



Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

Isaac Newton High School, Kateera, Masaka

July 2019



Arrival at the school and new teaching block

First Impressions

We were held up for 3 hours in Kigali, on our way to Uganda, owing to a computer failure causing delays for passengers embarking in Rwanda. Our plane arrived in Entebbe at 2.30 in the morning yet, by 9am, we were on our way to Isaac Newton School. We made the usual stops in Entebbe town for local currency, airtime for my paleo-technic Nokia and fuel for the minibus. After a brief stop for lunch, while crossing the Equator into the southern hemisphere, we reached the school in the early afternoon.

The transformation in the school site since our visit in July last year was remarkable. The first thing you see on entering the school is a new teaching block. It has three substantial classrooms and a fine A-level science laboratory, named in honour of Ian Gurney, a former prominent member of North-East Humanists, in whose name a donation was

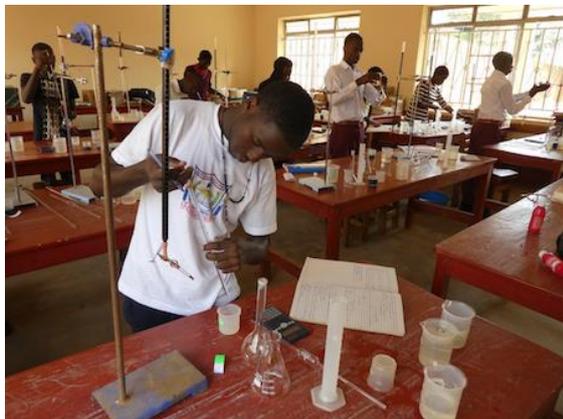
made. The classrooms are well finished, painted green and white throughout, with the happy Humanist emblem proudly emblazoned on the ceilings, which create a roof space that deadens the sound during heavy rains. Windows are glazed to prevent rain washing into the classrooms.



Happy Humanist Emblem on Ceiling

Each classroom is furnished with well-made desks and chairs and has a storeroom for books and other scholastic materials. The laboratory

has benches for experiments and stools and a good-sized prep room, to store equipment and chemicals. There must be very few rural schools in Uganda that can match these new classroom facilities, and it is clear, from the beam in their eyes, that the students appreciate that.



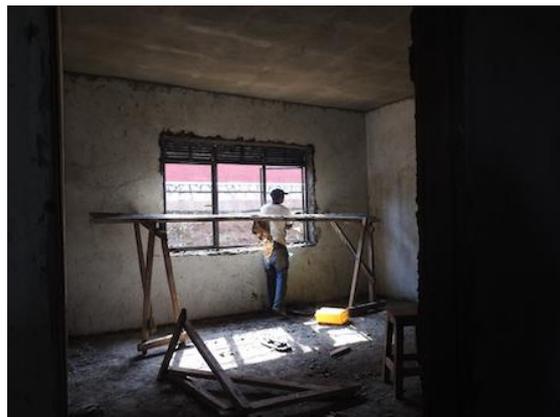
The Ian Gurney Science Laboratory

Isaac Newton has a wonderful site. It is on the side of a hill that, in the afternoon, receives cooling winds from Lake Victoria. The school overlooks a green valley which has many trees and a large variety of inter-planted crops. Building on a slope necessitates cutting flat terraces. These create a back wall of earth behind every building. Although the earth is quite firm, over time it will erode and present a danger of slippage. To prevent this, we are providing funds for retaining walls, safety fences and drainage channels.



How Green is My Valley

At the moment, boy boarders are living in overcrowded conditions in the hostel we refurbished earlier in the year. However, a much-needed second boys' hostel is nearing completion. In a few weeks' time the school will have two well-appointed hostels accommodating 121 boys, in 11 large rooms with 6 double bunk beds. A teacher, who is given free board and lodging for serving as hostel warden, occupies the 12th room.



New Boys' Hostel Under Construction

At the insistence of the school inspector, the two girls' hostels are now protected from possible intruders by a surrounding wall. This has created an ugly division on the school site. However, the school has been creative. An earth bank between the hostels is now a stepped terrace, where the girls can sit and watch TV and films in the evenings and at weekends. They intend to grow climbing plants to soften the appearance of the walls.



Wall Around Girls' Hostels

Mains Hydro-Electricity

Two years ago, UHST supporters contributed £10,000 towards a World Bank/Uganda government rural electrification initiative costing £100,000, which has finally brought mains hydro-electricity, generated on the River Nile, to the school and five surrounding villages. The project took two years to complete, but it has already made a huge difference. All the classrooms and student hostels have LED lights to provide low-cost lighting in the evenings and early mornings. On-site power enables students to do prep in the evenings, take part in school clubs and watch news, documentaries, football and films on TV.



Classroom with two LED Lights

Over the next few years, as more homes find money for the connection fee, life in the local community will be transformed. Lighting will eliminate long unproductive evenings (it gets dark every day at 7pm on the equator). People will be able to charge mobile phones, use radios and TV and operate machinery. Already one villager has established a broiler chicken farm, using lights to incubate eggs. This will transform the local diet by ensuring a regular supply of eggs and chickens. Another new local initiative is a mill producing maize flour from grain grown by local farmers. By adding value locally and cutting out the middle-man, farmers will receive more for their crops and the cost of maize meal for cooking will come down.

The school hopes to capitalise on the arrival of electricity by setting up a coffee de-husking facility. This will add value locally. It will enable local farmers to earn more for their coffee. The husks will be returned to farmers to provide mulch and improve soil structure. The school will gain an additional income stream and students will learn about business first hand, as part of their studies of entrepreneurship, a new subject in the curriculum.

Electricity is attracting new people to the area and land values are rising. Those local residents with land to sell or rent have more money in their pockets. This enables them to improve their farms and set-up businesses. Children from incoming families swell numbers in school, raise fee income and help to make the school more sustainable financially.

Growing School Popularity

As educational standards and exam performance rise in the school, and knowledge spreads that the school has mains electricity, good water supply and high standards of student care and welfare, pressure from parents locally and further afield to get their children into the school is growing. Isaac Newton attracts students from Humanist primary schools in the West of Uganda, notably from Kasese and Katumba in Bundibugyo on the Congo border. A growing number of children also come from better off homes in Kampala and other towns. The high quality of the hostels at Isaac Newton is beginning to allow them to charge a premium on the fees for boarding places for those who can afford them, the additional income being used to subsidise schooling for the generally much poorer day students who walk to school from the surrounding rural area. Help for bright but really destitute students comes from UHST supporters who provide scholarships to enable 60 students, including many orphans, to have fully-funded boarding education at the school. Additionally, the school itself funds, from local-

fee income, free boarding education for 43 desperately poor local children, orphaned or from single-parent homes.

We have been pleased to see the different ways in which Isaac Newton High School has been concerned to raise standards of welfare and create a convivial atmosphere with good relations between staff and students. The happy atmosphere of the school is evident to visitors. All the buildings have been made to a high standard, the site is kept attractive by cutting the grass, planting trees and shrubs. Teachers and students treat each other with mutual respect. When problems arise, students raise them with the Humanist counsellor or with class representatives. They are then discussed at the monthly School Council, which includes teaching staff and student representatives.

School food

There are the inevitable complaints about school food. Which school anywhere in the world does not have them? However, the school has moved beyond the practice of most in Uganda of serving a monotonous diet of posho (a dough made from maize flour) and beans. The staple carbohydrate is supplemented with more expensive rice, which is very popular, and vitamin enriched sweet potatoes. They have green vegetables and, once or twice a term, chicken or beef. Providing meat is no mean feat. The school has to buy, pluck and gut 60 chickens to cater for 600 students – and that means each chicken is shared among 10 students. However, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. The students all appear to be thriving and have very low levels of sickness.

The cost of food is the largest single element in the school budget. At 165 million shillings (£35,000) a year, it costs more than staff pay. However, when divided by 600 students for 30 weeks a year it represents expenditure of less than £2 per student per week. The school is considering whether to rent additional land to

Fatumah Namanda: A Student's Story

Fatumah completed her A-levels at Isaac Newton last year. She receives a small payment to assist in the school Library during her vacations from Mbarara University of Science and Technology, where she is studying for a BSc



and hopes to return to the school to teach Maths and Physics.

Fatumah was born on 17 May 1998 in Masaka and has one brother. Her mother died when she was 7 and she has never seen much of her father, who was a fisherman.

She was brought up by her paternal grandmother.

She had a lot of issues at home which led to her missing much of her primary schooling. However, her grandmother's sister told Fatumah that Isaac Newton give scholarships to bright but needy children. It was arranged that Fatumah would live in Kateera with her uncle's family and attend the school.

She started as a day student but, as she could not afford a uniform or shoes, she was not comfortable until her grandmother found money for them and she started to enjoy her time in school. Her happiest moment was when she was told that her scholarship would continue up to her O Levels. This encouraged her to work hard.

Hilary and Steve Hurd visit the school every year and talk to the scholarship students. In S3 Fatumah asked Hilary if she could be supported until S6. Hilary told her this was a possibility if she did very well in her O Levels. This encouraged her to work even harder!

She became a boarder in S4 which was a difficult time for her as she had no money to buy a mattress. The director, Peter Kisirinya, took responsibility for this. Fatumah did well in her O Levels and went on into S5 and S6. She had good A-level results but did not fulfil the criteria for government support for university. She had the best results in her science class and, fortunately for her, she received support from the Brighter Brains Institute in the US to attend university.

Without all the help she has been given, Fatumah knows that her life would have been very different and compares her life to that of her brother who dropped out of primary school and struggles in life.

grow more of their own food. It would have the additional benefit of providing practical experience for agriculture students, but they would also need to employ a full-time farm worker. The prospect seems tempting but given the vagaries of climate and crop pests and diseases, it is difficult to be sure that self-production will actually reduce overall costs.

Some other schools require students to contribute each term a sack of maize flour, but by no means all students would be able to do this.



Every Child Matters

What is remarkable about the school is that every child matters. For example, one of the girls, Laila, is albino. Having no pigment in her skin means she has

to keep all parts of her body covered from the sun. She also has to cope with sensitivity to UV light from lack of pigment in her iris and an underdeveloped retina which makes her very short sighted. At the request of the school our charity has made funds available for Laila to be fitted with progressively stronger spectacles and, this year, we will pay for the examination board to print her exam papers in large type. Laila is bright, and whereas many albinos are marginalised, she should, by completing her education at Isaac Newton, be able to lead an independent and fulfilling life.

For many students, school is their term-time home so there has to be provision for activities for the evenings and weekends. They have satellite TV and are able to watch premier



league and Africa cup football, which is very popular among both boys and girls. The school has both boys' and girls' football teams. They also watch news, other factual programmes and feature films. This means that Isaac

Newton students are knowledgeable about world affairs and are as concerned about climate emergency, plastics and inequality as the rest of us. There are a number of thriving clubs in the school. On our last visit I gave a talk to the Humanist Club about First Aid and left them two First Aid manuals, suggesting that they might like to use them to learn about first aid. As many of the students want to work in the Health sector, the idea was taken up with gusto.



They formed a First Aid club which now has 40 members and are working systematically through the manuals. Peter Kisirinya has responded to their enthusiasm by contacting the Red Cross in Masaka, who have agreed to adopt the First Aid club and provide ongoing support. In August the Red Cross will hold their annual work camp at Isaac Newton School. This will further raise the profile of the school in the area.

Staffing

Given the inability of local families to pay adequate fees or even to keep up with the low fees set by the school, it is a constant challenge to provide adequate pay for its teachers. Pay levels are roughly 50% of these in government schools and the more established private schools pay much more. Despite this, the school manages to foster loyalty and maintain a high retention rate. Some teachers, including the Heateacher and Director of Studies, get free board and lodging, by helping to supervise

students outside school hours and by serving as hostel wardens. The school has this year, for the first time, enrolled all full-time staff in the National Social Security Fund (NSSF). Each teacher contributes 5% of their salary to the scheme and the school provides a 10% contribution. This enables teachers to build up a transferable pension fund. A new savings scheme is being set up along the lines of the one already existing at Mustard Seed School. Each member of staff (the scheme applies to both teaching and non-teaching staff) will make a non-refundable initial contribution of 10,000 Uganda shillings (£2) and thereafter contribute a minimum monthly contribution of 50,000 shillings (£10), or a manageable percentage for lower paid site workers. With some initial capital donated by UHST supporters, the teachers will be able to take out short-term loans for purchasing domestic items, seeds and school fees, and they hope to build up sufficient funds to enable staff to purchase small plots of land and pay for home improvements. The new scheme is the source of great excitement and provide a further good reason for teachers to stay at the school.

Reading for Pleasure and Afripads

For the past 3 years, UHST has been promoting a Reading for Pleasure programme. Funds have been given to increase the stock of novels and engaging non-fiction readers, using African authors and publishers as much as possible. A reading ambassador within the school, encourages students to read and discuss with other students what they have read. UHST has given the school £800-£1,000 a year over the past 10 years to purchase books, and they have made a difference. Children can borrow books for 3 days at a time, and they do. Very few books sit on the library shelves. Students use text books to supplement notes they get from lessons, and many are getting into the habit of reading novels. Although there are quite a lot of books, one girl complained that she had already read every book in the library and urged us to buy more – and this we are in the process of doing.

The annual Reading for Pleasure competition requires each student to select one of the novels they have read, read a short passage to the school, provide a summary and explain what they liked about the book and what lessons they learned. A panel of teachers asks questions, including the meaning of key words. As winners and runners up receive dictionaries and small amounts of cash (£4) the number of students entering the competition each year is growing, as is the rate of book borrowing from the school library.



Ann Kawoya, 2nd left, presenting Prizes

This year was a big occasion as Ann Kawoya, Manager of the Aristoc Bookshop, where we buy our books, came with two colleagues to award the prizes. Ann gave a speech to the students about the importance and pleasure of reading. Her colleague, Ronald, urged students to widen their career aspirations, citing his own example as a graduate in social sciences who has gained an interesting and worthwhile career in the book trade.

Later in the afternoon, Afripads, funded by UHST with help from St Louis Ethical Society, were distributed to the 300 girls in the school. These reusable sanitary pads have transformed life for girls and eliminated absence from class during menstrual periods.

This year our visit to the school was covered by a news reporter from Bukedde, the main Ugandan TV channel. On the Sunday following they transmitted a 30-minute TV programme

about the event and the transforming impact



Bukedde TV Recording Prize Giving

of Afripads in particular. An article about the school's Humanist philosophy, the Reading for Pleasure programme and the Afripads initiative has also appeared in the government newspaper, the New Vision. The resulting publicity is very good for Isaac Newton School and for the Humanist cause in Uganda.

School Fees

Full fees for those day students who can afford to pay them are currently 240,000 shillings (£52) per term. Boarding fees are 380,000 shillings (£82) per term. These fees provide for a child's tuition and food. The boarding fee covers lodging and food for breakfast, evening meal and at weekends. In addition, students receive free medical care in the school clinic and a reasonable level of external medical care if they need to go to the regional hospital. Students with protracted illnesses are sent home for care. Fees cover the costs of the annual licence fee for watching TV, regular hair cutting and a small contribution towards ongoing improvements to the school. Students are expected to provide their own bedding, soap, washing powder and sugar (to add to their daily porridge), pens, pencils, calculators and stationery, and families are expected to pay for school field trips and examination entry fees. The school operates a hardship fund to help those students who cannot afford to pay for these extras. The £300 UHST scholarship, as well as covering the fee element of £246 a year, includes a contribution towards the general

running of the school for the benefit of all students.

To put Isaac Newton School fees in perspective, a well established but middle ranking school nearer to Kampala charges basic termly boarding fees of 1.25 million shillings (£270) and charges extra for food, health care, books, field trips, examination fees, uniform, TV and for school development. In Uganda all schools, including state schools, ask families to pay for education either in the form of a fee (private schools) or as a required contribution (state schools). Fees are higher in urban schools than in rural ones and, otherwise, broadly correlate with exam success. Those schools at the top of the exam league tables charge the highest fees. This has been a consequence of the forced liberalisation of education in Uganda under the Millennium Development Goals in the year 2000, when many of Uganda's foreign debts were cancelled in return for the liberalisation of the economy. Additional money came into education, as schools were established as businesses and by religious foundations. It resulted in huge rises in educational participation from 50% in the year 2000 to 94% today at primary level, and from 20% to 45% at secondary level. However, it has also resulted in a huge variation in standards across the school system. The only check on which has been the enforcement of a national curriculum on all schools, and a rigorous inspection regime, which has demonstrated the Uganda government's preparedness to close schools that were seriously failing to provide minimum standards of education and welfare or to show year-by-year improvement.

Annual General Meeting

As part of a policy to strengthen governance and accountability in the Humanist schools we support, each school has become a charity which is incorporated as a not-for-profit company under Uganda law. One Director in each school is nominated by UHST. The schools hold their Annual General Meetings during the

time of our annual visit. The AGM at Isaac Newton this year was chaired by the Peter Kisirinya, the School Director. Those present included Ezra Mulwana, the headteacher, Winnie Nassirinya, the school bursar, who has recently completed a degree in accountancy, Steve Hurd, representing UHST, plus two community representatives; Richard Kasumba, a local businessman who is a parent of children in the school, and James Luyobya, a senior teacher from Muyenga High School. Moses Kamy, the Director of Mustard Seed School, who is also on the Board, was absent this year due to illness.

The accounts, which are audited by a firm in Kampala, were examined in detail. The school returned a very small surplus in 2018. However, we discussed how the school might cope if UHST funding disappeared. Leaving aside what our charity contributes towards improvements in school infrastructure and books and resources, the school receives a further £20,000 a year in the form of scholarship and other payments, which make a substantial contribution to the running costs. After discussing various options for replacing UHST money, raising fees seemed to be a feasible option. Spread over 600 students and 3 terms would require an average increase in fees per child of about £11 (52,000 shillings). The parent representative thought that, in view of the very good performance of the school, most families would willingly find this extra money. As a Board there was some sense of relief that the school had a survival strategy should UHST funding dry up.

The Board confirmed the policy of stabilising numbers in the school at 600, with roughly equal numbers of boys and girls, 400 boarding and 200 day-students. The school has reduced class sizes by operating two classes (North and South) of 50-60 students in each year— small classes by Ugandan standards. Fees will be progressively raised for better off boarding students and used to subsidise local students from poorer homes in the community.

There will be a freeze on new building for a year. Money being channelled instead towards improving safety on the school site by fencing dangerous drops, improving roadways and drainage and smartening up the buildings and grounds. A commitment was made to creating really high standards of education by increasing spending on books and resources, including extra computers and connecting the school to the internet. Other funds would be directed to raising welfare standards and improving staff conditions.

The Headteacher put forward the case for the provision of school transport. When students have serious medical problems, they need to be transported to hospital quickly and at present this depends upon the goodwill of the one teacher with a car. A bus would allow the school to organise more field trips and they could raise money by renting it out to other schools in the area. It was also seen as a good way to publicise the school, as the school name would be emblazoned on the side of the vehicle. It was agreed that a cost-benefit analysis would be carried out that set against the benefits the considerable costs of initial purchase, ongoing tax, running, maintenance and repair costs and which considered other school priorities.

Further School Needs

Money raised in our 10th Anniversary Building Appeal has made a difference to the school. The basic infrastructure is good, but a few important needs remain:

1. The school would like a new Hall to be used for dining, assemblies and examinations. It will cost in the region of £35,000 and enable the school to convert the old hall into a library/information Centre. Unfortunately, this is beyond our funding capabilities at the moment.
2. Additional toilets and wash rooms are required to accompany the new boys' hostel. This will cost in the region of £5,500 and is essential.

3. An additional 12 computers with software are needed to cater for the increased student population. This will cost £2,200 with second-hand computers or £4,400 if we buy new Dell computers.
4. Fencing the perimeter of the school with chain link fencing covered by hedging will cost £3,500.
5. Improving site safety and appearance by building walls, fences and planting trees and flowers will cost £1,600.
6. The school needs to acquire flat land for a playing field. This is a highly desirable future cost.

If you feel you or your group would like to help us with this, or to sponsor a student then please contact stevehurd@uhst.org (01782 750338).

Donation forms can be found at:

<http://www.ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org/donate/>

Steve Hurd
Chair, Uganda Humanist Schools Trust
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