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## **Karen Claxton – Mary's Little Lambs (MLL), The Gambia - 11th – 28th February 2019**

This was my first ever experience of volunteering. The Gambian government has determined to boost agriculture with the aim of making the country more independent in terms of food production, so all schools are to develop gardens and familiarise children with the idea of growing vegetables. This is now a feature of the national curriculum but without the offer of any funding, so it will prove a struggle for many institutions.

Note from *people and places*: MLL had identified the need for input and assistance in developing their garden programme – volunteer Karen came along at just the right time.

Mary's Little Lambs is a nursery school founded and headed by Lisong Bah, in memory of her mother, Mary. There are some 90 children in the school, ages ranging from 3-7. The school benefits from a substantial area of walled land adjoining the school, and this was to become the school's garden. The entrance to the garden from the school had been fenced off for the safety of the children and the only way that I was able to enter the garden was by creating a pile of old tyres on each side of the wall which enabled me to climb over it. Being the wrong side of 60, it had been a while since I had climbed over anything higher than the side of a bath and this wall is shoulder height! However, I survived 3 weeks with skull and limbs all intact, so no issues there and I'm feeling more than a little smug!

Note: Abdoulie (head groundsman) was always with Karen during these initial adventures !



On my first visit (stood on the outside looking in), I noted a leaf covered area containing several trees, species mostly unknown to me, a broken well, a very large termite mound, a rusty frame several metres high, supporting a huge water tank (which uses gravity to supply the school with water), a circular, shed-sized storage building in concrete with a rusty metal door, a concrete lined fire pit which doubled as a compost heap, many old tyres and a pile of felled tree trunks. The layer of mango leaves, which covered the

1 Naboth's Nursery, Canterbury Road, Faversham, Kent ME13 8AX  
tel +44 (0) 8700 460 479 | email [info@travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk](mailto:info@travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk)

entire area, actually concealed a rubbish tip. We unearthed countless bottles and aluminium cans, sheets of corrugated iron, a couple of metal doors, cans of toxic paint, yet more tyres, coils of wire and hundreds of palm nuts (the size of small coconuts) from one of the trees, which were to prove useful a little further down the line.

My remit was to turn this into a productive vegetable patch, with the help of Abdoulie (school groundsman), one pick axe, the rusty head of one spade (minus handle) and one very weak rake, fastened to a stick. The heat was unseasonably intense and was such that it was impossible to undertake any manual work after 11.30am so, although I started at 7.30am each morning, my working day was short and I had plenty of time to explore the area, shop for seeds etc or relax by the pool at the apartment in the afternoons.

Originally I had planned to create a garden out of tyres, giving each child a tyre and therefore a bit of garden of their own. There is no shortage of discarded tyres in The Gambia, but it would have taken far too long to clear an area large enough to accommodate 90 so we decided to create four large beds, one for each house, and generate an element of competition between the houses. It took the best part of a fortnight to clear the land of rubbish and make the area safe for children. Abdoulie and I cleared the area, felled the necessary trees, marked out, dug over and cleared four house beds. The palm nuts that I had collected, I cleaned off and divided into 4 piles, one for each house. I purchased paints and the youngest members of each house painted the nuts in the colour of their house – either yellow, blue, green or red (or pink in this case, due to the volunteer's ineptitude at mixing colour!). These were then used to mark the fronts of the house beds



When I wasn't working physically in the garden, I visited market outlets and allotment gardens to seek advice on seasonal planting in Kololi. This was all new to me but by the end of my 3 weeks, I had put together a guidance chart for what to plant and when, taking into account school holidays and the rainy season but also speed of germination to ensure that the children would not get bored waiting. I had made contact with a local organisation "My Farm" fairly early on in my stay and learned a great deal from them. I was then able to introduce Abdoulie, Abdourahmen (deputy head) and Lisong to this group, which will be of great help to the school in the future. In fact, this introduction may have been my main and most useful contribution to Mary' Little Lambs.

The main problem facing the success of this project is that of voluntary watering. The beds need to be watered twice daily and, although not a problem during the week, a rota needs to be organised for weekends and holidays. Abourahmen and Lisong believe that this can be managed – hopefully this will prove to be the case.

By the time I left, the four house beds were finished and the garden had a workstation in the form of a frame of shelves divided into 4, to house watering cans, toilet roll plant pots, seedlings and potting tools for each house. In addition, my gift to the garden (as opposed to my donation) was a herb garden, planted in

tyres, of chilli, parsley, sorrel, lemon grass, mint and a healthy tomato plant (the latter donated by the gardener at Riyan Apartments). I had also purchased and planted citronella grass (to discourage flies etc) and aloe vera.



My financial contribution to the project funded a wooden gate to allow access to the garden from the school and also a top for the well to ensure that no child could fall into it. It also paid for a quality spade and garden fork for future planting projects and a sack of organic compost for each of the beds. Funds are still needed to repair or install the mechanism necessary to enable children to draw water from the well for their vegetable patches. This is something on which a subsequent volunteer could work.

#### **What still needs to be done:**

- Felled trees need to be cleared for the safety of the children (teachers offered to involve families in this)
- The termite mound needs to be cleared to make space for composting
- Abdoulie needs a dual partition compost area. Would recommend this to be sited in the far corner of the garden as 2 of the 4 walls required are already available.
- The well needs to be fitted with a working mechanism to enable the staff and children to draw water.
- Addition of further beds as required (Abdourahmen is very keen to grow fruit and vegetables himself on the premises).

#### **Accommodation, Location, Leisure**

The accommodation at Riyan Apartments is excellent. Everywhere was clean and comfortable and the staff at the time were friendly and sociable. Future volunteers should probably arrive with a Swiss army knife, but that would cover everything that we missed.

This is a good location to have as a base and, although we were fortunate enough to have a driver, we were in easy reach of many tourist destinations. Senegambia and Bijilo Forest Park are within walking distance.

We saw fish being landed from colourful pirogues on the beach at Tanji, shopped at Serekunda market and local craft markets and danced by firelight to African drums on the beach at (ask Sallie?). We also visited the village home of Kunta Kinte (Roots) at Juffure (geared to the American visitor) and spent a night at Mandinari River Lodge. Mandinari was not all that it claimed to be but it was very pleasant nonetheless and the staff were extremely helpful. The gardener in particular was a great source of information for the project at MLL.

My time with Mary's Little Lambs has been one of the most significant experiences of my life and I hope that I will be able to assist with similar projects in the future. I love the Gambia and can't wait to return.

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