

UK Teacher Exchange 2012 [Nich Cunliffe]

38 Teachers, friends and family left the UK for sunnier climes at the end of October and returned [no one got lost!] much changed and encouraged from the experience. We went with projects in mind, researched and with pockets and bags bulging with resources. However no one, least of all me, realised the massive effect the children would have on our outlook! Basic hygiene, washing faces and hands was very evident and has proved hugely beneficial in extending life expectancy to young and old alike. Glad Tidings Orphanage thrives with direct support from Starfish and our visit there was a wonderful introduction to the country with a HUGE welcome from everyone.



Many initiatives were implemented from the simple supply of girls pants to expanding 'Days for Girls' [a project promoting basic hygiene for growing girls allowing them a potential of an extra 60 days at school previously missed] The training and promotion in the use of hand powered sewing machines in older generations allowing them to establish an income where none was previously available, sewing material for school uniforms, home clothes and repairs to existing articles—simple things we in the UK tend to take for granted.

The first weekend was spent getting acclimatised and settling into accommodation and generally finding our way around, meeting the other teachers who were to become very much part of the 'team'. 14 members went North West to Kasungu while 24 went East into Salima which adjoins Lake Malawi [the 'Calendar Lake' being 365 miles long and 52 miles wide at its widest point and over 700 metres deep]. Wildlife parks, beaches and Church were on the agenda together with preparation for the coming week in link schools.



Monday morning came as a bit of a jolt with transport arriving at 0730 and the real work began. 3-4 teachers per vehicle being dropped off with a colleague and or an interpreter for the school day which range from 0700 - 1400 depending on the individual school and the length of the teaching day. Many were invited into the local villages to see 'community projects' underway such as composting, goat rearing, wood lots [growing trees for firewood and climatic protection]. Opportunities to share resources such as UK class made banners promoting the Eco projects that Chris

Knott and I have been taking into schools over the Autumn terms. We were all hugely impressed by the endeavours of the Malawi teachers in keeping order with such huge class sizes, ranging from 285 in Year 1 under a mango tree to the other end of the scale with Year 8 with a mere 70, BUT ages ranging from 12 to 25! Classes by sheer force of numbers are forced outside and have to be sent home when the rains come. The older children in the Year 8 class come back in the evening after their farm work is over and take advantage of the solar powered Lighting to continue their studies trying to catch upon what they have missed.



Much of the educational work carried out in the past year has been focused on the Eco-Stove, briquettes made from combustible waste such as straw, peanut shells, rice husks and the like that were normally just thrown away. The reduction of available firewood has made it harder for the average rural family to survive. Research on other various forms of cooking has resulted in some good alternative stoves to run alongside the eco friendly stove. Made from mudbricks this double stove [pictured] costs nothing to build, burns one third of the wood of a traditional fire and is easily maintained and retains a lot of the stored heat.



Aptly named the 'Changu Changu Moto' [Fast Fast Fire] by Ripple Africa [whom I visited in Nkhata Bay] it has one major problem, it burns wood! So throughout the country tree planting schemes are being implemented with specific trees [that the goats don't like to eat!] being supplied to communities and schools alike to grow on from seed in maintained nurseries. It can be coppiced in 3 years effectively giving an endless supply of firewood, shade and wildlife habitat. These trees [pictured] are less than 3 years old having been planted in good soil with compost and well watered from the start.

Through the generosity of parents, pupils and their schools and individuals such as the Crowborough Christian Men's Group, Starfish is able to oversee the building of cost efficient and practical classroom blocks such as this newly completed one at Chapsinja, as well as staff housing & toilets.



Education is at the heart of the work we do, being the way out of the poverty trap that so many of the children in Malawi face on a day to day basis. However we, in the UK, have much to learn from our friends in Malawi so the exchange of teachers brings real insight to the teachers and pupils alike.

Below some of the teachers, family members and Starfish Staff of this years adventure. NC

