

REPORT OF VISIT TO BO ON BEHALF OF WARWICK DISTRICT ONE WORLD LINK.
- Jane Knight -

In January 2001, it was arranged that the Mayor of Leamington Spa, Cllr. Bill Evans (also a Warwick District councillor), should visit Bo Town Council in Sierra Leone. The purpose of the visit was:-

- to find out more about Bo Town Council and its activities and to what extent there can be co-operation with Warwick District Council,
- to find out potential projects for allocating funds from the Mayor of Leamington Spa's Fund
- to work out the possibilities of shared involvement by the community of Warwick District with members of Bo community to reconstruct their lives post war,
- to bring new life into old links and investigate possible new links.

I was invited to accompany the Mayor as he had not been to Africa before. As a founder member of the Link, I had a good knowledge of the people involved at the Bo end, despite the fact that my last visit was 17 years ago.

This report is a record of the visit, (see appendix for details) with particular emphasis on my impressions of:-

1. Bo - 20 years on,
2. Bo Town Council,
3. Bo One World Link (OWL) committee and members,
4. Possible opportunities for development of the link with Bo,
5. Opportunities for good governance and joint local authority/community action in Bo with a view to extension elsewhere in Sierra Leone,

and makes recommendations to Warwick District Leamington One World Link (OWL) and to Towns & Development Africa.

The latter point number 5 is connected with my work for Towns & Development and my links with the Municipal Development Programme (PDM) based in Benin. The other points are written in my role as member of the Warwick District OWL.

On the way to Bo, Bill and I had one day in Freetown, assisted by Ron and Liz Fennel (he is working for DFID in Sierra Leone and they are friends of Leamington One World Link) to find our way around. Momodu Koroma (Minister of Presidential Affairs) kindly arranged for us to visit the President, who welcomed us warmly. It was also a tremendous personal pleasure for me to meet up again with Momodu who had played a very active part in the '80's visiting many people in Warwick District and helping to establish the link.

We also visited the Minister of Local Government, Freetown Council, the British Council and we had lunch with the British High Commissioner who again gave us a very friendly welcome. Rajiv Bendre of the British Council kindly offered to help Bo OWL with communications with us, school links and with library facilities for Bo.

We saw many burnt out and smashed buildings including the city hall. It was tragic to see such mindless destruction.

We ended the day with dinner with the Fennels and some of their friends.

1. Bo - 20 years on,

In 1981, 1982, and 1983, I visited Bo as a local OXFAM campaigner and a founder member of OWL, to investigate possibilities, and implement the initial stages of the Warwick/Bo Districts' link. The result was that 12 school links, half secondary, half primary, were set up. We also set up hospital, church library and individual links. There were many visits both ways, including home visits to Leamington by Sierra Leone students, and strong bonds were established between families and institutions.

The war intervened and there have been no direct visits since 1990, only exchanges of letters, funds sent to Sierra Leone for humanitarian use, and occasional phone calls made so that the link was not broken.

My impression on returning to Bo was that the town has not changed at all significantly on a superficial physical level. Although some buildings have been damaged and burnt out, there were not as many as noticed in Freetown. Also many people I met so many years ago are still there - only their hair has started to turn grey! Those who had been to Warwick District remembered very well all the people they had met. I returned to the schools I had visited so long ago and they looked the same. At Saint Andrews' Secondary School, Mr. Bayoh, the head teacher was sitting in the same chair in the same office – it was like a time warp.

However there are in fact many human changes which I found very distressing and difficult to cope with. Everyone I spoke to, had a story to tell about the suffering they had been through at the hands of the rebels and junta soldiers. The poverty left behind after the looting and theft of everything of value (sometimes the result a whole lifetime's toil) fills daily life with constant worry and anxiety. There are so few jobs and young people in or out of school have little prospect of a meaningful career or just a job. There was evidence of youth discontent beginning to spill over into violence. While we were there the pupils at CKC and Ahmaddiya had an unpleasant post football fight.

School classes have tripled in size. Queen of the Rosary catholic secondary school for girls had 20 girls to a class in 1981 and now they have 80. I saw several back to back lessons (2 classes in one class room), and the number of books and classroom materials available was minimal. Also at QRS there was a sole computer which was new but unused because no-one knew how to use it and the power is rarely on during school hours so any training if it were available would have to be out of school hours. At Christ the King College - the catholic secondary school with a long history in the link (linked with Kenilworth 6th form college) - they are desperate for graph paper and musical instruments to name just some items. I saw the current dilapidated drum kit and rusty trombone.....

Bo hospital was one of the most depressing visits - much as it had been when I last went there. There were the usual huge numbers of patients and sick people and overworked staff, particularly Dr. Rogers. But in addition the numbers are now so large that there were roughly erected tents with beds in them. The tents looked unhygienic and very hot and uncomfortable. Also, it seemed that however sick you are, without money there is little chance of treatment. One comfort was the presence of Médecins sans Frontières who appeared to be doing useful work. Some of the nurses we met had been there in Dr. Jenny Gibson's time and sent greetings to her.

In contrast, I was taken to the new Messima clinic being set up by one of the Bo hospital doctors, Dr. Massaquoi - a gynaecologist. He has used his own money to build the clinic and is erecting an outpatient's department available to anyone who pays Le. 1,000 which is less than 50p. He has the only scanning machine in the area and the atmosphere was business like and impressive. At least there are some positive initiatives being taken and succeeding.

Bo is a very busy town and the local economy is still very dominated by the Lebanese community. A new feature was the number of diamond bureaux, which are integrated into all the stores, and it appears that people with diamonds go there to sell to the Lebanese traders. I do not know what happens to them after that.

One of the newest features, and the most distressing, is the camps for displaced people which are neat but crowded rows of temporary housing on the outskirts of the town. The residents are mainly displaced from Kono and Kailahun where rebels are still fighting so the chances of the camp people being returned home are not good at the moment. Life in the camps looked grim but people have adapted to making normal life happen. The schooling facilities are very limited with one camp having a school with 5 classrooms separated by 3 foot walls, in the space of one normal classroom in our schools. Nevertheless, we found one boy out of school hours, sitting in a hot makeshift classroom, drawing pictures on any kind of paper he could find. The clinic in Camp Splendid looked most uninviting and we were very moved to find in one of its little dark rooms, a mother who had just given birth to a twin boy and girl. What kind of life will these beautiful babies have?

The orphan children and the traumatised young people, some of them young girls who had been raped and who were being helped to look after their babies, brought home to us that the war may have subsided in the Bo but the after effects will take a lifetime to sort out. The work of the Christian Brothers to assist the young people to return to normal life and to re-unite them with their families was most impressive.

Another new sight was the blue berried UNAMSIL soldiers travelling in UN trucks and sitting in regular control points particularly near Freetown with machine guns at the ready. Although they did not seem to have much to do, (thank goodness) their presence was reassuring. Both they and the police looked after Bill throughout his stay - the police providing a 24 hour watch.

In addition to the many UN vehicles, there was a plethora of NGO vehicles, with their distinctive thick 6 foot radio aerials, moving all over the town. Nobody seemed happy with the NGO activities and several times it was mentioned that they take teachers and other people away from their jobs because of higher salaries, but there is no permanence or security in those jobs.

The above description indicates reasons for our feeling of distress when visiting Bo, but it was not all distress. On balance, it was a brilliant experience and quite humbling. The warmth of the welcome, the opportunity to renew and continue long standing friendships as well as start new ones, overcame the sadness and made the stay very exciting and happy. We could not help admiring everyone for their ability to get on with normal life. Power cuts meant there was always a moment of joy when the power actually came on! A full bucket of water was a source of pleasure! These latter experiences I had after Bill left, because during his stay we were in a hotel and it had

running water and a generator. After that I was hosted by Mussa Conteh and Jo Kobbah and was made to feel very much at home.

We were given delicious meals at formal and informal occasions, had many happy moments chatting over a Star beer and there was never a dull moment.

2. Bo Town Council

My impression of Bo Town council is that it is very weak in terms of human and financial resources. It is not a democratically elected council, because there has not yet been an opportunity for the government to hold local elections. The history of government in Sierra Leone is one of repeated centralisation and attempts at decentralisation (currently), so it is no wonder that starting all over again after the war, the council is only just functioning. The community does not like paying taxes because of poverty and no obvious benefits. The council does not have an efficient valuation and rating capacity and because of the effects of the war, it has an increased population (from about 60,000 in 1981 to 800,000 now) to serve. In addition the local people are suspicious of it.

Electric bills are also not paid regularly hence the power station does not have enough revenue to mend generators and provide full time power. At the moment Bo and Kenema take it in turns to have an average of 6 to 12 hours electricity per day. The council said one of its aims is to ensure regular power supplies even though the power station is independent. It is not clear therefore how this can be done.

I was taken on a tour of Bo by Mr. Foray, the deputy town clerk who seems very hard working. He has been round the city trying to find out the priority felt needs of some of the new communities in Bo. Some of the displaced people and refugees have set up home now in Bo. But this does not mean more revenue for the town council, rather more problems to solve. Mr. Foray showed me an example where 100 new houses have been built, but they are separated from the town road system by 2 significant streams crossed at the moment by decrepit palm log bridges. These bridges would collapse if crossed by a vehicle. We saw a man (quite small and elderly) struggling to transport a lorry load of sand from one side of the bridge by means of a wobbly wheelbarrow balancing on one of the palm logs to reach the other side and then progress up a hill to where houses are being built.

Mr. Foray said there were 3 other similar uncrossable areas and he needed Le 34 million (£13,600) for a culvert for each of them to enable proper crossing and to justify taxing the new house holders. He did not seem to know who could provide such funds. He then took me to see the slaughterhouse. Bo council is responsible for health and therefore they want to make the slaughterhouse healthy enough to function. It stank and was filthy but bizarrely had 4 *new* toilets provided by the EU. It seemed to me that it could never be healthy without being flattened and rebuilt and I was not clear why it should be a priority as there are not many cows in the Bo area and the meat I ate was mainly chicken or other home killed animals.

Bo council would I am sure benefit from some capacity building and training for staff and councillors and I hope that a study of their needs will be made by the Municipal Development Programme (PDM) in Cotonou. I suggested this to the Chairman and Mr. Foray and they said that such capacity building help from PDM with the assistance of Warwick District Council would be welcome particularly with regard to finance and valuation.

3. Bo One World Link (OWL) committee and members,

20 years ago, as I left Bo for the first time we had a final meeting to try and set up an OWL committee. The Methodist minister at the time thought it would not survive. However I attended meetings of the committee on each of the 2 subsequent visits and although it was not strong, there were people on it determined to make it work.

During the war, we had maintained some contact through one or two members of the committee and with the help of Fr. Patrick Koroma. Then the committee appointed a new chairperson, Jo Kobbah, and he steered the committee throughout the aftermath of the war, despite many other priorities.

It was therefore a great pleasure at last to meet Jo Kobbah, David Ngombu (Secretary), Mrs Rogers (Treasurer), the social secretary who teaches at Holy Rosary School and who handled the catering brilliantly, Johannes Mallah, Tom Smith, Henry Sheku, Raymond James (Vice-chair), Alliou (Asst. secretary), A. Mensah and many others. Most of the committee members have visited Warwick District in the past and have kept in touch with a wide range of friends. The committee is strong, reliable and effective and it was a pleasure to work with them.

We discussed at length their ambition to create a unique community development centre which will be multi purpose and will be a concrete identity for the link. They felt strongly about the need to have something to show for the years of shared friendship apart from a few material gifts and visits that can be forgotten in time. This centre will be a permanent memorial to all who have worked on both OWLs. The centre will be both income

generating through provision of bed and breakfast facilities, a restaurant, a library with video rental facilities, a craft shop and conference and workshop facilities. The activities will be educational and developmental for both youth and adults and will include all kinds of skills training.

I worked through the proposal with the committee members and they will produce a revised proposal focussing on the activities and budgets and financial receipts and expenditures as well as the details of the building and construction.

The kindness and attention that was given to Bill and myself by Bo OWL committee was quite overwhelming and very much appreciated. I was fortunate enough to stay with Jo Kobbah and his wife Saphie and look forward to providing them with hospitality in turn.

Mussa Conteh is one of the Sierra Leonean founder members of the Warwick and Bo OWLs. He is now engaged in a project to interest traumatised and disadvantaged young people in sport. His aim is to build their self esteem through sport of all kinds and then to encourage them to take up education and training. The project is called Bo Kolosseum named after the traditional practice of taking newcomers out from the village to fight the strong men in order to work out the hierarchy of prowess (Kolosseum). Mussa provided the Bo Kolosseum vehicle for the whole of our stay, which meant we could travel all over Bo for all the appointments. Bo OWL does not have a vehicle and this collaboration with Bo Kolosseum indicates the level of cooperation taking place between the 2 organisations. Mussa is also a member of the committee. The committee meanwhile is supporting Mussa fully with his efforts to build up Bo Kolosseum and is taking interest in all his activities. The good will between the two organisations was palpable.

In order to make himself and Bo Kolosseum more independent and sustainable, Mussa bought an ex army 3 ton tipper in 1992, had it repainted and prepared to sent to Sierra Leone. It has been sitting at Tilbury docks for 18 months because it is claimed to be breaking UN sanctions if sent to Sierra Leone. Mussa appealed for an acceleration of the process to try and get the tipper released. He knows that by transporting sand and other materials he could make a significant profit for himself and his work.

I was privileged to sit in on 2 Bo OWL committee meetings. The first one ended in a celebratory dinner. Before we ate, Raymond James brought up the concerns which were deeply felt. He asked Leamington OWL about:

- Apparent breakdown in communications?
- Why the doubt about the building?
- Why schools could not be linked?
- Why gifts were sent which in fact often ended up being dumped because they were unusable for various reasons, mainly missing parts or lack of spare parts? This was highlighted when we visited Bo Commercial school and saw the computers shipped out from Warwick District but sadly unusable because parts were missing. On top of a cupboard, there was a row of monitors, totally useless and typewriters were gathering dust for lack of ribbons etc.

There was also a problem of limited computer knowledge, both with regards to software and hardware. This limited knowledge re. computers was widespread in Bo and therefore it would be essential if Warwick District wants to send out computers (working ones) that a trainer of trainers should go with them.

While I was there, the printer consignment arrived for Bunumbu Press (BO OWL seemed to know nothing about this consignment) and most of the machines were unusable – either because parts were missing on despatch or lost during transit.

- They wanted us to know that they are still worried about the war which continues on the border and until that is resolved, they felt they were still vulnerable, and so hoped the British will continue to support them and not withdraw prematurely.

At the meeting which took place after Bill left, apart from the concern re. our interest in the multi purpose project, they evaluated the visit. There was a strong rebuke from Henry Sheku who said that his school and others had been expecting us to visit and the school was prepared but the visit came on the next day or after schools finished without any explanation or fore-warning. This had been caused by unscheduled stops out of the control of the committee and by an over ambitious programme. It was agreed that lessons had to be learnt from the experience of this visit.

It was agreed that Bo OWL would try and do some fund-raising in Bo for the community development project and they were glad the council was giving them full support. They plan to build in phases and to have a celebration after each phase to publicise it e.g. after the foundation is complete, after the walls reach window height, and later roof height etc.

They felt the visit had opened new doors for them and that they might be able to take on members from other professions besides teachers, which dominate at the moment. They were also pleased with the contact with Bo council and the benefit of having their support.

On a practical point, one of the problems of the aborted visits was that there was no means of letting anyone know about changed plans. It might be worth discussing with the committee whether we could supply a motor bike for use by the committee and Jo Kobbah in particular, as the Koloseum vehicle is too expensive to run for that purpose and it is needed for other work.

4. Possible opportunities for development of the link with Bo.

The schools which were linked before plus others are very keen to link up again. They include:

Secondary:

- QRS – previously with Kingsley School
- St. Andrews – previously with Aylesford School
- Sir Milton Comprehensive – previously with a teacher at Trinity School
- CKC – currently? With Kenilworth 6th form college
- Ahmadiyya – previously with Champion School
- Bo School – previously tried to link with Warwick school?

Primary

- Holy Rosary School – previously with St. Mary's Warwick,
- St. Francis catholic – looking for a link
- Methodist Primary – was with Milverton middle

I cannot recall the others but either myself alone, or Bill and me visited the above. If more primary schools were interested, I am sure the Bo OWL committee can identify more....e.g. Model school which was linked with Newburgh, the Methodist first school....

Bo teacher's college would like to link with a teacher training college.

Bo hospital is another potential for linking and it would be helpful to Doctor Rogers if medicines could be sent out as in the past. More details about what is required will have to be sought from him, perhaps by Bo OWL. Dr. Massaquoi was also interested in linking medically. Jo Kobbah would be happy if we could set up a link between his Planned Parenthood Association and a family planning unit here.

Building the multi-purpose centre could provide an opportunity for a builder's/planner's, carpenter's link?

The UAC were interested in a hairdressing (Afro) and carpenter's link.

The radio station for Bo and the surrounding villages is technically very good with recent investment of equipment from DFID but the quality of programmes is poor. A group who could link up and help to produce programmes in an imaginative way to use the radio for adult education could be very useful.

Fr. Peter Conteh showed interest in linking with St. Peter's Catholic church.

How can we develop computer specialist links?

Lack of information from the outside world was a source of worry. I never saw books in people's homes (except Mussa Conteh's) and children's books were nowhere to be seen. No-one I spoke to knew about the World Trade Organisation activities in Seattle or elsewhere. The only benefit from this lack of information and media facilities generally, was that no-one had heard of Pokemon, Star Wars or EastEnders! It was agreed that newspapers and information on development issues as well as children's books such as colourful encyclopaedias and other informative books would be very popular. I watched children at night sitting in the lamp light having finished their homework with no obvious stimulus to entertain them and longed to show them some of the lovely books our children enjoy...

Bo Koloseum is working on the basis that if disadvantaged young people can take an interest in sport, they will then be open to other educational and creative activities. Mussa is so enthusiastic and full of ideas to encourage young people and having seen them in action, his efforts seem to be yielding excellent results. He plans to do a survey of young people who gather in certain parts of Bo at night to find out what can be done to lead them to constructive activities...

Mussa will be coming to England in late May and I am sure if any sports group here were interested, he would like to meet them...

5. Opportunities for good governance and joint local authority/community action in Bo with a view to extension elsewhere in Sierra Leone.

Wearing my T&D hat, my observation of local government in Sierra Leone, is that it is starting almost from scratch and has limited resources human and financial. The government is in favour of decentralisation and I think that apart from the security risk, the country is ripe for developing its local government system at least in Bo and Freetown. There is active work taking place, not least with the assistance of Ron Fennell, to resurrect the chieftaincy administration, but for urban administration, there is plenty of space for capacity building.

An objective study by an experienced African local government officer such as the ex. Town Clerk of Bulawayo or equivalent, to find out the requirements and priorities to strengthen at least Bo Town council, would enable better opportunities for community development. Towns & Development is about to embark on a programme to strengthen local government and communities in West Africa to work together to reduce poverty. I am going to pursue the possibility of Sierra Leone being part of the programme and have had positive response so far.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Bo Council

I recommend that there should be a visit to Sierra Leone by T&D and PDM to investigate good governance possibilities focussing on Bo and Freetown, and that Warwick District meanwhile enter into dialogue with Bo council through visits both ways.

Links

I recommend that Warwick District OWL use Bill's status and enthusiasm to try and find a range of linking partners for Bo and hopefully in the process to strengthen our own committee and membership.

Visits

I recommend that regular visits be resumed between the two communities to build on the momentum which this visit created. Fr. Patrick has agreed to provide accommodation for visitors passing through to Bo. He has a flat with 2 bedrooms and the hospitality he provided was excellent. (Accompanied by Mussa, I was very moved to attend Mass said by Patrick in his own church).

Now that Bill and I have shown that it is possible to travel safely to and from Bo, and now that we have resumed our working relationship with the Bo committee, any future visitors should be able to do the same with the committee's assistance and guidance.

IN CONCLUSION

The visit was overwhelming. It was a success as far as opening the link up again was concerned, and it now lies with us in Warwick District to try and fulfil some of the expectations built up by our visit. It was overwhelming on a personal level because we were received with such warmth and affection and we were looked after in the most remarkable way.

I would like to thank all our friends in Bo and Freetown for their efforts on our behalf, particularly Jo Kobbah and his committee, Mussa Conteh and Father Patrick and all the hosting institutions. Thanks also to the London based Sierra Leoneans for their initial advice and to Michael Moss for the help in the preliminary stages (and for the hot water for morning tea!). Thanks also to the Fennels and to Derek Partridge for making the first day in Freetown and the transfer to and from Bo so smooth.

30/05/07

APPENDIX VISITS MADE

March 6th – Freetown

Visits to

- Minister of Local Government – Mr. Dauda
- President Alhaji Ahmed Tejan Kabbah
- British High Commissioner – Alan Jones?
- British Council – Rajiv Bendre
- Freetown Council-Chair, Mr. H Ferguson
- Dinner with Mr. And Mrs. Lappia and ?

March 7th – Arrival in Bo

We travelled to Bo by plane and had no problems. We were greeted by an enormous crowd at the airport led by the Chairman of Bo council and all the councillors. UNAMSIL was there and Bill was asked to inspect the troops. The Bo OWL committee were there, led by Jo Kobbah and Mussa was there to greet us on behalf of Bo Kolosseum and to drive us (the “entourage” - as opposed to Bill who had transport provided by the council). The police were also there in force.

- Visit to Minister for Southern Province for welcome also from Provincial Secretary and Senior District officer,
- Welcome from police
- Welcome by UNAMSIL

We were eventually dropped off at Sir Milton Hotel where we were provided with 24 hour surveillance by the police.

Followed by

- Visit to Bunumbu Press – machines old enough to be museum pieces and dusty and out of order for the most part. In contrast two brand new photocopiers from “Feed the Minds”. Given modern publishing machines and training, the Press could be a thriving business providing Mende books and textbooks as well as publishing a newspaper for Bo.
- Very entertaining cultural evening

Diary comments – “Lovely first day but dripping with perspiration!”

March 8th

- Full council meeting followed by lunch. Current activities and vision for millennium presented, e.g. low cost housing, social services and waste management...
- Cheshire Home – a sad place with many disabled children and no transport to take them out and about,
- St. Mary’s Orphanage – well run with very good cultural group
- HANSI orphans who spent time in the bush during war – some teddies distributed
- Christian Brothers UAC (Un Accompanied Centre) for traumatised displaced young people – very impressive

March 9th

- Visit to Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service station which is housed in the old presidential lodge on Candy Hill and which is very well equipped through DFID assistance. However the broadcasting skills need to be developed. The lodge had been gutted by rebels which was so mindless and destructive
- Abraham Mensah’s office – not scheduled
- HANSI orphanage again - not scheduled
- CKC where Henry Sheku sketched the long history of association with Warwick District and appealed for starting up their link again with Kenilworth 6th form and possibly the feeder secondary school.
- Holy Rosary School where the children gave very professional speeches and entertainment in Bill’s honour. They showed us the water tank which St. Mary’s in Warwick provided as *there is no water on the site*. The tank is only usable in the rainy season, so they appealed for help with a well.
- Kamajor centre where “Black September” soldiers performed some drill for us and they appealed for help to refurbish their building and have transport to check security in the villages
- Bo Teachers’ college. A kind welcome and much appreciated lunch. An appeal for a link with a teacher training college.
- Formal dinner hosted by Bo Town Council in the Town Hall and addressed by the Minister for provincial affairs.

March 10th

- Mussa took us to watch youngsters playing tennis at Bo club which is much dilapidated since I was last there. The children were impressive and Bill posed for a photo with each one of them as a reward for their efforts. Mussa is planning to build a new Bo Kolosseum club customised for all sports and library facilities provided.
- Bo Growth centre trying to provide practical skills training against the odds of diminishing EU support
- Splendid refugee camp
- Dinner provided by Bo OWL. After initial formalities became lively happy evening with lovely presents presented and tremendous atmosphere of affection and “bon homie”.

March 11th

Bill departed with the Fennels and a send off by all the Bo officials and the police. I was sorry to see him go, as he had been a very amiable partner throughout the visit.

I was moved into Mussa’s house in New London which was short of power and facilities but had a bed and a good water pump. Michael Moss also stayed there. This was to be my home for 4 days. I was well looked after by women from Mussa’s extended family.

In the evening I was taken round to see all the youth gathering points around Bo.

March 12th

Visits to

- Planned Parenthood Association of which Jo Kobbah is director. He is frustrated by lack of a vehicle to get out to the villages and by Freetown bureaucracy. The staff seemed well qualified and busy and a nice group of people to visit. Any support from exchanges with family planning agencies in Warwick District would be welcome.
- Queen of the Rosary School where I had to speak to all the school and explain what the link is about and what I was doing there. Used the information that 1/3rd of the world's population consumes 90% of the world's resources and we were linking to share the work of changing the balance. For most staff and children, these facts were new in all the schools I went to. Very anxious to link with us.
- Dr. Massaquoi's clinic,
- Milton Comprehensive School, where I spoke to the whole school. Again very keen to link and anxious for help with a section of roof which was blown off in a storm. I have a list of teachers and pupils with their interests, requiring partners.
- Meal with Johannes, Jo, and Mussa.

March 13th

- St. Francis catholic primary and middle school led by the head Joe Pyne who had spoken to me from his office, when he was out of hiding, during the war period. The staff met me and asked to be linked. Later Joe brought me two folders of work done by his pupils for a school over here.
- Ahmaddiya secondary and St. Andrew's secondary school – spoke to staff
- Another camp – hot and far from the town

March 14th

- Bo Council Chairman – discussed capacity building ideas and their co-operation with Bo OWL re. the multi purpose centre. Walked back from that visit to Bunumbu press and was stopped by 6 boys who claimed to be displaced and wanting help with school fees and exams. They were so persistent that I told them to write letters for prospective pen friends. Letters with Brian Austin.
- Lunch provided by the OWL social secretary (as a thank you present, I think) – very delicious.
- Bo OWL meeting
- Moved to Jo Kobbah's house.

March 15th

- Tour of Bo led by deputy town clerk including viewing of site for multi purpose building,
- Power station, and lunch with Johannes Mallah
- Relaxation and long discussions with Mussa, Jo and teacher from Sir Milton school.

March 16th

- Meeting re. plans for multi purpose building at Mensah's office
- Preparations to leave and receiving presents for link members in Warwick District.

March 17th

- Travelled on bumpy road for four hours to Freetown with Mussa and driver.
- Visited tennis club in Freetown to compare standard of play compared with the Bo Koloseum players. Mussa thinks a visit by his best players to Freetown will give them incentive to improve. We watched the President of the club playing and discovered it was Dr. Songor Williams who was the ear nose and throat specialist in Bo Hospital when the link started and he was linked with Mr. Schofield, his equivalent here. He said he played tennis throughout the period when the rebels were in Freetown – a very charming and remarkable gentleman.
- Had very happy dinner with Fr. Patrick Koroma. Main reflections on peace were focussed on the fact that peace depends on dialogue between Lansana Conteh, President of Guinea and Charles Taylor. Patrick said there is deep enmity between them and LC has nothing to say to Taylor.
- Patrick also commented on the fact that Bo is better off than most of the other provincial towns in Sierra Leone. He also told us about when the rebels ran up to him and found him relaxing and wearing shorts and t-shirt. They said "where are the fathers?" He said "they went that way " – pointing towards the outside of the compound , and they ran off!

March 18th –last day.

- Mass said by Patrick
- Visited the appalling rubbish heap in Freetown
- Visited beach! Cool at last!

VISIT TO BO AND FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE, March 2001

Bill Evans, Mayor of Leamington Spa

Introduction

From 5th to 12th March 2001 I visited Sierra Leone, at the invitation of the Town Council of Bo. On the way to and from Bo and I undertook some activities in Freetown. I was accompanied on my visit by Jane Knight, a founder-member of the Link between Warwick District and Bo District; Jane had made two previous visits to Bo before the in the 1980's, and has many friends there. Liz and Ron Fennell gave us valuable assistance in the preparation for our visit and Liz accompanied us for many events in Bo.

The idea of a visit to Bo developed gradually during my term as Mayor of Leamington. I have for a long time been a member of Warwick District One World Link (O.W.L.), which meant I had an interest in Sierra Leone – particularly in Bo. For many years the civil war in Sierra Leone had made contact between Warwick District and Bo very difficult but we were aware that there was a great deal of suffering and trauma throughout Sierra Leone. It appeared to me before I became mayor last year that the news from Sierra Leone was improving, and that there might be a window of opportunity to provide some direct assistance to casualties of the war. For that reason, with the co-operation of the Warwick O.W.L. committee, I established the special “Bo Fund” to assist with relief and rehabilitation projects, with a particular emphasis on children and young people. In line with the objectives of O.W.L. we immediately tried to contact our Bo O.W.L. partners for their help in identifying suitable projects. When I became mayor I also developed an interest in civic life within Bo. I was fortunate enough to be able to invite the Chairman of Freetown City Council (Freetown being the capital city) for a very short visit to Leamington while he was in the U.K. last September. The Chairman, Henry Fergusson, took a message from me to the Chairman of Bo Town Council. It was only when I received a very positive reply to this letter from the Chairman of Bo Town Council that the idea of a visit began to crystallise. During the succeeding months it became clear that it was the right time for Warwick District O.W.L. to arrange a visit and the committee were kind enough to take on board my aspiration to undertake a civic visit.

There were problems. It became clear that for protocol reasons I would need to seek an invitation from Bo Town Council, which in due course came through. We then needed to take on board the standing Foreign Office advice to British nationals not to travel in Sierra Leone. The High Commissioner in Freetown needed some assurance that we were being careful for our safety. (I certainly did not wish to become a mayor involved in a hostage situation!) Sierra Leone is not the most straightforward place to reach, Although there is now a regular weekly flight. If you don't want the constraint of going or coming back on a Monday you have to travel via a third country. We decided to use the direct flight; I planned to go for a week, though this meant a very tight schedule of only four days in Bo; I kept open the option of staying for a further week if necessary. Jane Knight planned to stay for two weeks anyway.

The Warwick O.W.L. committee agreed to underwrite our visit, which had a number of clear objectives, which in summary were:

- 1. to revive our links with Bo OWL;*
- 2. to try to build an effective civic link with Bo Town Council (involving Warwick District Council as well as the Leamington Charter Trustees)*
- 3. to discuss with our partners practical projects for the Bo Fund, and to see them “on the ground”.*

In the event, although we achieved our objectives, the visit (or at least the week I was there, turned out somewhat differently to anything we had planned. In consequence in my visit, though it was full of interest and excitement, it was really difficult to find time for in depth discussions. Jane had a much more informal second week and was able to achieve valuable consolidation in relation to all our objectives. Her report is therefore more valuable than this as a tool for action.

Before leaving for Sierra Leone we undertook some preparation here, both with O.W.L. members and with Warwick District Council. The District Council, and some members of staff, were very helpful in offering things to take and some surplus computers for later transportation. This was much appreciated.

Freetown

We left Gatwick at 9.15 pm on 5th March, on the overnight flight to Freetown, arriving at Lungi airport at 5.30 am on 6th. It takes while to get from Lungi to Freetown by helicopter and I feel we were settled in our rather well-

appointed guest house somewhat before 9 am. Our day in Freetown started shortly afterwards. Ron and Liz Fennell had arranged for us to have a car with driver throughout our stopover in Freetown, which meant we were able to make a number of visits which had mostly been arranged for us. These were all interesting and significant, though shortage of time meant we were unable to see any social or medical projects caring for victims of the war, as I had hoped.

We were taken to the Ministry of Local Government where we met Henry Fergusson, Chairman of Freetown City Council (who had visited me in Leamington). He accompanied us to a meeting with the Minister of Local Government and Rural Affairs, Mr. Dauda. Momodu Koroma, the Minister for Presidential Affairs, had arranged for us to meet President Kabbah in his Lodge at 12 noon, which was a great privilege. In view of the many problems he must face I was impressed with his placidity.

We had a very good reception from the British High Commissioner, Alan Jones, who entertained us to lunch. Later we visited the British Council and had a worthwhile discussion with Rajiv Bendre. He expressed frustration that British Council employees (in common with High Commission staff) are not yet permitted to travel outside Freetown. He is very anxious to extend facilities such as the library service to Bo, and is willing to work with Bo O.W.L. in any way he can.

Henry Fergusson then welcomed us to his “temporary” base overlooking the harbour. It is not quite the collection of huts he had painted on his Leamington visit but woefully inadequate to serve a city like Freetown. Members of the City Council received us and I was given a fine wooden sculpture to bring back to Leamington – the first of many fine presents I received on the trip. Henry then took us to see the real City Hall, which is just a burnt out shell, having been destroyed by the R.U.F. It is symptomatic of the enormous amount of destruction which has occurred in Freetown during the war. It makes one aware how close the country must have been to falling entirely into rebel hands. Henry and some of his staff did give some inkling of the problems of administering a ruined city – furthermore a city which has grown from half a million to over two million. Income from the basic property tax has virtually dried up.

In the evening the Fennells kindly took us out to dinner at Lighthouse Point, where we were joined by some of their friends, including Roland Kargbo, the local director of Help A Needy Child International (H.A.N.C.I.), a locally based project supported by Hope and Homes for Children, whose work in Bo we were to see later on.

Bo

On Wednesday 7th we flew to Bo. I am not given to hyperbole, so when I say our reception was wonderful I really mean it filled me with wonder! Bo has a very basic airfield, but as our little turbo-prop plane came down we could see out of the window an enormous welcoming party, with a big welcome banner, awaiting our arrival. As I walked towards them from the plane the band (or bands?) played, and I could see that, in addition to the dignitaries and what seemed to be hundreds of other civilians, there were detachments of army, police and the United Nations peacekeepers (UNAMSIL), all lined up ready to be inspected. After shaking hands with the Chairman of Bo Town Council (Mr. D A Kawa) and numerous other dignitaries, and some I later discovered were friends in Bo O.W.L., I had to inspect them! As we drove into town there were streets lined with schoolchildren to bid us welcome.

I was quite overwhelmed by an experience that had never happened to me before and I’m sure won’t happen again, so although we went on an extensive tour of the town on our way to the hotel, it’s a bit of a blur. I did take in that Bo is not physically damaged like Freetown – I was told that the people of Bo put up successful resistance. But there are many damaged people around. The population has risen from 60,000 to over 800,000, according to Mr Kawa. After visiting and inspecting the Police headquarters and the UNAMSIL base, we eventually got to the best hotel (really the only hotel) in town, where, of course, the Mayor had the best room! We finished the day with a most entertaining Cultural Performance, the venue “Under the Palm Tree” at the Sir Milton Hotel.

On Thursday 8th March Jane, Liz and I attended an extraordinary meeting of Bo Town Council. This was virtually my only opportunity during the programme set out for me to listen to formal representations from the Town Council. It would be helpful to have a record, but all I have is a document giving the structure and functions of the council. However, Jane did manage to do some follow-up in her second week. I was asked to make a keynote address in which I said a lot but promised not very much. The meeting finished with lunch. I received a fine woven cloth from the Town Council. We then went into the Chairman’s Parlour, where the entire town hall staff came in and sang a specially composed song of welcome, after which we toured the offices – we couldn’t go into the community hall because there was a celebration for International Women’s Day going on. During the tour I did have the chance to speak with someone who seemed to be the director of finance, though he was most concerned, as in Freetown, with not being able to pull in local revenue through the property tax. He told me they do need help with equipment, for their offices and for manual workers, but he would really value some way to get training and expertise.

An interesting thing happened in the afternoon. By midday on Thursday I realised that wherever I went I would be escorted by the police and by UNAMSIL. One particular Special Branch officer more or less acted as my batman. In the afternoon we were expected to rest, but Bo O.W.L. managed to get us out on an alternative programme! It was to cause some consternation later in the day when the official a party turned up to find us gone. However, that afternoon was immensely useful, especially to me in looking at possible projects for the Mayor's Bo Fund. I can recall visiting the Cheshire Home, the St Mary's Children's Centre, one of the HANCI homes and a centre for unattached children run by the Christian Brothers. We made an abortive attempt to visit a displaced persons' camp called Splendid.

The visit to St Mary's stands out in my mind because, apart from a beautiful shirt which they gave me, and a nice banner, I had arranged to take a gift of money to them resulting from our specific Christmas appeal. The children and staff all gave us a very warm welcome and we were then wonderfully entertained by a group called The Archbishop's Dance Troupe. We later went to inspect the site where their new building is being built. The other project which greatly impressed me in my brief visit was that run by the Christian Brothers, which seemed to have a particular concern for young girls and women who had, for whatever reason, become mothers. They are also looking for links in respect of skills training such as carpentry/joinery and hairdressing. I cannot imagine how we would have accomplished all that if we had kept to the Town Council's agenda.

My recall of parts of Friday 9th are quite confused. I know we visited the SLBS Radio Station and saw the important practical support from the British Government to make it a more comprehensive and reliable service. Not very sophisticated fare, but clearly the radio station is a key facility. I know we went to Bo Government Hospital. I had a brief chance to talk with Dr. Rogers, the medical superintendent, who was actually engaged in an operation when we arrived and we also met some long-established nurses. The hospital can make use of serviceable medical and surgical equipment; I am not sure about the position with regard to drugs; they are desperately short of trained medical staff – some who have worked there have been tempted away to work for NGO's who can pay more. They have to cope with vast numbers of outpatients with no proper facilities; they also urgently need new buildings, especially to replace parts that are under canvas. The Belgian wing of Medecin Sans Frontieres provides welcome assistance to them.

I also remember visiting the base of the Civilian Defence Force (The Kamajors) – another inspection of the troops – though I think their main message was the need for a new building! We made unscheduled stops at Abraham Mensa's project and at another children's home run by HANCI. I know we finished up with a meeting at Bo Teachers' College, who provided us with lunch, but apart from inspecting their captive crocodile we did not have time to see the campus. I find I am quite confused about schools I visited – at every one we enjoyed tremendous welcomes from the children and the staff, in a very pro-active way. Jane will correct me if my recollection is wrong, but I think that Holy Rosary School had a water tank donated by a St. Mary's School in Warwick. Unfortunately the tank is empty and they sorely need a good well. We visited both Methodist schools and recalled that Bob Crowther did an exchange with the primary school. All the schools would value new links (or the renewal of old ones).

Once again I shall need to check with Jane where one of our greatest matters for concern arose (was it CKC?), when we found a room full of mostly useless computers and monitors, all sent from here, and also some useless electric typewriters. It is important to make sure we send things which arrive complete and serviceable.

On Friday evening we were entertained at a farewell banquet given by the Town Council, but presided over by the Senior District Officer for Bo District. It was called a farewell because they had thought I would be leaving by plane on Saturday morning and not, as transpired, by road on Sunday. The Resident Minister gave the keynote address, but we also had speeches from Mr. Kawa and Joseph Kobba, Chairman of Bo O.W.L. In my response I had to explain why my farewell speech was not my last.

Saturday 10th - This was a day planned by Bo OWL, since the Town Council programme had finished on Friday. Moussa Konteh took us to visit the Bo Club, which showed many signs of having once been a prestigious campus – one of its distinguished past members had been a famous Davis Cup player. However, is now very run down. It still has some very serviceable tennis courts and Moussa introduced us to a group of young players – mostly boys. The condition of their racquets notwithstanding, some of them showed remarkable skill and they mostly seemed to have a very good eye. The coaching was evidently most effective. We had a prolonged photo session with groups and individually with the Mayor! Moussa outlined some of his plans to provide improved sporting facilities for young people through his Bo Kolosseum project. Jane no doubt has more detail but to me it seemed a well worked out scheme.

We made a call in passing on the Growth Centre, which we had missed out during an earlier itinerary. This is a centre which had been financed by the EU to provide practical training in artisan skills. Unfortunately, being

Saturday, no trainees were there, but we were able to see round. I think their funding is not guaranteed for the future.

We moved on to “Camp Splendid”, a displaced persons’ camp run by UNHCR. We had made an abortive visit earlier in the week and had made a fixed appointment for this Saturday visit, but they weren’t really expecting us. We had an extensive tour of one of the schools; there were no children in classes, being Saturday, but we found one boy busy painting many pictures. We did meet a group of teachers, who were attending voluntary extra training. Many of the teachers are in any case volunteers from within the camp, who do not get paid any extra for being teachers. The school building is primitive and the conditions cramped; there is an acute shortage of basic teaching and learning materials – even blackboards have to be used on a rota basis. We also called in on the dispensary, where we were able to visit a mother with two new-born twins. My overall feeling about the camp was that, although conditions were bad, there was some evidence of a sense of normality, in that people were obviously trading with each other. There is obviously great need, but the scale of it would be outside the scope of anything we might offer. The only possibility would be to give basic education materials to the school.

In the evening we attended a meeting organised by Bo O.W.L., followed by dinner. This was a very useful opportunity to listen to the concerns of Bo O.W.L. members and friends, and to hear something about their project for a multi-purpose centre. This event also at last provided an opportunity for Jane to make a speech. I received another very handsome country cloth as a gift from Bo O.W.L., at which point I became quite sure that I was going to go home even more laden than on the outward journey.

Sunday 11th In the morning Jane and I attended Joseph Kobbah’s church, the United Brethren Church. Although we were there for two hours we had to leave before the end of the service.

I left Bo at 1.30, travelling by road with the Fennells to Freetown. I said goodbye to my Jane, to many Bo O.W.L. and Town Council friends, to the hotel staff and to my police and UN escorts. We had an escorting motorcade to the boundary checkpoint and one policeman accompanied us to Freetown. During the journey we stopped at a road junction called Mile 91, where we saw evidence of the good work which had been undertaken by Indian troops of UNAMSIL. They had constructed a library, a medical centre and a very nice playground for the community; I also believe they had done drainage and sanitation work.

In Freetown we had dinner with the Archbishop of Freetown and Bo.

Monday 10th Back to Gatwick. Thanks to many people who helped both in Bo and in Leamington, and places in between. These should be listed but not yet!