

Autumn 2007

Week 1

We were met at the airport by Ansumana - the acting Head Teacher and Keba – the chair of the new PTA. It is always good to see familiar faces and their greetings were clearly warm and welcoming. We were into the airport and out with our 6 boxes of materials in 15 minutes which was marvellous and so we were able to immediately slot into news of Farato life. Travelling through the villages towards Tonka Kunda, our home, helped to settle us into African mode. On arrival at the school 120 Primary school children were waiting patiently under the neem tree and as soon as we stepped out of the pick up truck they burst into greetings: “Tony is our leader, we shall not be moved” and the Gambian national anthem, which by now we can sing by heart. After a very long journey we suddenly overcame our tiredness with the realisation that all these children represented the families in Farato who had benefited from GamBLE and could now go to a good Primary school instead of walking to the next village to be in classes of over 60 where one teacher taught two classes simultaneously (multi-grading). We very seldom have time to recollect what we are achieving but this was one of those revealing moments!

We were overcome when we walked into the doors of our house – everything was spotlessly clean and the tiled floors actually shone. Signs of the rainy season were inevitable, such as splash marks on the courtyard walls and a dampish smell in the strong cupboard but the latter disappeared once the doors were opened and the air introduced. It is difficult to imagine the level of humidity that occurs during the rains – not so much the actual drops because they have been fewer this year and the water table is much lower even this early in the dry season.

Once we'd unpacked our clothes from the cupboard in the living room and had a cup of tea (no milk as the Marvel had not survived the rains) we walked up to the market area and bought some corn cobs and a water melon. So many greetings as we passed everyone by, "Welcome back" and "You are home again." Once we had boiled and eaten the corn we felt very, very tired and flopped into bed to a deep, relaxed sleep.

We were surprised to learn that Thursday was a school holiday (All Saints Day) – given that nearly all the children and certainly all the staff are Muslims and that we do not have a holiday in UK for this. But the Gambian way is to embrace all cultures when it comes to holidays! So we used the time to shop for bits and pieces for the house, visit the bank, the surveyor of the primary school project and Saffie – the newly retired Head Teacher. Her resignation in early September had been due to ill health and when we found her in her compound she had just returned from the hospital with medicines for chest and abdominal infections. A long rest is what she needs. We gave her two photo frames with a picture of her in one and a series of twelve (one for each month) photos of every volunteer or group who had visited Yalding School Farato. She seemed thrilled.

Friday saw us in school. We started with a report from Ansumana who seems to have done wonders with keeping the staff focused, the environment clean and pleasant and disciplined pupils and staff. Children and staff arrive on time and classes are busy and vibrant. It was good to see the youngest ones (who were a bit bemused by the new Toubabs) playing with their toys while Sanna their teacher observed their behaviour and got to know his new intake. In the afternoon Karen observed each of the primary school teachers teaching in order to give them their regular feedback and appraisal. Jorju, who started in December 2006, knows the needs of her pupils very well and works patiently to ensure that all the children understand. Ansumana, the original primary teacher

who began in September 2005, now has numerous ideas for making sense of the concepts his pupils are learning. They have practical experience of making tens out of units before doing their sums and he takes the time to help the slower children individually. Kemo the newly appointed teacher is an experienced practitioner with first prize from college for his practical teaching. He too seemed thorough in presenting ideas to the pupils.

The primary teachers face a challenge – yet again, because this happened last year – of working in shared classrooms. The builders are still completing the two new classrooms of the primary school and so the teachers and pupils have to share the nursery accommodation. This means that in the morning the nursery runs from 8.30 – 13.00 and then the primary runs from 13.30 – 17.30. Not ideal but we hope this will be over in a fortnight when they move into their lovely new and airy classrooms. Having a two-storey building is unique to the village and because it stands over the boundary wall all the villagers can see what to them is the symbol of GamBLE's achievement. The PTA met in the afternoon and invited us to attend. They informed us of the pleasure at the progress of the school, to the extent that there are 100 pupils on the waiting list. They appealed for us to run two sessions (morning and afternoon) to accommodate the demand but that would mean more teachers and therefore more sponsors for salaries. When we explained the situation, the parents were very understanding but it made us think that perhaps we need to investigate these possibilities.

Saturday was a day of meetings. First Karen met with the representatives of the Early Childhood Development Association (ECD) to discuss GamBLE's plans to set up a programme of workshops in partnership with the Gambian College Education Department with the ECD association as monitors to ensure that the content and design of the workshop programme is relevant for the Gambian nursery teachers taking part. The ECD members will also help to identify the schools and teachers who most need support and help. Two Level 1 workshops

were planned for this year and one for Level 2 teachers who have already attended a number of GamBLE workshops. Straight after this meeting Karen held a half day workshop with the teachers of Farato school. Using the theme of minibeasts we explored mathematical games, science projects and language activities through song and rhyme. Not one of the teachers knew about the life cycle of a butterfly and Karen's discovery of a caterpillar on the terrace of Tonka Kunda led to a timely discussion. Adama from the compound opposite cooked us a delicious fish and rice lunch and the teachers went happily home after a long but useful day.

Sunday day of rest. Tony and Karen went to visit Lamin Balajoh – a good friend from back to our first joint visit to The Gambia in 1999. His family has grown to three children now and he is studying at weekends for a diploma in Social Work. Apparently there is an urgent need for Social Workers and outside agencies are sponsoring the education of the first group of Gambians to qualify for the role. After a friendly chat in his compound we sneaked off to the beautiful Osprey Paradise beach which is just a mile or so on from Lamin's home and sat under a shady palm to read and relax – our last opportunity for several weeks as we look forward to a busy three weeks of visitors, workshops and a variety of essential jobs in the school.

Monday we visited Take Care nursery on the outskirts of Farato to assess their needs and advise about how to spend the money that has been raised for them by a couple in Devon. The walk along the tracks that weave around the villages was relaxing and interesting as people greeted us and we noted life in and around the compounds. Fetching water, washing clothes and preparing wood fires for cooking are the ubiquitous activities whilst the occasional young boy bowls a old bicycle wheel as a hoop with a stick and babies crawl in and amongst the family activities. We returned to Yalding School Farato to greet a jeep load of visitors from Kent and Sussex who are working on a project in the

nearby village of Jabang. They wanted to see how we had made progress since 2000 and we were happy to show them around. Not only are the buildings evidence of GamBLE's achievements but the quality of the teaching is a noticeable difference between our school and other nurseries.

Karen spent the whole of Tuesday touring Region 1 looking at a variety of nursery schools that had been chosen to participate in the teacher training programme. The range of needs spread from a tiny classroom miles of the beaten track where 120 pupils attended and one very disillusioned young teacher struggled with her sister to teach children from 3-7 years old to an impressive nursery sponsored by a German association which not only had sturdy, large classrooms, play equipment and resources but two teachers for each class. In the same 7 years that GamBLE has been working with Farato this school had grown from nothing to an institution on a par with any European equivalent. However, GamBLE has invested its resources into the extension of the Primary school and by this means will give a more extensive education to a larger number of children.

So our first week ended with our usual feelings of awe at how much there is for us to do here but definitely with a sense that things in the school are running well and that although the completion of the next primary classrooms has been delayed, the teachers and pupils are coping well with adapting to the situation. The primary children come to school in the afternoon when the nursery pupils have gone and share their classrooms. This means that their day is shorter and all teachers and pupils are having to share furniture and equipment which can be confusing. However, we are assured that (Inshallah – God willing) the new block will be available for use by Friday week and we are doing all that we can to put the required pressure on to see this come to pass!

We are fitting in to Gambian life in our home. Shopping and cooking remain a challenge – local markets offer a very limited range of food and every stall

offers the same: limes, tomatoes and peppers. But we are eating the sweet potatoes, okra and aubergine from the school garden and local rice is tasty. We are sharing our home with a nest of birds and some rather large wood eating bees but everyone is tolerant, easy and happy go lucky here! After all the sun is shining!