



Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

Visit to Isaac Newton High School, Katera, June 2012



This year our party visiting from the UK for the Friendship activities at Isaac Newton High School comprised 12 people. They included: Steve and Hilary Hurd, from UHST, Chris Smith, a recent volunteer with VSO in Uganda, Mike and Gloria Milne, involved in music and drama in the Cambridge area and Bob Churchill, who is about to take a post with IHEU. In addition, thanks to a school twinning arrangement, we were accompanied by 2 lecturers from Newcastle-under-Lyme College: Jay Allen, Arts and Textiles, Faye Matthews, Dance, and four students Holly Jordan, Shannon Downward, Grace Hancock and Katrina Wilde. We were at the school from Sunday 24th to Friday 29th June.

New Developments

Since the last Friendship Visit two years ago there have been a number of significant developments at the school:

- A new girls' boarding block which houses 72 students and their matron, Lydia Namugerwa, who also teaches at the school.
- The erection of a perimeter fence to provide security – a requirement with boarders.

- A new kitchen with efficient wood burning stoves is nearing completion.
- A two roomed hostel is almost finished, where the male warden in charge of boys' boarding stays and other teachers will be able to sleep when necessary.
- A new pumped water storage system was completed during our stay. This transformational development is described below.
- The school has received its licence from the new local education authority and has two years to prepare for full registration.

On arrival through the main gate of the school there is a splendid view across the school site towards Lake Victoria in the distance.



To the right of the main buildings, above, there is the new girls' boarding house.



The site is developing into a pleasant environment for the school community. The grass is kept short, helped by two grazing cows, and trees have been planted to provide

shade, where students can read quietly and chat to friends (below).



The boarding house has well-made metal-framed bunk beds, for which the girls bring their own mattresses. This is in line with general practice in Uganda to keep down the spread of parasites. There are three bunks in each fairly sizeable sub-room. So the girls have plenty of floor space and room for their personal possessions, which they keep in lockable metal chests. The house has a room for the matron and a sick bay at one end. At the other end there is an area where the girls do their ironing. The house has 3 outside pit latrines and a wash room. Up to now girls



have had to fetch water in jerry cans but in the near future there will be piped water for washing and a

shower, which will make life much pleasanter.

A school inspector visited the school and was very impressed by the boarding facilities. So many boarding houses in Ugandan schools are overcrowded and vulnerable to the spread of disease and fire. In comparison with other schools the density of occupancy is low. All windows and doors open to allow exit in the event of fire and the dormitory is lit with electric lights rather than the paraffin lanterns found in many other schools. The school has arranged for the local health department to supply free mosquito nets for every bed. However, these are taking some time to come so some girls have brought nets from home.

The inspector has insisted, however, that the school site has a perimeter fence to protect the site and the girls from intruders. UHST provided funds for a temporary high fence comprising 9 lines of barbed wire. A UHST supporter provided funds to plant a hedge alongside the fence and this will eventually grow into and obscure the barbed wire (see picture with small saplings, which will grow quickly in the Uganda climate).



Below are pictures of the new kitchen with the wood-burning stoves under construction. This should be in use within weeks.



The stoves vent to external chimneys so the cook does not have to breathe in smoke from the fires.

Below are two rooms that will be used as hostel accommodation for teachers. The warden for the boys' dormitory will sleep there regularly, and other teachers who live a long way from the school will be able to stay from time to time.



Undoubtedly the most important development for improving the day-to-day life in the school is the introduction of a pumped



water system. Hitherto the only water on the site has been rain water from roofs

collected into tanks. The one illustrated was provided by Walsall Rotary and Birmingham Humanists. In dry spells it has been necessary for students to carry water in jerry cans from the bottom of the valley, 25 minutes from the school. After considering various alternatives Peter has chosen a pumped system to improve water supply.

A well has been sunk in the bottom of the valley, at the level of the water table. The first picture below shows the well. It has since been covered to prevent contamination. A diesel powered piston engine (second picture) draws water from the well and pumps it through pipes which pass in a trench over 200 feet up the valley sides to a header tank at the highest point on the school site (third picture shows the pipe being connected to the header tank).



The water pipe passes through farm land adjacent to the school site. The pump can fill the 5,000 litre header tank in one hour. The water will be gravity fed to a stand pipe near the kitchen and into the girls washroom, where it will feed a shower. Eventually it will also provide piped water to the science lab.

Friendship activities

Our arrival at the school on Sunday 24th coincided with the school holding a Music, Dance and Drama competition. This is part of a national programme initiated by the Ministry of Education, which provided an outside adjudicator. The competition was between the three school houses, where each house had to write, rehearse and present songs, dances, mime and drama. The songs and dances were based on traditional activities such as hunting, making local beer and cloth from the bark of a local tree. The dramas were all hard-hitting stories on the theme of child abuse within the family. Clearly this has been a problem in Uganda but it is

being addressed by school drama holding up a mirror to society. Below are some pictures from the event.



The standard of music and drama in Uganda is high and the external adjudicator said that students at Isaac Newton High School were above average, which is high praise.

On the Monday we were shown around the school and introduced to teachers and students. During the course of the week a number of us helped with lessons in the school. Hilary gave talks to the whole school on evolution and parasitic diseases like schistosomiasis and sleeping sickness. The school students have a malaria club, led by one of last year's A-level Biology students who gained a grade A. Students in all years come together to learn about the disease. Hilary was invited to run two seminars with the club. She was very impressed and felt their knowledge was up to first year university level.

Steve helped out in a Geography class by explaining about the formation of landforms in mature river valleys – meander development and progression. He gave a talk to the whole school, staff and students, about Humanism. As many of the staff are employed on part-time contracts and have been with the school for a short time it is important that they get to hear about Humanist principles, which underpin the ethos of the school. Peter Kisirinya followed up the talk by answering questions and giving his own views on God and life after death. Steve introduced the boarding students to the game of snakes and ladders. This will provide a useful peg on which to discuss "life chances" in the future.

Chris Smith worked with the Maths teachers, doing some team teaching as she did at the Mustard Seed School. The group from Newcastle College, staff and students, brought along paints and brushes with them and ran some painting classes for the fine art students.





Before this, due to lack of materials, the fine art teacher, Farouk Lusiba, had had to concentrate on drawing and some craft work. Despite the dearth of materials we were all impressed by the high standard of drawing at Isaac Newton. Above are some examples of drawings made by school students.

As well as helping with an art class the Newcastle teachers and girls helped to organise the students for a concert that was given on the final day of our visit. Gloria created a script for a musical from a fable we heard in Lake Mburo National Park and Mike wrote the accompanying songs. In Uganda there is a traditional story of how the hippo's life style came about. The fable suggests that once upon a time hippos had beautiful long hair. However, the other animals were jealous so they lit a fire which burned the hippo's coats. This led to the hippos taking to the water to hide their nakedness and, since that time, they only come out at night to feed when the other animals are asleep and are unable to see their nakedness.

The students had great fun dressing up, acting and singing the songs of the different animals. Songs and costumes were created for the hippos, elephants, giraffes, buffalos and monkeys. Below are some pictures from the concert:





The concert was a fitting culmination to a week when students, staff and visitors worked together. There was a completely relaxed atmosphere, and any barriers that might have existed at the start of the week disappeared and everyone had a thoroughly good time. It was a perfect event for cementing international friendships.

In the evening after the concert we held a meeting in a nearby monastery conference room where warm speeches were given by the Headteacher, Ezra Mulwana, the Director, Peter Kisirinya, Steve Hurd, for UHST, and the staff of Newcastle College. This was followed by dinner and fond farewells.

The International Friendship Week at Isaac Newton School was a great success.



Mike and Gloria Milne felt that: *“all the first time visitors to the school, ie themselves and the girls from Newcastle College, were so impressed with the overall achievements of the teachers and students ... despite their challenges and lack of resources.*

The people involved are all amazing. It looks an impossible task to provide a decent education in those conditions and environment, but we have huge admiration for the good results with such limited resources.”

Chris Smith, who has visited the school

several times in the past 4 years said:



“my first impression this visit was the amazing progress with buildings and the way the whole site is beginning to

have an inviting and established feel. The welcome from Peter, the head and all staff, as well as the students, is as warm as ever. Having visited many schools in Uganda I appreciate small things, a notice board in the staff room, student work displayed in classrooms. The first Music, Dance and Drama day was exceptionally good; the plays explored real issues, the dancing and singing were extremely good. Staff must have given up a lot of their own time to achieve this. I also saw some very good maths lessons and particularly enjoyed explaining my Humanist beliefs to a group of older students. I like this school, it energises me!”

Faye Matthews summed up the feelings of the Newcastle College group:

“we were made to feel most welcome by all the staff and students at Isaac Newton School. It was an amazing opportunity to see the teaching and learning take place



and to view the school’s facilities. We were also able to see how the money we had raised at the college was being used to help all staff and students. Our students had such a fantastic experience at the school and got involved in a drama production performed by the Isaac Newton students, they also helped teach art and dance classes. All four students have said what a life changing experience it was visiting the school and meeting the students. They have come away with many fantastic memories and experiences that they will be able to build on

for the future. Already other staff from other curriculum areas at the College are expressing an interest in taking students to the School. We hope that this will be the first of many trips to Uganda."



Peter Kisirinya, the Director, is very positive about the achievements of the Friendship Week:

"It was nice to welcome Steve, Hilary, Mike, Gloria, Chris and the teachers and girls from Newcastle College to our school. In my opinion this marked another great stride in the school's development. Thank you very much for the work you have all undertaken at Isaac Newton High School - it has been really great. I am committed to seeing the school reach the highest possible point. The friendship visit was fantastic for everyone who had a chance to get involved. The staff, students and the whole school community are ecstatic about the week."

The students

The number of students at Isaac Newton High School has increased from 120 in 2010 to 195 in 2012. This reflects growing local confidence in the school, which has been generated by high standards of teaching, student care and the improving examination results.

UHST supporters provide scholarships for 34 of these students, including 9 boys and 25 girls. The majority of scholarship students are either single or double orphans but all are from very needy backgrounds. Once they knew the number of new first year scholarships available Isaac Newton approached the District Education Officers

and local primary schools to find suitable students. While they favoured students who had done well in their Primary Leaving Certificate (PLC), they also took students who were less bright but had no alternative access to secondary schooling. So Isaac Newton School has a more mixed first year intake than Mustard Seed School, which has only taken students with a Grade 1 in the PLC.

We interviewed all the scholarship students who were in school that week. Some were away from school due to illness or because their families were keeping them at home to help with chores.

We also interviewed students who took their A-levels in 2011 and who have gained scholarships to study at university. These are three of their stories.

Francis Odongo, 21



Francis gained 21 points in his A-levels last November with B grades in Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Agriculture and a Grade 1 Distinction in the General Paper. He has been awarded a government scholarship for a B.Sc. degree in Agriculture at Makerere, the top university in Uganda. He told us:

"My parents are peasant farmers who cultivate a small farm so it was not simple for them to raise my school fees. I am the eldest of four children and the future of my family lies on me. I chose agriculture because it is the backbone of Uganda and I am determined to venture into it in future and become self-employed. I would like to open up a dairy farm to produce good quality milk to improve the health of my community and also a vegetable growing project. In order to achieve all this I will need additional financial help to get me through university for the next three years."

Mike Mazinga, 20

Mike gained 23 points in his A-levels with straight A's in Biology, Agriculture and Food and Nutrition, a C in Chemistry and a credit in the General Paper. He is serving in the school as an assistant teacher to earn some money before he goes to Kyambogo University to study for a medically related B.Sc. in Dietetics and Nutrition.



Mike says:

"I was very happy about my results, although I could not share this moment with my beloved Dad who is deceased. My Mum is a peasant

farmer of 62. She is illiterate although she wants me to study and attain a high level of education. I paid for my own schooling by working in a restaurant as a waiter. I have a place at university but I will need help with supplementary finance to get through. A degree in Nutrition will enable me to help the enormous number of malnourished infants in my village and the country at large."

Joseph Kawuki, 19

Joseph also has a place at Kyambogo University to read for a B.Sc. in Dietetics and Nutrition. He and Mike are close friends who have studied together through school, and they intend to help each other through university. Joseph gained A's in Biology and Food & Nutrition, a B in Physics, D in Chemistry and a credit in General Paper.



Joseph's story:

"I am an orphan raised in my maternal family. I am the second born in the family. I have my little brother Henry who is the last born."

Dad died in 2000 when I was only 7 years old. Studying has been and still is a hard venture, most especially due to financial problems. I have had to finance myself by picking up work in the holidays. Although I have a place at university I need someone to help me with additional financial support if I am to take up the offer of a university place."

The results at Isaac Newton School are remarkable for a rural school in an impoverished area. I sent them to the Head of Education at Makerere University and he found it hard to believe that they came from a school in such a location. This is a testimony to the hard work and dedication of the teachers and the help we have provided by providing a book rich environment.

Mike and Joseph described their study strategy. They went to lessons and afterwards compared notes to check they had the same understanding. They used textbooks from the school library to make additional notes on things they did not understand. Then they worked through past exam questions, making additional notes as required. Finally they made notes on notes and tested each other in the run up to their examinations. This is a model study strategy which is clearly being employed by others in the school. During 2012 Isaac Newton will be sending 5 students to university on government scholarships. Others are eligible to go if they can find funding.

Clearly only a minority of students will make it to university. The school has no firm data on where other students go. They know that some others continue their education in primary and secondary teacher training colleges and in vocational colleges. Other students take up apprenticeships as builders and welders. Some find jobs riding motor bike taxis (boda-bodas), Still others become market traders and some return to help out on the farm (the shamba).

Staffing

Isaac Newton High School employs 21 teachers plus a bursar, a cook, a caretaker and

guard (askari). Only 5 of the teachers work full time. However, the average qualification level of teachers has improved in the past two years. Reliance on part-time teachers poses a problem for the allocation of duties in the school. The shortage of full-time teachers makes it difficult to offer much in the way of out-of-school activities. Despite this the school offers football for boys and girls. They have a choir and do dance and drama. There has been no change in pay levels, which remain very low.



The school has started a pig husbandry project involving Agriculture students

working with the local community. Piglets will be fed on food waste from the school kitchen and given to members of the community. The project will give students valuable practical experience and also help to raise local incomes.

Challenges of growth

The growth in student numbers in 2012 has increased the pressures on teachers and on the facilities. Class sizes have increased. There has been a large increase in numbers boarding – 72 girls and 45 boys.

The pressure on books and science materials has increased. UHST has helped by providing an additional £1000 worth of books and £500 for science equipment and chemicals since the start of the year.

Additional toilets are urgently needed for boys, girls and staff. The existing ones need to be regularly disinfected and the holes covered to keep down flies. Arrangements for hand washing with water and soap outside the toilets are lacking. The provision and disposal of sanitary towels is a particular problem. At the moment they are being dropped into the pit latrines. If this continues the latrines will fill up too quickly so there is a need to start

incinerating them. In general the school needs to develop a whole school policy on health and safety, especially as the number of boarding students increases. Encouraging all students to use mosquito nets to prevent malaria is a priority. The purchase of fire extinguishers is also essential.

The school has a number of other challenges. Covering day-to-day running costs is difficult, especially when there are sudden unexpected extras. Money is owed on the pumped water storage system. More money is required to finish off the new kitchen and staff hostel.

Pressure on the computer room and lack of a suitably qualified computer manager has meant that many of the work stations are not working. This can be solved easily but it needs a visit from a qualified technician and investment in some training for a computer system administrator.

Money also needs to be spent to provide leisure activities, including sports, for boarding students to use at weekends. The school would like to connect the computer network to the Internet. This will facilitate email contacts with their twin institution, Newcastle College, in the UK.

The school uses a public playing field in a neighbouring village, but it would like to create a playing field on school land. Additional land may need to be purchased.

Drums and musical instruments are needed to help with our-of-school music, dance and drama.

The boys boarding arrangements are sub-standard, so a purpose built boys' boarding house is needed.

Catering for religious students

The Isaac Newton School is within a largely religious community. Most people are Christian (Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical) and there is a substantial minority of Moslems. The growth of the school has led to requests from the different groups to be

given opportunities to practice their religion within the school.

Peter is clear about the Humanist ethos of the school but equally he wants the school to be open to children of all beliefs and none. Moslem students asked for permission to use a classroom for prayers on Fridays. This was refused but the school is allowing the Moslem students and a teacher to build their own small prayer room on the site using local materials.

Each Humanist School has to decide how to handle such issues. Isaac Newton School is trying to tread a careful line that respects the secular nature of the school while respecting the religious beliefs of individuals. This is how Peter Kisirinya expresses the school's aims:

"The school allows religious students to practice their beliefs but the school does not facilitate such activities. The Moslem students, together with their patron and Biology teacher, Mr Mohamed Siraje, asked to be allowed to use one of the classrooms to worship on Fridays. However, we felt that this would interfere with the normal school routine so we declined. Instead we asked them to erect a temporary shed behind the classrooms for their Friday prayers.

With the introduction of boarding at the school, we now have Christian students staying at the school over the weekends. To cater for their needs we have introduced each Sunday an item on the school programme called Devotion, where those with religious beliefs have one hour for prayers. During this time, two of our senior students, Ashraf Bukenya and Alex Kawooya run a Humanist fellowship for the growing number of students who do not want to attend prayers. Also on Fridays we have secular discussions and debates on topical social, political and economic issues. The debates are open to all and students and teachers openly debate together.

The school does not promote any religion but at the same time we do not deny those with one to practice, provided it does not interfere

with the school programmes. We aim, as Humanists, to introduce students to Humanist principles but we do not fight against other beliefs and prevent those with them from practising. We believe in free will."

IMMEDIATE PRIORITIES

- 10 extra scholarships for a new intake of Senior 1 students in 2013 (the cost is £120 per student).
- Additional latrines and wash rooms (£5,500)
- Balance of money to pay for diesel engine and water pump (£2000)
- Purchase of additional land for expansion (£4,500)
- Refurbishment of the existing hall (£2,500)
- Beds, mosquito nets and fire extinguishers for the temporary boys dormitories (£500)
- Construction of a school clinic and sick bay (£6,000)
- Books, science and other learning materials (£3000)
- A dedicated boarding house for boys (£27,000)
- Musical instruments (£800)

If you feel you or your group would like to contribute to meeting any of these needs then please contact us at info@uhst.org or download a supporter form from our website: www.ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org.