

## JOLE RIDER

## The Whole Story – Part1

1475 LF

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

## 1 HOW IT ALL BEGAN

2 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 beginning today with part 1.

3 It literally all began with a bike ride. In the early noughties, my son and I used to ride out on bicycles at the weekend. The rides got longer and longer with increasing fitness and an increasing love of riding bikes. Partly as a father and son bonding mission - but coupled with raising money for a charity - we planned what for us was an epic bike ride – the daddy, in fact!

We planned the route and the logistics, date and everything and then went looking for a charity partner. We actually thought riding 1000miles from John O'Groats to Land's End – the harder way round as it is – was a big deal. The charity we selected to support though - weren't so impressed!

As disappointed with the charity's reaction as we were, the charity had given us an idea. It wasn't instantaneous, it was more like one of those thoughts which for some reason just keeps coming back. The charity was sending recycled bicycles to Africa and the idea did more than just leave a deep impression on us. We eventually got to the thought, of how wonderful it would be to do exactly that ourselves.

And that thought is still as stupid as it sounds today – but now we understand how stupid sounding ideas are actually meant to work – and often do.

4 One of the things which I have underlined to my son over his impressionable years, is the importance of following your heart – which means doing the things you are driven to do. These can include the things you believe you can't do - and in that respect, I had some personal reflecting to do.

My partner, Helen King and I looked at the whole idea inside and out. It seemed that the only positive thing we had at the time, which anyone could call an asset, was the idea itself - plus a resolve that just would not dilute or – far more comforting – just go away.

Although I was no stranger to business organisation, given my career to date, we actually knew little about bikes and nothing about shipping, Africa or why we should even think about doing this. And at the time, we also knew nothing about charities and the Charity Commission – except for their existence.

5 Regardless and with our heads still in the clouds, we organised our first fundraising event in the name of JOLE RIDER. It was a name which just popped out on the desk one day – derived from the bike ride we were still planning to do regardless. We named the ride the JOLE 1000 taking its name from the start and finish points - and the horrendous distance between the two. On the day of the fundraiser – a general goods auction, with static caravan, held in the local village hall - we were donated a mountain bike by some people emigrating to Spain. We really had no idea how that bike might get to Africa - although it did seem hugely symbolic at the time.

6 But before we did any more fundraising, we were connected – strangely by an Olympic gold medallist – to a retired GP doctor in Marlborough, Wiltshire. Nick in fact was the first of three key medical doctors we would get to know - two of which would get heavily involved in the venture.

We had been told Nick had great experience in Africa and was worth speaking to because of it. We did speak with him and soon after, we met with him. He was kind about our crazy sounding idea, but he asked if we'd ever been there. We answered and he said, "Well, I'm going in a couple of months – do you want to come with me? Now we had reached the point where we had to put our money where our mouth was. Where would we be going exactly, we asked? Gambia, Nick replied.

Well, the first thing we did on reaching home was to look up where this place was. It's actually the smallest country in Africa and located on the west Atlantic coast. It nestles like a pin stuck in a pincushion, which is Senegal. Senegal wraps itself around the tiny Gambian land mass – except for the Atlantic Ocean at the western end.

We also found our destination village on google Earth. It looked remote and although Nick had said the style of accommodation would be new to us, we knew we would be staying with a real African family, in a real African and rural community. What is not to like? To be fair – given Nick's description of abluting and toiletry practices, Helen had her concerns!

7 Suddenly, all manner of things seemed to be falling into place. We had an opening for our crazy idea. We had a bike to ship and someone to give it to at the other end. We had a tour guide who was passionate about Africa – oh, and education. We also had the promise of some really warm sunshine in mid-November.

8 And so, one freezing, dark winter's early morning – in late 2004 - we met Nick in Marlborough and set off to Africa for a week. There were 6 of us in the party, the others being acquaintances of Nick's and interested to see what he was quietly passionate about in this, apparently, very special country.

Well, we all got to know - and it began with a private welcome at Banjul airport involving a press conference for Nick. From there, we were taken by minibus to the village of Gunjur. We stopped briefly in Brikama, enroute, where things got even more strange to us. We were now in a convoy of cars and minibuses.

When we reached the edge of the village of Gunjur – which is no small village and much bigger than Tetbury – the whole world and all their wives and children turned out in a welcoming parade. It was as if Nick was royalty and we were right at the centre of something astonishing.

Nick though was no glory seeker and went about the things he did, quietly with only a keenness to connect people and their ideas – north to south, black to white. He was not only a medical doctor but a true humanitarian. This is why Nick had invited us on this trip. He did the same thing for everyone he invited to join him on a trip to Africa.

9 By the time all the excitement was over, it was dark. In November in The Gambia, it gets dark early and quickly and we had no idea where we were being led. The only light came from our newly acquired head torches and the stunning Milky Way overhead. First, a stop at Mankamang's compound, where Nick always stayed on his visits. Then next door to Boyo's compound and our own accommodation. Basically, the only thing we saw that evening were the white eyes of a few of Boyo's family - and the goats. There were animals everywhere, including - as we found - in the bedroom too, albeit far smaller – although fairly meaty.

Hey, this is Africa and there was a growing sense building over the first few days there, that we were not just comfortable being where we were – it was also strangely familiar. We were at home – and I cannot explain just how strange and absorbing that feeling was.

Here, I sadly record the passing of a dear friend, [Mankamang](#). Mankamang Touray died last year, in 2020, as recorded in the Marlborough press.

10 The next day we met with our hosts, including Boyo's two wives and all his children, ranging between knee -high and all stops north. This was a week of unimaginable new experiences and it kicked off on the first morning with a breakfast of fried tinned meat, a local and freshly baked gorgeous baguette plus hot cups of tea made with condensed milk - which all tasted divine.

We spent a lot of the day getting to know our hosts including learning a few more words of the local language, Mandinka. We later met up with the group – all billeted with different families - and had a tour of the village. That included a stop at the one bike shop on the main high street. There were so few bikes in the village, but the mechanic rebuilt the donated bike we had brought with us - in a box – in bits.

The following day, we presented the bike to a local charity, TARUD, and it became the personal transport for the chairman at the time – a gentleman

called Sandang Bojang. Sandang had been a visitor to Marlborough and is mentioned in the article about Mankamang above.

Although we had a strengthening sense of belonging – and were at total ease with our new environment – we still had no idea what on earth we were doing there. That is, apart from having a crazy idea to deliver reconditioned bicycles for people to use. But who – and the bigger question – how? Well, the next day it happened.



- 11 Nick was very well connected and highly thought of everywhere. He also had a habit of quietly unfolding our itinerary as we went. Nick, having warned us the evening before, had us all dress up a bit for our next exposure. He was taking us – in Abdu's minibus and chauffeur for the week – to the capital Banjul which is about an hour's drive away. We were on a visit to meet a retired Education minister in the Gambian government – a personal friend of Nick's. It was though preceded by a visit to the State House to meet the Vice-President – no less. We had to pinch ourselves – more than once – to check this was really all happening to us.

To be honest, all that exposure is a bit of a blur now – but what happened next is as crystal clear today, as it was that day. On a meandering drive back to Gunjur, we stopped in a back quarter of Brikama. Nick wanted to meet someone he knew and invited us to join him in his friend's compound – where we just might all get a drink – he said. Well, in we went and there was a big meeting going on with the usual mass of children, chickens and goats everywhere. A familiar scene for us now.

We were invited to join the feast also going on – just confirming what we were beginning to understand about Gambian hospitality and the Gambian way of life. We were also invited individually to tell the assembly what we white and green faces were doing in their place. And we did – we told them.

Henry was a senior gent who spoke quietly and slowly in a deep tone. He approached Helen and me after we sat down and said he was interested in what we had announced to everyone. Henry was a Christian – in the minority in this land of Muslims – and also not from there. Henry was from Sierra Leone originally and explained that he was also the principal of a local secondary school.

Henry described that the children have difficulty in getting back and forwards to school. The journey on foot is very long and the children always arrive exhausted from their daily walk. They repeat that walk to get home and often in the dark when girls sometimes have other challenges. Henry said – if the children had bikes, it would make their plight so much easier.

BOOM!

There it was – the reason we were standing there in Africa – in The Gambia – taken there by a man who connects people with ideas – with the people who have the need. I cannot explain the feeling Helen and I both had. If I said it was spiritual – some of you reading this might understand what had just happened and how we were feeling.

12 Everything that happened in the rest of that week was just pudding. We had sat down in Brikama for the main event and were now filled with ambition.

We returned to England and committed to go back to The Gambia with Nick a few months later in February. There we met Henry again and got to know more about him and his school. We also visited other schools and had the same message confirmed about the plight of the children.

We learned that in even more rural locations, children can walk for hours in one direction just to get half a day at school. There aren't enough teachers or buildings to accommodate all the children for a whole school day. We also learned – and this was really key – that all these children were desperate to get to school. They all knew the importance of completing a general education and would do almost anything to get theirs. Our role was becoming ever clearer – we were there to help them.

13 I had already left behind a career in business consultancy. It ended with marital divorce and legal fights over father access rights. I'd later recovered through studies and courses in personal development. These developments led me to a new field for me – business marketing. On meeting Helen – also in marketing – new starts were everywhere.

What neither of us were prepared for, or expected, was the following. We learned about our latent passion for Africa and its people. We learned about our latent passion for the education of young people. We learned about ourselves - as ordinary people – pursuing a crazy idea.

Our lives were on the cusp of changing and changing significantly. We were about to change the lives of 1000's of African children too. None of this was obvious at the time – but a mission had begun.

### **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](#)

[LINK:](#) Obituary: Mankamang Touray (Manky), a founder of the Marlborough Gunjur link

[LINK:](#) Aerial view of Gunjur-2020 - featuring the fishing village and new Mosque

[LINK:](#) Aerial view of Gunjur-2017 - featuring Mankamang and Boyo's compound

[LINK:](#) The Mandinka language

#### FURTHER READING

[LINK:](#) Dr Nick Maurice's autobiography charts the Marlborough Brandt Group and life of a true 'citizen of the World'

[LINK:](#) Nick Maurice nominated for the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize

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