

Spring 2005



Tony and I spent 3 weeks in Farato over Easter and although we worked very hard, we probably returned with a longer TO DO list! We were impressed to see the fourth classroom started and the entire school wall plastered inside and out.

We started work first thing in the morning: a meeting with the new PTA committee and Saffie, the headmistress, and inspection of classrooms. The teaching standards continue to rise and the children were all preparing for a special ceremony to celebrate Gambian Independence Day. Our main plan was to identify and visit five schools whose teachers were attending the Early Childhood Development 3-year course (ECD) at the Gambian College. Tony and I returned to 2 schools that attended our previous workshop in December to see how they were developing. The teachers there seemed to be enjoying their teaching a great deal more although one school has had to vacate its premises and will be opening in a borrowed building with no roof.

The following week Linda Gilbert and I visited a different school each day to assess the needs of the school (in terms of materials) and the teachers. One school was tiny and literally made of sticks and grass, where over 40 children from 2 to 8 were squatting on the sandy floor. It was 3 km from the nearest road and we had to borrow 2 cows and a cart to return home! Another school had a solidly built classroom but no furniture and over 80 children. Most of the school lacked materials, although one teacher had created a wonderful range of teaching resources from recycled cardboard.

Child-Centred

The purpose of the visits was to invite all the teachers to a 2-day workshop at Yalding School, Farato, and to bring their own ideas and skills to share. All have completed the ECD course at the Gambian College or are attending. However, due to lack of materials, support and, in most cases, their own education, many lack confidence to try new ideas or develop beyond traditional chalk and talk. The Gambian government is keen for education to proceed to a more child-centred methodology and we planned activities to enable teachers to enjoy and use the new teaching style.

In the third week we were joined by Clare and Derek Hudson and Sarah Mann (who lives in Gillingham, Kent and works for the Kent Music School). Whilst Sarah, Linda and I organised workshops, Clare and Derek went to market and prepared meals for 30 teachers. Tony supervised and captured some memorable moments on camera.

Crumbled

It was a challenge to organise days along Gambian lines. We had to take account of the importance Gambians attach to food (bread in the morning, rice in the afternoon, NEVER eat with your left hand!) as well as the educational content of workshops. We needed to allow time for prayers (on Fridays men and women pray separately so our timetable crumbled that day).

We learnt a great deal from watching each other and exchanging ideas. We made excellent games and visual aids from cement sacks, rice bags and cardboard boxes and teachers left with "goodie" bags containing paper, pens, toys and games donated by friends in England.

Jay Presnell, an art teacher from Nettlestead, Kent, joined us and spent a wonderful fortnight working with students at the secondary school. He visited local artists and lived for a week with Saikou and Oumie Njie and their 6 children. He painted beautiful birds on the school veranda.

Derek and Tony built a Sound Bar of bells, triangles and recycled materials suspended for the children to experiment with combining sounds. It proved very popular and we bought the children two djembes (drums) and a balafon (a sort of xylophone) – now they can play local instruments.

Derek and Tony also spent a great deal of time visiting the Planning Office to design the new phase of the school and gain approval. We hope to build six classrooms on the same site to form the Lower Basic School (Primary) for children aged 7 – 12. In September 2005 the current new classroom will accommodate the first Primary pupils and we will appoint a fourth nursery teacher, Jainaba.

The project is developing rapidly and we keep on the run to keep up! Sometimes it is frustrating we cannot achieve all the things we see as needing to be done but it is evident the children in school learnt a great deal in the last year because their teachers are, in turn, learning fast. Above all, they enjoy teaching and we certainly gain a lot of pleasure from our visits. At the farewell ceremony on our last morning very few of our party managed to hold back the tears!