



# **FROM HEAD TEACHER IN ROME TO SCHOOL INSPECTOR IN MALAWI THE STORY OF A RETIRED TEACHER WHO TRAVELLED AROUND MALAWI INSPECTING SCHOOLS**

**By Margaret Stenhouse**

When Jill Bennett retired as head teacher of Rome International School in 2002, she decided to dedicate herself to a term of voluntary work where her particular skills would benefit youngsters in difficult circumstances in an underdeveloped country. Here she talks to Wanted in Rome about her experiences.

"Many employers and aid agencies would have believed that a 65-year-old grandmother was too old to head off for a new life as a volunteer worker in Africa," she said with a smile. "But not Voluntary Service Overseas (motto: 'Sharing Skills. Changing Lives'), which is one of the few actively non-ageist aid organisations that appreciates the experience and expertise a mature person has to offer."

After a concentrated training programme, Bennett was sent to the small African state of Malawi, ranked as the sixth poorest country in the world and afflicted with the numerous woes common to so many African nations, such as endemic poverty, famine, soil erosion, periodic drought and disastrous flooding, inefficient governance and the ever-hovering deadly threat of HIV/AIDS, referred to locally and euphemistically as "the slim disease".

Conflict is mercifully missing from the list. Malawi (formerly known as Nyasaland) was one of the earliest colonies to gain independence from British rule in 1964 and is at present governed by a multi-party democratic system. It is heavily dependent on donor aid from various developed countries.

"I was sent to work for the education department in the small town of Mzuzu, the administrative capital of the northern region, as part of a Malawian inspection team, responsible for monitoring and improving schools in the north of the country."

A routine day involved teaching 75 students, ranging in age from 11 to 19, in a classroom with no resources except a blackboard and chalk. The school day started at 07.00 when the pupils were supposed to be in class for half an hour quietly reading, even though "none of them had textbooks and library books barely exist. Some of them made do with scraps of paper torn from newspapers or one book to be shared among them."

The tea break in the staffroom was another lesson in economising. "It involved a teaspoon of tea between 18 of us, with each one straining lukewarm water through it into a cup. I made a terrible blunder the first day by innocently putting fresh tea into the strainer for my cup. Malawians are so kind and polite – nobody said anything."

Bennett found that local teachers were demoralised and frustrated, and that absenteeism was rife, mainly due to the fact that salaries were too low to support a family. Teachers were therefore often forced to take time off in order to earn extra money to feed their dependents. In addition, they were morally obliged to attend the frequent funerals and extended "condolence periods" for relatives and friends who had fallen victim to AIDS.

"HIV/AIDS is taken so seriously that it is actually a core curriculum subject in schools. There is even a very explicit textbook. VSO training stressed the necessity for frankness and open discussion. I learned to set my natural reticence aside and discuss transmission and prevention. The rest of my team furnished me with a banana as a necessary teaching aid for demonstrating the use of a condom. I was confronted with alarming misinformation, such as 'girls get rid of AIDS virus when they menstruate' and 'men can be cured by sleeping with a virgin!'"

When teachers did not turn up, the class was routinely ordered outside to cut the grass with lethal looking metre-long parangs under no apparent supervision. "The mere sight would give any school health and safety officer in the UK or the US a heart attack on the spot!"



Jill Bennett with a little friend in Malawi.



A typical classroom in Malawi.

Despite their many problems, Bennett found that Malawians were irrepressibly cheerful and friendly.

"I heard the word 'Welcome' sung at me at least five times a day: 'Welcome to our school! Welcome to my house! Welcome to our country! I will never forget my first evening in the small teacher's house which was assigned to me out in the bush five miles from Mzuzu. I had barely arrived when a procession of neighbours came to say "hello" and offer any help I might need. I went to bed that night knowing that I was going to be all right in a place where people were not too insular or inhibited to welcome a stranger so generously. I couldn't help wondering how many Malawians arriving in a European country would receive such a warm welcome from their neighbours."

"My little house in the hills was a very simple African teacher's house, which had both electricity (for three or four hours a day) and running water. I was luckier than many other volunteers who have to live with neither. The house had years of grime on the walls and a kitchen that was covered with grease from top to bottom from cooking on an open fire. I managed to find a painter, but I had to clean up first as he would happily have painted over everything, including the thick layer of black grease, spider webs, wasp nests and so on."

VSO insisted that every volunteer hire a night watchman. "One night I got home late from a trip and I searched in vain for him. Eventually I located him, sprawling half naked, dead drunk and snoring loudly in my vegetable garden, stretched out on my newly planted lettuces."

"One thing I was not prepared for was the cold when winter arrived and the temperature went down to six degrees. No-one had told me I should take woolly vests and bedsocks. Of course, I had no heating and no hot water."

Bennett's house was five kms out of Mzuzu, which involved a 05.30 rise in the morning and a long walk through woods and maize plantations to get to work in town and then back again at night. "I loved the morning walk, but in the evening, when I was tired, it could be excruciating. However, I would beg a lift from anybody going my way and I usually managed to get one. There was a taxi service, but it cost a whole two pounds – a fortune in Malawi - thus only to be used in emergencies."

"Little Mzuzu itself did not suffer from drought. In fact, it seemed to rain every day most of the day, with frequent mist in the mornings. It's a fairly typical "developing country" town – dirty, scruffy, noisy and frankly ugly but brimming over with life and warmth and good humour. Shopping was severely limited but sometimes I found unexpected treasures like a jar of Marmite or a tin of cocoa lurking behind the huge sacks of rice or maize. In the market you found stalls selling "first world" charity shop clothes at bargain prices. Fresh baked bread and butter came from South Africa as well as long-life milk. Malawi imports things like tomatoes and vegetables from Tanzania although the country itself has an ideal rainy climate, and huge areas of fertile land that could be cultivated. But no-one seems to have any idea to start a market garden here in north Malawi. They are used to receiving aid and they tend to get resentful when the donor demands certain standards."



A farmer in Malawi.



With the inspection team at Nkhata Bay.

Bennett's job also involved regular marathon tours in rural areas with a team of seven colleagues ("authentic jewels every one") from the inspection branch of the ministry of education.

"On inspection days we were up at 04.45, with departure around 05.30 to arrive at the selected school in time for the start of lessons at 07.30. Conditions varied enormously. Many schools were in the remote areas, involving hours driving down bumpy dirt tracks in an old Landrover that needed oil every two hours and water every half hour. Some schools were in good brick buildings, others had thatched grass roofs, and some were simply an open space under a tree, surrounded by chickens, cows and guinea fowl. In some places children had to walk nine kms and back every day to get to school and in some remote schools pupils had to cook their own school lunch in a makeshift kitchen."

"We visited some government boarding schools where the kids slept on the floor as they had no beds or mattresses but otherwise they weren't too badly off. There were smaller classes and they actually had desks. We were also obliged to read the discipline reports. They included episodes of drunkenness, the odd pregnancy and stoning and eating a teacher's chicken."

"Students were usually very biddable, but when no-one listened to their grievances, they eventually lost patience. One year we had riots in four schools in the northern division and every time it turned out that the students were quite justified in their complaints. In one instance, a normally disgusting sanitary conditions in the boarding school became even more unacceptable when the whole system clogged up for lack of maintenance. In another case the teachers had stopped teaching, and in yet another, the teachers were stealing the pupils' food. Easy to laugh, but with all teachers struggling to support several dependents one has to understand."



Canoes on Lake Malawi.

“One school could only be reached by crossing Lake Malawi, involving a seven-hour journey in a small boat. The water was calm when we set off but half way through a wind blew up and the waves got higher and higher. We put on lifejackets and prepared ourselves for a long swim. The waves broke over the boat and we got soaked from head to toe – my colleagues in their smart suits and me in long skirt and jacket (no question of wearing trousers here). After an hour of terror the wind died down as quickly as it had begun. We finally arrived at our destination, the most bedraggled team of school inspectors you ever saw. Then we had a 30 minute climb along a rocky path to reach the school high above the village. We inspected the school for all of three hours. Finally, the whole village, including the headman, accompanied us back down the hill to the beach, where all helped to push the boat back into the water.”

During her stay, Bennett “adopted” several students. While primary school education is free for all, secondary education has to be paid for. The fees – equivalent to €12 per term – are way beyond what most families can afford “so people like me are approached for help.” University is an impossible dream for many bright youngsters who, without financial help, have no future beyond going back to subsistence living in their village.



After appealing to her old school in Rome, many Rome International School parents began to sponsor promising pupils and raise money to help children whose parents had died of AIDS. One particularly generous donation of €3,000 was used to build a much-needed community orphan care centre where small children could be fed and cared for during the day before returning at night to the extended families who were struggling to support them..

On her return to Italy, Bennett set up a trust fund – the Malawi Orphan Care Trust Fund – to ensure a future for orphaned children and promising students, who would otherwise have no access to secondary or tertiary education. Anyone interested may contact Jill Bennett directly, [ghbennett50@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:ghbennett50@yahoo.co.uk).

Jill Bennett graduated from St Andrews University, Scotland. After some years teaching in Jamaica she moved with her family to Brunei where she founded the International School of Brunei. After her return to Europe, she was asked to found the Rome International School in 1988, which she built up and directed for 14 years.

***Read more on our website [www.sasterling.com](http://www.sasterling.com) and connect with us on social media.  
@sasterling72 Facebook - Instagram - Tiktok - Youtube***