

2009 has been both busy and productive for the Charity as we extended further the network of schools we support and consolidated work on the two schools we have built. Again, Judith has sent us an update from Naata, which you can read below. Working with The Blue Water Partnership we have also built our third school and page 2 of this edition of the newsletter is devoted to a description of the opening of the school at Kumbija.

As usual, summer ended for us with Hilary, Steve and Judith planning to return to their homes in The Gambia while the rest of the committee planned when and how their own visits would take place. Central to all this is the loading and despatch of our annual container. See below for more on this.

There are some changes in the pipeline, too, regarding how you can find out about the Charity. We intend to increase the frequency of the newsletter, which will be available electronically and on line. Dennis Percival has taken over the role of webmaster of our website and has said that he intends to keep it livelier with more frequent updates and some new features. Watch out too for an exhibition dedicated to the Charity's work put together by photographer Tony O'Connell; Tony's recent exhibition *Acts of Kindness* has already featured the Charity alongside other voluntary organisations; in January he went with us to The Gambia and his images from that visit – some of which are included here – will form the basis of his new exhibition.

Naata Update

Once again, Judith Meggison has written to tell us about what's happening at Naata School:-

We had many visitors during my last three months at Naata English Nursery – some old friends and long-standing supporters of the charity--and

some new people who were amazed at the charity's work and who promised to return.

I mentioned in the April newsletter about introducing "phonics" to local teachers. After much discussion the first course took place at Naata on two consecutive Saturdays.

Phonics

About 15 local teachers had signed up--so on the first Saturday I was there at 8.30am ready to start at 9.00--visual aids, photocopied sheets, notebooks etc - all provided by the Charity.10.00am arrived- no teachers!! I had forgotten this was Gambia!!! but by 10.15 everyone had arrived. However at 10.45 they needed a breakfast break so it was about 11.30 before we got going. The rest of the day went according to plan and the following Saturday was devoted to making visual aids for the teachers to take back to their own schools. All agreed they had enjoyed the course and would put into practice what they had learned. I later did a second course in an area called Bundung-which was also a

success; over the next few weeks I visited some of the schools to provide support.

Commonwealth Day

Naata again took part in the Commonwealth Day celebrations. To Gambians this is a joyous day and the children wear their best clothes and the girls have their hair elaborately braided and adorned with sweets. We all marched to the village square where we were addressed by the Alkalao (*village leader*), who told them that all children and adults in Commonwealth countries would be celebrating and praying for each other!! Then the long walk back to school where Mariama had produced a beautiful lunch. A day to remember for the children!

All too soon it is time to return to the UK to help other trustees who have been working hard collecting educational equipment ready to load onto the container which leaves for Gambia each October.

The charity has made a huge difference! We have provided books, equipment, pens, pencils, computers, sports gear, toothbrushes etc to many schools and we have been amazed at the welcome we have received.

Thanks to you---our supporters--- we have made a huge difference: long may you continue to do so.

Judith

The Container

Each October The Charity sends a container of school supplies from the UK to The Gambia.

Because we work closely with schools over there, we are able to ensure that everything which is sent will have a definite use. Some resources simply are inappropriate (wooden shelving, for example, readily falls prey to termites.)

There are also clear restrictions on what, as a Charity, we are allowed to ship into the country.

What you may not realise is that almost everything in the container has got there without money being spent. Schools which are updating their resources, schools which are closing down, schools which have organised collection events in support of the Charity donate a lot of the materials which we take out

You may not think of recycling as one of the Charity's aims but, by default, it is one of the things we do. When schools in this country have to make way for new materials or when they close down, things have to be "written off". They become rubbish.

Anyone who has been to The Gambia knows that one man's rubbish is another's treasure: try giving an empty water bottle to someone who doesn't live in a city there.

So things which are no longer of use in the UK gain a new value when they arrive in The Gambia. It's a good feeling to address one issue while actually solving another.



Over the past twelve months, The Gambian Schools Trust has worked with The Blue Water Partnership to build a new school at Kumbija, where previously no primary education was available. Not only has the partnership funded the construction of the school, they now fund the running of it. The school had its official opening ceremony on November 19. Gordon Roscoe from Blue Water was there and sent us this account:-



“In 33 degrees of heat we bumped along the dusty road to Kumbija. The smoothest road had been badly damaged in the recent rainy season so our cavalcade of police car, the regional commissioners 4x4, the chief of police in his vehicle, the deputy head of education in another and other local dignitaries bumped along back roads generating an impressive cloud of dust as it moved through Gambian countryside, that in this region was well tended. And so the villagers were alerted of our approach well before our arrival(although even without the dust most villagers seem able to produce a mobile phone from their robes these days rendering jungle drums, or in this case savannah drums something of the past).

We drove into an explosion of colour, song, dance and drumming; many faces jostled and grinned, countless hands were extended in friendship. The unmistakable shape and colour of the Blue Water school was the backdrop, a long white building with corrugated iron roof and trimmed in blue - in a township made largely of mud and thatch it is an extraordinary sight. We were a party of 14 white people in all, absolutely a record in itself for Kumbija and all of our party had taken some trouble to dress colourfully as we knew the locals would do. Everyone was clearly in party mood.

Taking advantage of the diversion created by a large arrival of white people, I sneaked through the crowd with the sole and urgent objective of testing the Blue Water toilet block set to the side of the main school building. Having completed my mission (and being greatly impressed with quality and cleanliness that I found) I returned to the front of the school which was alive with excitement and anticipation. A large tented awning was set 30 yards in front of the school under which shaded seating was provided, between the awning and school the many people in attendance had formed three sides of an oblong with the awning completing the fourth and forming an open area in the middle. As I made my way around the back of the crowd I saw two large and decorative settees in pride of place at the centre of the awning, surrounded by rows of seats. On one settee sat the regional commissioner and another man, in the other sat Sharon with a conspicuously empty space next to her. Hilary and Steve Lawther, intrepid and apparently unflappable local organisers for the Gambian Schools Trust, had not informed me that we were to be so visibly the guests of honour but never one to shy away from the spotlight I took my seat as the drumming seemed to step up in volume. Drumming and dancing are intertwined as a core cultural activity for these people. They tell stories, compete, entertain, welcome (and no doubt more) with dance - every person seems keen to take a part and so the oblong of soil now became centre stage to an astounding array of colour, song and movement. There was no doubt that these were happy people in celebratory mood, this was not just a school event, the whole community had turned out to welcome us. A megaphone appeared first used by a strident lady singer who turned out to be a ‘griot’ - someone who sings family histories. Some of the Blue Water school children appeared in their checked gingham

uniforms and sang the Gambian national anthem to which we all stood and applauded, a group of ladies made some demonstration of traditional skills around spinning and pot making, and the drummers never stopped - sometimes quiet and subtle and at other raucous and driving even more dancing. And then the speeches.

Hilary had warned that these ‘programmes’ of celebration could take several hours with many speeches and whilst we had many speeches we also had the benefit of our school headmaster Mr Sowe as translator. On behalf of the sponsors I thanked them for their wonderful welcome and gave them some brief explanation of why and how we had raised the money for their school, with Mr Sowe’s help they understood and in particular enjoyed the point that we wanted to show their young people that with focus and determination achieving extraordinary things is possible. The final speech was from the Regional Governor who certainly played to the TV cameras that were in attendance. He reiterated the government focus on education of the young and the importance of empowering women in a country where most women seem to work hard and many men do not. He also led the presentation to the UK delegation of African suits of green and blue made by the ladies of Kumbija in the new Blue Water skill centre. It was at this point that it seemed appropriate to join the dancing, and photographs are available of the ensuing duet offered to the appreciative and very surprised audience by myself and Maurice (one of the more outgoing members of our group - some understatement here). Apparently we got full marks for joining in but not for technique (which was innovative, exciting and only vaguely African).

I guess we were 2/3 hours into these fascinating and unforgettable festivities when it came to the official opening of the school. A cord had been extended across the front entrance and the Blue Water friendship plaque carrying the names of all who had contributed financially to the project was mounted on the front of the school beside the door of the headmaster’s office. The Regional Governor led the crowd to the front of the school and invited myself, Sharon and the village chief to hold the cord as he wielded the scissors and invited me to unveil the plaque.

And so the Blue Water nursery school was officially open. We met the teachers, the children, the villagers and returned invigorated by their enthusiasm and what has been and will be achieved in Kumbija. An achievement both for Blue Water and the Gambian Schools Trust to be proud of.

Two evenings later, having completed the long journey back to the coast, we sat in the heat of the evening with a cold beer watching the Gambian TV news in the company of Hilary and Steve Lawther. We all raised our glasses and let out a cheer as we saw ourselves appearing on the national news. Our TV fame was fleeting but the school is already changing forever and for the better the lives of those who are using it.”