



Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

Isaac Newton High School, Mbute Campus, Mpigi

November 2013



Students singing and dancing in new school uniform

School on the hill

Access to Isaac Newton High School's Mbute campus at Mpigi is still difficult due to the steep unsurfaced road up Mbute Hill. It had been raining heavily the day before our visit so the grass, which had grown over the road, was slippery and our car could not gain sufficient traction to reach the top of the hill. However, it is a pleasant walk with splendid views into the farmed valleys below.



When we reached the top of Mbute Hill changes on the school site were soon evident. The long grass of the compound had been cut short and the football field had been reinstated by the filling in of divets. Unfortunately all the balls for playing games had been burst and new ones are required. The rate of attrition for balls at the school is remarkable. Refurbished and newly painted buildings stood proud in the cool morning air. There was a quietly purposeful atmosphere as newly motivated teachers gave lessons to

equally motivated students proudly sporting their new Isaac Newton school uniforms. The transformation was evident for all to see.

I was taken first to see the new kitchen building, which replaced the wooden make-shift shelter that preceded it.



The building has a rodent proof food store and the room, with the efficient wood burning stove, has a serving hatch where students pick up their meals. The stoves below have reduced firewood consumption by more than 50%, while allowing three cooking pots to be heated at the same time.



Grants from the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) have enabled the school to construct two new toilet blocks on land adjacent to the classrooms. There is a large, two-sided block (top picture below) with 4 toilets for girls on one side and 4 for boys on the other side. At the end there is a separate toilet for male staff. A second smaller block (bottom picture below) has 4 additional toilets for girls and a separate cubicle for female staff.



The toilets are of traditional design and do not have the venting which is characteristic of the newer Blair-VIP design. The original classroom block has had the floor relaid and the walls plastered and painted. One of the rooms is shown on the front page of this report where the students are dancing and singing.

I observed and took part in a history lesson on the Ngoni migration from South to East Africa following the expulsion of Shaka from the Zulu Kingdom. I talked about the migration of the whole human race from their origins in East Africa and made the point that all human beings share African blood and common genes. The students were keen to know why they turned white as they moved north into Europe. This opened up discussion of how white skin proved to be a useful mutation in northern climes where the sun was much weaker, and how it enabled whites to use melanin to generate essential B vitamins.

Looking at student exercise books it was possible to see that students were being given good notes despite a serious shortage of

textbooks and learning materials for science and other subjects.

It was clear how this school was starting up afresh. The infrastructure is much more acceptable than it was in its previous incarnations as the Humanist Academy and Fair View Schools. I sensed a good positive air around the school on the part of both staff and students.

Students at Mbuta

Annet Kisaakye, who has remained with the school as Headteacher despite the past problems, brought together the students receiving UHST scholarships so that I could talk with them. I told them about the sort of people in the UK and around the world who are providing scholarships. I explained that many people have their photographs in prominent positions in their homes and how they like to hear about their progress. We then gave students an opportunity to write about themselves and what they felt about their school.

In 2013 the school has 80 students and 32 of these are on scholarships provided by UHST supporters. 15 of the scholarship holders are boys and 17 are girls. The vast majority of students are from subsistence farming families with meagre cash incomes, which come from the sale of surplus food crops or the odd chicken. A number make supplementary cash by digging and fetching water for others and one or two by weaving mats and baskets.

4 of the scholarship children are orphans with no surviving parents. 2 live with grandparents, one with an aunt and one lives with his brother. Another 8 of the students have only one surviving parent. 5 of these live with their mother, one with their father and others with either a grandparent, aunt or with a sister. Almost all of the children walk for 2 to 2½ hours to school each morning and back home in the evening. Part of the journey involves wading through swamps in the valley bottoms.

We asked students to write what they liked about the school. These are some of their comments:

The teachers are simple and approachable.

There is a cool climate because the school is on a hill.

We can pick fruits like jackfruit from trees around the school. We have good clean toilets.

We have good, skilled teachers, a good laboratory and a good kitchen and meals have improved for lunch. We like having posho instead of porridge.

We have enough reading books.

We have many tanks to collect water and good equipment like drums and footballs.

I like sports and debating. We have a good education and freedom.

My school has well trained teachers and we have a good standard in our school. Teachers know how to handle the students.

We have a nice uniform. The buildings are well constructed.

We have a beautiful compound and classrooms. We have enough desks to sit.

We have a good head teacher.

What I like most at our school is that they help in paying school fees to those who cannot afford.

We have very good teachers who are friendly to us and this enables us to understand easily.

Our school helps the needy by offering them scholarships in order to fight against illiteracy.

Serious teachers attracted me to come to this school.

My school is among the better schools in the district.

As in the other Humanist schools the students are well aware of what should be done to make the school better...

We have to walk a long distance on foot to get to school.

During the dry season our water tanks become dry and we have to walk up to 4 miles to fetch water.

We would like a school van.

We need a computer lab (said by many), more musical instruments and balls.

Climbing the hill each day and the long walk to school is a major challenge. We would like a hostel so we can stay at the school each night (repeated by many).

We want the road and paths to the school improved and bridges made over the swamps and streams (said by many).

We want more varied food and more reading books.

We want the school to offer HSC/A-level courses so we can stay on after O-level.

Our school needs to be fenced to improve security.

We need to improve the water supply.

We would like to have a suggestion box.

School bursar

I was introduced to Irene Babirye, the school's



new bursar. Irene has the job of collecting local school fees and paying the teachers and settling other bills. She explained that, although the school fees were low, many parents and guardians fell

behind in paying them. She found she had to go to the homes of children in an effort to bring in missing payments.

During this re-launch year of 2013 the total income from local fees and 32 UHST scholarships has been below the basic running costs of paying for school staff and consumables. The shortfall, on an annual basis, is between £3,000 and £4,000. This raises the question of whether the school will require an ongoing subsidy each year if it is to keep going.

School Management

I had long discussions with Peter Kisirinya, the School Director, Annet Kisaakye, the Headteacher and Tom Mutebi, the Site Manager about what the school needs to develop.

They acknowledged that boarding facilities for students would be desirable. However, before these could be contemplated there were other more pressing priorities. Fencing the site was needed to improve the general security of books and equipment, but also to prevent local hunters and farmers using up the scarce stocks of water from the rain water tanks. The school needs at least two more rain water tanks. Ways should be found to bring power to the site. Solar panels might be a possibility to power a computer lab, but having people around the site to keep things secure was essential before this could happen. It might be possible to bring mains power to the site. The nearest supply was three-quarters of a mile away at the bottom of Mbute Hill and the line could be extended for several thousand pounds. There were possibilities of sharing some main service costs with a South Korean Experimental Farm and a Primary School which were currently being built in the valley. This could work for improving electricity supply, possibly for a pumped water system and certainly to improve local roads and paths.

Once there was power on the site the senior staff felt that on-site staff housing was the next priority. Annet, the Headteacher, would move her family to live on the school site if a house could be built for them. Tom Mutebe felt that a short-term housing block of 4 units would help teachers coming in to work at the school during the week and going home at weekends. All of these were needed before they could contemplate providing hostel facilities for students.

Peter and Tom felt that members of the local community would help to improve paths to the school and to build bridges over streams and swamps. All they would want in return would be some food and drink while they worked. It was felt that money for a goat for meat and some beer would be sufficient to mobilise a communal effort.

The period from December to the end of January was crucial for school recruitment. A number of open days for local parents would be organised in this period. They felt that an

injection of money for advertising leaflets and to buy more books and science equipment would help to attract new recruits.

Urgent Needs

- Publicity materials, leaflets & hospitality for open days £1,500
- Books and learning resources £2,000
- A perimeter security fence and tree planting £2,000
- Two additional water tanks £1,500
- Extension of electricity to the site £4,000
- Solar powered Computer Laboratory with 10 work stations with educational software £7,500
(This is not a requirement but highly desirable)
- On-site housing for teachers.

If you would like to help us to raise money for these urgent needs please contact:

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Donation and standing order forms can be found at:

<http://www.ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org/donate/>