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Three Months in Gyetiase

By Freddie Spence

I left school last year and decided against going straight to university. I wanted to see more of the world and to have a different experience from those I had had in the past. I had the good fortune of finding out about Ashanti Development through my godmother, Ruth Simpson, who had for a time lived in Ghana and now works alongside the charity. So, it is really to Ruth that I owe my thanks as without her I would not have had such an incredible and unique experience.

Here in Gyetiase, life is very simple and straightforward. The villagers take nothing for granted: simply managing to eat and drink is a good enough reason to be happy. I had expected to find a village of down-beat, miserable people who were (rightfully) fed up with the illnesses, long walks for water and never-ending poverty. I was shocked to see how wrong I was. Instead, the people are full of energy. They are incredibly positive, productive and hardworking. When I looked out of my bedroom window at 7am on my first morning everyone, it appeared, was already up: the young and their elders collecting water, washing pots and pans, preparing breakfast. Seeing

people who have so little being so practical and motivated really took me aback.



The view from Freddie's window

Of course, the signs of a poor community who can't afford western healthcare are plain to see, for example I noticed young Ghanaian boys with odd deformities emerging from their belly buttons¹. It was also hard to see so many children suffering from intestinal worm disease and to know that the little nutrients they were getting were being taken from them by the worms. What amazed me was how the villagers appeared to be in good health and well-being in spite of all the suffering. Without doubt, this is down to

their simple lifestyle - a lifestyle where everyday everyone is outside from six in the morning to seven in the evening, constantly farming, building, learning, playing, cooking, selling and washing. Since there are no washing machines, no kitchens equipped with ovens and taps, no electricity, the villagers have to do everything the hard way. And although they are undoubtedly burdened because of this, I can't help but think that these same burdens are also the reasons why the villagers are such resourceful, robust and impressive people. Whilst they suffer from lack of the advanced technologies that more developed societies rely on so heavily, they equally benefit from their absence. The inaccessibility of technologies and luxuries means there are no unnecessary distractions from their daily lives, no needless disturbances to their wholesome ways of living. There is just nature and each other, and this simplicity is something I really grew to admire.

During my time in Gyetiase I've tried to immerse myself in village life as much as possible. Fortunately an important part of life here is centred around football, and I've absolutely loved joining in every afternoon. The Ghanaian boys usually wear flip flops as football boots and use large stones as goals. Annoyingly, although I wore trainers and would usually be a few years older than the others, I would still end up having the ball taken from me.



A Village Football Match

Sometimes the Gyetiase teams would organise matches against other villages, and whenever they were playing on home turf (dust), I would make sure to be alongside the pitch cheering for a Gyetiase victory. On a few occasions I was even invited to wear the team kit (usually a Liverpool shirt, Arsenal shorts and Man City socks... criminal) and play for the men's team. The training sessions before these matches were always amazing to watch. The Ghanaian boys would fill up empty plastic bottles with dust and use them as cones, dribbling in and out of them, passing through them etc. This for me was just

another example of how the villagers, because of their misfortunes, had been moulded into such creative and resourceful people. I was more than happy to help them in this department and was very popular with the village children after giving them a few footballs.

Another gift that made me well liked by the village youth was a deck of cards. In the evenings, I would sit down with a few of the children and play a card game that I had managed to teach them. Even more than card games, the children loved to see magic tricks, and I was acclaimed "magic broni²" at one point for my card tricks.

I enjoyed visiting other villages too. I ended up visiting one, Mantukwa, which apparently means "I didn't leave for nothing", much more than the others since Nicholas³ and I decided it would be a suitable village in which to carry out the latrine project⁴. We went there regularly, both to introduce the project to the villagers and to check up on their progress building latrines. During one of my first and most memorable visits to Mantukwa, Nicholas had arranged a meeting so that I could introduce myself to the villagers and explain that I was responsible for the project's funding. The meeting was held around a tree, to which a goat was tied. Earlier that day, Nicholas had mentioned that volunteers who had sponsored villages in the past had been given

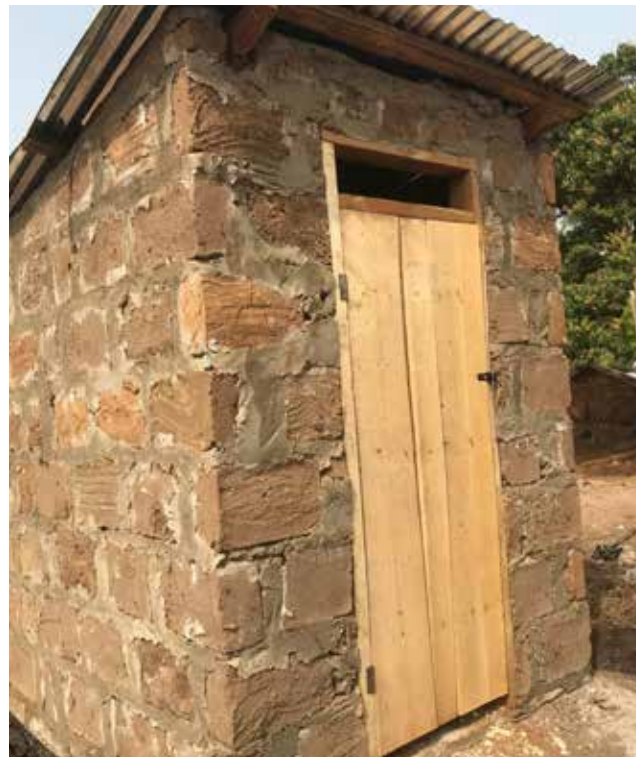
live animals as a way of saying thank you from the villagers. I hadn't taken him very seriously at the time but I was forced to believe him when a goat was untied from the tree at the end of the meeting and carried off to the boot of Nicholas' car.



Freddie and his Goat

Not only did I receive a goat, but the project itself was a massive success thanks to the hard work of the villagers and the brilliant planning and organisation of Nicholas and the rest of the Ashanti Development Team. In little more than a time, most households had their own latrine to use and boast about to neighbouring villages

and, as Nicholas commented, the latrines were better looking than the houses which owned them.



A Latrine at Mantukwa

Another Ashanti Development project I was lucky enough to be involved with was the Farm Support Project⁵. Nicholas and I would often drive to villages where the Project was taking place to monitor progress and collect the money plus interest that had been loaned them at the start of the project. We would then visit the villages that had not yet received support, introduce the project to the villagers and redistribute the money to those who were selected. Whenever we went to a village to collect money that had previously been loaned, it astonished me to see that each and every person was able to pay back the sum. The project was such a success that it was not uncommon for farmers who had participated for some time to own shops and motorbikes.

My biggest contribution, I feel, came from teaching a maths class at the local primary school. Although I was new to teaching, I was determined to do a good job and thought I would first need to gain the respect of the children, to convince them that I was an experienced teacher, someone who wasn't going to be messed around. Unfortunately I wasn't accustomed to the old school methods of chalk and black board. After a confident start, I proceeded to write "mathematics" on the board but the chalk snapped clean off and fell to the floor. From then on the class never really took me as seriously as I would have liked. After a month of lessons,

I was satisfied that they had made real progress, partly down to the class' constant re-assurance. Every time I asked if they had understood the topic we had just gone through, the children would nod emphatically, making big smiles and thumbs up. Convinced that they were ready to be put to the test, I set the class a small exam. With a class best of 5/24, we clearly had a lot more work to do.



Freddie at work

That said it was an absolute delight to teach the Gyetiase children, all of whom were very polite and hardworking. In fact, I enjoyed it so much that the one hour period that I spent teaching

quickly became the highlight of my day and I will without doubt miss the class and the lessons very much.

As will I miss the entirety of my time spent in Gyetiase. It is a special place full of incredible people and I feel lucky to have been able to be a part of it. I cannot thank the charity enough for their hospitality and generosity and I hope to visit again soon. Medaase Gyetiase.

¹Probably umbilical hernia

²Magic white man.

³Nicholas Aboagye, Ashanti Development's Country Director

⁴Before leaving the UK, Freddie ran a half marathon to raise money for Ashanti Development's Develop A Village project. The money was used to buy everything necessary to build one latrine for each household with the villagers carrying out the unskilled labour. At the same time, they are trained in health and hygiene.

⁵The project provides four years of farming and marketing training and loans to buy quality farm inputs.

Rose's Story

Sometimes Ashanti Development interviews local people. It can be a long, arduous process, especially if conducted through an interpreter, but it can also give us unexpected insights into local people's lives.

We first met Rose ten years ago. A serious, beautiful twenty-nine year old, Rose lived in Kumasi and helped her mother look after her eleven younger brothers and sisters.

As a young woman, Rose's mother used to run a stall in Kumasi market selling lengths of printed cotton. This is where Rose's father, wandering round the market, first saw her and immediately decided he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. They married soon after and that's when the trouble started.

Family planning was an unknown concept at that time. Even if they'd heard of it, access to condoms was impossible. "It seemed as though every time my father looked at my mother, she had another baby," said Rose.

Her father worked all hours to feed his growing family but they were always hungry and more kept arriving. In the end he realised he was fighting a losing battle so he asked the family elders lend him the gold which they, like most

Ashanti families in the area, had collected from the surface of the earth over the years. He made them a solemn vow to pay it back as soon as he possibly could. He used it to raise a loan with the bank and borrowed a passport from a friend, promising to post it to him as soon as he arrived in England. He got on a plane and became an illegal immigrant in the UK.

“Now we have enough food and everything we need,” said Rose. “I can even afford Spanish lessons. But I miss my father,” she added.

A couple of years ago, we managed to catch up with Rose’s father in London. He told us he worked as a cleaner, spending his days or nights going from one job to the next. He had no job security and lived in a tiny, unheated room in a house inhabited only by illegal immigrants. They were in constant fear of police raids. When he came home after work, he would get straight into bed to keep warm, and spend a long time on whatsapp to his family in Ghana. On Sunday he went to church. That was his whole life.

He said he was happy his family were no longer hungry but wasn’t sure when he’d ever see them again.

Rose’s father is typical of many of the illegal immigrants to this country. He is not a criminal or a benefit scrounger. A fairer society would judge him a highly responsible family man who

had little option but to travel if his family was to survive.

On the outskirts of our home village of Gyetiase stand several substantial, cement houses, usually unoccupied. They represent the dreams of past residents of the village, who left home to support themselves and their families and managed to earn enough both to do this and to save up for a retirement home for their old age.

Would these people travel if they could make a half-decent living in their own country? Certainly some of the most confident and ambitious would travel. Ghana has its fair share of young people eager to see the world. Others would travel for different reasons – for education or training which was unavailable in Ashanti, for example. But most seem to come home eventually and the numbers leaving the country would be much lower if life in Ghana were just a little more bearable.

Many of the problems besetting Ghana and Africa in general are largely down to the behaviour of the developed world. Had it not been for the devastating effect of climate change which made itself felt at the turn of the century it would still be possible for the Ashantis to grow cocoa and farmers would still be prosperous.

The most shocking thing is the tiny amount of money needed to enable people to stay at home

and bring up their families without hunger or fear. The experience of Ashanti Development, which started as a group of well-meaning amateurs, makes the point. In twenty years, we have only managed to raise and spend some two million pounds sterling on our work. We believe with this we have made the lives of people in one local authority area (there are 228 in Ghana) at least tolerable. Unfortunately, there’s no way of setting that figure against the incidence of emigration.

De-worming the Children

By Ruth Simpson

Ruth was a nurse in Mampong Maternity Hospital in the late 60s and early 70s. She often returns to Ashanti and runs a project for de-worming under our auspices.

The De-Worming Project in the northern villages of Ashanti, Ghana, was started in 2018. Since then Ashanti Development has treated well over 19,000 children and I know the parents of those children are so grateful for this help.

There are four types of tropical worms in children.

One type causes anaemia, another worm lives a phase of its life cycle in the lungs causing severe chest infections, and the other two types cause malnutrition.

Worm infestation is endemic in the remote villages of Northern Ashanti. It causes children to have large protruding tummies making walking difficult. Some children are unable to walk to school. It also weakens the immune system and infections such as malaria, cholera, typhoid etc are easily caught. Sadly some children don't survive.

Since the de-worming project started things are changing for these children. The Minister of Health for the area of Eastern Sekyere allows government nurses to distribute the worm tablets for us. They are given out in schools, and to children who can't walk to school, and also to very poor remote villages where children don't attend school. One nurse found the dirt road she was driving along ended a mile or so before she reached the village she was going to. She walked along a lonely bush track to the village and gave out the worm tablets. Such is the dedication of the nurses to this project.

It costs 50p to give one child one de-worming tablet. Last year over 5,000 were treated and this year we've treated another 14,000. The 50p covers the cost of the tablet, also travelling costs and community sensitisation.

This last takes a lot of time. If there is a school in the village the chief gathers together the teachers and the villagers. The nurses explain the need for children to have worm tablets. This is necessary because many village people have never taken tablets and parents may refuse treatment because they are afraid. The safety of the tablets and side effects are also explained.

De-worming takes about three years to treat in severe cases and then a maintenance dose is needed until children are older and leave school.

The results of treating worm infestation are amazing. In 2018 we went back to Esereso, the first village we treated for worm infestation. We met a group of parents and children walking along the bush road, and when she saw us one lady shouted out MIRACLE. Some children who have had a year of treatment still have largish tummies but look how happy they are, able to walk and run. De-worming tablets truly act like miracles.

The Medical Officer of Health, the nurses and parents cannot thank Ashanti Development enough for making the De-Worming Project possible.

News in Brief

Farm Support

We're not big-headed but we can't help being proud of our Farm Support Scheme, created by Nicholas Aboagye and currently eliminating hunger from over thirty Ashanti villages. We're trying to expand it fast to counter the worldwide food shortage Oxfam predicts.



Farmers repaying their loans

We were lobbied recently by people from Bimma village, where they've benefitted from farm support for several years. A lot of the village youth left the village some years ago to find work in the city of Kumasi. Bimma representatives asked if we could see our way to extending the scheme for those same young people, who'd like to come home again and farm, now they know that farming can be a profitable activity.

Bee-Keeping

Dawn and Paul run the bee-keeping project. They're setting up a demonstration apiary, which is coming together well with several swarms arriving and settling there.

They've also decided to give extra help to some of the best beekeepers, so they can develop their hives. Mustapha of Dagati – a village of migrants from North Ghana – will get ten new hives. Dawn says he's got a feel for bees and is a hard worker. Four will go to Ellen, who lives near Nsuta. She's been a steady but successful beekeeper.

Meanwhile, Agado who is permanently employed on the project by Ashanti Development, continues to produce as much honey as all the other beekeepers combined.



Basket hive