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Language course in Staffordshire

By Charlotte Röttger, Munich

From 27 July to 9 August 2003 a group of young people from Switzerland went to England to take part in "SWISH 2003", a holiday course with Elan Language Courses, in Little Haywood, Staffordshire. The school is in a very nice, quiet area North of Birmingham (1 hour). Little Haywood has beautiful natural surroundings – the ancient forest and heathland of Cannock Chase. People like to go by boat on the canals. Many of the boats are painted in green, red, yellow, blue, black and white. The town centre in Stafford is rich in old timber-framed houses like the Ancient House (dating back over 400 years).

Our time in Stafford

We were nine participants, all but myself from Switzerland, and our age ranged from 15-21. Most of us stayed alone as a guest in a British family, where we had the opportunity to improve our knowledge in English and to look into the everyday life of a British family. Many things were new to us: for example the television is always on during the whole day – it doesn't matter where you are (e.g. you are cooking in the kitchen while the TV is on in the living room). We also found that the dinner is different to ours and the houses are smaller and haven't as many rooms as ours in Germany or in Switzerland. However, we enjoyed a great hospitality and felt as if we were at home during the whole time.

Upon our arrival at Luton Airport (one of the London airports), all the students were picked up by Olga McAulay (our teacher), and her father, Doug McAulay (we called him "Mac"). He was our mini-bus driver who always picked us up every morning and took us to our lessons and on the many sightseeing tours.

The journey from the airport to Stafford took three hours. Mac drove us to the Village Hall in Little Haywood, the place of our

lessons from now on almost every morning. Liz McAulay (Mac's wife, also a teacher and the main organiser) and our host-families welcomed us there in the afternoon. Each student met his or her family whom we were going to stay with for the next two weeks and went to their homes. Although the students lived in different villages in the Stafford area (like Little Haywood, Great Haywood, Rugeley, Weston Road and Colwich), the distance was not so far from each other.

On this first afternoon we had to stay with our host-family and got to know them and they us. I think everybody had certainly a long chat with them. It was the first experience in practising English for almost everyone from the continent – puh!

On the next morning we all met at the Village Hall and did a "getting-to-know-you" ball game. One student was thrown a ball. First he had to say his name and then to throw the ball to another member of the group who had to do the same thing. After this we did a conversation – everybody had to ask somebody like this: "Hello, Charlotte!", "How are you?", "Are you okay?", "Thank you, I'm fine!"... So everybody had a chance to remember the names of each person. Afterwards Liz explained to us that everybody had had to write a diary about our stay and at the end there would be a diary competition. Then our lessons began...

With the exception of three days we began the day every morning at Village Hall having lessons from 9.15 a.m. to 12.15 a.m. But the course was quite different from our school at home. We were not just sitting in the classroom every day listening to the teacher - Liz gave us a very active part. Twice, for example, we were sent out to do an "Infosearch", in Stafford Town Centre and in Great Haywood. We had to form three groups. Each group had to try to find specific places. Since nobody was in a position to know where he was and how to find

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anything, we were forced to ask the people coming along. So we had to speak again and to listen to the answers given to us in this foreign language with quite a new sound of the voice. We felt like facing the biggest adventure of our life, obviously, but it was an excellent exercise again to improve our English.

One day, we went to London to get know the English Capital where we saw famous places like Buckingham Palace, St. James Park, 10, Downing Street, the Houses of Parliament, the London Eye, the Thames, Tower Bridge etc. Everyone was so enthusiastic about this impressive city and I am sure that everybody would like to go to London again!!!

Another one day we went to Alton Towers Amusement Park, where we had a lot of fun on the big roller coasters – I think there were more than twenty different ones.

On the first Friday we were allowed to do circus skills. A man, Jay Linn, came to us and showed us how to do unicycling, juggling with balls or cloths, playing diabolos, how to walk on stilts etc. He did all the explanation in English and we had to understand what he said, because then we had to do it ourselves and later we had to show some visitors our new skills. It became a very funny show.

And, in the afternoons of the two weeks we did lots of activities like swimming in Water World (a pleasure swimming pool) or in a leisure centre, playing badminton, bowling, visiting Stafford (Town Centre) or Lichfield, playing tennis, go-karting etc.

Our meeting-point was the "Lamb & Flag", a pub where we met each other almost every evening. There we usually chatted and played pool and the card game UNO. But on some evenings we preferred to go to a disco, to Deaf Club (where we met other deaf people), to a concert or to stay at our host-families' houses to spend the evening within the family.

On the last evening we had a very nice supper with our host-families and the teachers at the pub the "Dog & Doublet". After the meal we played skittles (an old-fashioned kind of bowling), chatted and had a lot of fun again. And finally we were each given a certificate with the results of our stay in England and got some personal comments about our behaviour or our typical characteristics.

Our stay in Stafford was an unforgettable experience for everybody. We were really sad that we had to say "Goodbye" and to leave England, although we were looking forward to being back home again and sharing the adventure and the new experience with our own families.

I would recommend everybody to take part in an Elan language course because I had really a nice time there. For me, as a German girl, it was great to meet new people from Switzerland and from England. We were such a nice, funny, cheerful group and we got along very well with each other, too!!! I also had a lot of fun with my host-family, which is really a humorous family, and I think I have gained some real new friends in Switzerland and in England. I did many things with them like playing golf, visiting stately homes, playing pool etc. I hope I'll be able to keep in touch with everybody I met.

A stay in Stafford is worthwhile for everybody.

In der nächsten Sonos-Ausgabe werden andere Kursteilnehmer mit einem kurzen "statement" vertreten sein.