

Darjeeling Children's Trust

Newsletter

Summer 2013



Dear Friends and Supporters,

Six months is a long time in the life of any construction project and since our last newsletter much has been changing at the boys' orphanage site. But other things have been happening too in Darjeeling: the Trust has a new story teller-librarian; current FCI students are about to take off for their placements whilst new students are about to start; and sponsored children continue to grow and develop. I hope that you will enjoy reading below about these events in greater detail; it is your support which is making all this possible. Thank you on behalf of the children and young people in Darjeeling,

Best wishes and thank you for your continuing support,
Marilyn Adams, Chairperson, Darjeeling Children's Trust

Change at the travelling library

In April DCT said goodbye to Sabita as its travelling librarian/storyteller. A diminutive figure, Sabita had been with us since the start of the project and her enthusiasm was a big contributor to its success. She helped to increase the number of schools visited, and the annual story telling competition, which involved the children from all the schools which are visited, was her idea. She was a talented singer and she also wrote stories for the local Darjeeling newspaper, including articles about the library and the children's music festival. We will miss her but she has had the opportunity to take the job of a permanent teacher at a local primary school which is more easily accessible from her home and which in the long term provides her with better prospects.



Sabita with DCT trustees and treasurer



Sabita will be a hard act to follow but we think we have found the right person. Married and with one daughter, Tshering is an experienced teacher with lots of initiative who decided that she would like a change of role. She is relishing the challenge of visiting the eight schools in the project and with her good English and outward going personality we are sure we have made the right choice and look forward to seeing her in action in future visits.

The project itself continues to work well. Books are being lent to the children who take them home to read and they are looking after them well. We have a good stock of books suitable for a variety of abilities and ages which we have mainly sourced from a publisher in Nepal. Some of the stories are in Nepali, some in both Nepali and English with a few just in English and we also have a stock of books in Hindi which were donated by a publisher based in Delhi. Almost all are based on local folk stories or relate in other ways to the lives the children lead.

The music making continues

Rajib's work too continues to be an important element of the Trust's commitment to children in Darjeeling. Research has shown that engaging in music helps the brain develop and that it activates many of its areas, including those involved in motor function, speech, language, cognition memory, and emotions. Rajib visits ten schools as well as holding a special weekend music session for those sponsored children who he would otherwise not see. During my April visit to Darjeeling we sat in on one of these sessions and enjoyed

hearing the new songs which the children started to learn in March at the start of the new school year. He is also starting to introduce the ideas of music theory which seemed to be presenting an interesting challenge to some of the younger participants!

Plans are now being made for a second music festival to be held in autumn this year which again will involve all the children. I hope to be able to report on this in our next newsletter.



Rajib during a chat about the project



Getting to grips with theory!

Madhu's story

We first met Madhu in October 2010 when she presented herself as a candidate for training at the FCI (Food & Craft Institute). She was a pleasant though shy and slightly untidy looking young woman. She hadn't been able to find a job and so was trying to earn money after passing her year 12 exams at 18 by teaching young children English in Sikkim. The most she could hope to earn was about 2000 rupees (about £25 a month). She had studied for a month at the FCI as part of a government sponsorship scheme for young people and was keen to do the course but she knew she wouldn't be able to afford the fees. Her mother is widowed and runs a small vegetable shop and she has a younger brother at a large municipal school in Darjeeling. Luckily she then heard about DCT!



Madhu when we first met her in 2010 and as she is today

She finished her FCI college course where she specialised in food and beverages in mid 2012 and then got her practical experience working in Siliguri. We met her again by chance in April this year and hardly recognised her. She looked a smart and purposeful young woman. Chatting to her she told us how being able to do the FCI course has changed her life. She told us how confident she now feels and how she feels more able to control her own life. Based on information from a family contact who is working for the same company, she has just gone to work in Dubai on a 2 year contract where she hopes to earn enough money to send back to her mother and brother and to establish herself for the future. We all wish her the very best of luck.

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FCI graduates in 2013

We had the chance to catch up with the four students who are about to finish their college course this summer and move onto the next stage of training – their work placements. Some had taken the chance to gain some experience and earn some money during the winter holidays but for others this will be the first time they have lived away from home for any lengthy period of time. Goma and Sumita who both specialise in front of house want to do their work experience in Calcutta; Deepa is aiming for Bangalore and Palden wants to work in Delhi.

FCI Candidates 2013

This year DCT hopes to help five young people undertake training at the FCI. It is unusual that this year's intake will all be young men. Three of the five live at the boys' orphanage and a further candidate is a former orphanage boy. They all have one thing in common: they come from low income families who cannot support them to do the course. Three have parents who are farmers in small villages just outside Darjeeling, the father of another has died and his mother is a labourer and another's father is a carpenter. All have siblings who are either still at school or for the most part unable to find a job so they are all looking forward to being able to help their families which will be hugely welcomed. One of our original candidates decided that he would rather take a different course of study and another failed to pass his year 12 exams and has had to pull out. One person's ill luck is often another's good luck though, and another young person from the boys' orphanage, Yogesh, will take one of the spare places that DCT is able to fund. The other will be taken up by Yogen who we interviewed late in the day and who was on the reserve list. He will now be invited to apply for the course.



Sushmil



Ongup



Upesh

For DCT the cost amounts to £250 a year for each student for each of the two years covered by the course. This cost includes provision of uniforms and books and also covers costs such as travel and accommodation during the student's work placement.

We wish them all well as they start on this adventure and I look forward to being able to bring more news of them in the future.

Nursing – the end of the course

The three trainee nurses who have been supported by DCT will take their final exams in August and are looking forward to their first jobs. I had the chance to catch up with two of them in April and we chatted on the rooftop of the hospital building where they were on duty. Subarna, on the left, plans to look for her first job in Kalimpong, Darjeeling or Siliguri but in the longer term has her focus set on working as a medic in Iraq. She is currently investigating recruitment options. Susmita on the right has family commitments locally and so will stay in the town.



New candidates in 2013

Nursing remains an attractive employment option for young women and DCT hopes to help a further three candidates, two of whom currently live at the girls' orphanage, to gain a nursing qualification. Aishwarya's father died when she was very young whilst Sanju's family rely on income from her mother's small shop as her father cannot find work. Neither of Alka's parents have a job. Together with some of their parents they went to visit a hospital in Siliguri which runs a three year course for which they would like to apply and which will give them a government recognised qualification. The choice of location is theirs and so they and their parents needed to satisfy themselves about the course and also the hostel accommodation they would occupy with other trainee nurses. They all came away very happy and are now in the process of making their applications. More news will follow!



Aishwarya

Alka

Sanju

An early monsoon – and the rain is coming in!

The first priority of Mahatma Gandhi school had been to fence the school playground to keep the children safe but as reported last time DCT has been requested to help with repairs to the roof of the school hall, (one of the few parts of the school which has glass in all its windows). The hall is one of the oldest school buildings in Darjeeling and probably dates from the 1930's. Its original roof has long ago been replaced with corrugated metal sheets and these are now leaking with water dripping through the wood timbers inside. The building doubles as a classroom as well as an assembly hall, so the damp makes life difficult for both staff and students. The latest cost estimate is just over £5500 to do the job – as the roof timbers need replacing it is difficult to drip feed funding and do only part of the job at any one time. This figure exceeds the resources DCT currently has for school improvements. Would you like to make a special donation to help Mahatma Gandhi School?



Meeting staff and students



The school hall



Inside view



Roof detail

Other school news

Other initiatives continue with eight schools receiving their regular supplies of exercise books, pencils, rubbers and rulers. Some of the children who benefit are shown here. They are pupils at Prabudas School which is the oldest municipal primary school in Darjeeling. The DCT funded toilet and water harvesting scheme here is well used although the teachers have to buy in water from the local shop for the toilet during the dry season.

Our local trustee, Major Wangdi, maintains good relations and frequent contacts with the schools supported by the Trust throughout the school year but for other trustees making a visiting to each of these schools when they visit Darjeeling is invaluable. It helps reinforce the good relations fostered by Major Wangdi and allows assessment of any requests for help that are made.

Not all requests are supported. One school wanted funds to fence off land to stop encroachment by villagers but it was clear that construction of a bamboo fence which could easily be put up by the school would do the job. It was agreed that this would not be a good use of Trust funds.



Sponsorship

All the sponsored children bar one returned to school in March at the start of the school year. Fifty children are now sponsored through the Trust into better schools. Thirty five of the total go to two schools: Camellia and Good Start Montessori. In both schools DCT trustees have strong personal connections with staff. The remaining fifteen children go to a variety of other schools which were chosen to particularly suit their needs or to reflect their age when they were first sponsored. All the children look well and healthy and are growing up. Some are surprisingly taller when we see them after a break of 6 months or perhaps a year, the older boys especially look as though they are on their way to becoming young men and the younger children are growing in confidence.

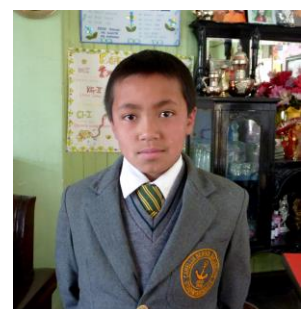
Camellia School which takes children up to the end of Year 10 when the children will be about sixteen, has a strong pastoral atmosphere. Most of our sponsored children at Camellia are still in the lower school where they are divided into four houses, each named after a flower. During each visit when we meet staff, notes are provided for each child and we are made aware of any problems. Some children may need some extra support – for example we talked with staff about one of our sponsored boys, Binay, being mentored by an older child at the school because although he is bright he has no support at home. His father has died and his mother is a porter and illiterate and so he often plays truant. Hopefully an older friend/advisor will help and happily he did well in the end of year exams last year

Good Start Montessori School which has 130 children has a strong family atmosphere. At present this school currently takes children up to the end of Year 6 when children will be around 11 or 12 although they are hoping to extend this by a couple of years. There is a very strong tradition of using song and dance at the school to reinforce children's confidence and the children all take part in an annual concert.

With the onset of the early monsoon it has been a busy time for DCT trustee Major Wangdi and his wife Neema who ensure that all the children have waterproof boots, and macs or umbrellas to ward off the damp. It is a lengthy job of organisation to contact all the families, many of whom do not have a phone, and then to ensure that those who need boots go to the shoe shop or get the right size of waterproof. It can be difficult if shoes get wet as with the high humidity and frequent downpours leather can start to grow mould in a week or so!

The one student missing from all of this is Abishek, the first child who was sponsored through the Trust. It is believed that probably due to family breakdown he and his mother and grandmother have left Darjeeling but nobody, including his father, really knows. It is heartbreaking that he has disappeared and is unlikely to return to school and get the education which he deserves. We can only hope that the education he has received so far will serve him well in the future.

Some of our sponsored children



Sponsored children at Camellia School



Sponsored children with parents at Good Start Montessori

Making plans a reality at the boys' orphanage

I look with surprise and just a little envy sometimes at reports by others of how easy it has been for a new orphanage to have been built somewhere in India down on the plains. The last six months have been challenging for all those involved in the construction of the new dormitories for the Phase 1 redevelopment of the boys' orphanage – and it has almost all been down to ground conditions and site location. The view from the site is beautiful – the buildings are lodged onto the side of a steep hillside with panoramic views over the valley and the buildings are away from the noise and dust of the main road as access is down a long stepped path. But this does not make life easy.

All reasonable precautions were taken at the outset with tests being done for soil conditions to establish land stability and were backed up by pre-build site visits by the architect, site engineer and structural engineer. However, it's only when excavation starts that it's possible to really understand what is happening under the soil and there have been some surprises! All excavation has been done manually and as the holes were dug for the foundations huge rocks have been found. Some of these have been broken up by hand but others have proved to be too enormous for that and there has had to be a slight re-alignment of the buildings to work around the situation. Not that this is all bad news though! Darjeeling itself is in a landslip and earthquake zone so the presence of large pieces of bedrock is beneficial in giving greater long term site stability.

The site's location has meant that there has been little mechanical help in works at the site. The only machinery has been the concrete mixer bought with funds donated by DCT to avoid the need for materials to be mixed manually. The mixer has saved many hours of work. It will be available throughout the whole project and then sold on and funds recycled back into the orphanage. One of the problems was to identify an area of the site flat and big enough for the concrete mixer to sit and be easily available.

During my visit to Darjeeling in April I visited the site a couple of times and was amazed that so much progress had been made despite all these difficulties. Work is managed on a daily basis by Ramesh who is the site engineer.

The gang of 20 labourers working on the project are living temporarily in a room at the back of the orphanage which also means that they provide extra security for the materials stored at the site. Their work looks physically hard and demanding, with sacks being carried in head slings as gravel, sand and cement are carried down from the road and concrete is moved around the site. Even in early April it was hard to recall the site as it used to be and now even more progress has been made with construction up to the second storey. It is now a race against time to get the roof on before the rains start in earnest. It is unfortunate for the project that this year the monsoon has set in early with heavy daily downpours. Once the roof is on though construction of walls and windows and fitting out can take place. Meanwhile a canopy of tarpaulins has had to be erected to protect the excavations and allow work to carry on. Recent work has shown the existence of a large hole under toilets used by the boys and staff and this has needed an emergency visit by the consultant structural engineer.

Darjeeling Children's Trust is very grateful to the Evan Cornish Foundation and the Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre for their financial support for this project.



Early days on site!



Pema Bhante lays the first concrete



Breaking rocks manually



Concrete mixer and new buildings



Hole found under the existing toilet block



Tarpaulin rain canopy

Right: New block



An invitation to join us at the Bricks and Mortar Ball



THE BRICKS & MORTAR BALL

Please join the Darjeeling Children's Trust for an evening of great food, wine and entertainment to raise money for the construction of a much needed orphanage in Darjeeling for 100 local children. Family and friends are most welcome.

The Garden Museum
London SE1 7LB

Saturday 16th November 2013

7pm - 11.30pm
Tickets £60

Lounge suits & cocktail dresses

R.S.V.P >

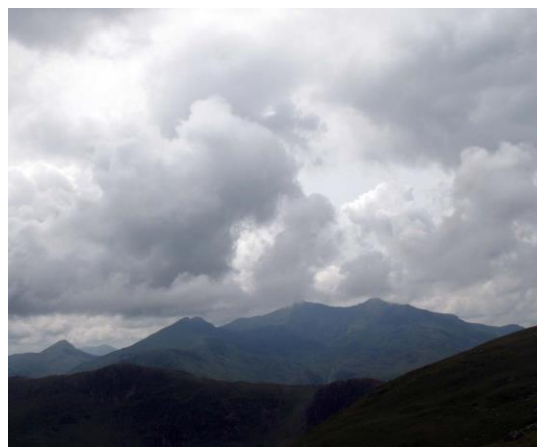
On the 16th November the Trust will be holding its first large scale fundraising event in London to raise funds specifically for the orphanage redevelopment project. The Bricks & Mortar Ball will be held at the fabulous Garden Museum on Lambeth Palace Road. Guests will enjoy a champagne and canape reception, followed by informal bowl food (with an Indian twist) created by Food Events Caterers. A well stocked bar will also be available. There will be live music and two professional dance performances by a fantastic Indian dance school, followed by a disco later in the evening. There will be an exhibit showing the build progress to date, as well as architectural plans, sections and a 3D model of the orphanage so everyone can see why this cause is such a deserving one. There will be an auction and tombola (with wonderful prizes!), as well as lots of other entertainment to make sure it is a night to remember.

We really hope that you can join us - if you would like to attend, or would simply like a little more information, please email events@darjeelingchildrenstrust.com.

Join us in Snowdonia for a Sponsored Walk up Snowdon

A sponsored walk up Snowdon is taking place on Saturday 14th September in support of Darjeeling Children's Trust with a special emphasis on raising money for nurse training and the orphanage project. Because of the mixed ability and age of those likely to take part the group will probably split into smaller parties and take different routes depending on the weather and their fitness. The rendezvous will be at the Tyn-y-Coed Hotel in Capel Curig about 9:30 in the morning. There are various levels of accommodation in the village from 5 star hostels at £25 per night to some great hotels. The plan then is to rendezvous back at the Tyn-y-Coed in the evening for a drink and something to eat.

On the Sunday morning, Nick Wheelden who is organising the event is getting a group together to have a go down the Snowdonia Zip wire, the longest in Europe: 700' high and 95mph! That should blow away the cobwebs! Would you like to take part or need advice on accommodation? Nick has kindly offered to provide help to anyone who might need it and can be contacted at chapelcapel@me.com or email Darjeeling Children's Trust at info@darjeelingchildrenstrust.com and we can send you sponsorship and gift aid forms.



Darjeeling Tea Tasting – a date for the diary in Bristol

If you are in or near Bristol on Friday, September 6th come and join us for an evening of tea tasting, stories about the history of tea, photos of the places and processes, nibbles, cup cakes and more! You will see the difference between the tea which goes in your tea bags and the loose leaf teas from Darjeeling – the champagne of teas from the place known as the Queen of the Hills. Tickets are £7.50 and the event will take place at the Bradbury Hall, Waterford Road, Henleaze, Bristol starting at 7.30. For tickets contact info@darjeelingchildrenstrust.com or ring 0117 9620519



Annual Golf Event – the Darjeeling Cup



The 3rd Darjeeling Cup golf event will be held at Pontefract, Yorkshire on 5th July. The event is fully subscribed and we anticipate the most successful so far for fund-raising. We certainly hope for better weather than last year which was the stormiest and wettest day of the year when along with other sporting events, the day had to be cancelled. Good luck to all taking part!