

Malawi Adventure

In Arlington Village Hall!

Despite being mid August with holiday season in full swing, Paul and Wendy Holmes had a brilliant turn out for their talk and slide show about their Malawi experiences over the past few years.

Until recently, Wendy worked as a classroom teacher at St. Mary the Virgin School in Hartfield. During her time there, the school embarked on a linking program through Starfish Malawi. Two teachers from the UK had visited Kajendere Schools and the head teacher, Samson Banda made the return visit to the UK in 2010. Samson stayed at the farm of Paul and Wendy Holmes for his first weekend and a close bond was created with him and the family. Samson was especially fond of Phil Wooller, Wendy's father who told Samson many tales of his life growing up on a farm and stories from his experiences in WWII. Samson, being particularly interested in history, was enthralled and the two have kept in close contact since this time with a regular exchange of letters. It being the beginning of his time here in England, Paul and Wendy had the pleasure of sharing the joy of many of Samson's 'firsts' e.g. holding ice in his hands, eating fish and chips and an ice-cream!, seeing the sea – and horses (of which he was pretty scared!) Thus, a friendship was born.

Wendy was lucky enough to be selected as the school representative to visit Malawi in 2012 and was delighted that husband Paul could accompany her – providing they self-funded his place. Chris Knott explained at a pre-visit meeting that the trip 'will be a life changing experience' - he was certainly right! The trip was amazing. Africa was wonderful, far exceeding our expectations – beautiful scenery, exciting wildlife but for us, it was most definitely the people who made our trip so special. Malawi is fondly known as 'the warm heart of Africa', admittedly we only met a few people in a tiny, rural village but they made such an impression on us that we can never now forget them and will always keep them fondly in our hearts.

We had many adventures during our stay and took hundreds of photographs. These of course, formed the basis of our talk in Arlington. The inspiration for giving the talk really came following the 2013 return visit of Malawian teachers to the UK. St. Mary's School invited a young teacher named Jordan Munthali who was chosen to represent Kajendere School for the visit. As Samson had done on the previous visit, Jordan stayed at the farm the first weekend of his trip. Paul and Wendy happened to be very busy preparing a village festival and needed to help erect a marquee – a task which Jordan was only too happy to help with! Paul and Wendy were very pleased to show him that they live in a thriving village with a good community spirit – very similar to that of Doka near Kajendere School in Malawi. One of the surprises and pleasures we have had with the school link is discovering the similarities between our cultures.

So, Arlington had become aware of Malawi!, the village needed to know more ...

People began arriving on the evening of the talk. They were greeted by Paul and Wendy who were wearing Malwian clothes given as gift to them during their 2012 visit. There were a number of displays set out which included: a table laid with gifts given to St. Mary the Virgin School in Hartfield from their link school Kajendere. The gifts were all handmade by the children, showing great skill and

offering a flavour of the country – a Galimoto vehicle, so accurate that it could clearly be recognised as a Landrover; models of items used in the process of making maize flour and musical instrument including a small drum. Other displays showed some of the items that Paul and Wendy are planning to take on their forthcoming trip to Malawi in September/October this year.

Another display was set up to introduce people to the excellent book by William Kamkwamba 'The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind'. It is a book which we highly recommend and tells the true story of the then 14 year old William, who built his own windmill to make electricity in a small, rural Malawi village. He made the windmill by looking at diagrams in school text books and finding the necessary items in a scrap yard – what an inspiration! Paul and Wendy and Wendy's grown children Alan and Claire, are planning to visit Wimbe to see William's (now numerous) windmills during their visit to Malawi in September this year.

Following a formal welcome by Paul and Wendy, Chris Knott began the evening by explaining a little of the history of the charity Starfish Malawi. Paul and Wendy then proceeded to show slides and chatted, fairly informally about each as they were shown. A script had not been prepared beforehand – the slides themselves led the show. Members of the audience clearly felt relaxed by this approach and several asked questions naturally as the evening progressed. It was great to have Chris Knott on hand as well as Claire Lloyd (a former St. Mary's teacher who had been on a previous visit) to 'chip in' with their own thoughts, sharing some of their experiences along the way.

Entry to the event was free but people were happy to donate and Paul and Wendy were both delighted when counting up the proceeds which amounted to £190 for the evening! Chris Knott also went away smiling as he had managed to sign up more walkers for the up and coming Starfish Malawi Bewl Water Walk (September 21st!).

Paul, Wendy, Alan and Claire are planning to visit Kajendere School in Malawi as independent travellers (with the backing and support of both Starfish Malawi and St. Mary the Virgin School) in September/October 2013. The education focus of the trip will centre around the book 'The boy who harnessed the wind' - looking at the theme of 'hope - from something small, big things can happen'. The key aim of financial support for the school will be to ensure that the power supply at Kajendere is reliable for the future. For ourselves - we are looking forward to seeing and spending time with our very special friends in Malawi!

