

serTA Sweet Sixteen Weekend – 23-25 September 2022

Saturday Short Talks
Saturday 24th September 2022

Teaching Young Adults

short talk by Kate Gentles



In the Cambridge area, there are three Scottish Country Dancing groups. The RSCDS Branch, the Scottish Society and The Reel Club. They co-exist amicably by meeting on different nights and catering for different clientele. There are close ties between the Branch Group and The Reel Club as they have a combined advanced class. Also, the Branch provides teachers for The Reel Club, which is made up mainly of students, with a small number of “outsiders” - the general public.

Kate Gentles currently has the enviable task of teaching this group. They are a mixed ability class but, being mainly students, they are highly adept at learning. This is their culture and ethos. They are used to being taught. They want to learn good technique. They want to be challenged and they pick it up so quickly. Kate is not too strict, but she gives the students the benefit of having high expectations of them, which in turn puts great pressure on her. She cannot let her standards slip.

Kate deals with the dilemma, in a mixed ability group, of social dancing vs. technique, by showing the more advanced dancers they will learn just as much by helping others rather than always having the class totally arranged for them. The students expect a lot of personal critique, but this is always given by Kate in a considerate way.

Kate is careful not to preach at them, but they are given a talk on etiquette each year, resulting usually in spirited arguments about when one can refuse to dance. If men want to dance with men, Kate will only split them up if it helps in the teaching.

Recruitment is not a problem. It is part of the student social package on offer and once a student is engaged, they may bring along their friends. There is though, a high turnover, as the students will eventually need to move away for jobs or further courses, training or just life in general. Many do, regardless, return to dancing. For example, when a reunion was organised at Malham Tarn every two years, a row of baby monitors in the hall at the evening dance was witness to how the students’ lives had moved on, but their love of dancing had remained.

The students are encouraged to participate in competitions, gain awards and attend Summer School with great success – and, where appropriate, to obtain their teaching certificate. On a student budget though, the cost of Summer School is prohibitive unless sponsorship is available.

The enormous enthusiasm and joie de vivre of the students is wonderful and extreme, but, being at that particular age, there are also lots of down moments for some individuals. Kate has to be prepared to be agony aunt at times, but this helps to improve her rapport with the students.

Kate admits that this is the dream job and I think we all fully agree with her.

Report written by Irene Robinson