

JOURNAL Spring 2009

Day 1 March 20 – uncomplicated flight and landed safely. Meth with huge enthusiasm by Abibatou (Deputy HT) and Abdoulie (our driver for 6 years now!). After the short drive to the school, we arrived to a greeting party of teachers who all came to help carry our bags to our home Tonka Kunda and stayed for exchanges of news.

Jainaba was keen to show of the Cultural Group (aka Yalding School Choir) and at 5pm I joined them and was very pleased to hear that they had continued with the songs and learnt some new ones. Numbers seemed a little lower but actually children kept flowing in and by the time we finished there must have been over 3 participants and Haddy, Abibatou, Mamhojam and Ida represented the teachers. I taught them *Bravo bravissimo* and *A Boat to cross the river* which we can later try in 3 part canon. Trish Vella Burrows and I have planned a variety of repertoire to share with her choir in Folkestone and we really hope to perform together via video link at the Choir Fest in October in Yalding, Kent.

We inspected the work done on the toilets by the Leigh group GPO and were impressed with their work. Unfortunately the water is not flowing into the hand basins although there is a small leak, so we need to ask the plumber to locate the problem. We plan to convert one of the original toilets into a flush one for the students that will then become the staff toilet and the other into a shower cubicle.

We settled in easily by unpacking cooking materials and bedding, ate a dinner of curried garden egg (straight from the garden) and rice. We are so organised to have all this in the store! Slept very well as we were tired from days of long preparation.

Day 2 March 21 – after a brilliant night's sleep (10 hours solid), galvanised into unpacking the store cupboard in Tonka Kunda in order to locate the SIM cards that we had packed "safely" when we left in December. Tony went off to the bank, to buy a flushing toilet and shower for the students and to meet Bevin Mendeh (the structural engineer) to commence building plans and I unpacked the 80k of materials that we had brought with us, sorted out the cupboard into logical areas, but still could not find the SIM cards. By 3 o'clock it began to feel a bit like time for breakfast and Tony returned with some bread, so we prepared a marmite sandwich each. Exactly at the moment that we sat down with it and a well earned Julbrew, Ansumana entered with a huge plate of fish stew. He was obviously enthusiastic to share it with us, so we sat down together and shared the spicy hot food. How wonderful to taste cassava again!

The PTA had planned a fund raising programme in the school and the ladies had cooked this meal for the Kambekele band of Jola musicians and dancers. Once they had eaten they began their music and people started arriving. We joined the occasion and were soon involved in the dancing and appreciation of the traditional event. These musicians are favourites of the President and he sponsors their tours all over the world to accompany him or the Gambian football team. Although the dance style is very simple and repetitive, the gradual increased tempo and complexity of the drums and claves turns the body into a pounding frenzy of movement which makes dancing

very exciting. Well after dark the enjoyment continued and by the end crowds of women and children danced in a writhing mass in front of the musicians. The PTA had invited patrons to donate a chosen amount and that alone raised D5,000 and the takings on the door at D5 for a child and D10 for an adult must have amounted to quite a bit given the steady flow of incomers. It is so good to see the PTA being active and a strong statement of support for the school that the villagers throng to donate their presence and money.

Day 3 March 22

After our preferred breakfast of tapalapa (French bread) and eggs with Tony's homemade yogurt and some papaya we walked around the village. First stop was a compound where we left some bottles with a man who sold kerosene – he told us to return tomorrow, then to the Painter man where his lovely sister and son greeted us happily and we sat inside their home talking until their father eventually stirred from his sick bed, miraculously better when he heard we had called and that we needed some painting done! The daughter had been talking about her longing to go to UK but when we explained the difficulties of existing on £10,000 a year she was completely staggered to understand that the dream that she had been born to follow was, in fact, a myth. She was almost grateful to us for explaining the truth.

We then walked around to the Alkalo's compound to greet her as is traditional when you arrive in a village as a "stranger". She was holding court with 3 ladies and a man but was very pleased to see us, sit us down and talk. We gave her a little present of hand soap and cream, (woman to woman) and took us discreetly into her bedroom to receive it (not in front of the others). By the time we had walked back through the village to the school Abdoulie was waiting for us and we prepared to go to Sanyang. We had decided to have a working break. A bit too early to give ourselves a day off, and yet we felt we had worked very hard in UK to bring ourselves here and so the compromise was that we had a planning meeting on the beach! We also carried out some research on some beach rooms that we had been told about. We thought that when Shirley comes for 3 weeks she might deserve a break over the Easter weekend. The rooms were OK and the location was peaceful and clear sand and sea but there was no shade apart from the actual bar. We walked along the shore to our known part of the beach Osprey, where we could sit under a shade and be left in peace to plan the forthcoming visits of 15 people, to read a little, have a quick swim and a couple of local beers. We were home before dark and so continued working at accounts, daily diaries and plans for school tomorrow. The Grade 4 children were watering the garden and when they had finished came to ask for books to read. About 8 of them huddled on to our verandah and read aloud for about an hour and it was wonderful to hear the buzz of their enthusiasm. Some of the words made no sense at all (parts of the house such as landing and hall way) are non-existent in their village and they tried to understand "pyjamas" and slinking.

We ate after dark from local vegetables and cous cous but the gas gave out part way through so it was a bit crunch – or was that the stewed insects that had been attracted to the lights?! Talking of which, our brand new solar lamps are not coming up to our expectations. One lasts for a little over 30 mins and the other is not charging.

Day 4 March 23

Up to our first day of work in the school. I went to a Senior Management meeting with Ansumana (PCO) Abibatou (DH) and Jorjor (Senior Teacher). We talked about the facilities for the visiting students who will be camping at the end of the NS building and using N1 classroom to store luggage and have their meals. The plan is for members of the PTA to take turns to provide an evening meal which we will all eat communally and then the students will be responsible for providing their own breakfasts and lunches from local shops and the market.

After assembly I started my plan of observing teaching for half the morning in each class. I started in N1 where Jainaba has only really been teaching for this term as she has been on maternity leave. We have had problems with her application and attitude during last academic year and just before she had her baby but today was a real delight to watch. She was well planned, rally interacted with the children and seemed to be completely on top of how to teach such young ones and create a vibrant but well focused class. I wrote up a report on her with a few suggestions for both her own personal development and for the classroom generally and after break observed Sanna in N2. Although he has not yet completed his training (1 more year to go) he is doing exceedingly well and his reputation has reached the parents. His pupils hang on his every word and even though they are very young they listen to his rather long explanations with interest. He was explaining about people who help us in the environment and had dressed some children up as police and fire officers (thanks to the very popular donations of dressing up clothes we have been brining from UK since Abi's visit in June) as well as some in party clothes. He explained carefully that whatever men can do women can try to do too, so that he had a policewoman and a fire woman. When it came to the boy dressed as Batman he went into a fascinating improvisation on cross dressing! He explained to the 5-6 year olds that some men like to dress like women. When he had finished this matter of fact description, I stepped in and tried to explain that Batman is just like the other officers who wears a uniform and badge to show that he helps people and that he turns from man to bat at night. When Sirif held out his arms and the teachers and children saw the wings on his costume there was a gasp of understanding and delight. So that was that sorted!

After a story from a book, Sanna also impressed me with his request that the children tidy up all the papers from the floor before they went home. In fact, there were hardly any to be found as his classroom is already very neat.

Overall, I would say that his challenge is to spend less time talking directly to the pupils and more letting them contribute their own ideas (which, when we did this, they loved and he soon saw how easily they took to this) and from what I saw of the phonics lesson in N1, the teachers still need help in understanding that sounds and symbols are, together, clues for building words, not an end in themselves. The actions that we have introduced after the Jolly Phonics idea work really well as the children remember them well. But too often here and in other schools I have visited where Jolly Phonics has been introduced (at great expense to the sponsors) the teachers and pupils are simply enjoying the actions and not applying them to symbols and blending them to make words. I is just a question of understanding the purpose and we are planning a workshops (in house, just for our teachers) on Saturday. We need to cover this so carefully and often.

After school Tony and I worked on the computers to put our records straight and Baba (Grade 3 teacher) showed us the DVD he had put together of photos for the GPO visit in February. He had made a brilliant job of putting music and fades in/out to the show. What a find he is!

Ansumana returned from another of his string of visits to various government departments to finalise the handover of the two pallets of school materials that arrived at the port on 7 March. Over 2 weeks later we still have more hoops to jump through – and this all because we want a duty waiver. We think it would probably have been quicker and eventually cheaper, to pay the import tax!

During the afternoon I prepared Maths ideas for the NS and Tony bought new gas, talked to the builder. My work was regularly interrupted with visitors. First, Sidia Sowe the craft maker who supplies a lot of items for the Craft Stall in England and then the children who water the garden. They come to extend the singing from choir and to read, but without supervision from their teacher (Kemo) they go for the social side before they have done the watering! It is a wonderful buzz of sound as they share chairs and books to consume all the words they possibly can!

We cooked a pasta dish for supper: local carrots, green pepper and onions, tomato puree and a little tin of kraft cheese added for the Italian effect! I dry fried aubergine slices to add to the salad which was really good with lime juice for dressing. With so many “garden egg” on our doorstep we are going to need to be inventive with ways of using them.

Day 5 March 24

I was able to resume my plan of visiting classrooms and, after greeting all the teachers in their rooms, I sat with Sainabou in N3 until break time. She has come such a long way since we first visited the school – originally she was the only teacher and, therefore, Head. And as the most senior teacher when Saffie (HT) came to us in UK in 2006, she was acting head. She likes to have new ideas and use them but she finds it difficult to progress beyond a given idea or to understand fully what objectives and purpose lies behind the activities we give her. Sohna is a young volunteer who is working with her and she seems to interact with the pupils really well and, although very quiet, Abi reports that she is potentially a very good teacher. I will have to see her working independently I think because it is not easy for her to show initiative if she is just helping.

The use of phonics is beginning to work and the children are able to spell 3 letter words phonically. It is important now to help the teachers realise that the phonic clues need to be applied at all times, not confined to a phonics lesson.

N4 was a great experience. Khaddy is really enthusiastic, imaginative and has a wonderful rapport with the children. She is so joyful in her approach and uses humour to inspire the slower ones and challenge the quicker ones. We had a lesson in the garden on the environment and how important it is to keep it clean. When I told her about caterpillars eating the cabbage leaves and then hatching into butterflies she was astonished and amazed to learn about the life cycle.

Tony spent the morning visiting various strategic people: first Bevin Mendeh who as the structural engineer gives the go ahead for the building of the next classroom; then Quantum, the internet provider – who, as soon as Tony Twoboab arrived, changed their story as given to Ansumana and Baba. We can connect to the airport signal and we do not have to pay for the more expensive non-domestic rate. It is a shame that the Gambian tradition is to stall and then wait for Gambians to offer bribes to get anything done. We do not bribe and so we are dealt with more directly.

I tried to get on with putting my inspections on record and preparing Maths activities for Sat workshop but, again, interruptions from visitors. The painter, Mr. Sowareh, is putting a lovely green colour up in our bedroom (and over himself and the floor and regularly needs reassurance that he is doing well,; Mr. Sidia Sowe called with samples for the craft stall and that took two of us over an hour to negotiate. Then Ansumana, Tony and Abdoulie all descended from their travels laden with plumbing bits, and stores for the kitchen (mostly tins of beans. Abdoulie the caretaker was very curious about the tin of beans which he handled, smelt and seemed amused by the fact it could be food. I did 600 pumps this evening to fill our water tank – that is a little more than usual, but I haven't left the school compound since Sunday and so I need more exercise!

Tonight's meal was chilli – using soya mince and local rice. Quite tasty!

Day 6 March 25

Catherine, the lady who interviewed us on the plane had texted us to say she wanted to visit the school this morning but she did not arrive. Tony worked on the register and discovered that nearly 1/3 of the pupils have not paid their fees this term. This is not good news as we are assured by staff and the Board of Directors that everyone can afford the sum required, it is just tradition to wait until strong requests are made to pay it. Without the income the school finds it hard to afford its commitments (salaries for the caretaker, nightwatchman, nursery nurse and the Oustas. She needs a stipend whilst she is at college for 3 years which the school is also paying, plus the temporary Oustas needs a salary too. Then we have been asked to pay for the uniform for the staff – at over £10 per person for 15 people – whilst the outstanding school fees could have paid for that. Good management is critical! It is a pity for us that the strictness about persuading parents to pay (stay away if you can't pay or come and say if you can't pay) only happens when we are here. It makes it look as if we are the ogres.

My observation of Grade 1 was a delight. Jorjor really prepared her English lesson well and gave a lot of care and time to helping children understand writing and spelling in a variety of different ways. In Grade 2 Haddy's lessons were also well prepared and contained a variety of discussion, action, student contribution, reading and vocabulary. She gave chances to children who were struggling to express themselves in English so that they could talk in their local language and then she translated. The boy for whom she did this later came back with another contribution to the class discussion but this time he had the confidence to speak English. The Integrated Studies lesson ended with a good demonstration about washing hands, using a handkerchief and a little drama that she had written and hugely amused the children. The Puzzles and Games sessions was also a good opportunity for children to share, co-operate and show each other a game they had learnt. One child was caught putting pieces in her bag and Haddy dealt with her strictly but without shaming

her. Still I believe the teachers need to understand more about jigsaw puzzles. There are too many pieces missing and Jorjor did not seem to know how to help the children who were trying to put one together.

I met with Abi and Jorjor to plan the meals for Saturday's workshop. As teachers on INSETs in UK do, they are looking forward to a treat for lunch. They put in a request that if we are doing breakfast, could it be different to the usual tapalapas that we bought from the lady on the high road (in other words, they can get that any day!).

Bevin Mendeh came to inspect the building and the sand arrived to start work on the final classroom. Tony and the plumber sorted out the blockage in the new pipes to the GPO toilet block but the solution means no running water to Tonka Kunda for a day. So we fetch buckets as we need them rather than do bulk pumping – not really a problem!

The worst disappointment of the day is that Ansumana returned from the State Finance office to report that the papers we need to take our materials from the sport have not yet been sent to the President's office and so after 19 days, inspection of the goods cleared, hours of visits to a range of departments, we still have no delivery or even a date/time when we can expect one. Everyone is so frustrated. To waive duty for education equipment has cost us money in fares, Ansumana's time and excess storage of the goods. We are beginning to think it would be cheaper to pay the tax. Tony will have to try tomorrow but it will be a disappointment if he succeeds where poor Ansumana has tried so hard and failed. Again, it's the story of people in high places not necessarily qualified but well connected who want extra "fish money" to do their job. Grrrrrrrrrrrr!

Mr. Painter man has now painted the living room a sunny yellow and the floor is filthy with dots of green (from the bedroom) and yellow all over it. He himself is a picture as he goes off to "take bath" and the crowning joke is that he has asked for the empty paint container to use for his shower water!

We ate a particularly delicious curried egg plant. The coconut powder is a pleasant change to tomato sauce.

Day 7 March 26

I finished observing in the Primary school by staying for the first part of the morning in Grade 3. Baba is quiet by character but has a brilliant sense of humour which he uses subtly. For example, he was talking about food cycles and dryly suggested to the pupils that he had died and his body was decomposing to provide excellent manure for the okra. The ch knew a great deal about condensation, photosynthesis and evaporation and were sent out to the garden to collect a variety of plants to study the parts of the plant.

Catherine arrived and Abibatou showed her round the school and I took over at break time. She came up to Tonka Kunda for a coffee and asked a lot of questions about how we have planned this project and how we propose to sustain it. She seems very keen to use our model to recommend to organisations like Thomas Cook. I was a bit late getting to Kemo's class in Grade 4 but was impressed by his teaching of English. He encouraged the ch to read short passages in small groups and then randomly as

individuals so that there was less of the T reading and pupils memorising the passage. Still there is too much of the T leading the activities and expecting ch to copy (without thinking) but gradually this is changing. Kemo and I listened to about a dozen ch read from the Ginn scheme that we have implemented and at whatever level they were, they read fluently although they did not stop to look at the pictures and talk about the story.

We rushed around tidying up Tonka Kunda. The new paint really brightens up the place and we managed to get the “living room” looking tidy and a bit less like a work place and school storage area.

Abdoulie (driver) was clearly looking forward to going to fetch Linda. We set off to the airport in good time and Linda arrived safely. Back at the school the Cultural Group had stayed on to welcome Linda and say some great songs. We settled her in and spent the evening cooking pasta and catching up.

We have Internet connection now! Quantum have fixed the antenna to the side of the school, found the signal and we have paid up. All the difficulties that were put in the way of Ansuamana and Baba have mysteriously evaporated and within 5 minutes of being in the office Tony had it all arranged. The Gambian attitude is to stall for bribes but when they know these will not be forthcoming, they jump to it. I find this embarrassingly awkward. Why should being white matter?

Day 8 March 27

It is still very windy in the mornings but becomes warmer by around 10 am. Sainabou was cuddling under a shawl she was so cold. After assembly I showed Linda around all the classrooms and then she spent time with Sanna as he will not be in the school next week. The College course starts on Monday and he and Mamhajom will be here for the rest of the term. It always surprises me that the College do not consider that it might be very difficult for schools to cope with one or more teachers out of the classroom at a time. Previously the course was designed to happen during the school holidays. Planning for all round convenience is a rare exercise. So often plans are made that give no consideration at all to the whole picture.

Chocolate biscuits for break time on Fridays and it was Sainabou’s birthday so we gave her a musical box and a homemade card. She seemed really delighted.

Linda and I planned the workshop for the next day until it was time for Cultural Group. The children had already arrived an hour or so early and wanted “reading” so we returned to the club that we started in November when the children that come for gardening stay to read as many books as they can possibly lay their hands on. They asked for the “Ben and Lad” books which are the Ghinn reading scheme. So that seems to have been a hit!

Jainaba and the other staff were late starting Cultural Group but Linda and I got going and we revised a few and learnt a couple of new ones: *Senua* and *Ram Sam Sam*. Tony brought over some of the Board of Directors to listen and we think they were impressed. The Board were meeting straight after the Cultural Group so we sat under the neem tree with four new members – one a retired school teacher, one an ex deputy head of the Lower Basic School in the next village and one an active lady member of

the PTA. We have yet to find out about the fourth one, but it is so good to have new blood. Sadly we have lost Master Hobart, an original supporter of the school and who died in December. The subjects that we talked about included the trials of the paperwork needed to clear the Duty Waiver on the materials we have sent over from UK; the collection of fees and the effectiveness of the PTA. The programme that they organised on Saturday made over D4000 which is a record amount. It is going in to the school account but will be kept to one side to provide a starting point for future fund raising events.

The collection of school fees is always an issue and I think one of the problems is that the village think that because there are twobaob sponsors the fees will only go into the pockets of Ansumana et al. In fact, the fees are pitched at a very low level and easily affordable so Ebrima the Vice Chair suggested that the policy should be to insist on annual fees and to turn them away if they did not pay.

We finished the meeting only just after dark which is a record and cooked a curry with cous cous. The solar lights are working quite well but they are not as powerful as we had hoped and one has resorted to rechargeable batteries.

Day 9 March 28

Woke with a cracking headache but coped with the Workshop for our own teachers. Linda and I planned a day that included as much teacher input as possible. We taught a new circle song and then focused on English. I dictated the words of the song to the teachers and this threw up a few problems. I then gave them a spelling book and encouraged them to use this to log words that they as individuals needed. It was hard for them to understand that they did not all have to copy the same word into their books. We led on to phonics and the importance of being uniform about the actions and sounds and then to actually use them to build words. I Spy, became "I hear with my little ear" and they found that quite challenging. Everything is so new and copying so engrained that it is a challenge to steer away from this.

The second part of the workshop was spent drawing a plan of the school compound and then, in pairs to track the area and highlight places where there were positive and negative points. We got into a discussion of how to improve health and beauty and Sanna took the opportunity to explain how he would like the office improved: electric fan, glass windows and (wait for it) carpet! I did point out that the latter was a high maintenance luxury and that the new office and resources room would be a huge improvement. We have decided to have a competition to publicise good practice in the school because if it comes from the children it will be well understood and passed on to the homes.

Day 10 March 29

I woke up with a persistent headache (which I have had for a day or two) and so took everything very slowly. Linda and I unpacked the Arts materials box and made a concerted effort to focus on 2-3 projects and organise the rest of the items into usable units. I painted some birds on the mural I proposed for our courtyard scene (an idea I created a year ago). Sidia Sowe came round with the black and white bags for the craft stall, so I paid for those, went to fetch ice and then Linda and I helped collect local wood to make a fence around the area that we are going to have for the school students to camp. Tony was in charge and designed a little gate to go in and out!

Baba miraculously arranged for us to get our internet signal at Tonka Kunda, so although we don't have electricity we have contact with home! Strange to read Paul's email whilst living in such basic conditions!

Picked a couple of garden egg for dinner tonight and Tony bought a few cups of rice so it sounds like curried egg plant tonight!