

Twenty Years On...

Johanna Walker (September 1995 – New York): I originally mailed Vicki to ask if she'd include some information about the National Information Infrastructure in the alumni newsletter, but her reply started, "*As it's been 20 years since you were on the Mountbatten programme –*" Clearly there has been some kind of mistake, but apparently it's been a whole 2 decades since I spent a year commuting to the British American Chamber of Commerce offices on Vanderbilt Avenue on the PATH from Newport. I gave myself a short test. The question was, "*Would you like to spend Monday night doing jello shots and dancing on tables in an Upper West Side bar before trotting home, showering and going straight into a full day's work?*" Ignoring answer A. (*Brilliant, I'll be there in 30*) I ticked answer B. (*But I've got Midsomer Murders on the planner and there's a chicken casserole that needs eating up!*) Yes, things have definitely changed.

But it's not just me. The New York of 1995 was a different one from now. The Twin Towers dominated the skyline, especially from Newport. Rudy Giuliani's zero-tolerance clean-up had just begun, and even central areas such as 42nd Street were unsafe after dark. Not everyone's office had access to the Internet (we used an America Online dial up) and the only Kardashian anyone had heard of was Robert, who was incredibly famous due to sitting next to OJ Simpson in a televised trial that obsessed the nation. Similarly, the Mountbatten programme of 1995 was a very different creature to the MBA-bestowing, degree-requiring, multiple-location, graduate-fair-visiting behemoth of today. The key requirement in the early 90s was a good typing speed and recruitment mainly took place through secretarial colleges and PA recruitment agency Angela Mortimer.

It also seems that some, important, things haven't changed about Mountbatten. I'm constantly amazed at the variety of activities and careers alumni go on to do, and this was also true for us in the early days. For example, my roommate in Newport, Julia Caird, works for a racing stables in Australia and Alice Mount, who was my intern successor at the BACC, worked for a year in the Virgin Islands and is now Head of Events at Variety. Close and lasting friendships are also forged on Mountbatten, and my maid of honour at my wedding was a Mountie, Ginny Paterson (nee Bishop).

Another constant seems to be the variety of slightly random, unlikely, mysterious, unpredictable and fabulous things that happen on the Mountbatten programme, both at work and play. I worked on events in honour of both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, saw Elton John at Madison Square Garden as a guest of Delta Airlines in their box, met Patrick Stewart at the Chamber Christmas lunch (held at the Waldorf, no less) and spent the night of the 1997 general election at a Barclays party at Windows on the World. Julia once spent the day photocopying pictures of shoes – they turned out to be crucial evidence in the Simpson civil trial that her employer was working on. Several girls bumped into Take That at the Tunnel club and spent the night chatting to them, another, in an earlier intake, had provided her floor as temporary accommodation to a band which were just starting out and couldn't afford hotels. Later, I saw the lead singer of

this band storm off stage half way through a concert at Jones Beach, abandoning their American tour. They were, of course, Oasis. There were also trips to Boston for the fall foliage, DC for the Fourth of July, Christmas in Connecticut, Labour Day weekend in Arizona, New Year's Eve on the Hudson and beach weekends at Fire Island, the Hamptons and the Jersey Shore.

After the end of my internship I took up a communications and information manager role at the BACC, (now known as British-American Business Inc.), where I was responsible for the installing of a new computer network, for our newsletters and our first ever website, which was built by myself and another intern, after work. This led directly on to my next role back in the UK, as a producer at AOL in the UK where I launched the shopping channel, and so has been fundamentally responsible for my subsequent career, which has stayed web-focused. After AOL I joined online wedding start-up Confetti, which I only left when I got the opportunity to spend a semester at UCLA as part of my MBA. On returning from the US and graduating in the top 10% of my class from LBS, I split my time between acting as head of online content and commerce at Thomas cook.com and working with LBS professor John Mullins on a number of entrepreneurship projects.

I've gone on to do a PhD in Web Science at Southampton University, where Tim BernersLee is a professor. This has introduced me to the concept of Open Data – data that is freely available for anyone to use however they like. The majority of this at the moment is open government data, and one of my roles is as a member of the Open Data User Group, an independent advisory group to the Transparency Team at the Cabinet Office. We advise the Cabinet Office on opening the data that will be most valuable to users, administer the Release of Data Fund, and recently published our vision for a National Information Infrastructure, which can be found at <http://data.gov.uk/blog/nationalinformation-infrastructure-nii>. I've just come back from Ahmedabad where I was researching the usability of open data in India, in May I'm going to Canada to present on user-derived metrics for open data at the International Open Data Conference, and who knows what will be next? It's an emerging field (which seems to be a theme in my career) and I love working in an area whose development is not yet clearly defined.

I once took a taxi home late one night and - as used to happen before mobile phones - started talking to the driver, who told me that he was worried about his daughter as she'd just left home to spend a year in New York. It transpired she was on the Mountbatten programme, and I thoroughly enjoyed myself relating tales of all my positive experiences.

As I got out of the taxi, he said, much happier, "She's going to have a brilliant time, isn't she?" I hope she did. I hope everyone does. And, even though it was 20 years ago, I can just about remember that I did.