



Hello, again. In this edition of the newsletter, we are again delighted to share with you the impressions of a couple of visitors to The Gambia, Steve Lawther brings us up to date with his field report and we take a look at some of the fundraising activities that have taken place this year. First, Denise Barker recalls her Gambian odyssey...

About 2 years ago I was privileged to join the BACCcrafters, a group of friends who make and sell a variety of items to raise money for The Gambian Schools Trust.

At the first meeting I attended there was great excitement as some of the members were trying on Gambian outfits and talking about their forthcoming visit to the schools. I thought "how exciting" and hoped I'd be able to go sometime and see the real Africa. My wish came true in January this year.

We landed at Banjul Airport on a Saturday night and on the way to our base we stopped to exchange our Pounds for large bundles of Dalasi, eat a typical Gambian meal and shop for essentials. All familiar activities but so unimaginably different to anything I've experienced before.

Our first school visit was planned for Monday so on Sunday we were able to go to the beach to enjoy a local festival. Here there was a brass band playing and marching with difficulty on the sand, a wrestling area and singing and dancing in traditional local styles.

I was the 'new girl' in the group so my companions were keen to see how I would react when we visited the first school. Seeing the facilities that the charity has provided and the children so eager to learn I just couldn't stop smiling. The teachers work with few resources but they are very inventive. It took me a while to realise that the blue, green and red counters they were using in the maths lesson were milk carton tops. These had been collected and sent over before I knew about The Gambian Schools Trust.



The break before lunch provided time to spend with the children. They all wanted to shake hands and exchange names. Some wanted to listen to a story; others wanted to show how well they could read. Some wanted to sing with Alan [Rose], others just wanted to hold your hand but they all followed us everywhere we went like The Pied Piper of Hamelin.

Kumbija and Loumen schools are up country, over the river. It takes almost a day to reach them and all equipment must be taken with you. Thanks to Hilary and Steve all the arrangements had been made so we set off early one morning for a long bumpy journey. Crossing the river on the old ferry boat was an adventure. Not to mention running the gauntlet of the vendors carrying their wares on their heads. When bartering for fresh food in the border town of Farafenni our driver Omar made sure we got a fair deal although Lynda has a good poker face and can drive a hard bargain.

By the time we reached Jamwelly lessons had finished for the day but the whole school and village came out to greet us. They enacted a Wedding Ceremony and we all ended up dancing to the ever present drums. We were thanked for all that the charity does for the community.

While the school cook prepared our meal we had to prepare the classrooms that were going to be our bedrooms that night. We erected our mosquito net tents with help from the caretaker and some of the older pupils.

I also went with Lynda to visit the village and some of the women she knew from previous trips. Everyone was very welcoming and we were invited in to the house of the local Member of Parliament who had pressed for the school to be built near his village. I was surprised how basic the facilities were and amazed at how clean it was considering that the ever present sand that gets everywhere. I still don't know how the women get the washing so clean and bright.

Next morning we were up early to see the school at work. Again the pupils were bright, alert and eager to talk to us. I sat in on a Phonics lesson then joined Christine and Jennie in the reception class. We did some jigsaws, built some Duplo models and read a few books. It's very important for the children come to school at an early age as they must

be able to speak English in order to continue their education. Not many of the parents speak English so the sooner the children are exposed to it the easier it will be for them to learn.

Later we went on to visit Loumen where we spent another night in mosquito net tents. The return journey was as interesting as that going out. It was nice to get back to base where we had an intermittent supply of electricity and water but I'd willingly go back and hopefully be of more help.

I was pleased to meet Hilary & Steve who live in The Gambia for part of the year and keep the wheels moving.

I'm proud to know Christine who decided it would be possible to help these children and all the Trustees who made the whole thing possible.

Next, Tess Wilkins' report on the visit by Belle Vue School, Bradford:-

Hands Across the Gambia River!

Belle Vue Girls Academy's link with the Gambia is thriving, following the first student visit to partner, Ndungu Kebbeh Basic Cycle School, in

February-March this year. The link was established in 2010 through the Gambian Schools Trust. The Gambian school has been a major focus of BVG's charity fundraising, with Fashion Shows, a Gambian Dinner, car washes and supermarket bag-packing all contributing to the several thousands already sent to our friends



in Africa.

This year brought an exciting opportunity to deepen the friendship when 10 students, accompanied by 4 members of staff, travelled to the Gambia to meet their African counterparts! The group spent 3 days and 2 nights in the Gambian school, braving the mosquitoes and primitive loos to learn about the life and culture of the NK students. The journey there was quite a challenge, as we had to be up at 4.30am on our first full day in Africa. We then travelled by minibus to the port in Banjul, and had to wait FIVE HOURS for our ferry! Not a single student (or member of staff) complained for a moment. We spent the time eating egg sandwiches and watching the ferry arriving and being unloaded of its cargo of live goats and other animals, exotic fruits and vegetables, with the Gambian ladies in brilliantly-coloured outfits, carrying most of it on their heads! It was fascinating!

Our welcome at the school was awesome! The whole school had turned out onto the street to drum, wave and clap us into their playground! Our students jumped out of the minibus and joined in. Within a couple of hours, everyone had made new friends, and one of our 6th formers was teaching maths, while our 4 Year 10 students were leading 200+ Gambian children in "Head, Shoulders, Knees & Toes" in the playground!



A highlight of the visit was a football match between the two schools. With the Gambian students smartly dressed in donated kit, and BVG girls wearing 3-day-old holiday gear, it may not have been a surprise that Ndungu Kebbeh won 2-1! Most Gambian students speak some English, but any language difficulties were quickly forgotten in the excitement of the match. Gambians love their football, and it really is an international language.

As well as the visit to our partner school, we were able to spend a morning at a nursery built by the Gambian Schools Trust. The BVG girls played games and did art and reading with the tiny Gambian children. (We managed to stop our students from trying to adopt some of them, - but only just!) Back at our hotel, we ate a lot of chips, walked on the beach, ate chips, enjoyed the sun, ate chips, and learnt to barter in the local

market. Everyone agreed that it was the most amazing experience ever, and everyone wants to return to the Gambia as soon as possible!

Steve Lawther brings us up to speed

As all readers of the winter Blog already know, the Charity has had another very busy year developing both the infrastructure and educational standards at our 5 operated and supported establishments in The Gambia.

All 5 of our nursery schools have benefited from improvements to teacher training, school structures and the wellbeing of the children.

Naata. Additional toilets and a new storeroom were provided to cope with the large increase in pupil numbers. All 3 classrooms were redecorated and fitted with new extensive wall boards for visual aids and displaying children's work.

Nemasu. The original main classroom block was redecorated and wall boards added. The perimeter wall foundations were improved to combat ground erosion problems in the rainy season. The well we provided was deepened to cope with demand; this is the only source of clean water within the village.

Kumbija. Walls were built to finally complete all 4 sides of the school. Discussions are taking place between the community, the Charity and sponsors to develop the grounds agriculturally to benefit the school and pupils.

Jamwelly. The charity upgraded the temporary mud classrooms with cement rendering inside and out, concrete floors and improved roof to combat the effects of the rainy season. Grades 1 and 2 are using these classrooms until the Government provide a new classroom block. A school lunch programme was introduced for all pupils. Grade 3 Lower Basic primary classes are going to start in September 2014, using the existing facilities in the afternoons; our first "two-shift" operation.

Loumen. School lunches were also introduced here this year. The area adjacent to the school has been fenced around the hand pump well and a ladies garden established. A school garden has been started and fruit trees planted within the school grounds.

All 5 schools have received additional on-site teacher training in "Jolly Phonics" from Government trainers at weekends throughout the winter. Links with the local communities have been strengthened at all our schools, training courses have been run for members of school management committees, co-ordinators have been appointed to manage and regulate operation of the school/village hand pump well. All our teachers are now either graduates of, or undertaking the Government Early Child Development course.

Our tally of School Libraries within the Government school system has risen to 7 with the conversion of a disused classroom at Kaur Lower Basic School. This was funded by Belle Vue Boys School in Bradford, who visited in March 2014 (8 boys and 2 Staff) to paint and stock the library and to join the school and community in celebrations at the official opening. Another successful school visit took place when Belle Vue Girls arrived in February to visit their twin school, see the separate article for details.

Container number 10 arrived in Gambia at the end of November 2013 with another 20 tons of school materials. Major beneficiaries this year were the 100 plus Government Schools in region 6 centred around Basse in the far east of the country; Gambia Teacher Training college in Brikama, our 7 supported libraries, Nemasu Senior Secondary School (with everything they needed for a computer lab) and of course the Charity's own 5 Nursery Schools. Thank you again to all the Schools, organisations and individuals in the UK who donate these materials; and to Gaunts Ltd who provide the Trust with storage facilities in Leeds.

At the start of the 2013-2014 Academic year, a major step was taken on the Gambian Governments' Road Map to implement free and compulsory education when school fees were abolished at all Government Lower Basic Schools. Initially there was little change in enrolment, but as news spread and the realisation struck home there has been a steady increase of Grade 1 pupils, particularly in

rural areas where traditionally only 50% of children attended school and the others were kept at home; either for financial reasons or to help within the family compound or on the land. By the end of April 2014, Grade 1 enrolment had increased nationwide by nearly 25%. The implications are obvious, either increase already overcrowded class sizes, build new classrooms and schools or extend the double shift system where classrooms are used from 8am to 1pm and then 1pm to 6pm for a second class. At Jamwelly and Loumen where we work in conjunction with the Government, Grades 1 and 2 already attend and use the Nursery building. In the next school year at Jamwelly, the Government plans to build additional permanent classrooms (and teachers' quarters) to cater for children right through to Grade 6.

At Loumen, discussions are already taking place at Government level to plan additional facilities for both short and long term solutions. It is only a matter of time before all our nursery schools become an active part of the solution. In a small way we already help, due to the quality of education provided at our Nursery Schools more than half our Graduates skip Grade 1 and some are even able to skip Grade 2. In the last 10 years more than 650 students have graduated from the Charity Nursery Schools.

The Charity has come a long way since it first started helping one nursery school and since Naata was built in 2005 with just 36 pupils. At that time the Gambian Government had little or no interest in nursery schools, since then the value of nursery education has been recognised, standards of facilities implemented and an Early Child Development Curriculum introduced.

Education is improving, in 2001 Literacy was 10% and today it is 40%, the Charity would like to think that it has helped achieve this target in some way.

Of course, none of this could happen without the fundraising which continues throughout the year: aside from direct-debit and one-off donations, there are car-boot and fête sales, garden parties, the Barn Dance and craft sales of hand-made textile goods made by BACCACrafts members who meet each Thursday. We end this issue with a report on one of our annual events, which might inspire some of your own fund-raising activities:-

The Annual Yard Sale in Saltaire has taken place each July for six years. Aside from the sale of books, hand- and home-made produce, CDs & DVDs, plants and Gambian jewellery, there's also Tombola (the traditional



Fairground Lottery which has an advantage over a Raffle with continuous participation and prize giving - you can even ring a bell for the star prize.)

Several elements encourage visitors to stay (and, one hopes, spend more)

- ✿ A covered area with seating
- ✿ Refreshments - tea, coffee & elderflower cordial
- ✿ Home-made cakes from Jennie Ellison's "Cake Hut"
- ✿ A choice of a dozen tapas, freshly made to authentic Spanish recipes. (We have a regular who arrives with his own take-away boxes!)

Live music not only entertains but also helps to catch the attention of passers-by. Musicians are encouraged to bring instruments and join in. This year a new element was added - requests at £1.00 each: luckily, Alan Rose who always does sterling work leading the music has a varied and extensive repertoire! Other musicians playing this year included Lynda Hardcastle, Helen Hockenhull, Steve Jones and Roger Davis (who donated a stack of his recent single to the sale), plus special guests Plumhall, whose critically acclaimed debut album had just been released.

The event ran from 11 to 5 (and has been known to extend into the evening under more conducive weather conditions): this allows us to draw in the 'lunch trade' who fancy a taste of the Mediterranean.

Of course, such things only work with suitable publicity. If you are planning a fund-raising event, don't forget the importance of posters in local shops, flyers (have them with you to give to

anyone you talk to about your event) and social media, which not only spread the word but also provide timely reminders.