Special Feature

| CONNECT | |
|---|---|
| The Whole Story – Part2 | |

1485 LF

*This story does not end in the way people may think*

**WHAT HAPPENED NEXT**

This is the full exposure of a story surrounding a Tetbury based charity – its founding trustee directors – and the extraordinary events which unfolded bringing destruction to a programme helping young children gain an education in Africa.

This story has been waiting for the right time to be published. We have now arrived at that right time.

This is a 5-part story and today we publish part 2.

By February 2005, Helen King and I, had made two trips to Gunjur in The Gambia. We had only spent a total of 14days there but had accumulated a wealth of information and contacts – and further ideas!

We returned home – not only with our heads buzzing – but with the knowledge that we had a person in The Gambia who would lead the project on the ground there. The man we selected to be our locally based executive was in fact our host – Boyo Touray. Boyo was well respected in the community and - as we quickly discovered - way beyond as well. It was partly because of these attributes, coupled with his quiet excitement for the programme - and not least his own vision for the possibilities - that Boyo became our long-standing Programme Director.

Helen and I also had what felt like a strong family connection with him. That seemed very strange to us. But then, everything that was unfolding in our lives, was all far stranger than we could possibly describe. We were going with the flow. It was a little scary – still not knowing anything about anything – but it was exciting. It also felt right. It also felt like we were being guided.

Together with Boyo, we mapped out the initial steps for the school bicycle programme. Two schools were quickly selected as possible partners. First was Henry's school in Brikama. Second, was the Upper Basic School in Gunjur. The third school was located in the wonderfully named village of Jambanjelly. All three schools were secondary schools and had been specifically nominated - and then selected as meeting what later became the official criteria for any school to join our school bicycle programme.

Unfortunately, Henry is no longer with us now. Here we acknowledge Henry and give thanks to him. It was due to Henry, firstly through his approach to us in that compound on our first trip to The Gambia [Story part1-11-page4] –

and then later with his support for the school bicycle programme - that we went on to impart a positive effect on thousands of young Gambian lives.

The programme in the UK became known as **Bikes4Africa**.
In The Gambia we would always be known as JOLE RIDER [*pron. Jolly Rider*] – although most people seemed to prefer "JOLE RIDERS" - and we really liked that.

Whilst the name **Bikes4Africa** had a powerful message and interpretation in the UK – we didn't want to use that message in Africa. The name underlines dependency – charity – and in a way, reinforced the difference between rich and poor. Our goal was to reinforce the concept of people working in partnership – we were proud of the name - jole riders!

4 One idea we returned home with in February involved leading a group of UK secondary school students on a week-long trip of extraordinary experiences. We weren't shooting totally in the dark with this idea - as we knew schools from the UK had ventured this far before.

In December of 2005 we made our third trip to the country and this time took with us 8 students and their teacher from a Wiltshire secondary school.
It was the first of a number of school trips we led over the years to come.
And joyfully, we counted them all out – and counted the same number back.

That said, we did have a couple of close calls. Day 1, of our first school trip that December, our ex-BBC cameraman, Mike Monks, collapsed. Thankfully it was only due to dehydration rather than anything more serious. The long and tiring day without enough water was the cause.
Mike recovered quickly and we all breathed again! We had a cameraman!
Mikes footage formed the centre of a BBC Points West TV article.

A year later we had to organise the repatriation of a Chippenham school student who suffered an anaphylactic shock. That was close, to be honest. We were fortunate that on our leader's team was Dr Simon Lenton - a senior paediatrician from the Bath RUH hospital. All ended well thankfully.
It was Dr Simon – on our first school trip – who stepped in to take care of Mike when he collapsed.

We called the schools programme **The Africa Xperience**.
And it most certainly was!

5 Our school trips were orchestrated to gain a real sense of life in rural Africa, including taking part in the typical cultural life of villagers away from the typical tourist scenes.

We did take the students to the popular tourist scenes, but it was remarkable to see how each of them wanted to gravitate back. That is, back to being among the local people and their families that we had introduced them to. We ate with our fingers in big family gatherings and laughed, sang and danced with the people we all came to know – and now regard as friends.

One lesson – among so many - which each of the students took away with them, was this. Our students were initially all stunned, that Gambian children could have so much fun – without a smartphone, headphones and a TV in the bedroom. Seeing young children playing with the most basic of things – whether it was a stick to roll a bicycle wheel or playing football with a ball made from plastic bags – made it clear to them that our modern trappings are only that. We are all people first and true joy comes from connecting with others.

6 Over the years which followed, we took a collection of secondary schools on trips to The Gambia. It was amazing to see how these youngsters - and their teachers - changed and adapted. - not just to the environment but in particular to the very different culture. The mid-teen students invariably made lasting friends with the peers they met in the local schools we visited.

We know that some have since returned to The Gambia after leaving school and teachers have been back too – taking their families to experience something of which they acquired, as a result of taking a trip with us.

The only reason we stopped leading the trips was due to our new commitments at home. In the latter part of 2012, we moved our base from Hullavington Airfield to Tetbury. The increased financial burdens meant we could no longer devote the time and effort needed to organise and run the school trips. They had been as delightful as they were exhausting.

By that time however, we had taken 5 different schools from around the country on successive and repeated trips. Over 300 students, plus teachers = in groups of between 20 and 30 - had been given a lasting experience. For some of them, that experience actually changed their study and career choices – and possibly for nearly all of them - their view of so much more. We felt a degree of personal pride because of that.

7 Although the school trips had ceased – at least for the time being – we still had to travel to The Gambia periodically as part of managing the Bikes4Africa programme. A regular traveller with us was Dr Simon.

We first met Simon in 2005 when he learned we were looking for unwanted bikes in Bath. He wanted to know more and Helen explained our mission. He also wanted to know where the bikes were destined.

Here was just another one of the strange coincidences which featured, oh so regularly, on our path. Helen mentioned the 3 schools to get the first bikes – and they included the school in Jambanjelly. Simon, then we, were stunned! Simon confessed that he had led a female fertility study programme for the MRC [Medical Research Council – based in Banjul] at that very school - some 20yrs earlier when he was still studying. It was just another one of those strange things that seemed to occur with a degree of frequency.

Simon went back to Jambanjelly several times after that with us. The second time was to hand over 100 bikes – being part of the first consignment of 303 bikes we delivered to the schools. Simon's first return visit was with us in

December 2005 when we led our first school party from St Laurence School in Bradford on Avon. The visit was covered by BBC Points West as mentioned above – thanks again to Mike Monks!.

8 The first consignment of bicycles was despatched in March 2006, just over a year after our second and far more focused visit to The Gambia.

On returning home in February 2005, we started looking for a school to join us on a visit. We also - and far more urgently – started looking for and collecting bicycles. In the process we also had to find somewhere to store these bicycles. Being a nosy parker and coupled to a mission, Helen and I dropped in one day to AV8, at Kemble [Cotswold] Airport for a coffee.

This led to our meeting the very nice guys at Delta Jets. We saw they used 40ft sea containers for storage - supplementing their hangar space for the historic military jets which they restored and flew. Well, basically, they emptied a 40footer of Hunter jet engine parts and presented us with our first storage facility. It was here – adjacent the RC model car circuit – that we had our first team Spanners Day, refurbishing the donated bikes before shipping.

9 Eight or so mechanics - working even most weekends - were always going to struggle to prep 300 bikes by early March 2006 – being our preferred target date for the first shipment. This date was earmarked such that a jole rider team could rendezvous with its arrival in The Gambia. The team would officiate at a formal handing-over ceremony - which Boyo insisted should happen - but more importantly, deliver bike maintenance skills to teachers, students and Boyo! Travel to The Gambia after March presents all kinds of unnecessary challenges – so April to October was always to be avoided.

10 Things galloped on at a pace. Simon was in the Bath HRC [Household Recycling Centre] one day and noticed discarded bicycles put to one side. The foreman told Simon – who had become our chief skip rat by now – that they were not available to us, as they were put aside for a charity that had them refurbished by the prison service. That meant prisoners - and those staying on for a bit in sunny HMP Cardiff.

How very interesting, we all thought, as we experienced a lightbulb moment. A moment to be followed by yet another one of those strange events. A few phone calls later and we discover that the charity was actually about to cease that particular involvement with bicycles and prisons, to concentrate on other core activities. Was this quirky - and good timing - or what?

Within a few days we had elevated our entire operation due to absolutely zero skill on our part – but just a following wind and another set of strange coincidences.

The charity was the **Inside-Out Trust** and we went on to acquire from them, tools and spares - a stream of donated bikes from the recycling centre in Bath – a further stream of donated bikes from widespread leisure company - Center Parcs - PLUS, a connection with HMP Cardiff for the refurbishment of all our bikes. BINGO!

We actually went on to develop similar arrangements with a further 9 prisons in England and Wales. They included, Swansea, Dover, Wandsworth, Gloucester, Hewell, Wellingborough, Risley in Manchester and Liverpool.
A tenth joined the programme late on as part of the charity's expansion strategy which would see the opening of the school bicycle programme in a second and third African country – starting with Sierra Leone.
That prison was HMP Portland in Dorset and for the first time we were able to get a prison to deliver bikes to us in Tetbury.

Given the number of bikes we needed to serve the programme expansion - which we had been planning for several years - we also needed to revitalise our logistical arrangements. Deliveries into Tetbury was going to be an important part of the overall equation.

We actually added a 11th prison in southern Ireland along the way. A second Irish prison on the North coast was also preparing to join the programme to cater for the volumes of bikes which were now being collected all over Ireland – north and south of the border. We had Rotary Clubs to thank for this and in large measure – the person who championed the jole rider cause in Ireland – Trevor Stewart.

But that was all to happen in the future – in fact 10yrs further on.
I return now to 2005 and the predicament we had to deal with then.

At that time, the pressure had moved away from how we get enough bikes to ship and how we get them refurbished in time. The new focus became where to store these bikes – which we knew were going to quickly scale into hundreds. One 40footer was never going to be enough. And then there was the other biggie - how do we raise money to ship them?

At the start we had no thoughts as to whether we might send a few shipments of 300 bikes at a time, or far more than that. To be honest, the whole programme had the feel of being ongoing – with no intention of slowing down. In fact, our thoughts were fixed on gearing up and improving.

After all, the transport needs of school students in Africa were never going to be solved any time soon – and naturally, not by us alone.

11 So, the money thing. Neither Helen nor I were flush and at the time we were living on savings. We had stopped our marketing work to concentrate on starting a new business. In mid-2004 we were on the cusp of launching an internet-based holiday homes agency when this bicycle project emerged like a whirlwind into our relatively quiet and ordered lives. The whole venture – the jole rider and the Bikes4Africa thing, had landed on our laps like a stray dog choosing us to go home with. We couldn't refuse the challenge.

Our business plans were parked for the time being – until we could see our way through the things that were now going on in our lives. By the time we got to shipping the first bikes to The Gambia we had little money in the charity pot to cover the shipping cost. In stepped a fairy godmother. Simon put up the money needed - £2174.

After this, matters for us personally got a little tight. Helen and I had both gone through marital divorce some years earlier which had been expensive in more ways than just monetary. We raised some funding by cashing in a mortgage and selling Helen's apartment. This gave us cash in hand to live on and helped fund the charity in the early days. And in the early days, we had decided that if we're going to have the impact needed, we needed to devote our efforts full-time.

And that we did. And that included driving the Ford Transit we purchased to pick up bikes and deliver them into prisons.

Over the years - and between us - we had been in and out of more prisons than the most persistent of offenders in a lifetime.

12 It was in these early days we had our first experience of the Regulator – the Charity Commission - and their bureaucracy which we found unbelievably challenging to deal with. Frustrated with the behaviour of their staff and their inability to grasp what it was we proposed to do – despite a very lengthy and detailed draft Constitution - a visit to their Taunton office achieved the breakthrough we needed. The charity jole rider was formally registered – enabling us now to claim 25% Gift Aid on all personal donations.

It also gave us a degree of added respect in the eyes of the public. As it turned out in the end – mutual respect between us and the Commission was not achieved.

13 Returning to the gearing up idea for the operation, we desperately needed more storage. So it was, on a tour of the businesses at Kemble Airport, I breezed into Richard's office on a faint chance he might have some racking to spare for our 40footer – which he had lying around, seemingly just waiting.

He said not – "but why do you need it?" I explained we were planning to ship bikes to African schools– and that's all I said. He then took the floor –

explaining that his son, Sam, had just got back from Africa. He was proud to tell me - Sam had driven in the Plymouth to Banjul old banger Rally – "Banjul is in The Gambia" – he said. Sam then drove south, to a village called Gunjur and - because Sam is charity minded - he got involved with the local school there, Gunjur Upper Basic School and a local charity called TARUD.
BOOM again!

My chin was now resting on Richard's carpet. It sounded like a scene from the film, Casablanca.
"Of all the gin joints – in all the world – and you have to walk in to my one".
Of all the schools in Africa……!!!

I knew TARUD – we had donated a symbolic first bike to TARUD. As for the Upper Basic – I had been there too and it was one of the 3 schools chosen to get the first shipment of bikes. Another very strange coincidence!

Anyway, Richard's business at the airfield was storing aircraft, cars and all manner of things for businesses and people. It was only when Helen and I met Sam for a chat about Gunjur – and the offer of donated school furniture from Hillesley Primary School – very near Tetbury - that things really took off!

"Storage is not a problem", he said. My dad is moving his business to Hullavington Airfield soon, where he will have acres of storage.

Well, it wasn't exactly acres, but Richard Glover's new hangar was plenty big enough to accommodate 500 bikes and a collection of school desks and chairs. Very soon, our bikes and kit and everything else we were now able to accumulate - was at Hullavington Airfield – stacked alongside a WW2 C47 Dakota aircraft, other aircraft and stores for a pet supplies retail business.

It was here, in March 2006, that 303 refurbished bikes were shipped off to Gunjur – and Brikama - and Jambanjelly – courtesy of Space Contained – Richard's business at Hullavington Airfield.
We had landed on our feet - again!

A party of school students and the assistant head – Mark Fuller - from Abbeyfield School in Chippenham, attended that first loading – eventually! The only time our shipping agent DHL *dropped the ball* was on that very first shipment. Doug admitted to forgetting to order our container - but quickly moved to redirect an empty 40footer doing a tour of the M25. Two hours later the loading was under way! And so were we - in so many respects!

Abbeyfield School became the second school we led on our supporting Africa Xperience programme. We travelled in December 2006.

14 After seeing off our first container we were soon to move again. We had bolted onto the operation another prison and more HRCs, including our closest one at Stanton St Quintin.

We outgrew the space allocated for us in Richard's hangar and needed yet another solution. Enter another saint and the very kind and open-minded base commander of 9 Regiment Royal Logistics Corps of the British Army.

The army occupy the airfield as a base which is technically owned and managed by the MOD. This was a rather small detail left out of conversations until sometime later. In the meantime, we moved hundreds of bikes into one huge empty hangar – hangar 181. The light was poor inside – and it had its own micro climate. 30 minutes after it rained outside – it rained inside. Wellingtons became standard issue for all our volunteers from then on.

Despite the difficulties we despatched a total of 7 shipments during our stay in hangar 181 – including a double shipment on the same day – and then two things happened in quick succession.

15 The suits from the MOD on a tour of the base discovered they had an unregistered tenant on site. As it happened, we were protected from all the flak that went up as a result - by our army friends in 9 Regiment. These guys defended our cause – with bayonets almost drawn we understand. One officer had a clear distaste for their MOD landlords and held his position like the stalwart soldier he was. The eventual fallout for us was just limited to agreeing a peppercorn rent for the space - payable to the MOD. Plus we had acquired the new status of flying ABOVE the radar instead of below it – where we had comfortably been all this time - but without knowing it!

But we still had problems ahead.

16 From the word GO – Boyo was clear about how the bike handover ceremonies with schools would happen. Basically, they were always going to BIG affairs.

Sun canopies were erected for all the honoured guests – which included the village Elders, religious leaders and representatives from the constabulary. Additionally, representatives from the Ministry of Education for the region were invited together with the main Banjul newspapers and the national television broadcaster.

To be honest, we were initially unsure about all this fuss and the added expense which naturally went with it – although it wasn't very much. The impact however was huge. Over time, the jole riders became known all over the country as a result of the very media coverage which Boyo organised and the contacts it generated.

Boyo's cell phone became a focus of contact for schools wishing to be included in the jole riders school bicycle programme. Boyo was constantly talking with school principals though-out the country and - at one point - had more than 100 schools on the charity's waiting list.

17 Speaking of the charity having a waiting list.

Helen and I had a view of African governments which made us disinclined to seek their support or involvement. What we know now, however, is that any reservations we had – or still have – are just as relevant to our own UK government. That issue I will cover later in The Whole Story.

We started the bicycle programme quietly – apart from what Boyo had kicked off of course. Interestingly, Dr Nick on our first visit to the country had taken our party to the State House to meet the Vice-President. It was just a courtesy visit and a conversation point to share with friends on our return. We had also been introduced to Nick's friend, a previous Education Minister at her home in Fajara, near Banjul. None of this meant anything to us at the time, since we had no idea what we were going to be doing with bicycles – if anything at all - or why.

But somewhere very early on – after a school beyond Bwiam in the interior had been provided with bicycles - something positive happened. It was another strange and fortuitous occurrence.

18 Boyo received a call from the Permanent Secretary of the Education Ministry. The PS – as he was known – explained what had happened the week before. President Yaya Jammeh had stopped his motorcade on his journey back to his home village at Kanilai - off the main road leading to the interior.

The president had only ever seen the school students walking to and from school along that road, like all students – but now those same students were riding bicycles. He stopped them and enquired where the bicycles had come from. The students explained to him.

Shortly after, Boyo was meeting with the PS and the Education Minister in Banjul. The President wanted to know how the government could help expand the programme. Now, we hadn't gone looking for a government connection, but a government connection is what we gained - and it came by personal invitation of the President himself. As a result, jole rider was catapulted into the lime light.

More practically speaking, the Ministry of Education, from then, on covered the financial cost of shipping the containers to The Gambia for the schools. This was major and enabled jole riders to move to a different level.

From this point on, we knew we would not incur any delays or trouble with importing our containers at the port in Banjul. It must be said, that we had never had any trouble at the port up to this time. Basically, our containers were thereafter seen as the property of the government and were slipped streamed through customs – with the usual protocols happening – but without unnecessary delay.

Once the shipment was completed, jole rider in the UK invoiced the Ministry of Education for the shipping cost. It was paid and the money was routed to a new bank account in the name of JOLE RIDER GAMBIA, in The Gambia.

JOLE RIDER GAMBIA – was a newly formed and locally registered NGO. Whilst Helen and I were named trustees and directors, Boyo and Kebba Barrow became our two local executives. Though his work, Kebba helped to register jole rider as an NGO – since he was a director at the central NGO office in Bakau. Kebba, conveniently, also lived in Gunjur, which made board meetings for the two executives easy to affect.

Again, jole riders had been elevated in status. More importantly, jole riders had a working source of reliable funding now, which would be used to finance the local operations without added support funding from the UK.

The wheels had again been turning to move this project forward – and again by route of good fortune.

19 Let's go forward again now to the early part of 2009.

We had a visit to our hangar 181 by the base Captain, who arrived to give us the news that we didn't want. He told us that our huge hangar was now needed back for operational reasons. Our hearts sank. But he went on to say, we can offer you shared space in hangar 9 zero.

Now hangar 9 zero offered mixed blessings. We were going to be tucked in with all kinds of army kit and stores - the army rowing club eights, some army glider club mechanical kit and another charity and its double decker community bus.

None of this was ideal for us, as we had now lost an element of security over our stores and moved to double stacking the bikes in order to fit into the space now made available to us. The blessings, however, were that the lights all worked, the roof didn't leak and we had an extension on our lease at Hullavington Airfield. We squeezed into our new home in the spring of 2009.

20 Again, progress gathered on. And along the way we became the recipient of releasable stock from an online retailer of cycling and sports equipment. It started with a trickle of cartons being delivered and two volunteers selling the stock at boot sales in the area around Bath. This brought much needed funds into the charity – albeit a few hundred pounds a month. That few hundred pounds turned into thousands of pounds later. The selling at boot sales had become unworkable for the quantities we were amassing – and therefore no longer an option. We started a new programme which we ran from hangar 9 zero once a month.

We called the programme - My Bike Jumble.

21 Our first Bike Jumble was held in December 2011 and we had invited other sellers of bike kit – mainly selling personal cast-offs - to add to the event. Bike Jumbles were/are a popular thing around the country and attract all kinds of bike enthusiasts looking for a bargain or a valuable or rare part - or both - for their beloved touring bike. A bike such as a Dawes Galaxy – being a famous and treasured piece of cycling kit for thousands of proud owners.

There were actually more sellers than customers at the first Jumble and our sales of stock was mainly to those individual sellers. That seemed funny!

The second event was in January. Although we had lights in hangar 9 zero there was no heating, that winter - or ever! The second Saturday in January was beastly – so beastly in fact that the hangar door we normally used was frozen to the ground and wouldn't open. The sale went ahead – thanks to the other entrance – 100yds away.
Despite the challenge in all kinds of ways – joyfully, sales increased.
In fact, sales kept increasing and we amassed some very useful funding. As it happened, we were going to need that funding soon and in a serious way.

In the summer of 2012, we made a film of our Bike Jumble and as much as it proved a marketing success for the charity, it also sounded a death knell.

A new Health and Safety officer had recently been appointed at Hullavington Airfield and he was apparently a bit of a bully. Somehow, he had caught sight of our Bike Jumble promo video on the internet and had seen us cooking bacon butties for our customers. He took exception to that in *his* hangar. Maybe there was some underlying reason which was never disclosed – like they wanted the space back but couldn't just ask us to leave to regain it. Army personnel seemed to be changing at every level – our friends had left - and the whole move had the feel of a planned assault.

Our world was about to crash. The floor space and volume we occupied was nothing short of significant. A redundant farm building or a small industrial unit was never going to suit what we needed. What we needed was nothing short of a perfect miracle. We knew they existed and we knew good things happened for us and the programme. To put it plainly – we prayed!

Bailing out of our hangar at Hullavington Airfield – which we had regarded as home for 6yrs – seemed like a disaster. As it happened, it was a godsend!

Before we left in December 2012, we held our Bike Jumbles at the newly built Upper Seagry Village Hall. That was posh – and warm – and came with a kitchen just handy for bacon butties.
As they say – "all's well that ends well".

We also managed to fit in a small fundraiser. A film company asked us if we could facilitate a filming day for them – promoting a company called KWE and their work involving the classic Jaguar XJS. They needed a big dark place for it – and we had that. It was freezing that day!

So, another chapter in the life of jole rider was about to close.
Another chapter was about to open – and that chapter had its problems too.
It also held significant promise and exciting possibilities – and that is what drove us forward with new milestones to achieve.

We had though clocked up some miles along the way to date.
On leaving Hullavington we had shipped 11502 bicycles to schools in The Gambia - in 32 separate container shipments. Not all the shipments though

were loaded and left from the airfield. We had shipped from Hope Valley in Derbyshire, from nearby Brinkworth and six loadings from Dover Prison. Its proper identity is Dover Immigration Removal Centre [IRC]. A truly detestable name but one of the best HMP partners we had - headed by Kevin Sherman.

Such was Kevin's enthusiasm for the programme – backed by the belief HMP Dover and its governor also had – and thanks to the positive effects being generated at both ends for children and detainees – we had a new traveller. The Prison Service paid for Kevin to travel with us to The Gambia to deliver skills training. It all had quite and effect!

We had the hang of this business now, but we were not underestimating the financial challenges ahead – or our potential for even greater success.

22 It was on a return trip to Hullavington - with a new consignment of newly refurbished bicycles by the inmates of HMP Gloucester – that I had a sign.

The story continues in part 3

**CONNECT'S Maxim and Oath**

Connect is only interested in finding and sharing the TRUTH.
In search of that TRUTH, we only pose questions – we have no answers.

By: Helen King + David Swettenham

Source: Tetbury CONNECT: Magazine

4 LINK: BBC Points West – Dec05

8 LINK: AV8 Cotswold Airport

11 LINK: KWE Jaguar XJS - the modern classic

FURTHER READING + Listening

LINK: View the jole rider image album – being loaded on Pinterest

**PLEASE DOWNLOAD AND SHARE THIS ARTICLE**

Opportunity to join the CONNECT team and network

END