

Nandri

The Joe Homan Charity – Bringing Joy and Hope to Children



Newsletter Summer 2014



All life is a Journey • Volunteers

Chairman's welcome

The future of JHC depends critically on the changing needs of the children in India, and as we attempt to look further ahead it was too good have the opportunity during my recent visit to have useful discussions with the Non-Government Organisations (NGO) we support, listening to their analysis of social trends in India and also their views on the future of their own organisations.

The Tamil Nadu Government has been outstandingly successful in reducing absolute poverty, with a mixture of rural employment programmes, free rice for the destitute, grants for elderly people and widows, together with a female child protection benefit, meaning a significant reduction in homelessness, extreme destitution and vagabondage. However, there has also been a rapid increase in the divide between rich and poor and having a safety net has not automatically enhanced the quality of life. Despite almost universal primary education in rural areas the quality of teaching in the schools is often poor. While there is a desire for children to remain at home and go to the local school – and hence residential numbers are decreasing (reflected in the closure of Watrap Boys Town last year) - there will be a continuing need for residential accommodation for children who are

victims of broken and dysfunctional families and those who suffer from disabilities or HIV/AIDS.

The provision of good quality education is crucially important. Some schools are excellent but a large number in the rural areas are of very poor quality, thus the Supplementary Education Centres we support provide important enrichment activities for village children and give them extra practice and confidence in the learning of basic skills. BTS is currently providing a number of Education for Life centres, and also a Nursery and Primary School for standards 1 to 5. Both these new projects have taken time to establish but very encouraging evaluation results from both projects show what a difference they are making to the achievements of the children who attend. There will be more information about these projects later but they represent a significant change of direction for both our organisations. Additionally, we continue to support Evening Study Centres run by other partner NGO's. The Dindigul Aids Control Home is now in its wonderful new building and we continue to give our support to this impressive project. It was very moving to see how happy the children were despite the unfortunate situation they are in; this is their home for life.

Gopi has settled down extremely well as our India Office Manager. Members and Supporters who visited earlier this year were full of praise for the efficient and cheerful way in which Gopi looked after them, and together with his assistant Vijay they form a very effective team.

We have had excellent support from all our Volunteers and are grateful for their invaluable help. They continue to form an indispensable part of our organisation and we make no apology for our appeal for further help in this newsletter. If you feel you could spare some time, Jon Crouch at our Peterborough office would welcome your call.

Peter Church, Chairman



Peter gathers with BTS Committee members

Please help, we need more volunteers

We set great store by being accountable for all money donated, so volunteers are valuable as the eyes and ears of the Charity, who can actually witness the work being done. To work with the Joe Homan Charity overseas is a unique opportunity to see inside another culture, to work with children and to see an NGO in operation. Not only will you be helping some of the poorest children to have the chance of an education and opportunity in life, you will find the experience rewarding, enriching, and enjoyable.

Volunteers will have tasks allocated that will involve visiting projects and meeting the children, write monitoring reports and very importantly involving with the children in the daily activities. We also have a small number of short-term placements, to help teach English to the children in our supported projects.

Once accepted for volunteer work, you will receive full briefing on arrival at the project, and our local Manager will arrange your individual work programme. To work with the Charity is interesting and rewarding for those who are enthusiastic about it.

Please consider whether you could manage to give two or three weeks of your time to help as a Volunteer, or perhaps take up the Sponsorship of one of our very deserving youngsters.



Cathy Fleury enjoys her time whilst teaching in the FMPS

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Front cover photo:

Children at Anthony Abs
gather in their library



Poverty has not left Tamil Nadu

All of life is a journey

The people featured here are just a few of those who have travelled with the Joe Homan Charity. Although the routes are various, the destination is always the same – Hope and Opportunity for the poorest of the poor.

Steve Millar's journey began a little over 20 years ago when he accompanied a small group of teachers and students from five Ipswich schools, who all travelled to South India to help in the building of Tindlepatti Children's Village. Steve's commitment continues unabated to this day, and here he puts some perspective on why our work as an international charity is as much needed today as it was when that little band arrived at Tirumangalam, travel weary and a bit overwhelmed, at 2am on a sultry July night.

Tamil Nadu has been identified as an example of how economic growth can be accompanied by social progress, and the figures for adult literacy, life expectancy, school enrolment, healthcare provision, etc, are all favourable. Why, therefore do we need to keep sending our hard earned money to a country whose

government claims not to need it and a state where things seem to be (relatively) rosy? The answer to this question is fairly straightforward; we know there is still a desperate need for targeted private aid, and JHC remains very much "in the thick of it". UN/WHO data tells us that India has 40% of the world's children who are undernourished. In a recent report it was emphasised that liberalising the economy had led to increasing marginalisation of the poor, particularly in rural areas. Despite its high level of urbanisation Tamilnad has a large rural population of some 39 million, at least 25% of whom fall below the official poverty line. That's rather more people than we at JHC can hope to help! Destitution and hopelessness remain widespread in those mainly rural districts of Tamilnad where our efforts are targeted. We know that the social evils - child labour, girl infanticide, ill-health

- which are the concomitants of extreme poverty continue to blight the lives of young people who we can help. Of course, there are some places in India where the need is even more desperate, but we are not, and never will be in a position to "up sticks" and move our focus elsewhere.

Following the model Joe Homan first established for small scale targeted aid giving, we have developed a network of relationships with a number of partner NGOs whose work we support financially. This is where our collective experience and expertise is at its most effective. Whilst we might envisage a time when our help is no longer required, that time is not now. I suspect it will not come in the lifetimes of most of your trustees. It is as important as ever to continue our commitment; to bring hope and opportunity to the poorest of the poor.

How to stay young and ride pillion

A series of coincidences and a decision to buy a ticket to India rather than pay winter heating bills led to a visit to Tamil Nadu and a discovery that riding pillion passenger is fun. Old age and retirement is much better than anyone ever suggested. I had travelled in India previously but never alone and with some trepidation. On the train from Chennai to Madurai I shared life stories with the wife of a recently retired Indian Ambassador. Her advice was to join every celebration I could to experience life in Tamil Nadu. So next day when the guide in the temple at Madurai offered to take me to a betrothal celebration I could only accept and within minutes found myself on the back of his motorbike. If you know about the traffic on the roads in India you will know that this was an exciting journey. 24 hours later I attended another marriage celebration, this at 6am being the hour declared propitious by the astrologer. As I



began my visits to Boys Towns, Children's Villages, and to interview students who had moved on to Technical Colleges, my initial bewilderment was slowly replaced by an informed sense of wonder at the transformation sponsorship brings to the lives of these children. Each evening I read several chapters of *Miles of Smiles*, Joe Homan's account of the progress from the early beginnings of the charity in 1964 to the present day, and most days I rode pillion again on someone's motorbike. I am not alone in renewing my youth in this fashion! At last the final reports were written and all that remained was for me to make a personal journey to visit the village where my aunt had been a missionary

nurse from 1956 to 1968. Nothing prepared me for the discovery there of a photograph of my relatives taken in 1967. Never did the world feel smaller.

I have now returned to Umbria and am already planning next year's winter journey. I am inspired by the determination of children who rise above their poverty and through education and a loving community find they can provide for themselves and their future families. Why not consider whether perhaps you too could ride pillion in Tamil Nadu? I had a much better time than I would have had sat in front of the fire at home.

Beverley Wilcox

Journey to Madurai



Geoff and Catherine Foster have made many journeys to India, and it was during a visit to Madurai in 2005 that they first discovered Madurai Seva Ashram, a home for poor and orphaned girls. Catherine tells us that the warm welcome they received is lodged in her brain forever. It was clear

from the beginning that the project was in dire need of capital expenditure to improve the very basic facilities, where the girls slept in the dining hall all curled up one against another like flower petals. Now a new dining-hall is on its way and JHC has funded a much needed toilet block, showers, and play area. The provision of water in big Indian cities is a constant headache and you always have to dig deeper than your neighbour, so JHC has also funded a new bore well. Initially, the ladies on the management committee, all devoted to the project, had limited aspirations for the girls.

At the age of 16 they would return to their villages, often to marry, with an education but no further skills training. Now, with the encouragement of JHC the girls are offered apprenticeships and this has been a remarkable success, with this year's batch doing business studies, nursing, teacher training and science. Staff attend good quality child care development courses and this gives them greater insight into the needs of these special but very vulnerable girls. Many local families will sponsor a special meal for the girls as a thanksgiving for a significant

event in their family life, a birthday or anniversary. The girls are delighted when this is announced as although well fed, their every day food is of necessity quite plain. Religious festivals are also a chance to celebrate with songs, dressing up and dancing. These girls are being raised in a loving environment and the attention given to their educational needs is paramount. They are given the opportunity to transform their lives and those of their very poor families. The girls will raise their own families far better equipped to face a modern India.



Boys Town Society – their journey this year

For many decades vulnerable children in Tamil Nadu have found a safety net and bright future with Boys Town Society. Exchanging the threat or experience of child labour for the security and stimulation of a BTS residential project, thousands of youngsters have gained an education and employable skills, lifting them and their families out of poverty - permanently. Young lives blighted by parental loss, family breakdown or sheer poverty, found the focus and support they needed, flourished and went on to enjoy regular well paid work and social respect.

Over the years needs and solutions have changed – certainly “one size doesn't fit all.” Early Boys Towns equipped farm trainees with practical skills supported by elementary numeracy, literacy and theory, enabling them to return home with a few sheep, milch buffaloes or a cart with



oxen. As India began the long journey from agrarian to industrial society, schools became more accessible and emphasis slowly switched to getting an education. That in itself doesn't automatically ensure regular income but acquiring a marketable skill does, either self-employed or with an employer hungry for reliable workers. So



was born the BTS Apprenticeship Scheme. After a basic education boys learnt a practical skill or trade, initially under a master craftsman but later formally with established companies, before launching out say as carpenter, mason, tailor, mechanic or driver. This principle still applies; BTS encourages youngsters to reach their educational potential then continue into further education or vocational/skills training as best suited to their ability and interests.

Children too come in all sizes, which is why in addition to Boys Towns and a Girls Town all catering for secondary school students, BTS also opened Children's Villages for primary school children. Here children live in groups of mixed age and gender, in their own cottage with their own foster mother. These are vulnerable or distressed women, sometimes having a young child with them or older children in other BTS schemes. They live with their 'family' round the clock, attending to or supervising individual and family chores, joining in their play as a mother would and, taking turns with the shopping, cooking, school run and duties for the whole village. Older children joining or transferring to a 'Town' live in small bungalows, each with a room monitor, under a Director, his assistant and a full time cook. In order not to alienate the

children from their roots, their lifestyle replicates many aspects of home life, including sleeping on floor mats, laundering their own clothes and keeping their 'home' clean. Salient differences are good sanitation, regular nutritious meals and, caring support as they each give it their best shots.



Residential sites were placed where the need was greatest, a factor which has changed with time. Of the 'Towns', Pannaikadu high in the hills has been variously likened to a mountain goat's retreat or a small monastery, clinging to its rocky mound overlooking a verdant ravine. Nilakottai is off the beaten track in open countryside, with the local village

nuzzling one flank and plenty of room for cultivations. Athoor has tree crops and cultivable land, with a backdrop of hills and a lake nearby. Rajapalayam's rural setting with plenty of space for cultivated and tree crops, contrasts with the busy road passing its gates and with development creeping out from the town to embrace it.

One location (a Boys Town, a Girls Town and two Children's Villages within reach) remains about 20 kms from the temple city of Madurai, but the city is marching out to annex the country, while the local town Tirumangalam also expands. The busy main road is wider, traffic denser and faster and, buildings sprout alongside. Girls Town nestles against its local village but schools and buses lie in the opposite direction - a walk across fields in all weathers. Isolation and the peacocks have abandoned Rengasamy Children's Village; now a furniture factory buzzes along one side and new buildings slink up to the other. Tindlepatti too draws nearer to village outskirts and new neighbours. The newest Children's Village, Anthony Abs near Dindigul, sees village outposts drawing closer but retains its rural character. Its fruit orchard is mature while ornamental plants and shade trees blur its stark newness. Regardless of age and any crops for income or consumption, all

sites nurture shade trees for hot season comfort and copious ornamental shrubs and climbers for pride of possession. Riotous bougainvillea reigns supreme, to be pillaged for visitors' garlands.

All residential projects follow the same basic pattern. Children attend external schools but enjoy a communal life together, with extra-mural support for their studies and considerable opportunity for games, sports, hobbies and leisure activities, meanwhile acquiring valuable whole life skills. Now in house support extends to computer skills and special tuition, to reinforce individual weaknesses or deficiencies in school coverage. Daily life kicks off at daybreak, with time scheduled for personal and communal chores, meals, homework, extra tuition or private study, leisure activities and games, with extra study time for those preparing for exams. Periodic events like picnics, Parliament, Parents' Day, etc, similarly have their slot.

Head Teachers assess BTS youngsters' academic skills as at least equal to and sometimes better than classmates from normal homes. Invariably they excel at sports, games and cultural dances and are invited to strut their stuff at school and community events or celebrations. Teachers generally praise their good

behaviour, positive interaction with teachers and their mature, willing demeanour. Most agree girls are the better students. One teacher sums it up. Asked which were the outstanding BTS children in her school, she replied "All of them. They are from poor parents. They are the first generation to be studying." They in their time are pioneers, yet follow in the footsteps of thousands of BTS children before them.



An essential ingredient in the seamless transition from school to work is the vocational guidance BTS provides. Meetings with the children and their parents explain the options available and brief them about their academic capability and reasonable expectations. Visits to companies and organisations give exposure to the world of work. Staff invited from Industrial Training Institutes and Polytechnics describe courses available, their admission requirements and likely employment opportunities. Final year secondary school students have a two-day 'Skill Development' programme. Less academic youngsters are encouraged to persevere but when their limit is reached, suitable training leading to a good job will



follow. Those completing their Secondary School Leaving Certificate face a wider choice of courses and levels. The majority opt for skills or vocational training, brighter students can enter polytechnic for a three year diploma course, but those with top marks have the option of two years Higher





Secondary Education – precursor to a degree course. Some go for it and are hugely successful. Others may feel they must get earning earlier, but part-time and correspondence courses now allow them to catch up later if they so wish.

Typical skills and vocational training courses include nursing, computer skills, electrician, motor mechanic, tailoring and, instrument mechanic. Polytechnic courses are primarily in engineering - civil, mechanical, electrical, electronic communications and, IT/computer related. While nursing and tailoring remain the prerogative of the girls, they give the boys strong competition on many of the engineering and IT courses. Although apprentices live at home or in campus hostels, they remain nominal members of their 'Town' and are always welcome visitors, mingling with and providing role models for their admiring juniors. The school children place great reliance on what their 'seniors' have to say about the world beyond school.

In 2011 BTS opened an English medium primary school at the Tirumangalam site, for children from their two local Children's Villages. Intended to address the growing need for spoken English and restore quality across the curriculum, future plans include increasing capacity with new buildings and fee-paying admissions from local families. This development echoes a more recent edict, spearheading introduction of English Medium streams, preferred by many parents, in government schools. Some schools eagerly are up and running, some drag their heels while others refuse to countenance it. Very few teachers have adequate English and sadly 'English' will continue to be heard. Meanwhile many Tamil speaking youngsters embarking on training and

especially polytechnic and degree courses continue to meet English medium head on.

In recent years many parents found it cost effective to put their children into proliferating school hostels nearer home, contributing to the decline in BTS admissions from their catchment area. However a shot in the foot by Government's own Social Services declared some hostels unsuitable for purpose and closed them. In contrast, BTS's facilities have won the broad approval of government monitoring teams. In 2008 Perumparai Boys Town closed,

Within the last decade, the Indian Government has increased resources for education and training

improving occupancy at other Boys Towns. Last year Watrap followed suit but this year total occupancy has dropped among the remaining projects.



While in some areas development has introduced new and more work for those with the ability to adapt, one downside is loss of land, which does nothing for traditional village economy and way of

life. Additionally there is concern about increasing break up among families. According to some this already affects children, with girls now seriously at risk. Possibly the historic definition of 'vulnerable' is changing and admissions could be set to rise for different reasons.

It's been a long journey since the first Boys Town opened, with many changes along the way as The Boys Town Society has adapted to prevailing conditions. Today ambitions run high, a broad range of technological qualifications and employment beckons and, unless parents dictate otherwise, most children aim to complete their education according to ability, take a course and get a good job. No longer required to return home to work, most have the freedom to go where the work is, even if it means living away from home. Girls too are enjoying this freedom and compete with the boys for what used to be men's work, in a nation hungry for skills and talents to support its burgeoning development.

What of the future? The old criteria for vulnerability may be changing, but eradication of poverty is still light years away. New needs may emerge, maybe for children from homes broken by alcoholism

or children infected by HIV with no homes. More may be living at home but still needing support to overcome mounting deficiencies in government education. BTS and other JHC Partners have already developed models for such children's community based non-residential projects. BTS's Education For Life provides an attractive blend of academic coaching, life skills and leisure activities at several village centres. If conventional admissions continue to decline, resources will be freed up to adapt to new needs – residential or non-residential.

Rest assured, as in the past, vulnerable children will continue to be the focus of BTS's mission, with innovative solutions to suit. Together with JHC they'll rise to the challenges and keep the success stories coming. Watch this space!

Gangeswari's journey – to freedom

Gangeswari's father worked in a restaurant and drank most of his meagre earnings. Her mother, who could no longer make ends meet on her farm labourer's casual wage, turned in desperation to Boys Town Society. That was the moment Gangeswari's journey began and her life started to change. Once she moved to



secondary school she shone, becoming one of only three girls in her year to continue into higher secondary school, the precursor to a degree. By now she was aiming high and was admitted to a private engineering college for Bachelor of Engineering. At first it was tough going; all work was in English, quite a challenge to a Tamil speaker, even without the complex concepts and technical vocabulary of her new discipline. Now she holds third place in her class of sixty, and is winding up on her studies, preparing for final exams and interviews by prospective employers. However, her intention is to study for a Masters Degree then take up lecturing at college level. Meanwhile home life has improved, father has overcome his drink problem and mother no longer has to work. Gangeswari is a petite young woman with a big personality and impressive drive and determination. Although often solemn as she chats about herself and her hopes, her innate happiness shines through. Just as she intends to master her discipline, so she is master of her life.

Rajakumari's Journey – from student to teacher

Rajakumari comes from a large family in a poor rural village. Unable to support their family, her parents turned to Madurai Sevashram Girls Home for help where

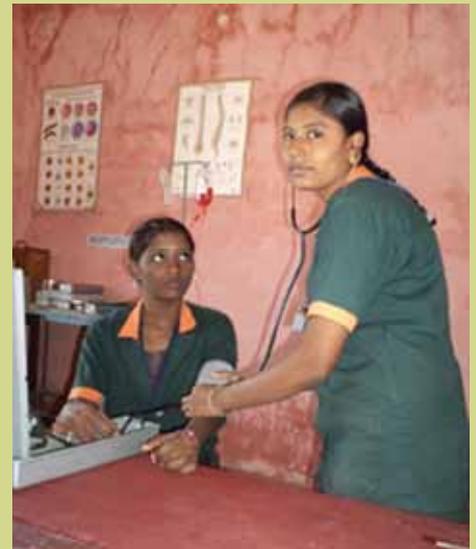
Rajakumari was admitted together with her four sisters. After completing higher secondary school, she took a one year diploma course in Office Management, but when no suitable computer work could be found the shrewd and determined tactician in Rajakumari then switched to Plan B - a two year Teacher Training Diploma. A year as a temporary teacher in a primary school, proved to be to Rajakumari's liking. Physics had always been her favourite subject and a degree would enable her to get a post in secondary school. In the first year of her 3 year BSc Physics course she admits it was tough at first but is getting easier. Finding a job near home won't be a problem but the best terms and opportunities are in government service. Once working she'll study by correspondence course



for Bachelor of Education. Then she'll be ready for a teaching job in a government secondary school. Under its "People in Need" programme, JHC is making an annual ex-gratia payment to help with her degree course. She'll be the first girl in her community of some 300 families to have obtained a degree. Her strong handshake as she accepts her richly deserved award matches her fierce determination to control and change her life...and will help to change the lives of her countless pupils.

Sudha's journey – from nursery to nursing

Sudha was barely six when she was first enrolled in the Anthony Abs Children's Village. In this caring environment and among children like herself, victims of poverty, she set about changing her life. Fast forward to July 2014 and she will complete her two year diploma course at a nursing college and commence work



in a private clinic. Soon after, she'll be married, to an educated relative, thankfully it's agreed she'll continue working. Without doubt her new home will be a vast improvement on the mud-walled and thatched single room without electricity or water, of her childhood. Initially her patients will benefit from her skills and expertise but later her own family will be immeasurably the winners. Sudha is very aware of the support her sponsors have given to help her realise her ambition. Without them her future could have been a life of exploitation and deprivation.

A volunteer's journey

Some fifteen years ago, following his retirement, Terry Quadling first went to India as a volunteer for JHC. Since then he has returned year after year, bringing the children to life with his words and detailed reports, and his name has become familiar to almost every one of our supporters. The youngsters in India recognise him instantly and it was with great joy they helped him celebrate a milestone birthday this year. Yes, this has been a journey of many many happy returns.



Home of love

I recently visited the new home of the DACS project in Dindigul. It is a lovely two storey building which contrasts greatly with the home I saw just 3 years ago. That itself was a huge step forward from the small house used by Mr Thankachan in 2003 to set up his home for children with HIV and AIDS.

Back then, there were 17 children, now there are almost 50. In the early days Thankachan called it an 'orphanage' as fear and prejudice of HIV is rife in India. Of course, he could not keep the purpose of his project a complete secret, and when the local community found out about the HIV children they were discouraged from attending the local schools, being taught instead at the project. Over the years the Government has to differing degrees supported the home and education of these children who are once again integrated into the local schools. I'm pleased to say that the children are doing well educationally.



JHC has been involved with this project since 2008. It is sobering to read the report from that year which said that the children 'cannot look forward to more than half a dozen years of life at best', and the number of deaths in the early years was evidence of that. The Government provides the drugs to treat these children, but Thankachan realised that the key to a longer life was nutrition. His approach of ensuring that the children have a good healthy diet has shown remarkable results, with only one or two deaths since 2010, and none since early 2013. This has, paradoxically, put more pressure on Thankachan who wants to be able to provide a home and support for these

children for life.

The atmosphere at this project is uplifting. You receive a true welcome from the children who are smiling and wanting to hold your hand, just like any other child in Dindigul. But these children are different. Most have been abandoned by their parents because of their infection, dumped on the streets, or left beside an ATM machine. Abandoned children are taken to a Government Hospital for assessment. The majority of children are then placed in an orphanage with hopes for adoption, but those who are HIV positive are sent to DACS, here they are cared for and can be assured of a loving home for life.

DACS has come a long way from its humble beginnings, and the contributions by JHC have played an important role in this development. This has included supporting the daily lives of the children and much needed improvements to their home. The latest support has been towards a new building which was officially opened in December 2013. This has cost over £52,000 to complete, with Thankachan raising much from local donors and family. The improvement in living conditions here cannot be over-emphasised.

The children now have a clean, well supplied and safe environment in which to live; they are more accepted by the local population; they can mix more with children of their own age at the local school. Above all, their life expectancy has improved immeasurably, as has their quality of life.

Yet we must not be complacent. In the short term DACS is still in need of funds to



improve their home and develop a small area of land into a playground for the children. And the future? For Thankachan to continue this excellent work he will need continued support he can rely on, and that means an on-going commitment from JHC. For me, to see the improvements in the health and living conditions of these children over the last three years has been both heart-warming and humbling. As I watch children playing, children who I had thought would not be alive today, I cannot help but wonder about their future in a society where people with HIV and AIDS are still feared and avoided. More and more local people are helping to support the project in a small way, through donations or volunteering, but the long-term future is more than they can handle. Thankachan had a dream in 2003 to provide a place where children with HIV and AIDS could live their short lives in a home full of love. With the life-expectancy of these children now immeasurably improved his new dream is to provide them with higher education, work and a home through their adult years. The commitment to funding which JHC has made just might make this possible

Dorinda Balchin

10,000km from Norwich to India one man – one bike

'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.'



Nick Prior

It was true for Dickens in the 19th century; it is true for us now, the enduring, tragic paradox of humanity.

Just like Dickens there were two ways of looking at my bike ride across Europe, through Kazakhstan and then down through the Himalayas to India:

1. Self-promoting, self-indulgent and ego fuelling. 2. Self-sacrificing, charitable and fundamentally good. I hope you might agree that it is the latter! I had six months free before going to medical school. In this time I aimed to bike 10,000 km crossing 20 countries, unsupported and in principal on my own to raise funds for 3 charities; MAP, StreetChild and The Joe Homan Charity.



Why has this charity touched me so much? One anecdote says it all – whilst at the charity in 2007, one man, with an ageless face called Muthupandhi, cooked for us and kept a general eye on us. Why bring him up? He is the perfect example of the transforming work Joe Homan had started in 1965. Muthupandhi was a street child taken in by Joe on his first project with street children found around Madurai Railway Station. Years ago Muthupandhi faced a life of poverty, now he owns a modest house, has a wife and three children! Amazingly, all three of his daughters are part of India's middle class revolution, working for telecommunication and IT companies. What progress! This is by no means a rare occurrence; in fact it is quite a normal achievement for JHC. Why? Because it is a exceptional charity with

fantastic principles: The whole structure for the children is to give the kids greater opportunities through education but also to make them all very aware life is not going to be easy for them.

Following his epic cycle ride, Nick Prior arrived back in Norfolk, safe and well. Having had time to reflect on his experience, and to catch up with friends and family, Nick put pen to paper to summarise his trip and pass on his thanks:

"Dear Friends, The last months have seen me reach India by bike, cycling over 10,000 km spending 60 nights in my tent, 25 in strangers' houses, 21 in hostels, 17 with friends, 10 in transit, and 2 on the streets! I saw so much and experienced great generosity from all I met, to the extent that it has been impossible to take everything in.

The months took their toll on me and the desire and commitment to the cause wavered as the reality of border crossings made my initial target unobtainable. As a result it was the last two weeks, spent catching trains and buses, which tested my resolve the most; not being on the bike, meant the purpose for my existence had disappeared. It took the biggest part of me to accept defeat and form a new plan.

I am not a natural cyclist, nor introvert for that matter! Hence some of the long days on the bike, and on my own, felt like long drawn out nightmares. It was thanks to your charitable donations and support that I did not waiver in my cause. If I had set off solely for my own sense of achievement I would have turned back at Tbilisi or perhaps even Dunkirk!

I thank you wholeheartedly for keeping me going. In total my trip has raised over £30,000, split evenly between my chosen charities. Lastly I want to say that, in all 20 countries I cycled through I was struck by the common decency and goodwill I met from one and all. Not once did I feel intimidated or threatened. In today's world bad news sells newspapers, hence it is no surprise that we see the world in a darkened tint. To many it seems dangerous and stupid to have cycled independently through countries we associate with



poverty and crime. From my experience these preconceived conceptions are wrong. Amazingly one can set off on a bike and pedal to India risking less than cycling through London. Thank you once again for all your support.

Already feeling saddle sore just imagining it? For those who did not see Nick's internet blog, here are a few excerpts giving a flavour of his experiences.

Day 22:

Distance 105km

End Point Ljubljana

I head towards the Wurzenpass, the last hurdle the Alps can throw at me. Altitude just 1073 m but full of inclines and freezing cold. I feel as if I am passing from the west to the east, an area frequently threatened by war.

Days 38–44:

Distance 1000 km

Igoumenitsa to Istanbul an area steeped in History and once under Alexander the Great's rule. I arrive here late morning and scout out a backpackers hostel to have a shower and a quick turn around. Later, as the sun dwindled behind the mountains the insects ascended as from thin air. The sky was full of activity, if I had kept my mouth open I would have been a happy trout.

Day 50:

Distance 80km

End Point middle of nowhere

Between Çamkonak and Babali I decide to keep on the coastal road, beautiful but

rugged and hilly. I get lost prior to Kerpe and on stopping by the beach realise that one of my panniers has fallen off. This is not good news. I start kicking dust into the air, stamping my feet, swearing at myself. Then I compose myself and impose upon a family. I point hysterically at the single pannier left, then signal two with my fingers, finally pointing into the distance... they understand me surprisingly quickly. I leave my gear behind and hop in a car with the middle son, and find it 1km down the road. On my return the family invite me to share their BBQ and are devoted to offering me everything they have. One man keeps my glass full, one keeps my plate full and another picks the best of the strawberries out for my pudding. It is rather overwhelming.

Day 83:

Head wind Distance 120km

End Point Dallyar.

The day was a 'pushing on' day, with moments of kindness to keep me going. The poorer the Azeri person the kinder they were. Road side vegetable and fruit sellers gave me tomatoes, cucumbers and cherries.

Days 93–94:

Desert recollections. The parched and barren road through Kazakhstan had tested my resolve. It had also made me think seriously about whether I was realistically going to make it to India. If not, what was I going to do? With the delay for visas in Georgia and slow progress across Europe it had dawned on me that I was

not going to make it to India by biking alone, I had been pushing this thought out of my head for the last month but it had become clear that it was far better to cross the Kazakhstan desert by train and bike the Himalayas than the other way round. I also had the uncertainty of obtaining my Chinese visa in Bishkek, the best place to get a Chinese visa in Central Asia.

Days 96–98:

On arriving at Aralsk I found myself stranded for 48 hours. Whilst sitting in the city's internet café I asked the owner, 'Is there any chance of a family letting me stay for the night?' One hour later I was eating round Dustin's kitchen table. Their kindness and hospitality was second to none, competing with that of the Turks. I fell asleep after lunch and awoke to find they had washed all my clothes! Somehow they had got out stains that no modern detergent could have touched.

Days 133–137:

The end of the road. The last two days were slow and steady. For the first day a 2000m climb kept me battling, however, it left the perfect ending – 120km of downhill. I found myself on the Indian border in no time, without even being stopped by border control. With the relief of finally having reached my end point, I was spent.

Funds raised by Nick for JHC are now being donated to BTS to support their needy children and education – many thanks Nick a good job done.

Journey to Thailand



In February we travelled to visit Thailand Boystown. It was a delight to experience, the wonderful tropical surroundings and the purposeful, cheerful and happy boys. Dr Anukul, the Director of Boystown since its foundation in 1989, and Pramote his 'jack of all trades' young assistant ensure the it runs like clockwork.

While we were there, almost 100 students from Kong Kaen University descended for the weekend. They came on Friday and camped all around – in the library, in the dining hall and on the play areas under a tarpaulin – bodies everywhere! All day Saturday they engaged in farming activities with the boys – hoeing, fencing, creating a hen house for more egg-laying hens, and a pigsty for 4 little piggies! They

dined 'al fresco' and finished off with a big campfire and singsong. On Sunday they played highly competitive basketball, students v boys, accompanied by loud music, cheering and drumming. The boys looked exhausted by suppertime after the students had packed up and gone, but both sides got a lot out of it.

We visited two schools the boys attend, one an enormous establishment with

nearly 3000 students and the other much smaller with 800 pupils. Both were very welcoming and appear to satisfy the needs of their respective pupils. Thailand Boystown has recently benefitted from donations towards much used facilities on site, including a water filtration unit and a four-sided drinking water fountain. The boys were constantly dashing over, picking up a cup and helping themselves to fresh water, especially after an energetic 5-a-side football game – they play football every evening until dusk. Surprisingly the boys are very knowledgeable supporters of top UK teams, especially Manchester United. The dining room now has new tables and stools, and we ate there each evening with the boys, although we opted for a more traditional breakfast and lunch – rice at every meal like the boys seemed too much of a good thing. We were amazed to find a 'Tesco Lotus' not far away to stock up. In fact Tesco stores seemed to pop up everywhere in Thailand.

After 25 years the future of this project is somewhat uncertain, with very high costs and standards when compared to similar projects supported by JHC in India and availability of funds. Proposals are in place to raise more funding locally, and perhaps use some of the site facilities for training programmes for outside students.



Unfortunately it may also be that the number of youngsters receiving their education here will need to reduce.

Certainly a visit to remember! Why not visit yourself and help these youngsters?

Sue and John Bowman, Volunteers