



A Report of an investigatory visit to Bo District between 13th April and May 4th 1981

After setting up an OWL Committee for Warwick District in the early part of 1981, it seemed that no further progress in promoting a link with Bo District could be made until the people of Bo District had been consulted.

FREETOWN

Hence I arrived in Freetown on April 13th with three weeks ahead in which to find out how feasible OWL could be. It was so hot and sticky in the capital and the atmosphere did not appear to have changed much since the time of Graham Greene. Two days took me from feeling afraid and alienated to wondering how I would be able to tolerate any more heat or stickiness up north in Bo. In addition reports from some contacts made me wonder how appalling conditions would be in Bo where electricity was always off and there was a big shortage of water. I was led to believe that people were going back to survival living in Bo.

At this early stage the VSO Administrator, Martin Long, was a most reassuring support meeting us at Lungi airport and driving us to Bo we were saved the trauma of trying to find public transport in such a strange town. We were always insecure because we were warned that there were thieves everywhere and in the Hotel Lido we were often so uncomfortable because the electricity was turned off so much of the time and no fans could work.

BO

Arriving at Bo gave me a thrill. After all this talk about Bo - I was finally there. However, feeling extremely hot and sticky my initial reaction to the town was one of total incomprehension. We stopped at Mrs. French's 'Lyons Tea House' for coffee. It was a rather squalid room full of yellowish looking young people - the majority of them members of the Peace Corps who are dotted around the villages and congregate at Mrs. French's to meet their friends and catch up on news. I sat there drinking my coffee feeling totally bemused and when asked what I was doing there, the tentative explanation of OWL seemed so out of place.

Two weeks later Bo feels like home. I walk through the streets and always see friends to wave to or can drop in to a bar and find someone to drink with. Squalidness is in the subjective eye of the beholder - Mrs. French's tea-house is a haven where her friendly reception makes it a real pleasure to visit. Her son, David, who spends hours studying his 'A' levels by dim lamplight is a splendid boy whose industriousness is greatly to be admired.

What was it that changed my apprehension to familiarity and love for this area? The answer must be the people of Bo, the dedication of those seeking change, the physical beauty of the area. At the same time the problems which oppress the people here made me very depressed because there are no quick or obvious solutions.

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On the day we arrived in Bo, we met Father Coffey of the Gerihun Catholic Mission and the latter invited us to accompany himself and Martin Long to visit some village schools which VSO/Oxfam were helping with funds. We trekked slowly along the rutted tracks through villages and monotonous but beautiful vegetation of bushes, trees and palms dotted with burnt areas cleared for planting. Arriving at Mambona we were greeted enthusiastically by handshaking, smiling villagers. I was introduced to the Headteacher of Mambona School and his wife and they came with us to see the new school building in progress. It took a bit of adjusting to recognise the crumbling mud walls, topped by a rusty iron roof which inside was whitewashed and scattered with one or two ancient wooden desks and benches, as a school.

Mr. Moseray the headteacher, travelled with us to the next village of Fabu to visit another newly built school. Bumping along in the landrover I explained the aims of One World Link. It did not take long for him to realise what we are trying to do. His considered interested reaction led me to offer one of the primary schools at home which wanted to form a link. He took the background paper and promised to let me know what he thought. Later in the week he visited me with a letter for his counterpart teacher and a small pile of written illustrated work from his pupils. It amazed me that in such deprived children could learn anything of significance and could produce such good work.

Visiting another school at the next village we were received by the whole population who with the Chief turned out with drummers, a devil and the women's secret society, all for our entertainment. They finally gave us a goat and a very large bowl of rice. We had already eaten rice and potato leaves at Mr. Moseray's house accompanied by bottles of Fanta. (African hospitality has to be experienced to be believed. These people with no modern facilities treated us as close members of their family).

Another memorable day in the villages was with Moussa Conteh who is in charge of the agricultural extension work centred at Tikonko. He is a man of dignity and integrity who grew up in a village, was educated married an English girl and is still more close to his village people than anyone else we met. He took us to see all the different crops being tried in the swamps by farmers who belong to village committees. As he took me down to the big beautiful river to see where the black fly which causes river blindness breeds he stopped me suddenly as a few feet away a snake sidled across our path.

Later we all witnessed a cookery demonstration for mothers of a porridge rich in protein. Moussa pounded the groundnuts spontaneously just as he had as a boy.

In contrast we visited Bo Government Hospital. Jenny Gibson, a saint, took us round labs empty of any equipment - the path lab had odd broken test tubes rotting blood samples in them. Mattresses with straw poking out were on rickety beds. Some wards had some sheets. Isolation wards had mothers in them with toddlers being exposed to infection from the 'isolated' patients. Electricity was off most of the time so the rickety autoclave could not sterilise. Until recently there was no water. The day before we visited there was a most serious accident. A 'poda poda' truck with about thirty people in it had been cut in two by an oil tanker and five people had been killed instantly. The casualties eventually reached the hospital but nothing much could be done because the electricity was off. As we toured the buildings the place was milling with relatives mourning the dying and visiting the injured.

Walls are dirty - one cannot spare water for scrubbing, the oxygen bottle has a valve precariously held on it, the trachea suction pump is dropping to bits. No stethoscopes, hardly any drugs, -patients notes scribbled on scraps of paper. How does Jenny Gibson - a British trained efficient doctor survive. Her eyes certainly lit up at the prospect of the doctors in the One World

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Link being able to send regular supplies of drugs.

In Serabu Sister Hilary a medical missionary, is training young nurses to systematically survey villages in Bumpe Chiefdom to find out the state of the health of the villagers. Her teams form village health committees which have a chairman, a secretary, a medical officer, a 'granny' midwife etc. and they decide what treatment to give, what noels should be dealt with, a well etc. If they dig a well they Make sure that the villagers use it. Slowly Sister Hilary is building up statistics and where there are trained ?grannies' the number of infant deaths have declined.

Secondary schools arc for the brightest youngsters to learn enough to make them civil servants, bank clerks and academic standards are eagerly sought. Father Brian Starke was asked to start a secondary school in Gerihun. He started with 200 leones (f100) and a large hall.

Now the Gerihun Vocational and S. Agricultural Secondary School has been built and is a monument to his sensitivity to the local needs and to his energy. The school is not yet complete but it blends academic education with a programme towards self sufficiency in agriculture , Students learn pig rearing, swamp rice farming, chicken rearing etc. as well as Shakespeare. The Geography and English teachers see many interesting ideas that could come from a link with the counterparts at Trinity School, Leamington Spa.

We visited the Cheshire Home for the disabled where there were twenty three children with useless limbs looked after by one woman and there was no water and no electricity. Hopefully, Hereward College, Coventry will link up with them.

The town of Bo - full of bars (Cokers bar, The Rio, Ma French) - full of volunteers, rippling with colourful life, and surrounded by green tropical bush - is it to be linked with Leamington Spa and Warwick District which are so modern and developed? The Answer must be Yes, because having made contact with this new group of people we must follow it through. Whatever the environment - human beings are, the same and our friends in

Bo District, as well as ourselves, in a changing world could all benefit from mutual support.

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JANE KNIGHT

ONE WORLD LINK.

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