



Contact: admin@undertreeschools.org
Tel: + 44 (0) 7962 976 755
www.undertreeschools.org

A Registered Charity No 1117679 A Registered Company No 5969781
Registered Office: 2 Meredyth Road, Barnes, London SW13 0DY

Dear Friends

March 2020

It has been some time since our last newsletter and we have a lot to tell you! We want to start by saying how much we thank you all for your continued commitment to our girls and the school community in Malek. They depend on your support which is essential to keep the school open. We have really good news from the school. At the end of the school year in December we got the results of their annual examinations. All those in their final year passed the national examinations and gained their certificates. So they now have the option of going on to secondary schools. 6 of them are doing this, joining the 15 of our girls already there.



Congratulations to the teachers who have brought the girls successfully through the school, despite all the ongoing challenges and problems of living in South Sudan.

We are really pleased and proud of our teachers that the state continues to point to our school as a beacon for education.



Life has been tough for the town of Malek Alel this last year. Inflation is high, including prices of food. So in summer the school decided to rent some land to grow crops to feed the school community, but dreadful autumn storms killed all the produce, not only on their land, but across the surrounding area too.

We are so glad that there is a small step forward about getting water: the women and girls of the community no longer need to pump water by hand up from the well in the school compound. In December a local charity provided a solar powered water tower that pumps water up out of the well, so people can now fill their containers from taps!

They still have to carry the full containers home on their heads though.....

The school is keeping up with routine maintenance: in the last few months the girls' toilet block has been repaired, and now has bright blue doors!



The school has been registering girls for the new school year and preparing to give them their annual free dress as school uniform as usual. However, we have just heard that the Government has closed all schools (and churches) in the country for a period to stop the spread of the Corona virus. Let us hope that the measure will protect the girls and their families.



We are so pleased that Peter Boyling, our administrator and now trustee has been able to visit the school in December. The school has not received a visit from its supporters since Spring 2013, when Peter joined supporters from Switzerland at the school. Soon afterwards the civil war broke out and we had not been able to travel there.

Peter received a wonderful welcome. A large crowd met him on the road, with flags, drums and singing, and led him to the chapel. There in a service lasting an hour and a half there were lots of speeches welcoming him. He was able to tell the community how much we supporters had been thinking of them and how pleased he was finally to make another visit. He spent the week meeting with the teachers and wider school community. It was so helpful and special to spend time together in person and to understand in more depth the challenges they have been facing living through these politically difficult times.

The school girls were on their end of year holiday.

It was amazing to see the growing cattle herd that we started a few years ago: originally a dozen animals, now 35!

Back in the UK it has been a difficult year, ending last December with the Charity Commission opening a statutory inquiry into the charity's governance. The Commission's reasons for taking this step revolve around the fact that, with the recently declining value of the South Sudanese Pound, the charity did not obtain market rates for its exchange of sterling into local currency and it failed to obtain documentation to show whether funds remitted to South Sudan had been spent on properly authorised expenditure.

From the announcement of the inquiry the Commission took over the management of the UTS bank account. One consequence of this has been that the Co-op Bank has returned one or two donations that supporters have made. We believe that this has occurred in isolated cases, but if you have been affected, please contact Peter Boyling by email (peterboyling@blueyonder.co.uk) because this should not have happened.

As a consequence of the inquiry two important steps have been taken:

1. Peter Boyling paid the visit to the school to which reference is made above. It was specifically an audit visit to introduce new and precise ways in which all of the school's expenditure is to be documented. These new controls came into effect from the week of his visit and are working well.
2. In January all but one of the trustees resigned and three new trustees, including Peter Boyling, were appointed. The new trustees have international experience of financial and operational management in both the commercial and the charity sectors. The names of the trustees are on the website.

The new board of trustees has radically changed the way in which sterling funds are exchanged into South Sudanese Pounds and immediate receipts are sent electronically to the UK. At present all expenditure by the charity is subject to the consent of the Charity Commission. It is not yet clear how long this will last. There will eventually be a Charity Commission report on their inquiry. In the meantime we are appreciative of those supporters who have heard about the charity's current situation and who have expressed their continued support for the school. Such support remains vital to the future of the school.

Joseph has stepped down as a trustee to show how seriously he takes the criticisms the charity is facing. He no longer has any role in the management or governance of the charity, though as the visionary who founded the school he is gratefully remembered and he is glad that it has been possible to keep the school running.

Karin, also no longer a trustee and with no involvement in management or governance, maintains contact with supporters, and the trustees are grateful for her devotion to the school and the girls we are educating.



With our warmest wishes,

the Trustees of Under Tree Schools

PS: if you get this newsletter by post, we need to tell you that sadly we are finding the cost of the paper circulation too expensive to justify any longer. The cost for each postal batch of newsletters is almost half what we give as wages to the teachers each month. We want to send the money instead to the school. So this paper edition is the last. We really want to keep you in touch with UTS, so we are asking please that you send us an email address - yours or a friend's if you don't have one. Our newsletters are also on our website. Please email your email address to: admin@undertreeschools.org Many thanks!

