

Out of Africa into Cheltenham

Words and pictures by
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For the past fourteen years a small dedicated group of Gloucestershire surgeons, nurses and willing supporters have battled to help a West African township and its hospital, which is registered as one of the one of the poorest communities in the world.

Set deep in the African bush, some four dust laden, bone shaking hours drive from Sierra Leone's capital Freetown, lies the town of Kambia which became the focal point for the proceeds of coffee mornings, cake and jam making sessions and even knitting marathons where dolls and jumpers flew off flashing needles during the early fundraising days of 'The Kambia Hospital Appeal' in the sedate surroundings of Cheltenham Spa.

The instigators of the Kambia charity, Godfrey and Pauline Taylor (now retired), had a guest from Sierra Leone's Action Aid team staying who mentioned he'd like to see Cheltenham hospital. Through their friend, consultant surgeon Richard Kerr-Wilson, they arranged a visit and while the guest was looking around he suggested creating a link between the two hospitals. Richard thought it was probably a waste of time but suggested he wrote a proposal, never thinking it would happen – but the die was cast. Now nearly fifteen years, and some eight African visits later he is chairman of the trustees committee which meets in Cheltenham and is extremely active in obtaining funds to make the charity's development aims for Kambia Hospital possible.

Other stalwarts of the charity's pioneer days who are still very much involved, include retired Cheltenham surgeon, Peter Boreham and his wife Ka, Paula Froggatt RGN and family planning nurse, plus many enthusiastic midwives and supporters, who have all made the long journey by air and dust track roads to work and impart their medical knowledge to staff at Kambia. These exchange visits, funded from their own pockets, have allowed both sides to gain valuable experience in African and Western ways of medicine. Africa probably more than anywhere else in the world tends to suffer from 'compassion fatigue' – like the poor, it is always with us,



crisis after crisis – but this has never daunted the Cheltenham group, even in Kambia's darkest hour.

In 1994 I was invited to team up with medical staff and Superintendent John Horan of the Gloucestershire Constabulary, now assistant priest of St Philip and St James Church, Leckhampton, for one of their visits to Sierra Leone. Having experienced the Ethiopian famine on two occasions and all that it entailed, I was still not prepared for the situation in Kambia. The hospital had no running water, electricity or security. Operations were carried out using torch-lights, the patient sedated with dripped chloroform onto a face pad and their pulse monitored by hand on a wrist vein! Under these primitive windowless theatre conditions, my film camera, with one eye on the subject and the other on my stomach, recorded a hysterectomy operation carried out by the capable hands of Richard Kerr-Wilson. During my week long stay I managed not to faint or fall ill from the salmonella-inviting meals of cold rice and fish, carefully prepared by the local nurses each night, then kept in plastic containers under their beds ready for next day's