



The Olympics. The Jubilee. The 50th birthday of *Love Me Do*. 2012 is quite a year. In The Gambia, this year is marked by the official opening of the new school at Jamwelly, the fourth we have built, with your help, in just over a decade. We are pleased to share with you the latest news and views from Trust members in The Gambia and The UK.

Callum Aveline has worked as a volunteer in The Gambia this Winter.

Jamwelly First Impressions:

I remember riding down a very bumpy and windy track on the back of a horse cart on the evening of Wednesday 8th February 2012. There's one image that I know will stick clearly in my mind forever - my first sight of the village.

The sun was lowering behind the taller huts, bright orange from the recent 'sandy' weather. The village itself was actually just a silhouette, but I could still make out these shadows getting bigger and bigger. Before I knew it, we were surrounded by the children, all beaming at us and running with the cart. We made a stop off at the school - my first sight of it. Suddenly, the hundreds of pictures I'd been sent by Hilary came to life. It was a strange feeling because I was recognising so many things- despite never being less than thousands of miles from the place. I was being dragged into every hut, children introducing me to their families. I eventually stayed put in a hut where the mother spoke a decent amount of English, and it wasn't long before I was made to read all the kids a book. Then they spotted the one thing that haunted my visit - my braces. From the toddlers to the elders, everybody was lining up to see me grin. So much was happening at once I lost track of time, so I had to go to bed. My first night was not what I expected at all. For a start, the donkeys keep you up at all hours. They must think that if they can't sleep then no one will.

Then the chickens and chicks wake up early to want to make the most of my free grub in my backpack. By this time I'm shivering in bed and have to put on 3 more t-shirts and a pair of trousers.

My second day was a little less hectic. I was still surrounded by children constantly, but it's not a problem, and I got used to it very quickly. What could have been a 45 second walk lasted 10 minutes, because people were greeting us and talking. Nobody is in a rush in Jamwelly, they lead such a relaxed and stress free lifestyle. I get to the school at somewhere between 8 and 8:30 (you also don't have a sense of time, when the sun comes up you wake up, and when you get tired you go to bed). I thought this was early, but apparently not - all the workers were raring for an early start. Either that, or eager for breakfast! The local town, Kaur, was about a 50 minute walk away. Me and Tom (who I was sharing a hut with) were put on the duty to go and get some bread for breakfast.

The rest of the day I spent the day fitting windows and painting the toilets- I hadn't realised that the toilet I chose to paint was the only one that had been in use. If there's one thing I'd suggest not to do in Gambia it's that. Paint a room less than 1m x 1m

being careful not to step into a hole in the ground. That day, I got more paint on myself than the wall. Bas (the painter) took me and Tom to Kaur towards the bar (which was somebody's house that you walked through and into the back garden), where we walked past the mosque and saw all the men praying. Walking back, I had plenty of time to admire the sky. I've seen the Northern Lights in Iceland, and the sunsets over the sea, and the moon shining on the Lake District but I've never seen a sky quite like in Jamwelly. It was the most beautiful array of dots you could imagine. I tried to teach Bas about constellations, but I don't think he paid much attention, he was busy thinking about aliens, or so he said.

After a while, you get used to the donkeys in the night, so the jokes on them! My third day was the day before the opening ceremony, so I woke up especially early, before the children woke up, and started work on the school. I was doing whatever needed doing to make the place look nice for the opening, like levelling out the ground, painting over the muddy handprints on the walls, painting the kitchen and clearing the tools and rubbish. After a very long day I came back and had a shower. It is simply a bucket of water and a mug. Despite this simplicity, it's something you really appreciate after work. Decided to walk back to the bar and the mosque had this spooky atmosphere. All the lights were off- yet a large chant was coming from inside. Bas said the electricity had run out. Came back to the village to find a campfire had been set up



outside our hut. I like campfires so didn't mind. Suddenly everyone got up and starting cheering and getting giddy. One of the local boys had captured a rat. It was the biggest rat I've ever seen! Before I knew it, the rat had been cut up and put into a stick and roasted on the fire. I was told meat is a luxury for the villagers and I decided to try a bit, after all, how many

people can say they've eaten rat in a village in Africa? It was very slimy and chewy. Now I'm not a connoisseur, but I wouldn't recommend it.

I don't know if I woke up early out of excitement or that the chickens were knocking on the door, either way- I was apprehensive but excited about what was happening today. I put on my bright orange African dress, and Tom his blue one. (I later learned from my mum that orange really isn't my colour..) Got down to the village and there was a really great atmosphere.

Everybody was just so happy! There was a drummer, a fiddler and a singer walking round entertaining. The first thing that happened was all the children from the 6 surrounding villages lined up for their uniforms and took a seat at the front of the school. Bless them, they looked very cute but must have been so restless sitting in the same seat for hours watching everyone have fun. Whilst this was happening I found myself dragged into the middle of some circle. I stood there and looked around me and realised they were expecting me to dance. Being a singer I'm happy to sing, but dancing isn't my forte and felt out of my comfort zone. However, like I've said, how many people can say they've gone to Africa and done it? so I went along with it and danced.terribly. We then took a place under the marquee and listened to the speeches from all these important people. After that, I found myself again dragged around by the girls of the village and made to dance with them- this time in front of everyone! I'm

sure Hilary will vouch for me and say it wasn't the best.. but I tried to copy the locals. I think the elders were laughing at me because I was copying what the women did- not the men. I had a go at singing (I just copied what the singer said in Fula) and I felt a bit more comfortable. Everyone went for lunch afterwards and things seemed to slowly break up and people went and never came back. After a couple of hours in the shade, I found out I had to pack up as everyone was leaving in 5 minutes! I raced back to my hut and packed up, but didn't get to say a proper goodbye to everyone which was very sad. Like when I arrived, the children followed the van running after it as best they could. Seeing the whole village waving me off made me quite emotional, and secured my decision I would definitely return- as soon as possible!

An experience quite like no other, I'd urge anyone to go and experience the amazing and hard work The Gambian Schools Trust put into each and every one of their projects. It is definitely unforgettable and life changing.

We commenced work on the Scott Wallace memorial nursery school at Jamwelly, Central River Region on 19th November, 2011. Construction of our usual 3 classroom/office/store plus kitchen, toilets, shower, deep hand pump well and perimeter wall proceeded very smoothly and on 11th February 2012 we had our programme to celebrate the completion. This was attended by a clutch of local dignitaries, around 1000 villagers from all 6 local villages and 21 "toubabs", representatives of Scott's family, the charity along with volunteers who helped build the school.

On our next visit just over 2 weeks later we were surprised and delighted to find over 150 children in school - the older ones already mastering the first 12 phonic sounds and "blending" their first 3 letter words. Outside of the classrooms the school garden had already been cleared, laid out, seeded with the first shoots coming through everywhere. All credit to Channeh Drammeh, the senior teacher, her teaching staff, the school management committee and the mothers' club from the villages.

After the opening programme our construction team took a week off to return to their home villages with their hard earned wages. Then it was time to commence our next project, the extension at Nemasu. Here we are building a third classroom and office block, together with a new kitchen incorporating a fire brick oven to ease the workload of the school cook. The new facilities will be ready to accept another 50 children from the waiting list.



As the new school wall will block access to the well used by a large portion of the Nemasu villagers, a new well is underway inside the village kindly donated by Dinah, in memory of her good friend Lesley. All the while the contents of the 40ft container full of school materials that left the UK at the end of October has been distributed, either by pick up or occasionally a loaned truck. Still about 3 tons, (6 pick up loads) to do. Minor works are still remaining at Naata and Kumbija nursery schools, and at a couple of Government schools which have had "twin" schools raising funds for them. All this needs completing before the start of the rainy season at the end of June. Abdou (Nemasu) and Abdoulie (Naata) finished their Early Child Development Teacher Training Course. Momodou

(Nemasu) will finish this July and Alieu (Kumbija) has one more year to do. Channeh (Jamwelly) has already passed this and also has her Primary Teaching Certificate.

A steady stream of volunteers and visitors have been coming and going all winter, both young and not so young. Some for a few months, some for a few days, either helping in the classroom or helping to build one!

Crossing the river has been a much bigger problem than normal this winter even with the help of our priority crossing status. All 3 of the old ferries break down frequently and take much longer to cross due to their mechanical deficiencies. Lower capacity at a time of increasing demand - result delays, frustration and occasional fracas between harassed port officials and angry drivers. The new ferry has a capacity greater than the 3 old ones together but has sat by the dockside since July 2011 as it cannot use the existing docking stations. New ones are under construction but they won't be ready before we leave. Next winter should be so much easier.....

On a final note, the Government here has announced that, despite heavy rainfall, the 2011 main harvest was a failure because the rainy season had started late and finished early. They have called on NGOs and development partners for assistance. Our feeding programmes at our schools will be more important than ever this summer in supplementing the childrens' diet. They are counting on the continued support of the charity to get them through the summer. Any additional help from our supporters will be most gratefully received. A little goes a long way here, but we still need £20 a day to feed the 500 children at our schools.



For over year, the ladies of BaccaCrafts have been raising funds for The Trust though sales of knitted and crocheted goods. In February, they made a brief sortie overseas. Christine Schofield writes

When I was in The Gambia in February with 9 supporters Mr Jallow, the Headmaster at Naata Nursery School had a Craft Day in his garden - it was a wonderfully productive day. The idea behind it was to teach girls who had not had the advantage of school new skills. Not only did the girls learn how to knit and sew patchwork, but the young boys got involved with rag rugging and Angi and the local tailor had a sewing session with an exchange of ideas.

In all it was an exciting and fun day made even better by the sharing of a big box of Thornton's chocolates brought from the UK and a delicious meal cooked by Mrs. Jallow assisted by Angi.



Judith Meggison writes from Naata:-

This session in The Gambia has certainly been different!

Looking out of the plane on the final approach to Banjul, I realised from the masses of vegetation that the rains had been great: it was still very humid on our arrival.

On my first visit to Naata, it was obvious that the rainfall had been torrential: one of the sand roads I usually use was full of huge potholes and had completely disappeared in places. However, the locals are very inventive and within a couple of days most of the potholes had been filled in and the road made passable with care - though not, I should add, for the local donkey-carts who are still having to use a detour.

Along with the rain and humidity come the mosquitoes: several families whose children attend Naata have lost adult members to malaria. It's heartbreaking to think lives have been lost for the sake of a few pounds, but when your family is hungry, you buy food before medicine.

The container arrived in The Gambia on December 9 and all the boxes put into the storeroom. I got my boxes on December 10, and then began the mammoth task of opening them, checking them and generally sorting them into what goes where.

It is a joy to see the faces of the teachers and children when we deliver the boxes which are filled with books, pens, pencils etc - all provided by you, our generous supporters.

The world economic crisis has affected many people in the UK and generally families are finding it harder to manage their finances. We tend to forget it has also affected Third World countries like The Gambia where people are struggling just to buy food.

So please continue your support - however small - because, believe me, you are making a difference.

Best Wishes from The Smiling Coast



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