

Our visit to Tissamahararama

Jane Edwards and I visited Tissa in October 2011 in order to visit some of the projects supported by Yala Fund, and the Suwa Sevana orphanage, which Jane has been supporting for many years and I had more recently raised funds for.

One our first day we called to the Kirthi Pre-school. Jon informed us that the building had been provided but the Yala Fund had furnished it and provided toys and colourful wall stickers. The children were very welcoming and loved the balloons and toys we had brought along. They had been very creative with previously donated balloons, covering them with papier mache and making them into something much more familiar to them - a coconut! There was also some wildlife on view, namely bats in the small storage room. There are no toilets at the pre-school, so the children call to a neighbour.

We then travelled to Kendagasmanakada primary school where Yala Fund is paying for a new building consisting of a special needs classroom, a library and office room. Parents undertook much of the work thus reducing the cost. Again we were greeted with a warm welcome from the children and staff. As we drove along I asked about musical vans that passed us and was informed us this was 'singing bread' vans like the ice cream vans in the UK, but in this case selling bread. We also passed another school with a fence proudly proclaiming 'Supported By Yala Fund' which had been provided to prevent the children running out on to the busy road.

After lunch we called to Suwa Sevana orphanage (see Suwa Sevana Orphanage, Thanamalwila, Sri Lanka on facebook), home to 32 boys aged between 8 and 16 years. Jane had been there several times and was welcomed like an old friend. Fr Modestus told us that the boys' diet consisted of cereal; lunch was rice and some dried fish and vegetables, and supper, again rice, for the 30 boys who resided there. This was cooked over an open fire in a big black pot. Fr told us that in the morning they had seen a cobra taking up residence in the warmth of the fire, even though it was 36° so there was no need for such heat!

The boys go to school each day and also study from 6pm - 8pm. Fr explained how he has recently been bothered by monkeys and it is assumed that the clearing of trees in order to build the new local airport is affecting their habitat. He also explained how the roof had collapsed on his building recently, and after bolstering it up with a tree trunk he is now

getting a new floor built on the building and this will be used for his vision of a computer academy. The boys in the orphanage will be taught to use the computers and the village children can also attend classes for a small fee. The boys were very proud to show how they could use both the English and Sinhalese keyboards.

Fr Modestus explained that in the 24 years the orphanage has been open between 300 and 350 children had resided there. Those who had grown up and left had trained as teachers, a politician, and many are married and most have jobs. The day before one of the boys had been presented with an award for his art the previous day.

The boys loved to drum and had built drums from an x-ray film stretched over a frame, indicating their resourcefulness. We promised we would look out for some drums for them.

The next day we visited Weligatta primary school. Although this school was very remote the sign on the gate read 'this is my child's school' and many of the signs up were in English. The children were again very appreciative of the gifts we took to them and bent down to touch our feet, which was very humbling. Jon explained that this was their way of showing respect and that our response should be *Budusaranai!* (May the Buddha Bless You),

The teachers were equally grateful for the help provided by Yala Fund. On our way back to the hotel we stopped to buy cricket bats for the boys in the orphanage who had said they had a match that weekend, and they were in training for the forthcoming 2018 Commonwealth games!

After lunch we went deep into the jungle to visit the home of a long-time friend of Jon's, and for whom Yala Fund had provided running water and a toilet. They were using the water to cultivate the land and grow vegetables. We then visited another family and one where the mother had abandoned her husband, leaving him to bring up his daughter Chamila on his own. The father was working hard in the garden and had grown cucumber-like fruits and kindly gave us a bag of these, refusing to take money for these even though he was preparing them for market the next day.

The next morning dawned even hotter and when we called to the Mattala School we were lucky enough to observe a show put on to celebrate Teachers' Day. There were wonderful costumes, songs, and dances. The teachers were again keen to talk to us and explained that once they are trained they are contracted to work for their first 5 years in these remote areas of poverty. They were sad as their electricity had been cut off as they were unable to pay the bill, and had to read by candle light in the evenings, making life very difficult for them. Several teachers spoke

English and were keen to practice their skills. One teacher had even visited England and been to Alton Towers and on the London Eye. This visit was in stark contrast to Jon's earlier ones, when the children used to hide and be fearful of him, never having seen a white person before.

After lunch and a cooling swim we called to another project supported by Yala, the local hospital, where money had been spent putting a guard rail around the children's ward to keep the children in and the wild dogs out. They had also provided air conditioning for the emergency room among other items of medical equipment. The hospital was reminiscent of a hospital in Britain in the 50's. The nurses were resplendent in their starched white uniforms and all present stood up when we entered the ward accompanied by the District Medical Officer, Dr Krishantha. He explained that he did a variety of tasks including post mortems and delivering babies. He had recently had to contend with injured soldiers following an accidental explosion at the nearby army base.

En route to our next venue we passed the local open prison, which was surrounded by an electric fence, which was to keep the elephants out, rather than prisoners in!

We then called to the Welani Childrens' Home, which is a wonderful building funded by money provided following the Tsunami. This was home to 50 children aged between 2 and 18 years, mostly girls, and like the other homes the children tend to be housed there by the court when families break down, rather than being actual orphans. The children loved the exploding balloons and were quick to work out how my smart phone took pictures and could look at them and re-take them if they were not satisfied. The children keep the houses clean and tidy, do their own washing and cooking on a rota basis and cultivate the garden. The older girls cooked again over an open fire. One girl in particular took a liking to me and held my hand throughout the visit. They explained that they had recently changed school and missed their old classmates and invited us to visit them at their new school.

We were very honoured to be asked if we could 'open' a new building at Mahasenpura school the next day, which had been funded by Yala to house the 6th form class. So we had a chance to know how the Queen feels each day as our arrival was marked by applause and Jon was given a garland of flowers around his neck and we were given Betel leaves representing good luck. We then lit candles as part of the Buddhist ceremony to mark the opening of the room.

After a refreshing cold cream soda served by the teachers we moved on to Tissapura School, where the children from the Welani home were educated. They were very pleased to see us and ran out to greet our arrival. The delightful girl I had held hands with the previous day became 2, when her twin sister arrived. The boys mentioned that they would love some cricket bats and as we had some in the car we gave them to them, to their obvious delight.

After lunch we again visited Suwa Sevana Orphanage, and met 3 youths whose education Jane had helped to fund. They were very appreciative, one having travelled down from Colombo (a 6 hour journey each way on a bus) so he could meet up with Jane. They were all taking advanced studies. One to be a teacher, one a computer engineer and one a doctor. The boys were relaxing, playing cricket, doing their washing in the garden, while the water was being shared by another boy having a shower!

Our next day was spent on safari at the Yala National park and the remainder of our holiday spent traveling to Negombo via the tea growing areas, and visiting the elephant orphanage before arriving back at our airport hotel, with the feeling that it had all been a dream. We had seen so many friendly people, struck by the exotic smells of the spices and herbs in the air and the warmth of the welcome. I would certainly recommend this region of Sri Lanka for a visit, to see the real side of this wonderful island, before it changes too much as it is exposed to more and more outside influences. What shone through was that despite the poverty some of the families experienced they were keen to help themselves and each other, caring and appreciative of all the aid given to them.