



A brighter future for children and young people in Darjeeling

Hopefully it's not quite too late to wish you a happy new year. 2020 was a difficult year for us here in the UK and for our friends in India; here's hoping that 2021 brings peace, health and happiness in greater measure.

Despite ongoing restrictions in India, we were delighted to see work continuing on the Kripasaran Children's Home. Dormitories for staff were completed in the autumn, and just this week we've received photos of the work continuing on the final girls' dormitory, the additional bathrooms and the activity room (shown below), which will eventually be kitted out with equipment to allow the children to relax and have fun, as well as complete their school work. Read on for a [report on the recent progress](#).



We were also delighted to hear recently from one of the students we previously funded to undertake vocational training at the Darjeeling Food Craft Institute, Phinzo Bhutia. You can read more [here](#) about the scheme, and his story.

I'm delighted to say that our wonderful supporters haven't let lockdown in the UK get in the way of their fundraising either. The fabulous students of Wakefield Girls High School held a virtual cabaret concert over Christmas, and students were sponsored to complete the Couch to 5km running programme. Some of

their students have [written about the experience](#) for us, and we're so grateful for all their efforts, which will make a big difference to the children in Darjeeling.

We're also pleased to include in this newsletter the reflections of two former visitors to Darjeeling, [Yvonne Dobson](#) and [Kirstie Davidson](#), who came across the Trust by chance after spending time in India and are now keen supporters. Our Trustees have really missed being able to visit Darjeeling this year, so it's lovely to be reminded of previous visits and look forward to travelling again soon.

Finally, our [campaign to find a new Treasurer](#) closes this Sunday, 24th January. There's still (just) time to apply so if you or anyone you know is interested then please do consider joining our lovely group of Trustees.

Best wishes,

Katherine Carr
Chair, Darjeeling Children's Trust

Progress to celebrate at the Children's Home

In these difficult times it is lovely to have something to celebrate and so we are glad to report some good news on construction progress at the Children's Home. As in many other countries there have been restrictions on movement in and around Darjeeling, which has meant that many of the workers who were employed in the building works at the Home couldn't travel to the town to carry on with their jobs. Luckily, after some searching, it proved possible to find local workers who were qualified to do the job and they have made great progress in the last six months.

Last November when the latest phase of the girls' accommodation was opened, both male and female carers had to share dormitories with the young people. Whilst this was unsatisfactory for the adults the arrangement also put pressure on the dormitory space available for the young people. It's wonderful to be able to report that thanks to your donations two new shared bedrooms and bathrooms have been completed for the staff members. They are ready for occupation once winter is over and the Covid situation allows the schools to reopen and the children and young people to return to the Home from their villages.



Each dormitory will house four members of staff and both have a similar layout. Newly painted, they both have large windows overlooking the valley which will be brilliant for light and sunshine and for ventilation when the air becomes damp during the monsoon. The door in the far corner leads out to a small balcony overlooking the valley below where staff can relax and enjoy some privacy and quiet time. Both rooms have their own dedicated bathroom.

Thanks to your donations it has also been possible to start the next part of the project: completion of the third and final dormitory and associated bathroom for the girls, and an activities room for indoor projects and quiet study.



The structural elements are already in place so work is in progress to build walls, put in plumbing and electrics and finally to plaster and paint. This is somewhere the girls' sewing machines can be kept as they continue to enjoy their weekly sewing lessons; where a library can be built up; health education and choir sessions can take place, and where it is hoped a supply of laptops will eventually be acquired and kept to allow the children and young people to access information for school projects or about the world around them.

Marilyn Adams, Trustee

A generous grant received

We were very privileged in 2020 to be awarded a grant by the United Nation's Women's Guild. This grant of £3,350 enabled us to furnish the girls' dormitory with beds and useful storage furniture. The girls are now living in a spacious and airy environment which has had a positive impact on their well being.

Patricia Bell (shown here), based in Geneva and a member of the Executive committee of United Nations Women's Guild, was instrumental in support of our grant application. Patricia was educated at Loreto Convent in Darjeeling and has been a supporter of the Trust for the number of years. We are hugely grateful for her help and for the support of the United Nation's Women's Guild.



Successful vocational training at the Food Craft Institute

You may recall that in our summer newsletter we reported the great work of the 'Darjeeling Do-ers', who spent a busy few months earlier in 2020 making and selling facemasks to raise money for the Trust. That initiative allowed us to enrol three additional young people into our vocational training programme at the Food Craft Institute in Darjeeling. We have funded many young people to attend this course in previous years, and they consistently leave with offers of employment in hotels and restaurants all over India and beyond. Although the courses are currently on hold due to Covid, these additional students are ready to take up their places as soon as the Institute re-opens.

We were delighted to hear recently from one of our previous students, Phinzo Bhutia. Phinzo studied at the FCI course between 2011 and 2013. He had 4 brothers, all of whom worked as delivery boys, but he had aspirations to be a chef. His message confirms that his training has paid off:

"Nowadays I'm working with Don Bosco Tech Society as a food and beverage

trainer. They call me sir, so wonderful feelings. I'm still grateful to you all for your help and support. With your kindness I'm able to see my life beautifully grown. Thank you."

Don Bosco Tech Society is a charity which brings together over 800 professional from different fields to provide training and skills to disadvantaged young people across 29 states in India. It's amazing that Phinzo has in turn been able to use his training to pass on skills to other young people and help them find opportunities to improve their lives.



Phinzo in 2011, when we first met him and he started his training.



Phinzo in 2020, a confident young man.

Lockdown fundraising at Wakefield Girls' High School

In the Music Department at Wakefield Girls' High School, we organised a Virtual Cabaret Evening to raise money for the Darjeeling Children's Trust, to help the charity complete the girl's wing. Girls from our school recorded themselves singing their favourite songs and we compiled them all into a video-concert, which was shared on Youtube. We had a wide variety of musical styles involved: songs from the shows, some classical music and pop songs. The concert was made available to our school community and it was shared on social media. We didn't sell tickets, but people donated as they were able.

We love singing and it was great to be able to perform once again, even if it was quite different to our usual Cabaret Evening. This usually takes place in our school hall with a large audience. In our current circumstances in the UK, we are trying to think of different ways to perform our music. Our efforts were rewarded by knowing that we were doing this for such a great cause. The charity does such amazing things and it felt great to help out by raising money for the new girls' dormitories.

We know we are very lucky to be in a position where we don't have to worry

about our houses being damaged by earthquakes or living in uncomfortable environments, so we have loved helping to raise money so that these children can live more comfortably and happily. Seeing the difference that fundraising can make to the lives of pupils at the school in Darjeeling is wonderful and we have loved being able to spend time helping in whatever capacity we can.

Mia Sedgwick, Year 12 A-Level Music student



I never really enjoyed running before lockdown, I would always find an excuse not to go on a run. With having lots of free time during lockdown I decided I would dedicate this time to try get into running again. I started with just going on short runs and over time I have built it up and I will continue to keep building my distance and improving my speed. I've been running with either my brother who is training for the Great North Run, or my mum who is doing the same as me and trying to get back into running again. Running for the Darjeeling Children's Trust charity has motivated me even more. I just think all I have to do is get up and go on a run and in me doing this other people will benefit loads and it could potentially change their life from the money we raise.

I have managed to complete my couch to 5k. After I had done the 3 miles for the 5km I felt really good physically and mentally and I decided to push on a little bit further. I managed to run 4.47miles. Running for this charity gave me a real incentive to run and push myself to do something I never really enjoyed doing.

Marriella Shuttleworth, Year 9 Pupil

A chance encounter leads to a lifelong connection

In November of 2019 I travelled to India for the first time to take part in a guided cycle trip in Rajasthan. It is said that India is an assault on the senses and I was at times overwhelmed by the sights, sounds and smells as we cycled through towns and villages, cheered on by locals, surprised to see a crowd of Lycra-clad English people tearing past.

At the end of our organised tour three of us travelled on by train from Delhi to Darjeeling to continue our adventure independently. Sue, Cindy and myself have been friends for over thirty years, since meeting when our children were little. We installed ourselves in the Lion Homestay and set off to explore the town and especially the shops offering beautiful textiles. Bemused by the choice, we stood outside one and got chatting to a lovely, friendly Indian lady who was then joined by an English couple, and we introduced ourselves. We had met Sharan, Robert and Marilyn! We arranged to meet for a drink later. Over gin and tonics in the lovely Elgin Hotel (SO much warmer than our homestay!), we learnt about the Darjeeling Children's Trust, its history and hopes for the future, and were invited to visit the girl's home.



The girl's home was in a state of flux as they were packing up to 'shift' to their new home imminently. Thank goodness. They were living in dark, cold, cramped conditions and sleeping in an attic room which was like a crawl space. The girls were delighted to have visitors and clearly loved Sharan, Marilyn and Robert, and enjoyed showing off the performances they were rehearsing for the opening ceremony a few days later. We were touched by the warmth of their welcome, their beautiful smiles, laughter and enthusiasm.

Sue, Cindy and I were invited to attend the opening ceremony of the girl's wing of the new home a few days later. The contrast between this accommodation and what they were leaving could not have been greater; the new dormitories were fresh and light, with bunk beds and cupboards for each girl, and up-to-date bathroom facilities. It was testament to the huge fundraising effort that the Trust could upgrade to such a wonderful home which these children have every right to live in.

The ceremony featured speeches, singing and dancing and was quite beautiful. As parents and grandparents, and as a former teacher myself, we were all moved by how the children performed with such concentration and vigour.



A few days later we left Darjeeling with a feeling that the Trust would be part of our lives for some time to come... we have stayed in touch, made donations, and are about to begin sponsoring a student. Our trip to India has left a lasting impression on me and I am so grateful for that chance encounter outside of the shawl shop!

Yvonne Dobson

Memories of Darjeeling, One Year On

This time last year, I fell in love with Darjeeling. Starting with the nerve-wracking taxi ride from Bagdogra airport, when the driver seemed to be relying on divine luck to guide us around the foggy twists and turns of the mountain road, I could

feel that I was ascending into a place of magic. Fate had certainly played a part in my meeting with Darjeeling. Earlier that year, I'd seen a rerun of a 2010 BBC series on the Indian Hill Railways. Hearing stories from the place, and seeing the almost unbelievably cute toy train winding its way through people's streets and lives, I made the decision to be a passenger on that train in the summer.

August is my travelling season, and it feels very strange to be grounded this year. Many locals were puzzled that I was in Darjeeling last August; the middle of the rainy season. It was perfect for me though. The weather was cooler, the mists gave the mountains a mystical cloak, and the storms, when they came, felt charged with universal power. I didn't miss the spectacular view of Kanchenchunga because I'd had no experience of them. On my last day, though, I woke early to find that blue skies had blessed the town and set off spontaneously to the Mall Road. There aren't sufficient adjectives to convey the first sight of this beautiful Himalayan goddess, but I sat in awe at the viewpoint and tried to absorb her majesty as well as I could with my only-human-sized soul.



A curious monkey at the Kanchenjunga viewpoint



Darjeeling's famous 'Toy Train'

I'm eternally grateful to the 22-year-old me who had no idea what to do on leaving university with a degree in German and Dutch. While my friends were embarking on 'proper' careers, I launched out optimistically to an English teaching job at a boarding school in Shandong Province, China. I still love teaching English and happily this was something that I could usefully do in Darjeeling too. Sharan also mentioned visiting the children's homes, and the exciting times that were coming with the opening of the new girls' home that December. And so it was that I booked plane tickets to return to the town for 11 days that November.

I wasn't sure exactly what my role would be for the girls, apart from taking over some fun little toys and trinkets from home, but Sharan assured me that my attention and love would make a difference to them. I needn't have worried. Despite not having much materially, and living then in very crowded and difficult conditions, the girls welcomed me with smiling faces, keenness to tell me about themselves and their friends, and invitations to play all sorts of hand games. Their warmth and ingenuity really touched me, and I looked forward to those

visits immensely.



My warm welcome at the children's homes was reflected at the Mahatma Gandhi High School. This time, the smiles came from the two lovely teachers and head teacher, who introduced me to their school and were happy to share breaks and lunchtimes with me. It was wonderful to experience their friendship and to share with them the simple and incredibly delicious food – being vegan in India was an absolute delight and I miss the variety of ingredients and wonderful flavours often.

Teaching teenagers was something I'd not practised much, being more at home with the younger children, but I found my niche and even managed to involve a couple of the older, more reticent boys with games of Countdown, complete with the famous time's-running-out jingle playing on my phone. They were impressed that I'd heard of Pub-G (the most popular mobile game at the time) too, thanks to my having a teenage son, and so I earned extra respect points there. Having boys in my class whom I knew from visiting the boys' home, and seeing how happy, comfortable and studious they were, really brought home the amazing impact that DCT has on the lives of the children they help through providing safe accommodation, caring guidance and educational sponsorship.



A further highlight of my stay was meeting the fabulous Major Wangdi and his wife, Neema, who arranged my school placement, my accommodation, my wonderful dinners at their house, and kindly taught me so much about the language, culture and peaceful way of living in Darjeeling. I wouldn't have been able to make the deeper connection with this amazing place without them.

While compelled by current circumstances to watch from a distance, I'm also very grateful to Sharan for keeping me up to date with video clips and news from Darjeeling and for giving me the chance to carry on helping in some capacity by sponsoring a boy through primary school. Times are uncertain at the moment but one thing I do know is that, as soon as I can, I will follow my heart back to the magical town in the hills and take part again in the fabulous, life-changing works of the DCT.

If you would like to see more of the pictures that I took in Darjeeling, please visit my Instagram @kjd35uk.

Kirstie Davidson

We improve the lives of children and young people in Darjeeling through education, training and better living conditions. We put children and young people at the heart of all we do. We work responsively via partnership with local people in Darjeeling to minimise our overheads and maximise our impact.

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