

w/e 31.10.09

A Halloween without trick or treaters; great. A year ago I was in Birmingham on a VSO course, titled *preparing to volunteer*, and on reflection the course only scratched the surface – good as it was it could not prepare you for everything that one has to face; and I think I've had it easy compared to some in other countries. What I really failed to do was bring 'old' trousers – the 30" waists that I grew out of 10 years ago would be good now, I have found the belt needs to be two holes tighter than in July.

Last Sunday we visited the Independence Stadium, site of the World cup outing (week 8), so that I could get some measurements for my '*Field of dreams*'. This is the Wembley/ Crystal Palace of the Gambia housing the best football pitch and athletics track- I needed the dimensions to apply to the Gambia College sports field. With Denise & kids in tow we managed to get in without too much difficulty: a chat to two security departments, a refusal of green tea drinking, and a phone call. We got the measurements, removed ring pulls and water bags from the 'hallowed' turf and as we were leaving were met by the head technical grounds man, or Mr. Grass of the Gambia. Grass is not the naturally growing vegetation here so whilst the discussion was very useful, his suggestion of a need for a borehole for irrigation at around £4000 I started worrying about what sort of project I have started. However, chances are it would all still be cheaper than the money spent on the training pitch at Middlesbrough Rugby club by a long way. We managed a quick visit to the beach in the afternoon, and were pleasantly surprised by a slightly cooler ocean, before the evening Skype session to include my monthly chat with Dale, no beach touch rugby.

The new experience for Monday was to attend a meeting of the *Hash House Harriers* partially to get some organised exercise and to make contact with another part of the community, the expats. Whilst there are many expats, of various European communities, the leader is Gambian (pale but not white) but the exercise is not challenging. Two levels exist – the runners are a minority; many walk as a social outing, but running isn't straight forward – a trail is set an hour or so before the meet with coloured flour, which may then be scuffed by children playing in the streets or eaten by hens; hardly the paper trail of old fashioned 'hare and hounds'. Socialising appears to be the focus, instead of an athletics club, so we might attend future meets as a family. I am also conscious that my working week is taking on a 'home' look as I spend less time eating tea with the kids, as half of lectures are late in the afternoon, and the other evenings have sporting commitments. I had hoped to spend more time with the family here so must be careful how I let things transpire; I do get more time with the kids in the morning anyway.

On Tuesday I commenced measuring the dimensions of the Brikama sports field. To start I endured a little racial abuse from some footballing locals who thought I was a surveyor for the builders Ballast Needham; some ended up offering to help when I explained my intentions to develop the sports field. The task was not easy using stakes in baked hard ground, snagging tufts of the more durable grass and six foot high millet crops covering a third of the field. I also found the start of termite mound on the left wing of the football pitch; it was only 6 inches tall but thought it was worth breaking up before it became 6 foot. For the parts I couldn't measure but need checking for boundary sizes I thought I would ask the Head of the School for site plans; unsurprisingly none exist. I'll just have to wait until the crops are harvested over the next month and hope that my paper plans can be applied anyway. I was informed at

beach rugby that the U17 supporters didn't actually depart for Nigeria, the President cancelled the trip so I learnt the rugby players will be interested in starting to train; apparently the Secretary I met last week has his fingers in too many pies to effectively promote the game – I have a political issue to manage now.

It seemed the rest of the week consisted of rearranged lectures; there are a surprising number of cancelled lectures by other members of staff so the students ask if you can teach them sooner in the cancelled slot so that they can finish earlier. On Wednesday I obliged, as best I could considering I was still in Serrekunda when the request was made by phone, to let the students watch the national under 17 team play in the World Cup. A different class made a similar request on Friday as I walked out of the car park; that was slightly more complicated as I had taken the family (on half term holiday now) to Brikama to visit my co-volunteer, Amy, (a big hit with Abigail).

We had been delayed on the way when Denise noticed another volunteer, Sukey, sat on the roadside 5-6 miles out of Brikama. She works on the other side of the road to myself in Brikama but needs a motor bike to fulfil her duties around the region. VSO policy is to try not to use motorbikes, as a matter of safety, but had a particularly bad week last week. Sukey had come off her bike when a young girl had stepped out in front of her and her evasive swerve meant she came off worse. While we waited comforting her, her boyfriend was delivered by an upcountry volunteer on his motorbike. The upcountry volunteer, Andrew, had suffered a similar accident on Monday, but he had a pillion passenger also. The score stands at: Locals 3 Volunteers 0 for the week – road sense is something we take for granted for the most part but I suspect the causers of these accidents would have fared worse if faced by a Gambian driver who is less likely to have the reaction necessary to swerve.

Saturday was 'clean the nation' again and this time we stayed in to complete laundry and domestic jobs; it is not easy keeping the kids occupied at such times of 'lock down'. For my part, I worked on my garden patch extending it, removing buried rubbish and building materials, and levelling the soil ready for the disappearance of the snails, I also built a compost stack (based on a book by the International institute of Biological Husbandry called *Composting in Tropical Agriculture* - a bit anorakish I admit but we will see if it works!) so really did my bit to make the nation better. I endured an afternoon of shopping but it was at least a bookshop and it was necessary for Abigail's imminent birthday. Unfortunately, I have been unable to source fireworks for the usual celebrations we have.