

Merton College's

50th

Anniversary

Merton College, in Morden at the southern end of the Northern Line, has had a musical instrument section since 1972. As the college approaches its 50th anniversary, current tutor at Merton, Keith Graves provides some insight as to the history of the course, and how they'll be celebrating.

The idea for the course came from Selwyn Jones, a charismatic Welshman and musician who taught maths at Merton college. He persuaded the principal that there was a need for such a course, and so it was created. In those days, colleges could invent a course and run it without the unending paperwork that accompanies such a proposal today. One very large room was turned into a workshop in which students were able to work on brass, woodwind, piano, violin or modern fretted instruments. Any, or all, of

year course: in the first year, students did a little of everything. The 35 hours were divided between woodwork, metalwork, technical drawing, brass, woodwind, pipe organ, guitar, violin, acoustics and business studies! Second year students narrowed their studies down to two main instrument areas and a minor one. Most of the emphasis was on repair and maintenance of instruments and this continued until a further one-year course was added in the 1980s which included some making. Every year government

“Every year has been a highlight: a different group of people bringing some amazing experience with them”

the subjects could be studied in the early days. Within a couple of years, it was apparent that more structure was required and so Selwyn organised the first proper course which was ratified by City and Guilds. This was a two-

funding has been reduced, from 35 hours a week in the '80s down to 11 just a few years ago: amazing that students learn anything at all but it shows that they are motivated to achieve.

After the millennium, courses



Above: Merton graduates busking on Wimbledon Common in 1976

became specialised into violin, guitar, woodwind and brass. Sadly, brass and woodwind were lost due to falling numbers, a real shame as it is almost impossible to restart a course once it folds. I believe right now there is demand for wind instrument specialists, but I don't know where they will be trained.

I started work here in the late '80s, while the department occupied an annexe of the college in South Wimbledon. The workshops were in prefabs way past their shelf life and

cut off from the main college, with no luxuries apart from an antique coffee machine and Tony's café up the road. This made for a wonderful atmosphere (or is this only in hindsight?) with staff and students taking a perverse delight in the tumbledown surroundings – or 'character' in violin terms. Lunchtimes saw activities such as music sessions, juggling, the odd rounders match and even violin lessons.

In 1997 the lease expired on the annexe and the land was earmarked for the new tram link terminus between



Above: Keith Graves teaching plaster cast making

Croydon and Wimbledon. Even the violin workshop had to go, despite being on land owned by Whitbread's brewery! We moved back to the main building. Surprisingly for us, the atmosphere has remained: musical instrument makers are definitely a breed apart.

After the disruption of the pandemic, the course is bouncing back. Currently our limit is eight students per workshop – it is normally up to 18 – and in September we expect to increase the amount back to pre-covid numbers. The students who have been with us through this time have had real disruption though, since few have workshop facilities at home. We were able to offer Zoom sessions every week, with quite a few well-known members of the trade joining in to offer insights into their work for

which we are very grateful.

To celebrate our 50th anniversary in June, we are expanding our normal annual exhibition to showcase the achievements of graduates of the courses. There will be some instruments on display and being played. We are inviting as many graduates as possible to come back and say hello, it could be quite busy!

Although we are celebrating our 50th this year, every year has been a highlight: a different group of people bringing some amazing experience with them. Seeing students handle fabulous historical instruments for the first time at the Ashmolean or the Royal Academy are stand out moments, as are the times when students instruments have been selected to be played at the BVMA Makers' Day.

If you are a Merton graduate and would like to come along please do, and if you would like to display an example of your current work please contact me. It need not be violin work either: whatever you do now that was inspired by your time at college.

The Merton celebration will take place on Thursday 23rd June 3pm-9pm at the college campus. ■