



This edition of our newsletter brings you two reports from Committee members who spent six months of each year in The Gambia. Many of you will know Steve and Judith through their extensive fund-raising activities during the half a year they are in the UK.

Judith Meggison is a teacher at Naata School; she continues her regular column with her latest update regarding what is happening at this pioneering community-based project.

Steve Lawther, with his wife Hilary, liaises with schools throughout The Gambia – this includes distributing materials which have been donated; overseeing building projects; identifying immediate and long-term needs.

Like everyone who visits The Gambia through the charity – either as representatives or supporters whose visit we have facilitated – they are entirely self-funded and voluntary. The Charity ensures that all money raised is spent directly on education projects in The Gambia.

Not all the donations to the charity take the form of cash. The container of school supplies which we send annually is filled almost entirely with donated materials; a lot of these are recycled items, rescued from unnecessary disposal by schools in the UK.

In this issue we launch an appeal for something which you probably throw away every single day.

### WHEN THE NEED ARISES

As the western world faces continuing recession and financial crises, it is important to remember that our fiscal woes have a knock on effect on third world countries.

Clearly, it can put overseas aid at risk, especially when Government feel the need to retain increasingly large 'emergency funds'. It also is reflected in a decline in both trade and tourism. Countries from Spain to Thailand to The Gambia, a large percentage of whose GDP is dependent on money spent by visitors, are already feeling the effect.

Following the recent volcanic disruption to aviation, number of people are now deciding to avoid air travel in the near future. This, too, will have a large effect on tourism in Third World countries.

The Gambia has never had local industries that can generate internal wealth; it has depended on the whim and requirements of western nations for its limited prosperity – the slave trade, the ground nut trade, a way-station on long haul sailing routes, a penal colony and, ultimately tourism.

Faced with decline, The Gambia, and particularly its children who you help us to support, will depend all the more on various forms of aid and charity. This is not sponging or shirking responsibility, it is a very real and pragmatic response to an increasingly precarious situation.

Like all Charities, we are aware that there is less money to go around. From large companies to single individuals, everyone has to "watch the pennies" more than ever before.



We hope that your support of The Gambian Schools Trust is not something you regard as a luxury item which can be crossed off a list as an economy measure. Your help and support has always been important, now it is vital.

### YOU'RE THE TOPS

Remember when you first learned to count? What did you use? Pictures in a book? Your fingers? Polished shells? Plastic counters? All are important teaching aids which make the crucial concept of numbers physically accessible to young learners.

We want a simple standard system to make such a resource available to Gambian children in a way which is readily renewable and easily replaceable.

So, we are asking you to collect screw tops from plastic milk bottles. We will then bag these in hundreds and ship them out to The Gambia where children in schools will be able to use them as counters.

These tops are not suitable for normal recycling, unlike the rest of the bottle. So, something which you'd normally have to throw away can be put to good use: please wash them, though, before sending them to us.

For almost no expense we'll supply something which hundreds of Gambian children can count on – we hope we can count on your support.



Steve Lawther writes:-

Even though we had only been away for 6 months, we were struck by the many changes in the Gambia. First the weather - the rainy season had been heavier and had extended by 2 months, with our last light shower on December 1st. Because of this the farming season was extended, to the benefit of the peanut and cous crops, but to the detriment of the maize crop. Instances of houses collapsing, normally primarily a rural problem, was extended into many



of the urban areas with staff at both Naata and Nemasu nurseries affected.

Electrification of both rural and urban areas continues at a pace and where schools have been able to meet the substantial costs of connection to the supply; computers are being added near the top of their "lists of constraints" which we are given. We split the small number of PCs shipped this year between Essau Lower Basic School, Ndungu Kebbeh Basic Cycle School, Banjulinding Upper Basic School and Kanifing Girl Guide Skill Centre. There are several more rural schools which we assist who require more. Headmasters across the country are being sent on the year-long Senior Headmasters Management Course, and are requesting lap-tops both to assist in the completion of the course work and for administrative work in their schools when they return. The West African Joint Matriculation Board now requires all exam results to be submitted by e-mail before the equivalent

GCSE certificates can be awarded, affecting all Basic Cycle (grades 1 to 9), Upper Basic (grades 7-9) and Senior Secondary Schools (grades 10-12). Headmasters from rural schools are having to travel up to 200 miles to pay someone in an Internet Cafe to do this for them.

The World Food Programme is extending their assistance from rural Government Schools to qualifying rural Nursery Schools. Last autumn, Headmaster Mr Sowe, from our Bluewater Partnership Nursery School at Kumbija, with the backing of the area MP (the Honourable Mr Bah), commenced discussions with the World Food Programme to have Bluewater included. However, to qualify, the school must already have in place a kitchen and secure storeroom for the food. Thanks to

the generosity of one of our supporters, Bluewater now has its own kitchen and storeroom. Mr Sowe and Mr Bah are confident that the food programme will commence this September enabling school lunches to be prepared in line with our other Nursery Schools at Naata and Nemasu.

In another initiative to maintain the excellent standards being set at Naata and Nemasu, Alieu and Jainaba, teachers from Bluewater are joining our other teachers on the Early Child Development Teacher Training Course at Brikama College this summer, funded by the charity.

Many things however are not yet changing. In mid April, shortly before returning to the UK we were introduced to another rural Lower Basic School, this time at M Bollett BA in North West Gambia near the border with Senegal. It is a small school with approximately 250 children in very dilapidated premises with very limited resources. But as we have seen before, they have a

### First Timer

Read about the experiences and first impressions of visitors on our website [www.gambianschools.org](http://www.gambianschools.org)

small team of young and very keen teachers backed up by an enthusiastic committee of villagers and no financial support. It would make an ideal partner for a UK school twinning programme.

The majority of schools will continue to be overcrowded, badly equipped and underfunded for the foreseeable future, but through the growing expertise of the teachers, the enthusiastic support of village committees, the determination of the children to learn and the financial and material support of all our supporters and volunteers, we will continue to increase the availability of resources and raise the standards of education wherever possible.

Steve Lawther

### FORTHCOMING EVENTS

#### Saturday June 26

Book stall at Saltaire Fete: also selling African Jewellery.  
Saltaire United Reformed Church

#### Sunday July 11

A day of book-, plant- & African jewellery sales, live music by Alan & guests, tapas by Nigel, cakes by Angi (Marvellous TeaDance Co.).  
108 Bingley Road, Saltaire. BD18 4DP

#### Saturday September 4

Garden Party at 2 Jowett Park Crescent, THackley, BD10 OSX.

#### Charity Concert

Details to be confirmed - keep watching the website and Facebook.

### Find us on FACEBOOK

There is now a Gambian Schools page on Facebook - why not visit us - look at the photogalleries, read comments and updates, write a message on our wall.

Judith Meggison writes

**NOV 2009-APRIL 2010**

So it's back to The Gambia after "summer" in the UK - fund raising for the Charity.

It was great to return and I received a massive welcome from the staff at Naata and, of course, from the children.

The older children had moved to the local Middle or Lower Basic school and we had a new intake of 3-4 year olds, who had never seen or met a "toubob" (white person) before. Initially, it was *'fear and tears'* - but gradually over a couple of weeks everything was fine.

Great excitement mid-November when our school cook, Mariama, gave birth to a baby girl - Isatou. During her confinement, parents rallied round and made sure the food programme continued and the children got a nutritious lunch.

As I reported last time, the teaching of reading and writing English via phonics is being promoted by the government and I have done some workshops for local teachers. However - as any teacher in the world will tell you - it is hard to change the practice of a lifetime and many teachers revert back to the "Look/Say" method.

We celebrated Tobaski and Christmas & new year with our Muslim friends - then, all too soon, it was March and Commonwealth Day. You may recall from a previous account that the children wear their finest clothes and we all walk to the village square to be addressed by the Alkalo. Then it's back to the school for a celebration lunch. It is always a lovely day - much appreciated by the children.

Other Trustees and supporters came out during my

## An Urgent Appeal

Naata was the first school build by The Gambian Schools Trust. We anticipated that this year we would have to raise money for its refurbishment and development. Instead, because of increased numbers, we find ourselves looking at ways to raise the revenue to build a new, larger school, having used money raised at last year's Dinner to buy the land.

All our fundraising activities this year will be dedicated towards this aim: among the activities already in hand are - charity book sales, car boot sales, a charity concert, garden parties and a range of sponsored events.

If we are unable to raise the money, there simply will not be a school - a situation which is unthinkable.

You can find out more at our website [www.gambianschools.org](http://www.gambianschools.org) which will be regularly updated with news of the Naata appeal.

You can also donate on line at <http://www.justgiving.com/Naata>

six month stay - often bringing family and friends who shared their expertise and skills with the children in our schools. These included building a kitchen, painting, playing guitar, working with small groups of children, even a university work placement - an eclectic assortment.

## THANKS

To David Wright, who completed the Edinburgh Marathon in 3 hours 22 minutes raising £1,000 towards the new school at Naata.

As many of you know, the Charity has been looking for land in the vicinity of Naata, which is now too small for the rising number of children. This seemed as if it would be an easy task! However, nothing in The Gambia is as easy at it first appears. We'd find the piece of land and the price immediately increased; then we found another but it did not actually belong to the person who was selling it. Fortunately, in the end we struck lucky and acquired land - a much larger plot than our present site - with room to build three classrooms, an

office, kitchen storeroom, and toilets, plus, importantly plenty of space for children to play.

At this moment, our builders are busy erecting a security wall around the site and, if funds permit, building the school will start when we return with cash in November.

Our final visitors included a dental hygienist who worked in the school. All the children were told how to look after their teeth correctly and about mouth hygiene. All were given toothbrushes and paste.

Our thanks go to hygienist for putting on this really worthwhile event and, of course, thanks to you all for all your help and support - long may it continue.

Judith

