curriculum. Mrs. Hester says, "We look

1971. They arrived to team teach in the new purpose-built building and together created a London scavenger hunt as an extra credit option for their Grade 9 Geography class (now Comparative Cultures) as a way for new students and their families to explore London. The scavenger hunt evolved over time to include new landmarks and mark the passing of others, such as ships on the



Grade 1 visited the Royal Academy to view the George Baselitz and Paul Mellon Collection shows.

Victoria Embankment. It became a popular feature of Grade 9 and has been cited over the years by alumni as a favorite memory.³ The scavenger hunt is now a popular end-of-year activity for Grade 7, who take off in teams across town to test their knowledge of the city.

Just as exploring the city gave students a deeper appreciation of their location, Mr. Wilson, in addition to coaching Model UN, has made a tradition of better acquainting students with the wit and rhetoric of the English language through his involvement with the English-Speaking Union, the Observer-Mace debates, the Rotary Speech and Bank of England contests.

X for breakfast

Mr. Hurtt believed that the impact of living in London is “immeasurable” for students, staff and parents alike. “Back in the early days, we didn’t have the equipment or the facilities.⁴ And so having those compulsory Wednesday field trips was not only a good idea, it was practical: pragmatism informed by imagination.

Although the School’s resources have developed and expanded radically over the years, the city remains a great resource. “London is a smorgasboard for musicians!” enthuses performing arts teacher Lorraine Davis, who requires her HS Orchestra students to find and review a concert, at which they can hear their instrument played at a professional level.

Diane Umemoto’s Grade 10 Western Civilization students explore, on their own time, museums and historical sites around London to research the objects or places connected to a particular time period. They select a place or an object as inspiration to write a creative response, in the form of a diary or a piece of historical fiction. Grade 10 student Bonny Astor imagines the journal of a Roman soldier preparing to do battle with the army of Queen Boudicca: “In order to form an effective tetudo, or tortoise, everyone has to hold their shields at the same angle... this is

extremely hard when your shield is as long as your body and rather heavy.” Classmate Teddy Burke’s diary of a Roman farmer recounts the smell of rabbit and turnip stew, the dangers of scythes, his theories on soil composition, and his business accounts.

HS art classes regularly visit museums to study the works in person. “The first time I went to the National Gallery, I had that out-of-body experience of ‘wow, I live in London,’” says Margaret Marsh ’09 who takes AP Art History and AP Studio Art. “It is all right here at our fingertips. We’ve been to the British Museum to see Egyptian artifacts and Roman and Greek statues, and in a few weeks I’m going to the Royal Academy with my French class to see the French and Russian master paintings exhibit.” AP Studio Art students are required to visit galleries, Margaret adds. In recent years, students have given talks at the Photographers Gallery and been accepted into Tate Modern’s Raw Canvas program.

London is a perennial favorite subject for project work. Grades 3 and 4 both study the River Thames and explore London. Lower School students this year visited the London Philharmonic Orchestra at the Barbican, the Science Museum, a paper mill and local shops. Shakespeare studies start in Grade 1, with visits from Shakespearean actor-educators, and continue throughout many of the grades. Film projects and trips to Stratford-upon-Avon and the Globe Theatre enhance the students’ appreciation of the Bard.

“Teachers at ASL,” says Mr. Wilson, “look around and ask ‘What’s going on and how can we use it?’”

And, as Mr. Hurtt pointed out, “What’s the point of having a school in the middle of London if you’re not going to use London?”

We have posted a copy of the Corrigan/Wilson scavenger hunt on the homepage of the alumni website.



Grade 3 students on a River Thames walk



Harry Hurtt with students in 1960–61: back row, left to right: John Gold, Jay Geiss, Lewis Neilson; front row, Tim Holly, Tom Waly, Chris McHale.

Endnotes

1. Ed. note: I was introduced to the Cockney Alphabet by ASL teachers Aneesa and Ethan Higgins. It can be appreciated by any ASLer who enjoys such things, and ignored as a bit of nonsense by those who don’t.

2. “Even the bus drivers know their history here,” adds Grade 7 teacher Mike Boodey, who enjoyed reading *The Canterbury Tales* on the Old Kent Road on the way to Canterbury for a field trip. “One of our coach drivers told me that the reason the Blackwall Tunnel curves is that it was built for horses and that if they saw the light at the end they would bolt.”

3. Mr. Corrigan recommends a visit to Fenton House, Hampstead. “It’s one of the unsung museums of London. There is a woodcut of Richard III, which when X-rayed, was shown to have been altered to add his hump; a neat bit of 15th-century political propaganda.”

4. Of the School’s facilities before the Waverley Place campus was built, Mr. Hurtt recalls. “One year we wrote and performed a shadowplay of *Treasure Island* on lunch tables in the little basement lunchroom with a makeshift curtain. I still remember Harry Dalgaard ’66, who played Long John Silver, suddenly disappearing from view as he fell off his peg leg. Everything was improvised until this place was built.”