

Welcome to the first of our half-yearly newsletters. Since the Charity started in 2001, we have expanded rapidly, both in terms of the number of people involved both as donors and sponsors and as volunteers. Whereas we started out supporting a single school: we now support a large number of schools, including three which are the main focus of our activities – two of which the Trust built. You can keep yourself totally up to date by visiting our website (www.Gambianschools.org), which is about to undergo a major revamp.

Changes: new ambitions

In January, committee members Christine Schofield and Linda Gunn led a party of visitors to The Gambia. (*see over for more information.*)

The committee meeting held in The Gambia proposed a significant revision to our aims. Inspired by the success of Naata School in providing a holistic approach to community education (*see over for Judith's latest report from there*), it was agreed that in future we should focus on a manageable number of clearly identified schools, with a view to bringing them up to the standard and approach of Naata.

This would involve developing a school so that it became the hub of the community. It would provide not only education for nursery students, but also a food programme and a welcoming secure, well-managed environment.

We shall, of course, continue to support a wide range of schools with books, furniture and other resources. Where we receive requests for projects which require financial contribution, we shall consider requests and proposals.

As part of a review related to this decision and in response to a range of other issues, it was also decided that the Charity would no longer give direct support to The Children of The Gambia School in Manjai Kunda. The fact that this was the first school ever to be supported by the Charity made the decision a difficult and emotional one, but over the years the school has

benefited from the support of our and other Charities and is currently in the happy position of being one of the best equipped nursery schools in The Gambia.

This Issue of The Newsletter focuses on the three schools we intend to raise to our agreed standard.

NAATA

Run with skill and dedication by Mr Jallow, Naata is the obvious model for the way we feel all nursery schools should be. Its inclusive approach means that it caters for the whole community rather than merely its students and it is truly a centre of village life.

Its atmosphere is friendly and outgoing. Its pupils are encouraged to be involved in proactive and stimulating education. The food programme, funded by the Trust and prepared by Mariama, a charming and committed member of the school team, ensures that children received a nutritious and balanced meal, whose benefits are obvious.



NEMASU

This school was built by the Charity and has now been running for 12 months. We are pleased to report that increasing numbers and positive achievement make its success obvious. In January, improvements were made to the structure and decoration of the school. In line with our plan to maintain a consistent standard for all schools, we are currently overseeing the installation of a fresh water supply, the construction of a kitchen and the initiation of a food programme, modelled on the one at Naata.



KUMBIJA

Work on this new school, funded and supported by The Blue Water Partnership is almost complete and it is hoped the school will open in late April. The official opening, however, will be in November and will be attended by several members of the committee and representatives of Bluewater. Watch Hilary's blog on the website for the latest news and a full report of the opening.

FUND RAISING NEWS

Following the success of last year's event, the Trust will hold its second Dinner Dance on **October 10th, 2009** at the Cedar Court Hotel, Bradford. Watch your email and our website for more details nearer the time

Songwriter Pete Morton donates £2 from the sale of each copy of his CD **Casa Abierta** to the Trust. The CD opens with a recording of children from Naata school singing a well known nursery rhyme. Copies of the CD are available direct from the Trust: contact the above number for details

Spreading The Word

Because the large number of newsletters currently being sent out represents an increasing outlay by the charity, we have decided in future to make it available primarily electronically, both through the website or via email (in PDF format). Anyone unable to receive the newsletter in this way can still, of course, continue to receive it in a printed version. **Please complete and return the form overleaf if you wish to continue receiving the newsletter. Please indicate your preferred form of delivery.**

NEWS FROM NAATA

Committee Member Judith Meggison is a full-time volunteer teacher at Naata School. Here is her latest report.

A very belated Happy, peaceful New Year to everyone.

It has been a very busy time here – settling back into teaching, unloading the container – and being amazed at the generosity of our supporters in the UK. I can't tell you how much the goods we transport are appreciated. We really do make a difference.

As usual I received a warm welcome when I returned to my school – Naata English Nursery – though some of the new intake had never seen a “toubob” (white person) before and were frightened to death. However calm was soon restored when I broke the ice with a few action songs such as “Head, shoulders, knees and toes. The staff are amazed by this style of teaching as their method is by rote. By the time the children have been in school for a few weeks they can all chant numbers from one to twenty – but if you point to number three – they say one! What they are saying has little meaning to them.

The Gambian Government is worried about the standard of both written and spoken English – which is the official language – and has said the preferred way of teaching English should no longer be by rote, but by phonics. So to that end I have introduced phonics at Naata and in the New Year to teachers at other schools in my area.



There has been quite a lot of illness in the village as the rains lasted longer than usual so the mosquitoes have been thriving! To treat malaria costs about 300 dalasis (£7.50), but sadly this is too costly for many families, where the average monthly wage is 800 dalasis.

Fortunately we now have piped water close to the school; so, as well as being more hygienic, this has made life easier for the women who spend hours lifting water.

The charity's plea for toothbrushes and toothpaste instead of sweets for the children has been brilliantly supported, and the children now get at least two toothbrushes a year plus a tube of toothpaste – and are given a lesson on teeth cleaning and mouth hygiene.

Thankfully we have seen a decline in dental problems.

Generally the children are healthy due in part to them getting a basic lunchtime meal that is supplemented by fruit grown at the school.

I continue to enjoy working with children who want to learn and with parents who are very supportive of how the charity is helping their children.

JUDITH

Like Judith, committee members Hilary and Steve Lawther spend roughly six months of their year in the Gambia. They visit schools daily, identifying needs, both long and short term and, where possible, fulfil them from the storeroom which they maintain. They also liaise with The Gambian Government on behalf of the Charity.

Thanks to Clare Matheson, a volunteer who has just spent three months in The Gambia helping with various projects, including one day a week at Nemasu and Naata as a teaching assistant



Other committee members visit for a couple of weeks at a time. Like all the Charity's activities, committee members fund these visits from their own pockets and are not financially supported by the Charity.

In January, Christine Schofield and Linda Gunn visited. Among their party was Tony O'Connell, a professional photographer whose images of The Gambia will soon be available via our website and can shortly be seen at his exhibition **Acts of Kindness**. (Bradford Cathedral, June 1-6)



The party visited schools on both sides of the River Gambia – including a school ceremony at Sineh Njabo which was filmed for Gambian TV (incidentally, using a camera which the party had taken out): part of the coverage included a speech by Christine broadcast on the Friday of their visit.

Part of their stay was dedicated to working at Nemasu where educational murals were painted: it was a particular delight to discover, a day after it had been created, a wall alphabet being used for a lesson which had decamped outside for the occasion.

OBITUARY

In February, we were sad to hear of the death of Sylvia Deighton of the Isle of Arran. Along with her husband Maurice, she was a keen supporter of the Charity and a good friend of most of the committee members. As a memorial, Maurice is raising funds to build a new classroom dedicated to Sylvia at Naata, a project which she had wanted to put in place herself.



Yes, I wish to continue receiving regular newsletters from The Gambian Schools Trust.

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