

If your church is one of those who take these Palm Crosses, please hold yours for a moment and think of, and pray for, the young person, unknown to you, who has made it – as they, on Palm Sunday, will be praying for the folks, unknown to them, 'who have received the Crosses they have made .



Palm Cross makers at Medina

Now that we are home, our thoughts are on our **Cream Tea 4 Africa**, our main fund-raising function of the year, held in my garden on the last Saturday in June (29th); there will be a stall, selling some of the goods made at the Special School, greeting cards and home-made jams, marmalades and chutneys, a garden stall and a raffle. If you live within reach of us, please mark the date in your diary and try to join us – we would love to see you.

If you would like further information about the work of the G.F.A., would be interested in sponsoring a child through their secondary education, supporting any of the projects mentioned or, if you can persuade your Church to do so, about adding to the list of those who take our Palm Crosses, please contact:

Anne Kenyon, 7 Hembury Park, Buckfast, TQ11 0ES

Tel: 01364 642 503 Email: aj.kenyon@tiscali.co.uk

News from the Gambia - 2019

I always look forward to my annual visit to my 'second home', the smallest country in Africa – the 'Smile on the face of Africa' - and it is incredible that it is 35 years since I first set foot on Gambian soil, and fell in love with the many lovely people I met then, and the many more I have come to know since. Like last year I had company – Alethe, who came for a fortnight in 2018, came back for the whole month, and worked three days a week at the Methodist School for children with Special Needs – the *only* such school in the country; I have asked her to write about her experience there (see pages 4 & 5). John Woolley also joined us for the last two weeks, during which we all visited Janjangbureh (where he and Rev. Elaine had served as Mission Partners from 2002-6).

As usual, I was planned to preach on two Sundays, the first at Brikama and the second at the new Church at Kassakunda – which was only a pile of building blocks when we were there last year.

Building blocks for Kassakunda 2018



Kassakunda Church 2019

Bishop Hannah had kindly arranged for someone to collect us but, unfortunately we had problems with the car – first the engine wouldn't start, so we were ½ an hour late leaving, and then we had a puncture (and no spare available!). I was able to warn the Local Preacher who was leading the Service of the problem but, sadly, I had turned my mobile onto 'silent' so did not hear the Bishop ringing to tell us that she would send her driver for us!

When I saw her a few days later I apologised, but said we would have been at least an hour late arriving even if I had known. She said that would not have mattered – the congregation would have waited for me! I can't imagine any U.K. congregation being so patient! I understand that I will be planned there in 2020 – and also at the next new Church

at Medina, for which the community had already made 6,000 building blocks; (G.F.A. have made a £1,000 contribution to their building fund).



Watch this space

On a day when she wasn't working at the Special School, Alethe and I had the opportunity to visit the clinic at Sibanor, some 80 miles inland. I didn't go there last year because the management of this facility had just been transferred from W.E.C. to the Ecumenical Church of the Gambia and were still finding their feet.

We also went to the village of Jamali, where the Cornish group have funded the building of a clinic, which is obviously highly valued by the residents, particularly the pregnant mums-to-be. The staff are funded by the Government. The ladies from the village laid on a benachin lunch for us all – served in two bowls, from which we helped ourselves – a wonderful saving on the washing up, with only two bowls and several spoons having to be washed – don't waste water, or time, on washing up plates!

As usual, I managed to arrange two days fishing – but was noticeably less successful than last year! Fortunately for me, the gentleman who caught the largest fish on the first trip didn't want to take it home (they don't like fish!) so gave it to the crew, who kindly offered it to me (I paid them for it) so Alethe and I were able to enjoy a lovely butterfish supper. The second trip was not a good fishing day for anyone on the boat but I did manage to win a prize – for the smallest fish (another butterfish) caught – 7cms! He (or maybe she) was put back in the river to live another day – maybe to wait for me to catch it next year for our supper.

As usual, we came home laden with Palm Crosses – 13,000 between the three of us! Alethe and I had joined one of the P.C.-making days; as usual I was rendered speechless as I watched the children and young people, all merrily chatting together while their hands are busy making the Crosses, raising funds for their Circuit.

While their English isn't perfect, I never cease to be amazed at these letters, particularly from the younger students, in Grade 7 or 8, written in (to them) a foreign language to someone they have never met. I also have brought home photographs, which have also been sent to sponsors, of all but three of the 20+ students involved; two of these have moved up-country, having been relocated to other branches of their family following the death of a parent and one who was sitting tests and wasn't given permission to come out of school to see me.

When John came out, we linked up with two ladies from Cornwall to go to Janjangbureh (200+ up-country) for a long weekend. A group from there has been visiting regularly and much of their work has been focussed in that area, including the funding of a nursery school in the village of Banni, across the river from JJB.



Banni Nursery School

This was originally built to accommodate some 20 children – but there are now 40+; with a legacy left by Elaine, John is having a second classroom (plus extra loos) built; work is due to start in April, so, hopefully, we will see this in use when we visit next year.

However I did meet Dr Mariatou, the doctor in charge, and Pastor Edward. It was good to visit the Clinic again and to find it, as it had always been in the past, decidedly busy. In the interim we have sent out two shipments of various medical supplies and baby (particularly prem-baby) clothes; as we went round we were shown their storerooms; they are well supplied with crutches, but there was a noticeable lack of wheelchairs (sadly we seldom get wheelchairs offered these days); walking frames and incontinence pads are also much needed, so if you know of any of these items looking for a home – we can find a home for them!



Meds store at the Sibonor clinic

Much of my time was spent meeting students and ex-students – all of whom expressed their gratitude for the opportunities opened to them thanks to sponsorship. Several have written letters to their sponsors, which have now been passed on. [Continued on page 6]

A special time in a Special School

Children with special needs have always been important to me and so I leapt at the chance to spend time at the Methodist Special School. In January I flew from a dark and gloomy England to a land of sun, warmth and smiles. I chose to spend three days of each week at the Special school – giving me the space to a. relax and b. maybe to see a bit more of the country. I took a taxi to school (I really didn't want to turn up all hot and sweaty) but walked the two miles or so, home. I arrived just before 9 always greeted by Kebba who I'd met last year. His physical improvement was so great that I hadn't recognised him! His sense of humour hadn't changed and he adopted me as 'his', directing me with no speech, to go and get a chair, bring it out and sit by him for the duration of morning



assembly. This of course takes place outside and is a boisterous and joyous occasion. Many of the children have no speech but we all joined in praising God by shouting, clapping, stamping, banging on doors, drums or

the person standing next you. Assembly ends with 'We are moving in the light of God' and off we went to class. Each classroom has three classes within it, arranged vaguely in age groups. The disabilities cover a vast range from Downs Syndrome, Autism, brain damage, speech defects, cerebral palsy, deafness.

No two students have the same needs so class is often noisy and disruptive and there are few resources for stimulating the students. Pencils are shared and paper given out sparingly. In the nursery much of class time was spent singing action songs while older students struggled with short attention spans and limited co-ordination skills. Education in the Gambia is in English but for the students at this school, where speech is often non-existent, there is a move to teach the students in their native tongue – Wolof and Mandinka being but two of the many. Lunch time brings a frenzy of excitement. Somehow the school manages to provide food for every child - and hangers on like me! The cook decided I could dish out the Benachin. Plated but no cutlery – fingers work just as well.

Resources in terms of teaching materials are minimal but the students are learning to socialise, they are in a safe environment free from abuse and they receive what is possibly the only meal they will have that day. The Gambia is a country struggling to move out of long-term poverty and deprivation but I felt this year there was a sense of a nation on the way up – the outlook for children and young adults with special needs can only get better. Please pray that it will.

