



In January, as happens every year, committee members from the UK, together with a number of the charity's supporters and volunteers, visited The Gambia to monitor ongoing projects and identify new needs. One of the highlights of the trip was the formal opening of the new school at Naata. Among the speakers was the village leader, sincere and articulate and keen to stress to children the need to take advantage of an education which he never had and a politician who, in contrast, quoted *The Merchant of Venice* from memory and offered words of wisdom – "The greatest gift you can give to God is to put a smile on the face of someone who is unhappy."

Linda Gunn: "The first Naata school we built was so successful it outgrew its premises and facilities. After a major fundraising programme in 2010, The Trust built a new larger 3 classroom school nearby. In just two months, the new Naata school, with toilets and kitchen was completed. On January 28, 2011 we celebrated the opening of the school, which is already playing an important part in village life. As well as supporting the permanent teachers, Judith Meggison holds workshops on 'Phonics' and 'Discipline' at regular intervals for both Naata staff and staff from local schools."



## A Letter FROM THE SMILING COAST OF AFRICA

by Judith Meggison

Two thirds of the way through this present visit, which – to be honest – has not been the easiest!

As you know, our main project was the rebuilding of the Naata English Nursery School on a new site. That has been successfully completed, but not without encountering a few unforeseen hurdles. A significant one was the concerns of parents of existing students that their children would have to walk an extra 500 metres to the new site and the danger of motor vehicles speeding on narrow roads. Fortunately, Mary – one of our teachers – agreed to lead a 'walking bus' from the old site to the new school: this is working well – none of the children from the old site has left the new school.

Abdoulie (a Gambian teacher) and I walked the older children up to the new site to witness the laying of the foundation stone and at a later date to practice their part in the opening ceremony.

Once the building was complete, trustees and other visitors painted the school inside and out and help with permanent displays in all the classrooms.

The official opening day dawned; guests were in place; and the ceremony started – only 90 minutes late! The plan was for the children to be the last to enter – singing the Naata school song which we had rehearsed and rehearsed, along with

the Gambian National Anthem. Unfortunately, when the children caught sight of all the guests, they were awe-struck and did not really sing – however, they did manage to lead the national anthem. Just under two hours later – all speeches done and ribbons cut – it was time for lunch cooked by Mariama and her group of helpers.

It was a tiring but successful day and officially the new Naata would be functioning from the following Monday.

I arrived the following Monday to find a queue of people across the playground and into the road, all waiting to enrol their children. Mr Jallow, the headmaster, undertook the task and soon we had an extra 45 children on role. This meant Mary who has the 2½ years + had 79 children and Abdoulie who has the 5+ has almost 60.

It was chaotic, to say the least, and we had the call for more tables and chairs from the GST storeroom.

Mr Jallow and the staff decided to move the brightest twenty children from Abdoulie's class into "Sylvia's Classroom" and then to move the oldest of Mary's into Abdoulie's. So while I am in The Gambia, I will teach twenty students for two days each week and for the other two days will bring out smaller groups of children specifically to develop handwriting skills. In my absence, Mr Jallow will take over.

We then had to consider school lunches. Mariama had a brand new kitchen with which she is delighted.



However, the stove was different and did cause a few problems during the first week.

We now have a caretaker – Ebrima – who is lovely and as well as cleaning the school will do anything that is asked of him.

As I write, we are awaiting the installation of glass in the windows: this will mean that classrooms are no longer full of mosquitoes each morning. We are also busy planting trees – mainly for shade but also to provide fruit for the children – mangoes, bananas and oranges.

The school is lovely – bright, modern and spacious – all thanks to the generosity of you, our supporters and fundraisers.

Do I miss anything of the old school? Well, yes, I do - I miss parents dropping in; I miss Mariama; I miss the banana seller Rogina who kept me up to date on village affairs.

However, I know within a few months mums will feel confident to come to the new school for a drink and a talk and again we will be the school at the heart of the community.



## NEMASU

*an update from Linda Gunn*

Nemasu Nursery School is now the smallest of the schools we have built. Since its opening in 2008 it has had considerable success, with many of its pupils moving up a year on joining the Lower Basic School. Due to a sizable waiting list we have bought adjacent land, where we intend building a new classroom and increasing the play area. Part of the project is also to improve the kitchen. The school now has better access to clean drinking water and the teachers have benefited greatly by attending training courses. All the children are reaping the benefits. Hopefully, by next year, we will be able to increase our intake.

## YOUNG VOLUNTEERS

*Steve Lawther*

Every day, this winter we have had at least one young volunteer helping the Charity at a nursery school. It has been a joy to watch the transformation of hesitant, inexperienced individuals into confident, contributing team players. The credit for these changes lies mostly with the community into which we place our volunteers. After a couple of days with us to acclimatise to the weather and the culture, they spend their time with a Gambian family. For our part, we monitor their progress regularly, provide resources to assist their efforts and provide a "safety blanket" if required.

Without exception, all these young people have contributed greatly to the work of the charity whilst covering their own travel and accommodation costs.

Most of our volunteers were here for 2 weeks, but Amy Fife has made 4 visits in 12 months and will be returning to Africa to climb Kilimanjaro for the charity before going back to University to complete a teaching degree. Krishan worked on the construction of the new Naata nursery from block-making on day one through to the grand opening when he made a brief appearance on local TV being praised by the village Alkelo as an example to all Gambian men folk. Sarah and Katie came in November and spent a month at Kumbija; Jess stayed for a 6 months: she began at

Nyofelleh Community Nursery School in south Gambia then travelled 200km to Bluewater nursery school in Kumbija, returned to help at Nemasu before rejoining her original host family back in Nyofelleh. We are amazed at her fortitude, adaptability and strength of character. What a way to spend your gap year before University!

## BLUE WATER

*Gordon Roscoe*

The big development at Kumbija is the garden wall. 'What's so good about a wall?' I hear you ask. Well in this case it surrounds a large square of ground next to the school which will no longer be free grazing for the goats and instead will become the school garden. In this fairly remote rural community (20 minutes from the nearest tarmac road) a garden has great significance - the children will learn to grow crops and the women of the village will also each have a plot on which they will produce fresh food some of which will be sold to the school kitchen. In this way the school will have a number of additional benefits for the village community - more children will come to school as we provide lunch for them, so more will get a healthy meal and basic education.

Both income and additional food will be generated for many village families, whilst the children will be developing important agricultural skills which in this community are all important.

So it was that I, my wife Sharon and my daughters Alice and Tess arrived in Kumbija only hours after the last brick had been laid. Along with Steve, Hilary, Dennis and Anne from the Gambian Schools Trust, we spent two eventful nights at the village sleeping on the floor of the school and enjoying the warm hospitality of the villagers, local MP Osman Bah, headmaster Mr Sowe, and teachers Aliou and Jainaba. It was an opportunity to understand the people a little better and in the wise words of the village chief 'we are all the same'.

We were privileged to be invited to a village wedding, like no wedding we would ever attend at home - colour, prayer, dancing, symbolism, eating and much more. Most of the meaning was of course beyond our

understanding but there was no mistaking the welcome and friendship that was offered. We left Kumbija much impressed with the efforts of the teaching staff, and feeling confident that school and its future are in good hands.

## FUNDRAISING NEWS

### BaccaCrafts

Some ideas just develop a life of their own. A suggestion that a couple of friends with an interest in needlecrafts could get together each week for a "knit and natter" quickly developed into the idea of creating things that could be sold to raise money for the Charity.

Now upwards of a dozen women gather each week: in their first nine months, the ladies of BaccaCrafts have already raised nearly £2,000.

The name, by the way, comes from the fact that most of the women are regulars at the Famous Bacca Pipes Folk Club in Keighley.

### Concerts

A Concert held in November at the New Variety Club in Keighley raised £ 1065. Acts included Steve Tilston, Grace Notes, The Durbevilles, Roger Davies, In No Particular Order, Joy Lorraine & Nina and Kevin Loughran. Many of the acts joined forces on stage to provide audiences with a chance to hear unique performances.

In October, mezzo-soprano Helen Anne Gregory gave a recital at Thackley Methodist Church. This delightful collection of light opera provided an unusual fundraiser.



This year is our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We began by funding teachers at one school. Now, we have built schools & libraries and support almost a hundred schools throughout the Gambian; we run a school meals programme, which may become an even greater priority in the coming months.

Each October, we fund a full container carrying school resources and equipment from the UK. Thanks to everyone who has supported the Trust over the last decade.