



Building, Painting, Digging

The first term of this year was a very productive one. The last of the original classrooms was rebuilt, we got new toilets for the boys, and the kids are all registered for their crucial final exams.

Importantly, we made the deadline!

I find myself thinking about how long it took us to get this far the first time around. Obviously, this time we weren't quite building from scratch, nonetheless, thanks to everyone's support, it has all been so much quicker!



My thanks for this latest push, goes to those who helped us to rebuild the last of our original classrooms. The building work happened quickly, but (as some of you might know) we must water new concrete here for many weeks to ensure it doesn't crack (something to do with the heat and the dryness I guess). So, it still all took a while.



We couldn't lay the floor until the walls were ready and then the floor had to be watered for weeks too. We couldn't paint until we had finished watering the floor, which meant

that despite the prompt building work we didn't actually get the finished article till near the end of term.



This was okay though, the goal was to have a building for the school inspection, painting wasn't a deal breaker luckily!



The finished product, the Lion Classroom in all its painted glory.



New Toilets

To comply with regulations, we also had to have separate toilet blocks for boys and girls.

Pit latrines are a bit like icebergs, in as much as what you see above ground is the least of it. Very deep, large holes must be dug, and out here they are dug by hand.

As kids, in Scotland, we were always told that if you dug a deep enough hole you would come out in Australia. Worryingly, we thought that here it was more likely we would come through somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. The kids were both excited and concerned about how that

might turn out! Toilets are more interesting than you might imagine, particularly as none of the homes in our community have one.

When you come across large stones, and you are already committed, 8 ft down, there is nothing for it but to break them by hand with a hammer and a metal bar. It is a long process and extremely hard work, digging a toilet. With so many convenient bushes to choose from it really is not surprising that nobody else has one.

Eventually a concrete platform is built over the hole and the rest is easy.



Registration

Getting our kids registered on the new system should have been straightforward, once the buildings were completed, but it turned into a bit of a last-minute panic. The local education department office was slow, disorganised and, frankly, unhelpful. It is quite possible that some of the staff were obstructive in the hope of getting bribed.

Most rural schools must merge their children in one central exam centre, luckily for us, the headmaster of the central school we are working with, came to our aid and we

managed to get all the students registered just before the deadline. After all we had done to get to this point, that was an enormous relief.

Kenya is like that. You can find basic requirements being made almost insurmountably difficult by one person, then you meet someone else who will go above and beyond to help. Over time this generally seems to balance out, but the constant unpredictability gets exhausting.

The Dining Hall



The rebuilt dining hall and classroom was in active service from the start of term. It is such a lovely light and open room. With this sudden expansion of space, we found ourselves rather short of furniture. For several weeks kids in this class were sitting on the floor. We were able to add some tables and stools mid-way through the term, but we are still far short of what is needed.



We also added a washable paint to the lower parts of the dining hall class, while we were painting the Lion class. Hopefully, that will help it wear better. It was beautiful all cream, but not so practical!

Teachers



Irene (left) and Jeremy (right)



There is good news, and less good news, from our little community of staff. The good news is that Irene is back! She returned at the start of term along with her little girl, who is now old enough to walk and talk and hang out with the youngest group in the nursery class.



Jeremy (in a white shirt) leading an energetic dance session.

We also have a new teacher called Jeremy. I am hopeful that he will bring a much-needed breadth of experience to the school. He is unusual in Kenya, as someone who retrained to be a teacher in his mid-thirties. Before this he did a range of work, including many years with horticulture companies (yes, those of you in Europe, he might well have been responsible for your French beans or those carnations you gave your mum).

He brings not just enthusiasm but a lot of extra know-how. This has already translated into practical projects (such as setting up a volleyball pitch) and he is a natural when it comes to developing experiments for science and agriculture classes.



At the weekly staff meeting. From left to right, Mama Lekishion (cook), Alice (nursery teacher), Mohamed (watchman), Steyah (nursery assistant), Naiterik (student representative), Irene and Jeremy.

The less good news is that Ben has suffered from ill health this term and won't be with us next term, or probably for the rest of the year. Obviously, this is a blow for the school, but we all want him to take whatever time he needs to get better. When he feels up to it, we look forward to welcoming him back. He remains a member of the school board and I am sure we will still get the benefit of his experience.

Volleyball



Our new volleyball pitch was a wonderful collaborative school effort. Alice organised the making of a volleyball net with string while Jeremy had the kids work with him to mix concrete and put up posts to hold the net.

We used to have a volleyball pitch before, but it got destroyed during the attacks. However, this one, made from scratch by the kids, is much better in so many ways.



Learning that you can make and do things yourself is an important lesson, for anybody, but I think especially for our kids. Their whole future is likely to depend on their ability to work things out for themselves, from scratch. There is little support to be got here, for anything.



Once the posts and net were in place, a whole new group of kids got to learn how to play volleyball.

School Maintenance

Jeremy took the concept of practical self-reliance a step further when he suggested that he and the kids should do some of the maintenance work at the school. First task, replacing the insect netting on the windows of Class One. This was the sort of thing that Kitonga use to do with the kids a lot, and watching the way our graduates tackle problems now, makes me feel certain that it has helped to give them a 'can do' attitude.





I am so grateful to be able to find teachers who see the benefit of learning beyond the basic curriculum and are inventive enough to turn our challenges into opportunities.

Alumni

I had never really considered that we would still be in close contact with any of our children, after they left our school. Not that I thought we wouldn't be, but I just didn't consider it at all. Thinking about it now, I'm not sure why I didn't. I have always compared the school to a family, and families are notorious for staying close for a lifetime!



Four Lions and a Leopard. L-R: Mary, Nchisho, Yopoko, Lekool and Koytalel

I get great pleasure from seeing our old students, and it seems that many of them get pleasure from seeing us too. It really touches me how strongly they feel about the school. Some of them have younger siblings here, but not all of them. Yet they obviously really enjoy coming back and spending time here.



Setting off from Isiolo with party supplies

At the end of term, four of our ex-students took charge of organising the end of term events. In this case, food, traditional dancing, games, and a lot of photographs.

We had bought phones last year as high school graduation presents, and getting sent photos and messages about their life has been an unexpected pleasure.

After the party, along with the photos, I got messages saying how much fun they'd had and a how much they enjoyed being back at the school.



Yopoko with some of the kids all dressed up for dancing (the little girl in front of him is his sister).



Nchisho handing out juice and biscuits.

Aside from the end of term they have variously dropped in when they are back at home. Often helping in the kitchen or playing football with the kids at the end of the day. Nchisho and Mary also took responsibility for opening one of the classrooms as a study base for high school students during the holiday.

Nchisho graduates in November. She was the best stores manager we ever had at the school (including adults) and has trained every student replacement since. After graduating she is going to come and help me with the school administration for a while and hopefully learn some useful skills. If these school updates start coming out in a more timely fashion, you'll know why!



High school students using the newly renovated Lion classroom for study sessions during the holiday.

Beyond School

We currently have several of the Lion group, who finished high school last November, doing work experience with us, outside of the school.

They are getting hands-on agricultural experience on our small farm, helping with a re-wilding project, and with a new tourism enterprise.



Learning skills and gaining experience - restoring eroded land, planting trees, putting in foundations

This is part of what we hope is the beginnings of a new social enterprise. Designed with the express purpose of helping young people to gain more skills and knowledge, and eventually, to set up businesses of their own.



Fencing: rewilding works best if you keep out the goats! Collecting local stone for structures that blend with the landscape.

We have also been thinking a lot about the benefits of a school that puts nature at the heart of everything it does.



Building a dam, regeneration of savanna grassland and laying water pipes.

As the first children to attend our school are now growing into adults, we are starting to see how different their attitudes to the natural world are, in comparison to others. And it is truly different. They are aware of the natural environment as something that exists in

its own right, and not just as a backdrop to the human experience. In other words, they see an ecosystem that includes themselves.

For all the noble talk of traditional cultures managing the natural world in a sustainable way. That is not the case in every traditional culture, and it is not the case here. The attitude of our young people is fundamentally different from the prevalent local attitude to nature. Which is that it is something to be moulded to a person's needs, a resource to be plundered or an obstacle to be overcome. Often, something to be feared.

In the recent past, the population here was small enough that everyone could take whatever they wanted from their surroundings and have relatively little effect on it. That has changed because the population has grown to a point where this kind of behaviour is unsustainable. Yet the behaviour persists with deeply damaging consequences.

Our young people seem to genuinely value and enjoy nature, and we want to help them take that passion and commitment further. To help them find ways to improve their own lives while also improving the natural environment. To be custodians and to be leaders that inspire others.

Thank you to everyone who has helped us so far this year. Those of you sending monthly donations so that we can continue to buy food, education materials and pay our staff a decent wage. Those who helped us pay for the rebuilding work, and to all of you for your care and support in so many other ways.

With love from Emma, Kitonga and all the staff and students at Oling'arua School



The next generation – photographed by Lekool.