

“Return to Bo – November 2006”.

By Jane Knight (acting Chairperson of One World Link, Warwick).

I set off on this trip with some trepidation as it was 2 years since I last went to Sierra Leone and few of our recent visitors had returned with malaria and I felt I was getting a bit old!

I stopped worrying as soon as I was greeted by Bishop Koroma at Gatwick Airport and stepped out with him at Lunghi airport into the familiar sounds and hot humid environment of lovely Sierra Leone. I was back “home”.

The journey from Lunghi to Kenema took 6 hours starting at 10.23pm - the first hour on the road nearly bumping me “into oblivion”! However I then had 24 hours to recover in the mini paradise which is the Bishop of Kenema’s home.

On October 25th I was delivered to the Bo Kenema Power Services office and fell into Johannes Mallah’s arms. This was the first of so many happy exciting reunions with friends of 25 years. I also had the pleasure of meeting the famous Maada Fobay who is doing a sterling job as a newcomer to OWL, running the finances and managing the One World Link Community Centre in an exemplary fashion. Johannes kindly hosted me for the duration of my stay in Bo and his family of school students looked after my every need.

The 25th Anniversary Celebrations



That evening we attended an anniversary cultural show with very young performers doing drama about travelling to Leamington Spa and dancing what I think they thought was our cultural style (some kind of jive!) and then very professionally their own dancing.

On Friday (27th) we went for Muslim prayers which was quite an experience. As we arrived, I was pulled away from Johannes and Maada and marched to the women’s side of the mosque. I took my shoes off but no one had told me I

needed headwear. As I looked round helplessly, someone wrapped a grey veil round my head and increased my temperature to nearly boiling point. I was then prised with my rucksack into a miniscule space among the hundreds of women and was ordered to bow appropriately. The prayers that crackled through the PA system were for One World Link.



On Saturday morning the OWL membership gathered for an anniversary meeting to review the last 25 years. Johannes, Joe Taylor, Mussa Conteh, Joe Kobbah, Ben Smith, David Ngombu, Theresa Bangali and many others made very moving speeches. People who had died were also remembered.

That evening everyone turned up again and before the dancing started awards for “passionate commitment to OWL’s aspirations” were handed out to 12 Sierra Leoneans and 12 Warwick members.

The party was only just starting when the link up was made with Bath Place Community Centre. It was a bit odd seeing familiar faces but not being able to hear and trying to point the camera at anything interesting as we waited for people to arrive. However I am sure this was a rehearsal for more planned conferencing in the future.



On Sunday hundreds of people turned up for a One World Link Jubilee Mass and we all wore our One World Link blue tops and black bottoms. After the Mass we marched from St. Francis church through Bo all the way to the Community Centre where the ladies fed the 500 school children who joined us in the march led by 3 brass bands.



Such great fun and excitement! I asked some of the school marchers at random what they thought OWL was and they all seemed to have been well briefed about the link, which impressed me.



That week I also heard John Myers and Janet Alty on the radio

Meetings

Local authority. I had several meetings with Dr. Wusu Sannoh – Mayor of Bo, and despite not having delivered any of our planned activities with Bo Council, he was very anxious to keep our dialogue going. He wants us to work with him on managing Bo waste, as the council tax is not enough to cover collecting and disposing of rubbish. Something very innovative and simple needs to be put together. Wusu has some black sacks sent from WCC and wondered if they were biodegradable and if a regular supply could be made available to him and then he might be able to employ young people to sell sacks for 10p to each household to be picked up a week later. However he would also need handcarts for the collections...



Meanwhile, I had subsequent discussions with the country rep. of the World Bank (Jim Sackey) and he suggested that there is money to deal with this problem if WCC and WDC could do an initial scoping of amount of garbage produced, cost of tips etc. recycling opportunities and then work out a costed plan with Wusu. It was also suggested by Mr. Sackey that DFID (Department for International Development) could be persuaded to pay for officer visits.

Wusu also expressed sorrow that the President of the RTPI had not been able to come out with me to Bo and hoped once his health is better that he could come and cast a fresh eye view over Bo from a planning perspective. He would also be interested in a visit from an environmental health officer who could work with the government EHO currently helping him in Bo.



Next year water services are being decentralised to local councils and Wusu is on the new SALWACO (Sierra Leone Water Company) board and has the report that was put together through WCC by an ARUP engineer. The World Bank is prepared to fund the implementation of this plan if it is updated and sorted by Wusu and his colleagues. I will discuss this further with the OWL local authority sub group. Currently people are using wells and tanks as there is no prospect of piped water and SALWACO is in a sorry state with no working bowsers even. Wusu has just acquired a nice new bowser from Libya.



Women. Theresa Bangali's Kayoma group seems to be thriving and they are doing splendid work running the bar and catering for events in the Community Centre. Meanwhile Johannes introduced me to "Sisters for Development" who are all married ladies with good jobs. They only started in January and their motto is "Injustice for One – Injustice for All." They help each other, but also meet in each other's localities and do surveys of the needs of women in those localities with a view to assisting those in need. Their work is really impressive. They gave me all their names and e-mail addresses in order to acquire pen friends over here and I

have passed them to Val Davis of the Soroptimists as they were asking for pen friends... In the short time of their existence they have discovered some worrying social problems relating to young girls. While meeting these ladies I was given a helping of porcupine stew!



Community Development meeting. Michael Samai's group, NACBO, invited me to their meeting and there was a good turnout. They started by wishing to inform me about all their problems... Not the start I welcomed. However after plenty of animated talk they accepted that OWL was not there to solve their problems but to work in partnership and that we would

support them as and when we can, particularly in opening donor doors and helping them to do appropriate funding proposals. Hopefully Michael will be an expert in the latter when he returns. They were very anxious to make it clear that their biggest concern was to find ways to resume their training for drop outs who had had volunteer teachers to build up their skills, particularly sewing skills, but the volunteer teachers were no longer willing to work for nothing. Irish Aid in Freetown showed some interest in this group as there is going to be a donor drive to reach out to youth and help them find employment. Otherwise the security of the country will be under threat.

Teachers

I visited Ahmaddiyya secondary, Kakua, New Gerihun Road, Messima, and UBC schools and have pictures of them. The most significant outcomes of my 3 meetings with teachers and head teachers, was that they agreed that because we cannot arrange one to one links for all the schools, we would in future focus on teacher group links. They undertook to set up 3 working parties to look at what curriculum materials will be useful for them and what resources would be most useful for the resource library when the centre is completed. The second group would work out some kind of revolving loan/credit scheme for moneys collected by Warwick District schools for their partner schools, and the third group were going to look at how to do effective computer training for teachers and pupils.



Those of you who remember Mrs. Awada will be pleased to know that she has rejoined OWL and has offered her computer teacher to assist the Teachers Group. Mrs. Awada was one of our first teacher visitors in the 1980s and she had a small nursery school and linked up with Kingsley school. She now has her own private nursery, primary, secondary and vocational schools. She had a bad leg but still took part in the Jubilee march ...

Messima school (newly linked with Shrubland St. community primary school), has to move its site and is already very cramped with enormous class numbers for the space available (including one class which sits under a tree). The picture shows the first 3 classrooms for the new site. Wusu hopes to help the school by making it the first municipal initiated school and putting municipal resources into it.



Community Centre

What a moving moment, arriving at the Community Centre (known all over Bo as OWL) on the first evening in Bo. It was only a one-floor shell when I last saw it. It is so smart and well designed and a tremendous credit to Jo Kobba, Johannes and the committee in Bo as well as our many contributors to the building funds. As you can see we are on the final stages now and meanwhile the bottom floor is functioning - hiring out rooms and with a bar from 4 to 9pm most nights.



The electrical wiring, plumbing, plastering and decorating of the 6 en suite bedrooms and resource centre, require another £12,000 for completion. We also need a PA system to make the Centre even more attractive to hirers. Internet connections are slowly going down in price in Bo so hopefully we can raise money to cover that too. I asked DFID if they would give us the remaining £12,000 and they did not say no...so fingers crossed. The appropriate staff are out of town at the moment, but I already have a proposal prepared for them.

On the day I left Bo, the Centre was buzzing with activity as it had been hired by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) for farmer workshops to learn how to do business plans. Their representative was very enthusiastic about the facilities even though the Centre is still lacking a PA system and Internet connection.

Other. I saw Fr. Peter Conteh who has been quite ill since his UK visit. He has a very unhealthy lifestyle, - little exercise and working too hard and eating at the wrong times. So he has gout. He is about to let some of his new hospitality rooms to Des Garvey from Nepean Bo link.

I saw Gilifa Jojo who was a great friend of OWL when he was studying in Reading in the 1980s. He is working for the UN on capacity building for Kenema council and he came over for the OWL anniversary and with council officers to meet me to discuss how Kenema could get a link like ours going.



Father Kailie, Catholic Education Secretary based in Freetown, has been working on the complete rebuild of Serabu Hospital, which was a beacon of good practice in the '80s under Sister Hilary's care. The war saw it demolished. Fr. K is very anxious to recruit doctors and nurses on long or short term stays as at the moment he has the building, beds and one doctor.

Freetown. Bishop Koroma generously conveyed me to Freetown and asked Father Kailie of the Catholic Mission to host me for 3 nights. I am so grateful for all this generosity, which made it possible for me to do a lot of work in the short time I was there. Fr. Kailie provided me with a vehicle and driver and I visited Emmanuel Gaima, Director of the Decentralisation Secretariat, DFID, the Deputy British High Commissioner, Irish Aid, VSO, the Country Rep. of the World Bank, Samuel Harbor the Deputy Resident Representative for UNDP, and the British Council and the House of Parliament. Everyone was very impressed with OWL's achievements. It was a very heartening tour.

The British Council is willing to transport post if we want them to and they are willing to help us training a librarian for the resource centre. Linda Koroma, the Assistant Director, is working on a Wilberforce women's photo competition with Hull for the 200th anniversary of Wilberforce. She would be willing to pay for someone from Warwick District to go out and do a similar activity in Bo for the Awards for All project. Johannes was not very keen on our Awards for All activities in case they diverted Bo from their priorities. However he thinks Bo OWL would be happy to join in with activities at our end if visits at the time seem appropriate e.g. linking in with youth debates or the African celebration. I think Johannes and committee would be OK with a women's photographic exercise...

VSO are hoping to start a volunteer programme in Bo next April and will be surveying possibilities there from January. Chals Wontewe, the Director was very keen to allow us a volunteer to kick start the management of the Centre and he favoured someone from Warwick OWL.

The Honourable Mussa Conteh MP was very fed up as Parliament had had no electricity for 3 days and their building is so dark they just could not function and they were supposed to be agreeing the government budget. His pay of £200 per month is less than VSO was offering to pay a volunteer "at local rates". He gave me a pamphlet re. Bo Koloseum activities.

Finally I visited Choithrams just to see if we could start up a free shipping scheme with them as they now have a shop in Kenema. Mr. Bansi was sympathetic. David Thomas from Envirodrill also phoned me out of the blue and said his wife who lives in Southam had seen Jane Shakespeare's advert for sewing machines in the paper. His firm (Southam based) regularly has free container space available and he was offering to carry some of our goods. I am passing all this on to our shipping volunteers.

The way forward.

OWL is alive and kicking and at each end of this remarkable partnership there are a few very impressive young people coming on board. I was asked to meet the youth group on the Saturday before I left but the chairman was watching Manchester United and Jane N. had bereavement, and nobody else turned up except the secretary. However Alpha Braima Bah is an excellent secretary and vowed he would have a general meeting of youth and would get new officers etc. We talked for nearly 2 hours about the young people's responsibility for taking the link forward. He was keen to spearhead that and to use the Centre for enhancing the lives of young people. I suggested he should start corresponding with Mary Weir to get our newsletters and start a young people's dialogue. He has already sent a letter to Mary.

The other very impressive young person is Maada Fobay together with the women from Kayoma. The potential in Bo is great but Johannes felt they need to increase the social activities of OWL to strengthen people's ownership of the link. He also wants the veterans to run some lectures and debates for the new up and coming members.

Having been privileged to join in the Silver Jubilee celebrations in Bo, I hope our young successors will have the joy of celebrating the Golden Anniversary and I hope I am alive to see it!

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