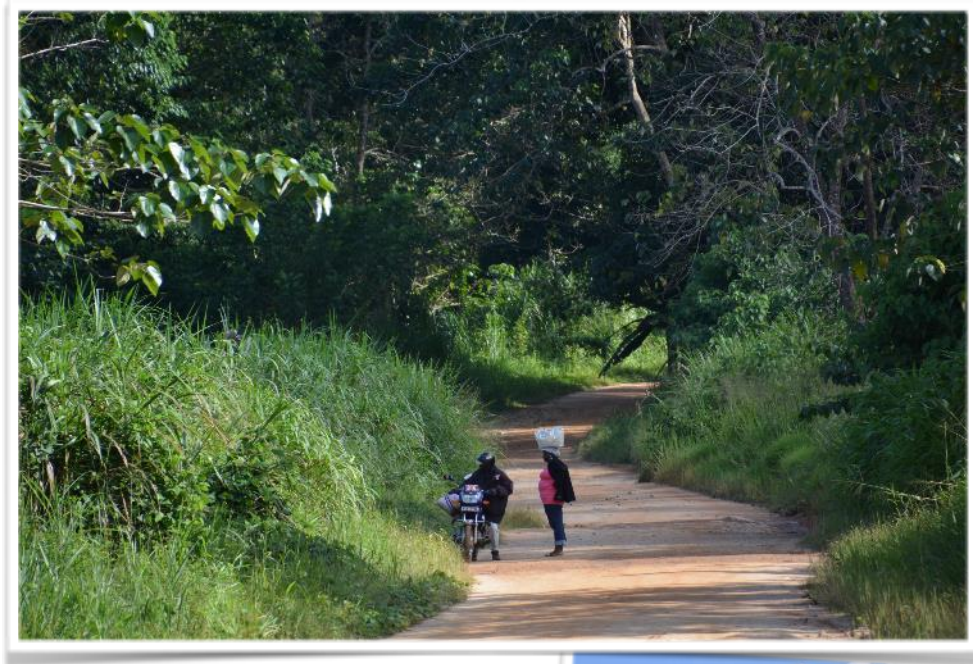


# EARLY HISTORY OF ONE WORLD LINK



**Bo and Warwick Districts -  
Friends since 1981 - By Jane Knight**

Most of the ensuing history is taken mainly from the author's personal journals.

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## PRELUDE

### RANDOM STATEMENTS

"You can come to mine for a party!". "OK but make sure we have plenty of Campari!"..."Of Course!" This chat took place during the visit of the Bo One World Link (OWL) committee representatives to Leamington in October 2016.

Liz Garrett (OWL Teacher Coordinator) says, "It is unique and incredibly special to have so many Leamington and Warwick primary schools linked with schools in Sierra Leone. Strong bonds and friendships have grown between school communities and it is a joy to see children and teachers from the UK and Africa learn from each other and work mutually together." *Press Release, June 2017.*

*From May 2017 Warwick OWL minutes* - "Phil (Local Government group) outlined the connection with The Prince's Trust at a 2 day workshop in Bo on 29th-30th May. It is anticipated that Bo could triple in size in the next 25 years with a population of around half a million. This makes Bo an ideal candidate for this planning exercise as this could help mitigate the worst effects of population growth.

"We are looking for nurses and doctors to join our Health Link team and support the small number of health facilities within Bo District. This will involve fundraising for your visits to Africa and sharing your world class skills with local colleagues trying to do the same job as you but in very resource poor environments. If you would like to be involved with strengthening our friendship with Bo and improving healthcare for some of the world's most vulnerable people please contact me for details and have a look at our website for further information about our work [www.oneworldlink.org.uk](http://www.oneworldlink.org.uk)

*Helena White - community midwife, Warwick Hospital*

#### COMMENT FROM VISITORS RETURNING FROM BO - February 2018

Feeling tired , but exhilarated by the last 12 days. Our friends in Bo have given us the most wonderful experience and I thank them with all my heart. This is a very special friendship that we have and I feel privileged to belong to it.

#### COMMENT FROM BO AFTER VISIT FROM LEAMINGTON- February 2018

Wow ! that was so great. We will miss them dearly.

### HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE BEGINNING

An OXFAM office was opened in Leamington Spa in 1974. Its aim was to raise money for OXFAM by opening and managing secondhand shops throughout Warwickshire.

Its other aim was to build up awareness in the communities it served, about the issues causing poverty in the world and to inspire a largely uninformed British public to campaign for change in government and global policies. This latter ambitious task was very difficult to implement as there remained colonial, racist, patronizing, or plain ignorant views among most of the British public whenever countries outside Europe were mentioned. If they were aware of the 'Third World',<sup>1</sup> they usually had stereotypical perceptions and simplistic solutions to offer. Footnote explains the origin of this nomenclature.

In 1974, I started working in the new local OXFAM office originally for 3 months. I was in charge of the 6 shops and had to speak to all kinds of groups about OXFAM's work overseas, and Third World problems. I had never travelled outside Europe so the knowledge upon which I based these talks was very limited. I mainly used OXFAM audio visual materials. A prominent member of OXFAM staff at the time was Kip Warr and he was particularly helpful and is still a significant member of OWL today). My other source of information was the World Development Movement<sup>2</sup> whose purpose was to address global issues of injustice. Underlying these sources, my perceptions were all tinged with stereotypes from school days...

In 1977, it was deemed a good thing for me, at last, to visit a Third World country, as part of my staff training. I was sent with a dozen teachers from Birmingham, to do a month's study visit to Ghana. Part of the stay included a visit for a week to Burkina Faso which helped me to see that not all African countries are the same. *"This whole trip was quite a life changing experience. All my assumptions and knowledge were turned upside down...." I really began to question the assumptions about what is poverty and to appreciate the many positive aspects of community life in a "poor" country.*

Two key lessons for me and many others who are fortunate enough to travel across cultures were that:

- direct experience for as little as one month, was more instructive than any book reading,
- intervention from outside does not bring about sustainable development - it is the people themselves, whether here (in the North) or in the Third World (the South) who have to be responsible for their own development.

My conclusion from pondering these thoughts and from discussions with colleagues, was that by working in partnership, we might be able to address the issues causing and arising from

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<sup>1</sup> Third World was the accepted reference at the time to describe countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia. We then moved in later days to talk about developing countries as opposed to us being developed countries. That's not acceptable so then it became the North and the South even though Australia was classed as a Northern country in terms of economic development.

<sup>2</sup> Now called Global Justice Now.

global inequalities. We could try and set up links with people in the South basing them on a solid foundation of knowing each other personally, thereby building up trust, and part of this would be a recognition of the values of both cultures.

Following the visit to Ghana, one of the students<sup>3</sup> I met in Kumasi, came to study for a PhD in Birmingham for 3 years. He became a regular visitor to my home, thereby getting to know my family, often joining me in school visits, when he talked about life in Ghana. He was regularly asked by primary school children how could it be that he had a wrist watch? Their knowledge of Africa was quite often informed from watching such programmes as Tarzan on TV. From these early experience with Seth, I realised the huge value of taking an African born visitor into the classroom, rather than telling children Eurocentric facts.

The learning I and others gained from these experiences was taken into consideration as the local World Development (WDM) group was founded with a view to campaigning to raise awareness. By 1979, they noted that Leamington Spa was particularly active in European town twinning. This came from the post war effort to ensure that there would never be any more European wars. Our local WDM plan was to extend this concept ..into twinning with a town in the South as an idealistic initiative towards global peace through a wider international understanding at local level..

The aim would be for local Leamingtonians to offer the hand of friendship to a community in the South in order to get to know each other's lives, families, concerns and cultures on an EQUAL basis. It was thought highly desirable and necessary, if this were to be an equal relationship, that aid should not feature in that relationship. We recognised that aid skews the power balance and the way the donor and recipients perceive each other. Offering gifts on the other hand would be seen as a natural part of the friendship as it built up.

In early discussions it had been felt that twinning with a Third World community would be impossible because of the huge material gap between us. However, those of us who had travelled, felt such disparities had not stopped personal human interaction on an equal basis.

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<sup>3</sup> His name was Seth Asiama, who is now retired after a career in government and Academia. One of my sons who periodically goes to teach post graduate Mathematics in Ghana, recently visited Seth and the family friendship continues after 40 years.

## CHAPTER TWO

### WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

In 1979, it was finally agreed by the local WDM/OXFAM group that we would go ahead and research into the possibility of twinning with a Third World community. There was an unquestioned assumption that wherever we decided to go, our suggestion would be accepted by the people we approached.

Our strategy was to set criteria for choosing where to go. These were that we should look for a community in a country,

- within reasonable distance from the UK
- where they spoke English
- where their size and occupation might be similar to that of Leamington
- where one of our group might already have contacts.

We had people who had lived in or visited Kenya, Ghana, and possibly Zimbabwe and Zambia. There were also vague mentions of Sierra Leone.

After much deliberation over the next two years, and after consultation with Cllr. Peter Barton, the Mayor of Leamington, we felt ready to announce to the local Press that we had decided to twin Warwick District with Umtali (now named Mutare) in Zimbabwe.

However, when we approached the Peter Barton with a request for a formal twinning with official approval by the Town Council, he said there were enough twinings already with 3 European towns and the trustees could not cope with any more. He then suggested that we twin Warwick District Council with our chosen community. In fact, that turned out to be a good suggestion providing a wider base at each end to develop partnerships.

We finally chose a town in Zimbabwe partly because being newly independent, the country was featured on the national media. A local academic recommended that we choose Umtali (Mutare) and this fitted into our agreed criteria for a partner.

In 1980, we held regular "One World link" meetings deliberating and debating until we finally had a public meeting on 23rd July. We invited Michael Harris, a much-respected Director of OXFAM's overseas development programme, to address us at Dale St. Methodist Church.

He was distinctly unimpressed with our proposal to link with Umtali (Mutare). He said we would be linking with white people in white bungalows.

Shock! Horror! After all that time our final proposal was dismissed, and worse, we had told the Press we were making a decision that evening. We then had an anxious review of possibilities, ranging from Ghana to Sierra Leone - like maybe Freetown? Where one of our members had a friend! We were quite stuck and then a Dale St. member of the audience said he had a brother in law in BO in Sierra Leone who was a Methodist Missionary.

Michael Harris then became very helpful. He said he knew Bo, and said it was very "African" and similar in size to Leamington Spa. Later we decided to include the rest of Warwick District (WD) and to link it with Bo District. This was partly because unlike the town of Leamington Spa, WD had no twinings.

I visited Michael Ward the Chief Executive at WD, and Stanley Birch, a prominent councillor at that time. They did not want a formal twinning but had no problem with a friendship link.

Following that, the rest of the year was busy, doing research on what kind of town Bo was, and we found they had a workshop on the railway sidings which housed a small manufacturing venture. We thought that compared with our AP factory and somehow, we might be compatible.

We consulted Barbara Harrell Bond, an Oxford based anthropologist and she was positive about what we were proposing.

Then we had a public meeting with the Sierra High Commissioner and Frank Judd who had been a Labour Defence minister, was later Director of OXFAM and is now Lord Judd and still very supportive of our link and its achievements. All these distinguished people were happy to launch the link at this end.



FRANK JUDD ADDRESSES LINKING WORKSHOP FOR WARWICK DISTRICT COUNCIL.  
(Michael Ward, WDC executive on right)

Our first Chairman in Leamington was Patrick Mc Auslan. He was a very well-travelled and distinguished Professor of Law who wrote the constitution for various African countries. Then after a short time, Ken Hall and myself were appointed joint Chairs and we persuaded Colin Franklin, Manager of the Parade branch of Barclay's Bank to be our Treasurer. Another key committee member was Dr. Paul Gully who went to Bo in 1984. His wife is Canadian, and he eventually went to live in Canada and became the chief government advisor on Public Health. He turned up again years later when Ebola broke out and helped us and the Bo friends and others in Sierra Leone through his links with the World Health Organisation.

### ***But what about Bo?***

Part of our research was to seek advice from Christian Aid, OXFAM and VSO and by chatting to anyone we met who knew Bo. Quite a few - once we started asking around! From this we were given names of people to approach. At that stage they seemed to be all Europeans, although one of them, Jean Conteh, was married to a Sierra Leonean who helped VSO with training their volunteers in the culture and language. That was Mussa Conteh. We were also told about Sister Hilary Lyons, a Holy Rosary nun who has started up a Mission Hospital at Serabu and had support from OXFAM.

OXFAM also had a film made some years back for educational use. It was called "Mrs. Washington goes to Bo". She had been selected from the Midlands's shop volunteers to go out and see for herself how OXFAM spent its money. Quite remarkable!

On the 6th of January, 1981, the OWL committee asked me to visit Sierra Leone to see if we could set up a link with Bo. Jean Conteh suggested it would be a bad idea because of the expectations we might raise, and asked me to leave it longer before embarking on a visit. There were one or 2 other more positive replies, not least from Neil Trainer (the aforementioned Methodist Missionary in Bo) who invited me to stay at his house. I also took an OXFAM 'secretary' Muriel, and Michael Harris allowed me to take his West African Field Director, Wyndham James, to guide me.

On Monday 13th April, I flew overnight with Muriel to Freetown. This was my second African journey following the OXFAM trip to Ghana in 1977.

We had arranged to be met by Martin Long who was working for VSO in Sierra Leone.



## CHAPTER THREE

### FIRST OWL VISIT TO BO

*Excerpts from my journal...* MONDAY, APRIL 13th

We finally landed in Freetown. Walking out of the plane we were greeted by that warm African clammy air. I felt relieved that I could stand the heat and that there was no big delay at the airport. Martin Long was not difficult to find (tall, young and British) ...and we really benefitted from his reassuring presence (and Land Rover).

The ferry trip was refreshing and we went straight up to Fourah Bay College, but accommodation was too expensive there, and far away from everything.

So Martin took us home and gave us breakfast which we enjoyed, feeling rather strange and then he delivered us to the Lido Hotel (opposite Victoria Park) where young VSOs usually stayed. We were now on our own. Our room was so hot, it was unbearable, and we were worried about the security of our belongings. The manager was a 'fat greasy white man' like someone out of Graham Greene and he locked away our valuables.

Once we had sorted ourselves out, we made our way to the British Council and met Mike Chadwick, the Director, who was very nice. However, he was more than pessimistic about our mission and described the people of Bo as starving?? So my early reaction now that we were here, was that a Link was impossible. I had an initial, almost racist view of the whole place.

However, Freetown grew on me as the day progressed despite strange long waits at the bank and at the sullen immigration office. We eventually went back to the Lido for a beer and fruit and nuts and a snooze. After cleaning up we set off for the (posh) Paramount Hotel - just behind State House - for a cup of tea and played the rich tourist role unwillingly, but inevitably. On our way back through the park a young man asked for our addresses and pointed out all the young unemployed men sitting around the park.

Our first meal back at the Lido was an enormous rice dish in a dining room which had a queer silent atmosphere. The initial impression was that Sierra Leone appeared much better off than Ghana when I was there in 1977, with its modern telephones, that worked, and many goods in the shops which I never saw in Ghana.

By 6.30 pm the day started to drag and we were too tired to go out, but too hot to try and sleep in that room. I had brought a plastic mosquito net and having no idea what to do with it, laid it over me instead of a sheet. What followed was a restless sweaty night (no electricity). We left the door open and lay there worrying about thieves!

APRIL 14th

Cheered up with a cold shower and an English breakfast and guava jam, we decided to hire a taxi and driver (Mohammed) for the day. He agreed to a price of 60 Leones with a 10 Leone tip plus photos (I don't know if I ever sent them to him).<sup>4</sup> In our original deliberations about choosing a partner town, one of our members (Ken Hall,) had said he had a friend in Freetown, Caleb

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<sup>4</sup> The exchange rate for the Leone was 2 to the £.

Edwin, so we decided to visit him. He welcomed us and took us to State House to find someone, but as always the chap was not there!

From there we left Caleb and went to the Atlantic Club to cool down, only to find it closed! Mohammed found us some beer from somewhere, and we sat on the sands and talked to a security guard who happened to be from Bo. We could see white people doing the usual swimming and beach play in the distance. One can understand their wishing to blot out what is really going on and just enjoying the luxury of the beach and the sea.

After visiting an attractive Arts and Crafts shop we visited Professor Eldred Jones at Fourah Bay and told him what we were hoping to do in Bo. He was charming quite encouraging and when I told him about Chadwick's views, he said we should not be put off. He recommended doing an Arts exchange<sup>5</sup> and recommended a wood carver to us and generally was very helpful.

Our next appointment we thought was with a Minister of Agriculture from Bo, Joe Jackson, but he was in Rome.

*"Yesterday, I was not too happy to be here, but today I am beginning to enjoy myself. Everything is becoming more familiar, we have a new bedroom with a fan. That evening we met Martin at a restaurant and had pizzas and salad and coffee for a total of 26 Leones ."*

So that was the end of our introduction to Sierra Leone and the next day (which according to my journal was a remarkable super day), we were off to Bo.....

### WEDNESDAY April 15th

Martin drove us the 140 Miles to Bo with 2 other volunteers and we passed palm trees and thick green vegetation, and lots of small interesting settlements.

I was full of worried anticipation about Bo. When I caught my first sight of it, my initial thought was *"My God, what has this got to do with Leamington?" It was full of bustle and I found it quite mind blowing."*

Our first stop was at Mrs. French's tea bar - *right* (a very popular venue for volunteers) and we were made very welcome. (It was just up the road from the current Black and White restaurant beyond the Milton Margai hotel). The cafe was really great *"full of greasy sweating volunteers"* -a mixture of VSO , Canadian CUSO, and Peace Corps young volunteers. They turned out to be




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<sup>5</sup> It was not until 2015 that we started on that idea!

a pleasant group who were helpful but sceptical about our mission.



Having found our first journey through Bo quite bewildering, Martin then took us further east to Gerihun (on the road to Kenema) to meet Brian Starcken - a Holy Ghost father. (left)

He is a remarkable man who is now principal of the Holy Ghost fathers in Dublin, but still visits old friends in Sierra Leone and once visited Leamington. He helped set up a link with Trinity School and the secondary

school at Gerihun which he built. In any one drinking session he managed to drink an awful lot of Star Beers. To my surprise, if he caught malaria which I once witnessed, he just drank even more Star Beers! He was a great friend of Bishop Koroma.

Here we also met Fr. Coffey, a missionary parish priest who took us out from Gerihun to isolated villages in his parish We were to see the schools supported by him and VSO. We were soon in the heart of the bush, crossing a big river where alluvial diamond mining takes place (R. Sewa). He mentioned 2 boys who had drowned in it the previous week. We passed through Ganduma and Fabu villages and then visited Mamboma school. The latter became our first link school partnered with Alcester infants' school.



ANN PARKER at Alcester infants' school (with African and UK food displays)

While Ann Parker, the Alcester head, was alive, it became a very happy friendship for many years. I was able to return to Mamboma with John Archer in 2014 and met the headmaster (Simeon Moseray)<sup>6</sup> again.

There were 75 children in that one classroom school with hardly any school furniture and with a map of Sierra Leone drawn on the wall. Simeon then took us back to his house for a potato leaf stew and Fanta. I was struck by his family's generosity.

In 1982 Momodu Koroma ( physics lecturer at Njala university) who was a friend of Jean and Mussa Conteh, came to study for a higher degree in physics at Reading University. He was from Mamboma and helped Ann Parker with her link with Simeon Moseray. *(Pictured visiting Ann in Warwick and right his family in Mamboma).*



Momodu was very concerned about the politics of his country and was taken on by President Kabbah as his Minister of Presidential Affairs. He created an anti corruption department and was all set to be vice President in the election preceding President Koroma's successful election. He was absolutely devastated when he failed to be elected, and is now based in the US and is engaged in business.



<sup>6</sup> Simeon Moseray visited Alcester school and stayed with Ann Parker who was Head at Alcester

## WELCOME TO FABU

We moved on past Tailu to Fabu where a nice new school had been built with help from VSO. There the whole village was gathered and we were given an amazing reception, led by the section chief. A devil came out to greet us and the Bundu ladies showed us how they work out the future of their babies with arrangements of stones. The whole occasion was unbelievable, with drumming and chanting and gifts of a goat and a huge bowl of rice...

We were shown round the impressive new school and as we set off the goat peed in the back of the Land Rover, and the devil jumped on to our bonnet. Quite a send off back to Bo. Martin then left us to look after ourselves.

We were greeted by our hosts, Margaret and Neil Trainer, the Methodist missionary, whose contact at Dale St. Church had recommended when he suggested Bo as a partner. Margaret was very kind to take us on but anxious that we were careful with our use of water. Otherwise we were well catered for with electricity most nights.

### THURSDAY APRIL 16th

Jean Conteh<sup>7</sup> to whom I had written for advice before coming to Bo, and who had been quite sure we should not come out on this venture, turned up (about to give birth) and was actually very helpful. We started gathering so much information, that we did not have enough time to make sense of it, and off we went to consult our first contact, the Manager of Barclay's Bank! He had been suggested to us by our treasurer at the time who was Manager of Barclay's in the Parade. Mr. Kamara deflected our interest straightaway by suggesting we meet his wife, Philomena Kamara who was head of Queen of the Rosary Girls RC secondary school. Then Brian Starken turned up. As he was Head of Gerihun RC secondary school I thought Trinity school in Leamington would be interested in linking with him.

We could not meet anyone at the District office because Bo Government School (set up originally to educate the sons of local Chiefs) was celebrating its 75th anniversary. Before we realised what was going on, we bumped into Albert Lamin. He had been mentioned to us as



PRESIDENT SIAKA STEPHENS BEHIND  
TABLE LEFT OF RIGHT HAND COLUMN



PART OF ENTERTAIN-  
MENT

<sup>7</sup> Jean had gone out originally to Bo as a VSO to teach English. There she met Mussa Conteh and married him. Hence VSO in London had suggested her as a contact to consult before going out to Sierra Leone...

a key contact before we left for Sierra Leone because he was chairman of the United Association in Bo and he was a teacher at Christ the King Secondary School (CKC). One of our new link group members in Leamington was Gian Clare who is still running our local United Nations Association. He had already been in correspondence with us... Albert took us to see the Chiefs' Durbar taking place at Bo Govt. School where we also saw President Siaka Stevens in the distance. There was dancing, drumming and massive celebrations. *"My goodness, we seem to be amazingly blessed with experiences, it is unbelievable"*.



MY FIRST MEETING WITH DR. JENNY GIBSON

The school was next to Bo government hospital, so we eventually moved there and visited Jenny Gibson, a Methodist missionary doctor who made us welcome and became a key contact for One World Link in its early years.

On the road to the hospital we also bumped into Mussa Conteh who welcomed us to Bo even though his British wife had been quite questioning about our idea. He said he did not always agree with his wife!

We later met Bob Dixon, another Methodist missionary. He had just returned from Freetown, and seemed quite strung up. He was running the Tikonko Agricultural Extension Centre (TAEC), which trained farmers in appropriate skills. Mussa Conteh was leading the training and Christian Aid and VSO supported them. I found the whole atmosphere in Bob's presence rather strange.

Then Wyndham James, OXFAM's West Africa country director, arrived from Senegal. He was actually feeling quite ill but we managed to finish the day over several beers with him. Talking to the Cokers' Bar family and a group of Canadian volunteers, we had mixed but mainly positive reactions to our proposed link

FRIDAY (17th) Woke up depressed and Wyndham had to go to bed by midday, he was feeling so ill. We managed to get about and met the Coker family who ran Coker's Bar (long changed into high street shop) and then Dr. Jenny Gibson at Bo Government hospital. We were taken to pay homage to the Paramount Chief Boima, *"it was a funny whispering experience"*.



Bob Dixon introduced us to a family who make gara dyed cloth skirts where I eventually had a lovely blue skirt made from scratch.

18th APRIL

Another meeting with Brian Starken in Gerihun and we were impressed with the way he had set up a secondary school all on his own. He gave us a thorough tour of the village and we met staff. Later a Courtaulds' employee (member of OWL) managed to get a load of laboratory

equipment which was sent out c/o Choithram's<sup>8</sup> to furnish Brian's developing science classroom<sup>9</sup>.

The Trainers arrived back with 2 elderly visitors from Edinburgh - Methodists visiting missionary outposts. My reaction to them and their mission was quite disturbing. I hated the thought that we might also be seen to be among the many Westerners wandering around looking at Africa as spectators, but not really part of it.

I later went out on my own which I enjoyed and looked for the local Bahais. I left greetings from Leamington Bahais as their representative was out. I used a taxi (car) which were all over Bo at that time and they were cheap. I finished up at Mrs. French's cafe which she ran for volunteers providing them with English dishes. *"She told me all about her working day and night for 14 years without a break, except for the odd hour a day. She does all this to make enough money to pay for her son David to go to school."*

I also talked to the Head of the Methodist school (Mr. Kondo) and felt he took a kind interest but I felt he would really prefer to meet someone who could actually do something to help, instead of voicing idealistic platitudes. *(Despite that initial reaction, he eventually came to Leamington for a month's stay at Milverton combined school.)*

I then dropped the most awful clanger asking why he didn't write to his MP asking for help with resources. He turned away and was silent. And when I asked Mrs. French if I had said the wrong thing. She said yes raising political issues was not acceptable... I withdrew apologetically but felt terrible.

*(I did wonder if we should try pressurising government officials? - Presumably that is what some of the expats do?) (How naive was I?!) Siaka Stevens regime was very oppressive as well as corrupt.)*

<sup>8</sup> Choithram's supermarkets were based in many African and Middle Eastern countries so it was quite a shock to meet the founding Mr. Choithram later in the visit. He agreed to transporting goods for One World Link.

<sup>9</sup> In 2018 Brian still visits Sierra Leone and assisted Bishop Patrick in many ways and continues to be a drinking partner of Bob Moran. Bob came out to Sierra Leone as a Peace Corps volunteer and worked at Tikonko Agricultural Extension Centre with Mussa CONTEH, (supported by Methodist church). Bob stayed in Sierra Leone right through the Civil War and Ebola and in later years worked for Bishop Patrick.



### EASTER SUNDAY 19th APRIL

...In the afternoon, Muriel and I set off in a taxi to visit the President's Lodge, up on top of a hill. It was beautiful up there.

We took photos and sat in the sun taking it all in, birdsong, sounds of insects and palpable peace and quiet. We then walked back into Bo through a feast of experiences. The trees along the road were beautiful. I loved the flamboyant tree and eventually

we came across a group of boys dancing and chanting. They were the Education Social Club whose aims were unity among youth, and self-help. Apparently they all went round to each other's houses and earned money working for their parents and contributed to each other's school fees. We gave them postcards of Leamington...



FLAMBOYANT TREE FLOWERS

As we approached Bo we came across a parade of Bo School Old Boys with 2 bands. Such a colourful sight! Stopping at Mrs. French's for refreshments, we were joined by some Bundu ladies with their devil<sup>10</sup>. Mrs. French was very disturbed. It seems that she was frightened of the black (female) devil and does not like it to come near her.

That evening we went to a concert at the Methodist church which our hosts, the Trainers, had organised. Mussa Conteh sang with a lovely deep voice and after the concert we had a chance to talk a bit more to him and his English wife, Jean. They became long standing family and OWL friends and were instrumental over the years in making OWL work. The following year they came to study at Reading University and while there, they introduced us to lots of family and friend networks of Bo District born Sierra Leoneans in London and in Reading. I was with Mussa many years later when he was breathing his last....

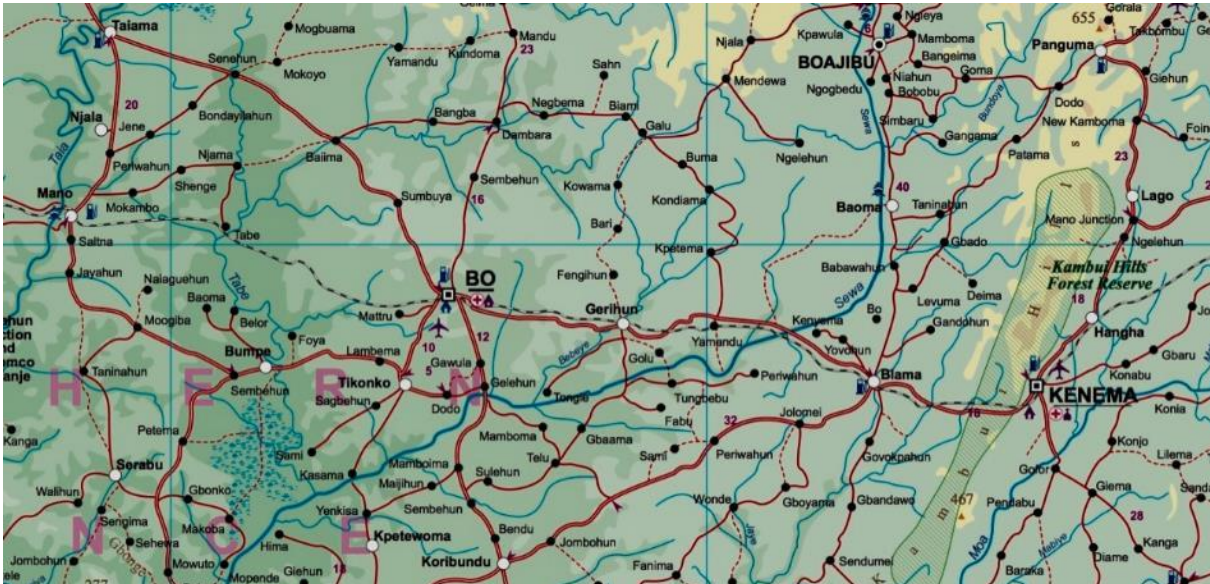
### EASTER MONDAY, 20th APRIL, 1981

Mr. Moseray from Mamboma school came to see us and said he would like to link with a school at our end. The obvious one was Alcester primary headed by Ann Parker who had sent out some materials. The first school link was established!

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<sup>10</sup> A major cultural feature in Sierra Leone is the use of Secret Societies for enabling traditional training of adolescent youngsters to adulthood. They have traditional ceremonies for the celebrating of this rite of passage and other celebrations. The entertainment involve music making and various 'magic' happenings with devils featuring in all of them... there are female and male devils and the societies respectively, are the Poro for men and the Bundu for women.





CAN YOU SEE SERABU, BUMPE, FABU, GBAAMA - STARTING SOUTH AND EAST OF BO?

Bob Dixon took us out to meet Sr. Patrick who had been a missionary in Africa since 1941 and 20 years in Bo.. She was dealing with 88 projects. She suggested all kinds of ideas to try and make a link work such as a further visit a year's time when ideas could be developed further.

Later that day Wyndham was up and about and he told me all about the life of an OXFAM Field Director and how he approached development.

The next few days consisted of many encounters and meetings with school head teachers, the Bahais, people like a VSO working at Bumpe, and Nigel Davies who was doing agricultural training at the National Training Centre, a sort of stepping stone to university teaching social and community welfare and agriculture. Nigel said most of the students really wanted to go to UK and the US to study Maths.

He wondered what could come out of our proposed link? On the whole he and his wife were very sceptical and started up again all my doubts about what this 3 weeks could usefully throw up . We discussed at length the harm done by whites and mad aid projects and the lack of efficiency or any kind of integrity among the politicians.

This was followed by a depressing visit to the Cheshire home for orphans, which seemed deprived of many basics including a proper water supply. Wyndham actually thought it compared well with similar homes which he had visited. He said OXFAM does not support institutions because they need permanent attention to be sustainable and - to be more effective, they needed help and interest from the local community. Evening drinks with Brian Starcken and someone called Evan Jones who was not over enthusiastic about Bo school linking. Brian was very kind to me trying to look positively at the link. But he said we should not be over ambitious. He said that if just one or two people could keep it going for a year and key people then could meet to discuss progress or lack of it, and could then review what to do. I was very grateful to Brian.

22nd APRIL. We first went to CARE<sup>11</sup> and demanded water for the Cheshire Home. The man said "We have to serve the bosses first - Charity begins at home. - Incredible but true. We planned to call the next day to see if they had taken any notice of us!

Then with ease, found a taxi to Serabu (see map above). We travelled along the forest road, all lushly green with a red laterite road pushing through it. The taxi eventually had 8 people in it, so that we were nearly sitting on top of each other!

We finally reached Serabu, (hospital below) where I felt bewildered at the size of the place and wondered again where we could fit into that?



After coffee we were shown right round the hospital. It is hard to know where one starts. The experience knocked me for six - the mother with 2 babies, and her toddler with a great red hole in his bottom, yowling for attention. The tragic child with osteomyelitis with his painful feet in a bowl of water and no smile for anyone and no crying either. The baby with marasmus...so many, so much to do.

Then we had a modest but welcome lunch. The missionaries are so well or-

ganised. Sister Hilary (recommended to me by OXFAM and a most remarkable woman who wanted to study history but instead became a nun and trained to be a surgeon), finally arrived from the village and was obviously very much loved by the other sisters. "It didn't take much to realise why. *She is so full of humour and so close to the people and their needs. Needless to say she speaks fluent Mende.*"

Sr. Hilary was quite encouraging re. the link idea, and I thought we might even be of assistance to her. She detailed some of the most useful drugs and equipment she could do with. For example, she said that because she had no Gentamicin and gastro intestinal sutures, which can be re-used, a father of 7 who had a PhD, had died. Sister's main long term aim was to get the government to invest in local medics to encourage preventative medicine. She was convinced there was much they could do with basic changes of practice in people's homes.

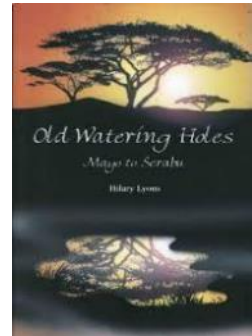


<sup>11</sup> CARE is a large international NGO who specialised in infrastructure provision.

Below is Sr. Hilary Lyons' reception into the Fellowship for Public Health at the Royal College of Physicians, three years ago when she was 92. Also worth a read is her very moving book 'Old Watering Holes' about building up Serabu and visiting it when it was flattened by the rebels in the 90's..



My question after this inspiring visit was "Can a link really save lives?" And I think over the next 38 years, we did in small ways, although the question is still in our thoughts as we are trying once more to build up a Health Link.



On our way back, we visited a village where palm oil was being processed from bunches of ripe red palm nuts.



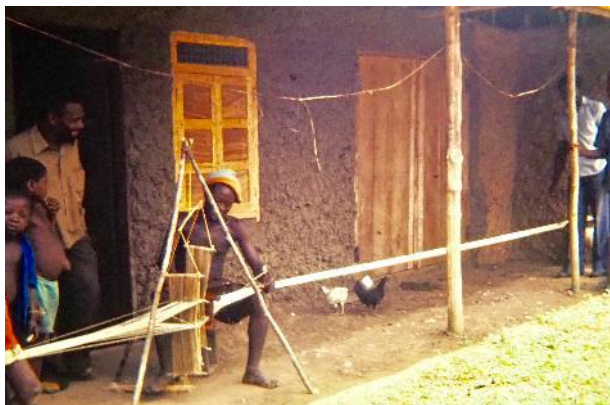
We also met some nursing trainees who were conducting village surveys at night. Their aim was to find out the number of deaths, and the various health needs as an initial part of founding a village health committee which was intended to pass on preventative ideas and train grannies in child care and to build wells etc.. We met the village Chief whose brother was the top Urologist surgeon in the country.

Leaving Wyndham to conduct OXFAM business and justify his journey, I left in a taxi accompanied by a baby, 6 adults and a live chicken in the boot.

### 23rd APRIL

I visited Jean Conteh who was teaching at CKC (Christ the King College) and we were joined by Albert Lamin (Chair of Bo United Nations Association) see April 16th for more info. re. Albert. He was particularly interested in my pictures of the Pump Rooms and I realised I need to learn more about mineral waters as I was not able to answer any of his questions. Jean took us to meet the principals of CKC, Ahmadiyya Secondary and Bo Govt. school to see if they would be interested in linking with our schools. Although they were polite, it was some years before in fact each of them plus Brian's Gerihun Secondary, did link up with Trinity, Campion and Kenilworth schools for a while.





24th APRIL

Up at the crack of dawn to visit TAEC (Tikonko Agricultural Extension Centre) - supported by the Methodists, Christian Aid and VSO - and headed by Mussa Conteh.

His favourite village (Pelehun) was full of thatched and mud cottages. I was fascinated by the old men weaving country cloth on a string and sticks loom which was laid out all along the village streets in zig zag shapes.

Passing a snake, we walked down to the river which was beautiful. Women were washing clothes by the river and were in danger of contracting onchocerciasis from the resident black flies, one of which landed on my leg. We also went to a swamp and then watched a cookery demonstration. This was to interest the mothers in feeding their babies with the locally grown beni-seed rather than imported baby foods.

Back at TAEC<sup>12</sup>, we met Bo Moran for the first time. At that time his hair was bright red. He had been a Peace Corps volunteer in the '60s and never went home, even during the ensuing war and during the Ebola outbreak.

He still lives in Tikonko and Kenema and is always worth meeting for a beer. He showed us the various innovative activities with animal rearing and appropriate technology farming methods. They were difficult to pass on to farmers because of their limited income but they did have some successes..

As with most of these early days in Bo, at the end of the day we all fell into Coker's Bar for Star beer. I was irritated by the 'fatuous' expats who regularly assembled there.



BOB MORAN

SATURDAY 25th APRIL

I went to the Post Office planning to phone home but the lines were down (no Whats App in those days)!

Today was to be a visit to Bo Hospital where we were shown around by Dr. Jenny Gibson<sup>13</sup>. She introduced us all as Leamington and OXFAM who want to 'help' Bo hospital. I was not very comfortable with that. My description was "the place was a mess" and seething with people who were attending their relations who had been involved in a serious accident the previous day. *"There seem to be shortages of everything in the hospital and it was so 'squalid'. Half the beds had no sheets. Jenny's total devotion to making a difference was very apparent and she looked quite tired, as she worked relentlessly, totally dedicated to God's work.*

<sup>12</sup> sadly long since defunct.

<sup>13</sup> 19th August 2019. Sadly Jenny died earlier this week aged 88., while I was writing this journal....

After this visit, I fell into a state of depression partly because of the "hopeless mess here and the immense difficulties facing the people having to cope with it".

That evening, I met Ian Aitken (Aid medic) who cheered me up explaining the programme he is setting up to establish a paramedical school in Bo to train 90 graduates in 3 years. I think Sr. Hilary became a leading operator in charge of the school's primary health training. But again the war finished all that off.

#### APRIL 26th

Albert Lamin took me to Mass. I was not impressed, and my depression continued. It was not helped by meeting Joe Jackson MP also going to Mass. Originally he was much respected in Bo, but now he was obviously quite wealthy and according to Albert, had disappointed everyone by ending up corrupt.



We then went to Mrs. French's cafe. Bizarrely my comment on that visit was that I thought Mrs. French seemed very negative towards Albert who I think had a mixed reputation.. And he seemed ill at ease when the Europeans joined in the conversation. I put the latter down to his lack of experience of our culture. After that I went to meet his wife Jeanette. She showed me her kitchen with its 3 stone cooker. We discussed various feminist issues and the difference between our cultures. *"These discussions can be quite fascinating"*.

Another reaction to our proposed link was very different. I was taken to meet a Mr. Labor who taught at Bumpe Secondary school. He was very pleased to see us, but when he realised just what we were about - it seemed his interest declined. He was very honest about his hope to become a corrupt politician, expecting to be voted into Parliament. I found it difficult to make him out. Linking his school with anyone was of no interest to him.

We stopped for a drink in Bumpe and watched a good game of Scrabble being played with the word - RAZE - earning a triple score on the Z! The last thing I expected to observe...

Back in the Rio restaurant in Bo, Joe Jackson MP came in and talked with us for 10 minutes. He spoke in favour of the link but said nothing! Something about British and Romanian tractors and technical farming ??

After that, we caught up with the Bahais whom Wyndham described as crackers. At the end of our meeting, their leader asked me to send them a £100 amplifier. Something most odd there! *(That is one link which did not take off).*

At last that day I managed to get through on the telephone to greet the family. I was relieved to find my husband was managing well with the 5 boys after 2 weeks of non-communication. The call went through cables plugged to an old fashioned telephone exchange board, but it worked!

In the evening Albert took me to meet Mr. Bundu and his friend at Bo Club. They welcomed our linking idea and I enjoyed chatting to a group of Sierra Leoneans without any Europeans

present. But Albert did not seem very keen on them. There seems to be a lot of rivalry between the schools. The evening ended with a visit to exchange cassette tapes with the family of a Sierra Leonean (Lansana Chan) who happened to be living and working in Leamington at that time and had heard about us through the local newspaper report about the formation of OWL.

### 28th APRIL

My eldest son's 16th birthday and I was far away...

Sterile but polite meeting with the Southern District officer and Chief Boima, followed by revisits to the secondary schools and Holy Rosary primary, where I delivered scrap books sent by our brownies and St. Mary Immaculate School in Warwick. The responses were all thoughtful and positive.

Later, we had a goodbye meal with the Trainers who had put up with us all this time. Having paid a last visit to the French family, we met up with Albert Lamin -left - (who was to be our first visitor to Leamington from Bo<sup>14</sup>) and the Contehs and Trainers. We found that Jean and Mussa would be staying near Reading the following September, for a year. This was great news, as I found Mussa a kindred spirit and really enjoyed communicating with him. So we had the prospect of continuing the linking dialogue in England while Mussa studied for a Masters in Agriculture.

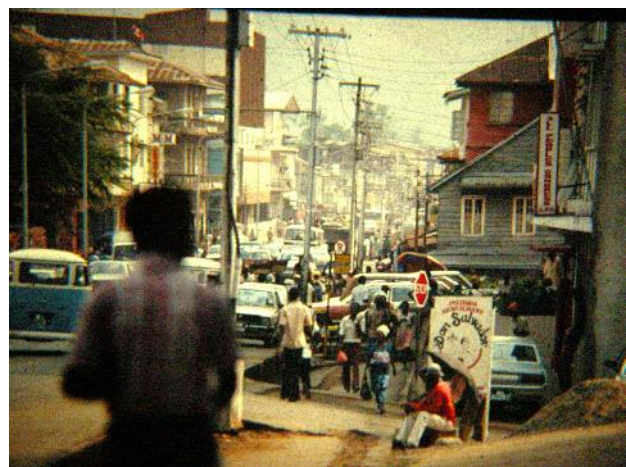


Before this gathering, Ben Smith from the Ahmadiyya School brought a letter for our Ahmadiyyas and a list of teachers. There seemed to be a certain keenness to set up an OWL committee in Bo. Fortunately Neil Trainer agreed to work on this for us and he became the first Bo Chairman, followed shortly by Ben Smith.

My last thought of the day....."What a lovely place Bo is, and what wonderful people we have met..."

APRIL 29th Before leaving for Freetown, Mrs. Massaquoi (HRS) took me round every class in the school and introduced me and she asked them all to say "Good morning Mrs. Knight"! She pushed them into saying they wanted to make a link with St. Mary's School in Warwick. *(and they did eventually!)*

We had a smooth bus ride through some lovely scenery. Freetown seemed so different from Bo and so squalid and crowded.



FREETOWN

<sup>14</sup> The following spring when Albert came over, he was invited to numerous schools in Leamington and Warwick. He became very fed up with answering children's questions and 'went on strike'. Jean Conteh happened to be staying with us then, too, and she gave him a big telling off!

We stayed with a much respected Rev. Leslie Wallace, Head of the Methodist Mission in an apartment in King Harman Road. There was a great feeling of deflation among us.

Trying to explain to Leslie about our efforts to set up links with possible visits involved, did not go down well. He poured very cold water over the whole business and questioned the amount of money which would be spent on travel. Would it not be better to provide educational scholarships etc.? We were left totally demolished, adding to our general depression.

Later we went to the Atlantic Club at Lumley and met Brian Starcken with some Canadian volunteers. Our muted state changed very quickly after they arrived. We were then taken to the Lighthouse restaurant, further round the coast, and we had dinner in what seemed like a magical venue. The food was great and included Armenian croquettes!. The tables looked out onto the twinkling lights across the sea.

We were joined by the architect who was responsible for designing the paramedical and other schools. He thought they were all inappropriate ?!

Eventually, Brian walked us to the nearby Bintumani hotel - so luxurious - it enraged me and Wyndham tried to calm me down. From there we went to the Sierra Casino where Brian won 50 Leones (2 to the £ in those days). My feelings and thoughts turned completely numb. On the way back we saw a sign that said

**“SIERRA LEONE - THE COUNTRY FOR EVERYONE”**

30th APRIL

During the rest of our stay, we had various meetings to follow up and try and come to some conclusions about our many encounters.

We went up to Fourah Bay university and met Cyril Fobay, a well known history professor. After he had listened to my stories, and hearing about my uncertainty about the whole purpose of the link, he said things were so hopeless there, it was hard to know where to begin. He thought the idea was a good one on the whole, but we should be careful to have good reasons for any journeys.

While waiting ,for a taxi driver at the university (situated on top of one of the Freetown hills) I was approached by a Bahai - of all things- and he tried to convert me!

Before coming out to Sierra Leone, our local Rotary clubs had sent greetings to any Rotary clubs in Sierra Leone. The only one I came across was in Freetown. So my next call was at the Paramount hotel where I was invited to join them for lunch.

I felt quite apprehensive but took the plunge and found they were half expecting me. I spoke for 10 minutes and they seemed quite receptive, and offered to help OWL get goods over to Sierra Leone and to Bo. I quite enjoyed myself and felt this would be a way to get into Rotary clubs at home.

The rest of the day , the trip continued to flag and it was really time to go home.

However next day - MAY 1st - we had a number of final meetings scheduled.

I started with Rev. Nelson Charles (Sierra Leonean), the President of the Methodist Conference. He had asked to see me and wanted to know all about the link. He was very positive, and refer-

ring to Leslie's reservations, he pointed out that Leslie had had years of observing people arriving in the country full of half-baked ideas. Nelson had spent 10 years in the UK and knew what strange notions people have. He thought exchanges of knowledge between our communities could be very important.

He warned us again about politicians and said we should use the umbrella of the Methodist church to protect ourselves....This helped to ease me back into a more positive mood.

That afternoon, Wyndham and I had been invited post the Rotary meeting to go to Choithram's Freetown office. We had a fascinating and rather bizarre interview. We walked into this predominantly red, plushly furnished, air-conditioned room which Wyndham described later to be like a "high class brothel". We were rapidly served drinks.

Mr. Rajwani who was the man I had met at Rotary, talked to us about OXFAM and Sierra Leone, and then asked about Serabu hospital and its needs. We described our perceptions of the needs of Serabu and of Bo hospital. While we were doing this, Mr. Rajwani was signing papers and talking to people and looking all over the place - quite disconcerting.

Behind me was another man at a desk with a visitor. After a while we were placed in front of the other man who turned out to be none other than the Mr. Choithram, Director and owner of the huge international supermarket chain with suppliers based at Wembley UK, and branches all over the world. The supermarkets are quite a contrast with the usual open markets etc. providing any commodity one fancies in air-conditioned splendour, but at an unaffordable price for many.... At that time, there was a branch in Bo. While trying to answer strange questions we watched this man, fascinated by his 1/3 inch diameter diamond ring and a heavy gold bracelet. His business was the only Indian one in a service usually provided by the Lebanese. It emerged that Mr. Choithram wanted to support the provision of medical needs for the hospitals and he offered to transport any items we could collect in the UK. I could hardly believe we were receiving such manna from heaven!<sup>15</sup> However Wyndham confirmed I was hearing OK. I then made an appointment to meet Mr. Rajwani in London the following Tuesday when he planned to be there.

Still in a daze, I then went to meet Dr. June Holst Roness. She had studied at Hull University and while there ogled the Mayor of Hull who was taken in by her charms and was persuaded to set up a twinning with Freetown. During the Mayor's visit to Freetown, she took him to stay on her island just off the coast! June had a mixed reputation having been the last known person to see the murdered bank manager Dr. Bangura?

She was very kind, polite and interested in what we were doing, but I felt uneasy visiting her, fearing it might jeopardise what we were doing in Bo. My comment after visiting her house was that I found the luxury (portable phones, luxury bathrooms) awful, as was the egomania which dominated the conversations.

MAY 2nd We left for England on after seeing Wyndham off to Senegal. We then faced the prospect of relating our adventures to the OWL members at home and trying to move forward into the next stage. Suffice to say, it took another 2 years of visits both ways before I could confidently say we had a link

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<sup>15</sup> For many years after that meeting, Choithram's became good friends even during the war enabling us to transport medicines and other goods in their under filled containers and helping with money transfers during the war, working with Bishop Patrick.. They dealt with all the paper work and delivered everything to Bo OWL in Bo..



## CHAPTER 4

### BUSY DAYS FOLLOWING THE FIRST VISIT TO BO

After the ground breaking visit to Bo in 1981, there was a surprisingly favourable response in the OWL committee. In Bo the people we had met seemed reasonably happy, and they formed a small committee to take the initiative forward.

The aims which had been agreed between us were 4 - fold:

1. to give a better, mutual understanding of the hopes, fears and problems of life in the two communities,
2. emphasis on contact with ordinary people in the home and workplace, where sufficient enthusiasm is shown, through churches, schools, businesses and clubs,
3. to increase the knowledge of the world and its interdependence in each community with a view to creating a more harmonious atmosphere when political, and economic changes take place,
4. all of this to be a means to enrich the lives of all of us involved.....

The first six months after our return we focused on the first 3 aims (seen as development education) and the actions in the UK were as follows:

- Public meeting to present the Bo visit experience
- A stall at the Leamington Festival (now known as the Peace Festival)
- A visit to Bo by a graduate student (Colin Mc Allister) in July 1981<sup>16</sup>
- Visits to schools to formalise the initial links
- Transport of drugs and books to Bo c/o Choithram's
- The arrival of Jean and Mussa Conteh in Reading and their first visit to Leamington to meet OWL members.

Then from October 1982, there was an even greater burst of activity.

- The Contehs met representatives from 3 rotary clubs,
- We mounted a Third World exhibition which was in the library for a month.
- We put together a WEA course on "Development in a Changing World"
- Some academics came over from the Centre of West African Studies at Birmingham University
- On a very snowy January day, Sr. Hilary attempted to travel to Leamington from London to address a medical group at Warwick Hospital. Unfortunately, the train had to turn back. Mussa and I were supposed to pick her up from Oxford station but we never got that far and ended up sleeping on the floor of a pub with a load of other stranded drivers just near Banbury.
- Kenilworth Sixth Form college staged a public meeting about the link in Kenilworth.

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<sup>16</sup> Colin wrote a diary which is on our website and I met up with him again for the first time 37 years later!

- Dr. Jenny Gibson visited us<sup>17</sup> and gave an address to over 30 members of the medical profession. While the Conteh's were in Reading they were joined by Momodu Koroma<sup>18</sup> (see note below) who was from Mamboma and was taking a year off his lecturing in Njala university to get a higher degree in Physics.
- Brian Starcken and Bob Crowther got a village link going between Birdingbury and Yakaji (near Gerihun). SEE BELOW
- Investigations were made to try and start up links between Towns women's guilds, and churches and eventually Bo and Leamington libraries linked.
- I had to write up evaluations of the progress of OWL to justify the OXFAM time I spent on its various activities.



One of my earlier submissions commented that

"There has been a definite increase in enthusiasm among OWL members they have met our Bo friends and have got to know them better. It is difficult to measure understanding, but some of the discussions at committee level have been intense and have raised many questions, e.g. some thought preparation for adults planning to visit Bo or Leamington was unnecessary. Others

thought it was essential, but the debate itself was quite illuminating. The questions raised at general meetings indicated a deeper awareness of life in Britain seen from a Bo perspective, and there was a keen desire to learn more....

Other positives were mainly around Albert's visit, when 11 schools supported events round his coming. There was a "Christmas morning" atmosphere when he distributed packages of letters and school work from their linking schools. He was overburdened with stuff to take back with him for Bo schools.

He must have spoken to about a thousand pupils, and still more complained they hadn't had a chance to speak to him.

The committee felt Albert presented positive images of life in Africa and the teachers were impressed with the maturity of some of the pupils observations. Myton School, said "we are all a bit muzzy about the Third World, - we hope we can learn more about it through the link.

Bob Crowther, a teacher from Milverton primary school and Ann Parker head of Alcester infants, were given permission by the County to visit their Bo partners on paid leave. This was quite an achievement because WCC was suffering from cuts even then.

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<sup>17</sup> Jenny died in August 2019, still very vigorous and dedicated to campaigning in her '80s.

<sup>18</sup>MOMODU KOROMA was a longstanding member of OWL and always made us welcome over the years when we visited Sierra Leone. When Mayor Bill Evans made his historic visit to renew the link, post war in 2001, Momodu who was then Minister of Presidential Affairs, introduced us to President Tejan Kabbah.

As well as progress in the schools in that first year, we managed to set up a medical group led by our Community Physician, Dr. Avery. (They were the ones who had invited Sr. Hilary to come and speak while she was on leave). The group worked with the local rotary clubs on various initiatives at the time.

We had good press coverage and Mussa and I were invited to speak for 15 minutes on "Woman's Hour" which later did a whole programme on the link sending out a reporter to Bo.

We had support from our local conservative MP and our European MEP who helped us on many occasions.

Contact with Warwick District Council started with a visit from Albert to the Chief Exec. and when the Chairman of WDC was installed, OWL was mentioned



After 12 months, OWL in Leamington was becoming well rooted in various parts of the community. At one of the civic events at Kenilworth castle, some business men were invited to meet Albert. They were quite impressed and the manager (Roy Sears) (*left in picture talking to Albert Lamin*) said he would like to set up some trade links with Bo.

In fact this never came to anything but he did give me the money for a fare to visit Sierra Leone again that year.

*And thus starts the account of my second - unexpected - visit to Bo.*

## CHAPTER FIVE

### RETURN TO BO - 23RD JUNE TO JULY 11TH, 1982

*Taken from my personal journal of the visit.*

I shall be forever indebted to Roy Sears of C&S international whose generous impulse enabled me to make this unexpected visit to Sierras Leone. It seemed quite timely as there were matters to discuss like communications, and clarification of our aims. It also was a great opportunity to really assess what Bo members felt about the link after 12 months?

"I was quite bemused at the thought of what was I going to do once in Sierra Leone? My last trip was planned months in advance, and had built in securities like the guidance of Wyndham James and the support of Muriel. This trip is very different and I feel a slight fraud. Will it justify the time away from family and work? Only time will tell. On the plane I felt irritated at the trap-pings most (all) of the returning Africans had with them and the pomposity of the first class passengers. *(I was into a violently anti materialistic phase of thinking at that time).*

Travelling from Lungi to the Methodist HQ, I noticed how it looked so green compared with the Gambia where I had stopped over. I also thought everything looked 'normal', whereas last time, I thought that making a living along those roads, seemed desperate. I stayed in a house let to me for a couple of nights by people I cannot remember now. I went from there into Freetown that night and felt quite safe.

24th JUNE

I went to various addresses in Freetown to pass on messages and visit Mr. Rajwani at Choi-thrams. As he was not around, I took myself to the Freetown Rotarian's meeting place. I introduced myself to the manager of BP and a man involved in the Mano River union and before I knew it I was invited to lunch!. Asked to say a few words about OWL, I found the reaction half-heartedly interested. Mike Chadwick (British Council) who had been quite dismissive of our ideas last year, was asked to give a vote of thanks! I was invited by a Lebanese Rotarian, Farid Anthony, to join him for a drink that evening.

Later with the help of Caleb Edwin's<sup>19</sup> driver, I went to take pictures in Kissy Road in which at that time I found it hard to take in the chaos. During our time together we discussed the Falkland war and how to manage on a wage of Le70 per month when a bag of rice cost Le70?

He also told me about his 6 year old daughter who had an injection when she was a baby. This caused her to lose the use of her legs and feet. Something had gone horribly wrong. He said it would cost Le30 to have a consultation about it, which he could not afford.

Being my naive, do gooding self, I suggested that I ask Sr. Hilary to let the child attend Serabu hospital for treatment when the annual visit of surgeons from Europe took place. And I said I would raise money for that to happen...and I did. Eventually, when all was set, I discovered that the child's family had raised money themselves and taken her to a local doctor... It is so easy

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<sup>19</sup> Caleb was Ken Hall's (OWL founder) friend who had helped us out on the first visit.

to interpret Sierra Leonean needs and capacity through our Western experiences, and we really do have to stop and think before jumping into unknown waters.

At least, this time, Freetown was a place where I could walk anywhere fearlessly and with confidence.



KISSY ROAD FREETOWN

After the Kissy Road experience, I was taken by Farid Anthony - a lawyer, and author of "Sawpit Boy"<sup>20</sup>, to visit the Aqua Club. What a contrasting experience. The clientele were mainly Europeans and Lebanese. They were drinking freely and discussing everything from corrupt happenings in the government to how does one cook half a hog (just shot that day by one of the punters who had been out hunting). They also talked with what seemed like genuine concern about the state of the hospitals and the lives of the very poor. I was caught between feeling guilty, and enjoying myself.

Next day (25th June), a VSO worker and someone from the British Council gave me a lift to Njala University, with my luggage. I was supposed to meet with one of the Conteh's contacts, but having had no breakfast, I did not feel like hanging around and ended up taking a taxi to Taiama Junction. It had 8 people plus luggage in it and was very 'intimate'. There was no taxi from there to Bo, so in the immense heat, I boarded a dormobile with 30 people in it. I was prised into a seat with a child's knee in my back and a chicken pecking at me...!after the initial horror, I quite enjoyed being one with the Sierra Leoneans, and not travelling in European splendour...

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<sup>20</sup> A History of the arrival of the Lebanese in Freetown.

As I alighted in Bo, I heard a shout and it was Albert Lamin. He took me to meet the Provincial Secretary, and then he brought me up to date with what had happened since his visit to Leamington. He seemed sad and had had a lot of problems with his school (CKC) principle since his visit. He had had a letter from Peter Muckersie at Kenilworth 6th Form college, saying they would like to help CKC. Albert put this letter on the notice boarding the teachers all wrote to England saying what they needed. Albert was very embarrassed trying to tell them that our schools were government owned and therefore could not send supplies and goods to Sierra Leone. One teacher then accused him of misrepresenting CKC in England and threw out her hand towards him, and he pushed it away. After complaints and disagreements, Albert finally lost his job. An example of what harm the link could do.

Once established in Bo, the days were quite varied. I was given a room in the lodgings of Tony Bullard<sup>21</sup>, who was working for VSO with the Tikonko Agricultural Extension Centre (TAEC).

The link was now over a year old. We had had a lot of advice and support from the Contehs who were still in England. Alcester school and Milverton primary in Leamington were in touch with their link schools and a visit between teachers was scheduled. By now there were people in Bo whom I had met before and who had some idea about One World Link (OWL) and what we were trying to do. Roy Sears had paid for me to come out to look for business opportunities for him. None of that worked and I think he went bust in the months after I returned.

I started with a visit to the Methodist junior school (linked with Bob Crowther's school, Milverton primary - *Bob seen below when he visited*).




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<sup>21</sup>Tony later worked on overseas programmes for OXFAM. Some years ago he was kidnapped and killed in the Himalayas.

I was asked to explain life in England to the children, some of whom had not travelled even as far as Freetown. There was no chalk, so I could not write the name of their link school on the blackboard, so it was all quite difficult. However, the teachers were quite keen and I hoped that ongoing correspondence with the Milverton children would help each school to understand each other. Always the optimist. However, I remember a parent at our end getting very upset because her child was asked to send a football to Bo and to help the Bo child to get to study in Leamington....this really puzzled me as to how we could explain how to deal with such issues....

From here I was entertained by the Bo scouts with tea and biscuits and they told me about their camping adventures using 'tents' made from local materials. I was very impressed by them and by the Girl Guides who organised a lunch party for me. (Later we had a visit of Dale St. Scouts to Bo).

That evening Fr. Coffey gave me a meal and we sat on the balcony at the Catholic Mission in Gerihun, admiring the romantic African night. Fr. Coffey talked about various Sierra Leonean traditions and events he had witnessed. I thought I was learning a lot from him, but like many of the missionaries I met, there was a touch of negativity and racism in the stories.

What I did not notice, was that while I sat there, the mosquitoes were eating my feet and legs. - I could hardly walk the next day...

With suggestions from Jean and Mussa Conteh, as to whom I should see, and following up contacts we had made during the first visit, I began to feel despite my initial doubts, that there was far more depth to this visit.

I revisited Mrs. Kamara at Queen of the Rosary school. She had great ideas about extramural training of Bundu girls to adapt to their traditional society, but also to Western ways. Later, Sister Hilary offered to take me on a tour of health units which she wanted to improve.

There were some outstanding moments, but the most moving time was my visit with Mussa's nephew, Umaru, to their home village, Golahun Vaama. Mussa had made a tape recording to be passed to his family in the village. Umaru took me on my first long ride on a poda truck.

Once more, intimately squashed without a square centimetre of space available between me and the other 26 passengers, I was bouncing over 18 miles of laterite road from Blama to the village.

Life here was so simple. There may have been the odd radio around, but otherwise for men it consisted of a routine of working hard on one's farm, and then eating and retiring early with one of one's wives, formed the basic pattern. For the women it was harder work, farming, bearing and caring for children, and providing meals.

Sadly that morning, one of Mussa's sisters had given birth to a stillborn child, and 2 other children had died since he left for the UK. I felt totally helpless at the thought of how could this woman have been helped if she had haemorrhaged or had some other complication. I was shown a small glass bottle of pills, red, yellow and black, obtained from a dispenser 18 miles away, and was asked if they were alright? I had no idea. (*Later Sr. Hilary told me some villagers are as much as 120 miles away from medical attention...*) There was no rice in the village, only

cassava (starvation rations). However, I was made very welcome, and they were full of smiles despite their worries.



Fr. Coffey took me on another village visit, to catch up with the head teacher of the primary school at Mamboma, Mr. Simeon Moseray. John Archer and I visited him too, during John's introductory visit to Sierra Leone many years later.





When the picture of the school was taken (*above*) the original school had had a wall blown down. The school resumed (2 classes) in the village meeting place (*bari*) and the children were squashed into it. I saw 2 classes functioning back to back in one of them...Both here and at other schools I wondered at the patience of teachers who can successfully teach anything under these conditions, sometimes sharing 8 books between 56 pupils. At Mamboma, the children had pencils and paper sent from their link school in Alcester.



The greatest difference between this visit and my first one, was that last year, although made welcome - I was a stranger with a new idea. This time I was treated like a friend who was part of a scheme being accepted by all of us. I was quite amazed at some of the enthusiasm. The climax of all this was the Bo OWL committee meeting attended by 15 Sierra Leoneans. They also brought food and drink and the evening was very lively. The meeting agreed to receive 2 of our teachers (Bob Crowther from Milverton Combined and Ann Parker from Alcester infants), next term, and they hoped to stage an exhibition about the link and Warwick District in their library. They also planned to build up a membership which would attend meetings at the Methodist community centre - addressed by themselves or visitors on given themes.

*(2020 Of all these plans, the teachers' visit was all that happened and we still aspire to adult education meetings in the centre! Question of resources for this still arises although Maada Fobay did his best.)*

One evening, Dr. Jenny Gibson, of Bo hospital, sat in her elegant summer dress, with her hair in rollers and her legs in heavy black boots (defence against mosquitos) .She was writing this limerick:

"A lucky old doctor in Bo  
Has friends we would all like to know.  
They send her drugs from afar,  
via Leamington Spa,  
and shower her work with dough"!!!

Later this was her response to a question from the Leamington medical group. Her comment was "I wouldn't be here would I if I weren't mad!"

It is impossible to relate all the incidents which moved me so much, I met old friends, and made new ones like Fr. Koroma with such a twinkle in his eye, the Bob Moran family in Tikonko, and

various teachers who worked harder than seemed possible, and Hannibal Kamara who taught me so much about weaving...and so many more..

Many members of the Bo OWL committee sought me out to discuss more arrangements and to confirm their interest. *"Mrs. Kamara (Head of Queen of the Rosary School), who has enthusiastically steered the committee through its first year, suggested there should be term long teacher exchanges. She successfully dismissed my doubts about the link."*

When Mr. Songor Williams (head of Bo hospital) turned to Sr. Hilary as we toured the health facilities in 2 towns, and discuss their lack of ketamine for anaesthesia Bo hospital, and then turned to me and said "can Leamington help" - I felt the link was really working. Less than a week after my return, a local pharmacist bumped into me in Sainsbury's and said "I have got some ketamine for Bo"....

There are many problems in Sierra Leone - rice - costing as much as a month's salary, corruption at the highest levels, dishonesty, and a badly run economy which is nearly bankrupt, frustration that elections have no effect in bringing change.....Our link can do nothing about this but as Fr. Coffey said "the fact that Warwick District takes the trouble to come here and want to know us, is a great comfort." Mr. Boya, vice principal of St. Andrew's secondary school said that only through people at our level, working together, would effective change in the world take place.

There is still a strong perception of life in England being a panacea, and that organisation by the British works! Like our society many Sierra Leonean perceptions are informed by the media and it will only be by direct contacts that a truer picture of life at each end might emerge....

New linking possibilities discussed on this visit were between Njala and Warwick universities and maybe mutual trading, as well as strengthening the new linkages like with Leamington library. They did not all happen but those that did have grown to nearly 40 years of enhanced life experiences for all involved. The librarian in Leamington library said he was proud that we were one of the first local libraries with an African partner.

## CONCLUSION

I strongly recommend that everyone involved with the link continues confidently, but with an annual review. I look forward to seeing more people from Warwick District visit Bo to form their own conclusions. And it is important that Bo friends come over here...I am aiming to obtain tickets for up to 3 visits from Bo in the next 2 years (*and we did!*).

The sincerity, the laughter, the politeness and the warmth all the friends in Bo and Freetown remains with me - my thanks to them all for the hospitality, gifts, lifts, accommodation and the privilege of meeting them....

Jane Knight - July 1982

## CHAPTER SIX

### RETURN TO BO 6th MAY TO 3rd JUNE, 1983

OXFAM sent me out on this trip to somehow evaluate the significance of the link and I was accompanied by Sheilagh Holmes (*below*), my secretary. By this time Mussa Conteh had left the UK and his family, to take up his post as Head of the Tikonko Agricultural Extension Centre (funded by various NGOs).



We were quite appalled at the airport when queuing and holding our plastic container of insulin for the hospital in Bo, to see on a trolley, a huge TV set and video machine being sent out to a Major? in Freetown. Such a contrast in concerns and expectations.

Arrived at 9pm and I was excited to feel the hothouse atmosphere and to 'smell' Africa as we left the plane.

This was my 3rd visit to Sierra Leone. Last time all seemed quite familiar, but still exciting. This time I felt as though I had never been away and the last 11 months since I left hardly existed. It felt quite odd. The thought of sitting on a beach and filling time was really off-putting and it was with great relief that I finally found myself sitting in the cab of a big lorry belonging to the attorney general! on the road to Bo. Again all familiar, but welcome sights. The bright red flowering Flamboyant trees were a special joy.



Such excitement arriving at Coker's bar where Bob Moran and another friend I last saw in Reading, were partaking of the plentiful supplies of Star beer. Jenny Gibson passed by and we were able to hand over the supply of insulin we had brought for her.

In addition to investigating the effect of One World Link on Bo after its 2 years of existence, I had to sort out the halt in shipping our supplies from UK to Bo because of a new Sierra Leonean import law. I also hoped to obtain more free airline tickets for Bo visitors to Warwick District. A bonus on this trip was the depth of insight into Sierra Leonean life which I gained from living in Tikonko (7 miles from Bo) for 4 weeks in a Sierra Leonean home (at Mussa Conteh's house).

The day after I arrived in Tikonko, I woke at 5am and watched the dawn gradually emerge behind the palm trees straight in front of me. It was so lovely and all the sounds of insects, birds, cockerels and quiet chatter rising slowly from the street outside were like heaven to me....



I was taken to watch a broken culvert bridge made from palm tree trunks, being repaired. It was a huge task to do by hand but I found it interesting to watch having been given a chair in the shade to sit on.



The quiet, friendly and relaxed atmosphere living in Mussa's home in the village with his mother and 2 nephews was quite a contrast with my previous experiences and staying with Europeans. There was no electricity and water came from a well. The bath was a bucket and the toilet a box latrine.

Except for coffee (which was Sierra Leonean), soap and radio batteries, we did not need to buy anything from supermarkets. Food - rice, fish vegetable sauces, mangoes and pineapples - all came from Tikonko. It was a simple lifestyle, completely satisfying and such a contrast even with the people down the road in Bo and Freetown. In the latter, they regularly buy all sorts of imported goods from supermarkets at high prices to themselves, and sourced from scarce Sierra Leonean foreign exchange. It was even more of a contrast with my own shopping habits at home, so often including mass produced packaged goods.

Particularly significant about my stay in Tikonko, was the way that for a short time I was part of the community, known to most of the children because I had visited their school (linked with Brookhurst). Thus I was able just to feel a little of what life is like in a 3rd world community.

Mussa Conteh was a fund of information explaining aspects of Sierra Leonean life which had puzzled me. Expatriates had often told me that Sierra Leoneans were work shy and they doubted their honesty - I got none of these impressions. Observing Mussa and his colleagues

at the TAEC<sup>22</sup>, and spending a lot of time with his health team, extension officer and workshop team (based at the Bo railway sidings), it was clear that everyone was very hard working. If anything, it was the European volunteers who sat around doing nothing.

Whenever I quoted comments from Europeans, Mussa and another significant Sierra Leonean friend - Dr. Nuli Lemoh (paediatrician at Bo government hospital)<sup>23</sup> - had very reasonable explanations for all sorts of puzzling behaviours. For example, my tendency to be critical of any material extravagancies in developing communities was questioned. Nuli suggested that individuals had the right to be different and to have extravagant lifestyles. It was their choice.....

Another example was when I was walking through Bo one Saturday afternoon, there were crowds of young people following a rather plasticky devil, quite different from what I had seen in villages and the crowds seem dazed. I found this a bit frightening and very foreign to my English eyes. Mussa explained that because the young men were born in Bo and had no village roots, they had not been initiated in the usual way, and they made up their own way out societies and devils and took drugs. He compared them with our punks and other rebellious youth groups. It all seemed to fit into place then.

I listened to conversations between the Tikonko staff about the difficulty of convincing local farmers that changing farming practices was to their advantage and shared their triumph when some farmers asked for help and made their own suggestions about using their new rice swamps to maximum benefits. I couldn't help thinking that changing the way of life of a small farmer is no different from trying to convince people in England to change their lives and to be less materialistic and less individualistic, for their own and everyone's benefit. Humans everywhere resist change.



MUSSA TALKING TO FARMERS DURING HIS VILLAGE TOUR

<sup>22</sup> Tikonko Agricultural Extension Centre where Mussa was now the Coordinator.

<sup>23</sup> Nuli and his Australian wife, Margaret eventually went to live in Australia with their family but Nuli and she eventually raised interest and money in Australia to build and operate the Bo Children's hospital which is now a close partners with OWL. Margaret addressed the OWL AGM in Leamington in 2017.

I found it quite amazing how many people dropped in to the house without any notice and at all times of the day, whether early in the morning, or when we were eating in the evening. The greetings were friendly and they made themselves at home - not a common occurrence in Britain! Very often these people were coming to Mussa for advice and help about work or money. Or they were just making a social visit. Mussa said he could do with a hardship fund as he found it hard to say "I cannot do anything about it".

Another event that fed this constant questioning when trying to work out cultural differences, occurred when I was stopped in Bo by a young man who somehow knew my name. He said he had leprosy but had no money, and needed 6 Leones in order to get treatment. When I saw the half inch hole in the sole of his foot, full of puss, how could I say no?

There were many discussions and arguments whether the individual's right to amass possessions when other people were suffering, or about children's upbringing, - liberal in Britain compared with the strictness in Sierra Leone. The rigid rules in Sierra Leone which restrict a child's questioning of his/her elders, and ability to develop ideas also produce a more polite and kindly person - which is better?

Should there be tractors to enable growing more food for the town's people - many of whom are unemployed and living off their working brothers and sisters, or should the unemployed roll up their sleeves and be made to grow their own food back in the villages?

My strongest impression was that life in Sierra Leone was more relaxed, congenial, happy and caring than at home. Nobody gets hang-ups about inessential details and moaning is not the order of the day. When a good young friend (22 years old) heard he had a job after a year's search and then had the offer withdrawn on the day he was due to start, leaving him to continue doing house jobs with no independence, what did he do? He had a drink and returned to his family and they all joked and laughed until he seemed to have laughed all the misery out of his system. He then continued to be a contented member of the family hiding any bitterness that he must have felt...

When I addressed the Bo OWL members before we left, I urged them to have more confidence in themselves and not to look to us for leadership, because their culture and way of life had so much to teach us. Some of them seemed surprised and pleased that Europeans might want to learn from them.

Some Sierra Leoneans knew so little about us. I was told that there were rumours among those who had had no opportunity to know white people that our new born babies could talk as soon as they were born....

All these questions kept coming up as I went around Bo meeting old friends and new, and having endless debates about the value of linking. Mussa and others introduced me to a cross section of people. One of the most significant was Johannes Mallah. Mussa took me to his house where he seemed to have an endless supply of Star beer, and Johannes was very positive about the linking idea. That was when I met his 2 sons, one of whom (Johannes Junior)<sup>24</sup> is currently a close friend of OWL in Warwick District, as he lives in Birmingham.

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<sup>24</sup> Edward his younger brother, died suddenly last year which was a shock to all. While Johannes Junior was in Bo for the funeral, he was the last from our end to see Maada Fobay, our late Chairman in Bo, who died shortly after Junior left.



JOHANNES MALLAH

In 1984 Johannes<sup>25</sup> senior came to study for a year in Reading and he worked with me and others on advancing linking in the UK for a few years before he returned to Sierra Leone.

#### ONE WORLD LINK IN BO

At the 2 Bo OWL committee meetings which took place, while we were there, the attendance was good and the link seemed at last to be a going concern in Bo. Various questions arose. They were worried about how to select any visitors from Bo to Leamington, because a free trip to the UK was something a lot of people wanted to do. Some even suggested we should select visitors.

Communications were a problem too for example, Mrs. Tarawally who ran the Girl Guides' group had been waiting to have replies to the letters they had sent to guides in Warwick District who might be interested, but I had had no responses to carry with me. Mrs. T was so disappointed and I felt really bad. Like us they were anxious about how to increase their membership, especially as compared with us who had an office base. They had few resources and volunteering is hard when time is precious for taking care of daily needs. They wanted help in putting up exhibitions, to set up a resource centre and the means to coordinate existing activities.

It was so impressive that with an acute shortage of petrol, reflected in the long and sometimes overnight queues at petrol stations, OWL members had to walk long distances in the heat after school to attend an OWL meeting. But they came and were very keen to see the link advance.

They appreciate the material goods send via Choithram's, but to them there was more value in the information they can get from the friendships which are building up. They agreed that it is important to understand each other's culture. This was stressed over and over again. Every time I mentioned the sort of information we have about global issues, the abuses by multinational companies. e.g. selling high tar cigarettes Third World countries, selling 245T pesticides freely,

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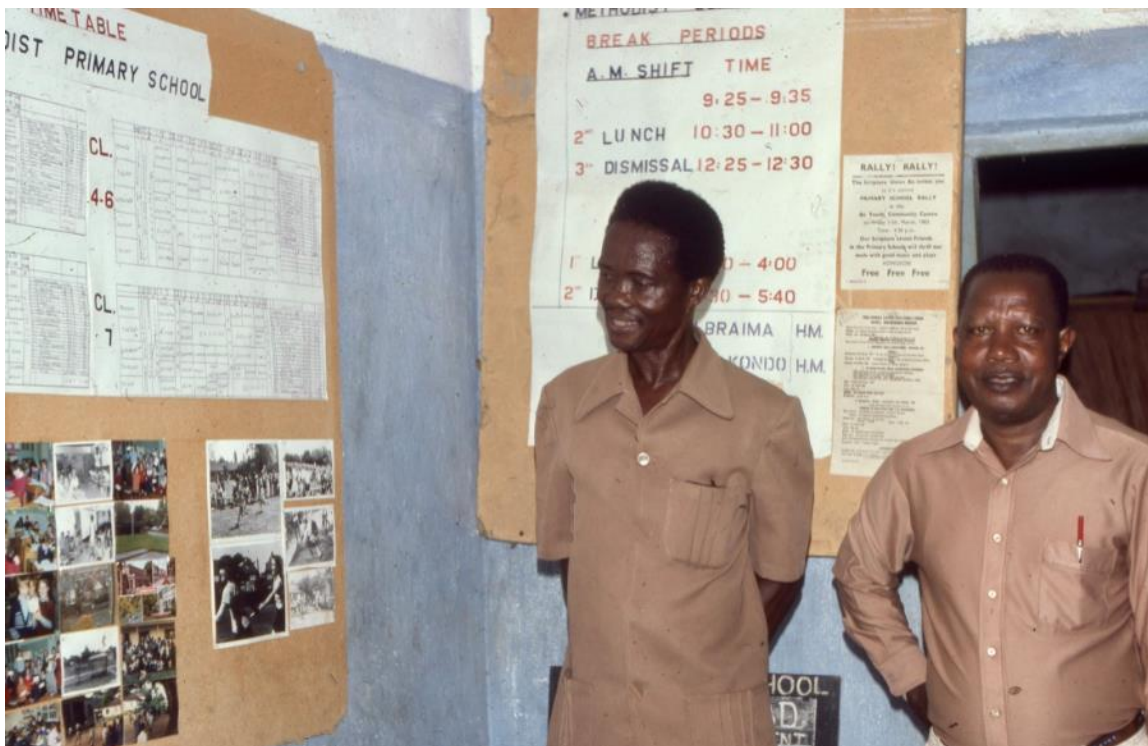
<sup>25</sup> see Johannes' reflection on linking in 1989 in Appendix B

when they are known at home to be dangerous, our Bo friends said they knew nothing about these things.

Many people I met think that England has a certain perfection because it is developed, but they really know nothing about our daily lives, the cost of living, and the loneliness that many people experience. On the whole it was easier to raise interest and commitment to the link idea in Bo than it was in Warwick District. One group of women (the Bo Hospital League of Friends) were particularly concerned about some correspondence they had had from here which showed the loneliness of life for a lot of old people whose families had moved away, and who often rely on pets for company. This is unheard of in Sierra Leone.

## SCHOOLS

The schools which had had actual exchanges were particularly strong with their link. At the Methodist school in Bo, the notice board was covered with pictures of their children and the



Link display at Bo Methodist school with Mr. Kondo - head teacher on the right. He came to Leamington later.



children at Milverton combined school. Simeon Moseray, headteacher at Mamboma school, received an overwhelming welcome at Alcester infants school as did Ann Parker last October in Mamboma. Even without personal exchanges, there are many happy personal relationships between teachers from the various schools.



Often in UK and In Sierra Leone people do not agree with the conventional way of thinking, but there was a sense of solidarity building up between the two ends of the link which is an important benefit for us all.

One teacher commented "We in the Third World, pray that the Anti Nuclear Campaigners will succeed in their efforts because a third world war will lead to nothing less than total global destruction. We pray that the voice of reason will prevail.." This was one form of solidarity. Another example which I found very moving was an account of a family in Bo who said they had had a Mass said for the wife of their link family who was seriously ill.

### COMMENTS ON LINKING

Although we took out a pile of questionnaires to try and evaluate the link at the Bo end, I found the insights from conversations during our time there, were more revealing. Filling in forms which is common practice here, was not common habit in Bo. People prefer talking face to face.

Dr. Nuli Lemoh described the link as a relationship comparable with marriage, and Fr. Veal described it as a means for enrichment of human beings. Such intangibles cannot be easily evaluated, but there is no doubt that OWL interactions and communications so far have brought much happiness to most of us in Bo and Warwick Districts. What is more, many seeds have been sewn in the minds of hundreds of children in both communities and hopefully these will contribute to their wider perception of the world when they reach adulthood.

One practical benefit for the children in Bo sitting for the Common Entrance exam, was their ability to respond to the question "Write a letter to a pen friend in the USA describing your life in Africa". Well of course the link children had had plenty of practice at this and their teachers were delighted. It also said that the link provided opportunity for practical use of their English learnt at school but not used at home.



Of course, there were also tales of disappointments. Hannibal Kamara (*left next to Albert Lamin, 3rd right*), the weaver, and the scouts and guides had had no success in establishing sustainable links. I found it hard to explain how difficult it can be to raise interest in our initiative in the UK. There have also been disappointments in Leamington when letters have gone unanswered or recipients in Leamington have been asked for money and opportunities to study

in the UK. Such requests were very different from our concept of friendship. It was quite difficult to advise our local recipients on how to respond...

Nevertheless, the general conclusion re. the link was positive. While we were in Bo, a new health group was started in Bo hospital, which

REV. BRIAN STARKEN WITH REV.  
FABIAN AT TRINITY SCHOOL -  
PART OF A LONGSTANDING  
CATHOLIC LINK.



brought theatre nurses together for some years. There were requests for partners in football, sewing clubs, a teaching college, church and adult literacy. For a while we had good linkage between Fr. Koroma and the Leamington Council of Churches which led to an on going Catholic church relationship.

Another breakthrough was that some Sierra Leoneans thought they could provide home visits for visitors from Warwick District. Certainly from my experience over the years, this is the best possible way to build up lifelong friendships and learning.

### CONCLUSION

Sierra Leone's economy is in a critical state, foreign exchange is scarce, petrol is so difficult to obtain that no real planning is possible, and this is demoralising for the grass roots development workers. Despite all this, they keep going and the link was growing.

The Minister of Finance gave his blessing to us by making it possible through Choithram's for us to continue sending supplies, and Sierra Leone Airways (long gone) gave us a free air ticket from Freetown.

It is up to us in Warwick District to keep this link alive and well for many years to come for all our sakes. As one headteacher said

**"LONG LIVE ONE WORLD LINK"!**



1983 VISIT FROM BO TEACHERS - MRS. AWADA, JOSEPH COOPER AND TOM SMITH (BO CHAIR WITH MAYOR OF LEAMINGTON) AND JOHN HOLLIDAY (CHAIR OF WDC OWL).

## **APPENDIX A**

### **SHEILAGH Holmes report of her impressions on first visiting Sierra Leone in June 1983.**

REPORT OF A VISIT TO SIERRA LEONE 6th MAY-4th JUNE 1983 BY SHEILAGH HOLMES.

I went to Sierra Leone as the Secretary of the One World Link, to learn about the country and meet people involved in the Link there, so that I could work more effectively for the Link here in Warwick District. This was the first time I had travelled outside Europe, but I was well prepared by 2 and a 1/2 years of involvement with the Third World Information Centre. Since joining OWL, I had read and learnt a lot about Sierra Leone, seen hundreds of pictures, and talked to people who lived or worked there, so to some extent I knew what to expect, but inevitably there were some surprises.

#### **FREETOWN AND FIRST IMPRESSIONS**

The first thing which struck me as I stepped off the plane late on Friday night was a wave of very warm, wet air which I could hardly breathe, and then the warm smell of woodsmoke and vegetable matter which is omnipresent in Sierra Leone.

The next morning I went to look for Lansana Chan's house. It was a long walk through side streets in the centre of town, and I felt extremely conspicuous as the only white person. It would have been intolerable if the stares I received hadn't instantly melted into smiles and greetings ("pumwe buua"). I was stunned by the friendliness of people. They wanted to know my name, where I came from, where I was going, and offered to show me the way. This openness was something I'd always missed in England, and it made me feel very relaxed and 'at home'.

I know that some country-dwellers in Europe still act like this, but here it was the norm. I wondered to what extent I was being given special treatment as a white person, possibly wealthy, but in fact, I think this hospitality is extended to all strangers and I was simply more obviously a stranger than most. An example of people's affectionate and demonstrative nature appeared even in the chilly air-conditioned 'London-style' offices of the British High Commission, where the smart male receptionist (a Sierra Leonean) walked round the room with a dejected, poor-looking man, holding his hand and patting it reassuringly, I imagined with distaste the comments this would receive in England. Even in places (eg, Immigration Office) where I was warned that difficulties would be made and bribes expected, I found that people responded happily if I was persistently friendly.

Of the few European expatriates I met, most seemed not to appreciate this side of life, and lived and worked well away from the average Sierra Leoneans. It was an exhausting walk up to the hideous blue British Council building, situated 'for the view' in a spot which only people with vehicles could reach with ease, and full of offices cold as iceboxes. I had soon acclimatised, and the occasionally excessive heat, like the mosquito bites, seemed a small price to pay for being there.

There were far fewer beggars than I'd expected, in Freetown and Bo. They were mainly the very old or disabled, and were not unpleasant. Even in Kroo Bay, the poorest part of Freetown, people were cheerful and friendly, though living with the very minimum of facilities. I was surprised by my lack of shock or horror at these conditions - I merely felt that the problems here were different from our own, not worse. They have so much to build up - clean water, good sanitation, health facilities - a comparatively straightforward process if only (an enormous 'if') the country's resources were directed that way, whereas we (in my opinion) have so much to pull down and redesign.

Some things were just the same. I had as much difficulty explaining to the market women on the Krootown Rd why I wasn't married and didn't want to be, as I did to the Russian Consul (another unhappy expatriate whom I met on the beach) or to many people in England.

My favourite hours were spent on the balcony of a friend's house in the evening, watching and greeting; tired people coming home from market, or high-spirited people going out on the town seeing the oil lamps on all the little roadside stalls start to glimmer as the sky turned from red to black and the stars appeared. I had begun to understand some Krio - a marvellously rich, flexible, and intimate language, equally suitable for market traders or lovers.

My last moments in Freetown before departing for Bo, were magical. At dawn, I stood on a hill listening to the sounds of the city - the calls to prayer from the mosques and the music of Bob Marley drifted up to me in a strange and piquant mixture. I was sorry to leave but excited at the prospect of at last visiting the interior.

#### UP-COUNTRY TO BO

Exchanging Freetown for Bo was like leaving London for Leamington Spa - the small town seemed very quiet and rural after the big city. People were just as friendly and open - I had expected them to be more shy and reserved. It was on the journey up-country that I began to realise that despite the apparent differences, the essential 'feel' of many situations was the same here or there, for example, driving through the countryside, having nothing to do on a Sunday afternoon, or continually meeting people you know on the street, were the same in Bo as in Leamington.

Within a few minutes of my arrival I had the delight of seeing Mussa Conteh again. I was to stay on the 'Reservation' - the old colonial quarter now used by government employees - isolated houses scattered over a large area; lonely, with a very long walk into town for people without vehicles. I had quite a busy timetable of visits for the next three weeks, starting the next day with a 'Field Day' at an important village nearby. It was just like any village fete, with an agricultural bias; there were displays of embroidery and schoolwork, colourful dancing devils taking the place of Morris-men; I had my first Sierra Leonean snack - sweet potato and pepper sauce (delicious), tried to speak Mende and met some very nice people.

I spent the next 3 days with Father Koroma, a dedicated Sierra Leonean priest who took me to a few of the villages in his huge and remote parish in a hilly area where the roads are bad or non-existent. The services I attended were conducted in Mende, and the music was played on traditional instruments.

I had a further taste of village life when I stayed in Kponima, a small community near Mamboma, with about 350 people. Here I was greeted by the chiefs - the leaders of different ethnic groups

in the community, and the Paramount Chief of the area came to see me. At first I was irritated by all this attention as I had wanted to stay in the background (!), but I realised that this was their way of doing things and I should submit to it - they wanted to know who the stranger was and why she was there. It was interesting too, to hear the rhetorical style (very sophisticated) of their speeches - I had a struggle to follow it, let alone reply in an appropriate manner! Their gifts were generous - a chicken, rice, money for the sauce, gara cloth, country cloth of cotton picked, spun, woven and dyed in the village. There I met Pa Lahai, the Mende chief, a very lively character who took a great interest in what I told him about England. We spent a peaceful evening shelling groundnuts on the porch by lamplight, while the children danced to music on the radio, until a heavy storm forced us inside. Then we worked out how an average weekly income would be spent in our two countries. I was surprised that people often don't pay rent - they help their landlord instead, with food, work on his farm, and other favours. They were amazed at the cost of travel in England when I told them that the train fare to London was beyond my means and that I hitch everywhere. I spent the morning watching my host, the teacher, at work in the village school, and then, sadly, I had to leave. I wish I could have stayed much longer to see daily working life in detail, on the farms or small-scale mining operations. I had only caught a tantalising glimpse of the heart of S.Leonean life.

I spent 3 nights in Tikonko with Bob Moran's family and joined the infant classes at the local school for a morning to learn some Mende. Then I visited Njala University, about 30 miles from Bo. It is very small - 500 or so students, quite a few from other African countries.. Many of the courses seemed appropriate to the country's needs - agricultural engineering and extension work, and Home Economics based firmly in the home; I watched students in this department learning about child nutrition, experimenting with the range of foods available in the area, and making gara cloth. Another interesting visit was to Serabu hospital where very good work in both treatment and prevention of health problems is being done. They have set up a network of health committees in villages throughout the area, and train nurses and health visitors. I was shown round the hospital by Sister Antoinette who miraculously seemed to have time to take an interest in everyone as well as working extremely hard. The wards are small and comfortable, and instead of T.V. rooms, the patients and their families can relax in bars, built overlooking the town's main street so that there is always something to look at or talk about.

My transport to most of these places, and within Bo and Freetown, was by taxi, long-distance taxi or poda-poda. The taxis were fun - often crowded, noisy with music and conversation, and skilfully driven. Most people don't own a car themselves - taxis are everywhere, and a bit cheaper than they are in England. They were very cheap for me and made a pleasant change from trudging everywhere on foot as I do at home. Poda-podas are like large-scale taxis but cheaper, used by people going to market with their produce. 30 people crammed into the back of a Mazda van means passengers can't avoid being close to one another and there was often a feeling, of camaraderie - on one occasion someone produced a bag of mangoes which we all shared.

Some of the roads are surfaced, some are just dirt tracks, and all are full of potholes, ruts and stones. Obviously, some improvement and regular repairs are necessary, but they still compared favourably in my mind with the unrelieved tarmac, concrete and metal of Coventry bypass, or choking on petrol fumes as I walk to work. So far in Sierra Leone, the balance seems to have been kept between natural and man-made. It could be seen in household goods too:- traditionally crafted items - a straw broom, sponge or basket live side by side with plastic cups and sandals, and stereo cassette recorders. It surprised me that a friend valued a factory-made,

mass-produced bowl (30p from Woolworths here, about £4 there) for its standardisation, and being 'not hand-made'.

My impressions of the work of the link in Bo were twofold. On the one hand, few people seemed aware of it, there had been no widespread publicity, few events, and I felt that the committee were over-cautious about involving new people. However, one has to accept that their way of running the link is different. Certainly, within the link, a firm basis does seem to be forming, and the open meeting was well attended, with a general air of enthusiasm - newcomers seemed to enjoy it too. Many of the individuals involved have a very clear vision of the aims and objectives of OWL, and new ideas to contribute. I had to revise my views of the 'aid' side of the link. Although I still think it takes too important a place, it is definitely a useful and tangible benefit, especially to some of the village schools.

I was impressed throughout my visit by evidence of people rising above their immediate problems - the imaginative teaching in classrooms uncluttered with sophisticated aids (but still decorated with scraps of fine artwork), or the dedication of the football team practising on a rain-soaked pitch. As I watched a friend, a DJ in a local disco, struggling with broken and substandard equipment, I was amazed at his efficiency and resourcefulness in being able to put on such a professional show. I met so many talented artists who had no outlet for their skills within the structure of the country - materials are prohibitively expensive or unobtainable, and job opportunities simply do not exist. It is a frustrating situation and a real problem which forces people to pervert or divert their talent into other channels.

The air of casualness and spontaneity which pervades every aspect of life in Sierra Leone is most striking. It is combined with a remarkable tolerance (apathy?) towards problems. Like everywhere else, the muddle of everyday life goes on - the petrol shortage never becomes a desperate crisis. The resultant 'room to manoeuvre', as a friend described it, is obviously very open to abuse. Many people bribe their way to success, perhaps to the disadvantage of more deserving cases with insufficient funds to do the same. Corruption of this sort seems most rife among the police and others in 'positions of trust'.

In many aspects of working life, I was sorry to see that white people were privileged. At Bo Government Hospital we were shown straight to a consultant's office and were instantly offered an appointment in the near future - difficult for a Sierra Leonean to do, or an English person in England. It was easy not to queue in the bank if one didn't want to, or to get the best seat on a *poda-poda*. However, 'room to manoeuvre' can be wonderfully refreshing, at least for a visitor from England. I loved swerving from one side of the road to the other in a ramshackle taxi with a shattered windscreen and an extra seat over the back wheels (contrary to British Safety Regulations, I'm sure), hooting the horn continually at pedestrians, music blaring out, and all windows open, with four people in the front passenger seat. Perhaps we were fortunate not to have an accident. It is a good life if you are strong and lucky.

One of my fondest memories of Bo is of another balcony which I had to pass on the long way back to the reservation. Friends of mine would usually be sitting there, and they would hail me and invite me up to eat with them, or sit and talk as we looked out over the flame trees and zinc roofs of the town.

It is probably obvious from this highly personal account of my visit, and in any case I freely admit that I am totally infatuated with Sierra Leone. Thoughts of palm trees, fireflies, pepper sauce, good music in the streets, and good friends, make it difficult to settle down to life in England.

Without the Link, I doubt if I would ever have visited West Africa, and I hope that my new-found knowledge will become a resource which members will be able to use. I expect the Link to continue to flourish, and hope that in the future it will expand to include new sections of the community here and in Bo, and widen in scope to stimulate interest and action in all development issues

***Sheilagh Holmes 16.6.83***



## APPENDIX B

### **NORTH SOUTH COMMUNITY LINKING - A SOUTHERNER'S PERSPECTIVE**

**- By JOHANNES MALLAH, 1989 -**

I feel privileged to be with you this afternoon to give you my views on N/S community linking. I want to thank the pioneers of the whole linking movement in the UK for placing themselves in the vanguard of a revived N/S dialogue. One encouraging sign of their effort is the promising trends in relations between N/S. The interest shown by Local Authorities in Europe and the Cologne Appeal<sup>26</sup> is another example.

Linking relationships between North - especially Europe - and the South is not a new idea. We only have to throw our minds back to the early periods of imperialist expansion when countries in Europe set themselves the task of discovering, civilising and educating the rest of the world - especially countries in the South. We saw the continent of Africa being put on a table and carved into small entities and given to European nations, Britain and France getting the lion's share because of their might.

One weapon provided by the colonialists - education - enabled a few people to agitate for political self determination. Today, most of the countries in the South are self governing. But political independence led to economic dependence. We simply have to reflect on the activities of the multinationals from the North operating in the South to give an indication of what I mean.

The legacy of the past has created a culture of polarised attitudes, prejudices and stereotypes. In the North, it is a feeling of racial and cultural superiority. This feeling was recently re-echoed by your Prime Minister when she told Commonwealth heads of state in Kuala Lumpur that "the North is rich because her people are hardworking and enterprising while the South - especially Africa - is poor because her people are lazy. If the South wants to be like the North they will have to work harder."

Today, we observe new forms of international relationships between North and South (UK Commonwealth, etc) where people meet and discuss global matters. This is followed by extensive media coverage of the whole South. The media conception of the South presented to people in the North emphasises chaos, turmoil, natural disasters, wars, corrupt governments and mass poverty. These images present us as victims of our own helplessness. The whole of the South is suffering from an endemic disease - underdevelopment - and we are looking to the North for the cure - development. This media presentation of the South has led the North to set herself yet another task - saving the South from itself. Hence we see the transfer of aid, cash, goods, services and expertise through agencies like IMF, World Bank, charities, from the North to the South. For most people in the North who have very little contact with the South, charity

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<sup>26</sup> The Cologne Appeal called for joint action between local government and communities world wide and include linking as an activity to promote sustainable development.

offers the only apparent means by which they can participate in the development movement taking place in the latter.

Third World aid and charity work obscures and thereby reinforces the unequal power relations which lie at the root of impoverishment. Inherent in the notion of charity and aid is the assumption that people in the North must help people in the South, who are incapable of taking control of their lives and managing their own environments. So aid and charity have become not only a product of the unequal power relations which has created impoverishment in the first place, but themselves represent the practice and continuation of a particular set of unequal relations between aid and charity supporters and Third World beneficiaries.

Against this backdrop of ongoing N/S relations a new concept - community linking - has emerged. This is a relationship between ordinary people from both North and South who feel that we live in One World and we are interdependent. Through a link, we are able to forge bonds of friendship, mutual understanding and mutual respect between the people in our different communities, with different lifestyles, different cultures and different living standards. We believe that in "one world", what we do abroad can bring positive changes for other people. In like manner what we do or don't do at home is equally important for bringing about those changes because of the interdependent nature of the world.

In community linking, as in past relationships, the initiative is coming from the North and in the face of all the overtures it is not surprising for the following questions to arise in the South: "What do these people want from us again?" How well do they relate with minority groups in their midst?" Do they have equal opportunities in education, employment, etc for all the races in their midst?" For those of us who have embraced linking, you may well ask: "Why have you agreed to link with us?" Our answer; simple. We see linking as a much closer relationship at the personal, group, and organisational level which will provide an opportunity for closer contact with people in the North. Once we have been able to forge these close relationships it is possible to initiate a dialogue about development and environmental issues.

You people in the North are fortunate because you have a lot of voluntary agencies working overseas in the field of development cooperation. More recently they have started using part of their funds to raise awareness about development issues in Britain. You can make use of them to extend your own activities in raising awareness through mass education. Since they are working overseas you should try to let them know that development does not just involve the construction of roads, the sinking of wells or building of dams etc but also involves such unquantifiable attributes as personal values, value for people, how people relate with each other and how they interact with their environment. These attributes are mostly found in the South. There are development attributes - development and interaction between people - which the North can learn from the South.

Community linking has had a few successes - there has been movement by way of exchange visits between both communities. During these visits people have learnt a lot from each other and there is a gradual change in people's attitudes. People are learning why people from both North and South behave in certain ways. People especially from the South are now learning that Britain like most countries in the North is not the land of milk and honey they have believed her to be. Britain too has her own pockets of poverty and misery in the midst of plenty. There have also been exchanges of gifts. People from both communities have been involved in development projects identified or initiated by people from the South. Perhaps the greatest success has been that for once we have been able to tell our Northern partners to listen to us

because all along they have been taking decisions on our behalf. This has culminated in a meeting planned for 1990 in Zimbabwe involving mostly Southerners.

Finally I want to end by saying that the central theme in community linking is the raising of awareness through education, campaigning, exchange visits, seminars, workshops, information sharing in schools, churches, offices, farms, etc, and through that, attitudes have to change.

Nowadays we should be thinking of interdependence rather than dependence; equal partnership and mutual respect rather than superior and inferior race and culture; one world rather than N/S, developed and underdeveloped; awareness and understanding of the complexity of life and relationships in a person to person context, rather than ignorance, backwardness, and providing of pat answers to all the global problems.

These ideals are not easy to achieve but I think with time, commitment, cooperation and good will, we will succeed in making this planet what it is was created for and make it a more congenial place to live in for generations yet unborn.

## **RIP**

**FINALLY, Condolences to the families of leading figures in One World Link's Development, who have died through the many years of its existence.. They are (as at April 2020):**

IN WARWICK DISTRICT

Peter Barton, Ken Hall, Ann Parker, John Holliday, Patrick Mc Auslin, Rev. Fabian Radcliffe. Sumaila Tarawally (struck down by coronavirus April 2020 - one of the main London based Sierra Leoneans who helped us take off.)

IN BO DISTRICT and beyond...

Ben Smith, Mussa Conteh, Johannes Mallah, Dr. Jenny Gibson, Maada Fobay, Alpha Bah. Jo Taylor, Joe Pyne, Bishop Patrick Koroma, Sr. Hilary.

**MAY THEY ALL REST IN PEACE**