

REPORT OF VISIT TO LEAMINGTON SPA. MARCH 17TH

TO APRIL 15TH 1984

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My mind is so full of facts that I am afraid I cannot write everything in a very coherent manner. If such is the thing I may be tempted to write a thesis for which I am not ready yet.

Although this is a general report on my visit to Leamington Spa with Odette and Tom, I am going to concentrate on some things about schools, local organisations and impressions.

At Gatwick, we were received by Jane Knight and Bob Crowther, after which we set off for Leamington. The journey was supposed to last for two hours. It lasted then for at least five hours as we were lost going round one city for several hours. Whenever we took a particular route we will meet "Road diversion go by.....". This continued for a few hours until we had to enter a restaurant at Guildford to help ourselves. After helping ourselves, we set off again quite fresh and the cold night hitting us. The road map was now properly studied and we finally made it, arriving at Leamington at 12.45 a.m. At Leamington (Sunday) I woke up at 6.30 a.m. wanting to sit on the veranda as I used to do in Sierra Leone. I walked all around the corners of the big house, but there was none to be found. There was no noise in the town, everybody was in bed. It was rather a " Ghost town". On my way back to my room I met a very fat pussy-cat looking at me with furious eyes. I wanted to shout aloud, I ran to my room with fear and went back to bed for another three hours which was quite strange to me.

On that same Sunday, we were met by various members of O.W.L. including the chairman John Holliday, after which a short tour was made of Leamington, conducted by Alice and Paul, the former a Ugandan and latter a Kenyan who had been in Leamington for quite some years. It was also a very happy moment for us to have been visited by Sierra Leonean (Mr. Komba) studying in the Warwick College.

The first few days of our stay was mainly to orientate us.

The highlights of our visit were the " Reception" at the Town Hall. We met the chairman of the Warwick county council, Mr. Peter Barton and his coucillors. After our welcome, we were introduced by the chairman. John Holliday the O.W.L Committee chairman also congratulated Peter Barton on the award to Leamington of the Europe Prize for its twinning and friendship links with Europe. Then towards the end of our stay we were treated to a Sierra Leonean Evening organised by the O.W.L Committee in Leamington Spa. This was a fantastic evening where over 200 persons attended and were introduced to various Sierra Leonean sounds. Mende sounds from the South of Sierra Leone (Amie gallon's sound), the Creole and Madingo sounds. The musicians came from London to entertain the people. It was interesting to see the chairman of Warwick county council dancing first time in his life to the Mende sound. It was a rather memorable evening.

My first school visit was made on the 21st of March 1984. (Aylesford school), a government school. I was very warmly welcomed by the geography teachers, John Knight, Roger Whittal and Helen Archer. They took me to various classes in 2nd, 4th and 6th form classes talking to children and teachers about life style in Sierra Leone. I was taken to the school Canteen to have my dinner, rather a strange thing to see the whole school coming together for dinner. The format of standing in a long queue was rather alien. Children asking me all sorts of questions. Some wanted to sit

by me to eat but I cannot accomodate them all. At the end of the day Roger Whittal took me on a fieldtrip with the 2nd year students to Nether Morton Farm, my first geographical trip made in an English land.

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My visit to Kingsley school (Private school), my own link school was another interesting one. Children were keen on seeing me in their Assembly Hall. They were all looking at me. Was it because I was strange or they were waiting for an introduction from the Headmistress Mrs. Fairhurst? My being introduced brought applause from all the children in the Hall.

It was rather infortunate that I didn't meet Mrs. Eilleen Chronicle, link Co-ordinator in the school, but she handed me over to Mrs Stella Moore a very keen hardworking geography teacher. She made my visit to the school so interesting that I felt like staying there for another one month. As usual I was taken round to talk to various pupils. She made me taught the climate of Sierra Leone for one period; after which I talked to the sixth form pupils about life styles in Sierra Leone.

Stella took me to the Kenilworth Castle and Stoneleigh where I saw the first thatch house in Britain. It was stated that rich people can afford to build the thatch houses as it was difficult to maintain and insurance also was high.

Similar visits were made to various schools such as Champion School, Trinity school, Castle Hall school, St. Joseph school, Milverton combined school and St. Mary's. At Milverton school, a big notice board was seen with all sorts of information on the O.W.L., with more information on Sierra Leone in particular. This was through the effort of the abled and energetic co-ordinator Bob Crowther. A Mende sound was played and I demonstrated to the pupils and teachers how to dance to it. They later took part with me and everybody was dancing " Funk " or "Raggae" rather than Sierra Leonean dance. The children in this school were quite informed about Sierra Leone.

Normal school hours are from 9.00 a.m. to 3.00 p m. and all schools are well established. The country is so advanced that education is free and compulsory. Most schools don't use uniforms. Schools are well equipped with resources which make work easier for them.

The children come to school speaking English Language as their first language and they are also taught in it. This I felt would make work tearless. There were some Asians in all schools mostly the "Indian Sikhs" who can speak English but their accents were different. It was interesting to see that in Champion school, most sixth formers were Indians with very few English students. I was puzzled at this episode.

During my visits in the schools I found it a little bit difficult to understand the children since they were very fast at speaking. I caught up with them after several contacts with various people.

The style of teaching was purely based on the children finding out on their own with the teacher's guidance. There were teaching aids right across the schools. Some schools especially secondary schools were taught in a less formal way; and this made the children to be also less formal. They called their teachers by their first names.

Looking at the different syllabuses in geography, there were some similarities to Sierra Leone's and the major differences were in the Regional aspects. Teachers only teach about the British Isles and East Anglia, no other regions. This made children not to know the position of Sierra Leone in the world. I was pleased to hear that some schools will be doing west Africa next school year.

Classes in all schools I visited were very small as compared to Sierra Leone's. The number in each class was ranging from 20 -25 pupils.

We were taken to coventry Polytechnic University by Phil Harris one time Biology Lecturer in the Njala University College. We were taken to various departments in the university which were quite unique and sophisticated. At coventry also, Jane Kight took us to the OXFAM shop, where second hand materials were sold. We had an audience with the workers, some of whom were voluntary workers. This was just one

aspect of the activities of OXFAM. Interviews were conducted by the local radio stations "Mercia round" and "B.B.C. 4" on our impression about Britain.

Still at coventry, we were taken round the major social services centre (old people's homes), these included, Foleshill Family Centre, Wilfred Spencer and Stone Bridge respectively.' Most of the people around the ages of 50 years to 65 years.

They were given all the comforts they needed. I was made to understand that they were sent into these homes because their children could not take care of them since they disturbed a lot and that if their children were working, there would be nobody to take care of them. The need arises for their being sent to these homes. Most people working in these homes were not paid. It was purely a voluntary service.

At Stonebridge there were over 100 disadvantaged son and women working in a factory where miscellaneous articles were packetted. They were quite happy in receiving us in their factory. They get only 44.00 per week. Some of them were having psychiatric illness. They were kept busy because idling was not encouraged in the English Land.

At Stratford on Avon, we met another OXFAM group all women but some of them were in their "forties" actively involved in the daily activity of this organisation. Most of them were also voluntary workers in the OXFAM shop. We had a meeting with these ladies and it was important to note that I was the youngest among them. They asked numerous questions on Sierra Leone. This was one of the most enthusiastic group. In a privileged conversation with the group's chairlady, she asked me whether I could help their wives in cooking at home or help in washing up. I replied that cooking in our society was not a man's job, but a woman's. She said to me that I should always learn to help my wife. In Stratford the chairlady of the OXFAM group took us to one of the most important tourist centres, Ann Hathaway's place, where Shakespeare used to stay; the birth place of Shakespeare, the school he attended, "Edward the sixth Grammar school. Later also, we were taken to the Royal Shakespeare Theatre to see "The Merchant of Venice" under the auspices of John Holliday the Chairman of the O.W.L. Committee.

My second geography trip was made to Wales , the hilly region of the United Kingdom. The trip was organised by Martyn Bradley a teacher in Trinity school, a never to be forgotten trip. It was rather very interesting to come across the former railway coaches of Sierra Leone at Welshpool running as Passenger train. In Wales, we visited Aberyst Wyth a beautiful coastal town and tourist centre during summer. I was also privileged to travel in a train from a slate quarry to Tywyn. I found this trip quite fascinating.

IMPRESSIONS

On arrival in Gatwick, the long road from the airport to Leamington provided a beautiful scene- lights all along the road though I didn't view the landscape since it was a night journey. In the morning (Sunday) I didn't see anybody in the streets of Leamington and all shops were closed to observe the Sunday. My visit to town the next morning showed so a different picture, the women nicely dressed, some with babies not on their backs as I was expecting but in baby carriers of different sorts. Some women were not having babies but pet dogs. Some of these dogs were directing blind people. I was expecting that blind people were directed by people as in Sierra Leone. The streets were quite busy with people shopping, some with green hair, blue hair (Punks) and some with British hair colour.

I very much admired the activities of the county council (Warwickshire) in that it spent quite a huge amount on education. According to the Rates for 1984-85, Warwickshire county council, the money to be spent on education was £124 million and £20 million on social services to quote. No wonder schools are quite heavily equipped. Schools in general are not only heavily equipped but the organisation of the schools were quite good and heavily equipped but the organisation of the schools were quite unique and the teachers were duty conscious and time conscious which could be applied to every British.

The severity of the cold weather made people to stay indoors at night, sitting by the heaters . Houses in Leamington seemed to be similar in that most of them have slate roofs with chimneys with double walls. Houses were without verandas as I was expecting.

Unemployment was a serious problem, but those unemployed were entitled to £ 26.00 sterling every week which on the other hand made some people not bother themselves to look out for jobs. The free and compulsory education was quite unique but this right was not appreciated by some students.

As a particular pupil from one of the schools stated- " The Government has given us free and compulsory education but has failed to secure jobs for us; I am disgusted with this whole idea". I in fact pointed out to him that if such right was extended to the Sierra Leoneans, it would be quite appreciative.

The pride of the home was another good characteristics of the British people. At supper time the members of the family would sit round the table eating in unison and to me this was a form of socialisation.

Through out our stay I was constantly being reminded of the way my parents used to pet me and this same thing was extended to me so much that I felt at home. I thought in fact that I was with my own parents Human relation was quite spelt out. Families were very kind and each time I visited any family they would serve me a cup of coffee, either black or white which every English family was fond of.

People were so conscious of developing their society that they cannot waste a single second even the unemployed were some how engaged in rendering voluntary services to various departments. A vivid example was at the Third World Information Centre (TWIC) at Bath Street, where there were groups of men and women rendering this kind of services. This is not done in our own society and this was quite admirable.

The drive to Birmingham and Worcester through undulating country side surprised me with its trees without leaves at the end of the Winter. Every where was having wheat or potato farms. Some of the farms were newly harrowed farms.

After a week in Leamington I realized that things which had seemed strange at first were already familiar; traffic lights on streets: very good roads where people were controlled by sophisticated traffic lights; there were no stray dogs on the streets; no butterflies or lizards seen anywhere; clean streets with dustbins everywhere; the quick mobility of people, mostly with their hands in their pockets; fleet of vehicles awaiting traffic lights and when I saw the passers-by I felt like greeting them.

After three weeks in Leamington Spa. I was amazed at reaching from a local news paper where £15 million sterling was assigned to the building of a new shopping centre in Leamington. Was this done to attract other shopping centres in the Midlands?

People are very hardworking in that even in their homes there were no house servants. Every member of the family worked together.

Although life was not much gay for some people, yet they always find ways of livelihood. At convent Garden a man was quite happy singing and dancing for a few pence. Another was found playing guitar in a tube station the same purpose.

I have come back to Sierra Leone full of marvellous experiences. I am grateful to the One World Link for the opportunity they gave me, initiated by the Committee members of the O.W.L. Leamington Spa., to the Commonwealth Foundation who willingly supported us and to all the members of the link in Bo, who were so kind and thoughtful in appointing us for this visit.

Joseph S. Cooper

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