Bread-making, basketweaving, organic apple-pressing, a soupçon of eurhythmic dancing and early-morning chanting ... No, it's not a snapshot of life in the Guardian office (we don't have an apple press), but a day in the life of a Waldorf-Steiner school student. Specifically, in this case, the Michael Hall students in East Grinstead, Sussex, whose school is set in 50 hectares of rolling parkland and partly based (you need a lot of space for baking and dancing) in an 18th-century Palladian mansion. It enables the school to offer all the activities that the Steiner approach to education demands. "We're aware," says education administrator Ewout Van-Manen with a wry smile, "how lucky we are to have such a setting."

The first Steiner school was founded in Stuttgart by Rudolf Steiner in 1919 for the children of the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory workers. There are now nearly 900 in more than 50 countries. In most of Europe they are state-funded, but here they are fee-paying (between £1,000 and £4,000 a term, depending on the age of the child). This may be about to change, however. A school in Hereford has just been given the go-ahead for a feasibility study into being granted state funding, which may open up the Waldorf way, currently mainly the preserve of the chattering classes, to a much broader section of the population.

But what is the Waldorf way? Essentially, it is a holistic approach to education based on the writings and thinking of Steiner. He was a charismatic and typically polymathic product of the late 19th and early 20th century, who, infused with the confidence of the age, allied his great learning to a claim that he could perceive spiritual essences and beings beyond the mundane reality apprehended by ordinary folk.

He called the resulting spiritual world-view "anthroposophy". It incorporated
reincarnation, karma, astrology, a dash of numerology and assorted other tenets that a sceptic might well be tempted to throw in a box marked, "So far, so wackjob". But, at least as far as education is concerned, it resulted in a liberal, progressive attitude that resonates deeply with current concerns about individual and social development and responsibility - not to mention lovely organic school meals.

Steiner viewed education as a means to developing creativity, initiative, social responsibility and moral awareness in a child, rather than as a process of filling a child with facts, having them regurgitate said facts in exams and then pushing them out of the door, diplomas in hand. He was - presciently, you might say, in a time of proliferating league tables and standardised testing - alert to the danger that state-devised education is likely to lead to curricula that serve political and economic rather than children's needs. Hence the bread- and basket-making in addition to the usual academic subjects, an interdisciplinary approach to subjects rather than carving them up into discrete enterprises, and teachers who are free to follow the Steiner curriculum as befits their particular classes and not at a predetermined pace. Steiner children are also taught to read later than usual - at around the age of seven - when they are believed to be more receptive. Until then, the cultivation of a child's imagination is paramount, so they paint (using watercolour washes as colour is deemed more important than form) and play with toys made from natural materials rather than plastic. "The closer something is to perfection," says Van-Manen, comparing the kindergarten's woollen dolls to plastic Barbies, "the less scope there is for imagining."

For the first eight years of lower school, a child has one teacher, who teaches them in every lesson, and moves with them through the school. This can occasionally cause problems, but is more than offset, says Van-Manen, by the security it offers to the vast majority, especially in a time when family break-ups are increasingly common. Most problems are resolved without the need to move the child to a different class.

"That one goes through times in relationships when things are more and less easy and difficult, and that you have to overcome that and find new ways of relating to each other, is an important educative experience in itself," notes the chair of the college of teachers, Simon Gillman. As the children move through the school, specialist teachers (who are sympathetic to the Steiner system but generally less anthroposophically inclined than class teachers) are brought in to focus more specifically on academic subjects, though still using Steiner methodology.

It seems to work. Certainly the Michael Hall pupils seem to be a supremely content, confident and articulate lot who say they are used to alarming people who don't expect them to be able to string whole sentences together without choking on the traditional teenage mix of bile and hormones. "When I go to Butlins with my cousins," says 15-year-old Alistair Crocker, "they always ask me, 'Why do you speak so intelligently?'" And how do people react when they discover that the youngsters are from the Steiner school? "Somebody thought we went to school in a big tepee and rode around on bikes,"
One of the girls says, to gales of laughter. But the laughter is tinged with understanding. They are aware that their school is different. "We don't just sit in classrooms all day, we do other stuff as well. We don't wear uniforms. You're treated more like an individual in class, so if they know you've got a problem with something, they'll come up to you and ask, and then try to explain it in a different way," says Alistair.

Still, knowing that behind them are people who hold a fairly odd set of beliefs nags at me as I sit in on various classes. In America, there are those who view "the Steiners" as a cult and some campaign against federal funding for the schools as a violation of the separation of church and state. From the pained look on Gillman's and Van-Manen's faces, it's apparent that they have been confronted with the "cult" word before.

Van-Manen, a former Steiner student himself in Holland, emphasises that anthroposophy informs a teacher's approach (though it is not necessary to subscribe to everything Steiner said, and some staff do not), but is not taught as a subject at any of the schools. "If the 18-year-olds asked questions, we'd answer them, but we'd never teach anthroposophy to the children - never," he says firmly. "And if I thought now that I was part of a cult or a religion, I'd be gone. No way would you find me part of anything like that, because the moment you say that, there's a feeling of dogma, of having to do certain things. The whole point of anthroposophy is the freedom. Not as in 'do what you like' but as in coming to your own conclusions, both as adults and as children."

Gillman objects to the secrecy implied in the term. "We have a very specific curriculum practised very differently in different places. But there's nothing hidden or concealed about it. There's a picture of what educating a child is about, but I think that can be sustained completely independently [of anthroposophy]. It's an open, objective thing and something you either choose or not."

But teachers who believe in reincarnation and in children having astral bodies - can they see how that might be unsettling for the parent in the street? "I absolutely see that," says Van-Manen. "Some of the terms Steiner uses are very scary and confusing. But it's just terminology. We might say among ourselves, 'astral body'. Well, another word is 'soul' and everybody uses the word soul. Or use 'psyche', if you're more comfortable with that. But we do have these terms and I accept that it is very off-putting." And reincarnation? "I say: 'Fine, we don't expect you to believe in reincarnation, but just listen to this. Do you think it's such a bad thing that teachers who work with your child think that your child comes from somewhere, brings certain qualities and then goes off somewhere else? No, it's a good thing. It doesn't really matter whether you accept it. The point is that a child has certain qualities. We try to work with those, bring them out, and feel that those qualities will go out and have a life beyond."

The class of 15-year-olds is clear on the issue of beliefs and religion in the school. "We're not being preached at"; "We get a grounding in all sorts of religion. It's history - makes you realise what people thought"; "I'm not religious"; "We do say a verse every morning, but it's much more about the spirit of God, which could be anything"; "Could
be me!" And they collapse laughing again.

Critics have also accused Steiner of being racist, although the passages on which the accusations are primarily based (comprising observations about different races) read to me more like the self-contradictory writing of a man wrestling with the ingrained prejudices of his era and trying, albeit not entirely successfully, to overcome them. "You can find things in Steiner, take them out of context and take them as racist," says Van-Manen. "But that doesn't mean to say it's true. You won't find racism in a Steiner school." Which leads us on to the question of the school's ethnic mix - or lack thereof. There are some Jewish and a few Asian and Korean but no black students in the 600-strong school, but this probably reflects the social makeup of Sussex rather than anything more sinister in the selection process. "Look at the state schools round here," Gillman says. "You'll find the same. It's not something we have by choice."

At the end of a day sitting in on various classes, from eurhythm to handwork, from French to physics, I feel more as though I have been time-travelling than indoctrinated. The children are attentive, well behaved (though not in a Midwich Cuckoos kind of way) and the teachers are enthusiastic and energetic. It seems to hark back to a time when teachers were in control of their classrooms and curricula instead of at the mercy of government initiatives and exhausted by paperwork, and when children could go off at tangents without being hauled back by those intent on target-hitting. The concentration on community, and on social and moral responsibility for themselves and for each other, seems like the right way to be heading. It may be a pity, to some, that such an approach never seems to spring from a purely humanistic or non-spiritual impulse, but perhaps this is the closest we can get for now.

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