

Linking the North Cotswolds to South Sudan?

Article from John Benington ©

At first sight, it is hard to see much connection between the North Cotswolds, one of the most prosperous and civilised places on the planet, and South Sudan, one of the poorest and least developed places on earth.

However, several people from this area have begun visiting Ibba in South Sudan, and vice versa, and finding that we have at least two things in common.

First our shared love of beautiful countryside and prolific nature – Limestone Wolds here; Equatorial Forest there; oak and beech here; mahogany and teak there; wheat and barley here; millet and cassava there; asparagus and strawberries here; aubergine and pineapple there.

Second our shared desire for good quality education for our children. Which is why a growing number of North Cotswolds people are supporting the building and development of a pioneering girls' boarding school in South Sudan.

Bridget's dream beside the Nile

The story began in July 2008, when Warwick Business School Professor John Benington, who lives in Icomb, was teaching officials from the newly independent government of South Sudan, in the capital Juba.

Sitting beside the Nile, one of these officials Bridget Nagomoro told John of a dream she had had in which she felt called to build a girls' school on family land which she had recently inherited from her father, in Ibba village Western Equatoria State.

Bridget said she was the first girl from Ibba ever to have had schooling beyond the age of 10! She wanted other girls to have the same opportunity for education as herself, and asked for help in translating this vision into reality. (Read Bridget's story, and watch our short video at www.ibbagirlsschool.org).

A 50 year war of independence from the mainly Arabic Muslim North has eventually left South Sudan (a mainly African Christian country) with its own Government, but overwhelming need. Only one in three girls currently go to school – the eighth lowest primary school enrolment in the world. Of those who do go, most girls drop out around 10, because of family duties, domestic labour, childcare or early marriage/ pregnancy

Solar pumped water, giving Ibba its first ever taps.



Richard Aluma, with the red shirt, is the Head Teacher and Vicky Dratia (on his right) is the Deputy Head.

South Sudan has the highest level of maternal mortality in the world, and one of the highest levels of infant mortality – partly because it has the lowest level of safe water, sanitation and toilets in the world.

A 15 year old girl in South Sudan has a greater chance of dying in childbirth than of completing secondary education.

So in 2009 John visited Ibba with Bridget to meet local community leaders and to discuss plans for the school – the first of many such visits since. Bridget soon decided to give up her job in Juba and return to live and work in Ibba, where she was later appointed as local government Commissioner. South Sudan Trustees and Board of Governors were then appointed to steer the development of Ibba Girls Boarding School (IGBS).

In 2011 we set up Friends of Ibba Girls School (FIGS) as a small UK charity. Several of the 12 founding Trustees come from the Cotswolds (Dame Yve Buckland; Professor Jean Hartley; Hugh Paget; Archdeacon Michael Paget-Wilkes; Eric Shepley and myself).

Turning dream into reality

Since 2011 FIGS and IGBS have together

- * Appointed a "green" architect, Malcolm Worby, to design the 73 acre site and buildings on sustainable principles, using natural resources, local materials and labour wherever

Internet connection, South Sudan style.





The girls and staff with the newly arrived textbooks.

possible – mud bricks made on site; indigenous wood; solar electricity; solar pumped water, giving Ibba its first ever taps.

- * Raised funding to build the first classroom block, dormitories, showers, toilets, kitchen, staff accommodation, so that the school can be fully residential and serve the needs of girls coming from long distances across Western Equatoria State.
- * Appointed an excellent team of African staff – head teacher, Richard Aluma, director of studies Vicky Dratia, finance manager Sonaa Santino, classroom teachers Yoane, Agnes and Fabiano, matrons, nurse, driver, cooks, cleaners, groundsman and security staff. We pay and train our staff very well, and expect from them high standards, continuous improvement, and long service.
- * Opened the school in 2014 to its first 40 ten year old girls, with a great public celebration – speeches, dancing and feasting with 300 representatives from the local community, the churches of all denominations, the state and national government.

Next steps – a 10 year plan

- * IGBS is now in its third year, with 120 girls in Primary 4, 5 and 6. The plan is to enrol an additional 40 ten year old students each February until 2022, when it reaches its planned capacity of 360 girls aged 10 to 18+, in Primary 4 to 8 and Senior 1 to 4, when they will leave for University, professional training or other leadership roles. Excellence without elitism.
- * We therefore need to build an additional classroom, dormitory, toilets and washing facilities; to appoint an additional

A shaved head is a sign of a serious student in South Sudan.



classroom teacher and matron; and to upgrade the infrastructure each year for the next 6 years. The costs are high (about £350k capital plus £150k revenue per year), because the devastation left by the 50 year war of independence means that many materials have to be imported at great difficulty and expense.

- * FIGS so far has raised over £500k in donations from over 600 individuals, churches, schools, and small family trusts. Our business plan for the next 10 years involves an increasing percentage of funds coming from within South Sudan, and small income generating businesses linked to the school (e.g agriculture; fish farming; goats; honey; repair trades; residential training centre).
- * However, we also face some more immediate needs – to raise £75,000 to build a new block of three classrooms in time for the next 40 ten year old girls arriving in February 2017 (and classroom capacity for the following two years)

Join our 75th birthday challenge

So John has taken on a 75th birthday year challenge to try to find 500 generous people who will donate £75 each towards the target of £75,000. This will raise half the required amount. Gift Aid will add a further 25%. John will then double this total.

See the FIGS website for a list of the core supporters of the school, and those who have already donated to this 75th birthday appeal.

We would welcome more contributions to this birthday appeal. (If £75 is too large or too little for you please consider giving any multiple of 75 – from 75p to £7500! The widow's mite is just as valuable as the millionaire's tithe ...).

Of course, we are not investing primarily in buildings but in the education and lives of a generation of students who have been deprived by war of the basic human rights we enjoy – to safety, security, shelter, safe water and sanitation, and schooling.

Please send Gift Aided donations to Treasurer Gary Bandy at Clover Cottage, Stubbins Lane, Chinley, High Peak, SK23 6AE; or donate online via www.ibbagirlsschool.org; or phone John on 07557 799648.

FIGS will send you regular news of the school, its staff and students.

Our gifts will leave a lasting legacy in the lives of these girl students, their families, and their communities.