



## Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

### Visit to Mustard Seed School, Busota, June 2012



This account is drawn from our 2012 International Friendship visit to Mustard Seed School, which took place from Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> to Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> July. The visiting party comprised Steve and Hilary Hurd, the Executive members of UHST, Chris Smith, a UHST supporter who recently spent 2½ years in Uganda on VSO as a maths trainer in a Primary Teachers' College, and Mike and Gloria Milne, friends who are active in music and drama in the Cambridge area.

#### Site Tour

On arrival at the school we were met by Moses Kanya, the school Director, and Headteacher, Daniel Isabirye, who led us on a tour of the school to see the enormous developments which had taken place since the last such visit.

In 2010 the school was on a small site on rented land. The main building was divided into classrooms by temporary

wooden partitions without sound insulation. A number of poor quality rented outbuildings were used for various purposes such as storage, a make-shift library, quarters for one or two staff and some students.

In the past two years the school has undergone a transformation. Land on the original, upper, site of the school has been purchased using grants from UHST and IHEU (the International Humanist and Ethical Union). The purchase of a nearby Moslem primary school in 2011 provided much needed additional buildings and land on a lower site, 100 metres down the lane. A further block of land has been purchased, which the school hopes to develop into a playing field for school sports. Finally, we are currently buying by instalment land next to the lower site, to allow future expansion.

The upper site has been connected to mains electricity and there is a lift pump to draw water from a borehole. Within a week of our visit, mains power was expected to be extended to the lower site, where internal wiring had been fitted in the days before our arrival. This will provide lighting for boarding students and power for audio-visual aids.

The formerly rented buildings on the upper site have been purchased and refurbished by concreting floors, plastering walls, fitting



Original building: now the hall with computer room to left

windows and doors, painting and furnishing. They now house the school’s administration with small offices for the Director, Headteacher and two deputies responsible for O-level and A-level students respectively. There is a new staff room, where teachers can prepare lessons and mark students work. A TV is used by students after school and by boarding students at weekends. Next to the staff room there is a new building which houses the science lab and school library, with a growing stock of basic textbooks. Students can now carry out science practicals and learn science by conducting experiments. In Uganda such practicals form an important part of the final examinations.

Beyond a large mango tree, which gives welcome shade, partitions making temporary classrooms in the original school building have been removed to create a school hall. This has been refurbished with a generous grant from a UHST supporter. The new hall has enabled the school to be adopted by Uganda National Examinations Board as an examination centre. It will be used for O and A-level examinations in November, so Mustard Seed students will no longer need to travel 24 kms to take their exams. A refurbished and secure room attached to the hall houses the school’s computer network. This is a tremendous resource for teaching as it provides a large electronic library of fiction and non-fiction resources. It also allows the school to teach Computer Studies to O and A-level. A new



makeshift wooden structure (above) has been built to provide an additional classroom for Senior 2 students.

A school kitchen (right) has been constructed on the upper site near the water pump (also right). Cooking is on two efficient wood

burning stoves, which have dramatically reduced purchases of wood fuel from 5 large lorry loads to 2 small lorry loads per term. Another previously rented building is now owned by the school thanks to a grant from UHST. This accommodates a couple of teachers and a small room is let out to the local police in an effort to improve security on the site. This follows a raid on the school by armed thieves, who were fought off by the school askari (guard), armed only with a bow and arrow.

### Friendship activities

During our visit to Mustard Seed we took part in a mix of educational, social and cultural activities. Hilary Hurd, who is a University Professor of Parasitology, gave talks and led question and answer sessions on parasitic diseases and evolution (the pictures right show the rapt attention of a girl and boy student). She was surprised to find that none of the students had heard of dinosaurs and they had very little awareness of the Theory of Evolution. A new data projector we brought for the school enabled students to see diagrams, photographs and DVD’s with evidence from the fossil record and animations of ancient life forms. Hilary took fossils of trilobites, ammonites and bi-valve molluscs to show the students.



As Uganda has mainly igneous and metamorphic rocks they were the first fossils that students and staff had seen. The talk on evolution provoked questions from

students on the origins and age of the earth and solar system, about the existence of God and on what Humanists believe.

Chris Smith worked with the Head of Maths in the school. Together they presented lessons using team teaching. Meanwhile, Mike and Gloria taught the school choir some new songs – including two Irish folk songs.

The students in return gave a short concert of local singing and dancing (below).



Steve and Hilary used the visit to meet, talk with and photograph students with scholarships provided by UHST supporters. They also talked with Moses and other teachers, put together a photo diary of the visit and gathered stories of developments in the school. A visit was made to the homes of two students living near the school.

On the last evening we hosted a short conference and meal to thank teachers for their hard work in such difficult circumstances and congratulated them on the excellent examination results. The Headteacher, Daniel Isabirye, and the Deputy Head, Annet Kasuubo (right), gave speeches outlining the progress and challenges at the school. Steve outlined the process of fundraising and tried to give a realistic picture of what help UHST might be able to provide in future. The need for the school to provide a regular flow of information for UHST supporters was



emphasised. We explained that donors were more likely to help the school if they are kept informed.

It is always interesting to take along new people to the Humanist schools, because they are able to give an independent view of the situation.



Mike and Gloria Milne were: “impressed by the high level of achievement in trying circumstances. The dedication of staff is outstanding, working under challenging conditions. The motivation of students puts many UK students to shame. I am struck by the politeness, the warmth of welcome and general good manners of Mustard Seed students, the neatness of their uniform, general enthusiasm and the absence of complaints.” (Mike)

“The people involved are all amazing. It looks an impossible task to provide a decent education in those conditions and environment, but I have huge admiration for the good results with such limited resources. I am impressed by the friendly and purposeful interactions between the staff and students.” (Gloria)

### The students

In 2012 the number of students has increased. This reflects growing confidence in the school within the community and spreading news of the rapidly improving examination results.

Classes	Boys	Girls	Total
Senior 1	42	42	84
Senior 2	27	18	45
Senior 3	27	21	48
Senior 4	30	20	50

Senior 5	14	6	20
Senior 6	7	3	10
TOTAL	147	110	257
Boarding	47	57	104

UHST supporters are providing scholarships to 40 of these students; 22 boys and 18 girls. The vast majority of scholarship students are either single or double orphans but all are from very needy backgrounds. Once they knew the number of UHST scholarships available in 2012 the school advertised for students on local radio in the towns of Kamuli and Jinja. Families who could not afford fees were invited to apply and the school chose bright students from among the applicants such that almost all new first year scholarship students gained "first" grade in their primary leaving certificates.

Below are some brief profiles of Senior 1 and 2 students who have been awarded scholarships.

Emmanuel is a 13 years old boy. He is a boarder who lives 25 km from the school and heard about the opportunity of obtaining a scholarship from an advert on the local radio. He is a bright boy who gained Grade 1 in his Primary School Leaving Certificate. He lives with his mother and 5 brothers and 4 sisters. His father left them without support. He likes all his school subjects.



Sandra is 13 and lives with her father, brother and 3 sisters. Her mother died. As her home is some way from the school, in Iganga, she is a boarder. She is a bright girl who gained the top grade in her Primary Leaving Certificate. Her favourite subject is history.



Robin is 15 years old. He lives with his mother and 2 sisters near Jinja, 1½ hour drive from the school and is a boarder. His father died. He has suffered for some time from peptic ulcers but is getting some treatment. He gained the top grade in his Primary School leaving Certificate.



Pauline is 14 years old and boards at the school as she comes from the town of Jinja, 40 miles away. She is an only child and lives with her aunt. The school Director found her begging for money on the street in Jinja and brought her to the school. She is a bright girl whose favourite subjects are maths and physics and her ambition is to be an engineer.



In addition to students supported on UHST scholarships, the school, of its own volition, has provided free places to a limited number of students in exceptional need. This is a testimony to the humanitarian ethos of the school. For example, some years ago Moses Kanya, the Director, came across two orphaned children whose families had been killed in cattle raids among the semi-nomadic pastoralist communities of Karamoja in north-east Uganda. One of the two boys we spoke with had lost 10 members of his immediate family in such a raid, including his own parents. The two boys were bright and despite only joining the school in Senior 3 they obtained the best O-level results in the school last November – each gained Grade 1 aggregates, putting them in the top 8% of students in Uganda. The boys are now studying for their A-levels in the school. One of them, Walter Ochan, is studying for A-levels in Fine Art, Geography, Entrepreneurship and Computer Studies. He is hoping to pursue Fine Arts or computer engineering at university.

During 2012 four students have gained full scholarships to university. These are given by the government to students who gain more than 20 points at A-level (the equivalent of four grade Bs).

### Staffing

Mustard Seed School employs 24 teachers. When we visited two years ago none was full time. However, now the school has 10 teachers working on a full-time basis and the general level of qualifications of the teaching staff has improved with more fully qualified graduate teachers.

This shows in the quality of teaching but also

in the growth of co-curricular (out-of-school) activities. Girls' netball and volley ball teams have been taking part in inter-school competitions. Football is popular with both boys and girls. Other popular out-of-school clubs include; choir, music and drama. The school also boasts its own mixed scout and guide troop. The picture below shows the scouts preparing drill for a meeting with other regional scout troops. They were worried that the lack of neckerchiefs and uniforms would let the school down and would like a scout group in the UK to help them.



Pay levels have increased a little, but they are still very low. The Headteacher and deputies earn 150,000 Uganda shillings (£44) a month plus allowances for housing, travel to school and mobile phone air time. Other full-time teachers earn a basic salary of 120,000 shillings (£35) plus allowances. We have agreed that UHST will pay all teachers an extra month's pay at the end of the year as a bonus to encourage retention.

To help the teachers manage their money Moses and Daniel, the Headteacher who is an economist, want to establish a savings bank within the school and they intend to encourage teachers to join the national insurance scheme so they can make contributions towards health provision and pensions.

## Challenges of growth

The growth in student numbers in 2012 is increasing pressures on teachers and on the facilities. Class sizes have increase from 30 to over 40. There is a need for additional

classrooms. This has been met partially by the construction of a temporary wooden classroom.

The pressure on books and science materials has also increased. To help, UHST has provided an additional £1000 worth of books and £500 for science equipment and chemicals since the start of the year.

Toilet facilities in the school are now completely inadequate and an urgent priority. The existing ones need to be regularly disinfected and the holes covered to keep down flies. While the pit latrines have water bottles for hand washing they lack a regular supply of soap. The provision and disposal of sanitary towels is a particular problem. At the moment they are being dropped into the latrines. If this continues the latrines will fill up too quickly so there is a need to start incinerating them. In general the school needs to develop a whole school policy on health and safety, especially as the number of boarding students increases. Encouraging all students to use mosquito nets to prevent malaria is a priority. The purchase of fire extinguishers is also essential.

The new lower school site lacks water, which has to be carried from the upper site. However, the site will soon have electricity. Students boarding (below) is using valuable classroom space and there is overcrowding.



The school would like to build purpose-built boarding facilities, starting with a girls' dormitory. This will cost over £20,000 and UHST will find it difficult, in the absence of a bequest or grant from a generous donor, to find this sort of money.

Money is needed urgently to complete the refurbishment of the lower school site. They have had windows and doors made but they have run out of money to have them fitted and for the floors and walls to be surfaced.

Pressure on the computer room and lack of a suitably qualified computer manager has meant that many of the work stations are not working. This can be solved easily but it needs a visit from a qualified technician and investment in some training for a computer system administrator.

## Attitude towards religion

Growing numbers of students at Mustard Seed, especially boarders, has required the school to think through its stance towards requests from students to allow religious observance in school.

Moslem students would like to hold prayers on Fridays and small but growing numbers of evangelical Christians are looking for opportunities to practice their religion in school.



Moses Kamyia takes the following position:

*“The Mustard Seed School 's policy is not to promote any religious beliefs in school. Equally, we neither compel*

*students to abandon their beliefs nor to embrace humanism. What we do is create an atmosphere of free inquiry so that the children can themselves make informed choices about what they believe. Of course, wherever we can, we talk about humanism as an alternative to faith-based beliefs.*

*We have resisted recent pressure from a handful of radical Pentecostal students who wish to engage in prayer within school. What I notice is that many students join us with strong beliefs but, as they hear about alternative enlightened ideologies, they gradually become more liberal in their outlook. I am very comfortable with the line we are taking as our objective is not to force people to think in any particular direction and to be tolerant towards the life choices made by others.”*

## IMMEDIATE PRIORITIES

- 10 extra scholarships for a new intake of Senior 1 students in 2013 (the cost is £120 per student).
- Additional latrines and wash rooms (£5,500)
- Final payment for the purchase of the additional land (£1,250)
- Refurbishment of Lower School Site (£3,500)
- Beds, mosquito nets and fire extinguishers for the temporary dormitories (£600)
- Levelling and surfacing the school playing field (£1,400)
- Constructing a school clinic and sick bay (£6,000)
- Books, science and other learning materials (£3000)
- Fencing the lower school site (£800)
- A dedicated boarding house for girls (£25,000)

If you feel you or your group would like to contribute to meeting any of these needs then please contact us at [info@uhst.org](mailto:info@uhst.org) or download a supporter form from our website: [www.ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org](http://www.ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org).

Students by the school sign



Mustard Seed School staff members



Whole school photograph



Senior 1 maths class

