

Southlands College

A generous and practical ecumenism



The University of Roehampton is a unique and interesting place. Formed by the coming together of four colleges which had functioned for many years as independent higher education institutions, the university's very existence is a testament to the power of collaboration and partnership. Here we see on a daily basis the great things which can be achieved when good people come together and focus on achieving a common goal for the benefit of others.

The unique denominational foundation of the university brings an additional quality to our institution. It is a powerful expression of ecumenical commitment to the church's mission in education, which transcends boundaries. This booklet explores the history and the outworking of the bold ecumenical vision that led to the founding of the new Southlands College buildings alongside our sister colleges at Roehampton, and points to how that vision continues to shape our work both today and for the future.

Southlands College was established in the 19th Century as a teacher training institution at a time when schools were primarily run by church bodies. The churches thus had huge responsibilities for the education of young people in the UK; towards the end of the 19th century, the Methodist Church alone had over 1,000 schools. The churches needed to create colleges to train teachers, and so Southlands (Methodist), Digby Stuart (Catholic) and Whitelands (Anglican) Colleges were established.

In 1975, Southlands College of Education, then based in Wimbledon, joined with Digby Stuart College, Froebel College and Whitelands College to form the Roehampton Institute of Higher Education.

After joining forces to continue their work in the modern context, all the colleges continued to offer high quality teacher training and expanded to offer a wider programme of degrees. This journey of finding an identity together while maintaining the distinctiveness of the colleges is told in the book, *The Story of Roehampton University* (Watson 2010).

By the 1990s, it was clear that a central campus for the Institute would offer practical advantages and in 1991 it was agreed that Southlands College would move from its Wimbledon site and relocate onto the Roehampton Lane site, neighbouring Digby Stuart and Froebel Colleges.



A Southlands College teacher with a class, in around 1890



The previous Southlands College site, in Wimbledon

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While the political context and changes in Higher Education and teacher training policy were the main catalysts for change, the creation of the Roehampton Institute also took place in a context of increasing hope and expectation around ecumenism. In the 1960s, this optimism was encouraged further by the Second Vatican Council, which opened up new possibilities for conversations between different denominations and the Roman Catholic Church.

In 1967, the Methodist-Catholic international dialogue was established, which continues to produce reports every five years. Its work demonstrates that, despite obvious differences, there are a number of areas of commonality between Methodists and Catholics, particularly around social justice and the theological idea of holiness.

By the 1990s, some significant setbacks in ecumenical conversations had diminished enthusiasm for formal ecumenism amongst some of the churches, since many of the great hopes for structural change of the 1960s and 70s had not been realised. However, when the possibility arose for the Methodist Southlands College to move onto the land of the Catholic Digby Stuart College, some within the Methodist Church saw the potential for a significant ecumenical partnership and a real opportunity to put into practice their ecumenical vision.

There were practical reasons for the move to Roehampton, not least the fact that the Wimbledon building was in need of major renovation work. While closing down Southlands College might have appeared to be an option in the face of increasing pressure on small teacher training colleges, this was one of the few sites of formal Methodist involvement in Higher Education remaining in the UK, and one that the Methodist Church wanted to maintain. This valuable connection to education provided further impetus for ecumenical partnership between the Methodist and Catholic Churches.

'Ecumenical activity has been stunted by the church's inability to be generous, imaginative, resourceful, or desiring of outcomes that are radical [...] This was an opportunity to buck that trend.'

Lord Leslie Griffiths



Architect's model of the new Southlands College building



Sr Bernadette Porter and Dr Mike Leigh at the 20th anniversary of the move of Southlands College

The move to Roehampton was made significantly easier by the generous act of the Sisters of the Society of the Sacred Heart, led by Sr Bernadette Porter, Principal at Digby Stuart College. The Society offered to sell, at a reduced cost, land on which the Methodist Church could build the new Southlands College.

This move was part of a pattern of generosity from the Sisters to help realise the vision of the developing Roehampton Institute. The kindness was interpreted by many of the Methodists involved as one of the fruits of Vatican II, embodying its ecumenical vision. Dr Mike Leigh, Principal of Southlands at the time of the move, described this as 'practical ecumenism', and celebrated Bernadette Porter's courage, which made it all possible. Lord Griffiths of Bury Port (Rev Leslie Griffiths), then Chair of the Southlands Governors, saw it as a 'beautifully subversive' demonstration to the churches, who had been slow to act on their ecumenical conversations; evidence on a large scale that, if there was a will, these large ecumenical ventures were possible.



Society of the Sacred Heart

The unique nature of Methodist-Catholic relations

From the outside there might seem to be little similarity between the Methodist and Roman Catholic Churches. Indeed, there are some significant differences in theology and liturgy. However, in the practical outliving of the faith and in their approaches to social action, members of the denominations involved in the work to move Southlands College found natural relationships.

Historically, there was a precedent for such relationships. Although a Protestant suspicion of Roman Catholics has not been absent from historic Methodism, John Wesley was increasingly influenced by Catholic writers during his life and encouraged Methodists to work with Catholics, particularly in his sermon *The Catholic Spirit* and his *Letter to a Roman Catholic*.

A generosity of spirit and emphasis on working together from the founder of the Methodist movement may have had an influence on subsequent Methodists' openness to finding commonality with Roman Catholics. The place of both denominations outside of the historically mainstream, established church in the UK was significant.



'Light, Love, Life'. Part of a stained glass window from Southlands College's original home that still hangs in the new Southlands College building.

'We always used to say that...we were both non-conformist...And I think that was pretty important in our ongoing dialogue, that the things that were important to Southlands, like social justice... were also important to Digby [Stuart]...we saw lots of shared opportunities for the development of social action between our two chaplaincies and by the two organisations.'

Sr Bernadette Porter

Rev Dr David Deeks, Chair of the Trustees of Southlands College from 2010 to 2016, General Secretary of the Methodist Church and Secretary of the Methodist Conference from 2003 to 2008, described "a commonality of spirituality and ethos" between Catholics and Methodists, particularly focused around their shared emphasis on holiness. A commitment to social justice and to the poor was another point of agreement and, as the Methodist-Catholic dialogue has shown, the language of holiness at the heart of Methodism is echoed by similar commitments in Catholicism (see *The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory*, 2016).

Significantly, it was personal friendships, particularly the friendship between Mike Leigh and Bernadette Porter, which were the foundation of much of the ecumenical work surrounding the move of Southlands College. The commonality wasn't one only understood in theory, but one discovered in practice as they worked together. As well as recognising what they had in common, they also recognised that the relationship had its limits.

While this unique relationship was significant for the Southlands move, it is a relationship which continues to bear fruit in the life of the University of Roehampton. The work in developing a student intentional community in Barat House, a partnership between Digby Stuart and Southlands, is a very recent example.

A new vision for education

In the formation of the Roehampton Institute, and later the University of Roehampton, the collegiate and ecumenical nature of the institution were seen to be important, not just as 'selling points' to attract future students, but more fundamentally in the vision for education that it held.

The founding vision of the colleges that formed the Institute was to train teachers to work in their denominations' schools in order to provide an education for their children. One hundred years later, this vision was increasingly limiting, but as the colleges came together a new Christian mission for education began to form, one that was explicitly ecumenical in nature. This was a vision about human flourishing, about space for open and rigorous exploration of big questions, and about seeing young people 'formed' as well as educated.

Our purpose is to change lives by helping students to develop the confidence, knowledge and adaptability they need,... understand and help to improve our world,...[and] support, encourage and challenge each other in a friendly and inclusive community.

University of Roehampton Strategic Plan 2019-2022



The campus is designed to facilitate expansive exploration and community wellbeing.



The ecumenical venture is committed to flourishing in community through learning and service.

The vision was not universally popular. Some people still felt that the purpose of these colleges should be to serve their own denominational schools. The colleges indeed had some difficulty convincing their own denominational bodies, their alumni and even their own governors of the fruits and potential of the ecumenical venture. In particular, many people were concerned that the colleges would lose their own individual identities. Ultimately, however, a combination of practical need, ecumenical vision, and the leadership of individuals allowed the move to go ahead. Addressing the concerns of those who saw the move as potentially blurring the identity and vision of the colleges, people such as David Deeks argued instead that this change would enhance it.

'It's more obviously part of our mission now than ever it was because we now have the opportunity in a robust environment of enquiring young minds of saying what we believe and why we believe it and why we're committed to certain values and ways of understanding relationships and learning and vocation and all those other things that are important to a university. That's why we do it. It's more important now than ever it was.'

Rev Dr David Deeks

David Deeks argued that as a Methodist College within an ecumenical university, Southlands is able to be a building block in the realisation of a rich, holistic vision for the university. This vision includes theology not just as an important academic discipline, but, through the colleges, as being part of the institution, enabling the kind of exploration of human life that comes from open, rigorous and wide-ranging conversations across boundaries.

The church's mission is both to provide the space for that conversation and also to be thoroughly involved in it. The ecumenical vision was, and is, a confident one. It placed religion, faith and the church at the heart of the educational venture, not with a dominant voice, but with the opportunity to express its beliefs, values and vision in a rigorous, academic environment.

Connected to this vision to serve society as a whole was a shared commitment to social justice. The churches, through the colleges, had a vision for a university which was committed to social justice through education, focusing on a widening participation agenda and looking to serve those who traditionally have less access to education. This was held alongside an institutional commitment to serving the local community and caring for the environment, the poor and the oppressed, locally and globally. These markers of identity are still very much at the heart of the University of Roehampton's identity, and shape its mission and strategic planning.



The Southlands College chapel



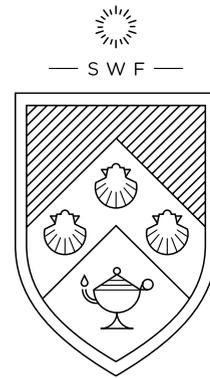
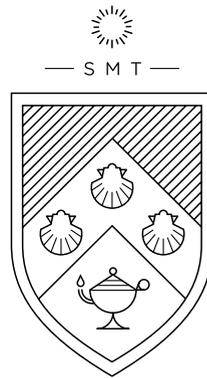
Students from the Business School, which is located in Southlands College

Beyond just an ecumenical partnership, there was a desire to broaden this vision beyond the four colleges, with serious attention given to incorporating other faiths, particularly Muslim, Jewish and Hindu, into the heart of university life.

Leslie Griffiths emphasised the point that, as an ecumenical and interfaith institution, Roehampton brings together institutions which, historically at least, have been violently opposed to each other. As a result, the university embodies a commitment to providing a safe place for the exploration of truth for its own sake, including dialogue between very different religious groups.

This ecumenical and interfaith vision which emerged at Roehampton wasn't only expressed through the provision and work of Chaplains, but was also to be nurtured by the various academic departments. Bernadette Porter saw the denominational basis of the colleges as 'adding value', giving examples of how the Business School had taken on particular research and developed particular courses because of an institutional commitment to social justice. Research into human trafficking, NGOs, human rights and social justice all contained echoes of these ecumenical commitments.

One example of colleges 'adding value' within the academic life of the university was the formation of the Southlands Methodist Trust a few years after the new Southlands College was opened. The Trust was founded with gifts from alumni and from money remaining from the sale of the Wimbledon site. It was established with a particular focus on developing academic and ecumenical connections in the college, the university and the Methodist Church. After a number of years of providing one-off grants to various different projects, the Susanna Wesley Foundation was set up by the Southlands Methodist Trust as its main activity, specifically to enable and encourage research and dialogue across disciplines, particularly around management, leadership and faith. The Foundation has an explicitly ecumenical outlook.



University of Roehampton 'Flat Rep' Training using resources produced by the Susanna Wesley Foundation



Roehampton Coexist is the university's award-winning interfaith society

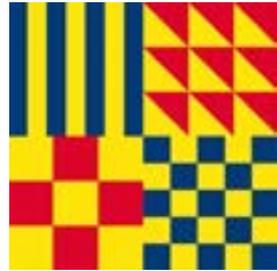
These strong ecumenical and interfaith commitments in the colleges after the establishment of the new Southlands College continue to be seen in the identity and commitments of the university as whole. When Paul O'Prey, Vice-Chancellor of the University (2004-2019), explored what the university stood for, he found its purpose to reflect these commitments, as described in this excerpt from *The Story of Roehampton University*.

'Challenging and supporting students in their intellectual and spiritual growth; preparing them to become citizens and leaders of a complex and fast-changing world; serving the communities on the university's doorstep; working for social justice; emphasizing the value of learning and the arts for nurturing the human spirit; engaging in the pursuit of truth through freedom of thought and expression; and promoting diversity, equality and tolerance.'

The Story of Roehampton University, p107

Identity and unity

Developing Roehampton as a collegiate University allowed each college to maintain and explore its own unique identity in the midst of the single whole. The original logo for the Roehampton Institute captured this, depicting four different squares coming together to form a single whole, with a cross at the centre.



As the University grew, attention was given to the architecture of the different buildings. When the new Southlands College was built, it was designed intentionally to reflect some of the values of the Methodist Church, and to encourage a way of living and learning that is infused with those values. These features ranged from the size and configuration of the student residences to the shape and space of the planned buildings. There is a Methodist chapel at the very front of the college (see p20), and there is a commitment to the environment, enacted in attentiveness to energy efficiency in the building design.





Members of the multi-faith chaplaincy team at the University of Roehampton

Unsurprisingly, the chaplaincy has been a key way that the colleges have maintained and promoted their individual identities. Digby Stuart, Southlands and Whitelands all have their own chapels and Chaplains. The collegiate approach to chaplaincy enabled the colleges to exercise their individual identity and develop their interests and commitment, particularly around areas like social justice.

However, the maintenance of separate denominational chaplaincies has raised further challenges for the colleges around how distinctiveness of identity can be achieved alongside meaningful ecumenical partnership. According to David Peacock, Principal of Whitelands College from 1985 to 2000, while chaplaincy became the primary way that the colleges could demonstrate their distinctiveness, it also had the potential to be detrimental to ecumenical work at Roehampton.

'The history of Roehampton and its colleges provides an unusual opportunity to explore issues of faith, society, conflict, change and social justice in an academic setting and thus to enhance the academic and cultural experiences both of staff and students.'

Chaplaincy Review, 2012

In 2012, a review was commissioned by the Governing Bodies of the four colleges to look at chaplaincy and to develop a strategy for the future. It was felt that the chaplaincies needed a broader vision to serve the whole university, particularly given that Froebel College did not have a denominational origin, and that Muslim students made up an increasingly significant proportion of students. The review recommended a more ecumenical and interfaith approach to chaplaincy which took the chaplaincy provision beyond the chapels. It suggested a unified University of Roehampton Chaplaincy Team rather than the individual teams in the four colleges. The review promoted the values in chaplaincy that had been fundamental to the ecumenical commitments, and which led to the creation of the Institute and the move of Southlands College to Roehampton Lane.

This focus was a natural development of the evolving collegiate identity of the university, and therefore encouraged the chaplaincy to be at the heart of the ecumenical vision for the university.

Continuing work

Friendship, generosity, common values, open conversations, individual and institutional risk taking, and courage all contribute to the rich identity and vision which, through the founding colleges, form the University of Roehampton.

Working with a chaplaincy which is structured to be ecumenical and multi-faith, Southlands College now sits as part of an institution with a strategic plan based on the core values of the colleges' providing bodies, a tradition of social justice, widening participation, promoting inclusivity and the open exchange of ideas. In many ways, the vision of those who led the move of Southlands College to Roehampton Lane in the 1990s has been realised.

However, the history of the university indicates that it is the willingness to take risks and try new things which has brought new life, and that the identity of Southlands as part of a university which is an ecumenical, collegiate institution must also continue to evolve.

Leslie Griffiths suggests that, in this sense, the story of the institution is similar to the story of Christianity and the churches. If the ecumenical vision is truly to continue, the experience of Southlands suggests that it needs to be one shaped by responding to and serving the community and one that continues to take risks and give generously.

Today, Southlands is working once again to renew its identity as a Methodist building block of an ecumenical institution.

It does this both in its approach to its work and through seeking to develop a range of new activities and initiatives which develop ecumenical and multi-faith dialogue. In particular, the relationship with Digby Stuart College has seen renewed life in recent years, and once again this partnership has been facilitated and enriched through individual friendships, a generosity of spirit and with resources, and also the recognition of identities which are at once distinct and united.

A cornerstone of this partnership was the foundation of the Barat House community in 2017, developed by the Chaplains and Heads of the two Colleges and sponsored by the Society of the Sacred Heart and the Southlands Methodist Trust. This student community house is guided by a rule of life developed out of the Methodist and Roman Catholic traditions, lived afresh in the modern University context, and led by Methodist and Roman Catholic members of the Chaplaincy team. The community is growing in its ecumenical identity year on year.



Members of Barat House - the Methodist / Roman Catholic ecumenical student house - and the chaplaincy team on a pilgrimage to Rome in 2019.

Beyond this, and with strong support from the Southlands Methodist Trust, Southlands College has become a hub within the Church for the development of a practical ecumenism between Methodists and Roman Catholics. Research and practical projects exploring Methodist-Roman Catholic ecumenical work are a part of the College's identity, not least in the exploration of how those traditions can work together in their shared mission for social justice.

The evolving nature of this work is an important and growing aspect of what Southlands College does. What this means in practice will, we hope, continue to evolve. An account of the work, as it evolves, can be explored in detail on the Southlands Methodist Trust's website, southlandsmethodisttrust.org.uk.

Key dates

- 1991 Governing body of Southlands College agree move to Roehampton
- 1994 New site for Southlands agreed on Digby Stuart land, popularly known as 'the South of France'
- 1996 Foundation stone of new Southlands College laid by the Revd Dr Kenneth Greet
- 1997 New Southlands College opened by the Vice-President of the Methodist Conference, Sir Michael Checkland
- 2000 Federal University of Surrey Roehampton formed
- 2001 Parkstead House acquired as new site for Whitelands College, close to the Roehampton Lane campus
- 2004 University of Roehampton formed

Contributors

- Rev Dr David Deeks: Chair of the Trustees of Southlands College from 2010 to 2016, General Secretary of the Methodist Church and Secretary of the Methodist Conference from 2003 to 2008
- Lord Leslie Griffiths: Chair of the Trustees of Southlands Methodist College from 1997 to 2003
- Dr Mike Leigh: Principal of Southlands College from 1993 to 2002
- David Peacock: Principal of Whitelands College from 1985 to 2000
- Sr. Bernadette Porter: Bernadette worked at Digby Stuart College, initially as a lecturer, then as Principal of Digby Stuart College, then as Rector of the Federal University.
- Dr Christopher Stephens: Principal of Southlands College, 2012 to present

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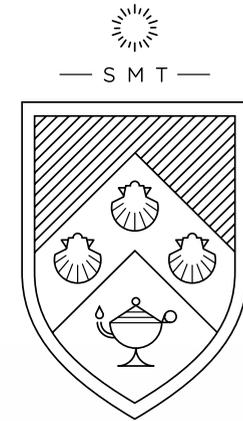
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Southlands Methodist Trust





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