

Darjeeling Children's

Trust

Winter Newsletter, 2013-14



Dear Friends and Supporters,

The last six months have seen many events, both welcome and unwelcome in Darjeeling. The on-going dispute between local politicians and the central and state governments about creating a separate Ghorkaland state led to a strike which began at the end of July and lasted with a couple of minor breaks for 6 weeks. Everything stopped including schools and colleges. Hotels were empty and businesses closed. The local economy was hard hit with an estimated financial loss of £3.5 million. Families of children we support were also hit hard and with a ban on any activity and no transport links to bring materials up to the town from the Plains, all construction work at the orphanage stopped. Thankfully an accommodation seems to have been reached and although about 1100 people remain in prison, the leader of the local political party has said that he wants to go forward through negotiation. Things are now back to normal with the good news that the work of the Trust is in full swing. Children returned to school before the winter exams in November, students went back to college and construction work at the orphanage recommenced at a good pace, taking advantage of the fine autumn weather. The children and students are now on their winter break, work is proceeding at the orphanage and we are all awaiting the start of the new school year at the end of February.

Thank you for your continuing support and I hope that you will enjoy reading news of the children, young people and activities which are funded through your donations. There is news too of fund raising during the past few months.

My warmest best wishes for a happy and peaceful year in 2014
Marilyn Adams, Chairperson

Our Sponsored Children

With no UK trustee visit to Darjeeling this autumn the task of taking photos of all the sponsored children has fallen to Major Wangdi. A call went out to all parents and apart from two children who were photographed later, parents and children all assembled on a bright sunny morning at the play area near Red Cross School. Despite (or maybe because of!) their enforced time away from lessons the children all seem to be thriving. It is noticeable how many of the children seem to have sprung up in the last six months or so and now look considerably more mature.

Only one child was missing completely. Little Abishek, the first child sponsored through the Trust, disappeared some months ago with his mother and grandmother following a breakdown in family relations. We had been hoping that he would re-appear and be able to restart his studies but unfortunately that hope hasn't been fulfilled. His situation demonstrates that the Trust's support for a child into better education is very much an act of faith and that things can, and do, occasionally go wrong.

Exams were taken in November and all our children have passed, some with flying colours. Major Wangdi attended a special meeting of the sponsored children who attend Camellia School together with their parents where congratulations were given to those children who had done well and a general pep talk was given to the assembled group. The school year is now over and will only restart at the end of February as the unheated schools have become too cold for both children and teachers.

Some of our sponsored children, all looking smart in their school uniforms



Vocational Training in full swing

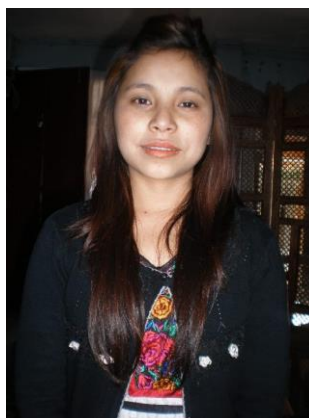
Unusually, all the students who are studying aspects of hotel management this year are young men as no suitable female candidates came forward. Two of the original number who were interviewed last April have been replaced as one decided that he wished to study other subjects and another did not get the necessary grades in his exams. The four students, who are shown in this photo, are all doing well and are specialising in either front of house duties or cooking skills.



It is always good too to have news of former students. Phinzo, who graduated from his college course in mid 2012, now lives in Delhi and works as an Assistant Steward at the Panasian Cuisine Restaurant. He is very much enjoying his job and is dreaming up new dishes to spring on his customers such as his recently named "Cracking spinach in a Hong Kong boat"! Ugesh, another of our students, has meanwhile returned temporarily to Darjeeling and is hoping to arrange a job in the Middle East. The opportunities and personal horizons of the young people who the Trust has helped have been transformed in just two or three years.

But unfortunately the news is not always good and recently we learned that Goma, one of students who had completed her college course last summer and who had been working in Calcutta, had contracted malaria and had been hospitalised. Her family joined her to help look after her and thankfully she is now home and on her way to recovery.

Two young women started vocational training this year: Alka, on the left, is working as a trainee nurse at the Darjeeling and Dooars Medical Centre, popularly known as Planters' Hospital, in the centre of Darjeeling. Meanwhile Aishwarya is training as a lab technician at the Institute of Rural Medical Education & Training in Gayaganga. This Institute offers opportunities and training for girls from poor families.

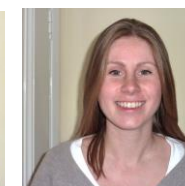
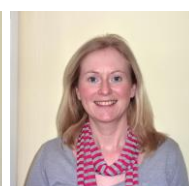
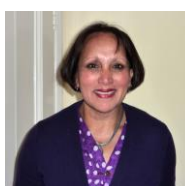
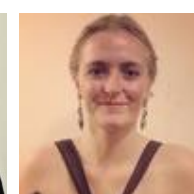
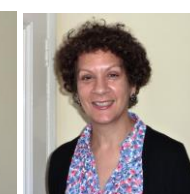
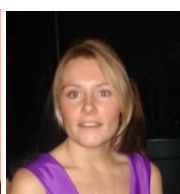


Sanju, a third candidate who had hoped to undertake nurse training had been a long term resident at the girls' orphanage but unluckily just at the time she finished her exams she was called home to look after her father who

was seriously ill. Unfortunately, and though it might seem strange to many of us, no-one has an address for her family who live in a village on the border with Nepal to enable us to tell her that the Trust is happy to provide support for her if she wishes to start the course next summer. We hope that she will call in to the girls' orphanage and hear the good news – and that she will be able to pursue this opportunity. We will be looking out for more young people to support in vocational training from July 2014.

Our trustees

2013 has seen the number of DCT trustees increase by two with eight of us resident in the UK plus our vital "man on the ground" in Darjeeling. Between us we offer a range of skills and encompass a fairly broad age range which should ensure the sustainability of the charity and on-going long term support for the children and young people we are helping.



Improvements to Schools

As I reported in last summer's newsletter, last spring the Trust received a request for help from Mahatma Ghandi School. The school, which lies on the edge of town and is accessible to the tea estates, has a number of children attending whose parents are part of the migrant work force of estate workers. It also works with children who for various reasons have been excluded from other schools and seeks to help them with their education.

The request for help was for repair of the roof of the school hall which is letting in large amounts of water. The works are likely to cost about £5000. Whilst the Trust was unable to fund such a large bill in 2013, we will consider how we might help the school in the foreseeable future. If you would like to make a special donation to help the children at this school, please get in touch.



A view of the front of the hall

Reading and Music

Meanwhile the work of our Tshering our traveling librarian and Rabib, our music teacher, goes on. Whilst their work was also disrupted during the strike they were back in schools as soon as the children returned.

Children at the orphanages

The number of boys and girls at the orphanages stays at a fairly constant level of around 100 in total. The title "orphanage" is perhaps misleading as not all the children who live there are orphans. Many come from families where, despite their best efforts, their parents simply cannot earn enough money to support their family even though in general the number of children per family in the hills is not large. One huge advantage for the parents is that by sending their children away they ensure that they will have food and shelter and an education, which is seen by many in India as a way to escape the cycle of poverty. Some children come from families where one of the parents has died. Often a child may have a brother or sister also in the orphanage. Others have been referred to the orphanage by social service organisations for other reasons.

Children are usually taken in from the age of about six or seven years and are able to stay until they have completed their school Year 12 when they will be about 17 or 18. One of the most touching things about meeting the girls is their obvious sense of family and the way in which the older ones look out for the younger ones. Whilst the older ones have to do the washing for the youngest girls and help out in the kitchen there is also a genuine feeling of caring for each other.



Meanwhile the Trust continues to provide extra water deliveries at the girls' orphanage as and when required (the boys usually have a more reliable supply), and to ensure that all the children have adequate supplies of soap, toothpaste and toothbrushes. Basanti continues to visit the girls at weekends and acts as both their confidante and advisor on health matters, helping them look after themselves in the best way possible.

At the boys' orphanage – the end of Phase 1 is in sight!

Since the last newsletter the new dormitories for the 60 boys at the orphanage have been gradually taking shape. There have been the inevitable hold ups – one of the biggest being the summer strike – but at last the end of the first Phase of construction is in sight.

Ground conditions have continued to be difficult throughout the whole period of construction and as the monsoon rains continued the tarpaulin sheeting was vital to allow works to carry on. Holes and rocks were discovered where none had been anticipated, plans had to be amended slightly and there needed to be frequent liaison between project manager and architect.



Despite all these issues, concrete has been made, drainage channels have been created, and concrete floors have been laid. The better weather of autumn which is shown below has led to easier working conditions.



During December and early January, bricks and materials for the roof trusses began to arrive on site and preparations are now being made to cast the tie beams for the top level. From the start of February the brick walls for the ground floor will be built.



Photos of progress in January 2014

It will be a close call as to whether the buildings are ready for occupation when the boys return at the end of February but if not, it shouldn't be long after this that they are able to move into their new accommodation – look out for more photos next time!



The Himalayan Tea Festival

Three trustees and the Trust's treasurer represented the Trust at the Himalayan Tea Festival which was held on August 31st at a Territorial Army base in Edgware. Organised by a group of serving and retired Gurkhas, the festival was organised to promote Darjeeling Tea and to raise money for charity. As well as dancing, music and displays there were a number of stands including from Darjeeling Children's Trust and the Darjeeling Historic Railway Society who work hard to preserve the world famous Darjeeling Railway (www.dhrs.org).



Treasurer Robert Adams, Marilyn Adams, Katie Williams, Katherine Carr plus the DCT display stands & displays from other stands

It was a pleasure to meet so many people and to be able to give a talk about the work of the Trust. We are extremely grateful for the support and donations we have received from individuals and the organisers we met at the event and look forward to attending the festival when it is held again.

The journey to Darjeeling

Getting to Darjeeling is not especially quick or easy. Arriving from the UK by air into Delhi or Kolkata, you can either fly to Bagdogra which lies at the foot of the Himalayan hills or arrive by train into New Jalpaiguri station. From both places you need to depend on road transport as the train line is still disrupted after the landslips of a couple of years ago, so most people opt for a taxi – and there is no shortage of people offering to take you.

Bagdogra lies at about 300ft (100m) above sea level with many of the characteristics of plains India – it is noisy, hot and dusty. Heat assails you as you walk from the plane to the small terminal but even so, as you leave the small airport there are views out over fields of tea bushes – you have arrived in the land of Darjeeling tea. There have been some road improvements over the last few years but your taxi will still need to swerve around tut tuts full to bursting with small girls being taken home from school, bicycles, overladen buses and rickshaws. As the town is left behind the road takes a left turn and the climb into the hills begins – destination Darjeeling, which lies at about 7000ft (2150m). It can take anywhere between two and a half to four hours depending on the state of the road; the climb is steep with many s-bends and once you have passed through the

town of Kalimpong, about half way up, the road criss-crosses over the railway tracks. Depending on the time of year the views open and close around you – winter months are clearest from mid October through to March – and as you climb it becomes necessary to reach for the fleece that was discarded in Bagdogra as the air gradually cools. On a clear day arrival in Darjeeling will be spectacular with views of Kanchenjunga, the world's third highest mountain, dominating the backdrop to the town.

If you are thinking of visiting, do let us know and we will be happy to advise about arrangements.



Fund Raising News!

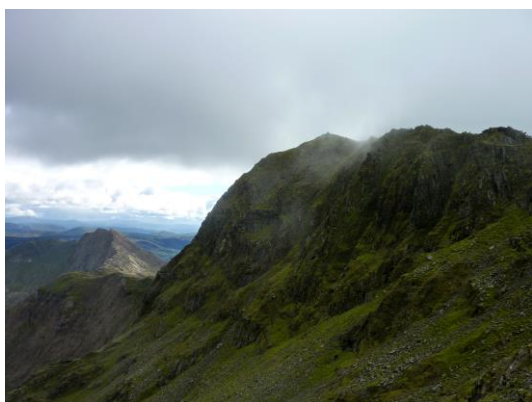
This has been the Trust's most successful year for fund raising – I hope you will enjoy reading about some of the events which took place.

A great day in the hills of Snowdonia!

On Friday the rain came down vertically and on Sunday it flew past horizontally but on Saturday 14th September the clouds lifted and the sun shone for the sponsored walk up Snowdon. Organised by Nick Wheelden in memory of his friend David Harper who had passed away, a group of about 40 intrepid walkers set out on the Pyg Track to reach the summit.

There were a few spots of drizzle on the way up and for some of the time there was mist on top where an extremely chilly wind blew, but everyone made it and raised the grand total of over £3300!

A big thank you to Nick and all his friends and the Trust supporters who came along on that day and everyone who did so much to raise money through sponsorship.



Darjeeling Cup Golf Event

2013 saw the biggest turn out of entries for the Darjeeling Cup. In contrast to last year when the event had to be cancelled due to the horrendous weather, the July day was fine and warm. There were some impressive performances: the only female competitor, Sarah Naden, came in second overall and Dan Gavin scored 5 under par, (just 3 off the all-time course record)! The winning team hailed from IFM Ltd and the overall winner of the Darjeeling Cup was Kirk James.



A great total of over £5000 was raised – a big thank you to all who helped with the organisation and everyone who took part!

Sampling Darjeeling's Teas

About 50 people came together on an early September evening in Bristol to sample a range of Darjeeling teas and to raise money for the Trust. A team of helpers prepared tastings of first, second and autumn flush teas during an illustrated talk accompanied by indian snacks and cupcakes. During the break it was possible to buy items from the Trust's stall as well as from Bristol Tea Co. who supported the event.

Thank you to everyone who worked hard to make the event a success and to everyone who came along.



A great event in London – the Bricks and Mortar Ball

After many months of preparation, November 16th saw a gathering of 200 people for the Bricks and Mortar Ball at the Garden Museum in Lambeth. Held to raise money especially for the rebuilding of the boys' and girls' orphanages in Darjeeling, the evening started off with a champagne reception followed by a free bar plus supper. There was a display of photos illustrating the work of the Trust and great interest was shown in the 3D model of the orphanage redevelopment that had been made by students at the University of the West of England. A welcome was given to everyone by Katie Williams and Polly Martin, two DCT trustees, followed by a short talk by chairperson, Marilyn Adams. A band, jazz singer, hoola hoop and Bollywood dancing provided the entertainment with the Bollywood dancing lessons eliciting a hugely enthusiastic response. Live and silent auctions were held and the evening finished with a disco.

A huge thank you to everyone who made this event possible – the organisers, the volunteers, those who donated auction prizes and most especially to everyone who came along. Together we have raised over £22,000 which means that the detailed design and costing work for Phase 2 of the orphanage redevelopment has been commissioned and the remaining funds are a significant sum towards the cost of the next phase of building.



Photos by Arron Leppard

Collecting loose change – a penny jar

Can you spare your loose change?? One supporter of the Trust has recently donated the contents of her “penny jar” to the Trust and it yielded the fantastic amount of over £320. What a great way to raise money if we all had penny jars that our loose change was thrown into at the end of the day – would you like to set one up and donate the contents to the Trust?



Thank you to everyone for supporting the Trust and the children of Darjeeling – you are making a difference!