

40 YEARS YOUNG

THE PRINCIPAL AND FOUNDER OF THE DEVON SCHOOL, BRIAN HAWTHORNE, REFLECTS ON THE SCHOOL'S FIRST 40 YEARS.



Congratulations on the 40th anniversary of the school. You must be very proud of this achievement. What made you want to start your own school?

Brian: Well, I'd been a teacher and had seen for myself what students really needed in lessons. I saw the students thrive when the lessons were all conducted in the language and the lesson content and materials were something they cared about and were interested in. I had taught French and German and Russian before I taught English. I had developed courses and even opened a Russian department in a school and I had lots of valuable business experience from my time in the textiles industry, so I think I had the right mix of academic and business knowledge to open a school. Plus I had no wish to spend my life working for other people!

What was the school like in those early days?

Well, incredibly the very first group we had was a group of 18 teachers from Switzerland. They stayed for 2 weeks and it went really well but more importantly those first students spread the word about the school and this began a relationship with Switzerland which has lasted to this day. I am still in touch with people from that first course.

The school was across the road from where it is now. We had 8 rooms and added 3 more. It was hard work of course and this is a slow business in many ways but it never felt like a chore.



How did the school develop and grow?

We bought a bigger school building in Palace Avenue in Paignton which helped us to grow and widen the circle of students. Later we bought the present school, the Old Vicarage, it in an auction. The garden was overgrown and it took a lot of work to convert it into a school but it was worth all the effort. It is important that the school is comfortable and attractive. The Vicarage has such a lot of character. It's a real asset.

I put a lot of energy into marketing, travelling around the world to make new contacts with agents and schools. I could be persuasive because I believed in the quality of school and I had no fear of standing up in front of 600 people and talking about the school and what we did.

I learned enough of a language, for example Chinese or Japanese or whatever I needed to get by and talk to people. I think people appreciated this effort. Being close to the client is very important. These efforts don't always pay off immediately but over time you establish trust and connections with people to build a long term relationship.



Why do you think the school has endured so well for so long?

I think it's important that the school's identity has remained intact. We are still a family-run school. I had no desire to make the school into another faceless franchise. We have never sacrificed quality for profit. My sons, Bret and Chris, opened a school in Italy and came back to Devon as school Directors and my other son, Paul, is now the Managing Director. Although I take more of a back seat now, I still try and talk to every student as I always have. I have always been interested in the communication of ideas and the exchange of information. I get so much out of it.

Did you expect to see the school's 40th anniversary?

Well, I was always very determined to make the school a success but you always need a degree of luck and of course a huge amount of help. It's extremely satisfying to think that students who came to the school over 30 years ago are now sending their children here. Now I'm looking forward to the 40th anniversary celebrations in the school in 2012