The Dairy and Kenwood

A wonderful afternoon as experienced and written by Terry
A mindfulness retreat in Kenwood!

It was overcast but mild that Friday morning as I made my way across the heath towards the Kenwood Estate. Not yet fully awake, I find myself trudging back and forth, losing my bearings and beginning to perspire a little. Would I ever arrive at this seemingly elusive location or just give up completely and attend an afternoon yoga class instead. Then suddenly all at once, the woodland opens out before me and I observe in the distance on a hill, three white pavilions which I presume to be The Dairy. Buildings which have been extant for more than two hundred years. I get closer and closer as the clouds break and shafts of sunlight bathe the location in an almost ethereal glow.

As I circle around the hill searching for a way in, I come across a gate and a small sign – ‘The Dairy’ - which confirms I have finally arrived at last. I've walked by this area many times in the past, never realising the significance of this most tranquil of settings. As I draw nearer I notice I am all alone. Am I the first to arrive or maybe they're already inside, it's hard to be certain. Just then a voice calls out my name, I turn and see the mindfulness teacher approaching from the same ground I trod moments earlier. “You have to go right around Andy” I explain. As I wait for him to reappear, I survey my surroundings once more, looking out over the valley below, with pathways criss-crossing and a few people walking their dogs in the ever brightening morning.

Andy knocks on the locked door and we are soon greeted by the caretaker. He shows us around the property, explains the setup and points out the kitchen area and toilet location. We begin to fold away tables in the central room and start
arranging the chairs in a circle, trying to anticipate how many people would be attending the retreat. Just then I see two carers approaching, so I quickly attend to doorman duties, a role I eagerly adopt for the rest of the day. “Hello and welcome to Kenwood Dairy” I said as I greet the first arrivals followed almost immediately by several more carers. Many agree they had some difficulty in locating this venue and that signposts are very few and far between, but that only adds to the mystique and remoteness of our location as we finally settle down to begin our highly anticipated all day mindfulness experience. Some plants in a basket are placed on the floor in the middle of the circle.

Andy keeps our enthusiasm in check by saying not to expect anything particularly special to occur today, but during the first awareness meditation exercise, I become very conscious of the serene quiet. Broken only by some distant sporadic birdsong, the lack of extraneous noise becomes all pervasive and enticing; the deafening silence. I can feel my heartbeat gradually relaxing at this juncture as I realise the retreat has now officially begun. Afterwards we recount our experiences as there are more doorman duties to perform for late arrivals, which fortunately occur outside the meditative process segments.

The second exercise involves the practice of free movement and self expression performed outside in the dairy grounds. Not a task I'm always comfortable with, I decide to sit this one out, staying inside to contemplate my surroundings with a short period of introspection - or so I thought. As I settle in my chair and begin to close my eyes, I suddenly glimpse through the window, Elaine approaching towards the door. I hurry to answer and greet her excitedly as we head for the kitchen to make tea and have a quick snack with some treats she kindly bought along to the event. Discussing our enthusiastic anticipation for the rest of the day, I recall that it was Elaine who first suggested the dairy as a possible venue for our retreat and it turns out to be a marvellous choice.

Eventually it's time for everyone to come back inside and recount their experiences. At this point Letifa asks if I am going to leave soon for the yoga class that I've been telling everyone about. “No not now, it’s already begun anyhow” I replied and she becomes animated, clapping and cheering loudly. I was taken aback, not realising I was so popular. For the lunchtime period, some carers bought food and for those that never, they were invited to share what was available with everyone else, as a real community spirit ensues. But I needed to stretch my legs and decided to walk with a fellow carer to the cafe at Kenwood House in what turned out to be a somewhat puzzling indirect route there and back.

It was only later whilst aimlessly traipsing around the grounds during the ‘non-seeking mind’ exercise, that I somehow manage to negotiate the shortest path to the cafe without even thinking about it.
The final part of this wonderful experience was now upon us - the famed tea ceremony. Sarah provided the lovely tea, Mary bought a very colourful teapot and Jackie the decorative tablecloth. Pouring and serving each other tea is performed in complete silence and we all begin to sip from our cups together in calm meditation. We offer both thanks and gratitude for the tea and the wonderful experience as a whole. I’m especially grateful for not attending that planned yoga session, otherwise I would have missed sharing this very special custom with everyone present. One lady reminds us all that if not for our caring roles, we wouldn't be enjoying this experience at all, and briefly it suddenly becomes quite emotional.

And so our ceremony comes to a fitting close and soon we shall go our separate ways, all refreshed by our group experience and hopeful of a possible return outing in the autumn. We begin tidying up and stacking the chairs, returning the room to how it was when we arrived. All fourteen of us present, begin to drift away quietly with a sense of something quite magical having taken place which will be remembered fondly for a long time. Have we really been here for six hours? It seems like time dilation has come into play and we only just arrived. It is indeed unfortunate that we never had a group photo taken for posterity, maybe next time though.

The end