

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, it 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!