

## **Uganda 2009 – the Head Master’s visit to the Great Lakes High School**

In July 2009, my wife Barbara and I flew to Uganda at the invitation of the Rev’d Dr Hamlet Mbabazi to lay the dedication stone of the Great Lakes High School at a ceremony to mark the official inauguration of that school which opened its hastily built doors in February 2007. Many pupils have already met Dr Mbabzi – or Dr Hamlet, as he quickly became known to us – during his visit to Highgate in November 2007 when he came to accept the donation which made possible the building of the High School. As Founding Director of CHIFCOD [Child to Family Development Organisation], Dr Mbabazi has been responsible for the creation of a family of schools – primary, secondary and tertiary – which aim to break cycles of poverty and build a better, healthier and more prosperous life for young Ugandans ([www.volunteeruganda.org](http://www.volunteeruganda.org))

Highgate School has enjoyed a link with CHIFCOD since October 2007 when the School raised £60,000 to help build a secondary school to serve the pupils of CHIFCOD’s four primary schools in Kinkiisi District, in the province of Kanungu, South West Uganda, on the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda. This link came to us through one of our Governors, Michael Lawson, the Archdeacon of Hampstead, who, knowing of the work we had done in raising money for a community in Sri Lanka in 2006, suggested to Nigel Little, then curate at St Michael’s Church, Highgate, that Highgate School would be well placed to help CHIFCOD and its founding director, Hamlet Mbabazi, who had studied with Revd Little at Oak Hill Theological College. When Nigel and I met to discuss his request in the summer of 2006, I had no idea of the scale of the work which faces CHIFCOD and its trustees or the impact which our fund-raising could have on the lives of hundreds of Ugandan children.

This was our – Barbara’s and my – first trip to Africa, certainly as adults, but I knew of Uganda. My grandparents met there, married there, worked there and brought up their family there. Some of my earliest memories are of my grandfather talking about his experiences as District Commissioner in Kampala or my grandmother relating comic accounts of her attempts to run the household. Their lives in the thirties and forties are, of course, worlds apart from the Uganda of the twenty-first century, but returning to my late mother’s birth-place – and hunting down the house where she lived as a child (now an art gallery) – gave our visit an added resonance and intrigued our Ugandan hosts.

We arrived in Entebbe to be met by face-mask wearing nurses who required us to complete swine ‘flu declarations. The hot news of the day was the debate over the proposed visit of the Sudanese President, General Omar al-Bashir, accused by the International Criminal Court in The Hague of orchestrating genocide in Dafur. Muslim Ugandans were protesting in Kampala against the suggestion that Uganda would issue a warrant for his arrest. Uganda borders the Sudan to the north and in the course of our visit, we came to understand how complex the relationships between geography, colonial history, religion and economics were. According to our Christian Ugandan contacts, the rise of Islam in Uganda, the influence of Libya, Libyan money and cheap Iranian loans are a cause of acute concern. Politics and economics were never far from our conversations.

For the duration of our visit, Hamlet and his wife Kellen had freed themselves of their many work and family obligations to look after us. In so doing, they assured us an intimate introduction to Ugandan life: in the course of our first conversation, Hamlet, who was for five years a member of the Ugandan Parliament, assailed us

with statistics and political home-truths: the average Ugandan family has eight children; Uganda's population is set to double every twenty-five years; of the eleven million people who work in Uganda, only four per cent have salaried jobs – seventy-five percent work on the land; the British divided work along ethnic lines, designating the peoples from the north as army or police material and restricting broader educational opportunities accordingly – is it no accident that Uganda's most infamous leader, Idi Amin, hailed from the north? We noticed that advertising techniques seem frozen in the Fifties, urging the implausible health-giving qualities of coca-cola and lucozade on its population.

Our first day brought us to the capital Kampala, a rambling, busy, noisy and often congested city. In front of most banks, slightly sleepy armed guards squatted or leant against walls, with rifles or machine guns hanging from their shoulders: it seemed unlikely that they would use them and our sense was that Uganda was – its lethal or suicidal drivers apart – a safe place. Hamlet told us that he thought there was a ten-year window before the Ugandan propensity to patience and friendliness was destroyed by unemployment (the inevitable consequence of agricultural land being exhausted and a rising population). Parking and changing money introduced us to the Ugandan enthusiasm for form-filling: everything in carbonised triplicate. As Hamlet wryly pointed out, if Ugandans were as good at generating revenue in business as they are at collecting fines, Uganda would be a wealthy country.

Ugandans aspire to work for the government: the top four per cent of pupils are state funded and almost invariably end up working for the state whose salaries and pensions provide wealth and security. We encountered our first well-fed Ugandans in the Parliament restaurant where we had lunch: Hamlet has a role as Chaplain to the Parliament (a British-built building) and runs weekly prayer meetings there. The post-lunch bell summoning MPs to the next debate rang for a good fifteen minutes and yet the Chamber was empty as we left. Hamlet spoke with great disappointment about his experiences of the political system and the unwillingness of the current regime to own up to and face the very real economic problems which face his country.

Street-life seemed dominated by bicycles, motorbike taxis and minibuses, always overloaded with passengers or improbable loads. We saw bikes carrying many things – furniture, crops, firewood, even an (empty) coffin. Street-hawkers offered drivers newspapers (stapled to prevent outlawed newspaper 'hire'), bananas, toys, mobile phone adaptors, sweets, posters and games of monopoly and scrabble. Building works progressed in oddly haphazard ways: scaffolding was often out of roughly cut and rather rickety branches; decorators leant precariously out of windows to paint walls; uncharacteristically energetic young men were seen shinning up towering billboards to replace posters.

We spent our first nights on the shores of Lake Victoria, Africa's largest lake and the world's second largest. It's difficult to believe it isn't the sea when standing on its beaches. Huge storks lollop along the private hotel beaches, waiting for offerings (given voluntarily or not) from guests' tables. Local lads use the lake to wash not only their clothes but themselves and bring soap, shampoo and towel to the lakeside most evenings. Even in the city, few houses have running water, still fewer electricity: throughout the day, roads and tracks throughout the country are lined with children (mostly) carrying yellow jerry cans walking to the nearest tap or stream to collect water for all the family's daily needs. Despite these limitations, Ugandans, except for the youngest children of the poorest families, dress neatly and soberly. Children's school uniforms are bright, clean and clearly cared for, although shoes are the

exception rather than the rule. Shirts are pressed, presumably with flat irons heated on open fires. With the exception of traditional women's clothing, Ugandans are not fashion conscious: all generations wear the same style of clothes reminiscent of 1950s Britain. It's an obvious point, but until there's enough surplus income, clothes serve a practical purpose. Many city dwellings along the chaotic and randomly laid-out back-streets look from the outside as if they might be abandoned (no doors or window frames), but elegantly dressed mothers emerge with their children to head off to do the day's chores. There are virtually no shopping centre or malls: each street has a collection of stands, huts or sheds in varying degrees of solidity which sell a wide collection of wares. Prices, which are invariably negotiable, reflect the economic realities: anything locally produced seems extraordinarily cheap by Western standards whereas imported (electronic or computer) goods are eye-wateringly expensive. There are unbelievable numbers of schools and churches, often very simple buildings. My favourite shop-sign was 'Trust in God electronics'. The most western-orientated (and successful) businesses seem to be run by Indians. Following a very pleasant trip to the source of the Nile at Jinja, we headed west towards Kirima, a nine-hour journey which we preceded by an advantageous and, we subsequently realised, wise purchase of some new tyres for Hamlet's trusty jeep. Tired roads, pock-marked with pot-holes, give way suddenly to beautifully re-surfaced highways complete with road markings, bus stops and pedestrian crossings which in turn disappear just as suddenly to leave treacherous dusty tracks. These roads are worn down by the constant east-west juggernaut traffic, as well as the apparently death-defying taxi and bus drivers who use their right-hand indicators (Ugandans appear to drive on the left) to warn would-be users of the centre of the road; if this fails, drivers draw on their armoury of head-lights and horns in the battle of wills to see who will budge. The more cattle, pedestrians, small children and heavily-laden cycles there are ahead, the more urgently drivers sound their horns and flash their lights to win their place on the high road. In a county whose people seem to have the patience of Job when faced with laborious chores and bureaucratic intransigence, the wheel seems to bring cut-throat action to the fore.

As we left Kampala behind us, the country unfolded to reveal spectacular mountains and valleys, apparently lush and well watered. Hamlet has identified the absence in Ugandans (although not amongst Indians) of a spirit of enterprise. He ascribes this, in part, to the fact that as a Protectorate, Uganda did not allow Europeans to buy land and settle as they did in then Rhodesia and Kenya. Ugandans, his argument runs, have not seen examples of commercial agriculture and cannot envisage running farms to grow cash crops. Given the abundance of sources of water, the absence of irrigations systems seems anomalous; Ugandan agriculture is thus entirely weather dependent and during our visit there were reports of death through starvation (denied by the government) in the east of the country. Hamlet spoke of his astonishment on a recent trip to Israel, where the African churches in the Anglican Communion held their recent splinter-group conference, of the use which Israelis make of their land to produce exportable fruit and vegetables. Why don't we export mangoes, pineapples and avocados, he railed? Why not indeed.

Fifty kilometres from Kirima tarmacked roads peter out for good and we made our way west. As the sun set, we stopped to take in the view of Hamlet and Kellen's home valley: an extraordinarily beautiful and peaceful setting for some of Uganda's poorest people. As we were putting away our expensive cameras, the peace was disturbed by a scratching, scrabbling sound. We looked round, half-expecting to see the Ugandan equivalent of a fox setting out on its nocturnal travels when a tiny and

rather frightened boy emerged, dragging a neatly trussed bundle of firewood, twice or three times his height. Hamlet tried to engage him in conversation, but he was too shy to speak as he stared at these strange-looking white people. He allowed us to take a picture of him. Hamlet explained that he hoped to find out who the boy was as he had seen him before collecting wood at dusk, like so many children, and he wanted to get him into one of the CHIFCOD primary schools, convinced that the boy was going to school only intermittently, if at all. Armed with this photo, Hamlet had a chance of finding him again and persuading his parents to let him go to school. Electricity reached the village of Kirima two years ago and Hamlet and Kellen's pretty house, perched on a hill, dominates the surrounding countryside and is constantly full of direct and extended family, friends and loyal hangers-on. We were warmly received and made to feel both like honoured guests and long-standing friends. Great excitement overtook the household when one of the seemingly endless telephone calls to Hamlet's mobile brought the news that a cursed neighbour of the Great Lakes College, the tertiary institution which serves Kirima and is supported by CHIFCOD, had changed his mind and was willing to sell a strategically critical portion of land to the College which will transform its functioning and help it to acquire university status. On our visit to the College, we were able to see what an impact this purchase would have and were happy to accept responsibility for this happy volte-face on the part of the awkward neighbour! This was our introduction to Ugandan trade-mark buildings: simple brick structures, tin roofs, timber beams, occasional window panes, concrete floors. There's a feeling of being half-finished, not because people have run out of time or are careless, but just keen to stretch every building material to its maximum use. In common with most Ugandan schools and colleges, Great Lakes has a desperate shortage of books for its library and very limited computer networks with unreliable dial-up modem access to the internet. Dormitories are cramped and spartan, as are the wash and toilet facilities. Pupils and students wash their bed linen by hand; if they have no washing powder or soap, they use their friends' dirty water. We met young men working on the site, levelling the ground in preparation for a new girls' dormitory block. Back-breaking work with every pound of earth dug out and moved by hand. The African diet does not equip one for vigorous labour.

That evening we met senior staff from CHIFCOD's schools, including the new Principal of Great Lakes College and the Head Master of Kirima Parents' Primary School. It was impossible not to be struck by their drive and dynamism, their commitment to improve the lives of their pupils and students. Lively debate about the economic doldrums in Uganda, the exploitation of Tanzanian farmers, taxed out of existence by government and the success of fat-cat farmers in Kenya. If all goes to plan, graduates from Great Lakes College will have acquired both entrepreneurial skills and instincts; certainly, the vision is there in its leadership. Kellen and her team of nieces and helpers had loaded up a table which positively groaned with the fifteen different dishes including goat, chicken, beef, sweet potato, rice, peas, matoke, egg plant, ground nut sauce and a kind of warm, stretchy bread made of millet. As part of the evening's fellowship, we were invited to talk about Highgate and our family and answered detailed questions about the English curriculum (is it not too rigid?) and the pastoral work of tutors (do they not get in the way of parents?).

Our visit followed on that of eight Year 11 pupils and their teachers, James Stenning and Dan Jones whose experiences you can read about elsewhere. The centre piece to our visit was the official opening of the Great Lakes High School on Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> July. Hamlet had fixed this date back in November 2007 on his first visit, and it was

clear that the staff and children had been planning the festivities for months and months. The track leading to the school has been named *Highgate Road* and the entire population of the school lined the road as we arrived to cut the ribbon and unveil the carefully (hand) painted sign. At this point, the school burst into song, led by three gutsy cantors who danced to the catchy, rhythmic hymns, praising God (and Highgate!) 'for this wonderful day'; helped by the insistent, hypnotic drum-beat beat, we made our way behind the immaculately turned out pupils towards the school buildings and marquees which had been erected for the occasion. Barbara and I were asked to unveil a dedication stone and add some ceremonial mortar to the building, as a sign of Highgate's involvement in the building of the school.

We were taken on a tour of the school site, a remote but beautiful hill-top location some fifteen kilometres from Kirima. The girls' dormitories were decorated with wild flowers, garlands made out of discarded (and used) file paper, precious family photographs and good luck cards; each bed was made with the kind of attention that would have an officious sergeant purring, not a pillow case or hand towel out of place. Despairing parents can take comfort from the fact that Ugandan boys are as untidy (but as spirited) as their European counterparts: to distract us from the unswept floors, one dorm had laid a red carpet to await its visitors. Classrooms are quite small but take up to forty pupils at old-fashioned desks; teachers use blackboards and chalk and such textbooks as they can lay their hands on (one of the excitements of our visit was the timely arrival of boxes of text and reference books, collected by Julia Challender, retired Principal of our Pre-Preparatory School and shipped by a CHIFCOD trustee and supporter (John Rutherford). A new science block is planned and will be needed by 2011 when the current generation reaches the top end of the school.

We were amazed at the patience of the pupils (and indeed parents!) during the service which followed. The pupils must have remained seated for about five hours during the speeches by the many dignitaries, including Council and Government officials, local politicians, the Headmaster and other CHIFCOD senior staff. However, the pupils' presentations – songs of welcome to their visitors from Highgate ('Settle down, be at home, be welcome Adam and Barbara') and about their school, as well as sketches – were both moving and entertaining and culminated in fantastic, vigorous demonstrations of local dances in which all, including 'honoured guests' were obliged to participate. Many parents were present and will have walked for many hours to reach the school where their children board. The sumptuous meal served at the conclusion to the festivities will have been the first meat they saw for six months, according to Hamlet.

Four primary schools feed the Great Lakes High School and we visited all four: first Kirima Primary School, whose voices we had already heard. Every morning, from sunrise, a great drum-beating and chanting drifted up to Hamlet's hill-top house and we discovered that this is the morning pre-school warm-up. Over a hundred pupils sing and dance before school in their assembly hall which doubles up as a classroom: the noise is astonishing – incredibly loud, but pulsatingly, resiliently, joyously happy. It is difficult not just to think that these children deserve to live in paradise, but as one's eyes stray along the classroom walls, and see warnings ('Don't accept gifts for sex'; 'Avoid sugar daddies'; 'AIDS has no cure'), one realises how far from paradise they live. Smartly dressed, beaming, enthusiastic teachers greet the children and get a terrific response from them as they praise God and thank him for his goodness. Kirima's buildings are being improved, with a new two-storey teaching block soon to open, thanks to a generous donation by a Highgate connexion, but they are

struggling with the dormitories which the authorities believe to be too crowded. Children as young as four board; this keeps them away from the chores of water or firewood-collection and goat tending, as well as keeping them in school and reasonably well fed. Our impressions of Kirima were replicated at Nyakabungo and Nyamarama Primary Schools: a lot of energetic teaching and enthusiastic pupils, keen to impress us with their commitment to and enjoyment of school. One school in Rutenga is in an even more remote area where standards of living are even lower. We could sense that there was a greater challenge here, with difficulties in recruiting and retaining good staff and children whose horizons are limited by their daily experiences: no access to books or newspapers outside the school and little parental understanding of the benefits of formal education as a way out of their familiar routines.

These schools survive without government subsidies or support of any kind. Their survival feels precarious: budgets eked out to pay teachers, finish buildings and feed pupils, with little left over for equipment or maintenance. The teachers who stay in these schools, rather than seeking out more lucrative employment in Kampala, believe passionately in the human resource which the younger generation represents. It is clear that the cycle of education which CHIFCOD schools could provide will be critical in the individual destinies of hundreds of children; it could also exploit the ten-year window of opportunity which Hamlet has identified, before famine and unemployment radicalises a population which has, as yet, not seen the ravages of the Sudan, the Congo, Rwanda or Mozambique.

While it is all too easy for the individual to feel defeated by the scale of problems facing humanity, here is an opportunity for all of us to make a difference, and immediately, and for the long-term. I came away struck by the practical, unsentimental, sanguine and yet determined approach which characterises the actions of those trying to make a difference. Every little helps: it is almost embarrassing how easy it would be to make a huge and lasting difference. Our sponsored walk, due to take place on Wednesday 21 October, will be *the* opportunity to guarantee the continuation of CHIFCOD's work and to lay an enduring foundation to ensure that the simple but handsome dedication stone which commemorates the Highgate/Kirima link points forward to a better world. Please be generous in your sponsorship! Please be active in seeking sponsors!

Adam Pettitt  
Head Master  
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