



build**n**



Final thoughts...

Aberdeen

Clare Ross



When the idea of travelling to Malawi to start a school build in memory of my late brother was first mentioned I thought it seemed like a good idea, my daughter Sophie agreed. Once we had completed the numerous pieces of paperwork and visited doctors and travel clinics for various vaccinations and tablets, all we had to do was pack and travel to our destination.

Saturday the 30th of May was our day of departure. Sophie and I were travelling on our own as the other members of the trek were either going out a few days earlier or were travelling from other locations across the globe. 3 flights and 16 hours later we arrived in Lilongwe to be met by the buildOn representative. We spent the first night in a Hotel, which I am sure if it had been in UK, would be lucky to gain

accreditation. After a meal in a local restaurant we headed to bed.

The next day we travelled to the village where the school was to be built. We arrived to an overwhelming reception from the villagers, greeted with lots of hugs singing and dancing, it was an amazing experience. After speeches from locals, education officers and buildOn representatives, Sophie then spoke from the heart about her uncle and the school build. This proved to be one of many emotional moments.

Once the ceremony was over we were then introduced to our host families. I have to be honest; I was probably more worried about this more than anything else as I wasn't sure what to expect! We were greeted by our extended Malawian family, and at this point we really didn't know who we were actually staying with. After collecting our belongings, mattress and mosquito net we headed to our new home. We eventually worked out that we were staying with 20 year old Mavis and her 8 month old boy Hadwick, and much to our relief she spoke a little English. The house had no electricity, furniture or running water, it was basically a brick shell with concrete floors. Sophie and I had a curtained off room which only just fitted our double mattress. We were then shown the toilet facilities, a brick build enclosure with a concrete floor housing a hole about 10cm in diameter with a cover held by a string, when we lifted the cover several cockroaches appeared. The shower was 2 buckets of water and a cup, one hot bucket heated on a fire, and one cold. It is amazing how quickly you get used to this as working on the site was very dirty and this was the only means to get clean!

The first meal with the family was a challenge. We were lucky as we were given a spoon and a plate, whereas other members of the trek had to eat the local way, using their hands. The main ingredient of a Malawian meal is sima, only describable as being white, having a consistency of rubber and being only just palatable with some additional dishes, i.e. beans or pumpkin leaves.

The build days started at 7am with breakfast, the early start was not a problem as the chickens usually woke you when the sun rose at 5am. The breakfast and lunches were cooked by the buildOn cook Mary; they were good if not a bit carb heavy. The build work consisted of digging, carrying buckets of sand and carrying bricks. We had to pump water every day to keep us hydrated, not only did we have to pump the water from a local pump, we also had to re-pump manually to purify the water to make it palatable for our Western stomachs. We worked on the site for 4 hours every day, 8am until 12pm. The last hour was the hardest as we started to get tired and hungry, it was however made easier by the local women who spontaneously burst into song and dance as they carried buckets of sand and bricks on their head.

One of the many highlights of the week was visiting a finished school. We didn't realise until we were there that it was Toby Wallace's school, we were again welcomed by locals and school children who were very pleased to see us and entertained us with songs and dancing, by this time we are all reciting the local songs and almost mastering the dancing.

The closing ceremony took place in the village on the Thursday afternoon which closely resembled the opening ceremony with speeches, song and dances, and our fantastic attempt at recreating one of the local songs, which seemed to be well received. After sadly leaving the village on the Friday morning we headed to Lilongwe where we spent a night in a hotel, again not the height of luxury, but we did have flushing toilets and running water. We also had access to WiFi but as the power went down it wasn't much use! It was great to spend the last night together as a group letting our hair down and having a meal at a pizza restaurant and a 'couple of drinks'.

I can honestly say that I loved the whole experience, even though I am not a camper and certainly would not have considered this trip if it hadn't been in memory of my late brother Andrew, and Toby. I know they would both be proud.



Alistair Watson, Jamie Cuthbert and Daniel Porter

Day 1 in the Village

I hadn't met Dan until this week, but after a full night together I can safely say we feel pretty tight. Safely tucked into our room by 8.30pm we felt ready for a long night's sleep. We are each 6 ft 1" and 200lbs but we both managed to fit comfortably in our "room" which is 8ft by 8ft. It is pitch black, the darkest room we had ever slept in. So not the best place to be for two disorganised packers. Before we even put our heads on the pillow we agree that in this room "anything goes".... I am convinced I don't snore but it was at least 4 times I heard Dan uttering "you're snoring again Al please stop" (but in slightly less polite terms). Our family wakes up at 4am to go to the water pump and we are awoken at 4.30am by floods of water being poured into the well next door to our room. The coal shovel scrapes and scratches and the fire is lit. Next thing we know our room is filled with smoke and our throats sound like we smoked 30 cigarettes overnight. The cute little three year old in our family starts to sing "punga di nyemba" (rice and beans) from the song we invented the night before and now we're sure our day is about to begin. A quick wash of the face and a few exchanges in Chichewa (Ine wandaluma njoka - roughly translated as I am a snake!) and a whole lot of

laughter and we are ready to go. No matter how you sleep, the energy of the people is infectious and we can't wait to get started on the building site.

After a quick breakfast with the entire Aberdeen crew we were off to the worksite for the first time. As we walked towards the grounds there were already 50 or so Malawian men starting to dig. The foundation is the first task at hand. The "westerners" as they call us were quick to grab shovels and axes. We quickly learned, however, that even the strongest members of our group were no match for the Malawians. We proceeded to let the local men pound away at the very firm, sun dried, African earth. Don't worry though, there were plenty of other jobs for us to do. We thought we would have better luck working with the women while they carried bricks from across the village and to the worksite. Each of us could uncomfortably carry about five bricks. The local women, however, used buckets and carried 10 bricks or more on their heads.

Let it be known that many women did this task with a baby tied to their back and no shoes on their feet. They went nonstop for 4 hours. It was unbelievable to watch. As we neared the end of our work day (which was around noon) the locals looked the least bit tired while the Aberdeen team appeared to have their lives in shambles on the dusty grounds. We have named Rob the MVP of the day as the strapping lad bolstered through the blistering African sun like a Greek God (we are very close to the equator and the sun is just relentless).

Our afternoon was spent at the school which had already been built nearby for Toby. If any of us needed any more evidence of how grateful the local community are to buildOn, or of the value of what we are doing here, this was it. The entire school mobbed the bus as we arrived, dancing, singing, waving signs to welcome us. After dancing our way through the crowd (if only the same tactic worked with crowds back home) we had a little tour of the school blocks. The original classroom, an area outside with only a tree for shade, stood in marked contrast to the buildOn block, which was amazingly cool inside. We were all slightly disturbed by our collective inability to answer the first maths question on the black board...a worrying development from a group of finance employees! The school then put on a really impressive display of yet more dancing, singing and even a comedy show to say thank you. One girl could give Rihanna and co a real run for their money on the dancing front. To leave, we had to dance our way back to the bus (naturally) and prizes must go to Rob and Sam for their outstanding performances. The visit really was so heart-warming and I think we all felt quite emotional afterwards.



Alistair Watson

There are so many vivid memories from this trip: the intense and electrifying welcome we received at the village; carrying bricks alongside the dedicated village women to the sound and rhythm of constant song and dance; the roars of laughter and noise from the tightly gathered crowd of 35 adults and kids when the Jenga set fell for the first time; the startlingly different attitudes portrayed by the village women and the village chiefs in our respective discussions with them; the smile on Kassim's face, the five year old boy in our family who is disabled in one arm and leg but shows tremendous spirit and resilience, when we showed him how to play with the rugby ball; the feeling of darkness as night comes in, and the incredible morning light. I could go on and on, but what I took most from this trip was the stunning energy, engagement and passion of the local people. We could not have detailed conversations with them, but by washing with them, laughing, working, eating, playing and just being with them, I felt we developed a mutual affinity and an understanding which will last a very long time. There are strong and individual characters throughout our family but above all they implicitly know what is important in life - family, community and a sense of fun and laughter even in hardship. They opened their hearts to us and let us into their lives, and in return hopefully we have given them something to remember and to inspire their children.



Evie Paterson



I think this photo says a lot about our trip to Malawi. On our last morning with our family, Frankie, the wonderful, indomitable matriarch of the family, presented each of us with a gift to take back to the UK: a pumpkin. A fervent attempt to explain vegetable importation rules ensued, complete with aeroplane mimes, with debatable success. Having expressed our enormous thanks and regret that we couldn't accept the pumpkins, we decided if we couldn't take them home at least we could put them on our heads and take a photo.

While on one level the whole episode was distinctly comical, it was also poignant. To give away four precious pumpkins was incredibly generous for a large family with so little of their own, so we were all very much touched by the offer. Our entire trip was characterised by this mixture of constant laughter, kindness, generosity and friendship. I for one will never look at a pumpkin in the same light again.

Robert Matthews

10 lasting memories



Malawi sky	day or night, constantly changing.
Malawi smells	the all-pervading smells of wood smoke mingled with sweat.
Malawi sounds	the songs, the drums, the laughter and the cockerels that wake up too early.
Malawi smiles	dancing or digging, carrying bricks or buckets, always smiling.
Malawi space	the long horizons, the open vistas.
Malawi (n)sima	an acquired taste; acquired by few.
Malawi socials	a sense of community, harmony and belonging sadly disappearing in our developed world.
Malawi soccer	Gil's indignation at being penalised by a whistle happy referee for taking his sun hat off to head the ball.
Malawi squad	a disparate team in age, shape and size, united in a common cause; good men and true. Shared experiences, lasting friendships.
Malawi schools	Toby's and Andrew's. Lives well lived. Memories not forgotten.

Thank you Aberdeen for the opportunity.

Sophie Ross



So I failed on my mission to choose just one picture to sum up Malawi, I did however manage to narrow it from about 300 to 3 so that'll have to do! Malawi was the single most amazing and surreal experience of my life, one which I will ever forget, and this seems fitting as we were all doing it in memory of two of the most amazing men you could ever hope to meet. I think we succeeded in making them proud and honouring their memory.

From the moment we stepped off of the bus in Kanowatimwa (the village in which we were staying) any worries or nerves disappeared. It seemed the entire village were out to meet us, singing and dancing and welcoming us to the opening ceremony. The ceremony began with several important people in the village telling us about the significance of the school and the difference it would make. After the buildOn representatives spoke it was for to me to say a few words about Andrew, bearing in mind when I had offered to speak I hadn't quite appreciated the number of people that would be there, I was rather nervous. I somehow got through my speech without messing it up; I just hope I did Andrew justice.

The next few days involved getting to know our families, starting on the foundations of the school and the rather important task of getting used to our 'facilities' for the week! The language barrier became less and less daunting as the week went on as we soon realised it didn't matter what we said the locals would explode with laughter the second we opened our mouths anyway.

The thing that struck me most about the people of Malawi was the fact that they just seemed delighted all of the time. It's definitely a lesson I think we all took back, it doesn't matter what you have you can always have happiness.

Finally, getting to know our buildOn team was amazing, some of the most genuine and friendly people I have ever met, from all corners of the world. We definitely all came home knowing more about each other than we ever thought we would. The picture above of us was after 4 hours of hard labour in the sun, and although we are all filthy and exhausted we all still have smiles on our faces.

Steph Peters

Esther and I



I'm sure all of us will have a difficult time picking just one moment to share about our trip to Malawi. The entire trip from beginning to end was filled with a ton of laughter, learning, hard work, adventure and occasionally, a few tears. I won't soon forget this beautiful piece of Africa.

A highlight for me was meeting my new sister, Esther. To me, Esther encapsulated a lot of what we would learn about the women of the village. The women here are the powerhouses. They are the strong foundations on which these communities are built. Every day, we watched women of all ages carrying massive amounts of bricks/sand/gravel on their heads to the school project. They were the most vocal group upon our arrival and in

every conversation regarding building the school. Esther was an example to me of an amazingly strong woman, even though she was only 13. Esther's family welcomed Claire, Sarah and I into their home for the week and we found that she is the one who truly keeps the household running. She's not in school and this is expected of her in the village. We learned after talking to the Chiefs and women of the village that women marry young here, sometimes as young as 14 or 15.

Esther does all of her tasks with laughter, smiles and a strong sense of love for, and responsibility to, her family. She took the best care of us, ensuring we were fed, bathed and comfortable (she didn't actually bathe us but did provide the water, which was indeed something we briefly wondered when she said 'I bath you now?' on our first night)! In the early mornings Esther, her older brother Harrison, and I would sit and read through the phrase book of Chichewa/English and practice our skills. Esther knew so much English and diligently read through that phrase book again and again, letting me help her with pronunciation of the very few words she missed while she taught me how to speak Chichewa. Our sessions were filled with laughter and I'll miss them a lot. It is my hope that the new school we helped begin will make it far less likely that girls like Esther will stop their education because they are exactly the ones who need it the most.

I believe the women of the village left the deepest mark on all of us. I have plans to return to the village and see the completed school and I really hope I will see Esther and her family again.

Yvonne Smith

Having only joined AAM last year I never knew Andrew and Toby. However, it's clear to me from spending time with colleagues and Andrew's family just how much this project means to those that did know them. So my first words are of thanks to those that came out to Malawi - for sharing your stories and making Andrew and Toby the focal point of our trip.

The other thing that really stuck out for me was the character of the Malawian people in the village. I've never seen people (women in particular) work so hard and do it all with such grace, humility and a constant smile. My experience as a visitor to their village was amazing - so warm and kind. I have a huge amount of respect for them and they've taught me a few things:

- 1) There are only a handful of basic decisions we need to make on a daily basis and clogging your brain up with other choices/decisions can be detrimental.
- 2) The importance of community spirit and closeness with friends and family.
- 3) When there aren't words there is ALWAYS a song or a dance!
- 4) Show more kindness - everyone there made eye contact, smiled, asked how you were and helped.

I'd also like to thank them for bringing me out of my shell; shyness is not something you can get away with when you're pushed into the middle of a circle of 30 children and ordered to dance!

I hope the school helps them address the problems they told us about: children starting school too late due to the long walk to the nearest school (8km away) and subsequently dropping out, or just not going at all; early marriages and pregnancies; crime. I think they know they have to make this work now; the building of the school is, in itself, not enough. It needs the support from the village. And judging by the opening and closing ceremonies held for us, I think that support is there!

I have a funny feeling I'll be back in Malawi someday.



Jill Sneddon

When the dust settles



I hope that I will always be able to remember our Malawian journey as vividly and as colourfully as I do now. I'm only home a few days though and already the whole thing feels like a crazy Malerone-fuelled dream.

I had mixed emotions from the start about how much we could accomplish in such a short space of time but I now realise that our purpose wasn't just all about the physical building of a school but the building of relationships. Relationships that will hopefully act as impetus and motivation to our new Malawian families to build and cherish their new school. Sadly, at the moment, children are getting married as young as 12 years old because of the lack of education. However, I am confident that Andrew and Toby's schools are going to give this generation and those going forward the opportunity to achieve great things.

Thinking back on our journey the over-riding sensation is warmth. Not just from the sun and our amazing team but from the beautiful people of Malawi. From the second that our bus touched down in the village to that unforgettable, moving reception - the locals opened their homes and their hearts to us strange white people with our odd customs and bad dancing. These people have absolutely nothing, but their overwhelming sense of community, deep family values and their unfaltering love for their beautiful land is something that we could all only wish for.

Of course, to many of us, this journey was about more than the physical construction of a school. To many it was a chance to 'do' something positive with our feeling of loss and to celebrate the lives of our friends. I think that this is a beautiful, fitting legacy for them and I truly believe that a little bit of their spirit has been left in that African dust.