

Behind the scenes at Urchfont Manor College

Maggie Grey

Urchfont Manor, close to the Wiltshire town of Devizes, has a special place in the hearts of stitchers for its textile courses and its wonderful food. The college has a long tradition of learning through short residential courses and City & Guilds.

Even though City & Guilds classes everywhere have been in decline, Urchfont still runs hand and machine embroidery C&Gs through tutors Janet Crowther, Jan Pineau and Lynn Horniblow.

In addition to the more formal classes, the college is home to several small groups who arrange their own tutors and use the opportunity to push their work forward and benefit from the advice and expertise of their peers – and have a good laugh along the way. Urchfont is fun!



There's a surprisingly small team behind Urchfont and they all feel part of something special. Jim Ross has overall charge when he's not wearing his other hat as head of adult learning for the county of Wiltshire. This broad base benefits Urchfont through expanding its horizons. The college has a remit of promoting informal adult learning and Jim feels strongly that this has an important part to play in the government's 'Big Society' dream. Studies by NIACE (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) have shown that there is good evidence that adult learning encourages healthy, active communities which support individual members. This is a powerful argument in these difficult times when local authorities are faced with hard choices.



Anyone who has taken on a long-term study commitment, such as City & Guilds, will know that lifelong friendships are made and the help and support is wonderful. This is especially noticeable in a residential setting.

Jim stresses that although owned and run by the local authority, there is no question of subsidy – the college must pay its way. Although he likens the college to a business, he feels that it is a family business and certainly some members of the staff have been there for many years.

Jim says that when he first came to Urchfont, he was uncertain whether the reputation for wonderful food, although a good thing, shouldn't the teaching take centre-stage? Now, however, he sees how important the 'nurturing' aspect is in the whole Urchfont experience and how much an appreciation of good food adds to the relaxing social atmosphere which, in turn, enables better learning abilities. Asked about his favourite aspect of the job, Jim cites the ability to step out in the extensive grounds and think through any problems. A walk around the gardens and the woods is certainly de-stressing for all and helps both tutors and learners to solve knotty problems.

Jim will soon move on to pastures new but all things Urchfont will continue to benefit from the safe pair of hands that is Catherine Grew. As centre manager she has both the day to day responsibility and the excitement of long term planning. We can't possibly mention all the staff but the noticeable thing with Urchfont is the fact that every single member from the reception staff to the night porter seems to have a single priority – making guests happy.

Mandy Dixon is responsible for arranging the courses. She says 'I am extremely fortunate to work alongside tutors from all walks of life who bring so many different aspects of experience with them. Some, like Arnold Lowrey, who teaches art courses, see right, have been with us for many years and still have great attraction. Others, who are relatively new, equally impart their knowledge to our students. While many tutors contact us asking if they can run courses, we are often recommended by students to contact others where their particular subject matter would benefit Urchfont students. Sometimes an area of interest is currently *en vogue* and we move quickly to be a part of this at that moment when everyone wants to gain experience of a new technique or material.



In October we produce an annual brochure for our Adult Education courses – this runs from January to December. We then send out a smaller update to advertise additional courses running from September to December and to re-advertise those with places still available. This is released at the beginning of July. We also have a website www.urchfontmanor.co.uk.

Time passes by so quickly at Urchfont and, in the 11 years I have worked here, there is always a variety of events to excite and hold my interest. Some of these have been quite quirky, to the point where we say that 'it could only happen at Urchfont'. For me, the end result is the fulfilment of arranging successful courses from start to finish and the satisfaction of providing the Urchfont public with a service which brings them back time and time again. And of course the beautiful surroundings!

The kitchen staff are absolutely vital and, although 'Steph the Chef' is a vegetarian, she produces both meat and non meat meals of gourmet quality. The lunches especially have to be experienced and the recollections of two Urchfonters swapping stories generally involve the words 'sticky toffee pudding'. Jean has been a delight for a great number of years and is an institution in her own right. Margaret looks after the tables beautifully, anticipating every want and, when asked what was the best aspect of her job, declared 'it's meeting all the students from such a variety of backgrounds and the staff here are lovely to work with'.



The college is blessed with excellent textile tutors, from Siân Martin (right) who runs an annual summer school for members of her Distant Stitch group (they come to Urchfont from all over the world) to those who teach the residential City & Guilds classes.

So much for the staff – what about the students?

Let's hear from some of the 'regulars' – members of two of the groups that meet regularly.

Jane Lemon MBE is well known for her amazing work heading up the Sarum Group who have been responsible for changing the face of ecclesiastical embroidery.

She is a member of the Machine Embroidery Group (MEG) and has this to say.

'I have been coming to Urchfont, both as tutor and course participant, almost from the beginning. It has always struck me that, right from the early days, those running the place have taken a huge interest in the work that was being produced. In those days, there were even Urchfont holidays with a knowledgeable leader. You just turned up at the college, left your car and climbed into the minibus to head for the airport.



I taught many subjects but the most memorable was the one on modern design for the church. We established links with local churches and designed for them, often leading to commissions.

Jane still maintains her skills with metal thread, as you can see from the work shown here and on the preceding page. It depicts an eagle, the symbol of St John the Evangelist and is destined for a local church.'



Jane Wild is a member of TX.TILES 21 and she had a very special Urchfont experience in the snowy winter of 2009. Here is her story.

'The snow started just before the February 2009 meeting of TX.TILES 21 and there was a fairly uncertain weather forecast so only five of the group decided to go. I had phoned Urchfont and was told that there was a bit of snow about but the roads were OK, just a bit slushy. I also checked on the availability of beds, just in case!!

My journey was very good as the roads had been cleared and there was hardly any traffic. A bit more snow fell during our first night and we woke to a very atmospheric morning of sun, mist and snow. It was fairly icy as well, so there was a possibility that the staff wouldn't be able to get in. Most did though and then a great cheer went up as the veggie man arrived, which meant there would be the wonderful meals.

After that things carried on almost as usual – we filled in the time between meals with walks in the snow and visits to the studio where we did quite a lot of work. During one of these visits, a conversation about tiles and architecture took on a life of its own and, before we knew it, we were considering a study trip to Turkey.

There was more snow overnight and it started again as we were having breakfast, so we thought it might be a good idea to check the weather forecast, which proved rather daunting and one member decided she would set off after breakfast rather than wait till the afternoon. Another was told that Swindon had been cut off for two days and was advised not to travel. Sue and I decided we would stay an extra night and see how things looked in the morning. It was a tough decision!!!



Having started out as the Urchfont Five, by Friday we had become the Urchfont Three with nine members of staff between us, definitely the way to live. We woke on Saturday morning to glorious sunshine and melting snow and were able to get home safely.

I've enjoyed all of my visits to Urchfont but this one has to be the most memorable – it was quite magical. The added bonus of our winter wonderland experience was that the idea of a study trip took off and several of us spent eleven days in Istanbul, having a great time and actually doing some work as well. We have also extended our meetings so that we can so that we have two whole days and a morning, which gives us more work time and of course three lunches.

I hope that this article has filled you with a desire to visit Urchfont Manor. You'll find an enormous range of courses at www.urchfontmanor.co.uk.

