



Uganda Humanist Schools Trust (UK)

Report on International Friendship Week Visit to the Isaac Newton High School, Masaka

Sunday 4th, Monday 5th, Sunday 10th and Monday 11th July 2010

Steve Hurd

Introduction

Special circumstances favoured a longer split visit to the Isaac Newton High on this occasion. The visit, which took place in the Uganda Humanist Schools' International Friendship Week, marked the completion and launch of a path breaking solar-powered computer network room, and, to demonstrate the use of this facility, we had offered to help Peter Kisirinya, the school's Director, to create a school newspaper: "*The Isaac Newton News*".

Our visiting party was eminently suited to the task. We had Paul Gubbins, a university lecturer in journalism, his daughter Jill, a radio reporter with BBC Radio Derby, Andrew West, a final-year undergraduate student in photography (the volunteer official photographer for the British Humanist Association), Sam Iles, a video arts student, Katie Darley, a fine art/car design student, Chris Smith, a mathematics teacher working on Voluntary Service Overseas at Bushenyi Primary Teachers College in Uganda, myself, Steve Hurd, Director of the ELATE project which produces support materials to help secondary teachers in Uganda, and my wife, Hilary, a professor of parasitology who leads a malaria research team. Andrew, Sam and Katie stayed on in the school for a full week and visited the homes of children in the villages. Andrew took thousands of photographs and Sam worked on video diaries of a day in the life of 3 of the school students. Katie helped out in fine art classes and took a close interest in student welfare and education in the school.



Hilary, Andrew, Paul, Jill, Katie and Sam at the Equator and Sam, Katie and Andrew at Isaac Newton School

International Friendship Programme

The International Friendship Days have a number of objectives. They give supporters of our charity an opportunity to visit the schools and help with activities with the staff and students. The schools appreciate specialist talks, which open out into discussion and group work. They also welcome practical activities such as sports, arts, crafts and music. The main objective is to allow students to interact and make friends with supporters from abroad and to give them an opportunity to hear and attune to English spoken by first language speakers. Such contact gives the school students an opportunity to improve their own listening and speaking skills.

On this occasion our visitors worked with staff and students to create a school newspaper. This would demonstrate the use of the new computer lab for word-processing articles and the new laser printer could be used to print the newspaper.



Paul and Jill Gubbins gave an inspiring talk about journalism and they led a workshop on how to structure a newspaper article - key advice being to put the most important information first and successively less important information lower down the article. Peter Kisirinya had worked with the students in the weeks before we arrived to create draft articles for editing. On our last day, articles written by students and staff were assembled, some of Andrew's photographs were added, then there was a final edit before the newspaper went to press using the laser printer. Sufficient copies were printed for staff and for the students to take to their homes. Peter was delighted and felt that the newspaper would help to raise the profile of the school in the local area. In fact, following the opening of the computer lab and the creation of the newspaper, families have rushed into school to pay off arrears of school fees, and Peter is very hopeful that the demand for places in the school will be substantially higher next year as local people want their children to have access to such a wonderful facility.

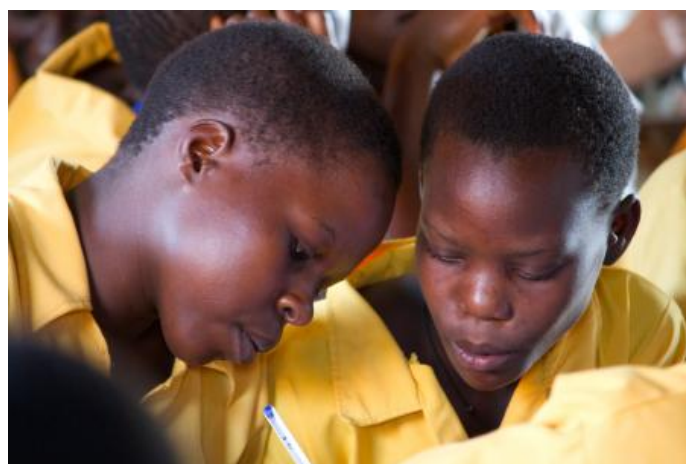


Apart from creating the newspaper our visitors were involved in a range of other activities in the school. Hilary gave an illustrated talk on Malaria. She explained the life cycle of the malaria parasite and showed animated films of how the parasite invades the liver and sticks in the capillaries in the brain, causing headaches and fever. In the photograph she is explaining to sixth form students how to identify the female mosquitoes, which are the ones that carry malaria to humans by biting them at night.

We knew that many students and local people were not convinced that malaria was caused by a parasite transmitted by the bite of a mosquito. Many believed it was caused by eating mangoes, which fruit during the main malaria season. They also believed, incorrectly, that the disease could be cured by eating onions and local herbs (Though, there may be some truth in the latter, especially if they use the leaves of the “neem” tree, which is thought to have a beneficial effects in reducing malaria symptoms).



Perhaps surprisingly, many of teachers in the school were unaware of key facts of malaria transmission. Peter was so impressed that he asked Hilary to repeat the talk to a gathering of 200 members of the local community who were in the school for the opening of the computer lab. A local health official explained that local villagers were refusing to use mosquito nets, which had been provided free to them, because they were afraid that the chemical on the nets that killed mosquitoes would also kill humans. There had been no funds to send workers into the villages to explain how the nets worked. The school hopes that the school students will take the health message back to their homes and it will spread from there. The pictures below show Peter helping students in the newspaper workshop, two girls working on their newspaper article, Steve revising theories of economic growth and development with the A-level Economics class and Chris helping students with their algebra.



The picture below left shows Katie at work with the fine art students, where she was teaching them how to look through the eye of an artist at the still art objects they want to draw. In the picture on the right a girl students shows off her amazing drawing of matoke bananas, the local staple food crop.



Below is a portrait of Ezra the Headteacher and of two local ladies, in their colourful basuti dresses, preparing matoke for the banquet which was being prepared for the 200 people visiting the school for the launch of the computer lab.



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The school now has 12 girl and boy boarders. Below is the girls dormitory and pictures of the boys playing football in Stoke City strip (courtesy of Stoke City FC).



The Chief Inspector of police talking to 200 members of the local community at the official opening of the new computer lab.



And finally, some pictures of the new computer lab.





The computer lab came with a host of carefully chosen educational software including Open Office, a typing tutor, 800 electronic books, dozens of videos, a huge off-line version of Wikipedia with a wealth of materials to support subjects across the curriculum as well as allowing students to indulge their wider interests such as football. In the last picture the two boys are reading about Alan Turing, one of the founders of modern computing. Two students found a video of Romeo and Juliet which transfixed them for an hour as they watched the film and listened to the dialogue on headphones. The electronic resources have provided the general library which the school was missing.

When we left the school everyone, students and staff, were in high spirits. Isaac Newton High School now looks like a school that is going places. The local politicians were falling over each other to offer to help the school by providing furniture, state funded students, and clearing the way to formal state registration. The school lab with its printer is also saving the school money. They have been able to print their mock exam papers in-house at a much lower cost than using an outside printer.

Progress since the visit in November 2009

Student numbers in the school were down a little over last year, about 110, and with a problem harvest it has been difficult to get in school fees. Consequently it has been difficult for the school to manage its cash flow and it has needed scholarship money from external donors, UHST and the North East Humanists, to cover its running costs.

1. At the start of the year the Isaac Newton High School was formally constituted as a "Not for Profit" Company (i.e. a charity), with a constitution that ensures that the land and assets will be used for Humanist schooling in perpetuity. The new Board has one outside member nominated by IHEU (The International Humanist and Ethical Union). This is Barrie Berkley, from IHEU and the North East Humanists, who has helped the school since its second year of existence.
2. Once charity status was confirmed IHEU's International Trust awarded the school £3800 to purchase the main block of land on which the school buildings stand. This helps to secure the future of the school.

There remains, however, the wider area of land on which the school grows its food crops and the crucial plot of land which gives access to the school which is occupied by a tenant farmer who is willing to sell up. It is very important that the school acquires these other two blocks if its future is to be secure.

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3. During 2010 UHST supporters have provided scholarships for 12 students (£1440). Below are three new scholarship holders...



4. UHST sent £500 to open an account for Isaac Newton School with a science supply company in Kampala. They are waiting for the completion of the science lab, which they are hoping to get more money from IHEU to do, before they collect the materials from the supplier.
5. Our charity also added £1200 to the Isaac Newton's bookshop account, which has enabled them to buy a textbook in each subject for every student in Senior 4, in their final year before taking O-level examinations. The books can be taken by students from the school's lending library/bookstore, which we built last year. Below is a picture of Peter's brother Edward, who is the site manager of the school and also looks after the lending library.



6. We also provided £800 so the school could pay for additional teaching to help the Senior 4 students in the final year before their O-level examinations. Peter has used this to lay on extra classes before and after school and at weekends and to pay for petrol for the generator to give additional lighting so that students can do private study in hours of darkness.
7. Water has been a critical problem for the school. There is no mains water in the area and the school uses spring water drawn at the bottom of the valley – a walk of 20 minutes. To alleviate the situation UHST has provided £1750 to enable the school to install rainwater capture using two 5000 litres storage tanks, including the one below.



8. A further grant of £1000 was given to finish off the hall, which was built from school resources, with a grant from IHEU for the roof. The money was needed to concrete the floor and for windows and doors. In the event, part of this money was used to supplement the costs of the computer lab so some work still needs to be done to finish the hall completely.



9. The computer lab turned out to be rather more ambitious than originally planned. We agreed to find money for 8 solar panels to provide 0.75kw of electricity at a cost of £4720 and a computer network with a server, 8 workstations, laser printer and software for a very reasonable £1760 (from U-Connect an NGO supplying refurbished equipment from European banks). The original budget of £1700 was for a building with 2 sides and a roof that filled in the gap between the hall and the science lab, and a further £800 for benches on which to place the computers.

However, when the solar panel supplier made an onsite inspection they found that the roof orientation of the new building was wrong angle for the sun. In the circumstances, given how the lab would improve educational opportunities and raise the status of the school in the area, Peter made a unilateral decision to make a fine free-standing building. This involved taking an interest free loan of £1650 from a family friend. UHST would like to find the resources to refund this extra money to Peter. He also borrowed some money from his staffing budget to complete the building but this was refunded with a grant of £800 paid into the charity by two of our trustees.

This has been a large project for UHST but the outcomes are clear for all to see. The lab has the effect of:

- Allowing the school to introduce computer studies as a subject for all students and so improve their preparedness for the world of work
- Providing online resources to enhance teaching and learning right across the school subjects.

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- Reduce the schools printing bills and, being solar powered, there are no ongoing power costs.
- In future the school will be able to provide Internet facilities for the local community and to allow them to take part in international projects with schools in other countries. Adding Internet will cost the school about £350 a year, and we are hoping that schools in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire will raise this money and, once established, have educational links with the school.

Below is the school site. The computer lab with the solar panels is in the foreground.



There is little doubt that the school is on a fine site and UHST supporters' involvement this year has contributed much to raising educational standards and the profile of the school in the area. However, the real job of educating the children is in the hands of the Director, the Headteacher and their teaching and ancillary staff who show great commitment to the school. Staff payments are low and we would like to find ways to raise these in future and we hope our supporters will help us to do this. One development we are considering is teacher sponsorship.