

# Help these wonderful children

## Jerseyman appeals for funds to rebuild Indian school destroyed by landslide



A JERSEYMAN living in India is appealing to Islanders to help rebuild a primary school destroyed in a landslide disaster which claimed 25 lives.

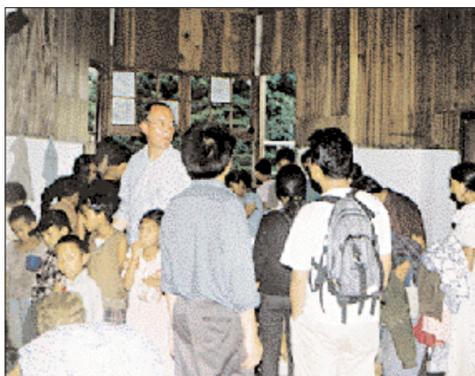
Backed by Jersey's Gerard Le Claire Environmental Trust, teacher Duncan Barette is involved in an effort to raise £5,000 to replace and equip the school, which was lost when the combined effects of deforestation and monsoon rains created a landslide on the steep slopes of the Gyabaree Tea Estate in Darjeeling. The slide, on 8 July, destroyed four villages and left more than 1,000 people homeless.

Mr Barette, an Old Victorian and former St Brelade resident who has specialised in teaching in the Bengali community in both London and Bangladesh and has also broadcast on Bengali affairs, moved to India earlier this year. He has been helping to organise relief for Gyabaree, whose school rebuilding project is being administered locally by the educational charity Shayog.

### Supported

The Jersey appeal is being supported by the Gerard Le Claire Environmental Trust, whose remit includes international environmental disaster relief. It was while on a UN humanitarian mission of that nature in Mongolia that Mr Le Claire, the States environment director, was killed in a helicopter crash, leading to the formation of the trust in his memory, which will channel other Island donations to Shayog.

• Cheques should be made payable to Gerard Le Claire Environmental Trust (Gyabaree Appeal) and sent to Brian Coutanche FCS, Treasurer, Gerard Le Claire Environmental Trust, Egret House, Mount Bingham, St Helier, JE2 4XY.



Duncan Barette and scenes from the Gyabaree Tea Estate school, including one showing the devastation caused by the landslide

SUNDAY 27/7/03

PETER and I were at the Robertson Road jeep stand at 6.45 am. Meena and her friend, Bikash, were already there. After Ghoom, it was practically all downhill, through forest, to begin with. We stopped at Sukhia Pokhra, roughly halfway for a breakfast of eggs, chana soup and chapattis, then drove through Mirik, a tourist resort, and were soon among the tea-gardens.

Although the roads were clear, there was plenty of evidence of recent landslides on the hills themselves, vast bare patches of earth where there had once been vegetation. As we approached our destination, we could see some of the recent devastation, where landslides had ploughed through villages.

We drove through the gates of the Gyabaree Tea Estate, then walked into the courtyard of the estate manager's bungalow. It was about 10 am. The bungalow was providing shelter for 50 families and also doubled as a classroom, with children of all ages in one room. Lindsay, who hails from South Wales, was putting his incredible energy to the best of uses, entertaining the children, organising their games, like 'London Bridge is falling down' and 'Pass the parcel', and playing the guitar. It was wonderful to see the joy and excitement

on the children's faces. We all joined in and had a great time. As well as Lindsay, there were several other young western travellers, most notably Tara, a vivacious young woman from Mexico, and Julien and Andreas, from France and Italy, respectively.

After a lunch of rice and dal, we men took the boys down to the 'playing field' for a game of cricket, while the women organised games for the girls. It was much, much hotter there than in Darjeeling, for we were only about 1,000 feet above the plains. After playing for a couple of hours, we were all sweating profusely, so we scrambled down the hill and bathed at a spring. By the time we had climbed the steep hill to the bungalow, we were all hot and sweaty again.

Besides the bat and ball and lots of sweets, we had brought balloons and frisbees, so, in the afternoon, we played more games. I can't emphasise enough how delightful it was to see the joy on 60 or 70 young faces. Glenary's (Darjeeling bakery) had supplied biscuits and

sweets, one carton for each child. So we all stopped for a cup of tea. It was touching to see the way in which the children wanted to share their biscuits and sweets with us. One girl, Eesharee, aged 15, but looking a couple of years younger, had taken a liking to me, called me 'mama' (maternal uncle) and insisted I eat one of her biscuits. She introduced me to her mother, her aunts and her younger sister.

For the last hour or so, we all had a mad rave. The children all wanted to know when we would be returning; I, for one, can't wait. We left at about 4.15 pm. The tea estate was on almost the last hill before the plains, and the view from its summit was incredible: it felt as if we could see for 100 miles across the plains. We covered most of the 60 km back to Darjeeling before it got dark, arriving at 7.15 pm. A long but lovely, lovely day.

SUNDAY 3/8/03

I left the hotel at 7.45 am, in the compa-

ny of Jenny and Jackie, Australian and South African, respectively, two young women who had taught in London and were fed up of teaching 'stropy kids'. We made our way to Robertson Road and departed by jeep almost without delay.

We arrived at Gyabaree at 11 am. We enjoyed the usual lively welcome, with about 60 or 70 children running laughing and yelling towards our jeep. After handing out sweets, the games started, with plenty of prizes: games such as 'London Bridge' and 'Pin the Tail on the Elephant', and dances such as the 'Hokey-Cokey'.

Later, I was introduced to a pleasant woman, Sarita Chhetri, who teaches some of the children. She couldn't speak any Bengali, so one of the young men from Glenary's accompanied us, as interpreter, to her home. [We were in West Bengal, politically and administratively, but certainly not culturally; most people there speak Nepali, not Bengali.] Sarita showed us a tiny room, where she usually conducted classes.

She has students of all ages, from four to 15 years. For the moment, she is holding classes in the estate manager's bungalow. But her school has no textbooks, no exercise books and no blackboard. She also monitors the health of pregnant women and nursing mothers and the physical development of the children. She showed me various registers. Sarita has 51 students on her roll, and attendance seemed rather patchy, but, as she pointed out, children have great difficulty travelling any distance during the rainy season. I also met another amiable woman, who was supervisor of the project for an organisation called ICDS. I admired their dedication and commitment, trying to do so much with so little.

In the afternoon, we had more games, then Lindsay and Eesharee helped me hand out bangles to the girls. We had a break mid-afternoon, when our group of ten or 12 visited what I think was the supervisor's little house for rice, noodles, dal and shrimp curry, the shrimps coming from a near-

by stream. We didn't leave until about 6.30 pm and all the children came to see us off, asking when we would come back to see them.

As a splendid climax to the whole day, four of us clambered onto the roof rack of the jeep and travelled the 45 km of hill roads back from a dinner stop in Mirik to Darjeeling, with the most marvellous views of the crystal-clear starry sky. It was a balmy, barmy night.

SUNDAY 10/8/03

THIRD trip to Gyabaree. Pritam, from Loreto Ladies College, responded to my request for helpers, by bringing two of her friends from the students' hostel, Shivani and Neetu. We were accompanied by several other local volunteers, principally from Glenary's, the local bakery.

Despite the low cloud and fog, we made good time, arriving at Gyabaree Tea Estate at 10 am. We played a couple of games with the children and soon had them singing and running around.

Then we unloaded 300 saplings of assorted trees with good soil-binding properties and gathered bamboo to use as digging sticks. We gave the 50 or so children 2 saplings each and carried the rest in boxes up to the scene of the most devastating landslide, which destroyed all but three of the 24 little houses, burying four entire families and causing 20 of the estimated 25 deaths.

It was a scene of utter devastation: corrugated iron roofs crumpled like silver foil, shattered wood and scattered personal belongings, cups, bowls, a few old photographs, adults' and children's clothes, and several small plastic toys. That was all that was left of the little village. As for the hill, there was very little vegetation left, just a mass of tangled tree roots, mud and loose rocks.

We toiled up the hill, slipping and sliding on loose stones. It was great to see the children's enthusiasm as they dug holes and planted trees. The youngest children, only four or five years old, all did their bit. They would

find a good spot to plant, then we dug holes for them. We spent a couple of hours up there, climbing a few hundred feet, digging and planting as we went. The steepness of the slope, the mud and loose rock made scrambling about very difficult. I lost my footing on a loose rock, while carrying a box of saplings, and slid far enough - about 15 or 20 feet - that I had time to wonder whether I would stop before reaching the bottom of the hill. Using my fingers as brakes over the sharp stones made no appreciable difference to my rate of descent. I ended up covered in mud, with cuts and abrasions from my stomach to my ankles.

The planting over, we slid and slithered down the hill to the estate manager's bungalow. While the young women in our group organised games for the children, the rest of us visited the local primary school, which, we had heard, was in a dangerous condition. The school, measuring 40 feet by 20 feet by ten feet high, has three classrooms accommodating 110 chil-

ren. I noticed that the last time the school had been used was 7 July, the day before the disaster, for the date was still written on a couple of blackboards. The school looked as if an earthquake had hit it. There were enormous cracks in the walls, some big enough to insert a fist, as well as some very large holes. It was much worse than I had expected: a large section of the wall could be moved by simply pressing a finger against it. Whole areas of brick were exposed, revealing the shoddiest workmanship, the mortar crumbling and running through one's fingers like sand. It seemed that another landslide, abetted by a lack of drainage at the school, had caused serious subsidence. In short, the school must be demolished and rebuilt.

We enjoyed a lunch of rice, dal and vegetables, cooked by charming local women, then I washed my cuts and abrasions at a spring. We went back up to the bungalow and joined in the children's games. I gave a packet of ear-

rings to Eesharee and asked her to hand them out to the girls who didn't get bangles last week. Conscientious as ever, she didn't merely hand them out, but fitted them, too. In Lindsay's absence, I organised a Hokey-Cokey, which the children always love. They are bright and pick up the words of English songs almost immediately. We organised more games involving singing and dancing, the boys enjoying them as much as the girls. They are the most wonderful children, content with very little and so appreciative of what we do for them. Often, during our visits, I have felt a hand slip into mine and, on looking down, have seen a tiny beaming face.

We left at 5.30 pm. As usual, the children surrounded us on the way to the jeep, and wanted to know when we'd be returning. Eesharee tied a 'rakhee' around my wrist, explaining that it was a gift from her mother. The tying of a 'rakhee', a thread, signifies friendship; it is supposed to protect the wearer from all evils.