



*Changing people's lives*

## September 2013 Newsletter

After the turbulence of the last few months it is good to be able to report a calm that has descended on Gunjur and an acceptance by all of the new structures, not least a new executive committee of the Gunjur Community Link (GCL) to replace our old friends in the GLC (Gunjur Link Committee). We are in regular communication with the new people and they are already demonstrating a refreshing efficiency which we hope will continue when Caroline Harmer and Nick Maurice travel to Gunjur on 22 October with six teachers from St John's and Marlborough College to explore the educational opportunities that Gunjur and the Gambia can provide for A level and IB students.



**Women's Garden**

We are hoping that the teachers will spend a day teaching in the Upper Basic School. We shall also visit James Island a centre of enslavement in the 19th century where

captured slaves were incarcerated before being shipped across the Atlantic to the cotton plantations in the Southern States or the sugar plantations of the Caribbean Islands.(history)

Our programme will include meetings with:

- Community leaders to discuss their roles in the community (sociology)
- women farmers to discuss how climate change is impacting on the production of food (geography) Islamic leaders to discuss the role of Islam in the community (RE)
- artisanal fishermen on the beach at Gunjur to hear how illegal fishing by foreign trawlers is impacting on their catches
- people running small and medium size enterprises to discuss how they run their businesses and the local economy (economics)
- The Medical Research Council to hear about some of the health problems facing The Gambia and the research that is being done into malaria and HIV infection.
- The Ministry of Education to promote links between schools in Wiltshire and schools in The Gambia

## Tower and Town

If you are able to get hold of a copy of the October edition of Marlborough's Parish Magazine Tower and Town mentioned in the August newsletter you will find a range of fascinating articles from people who have lived in Gunjur for shorter or longer periods. Nicola Spiller who spent a year as a volunteer teacher in Gunjur in the 1980s and tells us that Gunjur "got into her DNA" as she now has an adopted son of Gambian heritage, Henry Pearson who visited Gunjur three times while he was Rector in Marlborough and became known as "the Imam of Marlborough",



**Easter IB Students outside Gunjur Radio**

Phoebe Studdert-Kennedy who was with a group of IB students from St John's that spent a couple of weeks in Gunjur last Easter, Lilli Loveday who first went to Gunjur as a student at St John's and then worked in The Gambia for two years in the field of human rights and is now married to a Gambian and Sue Ballard who worked in Gunjur as a radio journalist - they all write about the positive impact that **"living with difference and yet understanding our common humanity"** had on them personally and how it has changed their attitudes and in some cases their lives. Some of these articles are soon to be published in the Gambian media also so that people there really understand the contribution that they make to our personal, and in some cases professional, development.

## My Time in Gunjur by Alex Rodmart



I arrived in Gunjur on the 12<sup>th</sup> of April 2013 to teach Maths in the Upper Basic School for 3 months.

**Teaching Maths** I started at the school on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April and spent the first two weeks following Maths teacher Buba Touray "BT" and sitting in on his lessons. After these two weeks I quickly gained his and a lot of teachers' trust and was given three classes of my own to teach (grade 8 Darboe, Bunjeng and Jatta). I was regularly supervised by Mr. Touray and the head of the department Mr. Ba.



**Alex with students in Gunjur**

Teaching classes of fifty students was daunting at first but I managed to impose my own teaching style and had the time of my life interacting with the students and learning about their lives. At first I tried setting homework regularly but soon realised that these were barely ever completed as the students all had chores to do in the afternoon and no electric light in the evenings.

### Extra Classes

Instead, I decided to organise extra classes once or twice a week after school for those who wanted to have some extra practise.

These were not widely popular, I had about 20 regular students out of almost 150, though I believe that it was definitely worth it for those who attended. About two weeks before the final exams these lessons became daily and often lasted over four hours. The students who attended these classes got the best marks in the final exam. Apart from the extra classes I conducted a test every time we finished a topic, about once every three weeks. These were pretty disastrous at first with only a couple of people passing per class but once I adapted myself to their level and they got to know what I expected the marks went up and in the end a little over half of each class was regularly passing.

### **Drama “each student was an organ of the digestive system”**

Other than Maths I became involved in the science and Maths club. They met three times a week and rehearsed some plays one of the science teachers Yahya Drammeh had written. One of these plays was about the elements (each student was an element and the plot was that they were all arguing to decide which was the best element) and the other was about the digestive system (each student was an organ of the digestive system and they were again competing to decide who was best). These plays were very funny and the students enjoyed the club very much. After some time Mr. Drammeh suggested we write a play together about an orphan girl. This play was a great success with the students though unfortunately I only saw rehearsals and not the final product.

As a result of long hours sitting in the staff room I became very close to almost all the teachers. We were all joking and teasing each other all day which I really cherished. I have

really fond memories of endless hours marking or making lesson plans with all the other teachers. I felt completely integrated in this group and hugely enjoyed their company. I am still in touch with a lot of them and speak to them regularly through Facebook and Skype.

### **Compound life**

I was hosted by Yapenda Jatta and her large family. I absolutely loved my compound and felt completely at home there. I got to know everyone in the family and had an incredibly close relationship with all of them. They truly adopted me as their son and did everything they could to make me happy. Even though they had huge amounts of back breaking work to do they were always smiling and always trying to help and make me feel at home. I spent hours and hours sitting in the courtyard with everyone playing cards and gossiping. We laughed all the time and got on very, very well. The times I spent with my family are the best memories I have of my time in Gunjur and I know they will stay with me forever.



**Alex with his family in their compound**

### **Social life**

During my three months I also made a tight group of friends. We went to parties and football matches together and spent entire Saturdays and Sundays together just lying about chatting and drinking the local Chinese Green tea hattaya. These friends also showed

me around the countryside surrounding Gunjur and the local beaches. I became very close to them and still keep in contact with a lot of them.

### **“A Million Wonderful Memories”**

In conclusion, apart from the first week, I honestly never once felt lonely in the entire three months. Everyone was overwhelmingly friendly and I felt absolutely at home even though I was almost the only European (David and Joe were in Gunjur but I saw very little of them). I learnt an incredible amount and will be forever in awe of the compassion, perseverance and hope that everyone has. I have a million wonderful memories and miss everyone a lot. I really cannot begin to thank everyone at MBG enough for making this possible. Thanks to the link I have forged some relationships which I truly cherish and plan on maintaining for years to come.

We are very pleased that we have introduced **Ric Law, the Director of Disability Africa** Gunjur and The Gambia and it is clear that the Gunjur Inclusion Project (GIP) is really taking off.



### **Music time at Disability Africa**

We are particularly delighted that the plot of land and the building that had been constructed in 2008 by a group from St John's and Marlborough College ostensibly as a skills training centre at the request of local people

but which has been lying idle since then have now been donated by the community leaders to Disability Africa for the construction of a major new building (incorporating the old building), which will become the centre for the GIP and will provide social and remedial services e.g. physiotherapy.

**George Cooper** is now back from Gunjur having spent two months studying the barriers to young disabled people gaining access to proper health and educational facilities and we shall be asking him for a report and hopefully get him to come and talk about his experiences to the MBG membership.

### **Gunjur in Bristol**

We don't stand still in MBG and Susan Suchopar, Caroline Harmer and Nick Maurice spent a very productive evening in Bristol with representatives of the Gunjur community living there discussing the educational opportunities that they might be able to provide for young students from St John's and Marlborough College. Given that they are being educated in a predominantly mono-cultural environment in Marlborough we are hoping that visits to Bristol might include a visit to the Mosque, talking to refugees and asylum seekers, learning about the contribution that the Gambian diaspora are making to UK society and to development in their home communities and perhaps sharing a Gambian meal!

### **Postscript**

Many will have read in the media of President Yaya Jammeh's decision to withdraw The Gambia from its membership of the Commonwealth. This clearly came as a surprise to most people including the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and people in The Gambia. One wonders whether the close proximity between the decision and the



Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Colombo next month is relevant but certainly we can only regret that it further isolates The Gambia from the International community and one can only despair that the impact on ordinary Gambians is likely to be negative. It makes it all the more important that we maintain our close links with Gunjur and solidarity with and support for our friends and colleagues there. We are in close touch with David Morley in the High Commission who is giving us advice and support.

### **Brilliant Young Pianists in St Peter's Church**

The first recital in our second series of "Brilliant Young Pianists in St Peter's Church" was given by Jessica Zhu on Sunday October 29<sup>th</sup> to a full Church whose audience were completely captivated by her technical brilliance, sensitivity and the strength of her performance. These recitals should not be missed!

Even if you are not a great lover of classical music generally, or piano music particularly, just to hear such extraordinary young mastery of the piano as an instrument is hugely stimulating.



**Pianist Anna Zassimova**

The next recital in this series is being given on November 10 by the Russian born pianist Anna Zassimova who is flying in from Germany especially to support MBG.



**Simone Dinnerstein & Stephan Loges**

And in addition to this series we have managed to "capture" one of the world's leading pianists the American Simone Dinnerstein and a leading German Bass Baritone Stephan Loges to give a recital of music by JS Bach and Robert Schumann in the Memorial Hall at Marlborough College on Saturday November 30 on behalf of MBG.

### **Dates for your Diary**

**MBG Christmas Party Wednesday 19 December  
Venue TBC**

**"An Evening with Johann Sebastian Bach and Robert Schumann"**

Saturday 30 November, 7.30pm

Memorial Hall, Marlborough College, Tickets £10

**"Brilliant Young Pianists in St Peter's Church 2013/14"**

Tickets £7 - £5 for MBG members

**Anna Zassimova (from Russia)**

**Sunday 10 November 2013, 7.30pm**

Performing works by Chopin, Brahms, Schumann, Catoire and Debussy

**Gunel Mirzayeva (from Azerbaijan)**

**Sunday 26 January 2014, 7.30pm**

Performing works by Gubaidulina, Bach, Schubert and Prokofiev

**Charles Owen (from UK)**

**Sunday 9 March 2014, 7.30pm**

Performing works by Mendelssohn, Brahms, Bartok and Schubert

**Ben Schoeman (from South Africa) Sunday 11 May 2014, 7.30pm**

Performing works by Bach, Schumann and Schubert.