



**The Rotary Club of Banbury**  
[www.banburyrotaryclub.org.uk](http://www.banburyrotaryclub.org.uk)

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

I attended a Rotary meeting in May 2005 where Mercy Ships gave a presentation about their Charity – I had never heard of the charity and to say that I was moved and impressed by the work they undertake would be an understatement. I picked up a brochure regarding Rotary Mission Challenge (an opportunity to take part in a hands on project) and bought a paperback about the Charity. I read the book over the weekend and I was hooked, so I registered my interest to go to Sierra Leone for 11 days. The basic cost is £1,275 which covers flights, meals, accommodation and insurance and Rotarians are asked to raise additional funds, if possible, to be spent directly on the project and I raised £1,450 for this.

## **ABERDEEN CLINIC & FISTULA CENTRE**

The project was to help build a 35 bed hostel for longer term patients at the Aberdeen Clinic & Fistula Centre on the outskirts of the capital Freetown. There is already a facility comprising 3 wards, an operating theatre, day clinic (for children under 12), laundry, kitchen and offices.

The plight of women suffering from vesico-vaginal fistula (VVF) has been described as Africa's silent epidemic. For a pregnant woman in Sierra Leone there is no help if she experiences a complication such as obstructed labour, instead she endures the agony of labour for several days and often eventually loses her baby. IF she survives this ordeal she is left with permanent internal damage and for the rest of her life she will endure the constant seepage of urine and sometimes even faecal matter and often she is rejected by her husband and family. Fistula problems are also caused due to girls marrying too young or as a result of rape, gang rape or sexual abuse during the civil war.



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On 31<sup>st</sup> October I met up with 9 others at Gatwick and the adventure began – in our party (age range 36 – 70) were 2 doctors and 2 nurses, who were going to assist at the clinic, a retired lady who spent her time doing knitting, artwork and just talking to the patients and the rest of us were just going to muck in and help with the general construction work and DIY tasks. We were the third Rotary team to fly out to Freetown to work on this specific project.

This is how the site looked on October 1<sup>st</sup> when the first Rotary team arrived – you need to remember that there are no mechanical aids on site and EVERYTHING is done by hand. This includes making the concrete blocks which are used in the construction and the average daily temperature was in the 80's!!



We spent our time on site, moving concrete blocks, clearing top soil, back filling trenches, moving sand, stone and gravel, mixing (by hand) concrete and pouring the concrete into pre shuttered pillars and lintels, preparing re-inforced steelwork, as well as unloading a 40 foot container that had arrived with building, medical and general supplies from the UK.

When we left on November 11<sup>th</sup> great progress had been made and this is how things looked.



The existing clinic facility has undertaken many fistula operations as well as running a day clinic for children up to the age of 12 (this includes polio immunization, which due to the civil war is still an issue). The medical staff run outreach fistula assessment clinics “up country” and patients are given an appointment to come to the clinic for a two week stay. A straightforward fistula repair can take as little as an hour, under local anaesthetic, but if successful it makes a world of difference to the patient. We had the privilege of attending the “dress ceremony”, which takes place on the day that the patients are discharged, and they all receive a traditional dress and headdress to signify the new beginning for them and they sing and dance their way from the clinic.

In December, after the Rotary teams had left, the locals poured the first floor concrete slab ready to start building the second storey in the New Year and this is something that I wished I could have witnessed as it must have been a major feat.



The entire experience was amazing – I had not been to Africa before and therefore was not sure what to expect. The country is rated by the World Health Organisation as the poorest in the world, however the people were so friendly and welcoming. At no time did we feel intimidated or threatened and we suffered no verbal abuse, in fact we were given a great deal of respect due to the fact that Mercy Ships is held in such high esteem in the Freetown area.

We saw poverty in all areas of the city, people bathing and washing clothes in streams (often surrounded by rubbish), shanty settlements that were so difficult to comprehend, rubbish strewn all over areas adjacent to the main highway (resembling a landfill site and smelling like it as well). But despite all this the people, whether patients, medical staff, domestic staff, site workers, street sellers or general members of the community made us feel so welcome. The visit was a total mix of emotions - humbling, joyous, overwhelming, uplifting, sad, - BUT very worthwhile – I feel we made a difference (and can continue to do so) and I have made some really good friends – Rotarians, Mercy Ships staff and Sierra Leonians.

At the start of February this was the progress on the first floor build and further pictures will follow to keep you abreast of developments.



**THANK YOU TO ALL OF YOU THAT MADE THIS POSSIBLE – I AM GOING BACK TO SIERRA LEONE IN MAY 2006.**

#### **FURTHER INFORMATION**

Contact Alan Wolstencroft as detailed overleaf or [www.mercyships.org.uk](http://www.mercyships.org.uk)  
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