

A snapshot from The Gambia

Gordon Roscoe's account of a visit in February 2008



We departed Manchester at -4 degrees and arrived at Banjul to $+35$ on Gambian Independence day 2008. Met by Hilary Lawther, one half of Hilary and Steve who live in the Gambia for 6 months of each year and organise affairs 'at the sharp end' for The Gambian Schools Trust. Our mode of transport from the airport was one we would get very used to over the next 7 days, a battered but apparently robust Mitsubishi pick-up. Goats, beggars, dirt roads, ladies in colourful costumes, waving children,

items carried on heads, roadside shacks and stalls, sun and blue sky; these were the images that piled on each other on the drive back to the house that would be home for the next week. I will summarise elements from two of our most interesting days.

On the first we travelled to an urban area a few miles from the Gambian tourist area. This was Nemesu. So unusual was it to see a white face that local children waved, pointed and called out 'toobah' which translates as 'white person', not meant as an insult simply a description. In the pick-up we bounced around the potholed dirt roads in this small town avoiding goats, poultry and children. First to the existing school, a small mud brick building with a straw roof, it was perhaps 30 feet square and divided into two equal rooms, accommodating sixty primary school age children. We walked from the parked vehicle and within seconds had barefoot children clinging to our hands and walking with us. The children are taught to shake hands with adults and all wanted to shake with the toobahs! Excitement amongst the children all smiles, laughter and eager to show us their books and classroom.



We met the two teachers that ran the school before walking 100 yards to the new school being built by the charity. Since this may be a model for our own project it was salutary to see the circumstances in which they were managing to achieve some schooling (teaching to read and write English and master basic use of numbers and mathematics) and the tremendous contrast of the new building. Whilst it is twice the size of the old one it is still much smaller than a

school for sixty children in the UK, but will nevertheless make a fundamental difference to what the teachers will be able to achieve. We visited this school again on our final day to see how work was progressing and to take a photograph of a cheque being presented for the cost of the building by Denis and Anne who both work for Leeds Education Authority and had raised the funds from within the LEA. This new school will lead to an increase in the numbers able to attend and an increase in the quality of facilities and education provided. In a poor country with limited opportunity to raise funds for education this external input makes a substantial difference to the chances of the average people raising themselves out of poverty.



Now it was another hot bumpy journey, this time I was in the back of the pick-up drinking plenty of water in the punishing heat and with hat firmly covering bald patch! Rounding a corner into the small town of Naata we found the road lined with children all in simple school uniform waiving hand made union jacks. When the charity began work here the school was a simple rough building with the teacher, Mr Jello who taught in a secondary school in the afternoons, doing some first school education in his spare time. He turned out to be a remarkable man and one in whom the charity has invested. They have: rebuilt the school building now cool with white walls and tiled floor, planted trees in the compound to give shade against the relentless sun, built a wall around the compound, built

a small kitchen and provided food for one cooked meal per day (because some children were fainting in the afternoon through hunger) and now for six months each year a retired British teacher Judith Megginson lives in The Gambia and teaches voluntarily at the school (with much personality and warmth). Mr Jello has ten children, four of his own, and six others who he has taken into his care through the death of parents or simply abandonment. The school is charming and four of us crammed into the schoolroom as the children sang and danced for us.



On our third day in the Gambia we were taken across the river and into the bush. This required a 5.45am start, the most chaotic ferry terminal I have ever seen and at last a landing on the northern bank of the river Gambia at about 8.00 am. A breakfast of bread



rolls and bananas by the roadside and then out along a tarmac road for several miles until turning off onto a dirt bush road and at to the village of Ndungu Charren. Mud brick round huts with thatched roofs, one stone building (a small mosque), goats, a few children (open mouthed and pointing), hot hot sun – this was a real contrast to the urban areas we had previously visited, it looked happier and more natural. On the far side of the village a good sized school, the building of standard

design built by a French charity Action Aid. Many areas have these schools, but all else must be provided separately – that is equipment and books. That was our reason for visiting delivering a wheelbarrow and two bags of cement for the wall that was steadily being built by the local people to stop dust blowing across the children’s play area and into the schoolbuilding. We made a stop in the village to meet some locals who soon appeared and we communicated in smiles and odd words, but nevertheless we felt welcome. We visited three other schools on that day delivering assorted provisions from the container load of donated items that the charity had brought across a few months previously. At each school we were warmly welcomed by grateful teachers and excited children (imagine seeing your own image for the first time in the wing mirror of our vehicle or the screen of a digital camera – mirrors are a rarity).

I hope that as they continue their slow progression from poverty the people of this country manage to maintain some of their natural openness and independence of material obsession – in a society largely without television they make their own entertainment so singing, dancing and story telling are very alive and part of daily community that involves much interaction between neighbours, friends and families.



I have described a tiny part of my experience and hope that the accompanying pictures help a to add some flesh to these meagre bones. I look forward to joining with anyone reading this who in twelve months would like to visit The Gambia, to see the positive difference that our project will make in a yet to be chosen corner of this small, fascinating and friendly country. You too can be a toobah!

<http://www.gambianschools.org/>