

Report on a Visit to Bo in April 2007
Kip Warr

I visited Sierra Leone in connection with the 25th anniversary celebrations of One World Link, having been engaged by the Warwick OWL Committee to undertake two of the year's celebratory activities: the postcard picture exhibition and the enlargement of the archive. This trip relates to both. My trip was supported by Warwick Bo and by the British Council in Freetown who paid for my airfare. The overall anniversary programme is supported by Awards for All with Lottery funds.

Before this visit we had promoted the picture exhibition in Warwick district and received photographs and children's pictures that we published on our website. There were four themes for the pictures: friendship, home and family, a day in my life, and dreams and aspirations. I took postcard-size prints of these images to Bo, and the Bo committee enabled me to get images to bring back to Warwick. With money from a grant¹ I took a digital camera out for Bo OWL and the Chairman fittingly took the first photograph. The Bo committee introduced me to a number of schools and provided a photographer who accompanied me on most of my visits and used the new camera to record them. Children at the Holy Rosary School drew pictures that will be scanned and added to the collection. We shall select a small number of pictures from the whole collection to enlarge and mount as an exhibition for public display during the remainder of the anniversary year.

My first sight of the One World Link Community Centre in Bo started my visit on a high note; there was a wedding ceremony about to begin and the main hall was full of people excitedly awaiting the arrival of the bride. So the first photograph of the visit might fit our theme as The Day of her Life! On a less happy note, I was shown how thieves had used the crashing thunder of a storm to cover the noise of them breaking in by cutting out the concrete by the door jamb. That damage is repaired but the loss of the generator and other items is a sad blow; it reduces the earning capacity of the centre and renders the small computer network useless. The newly-refurbished hydroelectric power station may begin production in late May and that would make a big difference throughout Bo.

The Kayoma Women's Organisation gathered at the OWL Centre to explain their work. They have distributed some of the sewing machines sent from Warwick OWL although I did not have a chance to see them in operation. They plan to set up a training facility at the Centre and have set some machines aside for that purpose. They came across as a committed assembly but well able to have fun; there was lots of laughter when we passed the camera round for them to photograph each other. I had taken out a letter from the Soroptimists of Warwick and Leamington in which they offered further help with sewing accessories. This was read out in full and was greeted with enthusiasm. The Soroptimists also suggested personal links between their members and those using the materials but I am unsure how practical that would be (not least because of the lack of a postal service).

School links were the bedrock of the early years of OWL and are highly valued in Bo. The gifts that have been sent out are invaluable. The schools are not only coping with their traditional shortages but also with the backlog of education from the closure, and often destruction, of schools during the civil war and the psychological damage to children press-ganged into action. I made brief visits to three schools (mock exams were a preoccupation) and would be glad to discuss things with individual schools if they wish. My visits were to BEDC (linked with Emscote Road Infants), DEC Messina (Shrublands Street) and Ahmadia (North Leamington School). I also met with the Head Master of Bo School (hoping for a

¹ Awards for All provided us with a grant from Lottery funds for many aspects of the picture exhibition and the archive project.

sports link with Kenilworth) and, very briefly, the head of BDEC School, Sewa Road (Clapham Terrace).

The container load sent from the UK was much appreciated but they had big problems clearing it and transporting it to Bo from Freetown². My original plan for the trip included providing computer training for link members in Bo using computers sent out in the container. The lack of mains electricity and the theft of the generator from the OWL centre unfortunately made this impossible.

I had timed my stay in Sierra Leone to coincide with a visit by a group from AFFORD³ in their SEEDA programme. They had a small team going to Bo to provide advice and training for small businesses and we were looking for mutually beneficial links between them and OWL. They intend to set up a business resource centre in Bo; I suggest that they approach Bo OWL to see whether there was scope for using the OWL community centre but the idea did not work out. Their team were very interested in the experience of the Kayoma Women's Organisation in providing microcredit, and Theresa Bangali attended one of their workshops to discuss this. She, in turn, is interested in the possibility of using their advisory services for Kayoma's member organisations.

For the archive, we used grant money to buy a digital recorder so that I could collect personal reminiscences of the link and its benefits. I interviewed twelve present and former committee members in Bo and shall collect further recordings in the UK. These will provide a live human collection to supplement the documentation and pictures of the existing archive. In addition, Bo have been asked if they would like to contribute written documents for the archive. We intend to put the archive on the Internet and make it available to the wider world.

There is a lot more going on than the formal contacts established under the link. In ten days I realised how much personal interaction – and activity – is going on between individuals in the two communities. Much of this starts from the link but then takes on a life of its own and is a measure of the genuine friendships that have been forged. Given the level of welcome I received in Bo I can understand how that has happened; the people in Bo who had visited Warwick district said they, too, had been made to feel very welcome.

My visit had started on one high note and ended on another. DFID had just approved a grant for fitting out the OWL Centre and the contractors were due to start work as I was leaving the country. When this is done there will be a resource centre upstairs and guest rooms for rent to visitors.

² I have written a separate note on this.

³ African Foundation for Development (AFFORD) are a London-based diaspora NGO. SEEDA is their programme of Support for Entrepreneurs and Enterprise Development in Africa.