

Autumn 2007

Week 2 - a visit from Hayesbrook School VIth formers

On Wednesday the group of 9 students and 2 teachers from Hayesbrook School Tonbridge arrived and the village really went to town with their welcome.

Children teachers and parents greeted them at the junction of the high road and walked them down to the school where even more pupils and parents gathered to sing welcome songs. The village drummers beat exciting rhythms, children adults and students all joined in the dancing and a traditional tribal creature frightened the children and intrigued the UK students. After some impressive dramas and performances from the pupils they escorted the students along the ½ mile journey through the village to the bungalows where they would be staying. They were all amazed by the warmth and energy with which the people of Farato greeted them. To the villagers, a visit from youngsters who are prepared to give their time to travel so far to be with Gambian people is regarded as the height of flattery and celebration. A week is not very long but the plans of both GamBLE and the people of Farato were that the students should have as many Gambian experiences as possible! They started the morning with teaching, gardening and painting in the school, meeting the teachers and giving the pupils new experiences. Some of the very youngest children had not seen white people before and were a bit phased – one little boy burst into tears and didn't come back to school for a week. The majority were excited and very pleased to shake hands and sing songs of welcome.

In the afternoon Karen took the students to a nearby village where her friend Neneh had arranged a batik making workshop. In the shade of her compound the students designed their own pictures, and learnt how to use wax and colour

to create a variety of images from football logos to African scenes. Whilst waiting for their masterpieces to dry in the sun (which took literally minutes) Neneh showed us round her garden where she grew mandarins, grapefruit, okra, sorrel, cassava, peppers and paw paw. Over the wall she had sown two kinds of sweet potato and she invited the students to dig up some tubers so that her daughter could cook them sweet potato chips. The students watched her light a fire, heat the oil and discovered that the result was delicious. Their second day was a full session working in the school, although Fridays finish earlier because it is the Muslim holy day. The heat of the sun meant that they were ready for an early night and woke to a weekend encompassing the GamBLE "Grand Tour".

On Friday afternoon Brenda Sharples, an experienced primary teacher from Boughton Monchelsea, Kent, arrived and she was overcome by the welcome the school children gave her. They had painted a huge "Welcome to Brenda!" sign and waved this enthusiastically as they sang her greetings. After that Brenda was welcomed to her accommodation in Tonka Kunda.

Saturday morning saw Brenda and the students up with the donkey, cockerel and Imam calls and off by hired minibus to the west coast of the country. They visited Tanji museum which is a small folk museum giving a good introduction to Gambian tribal life, weaving and local animals and then moved on to the beach where the fishing industry operates. Some of the students found the smells and sights too difficult to bear but the sea provides work at a variety of levels for many Gambians and Africans from surrounding countries and without fish the Gambians would eat only rice and home produced vegetables. The fishermen row from the shore in their colourful rough hewn boats and sometimes spend several nights aboard as they wait for a full catch. Very few Gambians can swim and the currents can be deceptive and the sea rough, so it is not uncommon for lives to be lost. Only last month 40 fishermen were drowned in

a storm. Given the close relationships within the Gambian people, this tragedy too the menfolk from entire families.

When the fish come ashore a large group of women come to greet the boats and buy the fresh fish. Some will sell it on the spot and surrounding them is a bevy of wheelbarrow runners, water carriers and seagulls all striving to earn something from the catch. The rest of the fish is sorted into species and prepared for either salting and drying or smoking. The huts on the beach have fires and racks ready to spread the gutted fish and many Gambians who live further from the sea will depend upon dried or smoked fish for their meals.

On leaving this busy place the students went on to the home and compound of Lamin Balajoh whom Tony and Karen met in 1999. He is a school teacher in the nearby town of Sanyang and a scout leader – both jobs he executes with great energy and commitment and it was through him that the Yalding Scouts arranged their memorable trip in 2003. His wife Roheh is always happy to cook a meal for our regular visitors and the students had the chance to watch her prepare fish and rice on an open fire, pounding the ingredients in a large pestle and mortar and cooking in palm oil in a huge iron cooking pot. When the meal was ready everyone shared from large bowls and all the students made an attempt to eat in the traditional way with their right hands. The resulting orange mouths and oily hands were proof of their valiant attempts and they all seemed to relish the taste of the food. The rest of the time was spent in the compound playing with the children and listening to the adults talk together or just silently be. Eventually farewells were made and the group went on down a bumpy track to Osprey Paradise beach where they finished the day on an unspoilt sandy beach, paddles in the shallow waters of the Atlantic and watched the sun go down amidst palm trees and large horned cows wandering along the shore. The day gave them a rapid introduction to Gambian life and enabled them to meet people outside of Farato village.

The next day was spent in the town of Bakau where there is a crocodile pool – famous for bringing fertility to women if you bathe with the reptiles. No one seemed to feel the need to do that but everyone was brave enough to stroke the ubiquitous “Charlie” who lies on the banks of the pool, well fed and tolerant of visitors. From there the students walked through the streets of the town amongst open sewers and the general residue of human life. The smells were challenging but the Gambian people cheerful and welcoming of strangers. This walk gave yet further insights into how Gambians scratch a living – selling small items to the tourist round the pool but, as you move further into the real town, the simple little shops all seem to sell similar things – hair cuts, photo services and a limited range of groceries such as rice, salt and sugar. The treat at the end of this walk was a swim in the pool of Afircaan Village hotel. This is the residence that Tony and Karen used to frequent on earlier visits to The Gambia and it is a simple hotel in the middle of the town where the manager is always happy for GamBLE to bring visitors.

Monday saw everyone up and ready for work but the day was punctuated with a drumming workshop that Karen’s friend Baboucarr provided in a compound behind the craft market in Brikama. The experience of taking a bush taxi into the town was new to most of the students and Brenda – old minibuses act as public taxis and people, goats, fish, chickens et al squeeze into the rusty vehicles to travel all over the country. We all managed to cram into the same dilapidated one and dropped off in the busy streets of Brikama. Hardly any toubabs (white people) venture into the town and it is a dusty, rubbish strewn mass of colourful Gambians all to-ing and fro-ing along the maze of streets. The main market is crammed tight with stalls selling shoes, materials, hardware, food and soap. You could probably buy any basic item but it is difficult to tell which stall sells what as they are so close together and many secret further goods behind the front display.

In the open space of the compound we all sat under a mango tree and, whilst a lady and her children toiled at the morning's washing, Baboucarr taught us a series of rhythms on an array of drums that he had procured from his friends. It was a relaxing yet stimulating hour or two and culminated in Baboucarr and his friend giving an impressive performance of improvised rhythms.

Brenda and Karen saw the students back home to Farato in a very dubious bush taxi that seemed to need over 6 young men to push it to start. It took a back road route to avoid the police check on the high way but everyone knew that Inshallah (God willing) they would have a safe journey! Brenda and Karen walked through the Brikama streets and eventually found the telephone centre where Karen phoned her mum on this her 85th birthday.

Back at the school we all carried on working with the pupils in the primary school. Their new classrooms still are not ready. Although we were assured of completion by Wednesday there are a few little problems! There is no paint available for the ceilings and there was a death in the village and all the workers are related to that person so they went off to the immediate funeral. So it will "definitely" be Friday week for the end of the job.

On the last evening the students, Brenda, Karen and Tony all went to a nearby Nature reserve to watch the animals drink from the watering hole and mix with the monkeys. Although there were fewer animals than we expected – the deer and crocodiles were shy – the proliferation of green and red monkeys and baboons provided ample excitement. It was dark by the time we returned to the minibus and from there we drove to the school where a party of teachers, villagers and members of the Board of Directors had arranged a farewell party for the students. In pitch dark we greeted everybody (very hard to identify each other) and once the classroom was lit with a few candles we sat down to peanut cake and fish pies washed down with Fanta. Speeches and

presentations were followed by energetic dancing and everyone happily shared the final hours of a week of hard work and new friendships.

The students arranged a very exciting sports day for their final morning in school. I am sure that they did not realise how exciting it was going to be until the teachers started whooping up the volume. Each of them supported a team (Red, Blue, Green or Yellow) and provided their own vocal and instrumental backing. Jorjor in particular took her role seriously and on top of her Muslim veil she wore a Hayesbrook T-shirt, shorts and a baseball cap. Fusion at its zenith! Everytime a child won a race the teacher leading that team picked up the victor and sang, screamed and shouted as s/he paraded the child above the heads of the pupils and students. After every race the excitement grew and eventually the walls of the school were topped with village boys eager to watch the games. The pupils seemed a little bemused by the seriousness with which their teachers took the scoring and results and suggestions of corruption were rife – one teacher was suspected of bribing pupils in opposing teams to lose their race! – but the final result was warmly accepted and everyone had thrown themselves into an exhilarating event.

Finally the students packed themselves on to the minibus that was to take them to the airport and their departure was lamented by the villagers. They had had an “amazing” week – to quote several of them and contributed a great deal to the life of the school and village. The school’s farewell ceremony was a mixture of joy and sorrow – just the right emotional mix for a short week of extensive experiences.