



In this newsletter, we thought you'd like to share the views of three different visitors to The Gambia. First, though, Steve Lawther looks back over our first decade as a registered charity.

Through the generosity of its supporters the Trust has been able to build, equip and maintain 5 nursery schools, provide 6 School libraries within the State school system (either as new build or conversion of an existing building), to collect, ship and distribute nine 40ft containers filled with school materials, furniture and resources, to build 2 new village wells, to convert 4 open wells into sealed hand pump wells and to facilitate projects involving British businesses and universities and establish links between many schools in the UK and Gambia.

Ten years ago there was no official policy or provision for nursery school education, however the Government has now looked at best practice around the world and introduced a comprehensive Early Child Development policy covering structural requirements, curriculum, teaching standards and environmental concerns. All 5 of our nursery schools have been built or converted to comply with all the new regulations. Our teachers, after serving a probationary period are funded and supported to undertake the 3 year Early Child Development Course at Brikama College. Consequently, when our pupils graduate from nursery and enter the Lower Basic Schools at age 7, they have received a flying start to their education and many are able to skip Grade 1 and some have even skipped Grade 2.

The Trust works in partnership with the Gambian Ministry of Education under a Memorandum of Understanding. The benefits of this to the Trust include an import duty waiver on educational materials, access to Ministry vehicles for major deliveries, an insight into future educational plans and ambitions, and the avoidance of duplication of effort with other Charities. With this dialogue in place, in recent years we have concentrated our efforts in the rural areas of the country where the need is greatest. Our last 3 nursery schools and all the school libraries have been built in the rural village areas.

At our 3 rural schools, the local communities have allocated large pieces of land to the Charity for construction and development. As well as providing a school building with 3 large classrooms, office, store, kitchen and toilets, we also add a hand-pump well to ensure clean drinking water and enough water for a school garden, orchard and a large Ladies garden for the villagers.

The Nursery schools in particular have had a major impact in their local village communities, none of which has access to electricity or a piped water supply. The village communities exist on subsistence farming, living on what they grow, the animals they keep and generating cash only on the sale of surplus crops or animals. School gardens provide the children with an early introduction into agriculture and supplement the meals provided from the school kitchens. The Ladies' garden provides both saving and income: families spend less money travelling to the nearest market town, salad and vegetable surplus can be sold either locally or in the nearest market.



The construction of the school provides a 'kick start' to the village economy, most of the labour is recruited locally, the local ladies are paid to carry the substantial amount of water needed for building from the village, as usually the new well is being built at the same time as the school. The school then provides employment for a Head Teacher, 3 class teachers, a caretaker and a cook, some of these may be from the village, but if teachers are brought from outside the area, they will lodge with local families, bringing more income into the village.

Usually the largest structure in the village, the school becomes the focal point, and has a school management committee consisting of local village elders, teachers and representatives from the area. Together they ensure the smooth running of the school and out of school activities which include the ladies' garden, first aid training, sports, religious studies, and meetings. The building is also used for Government health programmes such as inoculation and worming by visiting health workers; it can also be used as a polling station at election time enabling more villagers to vote as travel to major towns is expensive.

The existing Government Lower Basic Schools are around 3 to 5 kilometres from our nursery schools, in view of this distance many parents don't send their children to school until they are around 10 years old and are better able to cope with the long walk. Traditionally many rural families have also kept the eldest boy and girl from school to help with the farming and around the home. With the provision of a village nursery school we have been able to persuade families to educate more of their children and it is not unusual to have children as old as 11 in nursery class 1.

This may change shortly as the Government plans to introduce compulsory primary education from 2015. This will put an enormous strain on the existing Lower Basic schools as many are already running a two shift system to accommodate present pupil numbers. Our nursery schools will be able to help this dilemma as nursery education only takes place in the morning, enabling the premises to be used for Lower Basic, 7-10 year olds in the afternoon. This would also mean that the children will be older before undertaking the 5 kilometre walk to the local School, and give the Ministry more time to extend existing school premises. In fact at Jamwelly, with the support of the Regional Education Directorate, the school management committee are already constructing 2 additional classrooms from local materials prior to the state replacing them with a cement structure sometime in the near future.

Over the last ten years we have met many young people who have benefited from the Charity's activities and it has been a pleasure to see how the introduction of a school library has encouraged pupils to read and extend their education beyond the traditional rote learning of the past. Some of these youngsters are now at University in the Gambia and it will be interesting to see how they contribute to their country on graduation. The Trust has also encouraged volunteers and gap year students to visit the Gambia and extend their own understanding of the world by helping in schools. The next ten years promises even greater changes, 60% of the population is now under 16 and we can be certain that the Trust's activities will be essential to support the Government and Community efforts for years to come.

As seasoned travellers we were looking for somewhere different to go on holiday in April 2010 and came across Gambia on the travel radar. We booked our flight and hotel and started researching places to visit etc. On Trip Advisor were several people saying to make sure you took plenty of pens and pencils. We thought this was very strange and started to investigate further, luckily someone had put on a link to The Gambian Schools Trust and I decided to ring up and ask what it was all about. We were hooked! We started collecting things to take over – (we both work in a high school so that helped). We travelled to Gambia and loved it – we were taken to a school in Kanalai and realised how little they had. We are lucky enough to have a fabulous new school with all the facilities you could ask for at Walbottle Campus and decided there and then to help them. When we returned with the help of the Head Teacher we managed to raise enough money to build them a library and sent out enough books to stock it.

We were able to return at Easter this year and got all dressed up in African dress and went to the opening ceremony of the library which was now completed. As we drove up to Kanalai village we were greeted with red, white & blue bunting, the villagers decked out in their finery and a beautiful building sporting “Walbottle Library” on the side!! We were absolutely thrilled, as was the Head and staff when we returned with hundreds of photos and tales of our amazing day.

We are now fundraising for another library and have about 40 banana boxes so far full of resources for various schools.

Shaun, Gill, Shaun & Steph Nelson

### Ellie, who is 14, gives us her impression of The Gambia.

My name is Ellie Brown. My sister Eve and I have recently been on an adventure to The Gambia. My Grandma, Christine Brown, is part of the 'Gambian Schools Trust' she has been on the committee for about 7 years now. Ever since I can remember she has helped others and did lots of charity work for the Gambia. She goes there twice a year to see her Gambian and English friends; this Easter Eve and I ventured with her.

Here's some of the things we did in our 10 days in Gambia:-

- ☞ Visiting local schools built by the charity.
- ☞ Creating colourful, vibrant sand paintings
- ☞ Opening Walbottle school library.
- ☞ Meeting a Gambian MP
- ☞ Handing out football shirts to families
- ☞ Taking a trip to the crocodile park
- ☞ Watching monkeys clamber through the hotel grounds.

The best experience of my Gambian adventure was visiting Nemasu primary school and meeting all the children. Their lives and academic lives were so much different to mine and my sister's. They loved learning and going to school, they're all so determined to succeed. Also, all the children wanted to make friends, any child I spoke to asked for my name. I played with the children, they were amazed at the bubble machine, their eyes lit up as bubbles fluttered around their sandy playground.

Travelling around Gambia with Mammass the taxi driver was extremely different to travelling around the streets of England. With dust, sand and dirt everywhere and no tarmac roads, you can imagine how much of a bumpy ride it was. Not just the roads that were different, the things we saw whilst we were travelling around are very peculiar compared to our home town; cows and donkeys roaming the streets; people begging; selling fruit; dancing and singing; all doing their best to earn some sort of living. To say their life styles are so deep in poverty, every Gambian I met seemed happier than anyone in England.

Gambia was a wonderful experience, worth the 2 injections and 17 days of tablets! One thing that did surprise me was that both Eve and I came away with no mosquito bites! Going to Gambia made me realise how different people around the world live and how their life styles work.



### Finally, Tess Wilkins writes:-

For our third visit to the Gambia, my husband, Allan, and I were delighted to be joined by Mary Copeland, Headteacher, and Vlad Waley, Head of Science, of Belle Vue Girls' School in Bradford, where I also teach. One of our objectives was to visit our partner school, Ndungu Kebbeh Basic Cycle School, and to introduce Mary and Vlad to Principal Ousman Kebbeh, the rest of the staff, and of course the pupils. Another objective was to enjoy some winter sunshine in this lovely country!

As always, Hilary and Steve arranged everything perfectly, and - thanks to them - we were able to combine the visit to Ndungu Kebbeh with attendance at the opening of the new school at Loumen. This also meant an overnight stay in the bungalows near Farafenni: an amazing experience in itself.

We travelled by a combination of minibuses

and the small boats - with Vlad and Mary highly entertained by being carried on shoulders by the boys waiting on the beach to “help” us to and from our boats!

Ndungu Kebbeh gave us a fantastic welcome, and Allan and I were greeted like old friends. There was even a performance of a special dance for “the husband”! It was quite humbling to see that the staff had saved all the boxes we had sent them in the last container, so that we could see that they had arrived safely at the school. They would only open them, once we had left.

Staying at the MRC bungalows was rather like being on a film set; goats and leaves drifting around among the seemingly deserted buildings... You felt as though anything could happen! The opening of the new school at Loumen was a new experience for all of us, and we felt a bit like minor royalty. It was quite luxurious, sitting in the shade and watching the scene unfold before us, while dressed in our gorgeous African outfits, made for us by the women of the village.

We packed so much into the two days up country, that it felt as though that made up at least half of our week's stay. Our Gambia River cruise was a highlight of this year's holiday. But the most memorable parts of our trips are always our days in the real Gambia, when we have the privilege of getting to know real people, and developing our relationship with our partner school. We are still saving up for a well for Ndungu Kebbeh, and we're still collecting banana-boxes full of equipment and presents, to go in the next container this Autumn. We've already raised a bit more money – and we'll be back with some students next year.

