

# LINCS WITH INDIA

Newsletter - Summer 2011



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Brian Harrison

## A PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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As you get older you will find that the gap between Christmas and the next appears to get shorter each year. Exactly the same phenomenon applies to Presidential Addresses - it seems no time at all since Geoff, our Newsletter editor, was pestering me for a contribution to the Newsletter and he has been doing so again recently.

Well, what has changed? The girls were in their new hostel at Stedland when this year's visitors arrived and the 'finishing off' list has since been done. There is still other work to be done at Sdetland (e.g. an ablution block for the boy's hostel and the completion of security fence) and these will be put in hand when funds are available. Alongside the hostel building schemes the financing of these 'capital' projects will be relatively modest and you will read elsewhere of the wonderful efforts of a group of members and supporters currently involved in a sponsored bike ride to Paris which may go some way towards a designated fund towards a bathroom for the boys.

Save for promoting special fundraising efforts of this kind, the managing committee has resolved not to undertake further major projects for the time being. For *Lincs with India*, this is a period of consolidation. The priority is to establish a sound financial base to sustain our investment in the building of the childrens' hostels at Stedland and maintain the 100 'lucky' children there. As regards ongoing maintenance costs, things wear out quickly in the climate of the sub-continent and there is at least the same level of inflation in India as we are experiencing here, especially in the

cost of food; and we also have to contend with exchange rate disadvantages, the pound tending to fall in value relative to the rupee. Mind you, at Rs70 to the £ there is a long way to go to get back to Rs4 to the £ at the time of India gaining independence from the Empire in 1948.

Our main sources of revenue are from talks and presentations, small 'events', membership subscriptions and donations. Our membership Secretary, Kath, will be chasing you for your subs but, if you could organise, or help organise a fund raising 'event', however small, or recruit a new member it would greatly help Lincs to continue to fund what we have so far established and, perhaps, in time expand.

Many members have commented that they appreciate receiving these Newsletters and recognise the time and effort put into producing them. They are, in themselves, a good source of our publicity and rather than throw it away why not pass it to a friend or neighbour. Who knows, this could double our membership!

I was glad to see so many of you at this year's AGM and look forward to seeing you again next year – but can someone please slow down the arrival of Christmas!

# WHY INDIA? FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Perhaps the most frequently asked question when we speak about our efforts to help these very poor tribal children is – **why India?**



This is very topical at present with newspaper headlines drawing critical attention to the UK's foreign aid budget in the face of cuts in public spending here. And, it is undeniable that the world order is changing; India is among the very fastest of the developing countries with its own nuclear and space research programmes. And, apparently, we read, out of every 10 billionaires in the world, 3 or 4 are in India.

Poverty is an inexact concept. Here in the UK we measure it and speak of the 'poverty line' by reference to a comparison with average income – which means, inevitably, we will always have poor people. Worldwide, there are several measures of poverty:

- The World Bank speaks about poverty in terms of income of either \$1.25 or \$2 per day. On that basis, there may be 3 or 4 out of every 10 billionaires living in India but also some 42% of Indians live on below \$1.25 and 76% below \$2.00 a day
- In India itself, however, poverty is measured by reference to the ability to purchase the recommended daily diet of around 2000 kilocalories, below which a person would be judged as malnourished. From this it is estimated that a monthly income of about Rs 356 [that's £7] is needed per person. Interestingly, factors such as

housing, health care (where there is any) and transportation are not taken into account at all i.e. in India, poverty is simply a measure of the cost of food.

*Lincs with India* is not about trying to change the morals or politics of the sub-continent government; least of all to try to help the millions of poor there. Rather, **we are advancing the interests of 100 of the poorest and most disadvantaged children in the world, children who through accident of birth happen to be in India.**

**Grant**



**P.S. Perhaps this explains Brian's frequent visits to India. He appears to have other interests!**



## THE REAL PRICE

Devi is not her real name but I thought I would create one; she might be only 21. She has a hard life. She may have married a market porter or an agricultural coolie at the age of 16 or she might have been married by the time she was 12; she might have three children, but will be hoping not to have any more.

The family probably has no home of their own. They could live with her husband's widowed mother and his unmarried brother in hopelessly inadequate accommodation, the only advantage of the arrangement being that Devi's mother in law, if she is not infirm, is there to help with the care of her grandchildren.

All this is pure speculation. However, you can be sure that Devi is employed on the local tea plantation. That much, and the rest of this story, is real.

Devi will walk to work and be in the fields by 7.00 a.m. Left unattended, tea 'plants' will grow into trees but continuous picking of leaves is calculated to restrict the height to just above waist or around chest level, depending of course how tall you are. These are extremely hardy plants, with spikes not dissimilar to our own briars and thorn hedges. Devi will be provided with a thick (and extremely heavy) rubber apron to protect her lower body. Her limbs, both arms and hands will be vulnerable.

**She carries a stick. This is not just to help her keep balance on the steep mountainside plantation fields. It will be handy to hit snakes with.**



## OF A CUP OF TEA - DEVI'S STORY

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Small groups of women, at first appearing as tiny figures in the distance as patches of colour on a sea of 'BRM racing green' sweeping down the mountainside; they are moving slowly along the contoured lines of the plantation, orange trees scattered about providing occasional shade, 'picking' leaves into sacks carried over their shoulders, sometimes fastened and held by straps to their foreheads. A truly iconic and picturesque rural scene – for the tourist.

In fact, however, the cultivation and continuous harvesting of the plantation involves extremely arduous labour. The degree of incline of many of the fields can be so severe that it is quite difficult just to stand upright for a few minutes let alone move freely through these heavy bushes with the weight of the rubber apron and sack of leaves. Much of the land could not be traversed by modern farm vehicles so that the land cannot be used for much other than tea or spice plantations.

So it is tough work. So are the hours. Devi left home at daybreak, soon after 6.00 a.m. and she will work until at least 4.00 p.m, allowing just enough time to walk home before the sun goes down at 6.00 p.m. (which it does all year round). Then of course she has a family to care for.

Devi is only paid when she works; so if there is work, and there usually is, she works. But, she will not be paid for simply turning up. She will only be paid for the leaves she picks into her sack (which are weighed carefully and a record kept). She works hard; she hopes to pick 50

kilos in a day (she's four and half feet and size nothing so that's a good deal more than she weighs herself). She says she could gather 50/60 kilos on a very good day. And, for this she is paid 2 rupees per kilo. At Rs 70 to the £, that is £1.50-£1.80 in our money (interestingly a bit more than the itinerant building workers).

Foreign exchange rate comparisons are not particularly helpful until you realise that in Munnar market where Devi might go shopping on her day off (and we visited this morning) carrots, beetroot, cauliflowers, cabbages, beans (all the things we buy and many others we can't) were costing Rs40 per kilo and Kerala rice and onions Rs60 per kilo. So, by my reckoning Devi's hard, very hard, day's work could have put a kilo of rice and a kilo of carrots on the 'table' at home (in practice there will not be a table).

So how do we know so much about Devi and her working terms? We wanted to know and she told us through our driver/guide. I am sorry I did not ask her name but now at least we know the real price of a cup of tea

**by Geoff Allen**  
18th January 2011  
Munnar, Kerala



# VISITORS REPORT 2011

## THE GOOD, THE BAD AND .....

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**The good.** Crucially, the children at Stedland were patently very happy and seemed to be well looked after; there was no apparent shortage of staff and the 'matron' in charge of the girls hostel was a strong and distinguished (young) woman and we were very impressed with her.

It was a Thursday. The children were all in school. By prior arrangement Ignatius took us to see one of the village schools (lets call it 'unpronounceable') attended by some of the younger sponsored children; we were well received by the head teacher, her staff and, as always, treated as celebrities by the children. Although the conditions and facilities were still very basic, things have changed considerably since we started these visits. The children are still sitting on the floor, but they have mats (and, in any case, chairs and desks would cut down the numbers on the school roll!).

Evidently, the children generally look better and well nourished (and no less artfully charming!). The older children were writing with pens and the head teacher of 'unpronounceable' graciously accepted, with obvious and sincere appreciation, a gift from Rolf of a significant supply he had brought from the UK.

**Still good,** the first impression on arrival at Sdetland is that whole development has been transformed by lines of trees which are now established in front of the hostel buildings; providing much needed shade to some of us who were wilting. Bringing the trees on (incidentally by the children themselves) has taken some of the desperately short water supply but has been well worth it. Other trees on the perimeter of the settlement have perished in drought conditions (as have much of the 'self-sufficiency' crops being grown on the land adjoining the hostel (owned by Ignatius and made available by him for the children to be taught how to cultivate vegetables). Remember that many of these children are from 'hunter/gatherer' families so that growing things is not in the genes.



**And, still good:** Ignatius has started to use the storeroom (which you may remember was a temporary dormitory for the girls while their hostel was being built) to provide vocational training for the boys and girls alike in clothes making. He has put in three (very 'Singer-like') sewing machines, with cutting tables, etc and has a staff member (he calls the 'tailor' of course) to instruct the children. We thought this, the gardening and land and stock management; milk cows and chickens, goats apparently do not work in these conditions because they eat everything else.

It would be easy and very nice to continue with only good things to report. For example, about how well the children get along with each other at the hostels. They so obviously do. The older girls 'mother' the very youngest boys and girls. Remarkably, some of the older girls are now still in full time education at 16/17 and have avoided marriage (while we know that some as young as 12/13 – yes, 12, do not return from their school holidays, back home in their villages, because their families seize the opportunity to marry them off. We mustn't criticise of course. And, happily, Ignatius reported that the supported tribal children are now getting on well with the village children in the local schools – it was not always so.

The cultural dancing has moved up to another level, another 'Slumdog' opportunity perhaps; these children are naturally gifted dancers. We were enchanted, as ever!

The last of the children, the eldest, return to Stedland from school by about 5.30 p.m. (having left at 7.30 a.m. – a ten hour day (only half day Saturdays). A few questions:

- bearing in mind two of us chaps, or maybe three of the ladies, can squeeze into the back of a 'tut tut'; how many school children would

you think could be carried? We counted 12 plus school bags and tiffin tins tumbling out the back of one – about average we were told. Ignatius says 18 is the record but then, for other reasons, we are worried about his maths!

- what would you think happens when they all return from school each day? First they have a 'roll call' lined up in the Stedland grounds, followed by 'physical education'. This involves running round the full perimeter of the hostel grounds followed by, very British 1950s, arm and leg swinging musical movement (without the music) and very un-British yoga moves. One each of the senior boys and girls is selected on a daily basis to act as 'coach'; the staff looking on, except the cooks who are preparing tea.

- television is severely rationed. The boys have one – whilst, much to their chagrin, the girls do not [and the visiting group resolved to do something about that]



## The not so good

The boys hostel was built and opened 4/5 years ago but SDET is short of money to maintain it. Naturally, Ignatius will not spend money on the upkeep of a building if he needs this for the care of the children. So *Lincs with India* is providing a budget for this.

An ablution block for the boys? I have put this under 'bad and ugly' because it will be until this facility can be added to the boys' hostel. Best

not to think about it too long but 51 boys and umpteen male staff produce quite a lot of waste materials. I will not elaborate but, suffice to say, appropriate facilities and a septic tank ought to be high on a wish list. The boys still bathe (when there is water) outside in one of the two 'tanks'.

## VISIT KERELA 'THE LAND OF THE COCONUT' IN JANUARY

Stepping down from a winter flight, an exotic world awaits far removed from the UK gloom half a day behind.

Leaving the urban sprawl of Trivandrum lay iconic palm-lined beaches to stay awhile; coconut groves, tranquil 'backwaters' and lagoons with luxurious house-boats; lush paddy fields and vegetation; and, further inland, the spectacular slopes of the Western Ghats with cardamom and spice-clad slopes and tea plantations and the hill-station towns there.

In his 'Plain tales from the Hills' Kipling describes India as that magical and mysterious place it is impossible to visit only once. Yes, quite apart from the emotional roller-coaster of the Sdetland and tribal village experience, almost everyone who has travelled with us would agree with this.

**Lincs with India** has several distinguishing features: our administration is wholly carried



out by volunteers; we incur no costs of management or operation - so that every penny received goes to the objectives; and, we monitor what we spend, through members visiting the projects annually – surely the best form of audit trail. But that is not the only reason for our travels.

**Interested? Want to know more?  
Just contact any of the committee  
members.**

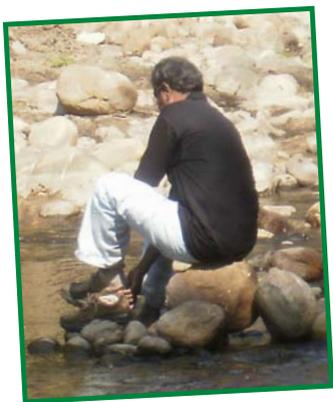
**by Jim Needley,  
in his newly found travel agent role!**

# GETTING TO MELAPUROVU

Some members will already know something of the tribal village 'Melapurovu'. Brian speaks of it. It's at the foot of the Ghats, rather nearer to Munnar (at about 6,500 feet where we stayed in a hotel I shall certainly be returning to) and quite some way from Stedland on the Tamil plains. It's the village Brian speaks of having to cross three river beds on foot to get there – which is so – and which almost certainly would not be possible in the monsoon. There, we met four generations of the same family (the eldest claiming to be 60 which actually is quite possible there!) including the mother and grandparents of the girl sponsored by Rolf and Pat Sperr of Grimsby. Anyway, more about the village, and its delightfully kind and dignified people, another time.

Now, coming from a 'ramble loving' nation, we had no trouble getting our shoes and socks off to cross the river beds; all of which carried some water and, this being after the end of the rainy season, one of the river bubbling along in quite lively

fashion. Rather surprisingly one thought, Ignatius seemed to judge he could manoeuvre across some – not particularly flat – stepping stones with his town shoes on. Half way across, he was thoroughly wet from the knees downwards, as we all were, but rather than plug on, here is a wonderful photograph of him sat on a stone in the middle of the river carefully removing and emptying water from his shoes, wringing out his socks and replacing both before continuing across.



Odd you might think. But, there again, perhaps he knew where the crocodiles were!

# A NEW 'SPECIAL SCHOOL' AT STEDLAND?

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We often speak of Ignatius' having a particular interest in children with special needs (one of his twin sons being severely handicapped). By common consensus among the visitors over many years the SDET 'Special Schools' at Shrivilliputur and Stedland are providing outstanding facilities where there would otherwise be none at all, leaving a lasting impression on us all.

It is easy to see why the International Childrens' Trust thought Ignatius to be deserving of an international award in recognition of his work with these special needs children. A few years ago the impression might have been that the only benefit of these facilities might have been limited to providing much needed respite to the parents of the physically and mentally challenged children.

It is quite different now. This year's visitors (who were able to have informed conversation with the staff about these things) were especially impressed with two physiotherapists.

Ignatius has long made it known he aims to have a purpose built Special School at Stedland. In this he is supported by ICT.

Naturally we wish Ignatius well, but (while we whole-heartedly support his work with the special needs children and propose to continue to help with the travel costs of the children receiving care) the Lincs with India management committee is not involved in this building project and have informed Ignatius of our concerns about any plans he might have to extend the hostel arrangements for these poor children.

## BUILDING THE BOYS A BATHROOM

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Sarah and Phil Witcomb are cycling 200 miles from London to Paris to raise the cost of building an ablution block extension to the boys hostel. Sponsorship donations can be sent to us direct at Lincs with India or via the online 'Just Giving' facility of the International Childrens' Trust

## WHO'S WHO ON THE COMMITTEE

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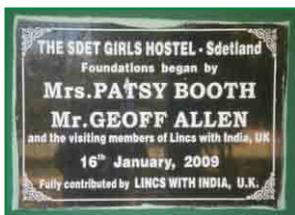
## AGM CHANGES



At this year's AGM the Chairman paid tributes to John Rowland and Patsy Booth, long-serving members of the managing committee who stood down.

Apart from providing wise counsel at our meetings, John attended the opening of the boys' hostel in 2008 and co-led the fund-raising initiatives for the girls' hostel, including the very successful 'Christmas card' project.

Patsy has been closely involved with us almost from the very beginning and, with Nigel, a frequent visitor to the projects. Patsy's experience from the visits and her links with the 'Lincoln Geographers' has been especially valuable over the years. Among many things, doubtless Patsy will particularly recall the permanent acknowledgement at Stedland of her part in the laying of the foundation stone for the girls' hostel!



Tony O'Brien from Sandilands, Sutton on Sea had already been co-opted onto the committee during the year and his appointment was formally ratified when he was appointed at the AGM with the rest of the committee en bloc.

Reshuffling of responsibilities include that Tony has taken the role of Secretary (which includes the day to day electronic correspondence with Ignatius at SDET in respect of the day to day managing of our work with him). This allows for Marjorie (girls) and Maggie (boys) to continue their roles as Sponsorship Secretaries and Kath as Membership Secretary.

While continuity is important to ensure the links with the past, it is nevertheless essential that there is continual change to the managing group to bring in fresh ideas and enterprise.

Other candidates for selection to the committee were put forward at the AGM which it is hoped could lead to further co-opted appointments this year but there is still room for others.



# WATER CRISIS, WHAT CRISIS?

## THANKS TO THE ROTARY CLUB OF SKEGNESS

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Remember the water predicament at Stedland, brought about by the drought conditions after the failure of the 2009 monsoon and made the worse by the demands of the construction of the girls' hostel? Water had to be brought into the settlement by tanker twice a week and there was a very worrying period when we wondered if the naturally available supply would ever be adequate.

The crisis figured as Rotary project here. A Rotary grant kick-started the financing of a mission taken forward by the Rotary Club of Skegness (under the direction of one of our members, Llew Kelly) to provide a safe and reliable water supply to Stedland:

- in the first phase, the existing borehole was re-bored and a new submersible pump put down paid for by the Rotary grant matched by the Alford + Mablethorpe Club. Initially this provided only 30 minutes water supply a day (with *Lincs with India* paying for tanker delivery of the rest of the hostel settlement's needs). Later, following the 2010 rainy season, the borehole produced enough for the childrens' priority drinking needs but not enough to be plumbed to the new girls hostel. Moreover, there was still concern that if the monsoon rains were not plentiful the source might dry up again;
- in the second phase, a second, much deeper, borehole has been put down on another area of Stedland in the hope of discovering a fresh supply which could be piped directly to the new girls' hostel. Skegness Rotary Club paid for the borehole costs and also agreed, provided this was successful, to fund the plumbing expenses.

The work started at the end of March and on the 18th April we received a message from Ignatius

“ We excavated up to 500 feets (sic) of 6.5” as we planned. We found that it has water source. We can say that it will be better than other existing bore well at Sdetland. So we believe that this new well will be giving enough water to solve the water crisis at Sdetland. We are all very much thankful to you for extended your financial support for dig this new bore well. I have sent five photographs taken while at digging. ”

Accordingly, we were able to authorise the plumbing work and which we have now heard has been installed and is working.

Leaving aside the cost of the tankered water, dealing with the second phase of the crisis has cost about Rs 85,000 (and at Rs 70 to the £, that's about £1,200 in our money). Future visitors will see an appropriate acknowledgement of the help from Skegness – a plaque perhaps, or maybe a Jolly Fisherman! On behalf of the children, very many thanks Skegness.

*Ed. So now our girls have loos as we know them and showers too. On the other hand, the boys who have no such grand facilities have a large screen television of which the girls are very envious!*

