

## University of St Andrews

### St Andrews Summer Internships Scheme

#### Assessment of St Andrews' Use of The Burn

*(Report by Student Intern: Louis Schirmacher)*

This report assesses the University of St Andrews' use of reading parties by evaluating the university's different schools and their relationships with The Burn, the offer of The Burn itself and what outcomes, benefits and drawbacks can be expected from reading parties in general. Heads of school and other academics within the university were interviewed, some with follow-up questions, as were students who had stayed in The Burn or who were there at the time, in order to develop an understanding of attitudes to The Burn and reading parties as a whole. Although the use of The Burn varies between schools, the outcomes and reasoning for attending change little. The outcomes of the report indicate that reading parties can be hugely effective in developing skills beneficial after graduation such as confidence, team work and communication, in addition to improving academic study and providing sustained periods of focus. Given The Burn's improvements and plans for expansion and growth, plus the support from academic research for improving access to other study methods found outside of the lecture theatre or classroom, this report suggests that continued and expanded use of The Burn can be beneficial to all parties involved in its use. Problems that can arise and need to be addressed to ensure success include the difference in experience and expectation between the customer and consumer of The Burn, the potential inexperience among tutors in leading reading parties and the cost and relevance to students.

#### **Reading Parties**

Reading parties are educational retreats designed to combine the relaxation and tranquillity of an apt location for study with the chance to reap the benefits of devoting extended periods of time to working alone or in groups alongside academic peers and tutors.

In the place of study retreats and reading parties one often finds fieldwork, which shares similar characteristics in terms of beneficial learning outcomes. These shared benefits are namely the opportunity to work and learn collaboratively in situations outside of the classroom or lecture theatre or on topics away from the curriculum or, alternatively, to focus on an important part of a curriculum which can be treated with more care and detail than in a classroom setting, as Blunsdon et al (2010) and Fuller et al (2014) have explained. The best outcome of these factors is that the student enjoys learning and discussion, thereby increasing engagement with the subject, which statistics show leads to better grades.

However, there exist other benefits which are less obviously found in a student's grade. These include one's enjoyment of their degree, increased social interaction and the development of character and skills on a personal level which can aid employment after graduation, such as the ability to present and critique work among others.

#### **The Burn**

The Burn is an 18<sup>th</sup> century manor house situated in 200 acres of private grounds at the foot of Glenesk in Aberdeenshire. In 1946 The Burn was gifted to The Students' Dominion Trust in London, now Goodenough College, along with a financial endowment. It was specified in the bequest that The Burn be used to promote educational advancement for students from across the world, meaning that Scottish universities and St Andrews in particular have the unique opportunity to take advantage of what The Burn offers.

Universities can opt to pay a £1000 'membership' fee which allows greater flexibility in securing bookings, full access to all conference facilities without charge and, most significantly, lower rates for all staff and students meaning that it may take as few as three reading parties to attend The Burn for the £1000 fee to be earned back. The current discounted rate per night for a student stands at around £47.50. Currently The Burn can hold up to 50 students in the house itself with a further 11 in surrounding cottages, a comparatively small size given the capacity of other universities' conference venues, with each booking including three cooked meals a day plus full use of the house and grounds. The capacity was remarked upon by students and staff of multiple universities, including St Andrews, as a wholly beneficial factor since it allowed the house to be easily occupied by a sole university group, which contributes to the cohesiveness within each reading party.

The Burn offers two rooms in which to make presentations and work collaboratively or alone. These are the library and the drawing room, both of which have full wifi access. There are future plans to expand the capacity within the house, increase wifi access to the rest of the house (with eduroam being considered) and to convert parts of the building to further breakout rooms and a lecture theatre.

### **St Andrews' Use of The Burn and Reading Parties**

A minority of schools currently make use of The Burn, with Physics, Computer Science and Philosophy regularly sending reading parties, although other schools make more irregular visits such as English and Geology.

The school of Computer Science has visited The Burn for around 30 years and usually takes around 50 students with five to ten members of staff. Whereas in the past the focus of the reading party was on a presentation, there is now no assessment and the emphasis is on junior honours students' year-long team project. The majority of students who attend this reading party are in their third year, although fourth years and postgraduates do attend on occasion as they claim to benefit from the focused atmosphere and social cohesion amongst peers. As nearly all honours students have to complete this project, potential timetabling issues to the teaching calendar over the trip's two days are negated as most of the class are taken. The Burn is preferred as a venue as its capacity is well suited to the size of the Computer Science class and its two working rooms are considered ideal for ensuring discussion ensues. There is equal weight given to encouraging social interaction between peers and focusing on academia as well as putting one's degree skills to the test in a situation outside of the classroom or lecture theatre, while it is common for members of staff to give talks on specialist topics outside of the curriculum. There is currently the only school which fully subsidises a trip to The Burn with regularity.

Similarly, the school of Physics has taken a large number of students on its reading party since the late 1990s, with sometimes over 60 students accompanied by up to 15 members of staff, oversubscribing The Burn and spilling over into the nearby village of Edzell. Physics use The Burn differently by taking students from an individual module, PH3014, whose students perform a presentation in front of staff and peers which is graded and makes up 25% of their module grade. The module PH3014, Transferable Skills for Physicists, is used to improve students' ability to present, critique and discuss, qualities which are well-regarded by employers. Like the school of Computer Science, the school of Physics uses The Burn because its communal set up and grand location offer a welcome change from the laboratory or classroom. Although there have been reading parties sent to other venues, and occasionally conferences at hotels, a visit to The Burn is currently the only trip of any sort organised within the school of Physics and while there is heavy emphasis on the assessed presentation, the staff who run the reading party make sure to leave ample time for recreation and talks put on by the staff themselves. The school currently subsidises the majority of the cost of the reading party, with students usually paying around £15-20. This amount fluctuates little because attendance is all but mandatory for students on this module.

At present the Geology department does not use reading parties. This stems from the fact that Geology already has a high number of mandatory field trips and it would be difficult to justify the increased cost of a mandatory reading party to students. The Burn has been used in the past for staff or postgraduate field trips but the surrounding geological sites of interest are not considered ideal for undergraduates. However, there are aspects of fieldwork that can still be exploited through a reading party at The Burn, namely the improved understanding and teamwork between peers and colleagues and the fomenting of a community spirit within the department, which many students cited as a hallmark of their department. From 2016, it is planned that students on the new MSc in Geochemistry will attend a compulsory reading party at The Burn in early September, so as to welcome them into the school as soon as possible, accompanied by fourth years and PhD students as well as five to ten members of staff, totalling around 60 attendees. As well as ensuring a smooth transition into the department, the aim would be to hold a “pop-up” convention, in which each student makes a short presentation or stall explaining their recent work and research, allowing knowledge and learning techniques to trickle down from staff, through to PhD candidates, to MSc students to fourth years. There is a strong belief in the department that in order for the reading party to be a long-term success, it must be made compulsory, with students contributing up to half of the cost.

The Department of Philosophy makes use of The Burn most regularly out of all schools in the faculty of arts. There are three regular reading parties sent to The Burn on an annual basis. The first is an undergraduate reading party for three nights in April, which around 40 to 50 honours students attend with the sole aim of studying in a relaxed atmosphere. The trip is free to those students who give a presentation on a topic of their choice, thus incentivising attendance. The fee for this reading party can vary greatly. In 2015 students were charged only £10 each, though in previous years it is sometimes as much as £40. The second reading party, held in July, is more similar to a conference, attended by postgraduates and academics who specialise or are interested in the works of Kant. Around 25 people attend this with regularity, although invitations are extended to students and academics from outside St Andrews. The third regular reading party is not always held at The Burn and is aimed at postgraduates, mainly the MLitt and PhD students. The reason for this is that this reading party is treated more as a retreat, with no focus on discussion and the main benefit being a relaxed place to study. Furthermore, with international students making up a sizeable minority of the department’s postgraduates, it is felt that a change of venue allows them to see more of Scotland while studying.

Despite its size, the school of IR has had no link with The Burn for nearly ten years. Because of the school’s growth, it is logistically difficult to organise a trip to The Burn as it is impossible to invite entire classes. It is recognised, therefore, that reading parties to The Burn need to take place on a modular basis, although it is difficult to begin that process as it is likely to seem unfair to students who miss out on a reading party simply because their module hasn’t been selected to attend. Here, then, the school has an issue with the lack of a strong institutional link or ‘memory’ which is most visible in the schools of Physics and Computer Science, who, when combined, have nearly 50 years of attendance at The Burn between them. As such it is harder to start a trend of regular reading parties than it is to amend or alter pre-existing links with The Burn. Another challenge of establishing a reading party is the teaching calendar, which allows little room for manoeuvre and has similar problems of fairness as some modules may miss teaching from certain lecturers if they are attending a reading party. Despite this, the potential benefits of reading parties at The Burn are recognised: exploring different teaching styles such as inquiry-guided learning, expanding beyond the curriculum and pursuing subjects which are of particular interest, and increasing cohesiveness and improving social bonding in a department whose size can cause some to feel loSt

## The Benefits and Drawbacks of Reading Parties

One of the major difficulties of justifying the effort and expense to set up a reading party is the issue of quantifying their benefits. When resulting in a concrete conclusion, such as the grade given for the presentations by the students of PH3014, the benefits and outcome of the reading party are far clearer than of those reading parties which place the emphasis on more abstract results such as social cohesion, the development of skills to aid a career or simply study and learning.

Evidence supports the approach that the Physics department takes during its stay at The Burn. Like St Andrean physicists, the Geography students mentioned in Coe and Smyth (2010) benefitted from student-led teaching where their work was assessed by lecturers but critiqued by peers as 'it empowers students to become more aware of their knowledge and its application'. Moreover, those who participated in this teamwork were 'able to demonstrate a range of transferable skills due to the nature of group work through leadership, coordination, cooperation and delegation', which indicates that group work in field work or reading parties, regardless of whether it is assessed, is beneficial to developing skills less easily honed in normal university surroundings.

The advantages of having the freedom to study individual topics to greater extent, perhaps even off the normal curriculum, followed by collaboration and discussion are laid out by Smith et al (2007). Medical students who attended a student retreat to develop, among other things, academic leadership felt afterwards that 'they had improved their leadership effectiveness most in the following areas: defining long term, immediate and short term goals; defining their constituents, allies and opponents; and listing the strengths/weaknesses and resources that they, or their organizations, bring to the campaign'. As a result, it can be claimed that retreats, including reading parties, can be powerful vehicles for advancing skills that benefit both the group and the individual.

There is the potential for issues to arise, too. Student-led presentations and teaching need to be monitored for them to be effective, but not constantly interrupted so as to be stymied. Collaborative learning is liable to be met with hesitancy by students, who are unlikely to have come across it often, and tutors alike, who need to be able and experienced in collaborative learning to produce effective results, as De Hei et al (2014) make clear. Coe and Smyth (2010) suggest that the tutor be seen as a facilitator to stimulate interaction and make corrections where needed, but it is hard to claim that a reading party relying solely on student-led teaching would be entirely successful. Further to this, there is the difficulty that, if a reading party were made mandatory, it would not necessarily be fair to charge students to attend, whereas if it were voluntary, numbers could suffer and the full effectiveness of collaborative work would diminish. In St Andrews, 45%<sup>1</sup> of students were in paid work over both semesters, highlighting this difficulty. However, as Taylor et al (2012) makes clear, students of this generation are now too easily detached from a sociable university life and work 'strategically' in times of need, i.e. when essays are due, skip classes more often thanks to the accessibility of online resources and are more likely to commute from further away. This elevates the relevance and importance of peer-to-peer interaction among today's students and shows that reading parties can be an effective way to build engagement.

If they are to be successful, reading parties should be seen as helping students to a better education, not just a better grade. St Andrews' Geology department's intention to use a "pop-up" convention is one such way of achieving this. The key here is for students to feel as if they are active rather than passive learners, contributing novel approaches and ideas to discussions instead of acting as vessels to be filled with knowledge, according to Phillips and Trainor (2014). Study retreats in general have the potential to boost academic output for any attendee, which Moore et al (2010) can attest to, but for students today it is more important to interact closely with the subject matter. Becker (2012) states that experiential learning is found to be one of the most successful and preferred methods of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/st-andrews>

learning among students, meaning that departments which do not offer fieldwork, where one would most commonly encounter examples of experiential learning, could benefit from the use of reading parties in their place.

### **Conclusions and Suggestions**

Reading parties are undeniably beneficial to anyone involved in higher education, but it is not always possible to be certain of the extent to which individuals benefit at any given reading party. We can claim with confidence that a reading party needs to provide a calm and quiet space in which to work uninterrupted (Moore et al (2010)) and also elements which a normal classroom or lecture can't offer. These include extended peer-to-peer discussion, collaborative learning, student-led learning and experiential learning. There does not exist enough research on the topic to say whether these learning methods have a noticeable effect on one's academic performance, but it is proven, by Coe and Smyth (2010) for example, that skills which supplement academic achievement such as social cohesion, leadership, clarity and confidence can improve markedly. To add to this, it is my belief that reading parties should be held as early in the semester as possible to improve students' bonds with one another and personal skills, which in turn is likely to result in greater satisfaction with one's degree and department and fewer dropouts. It is for these reasons especially that reading parties have special resonance with undergraduates: the earlier students are introduced to a variety of learning methods and materials alongside peers, the sooner they will develop better academic and supplementary skills.

Regarding what The Burn itself offers, it is relevant to note that many members of staff at St Andrews who attend reading parties enjoy the fact that the wifi is both limited and can be turned off on demand, something which can irk students to begin with but soon encourages natural interaction, Black (2010). In addition, The Burn is a unique and extremely affordable venue, offering comfortable board and accommodation in a homely atmosphere, while its capacity seems ideally suited to bringing reading parties on a modular basis as they can fill every room and increase the feeling of being undisturbed, something which one could not achieve at a hotel or conference venue. As well as this, The Burn's fortunes have improved since the installation of the most recent bursar and many improvements to its amenities have already taken place, with more scheduled. With a better financial future on the horizon, The Burn is planning to expand and modernise, allowing St Andrews more flexibility in the departments and number of students who attend.

In general, the departments at St Andrews which send reading parties to The Burn make good and effective use of the venue. There is certainly scope for other schools to benefit from The Burn however, and there seem to be a number of ways to set this in motion. Firstly, awareness of The Burn varies within each department, let alone from school to school, with most regular users of The Burn doing so almost as much as from tradition than from a recognition of the benefits that reading parties can bring. From my experience and the statements of those interviewed, it seems that once someone has an understanding of The Burn, they tend to remain a supporter of it. Ferguson and Winder's (1981) suggestion that opportunities such as reading parties ought to be expanded to a larger amount of students, regardless of any potential sacrifice of the quality of supervision, because of the consistently beneficial outcomes, seems most pertinent here. Similarly, it is interesting to note that students will generally make good use of facilities such as The Burn if they are aware of them, as Amenkhienan (2000) discovered, and have been found by both Dugan et al (2011) and Smith et al (2007) to be eager in their support for programs such as retreats and reading parties to be repeated annually for other students. Awareness of what The Burn can offer can best be brought about through the use of inter-department reading parties, as is already the case between St Andrews and other universities, and has been shown to be helpful in getting other universities to set up their own reading parties after taking part in one in tandem with another institution.

Finally, mention should be given to The Burn's flexibility in that it is an equally viable conference centre. Furthermore, this flexibility lends implies that suggestions from interviewees that The Burn could be used to host academics' demonstration of their research impact could be feasible after more inquiry. Using The Burn in this way could also pave the way for the inclusion of students, either postgraduate or undergraduate, as their involvement can be hugely beneficial to their learning. Fuller et al (2014) wrote at length about how a strong relationship between teaching and research can enhance a subject's attractiveness, while student involvement in tutors' research helps them transition from passive to active learners. The same article makes note of the difficulty of scheduling work around the academic calendar and how a reading party too near to exams, rather than relaxing a student, would cause stress and concern and have a largely detrimental effect on students' short-term academic progress. This question of timetabling, with tutors at times under pressure with regards to their research output, has the potential to be partially remedied, through students and tutors working together to mutually beneficial outcomes. To add to this, there is always an inevitable difference in appreciation of The Burn between its customers, i.e. the university, and its consumers, i.e. the students, which should be addressed so that money spent on reading parties will ensure a rewarding experience for all involved. Students' opinions on how beneficial reading parties are, what works and what doesn't, are always relevant and often hugely enthusiastic as Smith et al (2007) demonstrated.

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