A YEAR IN MAKENI
LETTERS FROM SIERRA LEONE

The Illustrated Tale of a Volunteer's Experiences in Sierra Leone, August 1972 – July 1973

by

Peter D. Phillips

"Ruth 2"
A Traditional Mende Carving (Ebony)

Dedication

I dedicate this tale to my fellow VSO, John Barwell. John was different. At 25 he was considerably older than the other VSOs, had several years of teaching experience at Wymondham College and in general had a maturity, which the rest of us lacked. Nonetheless he was always self-effacing and never let his superiority show. He was my house companion, mentor and closest friend for the year I spent in Makeni. Like me, he taught at St Francis Secondary School, but was strictly non-scientific (teaching History and English – I sometimes wondered if he knew that the world is round – but if he didn't, I don't think it would have bothered him). Back home in Norfolk he had been the school's rugby coach – but in Makeni he had tended to opt for a sedentary lifestyle.

We spent hours talking – especially of an evening when there was no electricity. One noteworthy evening we spent hours debating the pros and cons of a father being present at the birth of his child – he was "con", I was "pro". He was a mine of information on things which my education had omitted – and vice versa. Because he was a seasoned teacher, he didn't have to waste much time preparing lessons like the rest of us, and he soon struck up an amicable relationship with the local police force. He often spent his evenings drinking beer with a few of them in "Gresham Valley", Makeni's "hot-spot", or in any of the myriad of less-refined bars.

He was convinced of the educational benefits of learning poetry by heart, and spent a lot of time doing just that. The first poem he set his mind to was T S Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". He would wander around the house, pipe in hand reciting. The opening lines "Let us go then, you and I" are so impinged on my brain, that hardly a week – even 50 years later – goes by without my quoting it – and thinking of John. In 2008 I was in Arches National Park in Utah, USA. After a stop to change the nappies of my first grandson, Lars, I was eager to get back to the car. "Let us go then, you and I" I announced in a loud voice. A Japanese American student, who was standing a few yards away continued "when evening is spread out against the sky, like a patient etherised upon a table". We exchanged glances and a knowing smile.

I have known any number of “Johns” in my life, but to separate him from the rest I always add the predicate “of the jungle”. Yes, John “of the Jungle” Barwell, wherever you may be, this oeuvre is dedicated to you.

Acknowledgements

In addition, I am indebted to Dick Gilbert who encouraged me with his constructive criticism to complete this work, gave excellent advice, proof-read and finally hosted this tale on his web site. Thanks also go to Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), an organisation which for over 50 years has been attempting to bridge the gap between North and South, Rich and Poor, Old and Young by sending volunteers, many of them like me barely out of their teens, for a year or two to help people in various parts of the world to have a better life through better health services, better education and better social infrastructure. At the same time those volunteers have been rewarded by being able to involve themselves in local communities, with different traditions and life styles. The organisation offered such an opportunity to me and for that I am deeply grateful. Had I not been “chosen”, then this tale would never have been written. My thanks go out too to the many people, teachers, pupils, fellow volunteers, named and unnamed, who crossed my path during my “Year in Makeni”. I hope that some at least have benefitted from these encounters in the way I too have been rewarded by them. In addition, I am grateful to my late parents, David (1910-1987) and Gladys Phillips (1912-1993), who encouraged and supported me during the year.

And last but not least to my then girlfriend, Ruth, whom I had met just weeks before I left for Sierra Leone, who kept my spirits up with her letters from London and later from Switzerland, who waited for me to come back and has been my constant companion ever since.

Peter Phillips August 2022

Prologue

Baby Peter was born in Bromley, Kent on 1 May 1951 (not only "Walpurgis Night", but also a rather nicely palindromic date) as the second child of two rather elderly parents – well he thought so – who a year or two later relocated to Winchester. The family was very middle class. Father was an accountant in a smallish civil engineering firm, which had flourished building "water purification plants" (sewage works) which aided by post-WWII affluence had suddenly come into vogue. Mother was a full-time house-wife. Father bought a quarter of an acre of land on the city's western approaches, and on this plot his firm, between sewage farms, built a rather magnificent (cold, draughty, but nevertheless rather magnificent) house – for £3,250/-/-. As Harold Macmillan famously proclaimed, the British people had "never had it so good", something the history books may yet prove to be correct. The family was not rich – the first car, a black Ford Prefect of course, came along in 1956 – just middleclass.

Primary school was soon over, the 11-plus exam passed, and there then followed 7 years of grammar schooling, which (except for the Swimming and History lessons) was a fairly enjoyable experience. This extreme dislike of History led to the fortuitous decision to embark on a three year course in O-level German, which had lasting effects on the rest of his life. Teenager Peter was interested in science, and the 60s being the golden age of atomic power, it was decided almost without thinking that a good Physics degree was the next step. Student Peter entered Imperial College, London for a three year course of undergraduate study. During the summer of 1971, Sophomore Peter, looking for adventure, decided to travel overland to Nepal with a small rucksack on his back and a ticket for a student flight from Bombay to London in his pocket. This journey is described in "Kathmandu: There And Back Again".

The freedom of being away from home and his parents, together with a growing disenchantment with the nuclear industry led to Undergraduate Peter for the first time wondering what to do with the rest of his life. At a student party in his final year, intoxicated by a surfeit of student-brewed beer and youthful nonchalance, he apparently announced to all and sundry, that he was

going to do voluntary work for three years to repay his debt to society – and make his first million by the age of 30.

Having an interest in public transport, he applied for a position with Leyland Bus and Truck as a graduate management trainee, which he got. But something told him there was more to life than Lancashire. And we know what happened to Leyland Motors.

A fellow IC Physics student told him that he was applying for a year or two as a volunteer with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO). This appealed to Senior-year Peter's altruistic inclinations, and so he did likewise. Both he and his friend were informed in March 1972 that they had been accepted for a year's service in Sierra Leone, commencing at the end of August 1972.

Two weeks of training were set for Wimbledon Fortnight 1972, somewhere in North London, and the old school in Winchester (NOT Winchester College) kindly offered two weeks of teaching practice to help get the feel of things.

Finals were taken and passed, the future seemed settled. Unfortunately, things did not quite go as smoothly as anticipated. The fly in the ointment was a Swiss girl, who quite unexpectedly turned up in Soon-to-Graduate Peter's life at the beginning of May 1972.

As a result Volunteer Peter set off rather reluctantly for West Africa, leaving behind him a newly acquired girlfriend, but nevertheless eager to find out what adventures life in the White Man's Grave had in store for him. Communicating in a mixture of O-level German (see above) and First Certificate English, the friendship with the young lady flourished and survived the year of enforced separation.

This is the tale of <u>my</u> year in Makeni, Sierra Leone.

Most of the information included in this account came from the 40 or so letters which I wrote to my parents – luckily the originals were kept by said parents for no other reason than that they were loath to dispense with any family mementos. So nothing was lost to posterity. The letters are to a great extent reproduced verbatim. Some parts of the communications were completely personal and not suitable for the general public. These parts have been purposely omitted. The letters to my parents form the

framework of the narrative and also provide a timeframe. A lot of additional information was gleaned from around 60 letters to my Swiss girlfriend, Ruth. Anything compromising was rejected! Due to the fact that the letters were written in poor O-level German, it is not always clear what I intended to say at the time, and resort had to be made to intelligent guesswork. Nevertheless, a lot of additional detail could be added to the original framework. Personal memories mutate with time and so these were only used sparingly and to make the text more comprehendible.

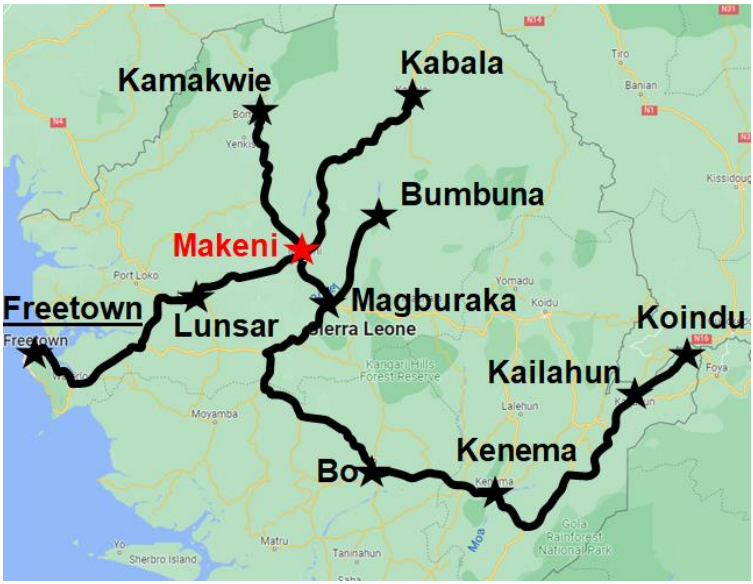
This is by no means a literary masterpiece and is not intended to be so. Although the events are retold more or less in chronological order, it is almost, but not quite, entirely unlike a diary. I have tried to capture the spirit of the time and "tell it like it was".

I also had at my disposal about 180 slides taken with a cheap Instamatic camera. The 100 or so included here were recently digitised by a specialist company.

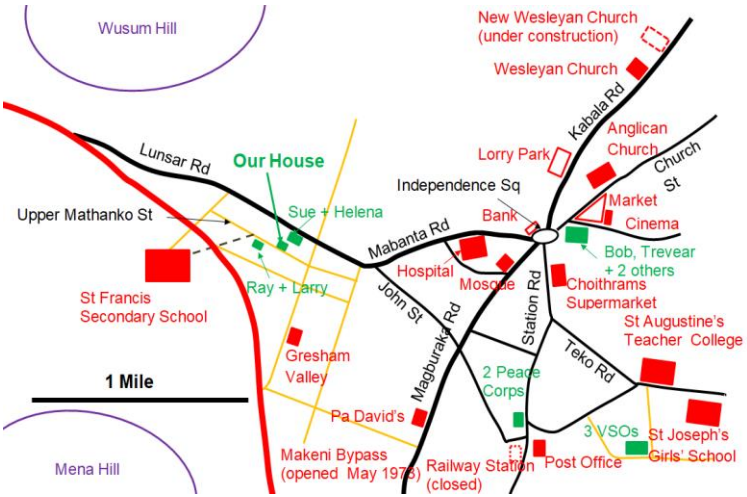
Whilst researching for this publication I came across an excellent History of St Francis Secondary School by "Old Boy" Anthony Karim Kamara (Sr)

Maps

There and back again: The circuitous British Caledonian route to Freetown



Map of Sierra Leone showing places visited



Makeni Town Map 1972

The Letters

Letter 1 "Flight/Arrival in Freetown"

Wednesday 30 August 1972 Freetown

We left London on Monday (August 28th) afternoon. I had a window seat on the plane, facing the buildings at Gatwick, just in front of the wing, so I had my eye on my family for some time after I had left their eyeshot.

We flew 2½ hours to Lisbon and 2 hours to Las Palmas (Canaries) arriving 6:30 p.m. (7:30 p.m. London time). The Canaries are a hole – dusty, bleak and barren with 3rd class high rise apartments jutting out from the rocky hinterland.

We left Las Palmas 9:00 a.m. the following morning (Tuesday) after spending a long evening in the bar and a rather short night in a rather noisy hotel. After a stopover in Bathurst (The

View of Tagrin Bay, Freetown

Gambia) at 11:30 a.m. we arrived in Lungi (Sierra Leone) at 1:20 p.m. where we were met by Adrian Thomas, ex VSO now a British Council Rep. There was no hassle at customs which was quite a relief really – memories of five/six hours I spent on the Iranian border in 1971 were not repeated.

It is not as hot as I had expected – a bit sticky, but quite bearable in Freetown at least. We had refreshments at the British Council before being allocated to our hosts for the next three nights. I and another VSO from Ryde IOW called Chris (who did PG teacher training at King Alfred's in Winchester) stayed with a youngish chartered accountant in his fantastic house in the European Quarter, on the hills overlooking Freetown – obviously quite a different life style from the one in store for us.

VSO Greenhorns: First morning in Freetown

Tuesday night we visited a couple of his friends who actually had a television. After the "World News" and a breakdown in the film of the Munich Olympics, we were subjected to "Not in

front of the Children" and Derek Nimmo in "Oh Brother!", both ex-BBC. Despite being only 2 miles from the transmitter, reception was atrocious. Suddenly, the programme was interrupted – apparently a regular occurrence. Transmission for the evening was over.

All the VSOs were required to report to the Immigration Office on Wednesday morning for Non-Citizen-Registration and the issuance of Alien Registration Cards. Our group of new VSOs were taken sight-seeing on Wednesday, visiting various historic sites, including the Parliament Building, before going to the British High Commission in the evening for a welcome party. Here we listened to a couple of boring welcoming speeches. We also tried our first African "chop" (meal). The guy we stayed with only eats European food which his steward buys in the local supermarket. That may be possible in Freetown, but what about up-country?

Despite suffering from a slight stomach upset – no doubt due to adjustment to the local diet – a group of us resumed sight-seeing on Thursday morning. Several other newly-arrived VSOs also seemed to have a similar problem with their digestive systems, but by midday it seemed to have cleared up. In the afternoon I went into the centre of Freetown again to buy various things which may not be available up country and I walked back (about 3 miles), dodging the rain. You get funny looks from the locals: They don't expect to see white men walking! At 8 p.m. we went to a reception at the Ministry of Education.

Letter 2 "Makeni, Our House, Cost of Food – and a Sunday Morning Hike"

Sunday 10 September 1972 Makeni

Well, I guess I have settled in reasonably now. I am getting used to the climate and am not having much bother with the food. I feel pretty good and have decided to give up shaving.

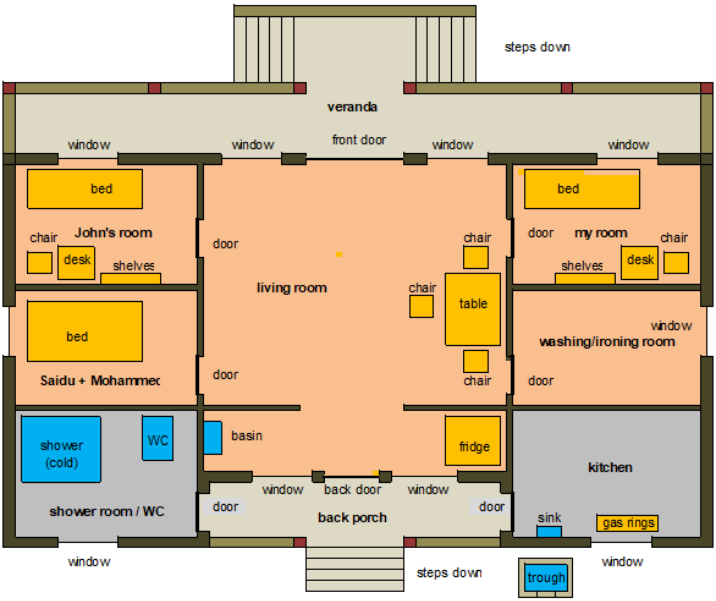
We came up to Makeni, where St Francis Secondary School is situated, by Mercedes bus on Friday and took up possession of our house later that same day. They were not expecting us until the beginning of next week and so the teacher family, who had settled there temporarily, had to be "relocated". It is fairly large and of pretty solid construction (mud-brick, wooden rafters and corrugated

iron roof). The double front door (from the veranda) opens into the dining-room with five easy chairs, a couple of coffee tables,

The bus from Freetown

and also the fridge (a giant Frigidaire) and wash basin. It measures about 15ft by 20ft. There are four rooms opening off the main room, two either side symmetrically. John (the other VSO) and I each have a room at the front, which are also the biggest. My bedroom has a bed (with mosquito net), wardrobe, desk, small coffee table, chair and book-case. John's is similarly equipped.

Of the two smaller rooms, one (behind John's) is a spare bedroom; the other (behind mine) is a general purpose drying/ ironing room. Out the back door, to the left is the kitchen (with gas and kerosene rings, sink, etc.) and to the right (opposite) is the "bathroom" comprising a rather old toilet ("sit'n'shit") and an excellent shower (unfortunately the water is off again today!). The water is usually very cold, but in the late afternoon, if water has not been run all day, it can be warm, even hot. The water supply pipes are buried only a few inches below the ground and are warmed by the sun. Then it suddenly goes cold as water from the mains arrives!



12 Upper Mathanko Road: House plan

The front windows are made of frosted glass (curtains are unknown here). The side and back windows have green shutters to keep out the neighbours' prying eyes. All windows are equipped with bars – to keep out thieves ("tif" or "tifman" in Krio). The rooms are ceilinged, but as there are no ceilings to the eaves, I imagine it would be possible for tifs to simply climb over the walls… The floors are of concrete, which means they are pleasantly cool to our bare feet. They are cracked and somewhat uneven and have been painted red.

We have a prettyish kind of a little wilderness as a back garden –- although part of the fencing is missing. So we tend to find the neighbours chickens, guineafowl, sheep/goats, lambs, dogs, cats etc.etc in it from time to time. We are supposed to be getting a puppy fairly soon as an anti-tif "device". We would have it now, except for the fact that the chosen one hasn't been weaned and so it

Choithrams supermarket

is staying with its mother. There are also a couple of pawpaw trees and a banana tree in the back garden. The former are said to be delicious, the latter are like oranges in being green and are also delicious.

As for prices in the Choithrams (Makeni's supermarket run by an Indian family):

- Nescafé ½lb: 75p,
- 100 Brooke Bond 100 teabags: 42p,
- Long life milk 1pt: 8p,
- Wall's sausages 1/2 lb: 20 p,
- Treetop orange 1pt: 23p,
- Dozen eggs: 30p
- Summer County marge ½lb: 11p (no butter)
- Swiss cheese portions packet of 6: 12p
- Bacon (Dutch frozen) ½lb: 30p.
- Beef, liver etc. is 17p per lb!!!

Hence, we will be eating a lot of meat.

Makeni's covered market

On the other hand, bananas are ½p each, oranges 2½p for 3, but we have been informed that prices should drop when the season comes in to 2½p for 9. Bread – beautifully crusty fresh: 2½p for a small baguette, coconuts and pineapples: 2p each. We can buy these from traders as they pass our house on their way to market, or in the market itself.

We have a Temne "steward" called Abu He must be in his thirties and has two wives (he is a Moslem which entitles him to three wives and Fridays off). I guess he has children too, but he hasn't mentioned them. Apparently, he has "stewarded" other VSOs in the past. He was recommended by Mr RA Kanu, the principal of St Francis School, no less, who came hurrying by to welcome us – apologising for the house not being ready. Kanu is obviously a force to be reckoned with, a no-nonsense sort of guy in his early forties, who lives with his wife and three daughters in a house nearly opposite us.

I managed to save John's bacon when he (John) mistook him (headmaster) for our newly appointed steward. It was a close run thing, though. Obviously we are going to have to get used to

recognising the individual Leoneans. Up until now, they have just been Africans. Abu is the proud owner of an old green bike – which apparently increases his efficiency when he goes shopping or attends to other business.

House veranda with Bohboh and friend

On Sunday John and I got it into our heads to climb Mena Hill, one of the two big hills to the west of the town – local landmarks. We took along with us two African schoolteachers, who were equipped with machetes (rather evil looking knives 15 to 20 inches long), and Bohboh, a 4th former who lives in a Peace Corps house, as guides. The path from the school soon fizzled out and afterwards it was pretty tough going hacking our way through the bush – hence the need for machetes.

Climbing Mena Hill with view of Wusum Hill. The high mountains of northeast Sierra Leone are visible in the distance

The locals don't seem to do much hiking – I don't even know whether our "guides" had been up the hill before – and they regarded us as foolhardy. However, I believe we are the first ex-pats to climb this hill within 2 days of arriving – or maybe within 2 months!! We were overrun by some huge black ants on the way down and learnt our first survival lesson: If ants start running up your legs, do not try to knock them off. First get well away from their buddies and then you can start to get rid of them. They really lock on to you with their pincers.

I still don't know what I am teaching, or when. School started officially on Tuesday 12th - with the teachers and boys cleaning and tidying up the classrooms. Lessons, I am informed, are unlikely to commence until next week or even later, because half the

View over the mangrove swamps to the west from Mena Hill

pupils are still chasing around to find the school fees from friends, relations, VSOs. I am sponsoring one boy (who has been recommended to me as a particularly urgent *("deserving")* case. That will cost me Le29 for the year (£14.50). The money here is very easy: Le1 = 50p, 10c = 1/- = 5p. The currency is fixed at that because it is sterling area: hence no black market.

There are two American Volunteers ("Peace Corps"), Ray and Larry, living over the road from us and two nurses – Sue Mitchell, a VSO (from Fordingbridge) and Helena Roberts, a CUSO (Canadian) – "at the bottom of the garden".

In all there are about 30 volunteers (male and female) in Makeni – English, American, Canadian, Germans, Dutch, even an Italian! Relations are very cordial within the group. In addition there are around 15 "missionaries" – in particular Italian nuns – in town. There must be around 50 Lebanese living here too – brought in by the British as a buffer group between the Europeans and Africans a long time ago. Sometimes you have to look twice to check that they are not Europeans! Finally, we occasionally see Chinese – usually

sitting five together in a (Chinese built) imitation Land Rover. They smile, wave and call out "harro" as they drive past before disappearing in the haze – that is the limit of contact.

We even have a Chinese made pushbike, which John refuses to ride. That's OK by me! The rear tyre is flat – whether because it hasn't been used all summer, or because it has a puncture, I can't say. Have to have a look at it.

Group of boys with bike (later stolen) in our back yard

John and I took a taxi down to Magburaka (20 miles or so SE of Makeni) on Tuesday to visit Judith Allinson (an Imperial College, London, Botany graduate, whom I have known for several years) as she was celebrating her 21st birthday. We managed to buy a 21st birthday card in Makeni and a couple of bottles of Babycham. She is teaching in a girls' school about 3 miles out of the town and is pretty cut off. She was delighted to see us – I got the impression that she is rather homesick and lonely. At least she has a Honda 50 to get around.

On Friday I mislaid my purse which had very little money in it. But it also contained a photo of me and girlfriend Ruth which we had had taken in a photo booth at Gatwick the day I left – and that was more valuable. The following evening it was returned – anonymously. Obviously the finder (?) had been stricken with a bad conscience. It restored my faith in human nature.

On Sunday, Bob Warwick, a VSO volunteer from Chandler's Ford, teacher training at St Augustine Teacher Training College, suggested I accompany him to the local Anglican Church, where he is organist. In the church was an American, Phil. There is also an American Wesleyan Church in Makeni and Phil took us to meet the pastor, who is recovering from a bout of hepatitis. He and his wife are very pleasant, and not at all like other American Evangelicals I have had contact with. We stayed for a couple of hours. It seems that all the major villages and towns have a Mosque, Catholic and Anglican churches, and a Free Church!

The American Wesleyans take care of the Northern Province, the (British) Methodists hold the Eastern Province, and some American "Brethren" the Southern Province. There also a number of other missionary churches around. The Free Churches seem to be replacing their small churches with larger buildings at an alarming rate.

Just a short note about church services in Makeni. They are a bit weird by our standards. Men and women (with children) are segregated – women to the left (as you go in), men to the right of the aisle. I guess this reduces the chances of quarrels breaking out between a man's wives/mistresses. Even non-Moslems are rather happy go lucky about relationships. Hymns are sung in English, and the tribal Temne and Limba languages. The congregation seems to know most of the hymns by heart, because hymn sheets are absent – and the vast majority can't read anyway.

The people sing with gusto! Services last 2 - 3 hours. According to Catholic VSOs, their services are much more regimented, and some parts of the mass are read in Latin. Wow!

Letter 3 "Settling in – Home Delivery, Krio, Teaching"
Saturday 23 September 1972 Makeni

It is now 8 a.m. Saturday and I am waiting for Abu (our steward) to cook my breakfast. He cooks, washes, irons, cleans (not too well), makes our beds, does our shopping and in fact anything we ask him to do. I have a slightly sore throat this morning but otherwise I feel very well. I pause to buy some oranges. We live on the western outskirts of Makeni (towards Lunsar), 15 minutes' stroll from the centre ("Independence Square") – it is too hot to walk quickly and there are always plenty of things to distract you on the way.

Many traders come past our house on their way to market. 15 mins ago I called "Seke" to the bread man who was passing and he sold me some bread. I like the bread – doughy, bouncy, tastes really good and costs 5c for a French style baguette (14 in. long and 2 in. diameter). An orange seller was taking smallish green (but delicious) oranges to market. We bought 10 at 1c each and so she gave us an extra one (*"baker's dozen"*). All the traders are women and carry their wares on their heads - and sometimes their baby on their back – and because we catch them on their way to market we get the pick of the bunch. We buy coconuts and bananas in this way. John, noticing the "hats", asked me rather facetiously whether it is "Ladies' Day at Ascot" yet again today. Tall, slim and with a graceful posture, they tend to glide rather than walk. Yes, they are ladies.

We are beginning to get used to the fact that about half of the women go "topless". It is said that you (that is: whites) have "arrived" when you start to ignore the naked breasts. In the girls secondary school (St Joseph Secondary School) English style school uniforms are worn (despite being expensive) and blouses are mandatory. The boys at St Frances School also wear English style uniforms. Most pre-school kids run around naked, perhaps with a T-shirt to keep them warm.

In general, the locals are very friendly towards us volunteers, maybe because our work is appreciated. The BBC World Service is very popular and a short wave radio tuned to London is quite a status symbol. The locals greet us all the time, calling out "Seke" Temne for "Hello" – we are in Temne country.

Women bring fresh bananas on their way to market

Each tribe has its own language (which are mutually unintelligible), although some locals speak more than one language – especially when marriage takes place across tribal boundaries. This was earlier completely unknown and even today apparently none too common. People of different tribes converse in a sort of pidgin – "Creole" or "Krio" – a very Basic English, "flavoured" by the local tribal languages and so varies from place to place.

We are beginning to learn some Krio. The Krio word for hello is "kushay" (no doubt originally a French sailor's greeting!) followed by "sa" (sir), "ma" (madam) or "pa" for an older, respected man. A "child" is "pikin", a "girl" is, for some reason "titi", a "boy" is "bohboh". Europeans are generally known as "omporto" ("Portuguese Man"), although younger volunteers are called "Pisscor" ("Peace Corps"), especially by children. Trying to point out that you are not a Pisscor but "VSO –English") sometimes elicits

the reply "Aah, Eeenglish". The word for a prostitute is "kornakorna", no doubt due to the fact that she waits on the corner.

We had a tremendous thunder storm in the night to Thursday and as a result had no electricity or water. Both were restored by Friday lunchtime. As to blackouts, my predecessor, in notes he left me, reported that in principle Makeni has electricity – "except during storms and at other times". Helpful!

Makeni Post Office

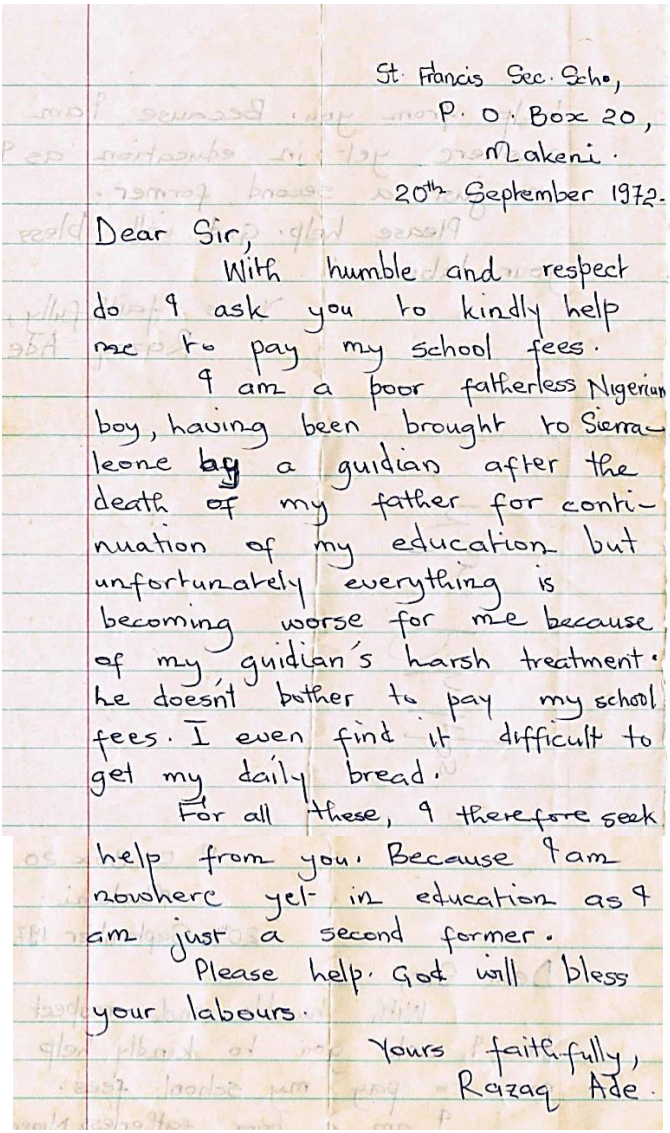
Thunder storms, which occur on an almost daily basis, are spectacular, not only at night, but also during the day. The clouds, at first small, gradually build up, turning darker. But not only the clouds are dark – a darkness comes over the land. Usually there is lightning, the stillness in the air gives way to a breeze which gradually picks up. All hands on deck now to close the house's windows and shutters. The twigs on the trees start to move, then whole branches start wave and finally the trees sway, sometimes dangerously so.

Suddenly the rain begins. Sometimes we sit on our veranda, just to watch the spectacle, the brute force of nature, and risk getting soaked into the bargain! In no time there are torrents of water descending from the sky, pouring off the corrugated roofs. There are no gutters and the rain falling from the edge of the roof erodes a channel around the house. Water everywhere. Thunder, lightning, the lights flicker – and sometimes go off completely. If we are lucky, the electricity supply is restored within minutes. But it can be hours or even days.

I have settled in to teaching fairly well. I take English Language in the 2nd year and Physics in the 5th. I will also have the Lower 6th Physics when they arrive (and drop the English teaching). The Physics 5th formers have been starved of practical Physics. They have been told about all the experiments but they haven't seen them done, let alone done them themselves – and they have to take an O-level practical exam in June. So I run practicals two evenings a week for them. There are 19 boys in the class. For A-levels I will have 7 or 8. A couple of boys have asked me if I could teach them Latin! They had found old text books – Latin is no longer taught here – and were curious.

I am paying school fees for 3 boys – fees are £5 a term *(£14.50 for the whole year)*. We have two 3rd year boys (Saidu Dumbuya and Mohammed Bah) living with us. Saidu, a Wesleyan Methodist Limba, was visibly uneasy when he handed us a note from a former VSO explaining his situation. Hardly had he put his stuff in the spare room, when Mohammed, a Moslem Fula came bouncing along saying, "I'm Mohammed. I lived here last year". We asked them if they would be happy sharing the room and also the (double) bed. They are class mates, know each other well and even come from the same village and they seemed happy about the arrangement. It is the done thing and anyway they are better off than the boarders. Two boys, two religions, two tribes: one bed, no problem! I think they have something to teach us.

A little later another boy turned up with a broad smile and a note which he had written himself. Obviously not a local (we are beginning to recognise Leoneans), his English was excellent. Razaq Adé, a 2nd former from Nigeria, made such an impression on me that I said I would take over his fees if John his boarding costs in a neighbour's house. No problem.



St. Francis Sec. Sch.,
P. O. Box 20,
Makeni.
20th September 1972.

Dear Sir,

With humble and respect do I ask you to kindly help me to pay my school fees.

I am a poor fatherless Nigerian boy, having been brought to Sierra-leone by a guidian after the death of my father for continuation of my education but unfortunately everything is becoming worse for me because of my guidian's harsh treatment. he doesn't bother to pay my school fees. I even find it difficult to get my daily bread.

For all these, I therefore seek help from you. Because I am nowhere yet in education as I am just a second former.

Please help. God will bless your labours.

Yours faithfully,
Razaq Ade.

Razaq's letter of introduction

House boys (as opposed to "stewards" like Abu) do no work for us, although they are expected to take over some duties. In

particular they come in useful against tifs: The theory is, that the more people in a house, the less likely a tif is to risk (and survive) a robbery. We have foghorns to attract attention in case we find anyone in our rooms at night. In fact we had a caller early today, who came to visit us under the pretence of wanting food for a journey. He was, we suspect, inspecting the house for valuables and possible ways of getting in. Luckily Abu recognised him (and vice versa) as a "tifman". They apparently knew each other some time back in Port Loko. Abu is not a tifman, but an honest steward (we hope). The other man will probably not come back now, due to the fact that he has been recognised.

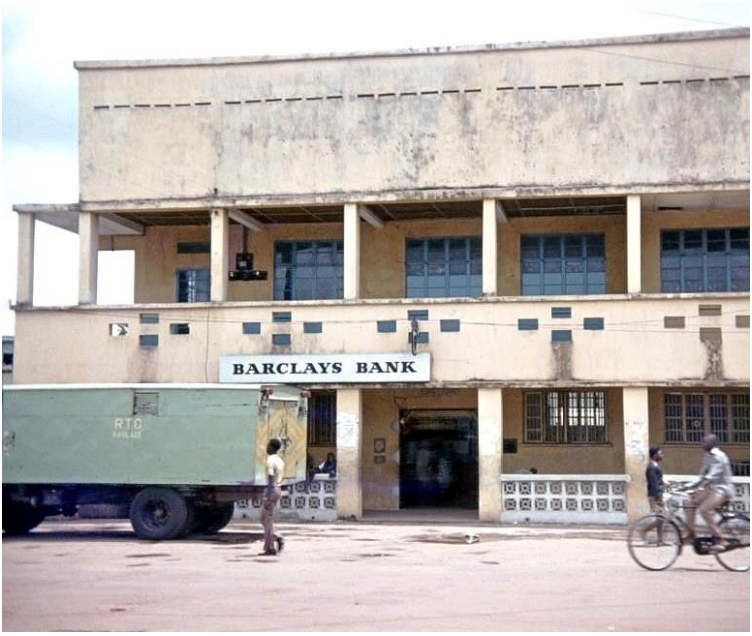
With Judith (with Saidu looking on) on the veranda

I am going to Magburaka this afternoon to see Judith. She came up last weekend and I said I would go over for dinner. It costs 20p to get down there by taxi along this incredible dirt road. The taxi

drivers race each other as if they were competing in the East African Safari.

Our banana tree is coming along fine, but unfortunately the pawpaw trees blew down in a gale a couple of days ago. We lost nearly 100 unripe pawpaws which had they ripened they would have been worth about Le 3. Still, we inherited them from the previous owners so we mustn't grumble.

I am off to open an account with Barclay's (!), the only bank in Makeni. In the centre of town there are a couple of "shops" belting out African music. Choithrams supermarket (rather like a small Co-op both in size and layout) plays only Western Pop music.



Barclay's Bank, Makeni

Makeni even has its own cinema! It is a large corrugated iron structure. When it rains it is so noisy that you cannot hear the dialogue. If the film rips, as does happen, and the projectionist doesn't notice (as also happens) the audience erupts shouting "Hey boh"! If the electricity goes off then the cinema goers wait a while. If the cut continues, everyone goes home (without a refund)

complaining: Surprisingly there is no violence. There is a word for it: “Hasha!”: “too bad!” It is an expression which is very widely used. “I missed my supper”: “Hasha!” Or: “My mother died last night” ”Hasha!” We sometimes go to the cinema as a group – virtually the only evening entertainment we have. In recent weeks we have seen “The Kremlin Letter” (spy stories are difficult for the locals to understand), a couple of Tarzan films, as well as “Soldier Blue”.

Letter 4 “Dreams”

Saturday 7 October 1972 Makeni

> “Sing hey! for the bath at close of day
> That washes the weary mud away!
> A loon is he that will not sing:
> O! Water Hot is a noble thing!”

So sang Peregrin Took in “Lord of the Rings”. What I wouldn’t give for a hot bath after yet another storm has cooled the heat of Makeni!

Judith came by – it is nearly 2 weeks since I last saw her. She had to do some shopping – various items not available in Magburaka. It is the custom that volunteers drop in on each other when out of town, to chat and exchange news. For us in Makeni it is not so much of a problem but Magburaka has virtually no “Europeans” – apart from Praibu, an Indian dentist married to an English woman. He has an enviable reputation – the sort of guy you can rely on in a dental emergency.

The young people here are eager to learn because they think that with A-levels or even just O-levels, they will have a better chance in life. Their extended families contribute to their education costs in the hope there will be a “return on investment”. Maybe they will get a government job and use their influence to improve the lot of the whole family. If they do well, then they think they will be able to study in England. Mohammed has his sights set on America. I guess that dreams are allowed, although there are tales told of exceptional students going abroad, only to forget their “primitive” families back home in Africa.

Can you blame them? In many respects they envy us volunteers, that we should have been able to enjoy such an education, able to travel the world.

Letter 5 "Teaching Blues – near Despair"

Wednesday 11 October 1972 Makeni

Life teaching the lower classes here is very frustrating!

You ask "Who understands?" – No response
You ask "Who doesn't understand?" – No response
You ask "Who thinks the answer is yes?" – No response
You ask "Who thinks the answer is no?" – No response
"Who doesn't think?" – No answer

My sixth form comprises 6 students with the following O-level grades:

4 have grade 6 (scrape passes)
1 has a grade 5 (somewhat better)
1 has a grade 3 (not bad)

And I've got to teach them through to A-level when most of them have only a basic understanding of O-level work.

One tends to become cynical! Why don't they get good passes?

Equipment? – Good, at least to O-level

Teachers? – Mediocre, young, rapid turnover of staff. Contract teachers are neither better nor worse than the others – just better paid. "Pisscors" tend to have the best reputation.

Pupils? – They tend to learn things by rote which is OK in the arts (to O-level) but not very good for science, where a logical, methodical way of thinking is required, rather than just absorbing and regurgitating facts! Groan from historian John

I sometimes wonder if they are incapable of logical thought. I don't think so. They are hampered due to the fact that education here is based on inappropriate principles, which in turn is at least partly cultural in origin. This country is very tribal. There is prejudice not only between black and white but also between the tribes.

John, Larry, Ray and self are the lowest paid people on the staff. (Perhaps it is fair to note that we only have to feed ourselves: the other teachers have extended families of 6, 8 maybe 10 relatives, all depending on a single income for support.)

St Francis School: my path to work

But we also have the best education – we are university graduates, even if we are not professional teachers. I am head of the Physics Department and Chairman of Science (because no-one else has the ability - or can be persuaded - to run it). As far as the sixth form is concerned, there is no laboratory (yet) and no equipment (or money for equipment). We are a cheap form of labour, sometimes overcharged by shopkeepers etc. and are expected to sponsor a number of children with school fees. Larry is an Afro-American who looks on Africa as being part of his roots – and doesn't quite understand why the Africans don't look on him as a "brother."

Despite all this, I am enjoying life! It is raining (again) and there is no water at present. We bought a ruddy great pineapple for 15p (probably too much!): The season is just beginning. Abu bought

a chicken today and, having wrung its neck, we'll have chicken for the next few days.

St Francis school garden

Letter 6 "Tifing, pupils, 23 lessons"
Thursday 19 October 1972 Makeni

"Tifing" has become rampant here recently, rather unfortunately. My umbrella disappeared, along with my thermos flask. We had our bike nicked last weekend under very suspicious circumstances, which I can't be bothered to report. The police here (those, who are not in the tifing business themselves) are so apathetic, that they would not know what to do with a tif if they caught one: put him in gaol or pay him to get lost and save them the bother. Keep that to yourselves – otherwise it could get me thrown out of the country – or worse!

The sixth formers went to the principal to complain that the Indian contract teacher, Mr Ramandan – usually referred to as "Raman" – can't teach Maths and they couldn't understand a word he is saying. They asked me if I would teach them, but I can't really.

As it is I am taking the fifth form Maths, because the teacher (another Indian Contract teacher) is also not easy to understand. I have also agreed to coach a couple of local teachers in A-level Geography (note: I haven't even got Geography O-level) – well Physical Geography, which is basically Geophysics and elementary Meteorology. I now teach 23 lessons a week and am kept fairly busy.

First A-level students in front of their new classroom

Officially the school has 748 pupils – 747 boys and one girl (Lebanese). As already noted, it is not too easy to tell the Lebanese from Whites here, and White women are a status symbol. So she gets a lot of attention– and appears to enjoy it. I take her for 2 lessons of General Science a week. In the sixth form, all Arts pupils attend General Science lessons, and the science ones have to do an Arts course. Now that is what I call progressive!

My pay isn't stretching brilliantly, but I'll survive. As a volunteer I earn Le116 (£58) a month, and in addition I get an extra £3 a week "laboratory bonus". John has no lab work and so is only

paid Le116. In view of this I have (generously) offered to pay Abu – Le16 a month, cash in hand. John often chips in too. Last year Abu was paid Le15, but we thought it best to keep him happy, and we really can't complain. Unemployment is very common in Sierra Leone. Subsistence farming is the norm. Anything grown which cannot be eaten by the family is taken, usually by the women, to be sold in the market (whilst many of their menfolk sit in the bars). I have to keep an eye on my finances, though, mostly due to the fact that I am paying too many boys' school fees for comfort.

Looks like rain. It was quite cold this morning but it heated up during the day. The rainy season is gradually coming to an end.

Makeni lorry park

The volunteers of all nations tend to get together from time to time – usually in small groups. If there is something to celebrate (and birthdays are always a good excuse) then the whole crowd get together – not only those from Makeni, but the volunteers from the outlying towns and villages. Due to the difficulty of travelling late at night (there are no podapodas or even taxis, and the roads are dangerous for those with Honda 50s after dusk) arrangements are

quickly made, and spare beds (or at least sleeping bags) found. Last weekend about 30 of us got together for an American girl's 25th birthday party, which was great fun. Judith was up from Magburaka – I feel sorry for her in her isolation and she really needs the company.

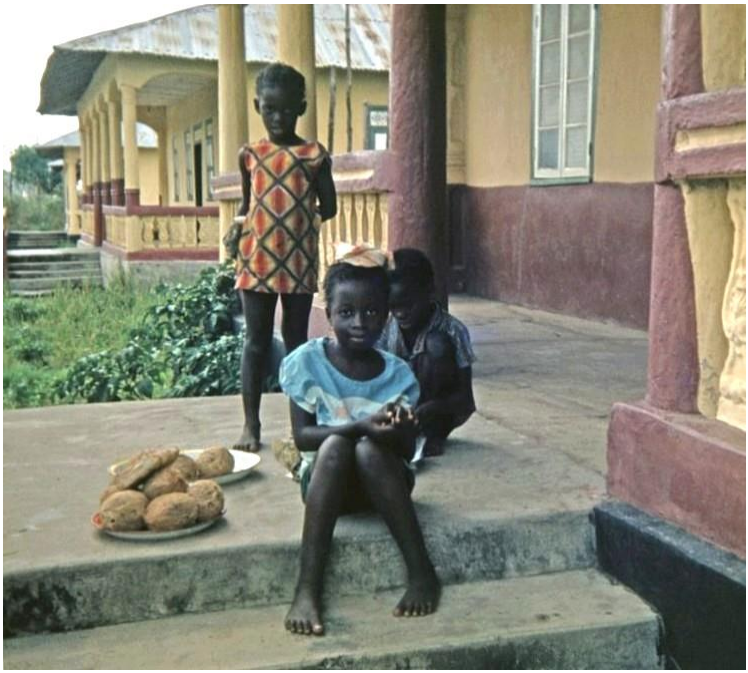
And then there are visits to the cinema with a get together afterwards, either in Pa David's on the Magburaka Road – a favourite watering hole among VSOs, CUSOs and Peace Corps volunteers – or at the "posh" Gresham Valley hot spot, where Makeni's rich and famous also gather. This is only a couple of hundred yards from our house, and on Saturday nights we can hear African rock music emanating from there.

As is so often the case when we have visitors, Judith had my bedroom and I slept on the floor in the washing/ironing room. John reckons that, at 25, he is too old to relinquish his bed, so I am getting used to it. If the boys are away, or out at their friends all night, then the problem is solved.

When I am not teaching, I seem to spend most of my time preparing for the next day's lessons. In general I am overambitious and only get through half of what I prepare. I sit at my desk in my bedroom, the sun pouring through the window. It is quite quiet, although there are children playing in the street, and strange birds calling from the trees. Sometimes I just sit and watch the world go by – there is always something happening out there.

A tap at the window of an afternoon and a small girl's voice calling "Mister Peter" means Amnata has oranges or coconuts to sell. I always buy more than I actually require – Saidu and Mohammed are willing to "take them off my hands". I know she is eager to get rid of them as quickly as she can, so she can go back and play. Sometimes she brings her kid brothers or sisters with her.

I can smell supper cooking. Abu's culinary skills are severely limited, but nevertheless the food he prepares is tasty (thanks to "Maggi" cubes), but maybe a bit too spicy at times. It is a long day for him (7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.), but he has spare time during the day, to do whatever he likes. A 2-3 hour siesta is a must for him. By eating fairly early, he can get away before dark. He has no lights on his bike. Not that there are many vehicles around – it is the pedestrians and children I worry about, especially in the dusk.



Amnata and friends bring afternoon refreshments

Although I am usually content with the BBC, I do occasionally listen to Freetown Radio. Siaka Stevens, our beloved president, has got it into his head that Sierra Leone should be renamed – to mark the country's 10th anniversary of independence. Sierra Leone actually gained independence in April 1961, so he is a bit late. But what is a year or two between friends – we are in Africa. He has a number of objections to the present name:

1. It was given by the British – bad
2. It is actually Spanish – very bad
3. It means "lion mountain", named after the shape of the mountain on which Freetown is built – OK
4. There are no longer any lions in Sierra Leone, the nearest being on the north eastern borders of Guinea, at least 400 miles away – neither here nor there.

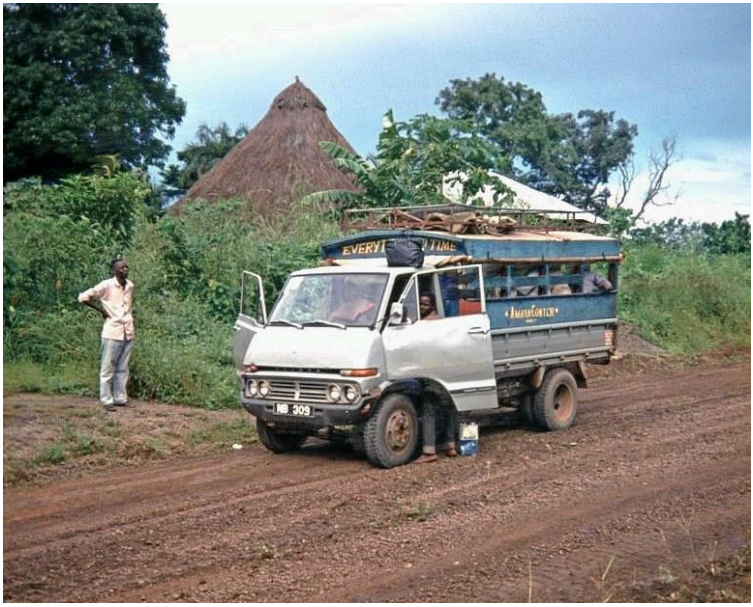
Now the BBC has taken up the cry and has facetiously announced a competition "Name a Nation". Mr Stevens isn't too

happy with the Beeb – never has been, actually – and is determined to go ahead with his plans, cost what it may (and it certainly won't be cheap). As long as he doesn't let out his anger on us VSOs. Anyway, there is no call for panic – yet. Apparently a General Election is due for 1973.

We had another day without school this week: Sport, well at least football, is taken very seriously and Sierra Leone has a school league. Usually matches take place at weekends, but this was obviously not possible this time: our opponents come from Kabala, which is a terribly long way away – in time if not in miles. Various teams are coming, and there will also be a volley ball match – the other game played here. May the best teams win, and there be no riots afterwards.

Letter 7 "Kamakwie"

Saturday 28 October 1972 Kamakwie



Podapoda on the laterite road to Kamakwie

Saidu, one of the boys, who lives with us, invited me up here to Kamakwie to stay with his parents. Such a thing is virtually unheard of, so I am honoured by the compliment! At 3 p.m. on Friday afternoon I left the safety of neo-colonial Makeni with Saidu and "disappeared up-country" in a podapoda – this one being a small lorry with seats fixed along the sides of the flatbed behind the cab facing inward – to beautiful downtown" Kamakwie", some 60 miles north of Makeni and 30 south of the Guinean (Conakry) border.

Because Saidu was a friend of the podapoda driver – he makes the journey several times a year – we were offered the prestigious seats in the cab, so we could enjoy the journey in style. The countryside is very pleasant at this time of year: green hills and valleys with many trees and luscious grassland.

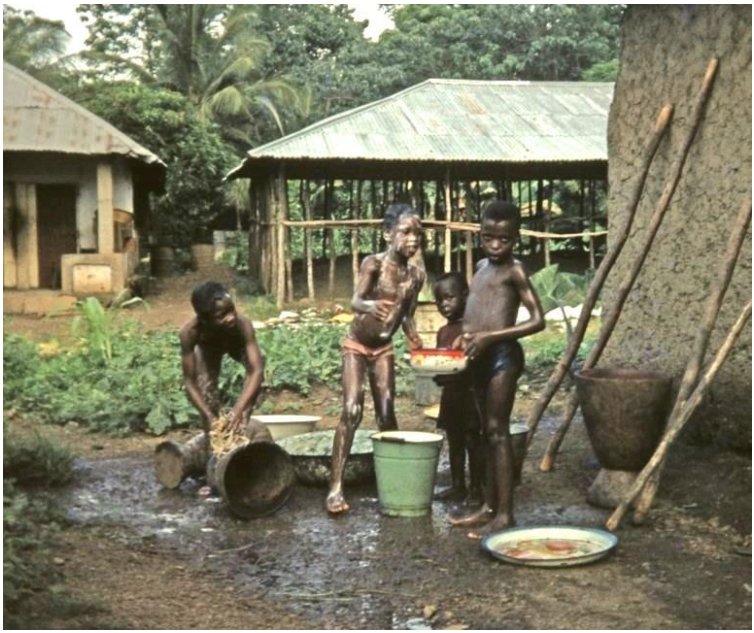
The laterite road is in a very bad state of repair – rutted and full of holes – and it took us nearly 4 hours to get to Kamakwie. The passengers on the back of the lorry bounced like balls in a bucket as

Saidu's brother, parents with Saidu outside their house

we sped along at 20 mph. We made regular stops at villages along the way, and these stops take up a lot of time. Passengers getting out, untying their goods from the roof, disentangling the chickens, feet tied and wedged under the seats, arguing what is theirs, and what not, saying goodbye to their fellow travellers, passengers getting in after securing their goods on the roof and stashing a lamb or two under the seat. But the travellers were, in general, visibly enjoying the ride, which was quite an adventure.

A scruffy "Pisscor" with Saidu's parents and brother
(Saidu's first, rather shaky, photo)

On the way we met another lorry driven by a friend of our driver's. It had a flat tyre – not an uncommon event and not surprising when you consider the state of the road and the (lack of) tread on the tyre. But *noblesse oblige*, even more so in the bush. We took the wheel to the next village where the tyre was repaired and brought it back to the stricken lorry, a round trip of 15 miles and



Bath time: the Dumbuya children wash before bed

over an hour's delay. Most of the passengers didn't come with us, preferring to sit in the shade and wait. But, fools as we were, we accepted the driver's invitation to come along with him. Payment? In kind! About 3 litres of diesel changed hands, or rather, tanks.

I am staying in a native mud hut. Quite literally! Although the locals want to meet you and visit you, they don't normally invite you back to their home, even to see it, let alone sleep there. I guess they are somewhat embarrassed about their living conditions. Saidu's family is poor, although many of their neighbours are worse off. Dressed in their best clothes, they were very welcoming. Hugs were exchanged all round. Communication was not easy, because their knowledge of Krio is very restricted and my Limba non-existent. So we got to know each other with sign language, helped by Saidu and his brother. Saidu's father seemed fairly old but his mother was younger and exuded a remarkable dignity.

The room where I am to sleep is about 6ft square, has one small window, 18in. square, and a door 2ft x 4ft leading into a

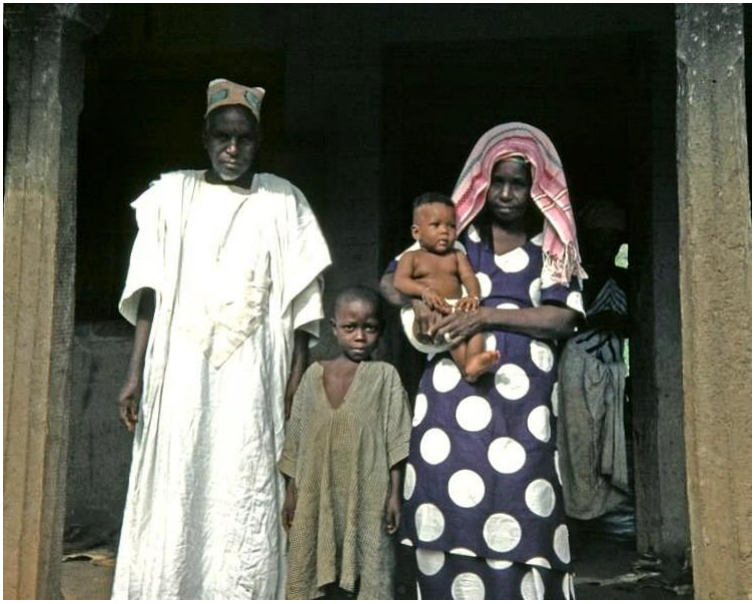
similar room which also has a door out onto the veranda. There is no distinction between the walls and the floors which are mud reinforced with bamboo framework. There is no ceiling; the roof (corrugated iron) is the only barrier to stop the rain coming in. There is some rush matting suspended from the woodwork.

The walls are covered with glossy magazine pictures of JF Kennedy, Ted Kennedy, Mao-Tse Tung, Ringo Starr and adverts for Chrysler Cars, Smirnoff Vodka and Grandee Cigars, which could have been cut from Sunday Times or Weekend Telegraph magazines. Conditions are pretty primitive really and very interesting for an "omporto". Of course there is no running water, and the toilets are communal latrines at the edge of the group of houses. I just hope I don't get diarrhoea.

Kamakwie Methodist Church

The "Kamakwieens" are very proud of their Wesleyan Mission hospital and Saidu insisted that we should go to meet the staff. The hospital has around 60 beds but is overcrowded with patients lying on the floor. The catchment area is enormous. The European staff (mostly Canadians and Dutch) comprises about 6

doctors, 10 nurses and 4 others (administration, pharmacy, technical personnel). Emphasis is also laid on training the locals, so there is no shortage of staff.



Mohammed's parents also live in Kamamkwie

Not only was I paid the compliment of being invited to stay up here with Saidu, but his parents (and also the parents of Mohammed, Saidu's roommate who also comes from Kamakwie) each gave us a couple of chickens in gratitude.

I got back to Makeni around midday on Sunday after a 3½ hour podapoda ride. The change in atmosphere (popular, nor meteorological – although it is cool today), was incredible. As in most towns, the people in Makeni are not a particularly friendly lot. But up in Kamakwie, I was really treated like a brother. One man, Saidu's "uncle" (i.e. probably, but necessarily, a distant blood relation) let me have "drinks on the house" in his bar. I was persuaded by a bottle of Taunton Cider (strictly for home thoughts) imported from Somerset. They appeared interested in the fact that it was produced close to my new home in England. (Note: My parents

Washing day in Kamakwie

moved from Winchester to Minehead – or "Exmoor" as my father preferred to say – shortly after my departure for Africa, when he took early retirement.)

The road back was as bumpy as the road up (it was the same one). This time there were about 20 passengers crammed into a minibus and once again we were offered the front seats at no extra cost. Saidu said that the driver, also a friend of his, would feel insulted if we didn't accept. What is more, John and I are now four chickens better off. The chickens (live) came down on the podapoda in hoops on the roof.

To the amusement of everyone on board I leant out of the podapoda as we passed through one village and yelled at a young white woman "Peace Corps – Seke" (pronounced "Sekkay") which is how most of the locals – in particular the kids – greet us. We had an encounter with the army who stopped the podapoda and demanded my (why me?) passport and aliens registration card/any

A group of Kamakwie villagers

proof of identity (which of course, being me, I didn't have). A small, on-the-spot "fine" settled things.

I am suffering from a sore back (mainly due to the "bed" at Saidu's)!

So what became of our chickens? It turned out that they were all cockerels. We fed them up for 3 days by which time we were fed up with being woken by them at 5 a.m. That sealed their fate. In a frenzy of activity, Abu slaughtered the lot one evening and we are now gradually working through them, one at a time. Needless to say, Mohammed and Saidu were invited to eat with us. They have an arrangement with a woman neighbour to provide their food (African "chop" – i.e. rice with a little vegetable and Maggi sauce at weekends).

Letter 8 "Ramadan"
Sunday 5 November 1972 Makeni

Some time ago when looking through a Peace Corps handbook belonging to a Makeni volunteer, I noticed the photo of a girl, Judy Bres, whom I had met a couple of years ago when I worked as a camp counsellor in New Jersey, USA. The Peace Corps was in Freetown last weekend and passed on my greetings to her. It appears that she got married last summer to another Peace Corps called Tim Wildfire (honestly). I hope to visit them at Christmas or Easter in Bo. I had stayed with Judy for a couple of days in Baton Rouge, La. in September 1970.

I went to Magburaka Friday night and stayed at Judith's. She had been writing to a number of mutual London acquaintances and had just received a letter with a photo of a hike they had made. We decided to write a joint letter and thus save on the postage.

Jam session with John and Mohammed

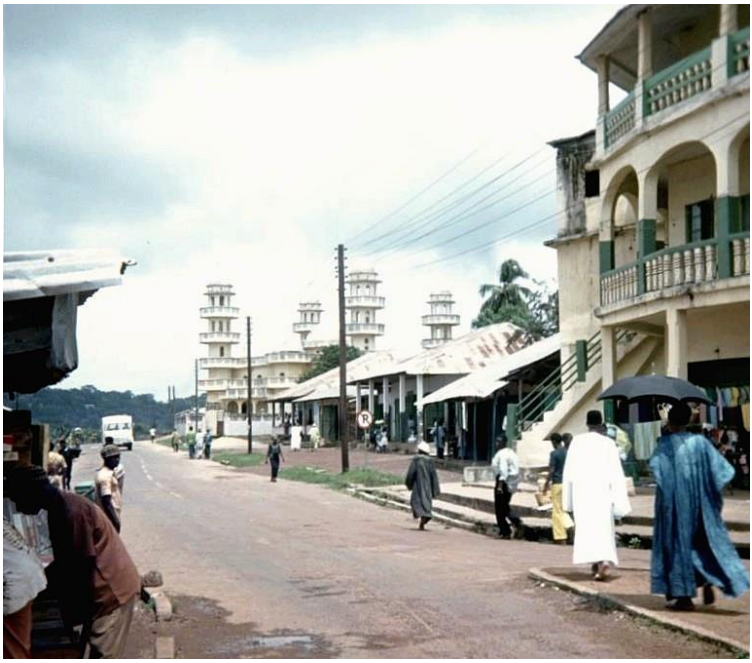
This weekend marks the end of the Moslem Ramadan festival i.e. the celebrations, although the fasting doesn't officially end until Wednesday. About time too, I say. Many of the Moslems who observe the fast are so tired and hungry during the day that they can't concentrate on lessons – and many don't even manage to turn up at all. It really is a ridiculous state of affairs, and the celebrations are incredible. Everyone dances in the streets, they eat (or rather suck) oranges and throw the peel on the ground. The centre of town stank of rotting fruit this morning.

The dancing went on until 6 a.m. and everyone was exhausted (not drunk of course, because Moslem's don't drink alcohol – officially). As far as choice of religion goes, cynics say that if they want to drink, the locals become Christians and if they want more than one wife (heaven help them) they become Moslems. It has often struck me as inconsistent, that whilst alcohol is taboo in Islam, smoking, also condemned by the Prophet, seems not to be.

Generally speaking, the locals follow their pagan/animist traditions anyway, which they then flavour with Christianity – or Islam – as the case may be. Alcohol is freely available and widely (mis-)used in Sierra Leone. Every extended family has its own favourite palm-wine recipe.

I did not participate in the night's frivolities, but instead went to the cinema with John and Ray, and Bob and Trevear Penrose, both VSO teachers at St Augustine Teacher Training College, also in Makeni. Trevear hasn't even done a dip.Ed. – both his parents are lecturers at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) in London (mother) and Nuffield College, Oxford. "Zabriskie Point" was being shown, a recent American film (only about 3 years old). It was quite good, surrealist in places with superb allegory and slow motion sequences. It was too subtle for most of the locals, though.

Tickets are cheap, but not for the locals. If a film is bad, we leave early, giving up our tickets to the myriad of locals waiting expectantly, who then watch till the end, neither knowing nor caring how the film started. They don't necessarily understand the language either. A couple of weeks back John and I went to see the Michael Caine film "Get Carter" about the Newcastle Ganglands which, if nothing else, had some excellent images of the squalor of the Industrial North of England.



Magburaka Road with the Mosque

Films are usually censored (to "protect" the locals) but this time the censors had missed a couple of risqué sequences with Britt Ekland, the gangster's mistress. This lead to uproar in the house. And here, where toplessness is common! Friends, who had seen another copy of the same film in Bo, later said that they didn't even know that Britt Ekland was in the film until they saw the credits at the end.

Tim and Barbara Brett, who were stopping over on their way back to Kailahun from Freetown, came along too and were suitably impressed. Afterwards we went for a drink with the others. They suggested that, if I wasn't doing anything special over Christmas, I should come and stay with them, squashed as they are in the triangle of land close to the Liberian and Guinean borders.

My fellow volunteers have decided that my beard doesn't suit me and so I have decided to start shaving again. Beards are more

of a disadvantage here anyway, in the damp, sticky conditions. We are all fairly outspoken, but we mean well.

Abu is going to post this letter at the Post Office on the way home. The only other letter box (a cast iron affair with GVIR on it) looks as if it hasn't been used since GVIR (George 6th) was on the throne.

Letter 9 "Harmattan, Animal Adventures"
Monday 13 November 1972 Makeni

10:10 p.m.: I'll set the scene as I have my supper: Bread, Marmite, cheese, Bournvita. Trevear has kindly passed on his old transistor radio to us. I am half listening to the 10 o'clock News from London. Reception (shortwave – from the mid-Atlantic Relay Station of the BBC World Service on Ascension) is near perfect tonight (during the day it is often poor). The Beeb is a bit of a bore really. Apart from news, nothing but parlour games and occasionally humour, for which it has been renowned for years/decades.

I guess it is a bit warmer here than in England at present. The weather is pleasant – for about 5 hours a day it is perhaps too hot, but the rest of the time it is just fine. We have had no rain recently – it is the dry season. The Harmattan, a dry wind which blows in dust from the Sahara, is particularly noticeable in the early morning. Saidu is just chasing a large frog (I hope it isn't poisonous, but he is pretty savvy and doesn't think it is). For the frog the dangers of living in here are not as great those outside, and it has now crawled into a corner.

Two days ago we had an influx of traders – they tend to travel in groups. Firstly a man wanted to sell me a spider monkey for £1.50. I toyed with the idea of buying it and naming it after my sister – or letting it go - but then resisted the temptation. Then a man carrying a sack asked me if I wanted to buy a "burr". What, I wondered, was a "burr"? It turned out he meant "boa" and pulled out a beautiful 7 ft python.

Intrigued as I was, I sent him away with his wares. I'm not sure if it was meant to be eaten, or used as a tif deterrent, or just kept as a pet. My 5th form Additional Maths group was interrupted by yells on Thursday. 40 excited boys and two intrepid teachers had

Dougal guards our breakfast table

surrounded a what was by now excited 4 ft lizard. It didn't get away and is now enjoying board and lodging c/o the Biology lab.

Our living room was fairly bare so we have decided to brighten it up with whatever is available. Pride of place is taken by a large picture of Dougal, paint brush in mouth, over the table. There are also a few pictures of the fatherland. The windows are barred to dissuade tifs, the walls very pale blue, the front door red, the woodwork green and cream.

Inspired by a physical map of Sierra Leone which adorns the Geography classroom, I have now commenced a map of England in similar style using chalk to liven things up a bit. John is out drinking with his policeman friends, but Saidu and Mohammed are both in "working", i.e. reading textbooks time and time again – hoping that some of the wisdom sinks in.

I duck to avoid a sausage fly – aptly named due to its close resemblance to that well known culinary delicacy, its wings apparently attached as an afterthought. The strip lighting attracts them of course and after each collision with the tube or a wall, they fall to the floor. Temporarily dazed by the impact, they struggle to their feet before charging along the floor, flapping their wings in an attempt to become airborne. Whoops, there it goes again. And then catastrophe: It didn't notice the wall looming up. Better luck next time, Soss.

A little later: The sausage fly came to an untimely end when it crash-landed in the corner near the (above-mentioned) frog, which promptly ate it. The frog has now been ushered out by a shoe-brandishing Saidu.

Letter 10 "Reorganisations, Frustration, Freetown"
Monday 20 November 1972 Makeni

Life is pretty strenuous again. We have just had another timetable change and this one is not so good for me. Half my lessons are now scheduled after school (i.e. during the "free" afternoons.) in my own time. I now have so few lessons during school time, (9-12/1-3) that I go to sleep between lessons, and don't get into the swing of teaching – it cramps my style. So I am doing some advanced German study in my "spare" time: the Dutch "brothers" who founded this school in the 50s, had the crazy idea of teaching the boys French and German (but not Dutch) and I have found the necessary books, including an excellent Langenscheidt's under a thick layer of dust in the school library. I can't expect girlfriend Ruth to send me back my love letters corrected in red ink: I write to her in German, and she writes to me in English.

I guess I'll look back on this year and savour the memories of having a steward to do all my work whilst I lord it up (quite rightly so!). The fact that I don't have to shiver to keep warm in winter and I spend hours lazing around in a state of blissful inactivity, sipping freshly pressed lime juice, consuming pineapples and pawpaws – or wandering around to chat to the nurses – I find appealing.

The nurses in question, “Sue‘n’Helena”, live just behind us, but I usually go the long way round to avoid stepping on snakes or other unpleasant fauna which might be lurking in the dark. They have stereo equipment and plenty of LPs and it is always a pleasure to relax in their deep armchairs whilst my ears are exposed to the pleasant sounds of Steeleye Span, Neil Young, Gordon Lightfoot, Francoise Hardy and James Taylor (to name but a few). They also own a dog, Yessir, who is, to put it politely, of very mixed pedigree.

These are just a few luxuries of life here. The main reason that I get on so well with Sue is that she is in a similar situation to me with a close friend (boyfriend) in England and we understand the problems involved. For some reason, she hates cameras and refuses to be photographed.

The evenings are warm and breezy, the mornings cool and fresh (you can see your breath if you are up early enough). The trees are turning brown – not the autumnal colours of England, but a menacing yellowish brown, harbinger of the drought and dust to come. The sky is no longer blue but off-white, the glare is reflected by the roads, the pale, dust-covered undergrowth, and the swamps which are rapidly drying out. Everything is becoming hazy and it will be over 5 months until the rains return to revive, refresh and cool the people, and clear the air.

Inside the house the rooms are cool, the walls thick and the eaves wide, protruding well over the walls and veranda. Providing it is not too rusty, the corrugated iron reflects a lot of the heat back into space, protecting the rooms from the sun whilst at the same time preventing the walls – and foundations – from being washed away in the rainy season.

Morale is not high in school at the moment. Sometimes from the teaching methods, one would think we were back in the middle ages. One of the Indian contract teachers has been asked to leave – he can’t teach for toffee – and Ray who has been here for 3 years now is really fed up with the whole scene. He thinks he may call it a day. I get pretty frustrated too, from time to time, and I begin to wonder if this teaching in third world countries isn’t just a romantic illusion in which volunteers try to ape their colonial ancestors and “tame the savage native”.

The main trouble is the heat and the environment – trying to overcome the induced lethargy and apathy is half the battle. One

year in a situation like this is fine, but I think I am perhaps not putting my talents to best use either as a teacher or in this country.

Adrian Thomas of the British Council says that Mr Kanu considers I am "doing a fine job" and is pleased with the way I teach. But what does Kanu know about the way I teach? I hardly ever see the man. He just hasn't had any complaints about my methods (perhaps because the boys fear that if I am replaced they might be even more unlucky) and this in his eyes satisfies the conditions of being a good teacher! (The boys are in general fairly open when it comes to criticising teachers. Turn up on time to all your lessons and you are a long way to earning the rating "good".) There are plenty of complaints going around about other masters. But as Mr Kanu says: "Education in Sierra Leone is a privilege, not a right".

I went to Freetown on Friday (17th November) evening in one of the Peace Corps Land Rovers. The road has recently been upgraded and it took us just 2hrs 45min to cover the 120 miles. The last 10 miles into Freetown is slow-going due to the mountainous terrain and high population density: people, goats, stalls on the road. We were doing 60 mph along much of the stretch to Lunsar with cars overtaking us. The road is a suicidal three-lane affair but is well-graded with banked curves, cuttings and embankments. We stayed in a "hotel", not dissimilar to those I had encountered a year ago in Afghanistan and India, tortured by mosquitoes and an uncomfortable (sagging) bed. Most of the guests in the hotel were Peace Corps Americans.

Up country we volunteers have a tradition of hospitality. All VSOs, CUSOs and Peace Corps offer accommodation to each other at a standard rate. In Freetown that doesn't work. Firstly, there are relatively few volunteers living there and so many others from up country requiring a bed for the night. Secondly, the cost of living is a lot higher. So a couple of cheap hotels are recommended. I had things to do and purchases (items not available in Makeni) to make, and so when I heard there was a free seat going, I jumped at the opportunity. Nevertheless the whole excursion turned out rather costly because I bought more than was essential. I am now stocked up pretty well and will be so for some time. I also bought a fair amount of cloth in the market, which I sent to Ruth in London. It is

safer to post packages in Freetown. I had dinner in an expensive restaurant, but the meal was worth every penny. Good food at last!

My hat nearly got me arrested because I had sewn the Leonean flag on upside-down by mistake.

I am having slight trouble with my hair. The Peace Corps office reckoned it could be the anti-malaria tablets, so I have changed them.

John buying Gara cloth

We were visited by tifs a few days ago. Strangely enough they don't seem to have taken much, if anything. Obviously very discerning tifs.

Letter 11 "Malaria, Staff Meetings, Coups"
Wednesday 29 November 1972 Makeni

Last Thursday was American Thanksgiving Day and of course the Peace Corps volunteers wanted to celebrate in style. Last year, Rick an American exchange student threw a party in the student house in Hammersmith where I was living – turkey, pumpkin the whole lot. Here everything is more modest. But it was a good excuse for a celebration and a good time was had by all.

The following day, our beloved President, Dr Siaka Stevens visited Makeni. There was no teaching as such, but St Francis Secondary School was on his list and we had all been instructed to be courteous and salute him! Apparently Ray refused to salute the last time the President came. He was arrested and would have been extradited, had the American Ambassador not intervened. Ray locked himself in his house this time, said he had malaria, and hoped Stevens wouldn't come looking for him. He didn't!

I have become quite attached to the place! We're going through a cool spell at the moment, maximum temperatures being in the mid-eighties, and I have had to crawl under the sheets for warmth at night when temperatures have plummeted to 65° F – brrr! It has been very overcast these last few days – and we've only seen the sun for a few minutes in three days. So the weather is comfortable, the humidity low.

I am feeling rather weak as the aftermath of a bout of malaria, and I am only slowly getting back to normal. It is rather a nuisance – I forgot to take my Paludrine tablets a couple of mornings and the next thing I know, I am in bed with malaria. So I took an overdose of antibiotics and was back at school after missing only one day. My teaching was not up to scratch for a couple of days but (triumphantly) "it takes more than a couple of mosquito bites to keep a good man down!" Thursday wasn't too good – I had 5 lessons in the morning followed by a 4½ hour staff meeting in the afternoon. I was nearly dead by the end of it and crawled off to bed as soon as I got home.

Most of the meeting was full of trivialities – the teachers really act like overgrown schoolboys at times. They can't discuss things without banging on the table and shouting. I often leave the

staff room during school-breaks, because I can't stand the racket that is going on. Mr Kanu did shape up very well, though – he is a superb diplomat and to be quite honest, I think he is wasted teaching (in Sierra Leone). Like all the best political brains in the country, he is scared of a revolution or coup which would throw him out – or worse.

As in many other countries it would be so simple to carry out a coup here. 1) Wait for the siesta hour in a cabinet meeting, 2) surround the presidential palace, 3) take the ruling clique prisoner, 4) march off to the local radio station and 5) announce your victory to the world. Like that it is swift, effective, and, hopefully, bloodless. No-one notices that anything has happened and, for the vast majority of the population nothing does.

An Indian contract teacher (not Raman) is to be deported. He was supposed to teach the 6th class, but was apparently not even suitable to teach the youngest classes. When Mr Kanu sacked him, he apparently became violent. The police were called (always a "Bad Idea") to escort him to Freetown and he is at present in a hospital for the mentally ill. I didn't know there were any Mental Hospitals in this country. The prisons are bad enough, but the mental hospital must be absolute hell. He will be flown out on the next available plane. He had on occasions visited us, and John and I were convinced there was something distinctly odd about him. We had wondered how it was possible, that he could get a job as a teacher in Sierra Leone.

Letter 12 "Exams, Roads, Animals, Bounced Cheques"
Tuesday 5 December 1972 Makeni

I'm sitting in the staff room. It is 11:30 a.m. and I have taken just 2 lessons today, but there are 2 coming up this afternoon followed by 2 hours practical this evening.

We seem to be having the best of the weather at the moment – it isn't too hot and the (early) mornings are beautiful with a cool breeze blowing from the Sahara. Temperatures will be in the nineties by the afternoon however. In February and March it is likely to be hotter (and drier) before the rains begin again at the end of April/May.

I have been setting exams these last few days. It is strange to be setting them rather than sitting them.

There are four more teaching days this term, although school does not officially break up until 20th December. I haven't yet decided what to do over Christmas, but I will probably stay in Makeni and then go to Freetown for a language course over the New Year.

The Catholic Chapel at St Francis School

There is an organ in the schools Catholic Chapel which no one ever plays, because nobody knows how to play it. When I mentioned that I had learnt the piano many years ago they suggested that I should try it out. I was surprised how well I got on – it is change from playing the guitar, anyway. They thought that, with a little more practice, we may be able to sing some carols before Christmas. I am not convinced.

Unfortunately our pay cheques have bounced. John and I, abiding by the school rules of not going into Makeni during school

time, didn't try to cash our cheques until evening by which time the school coffers were empty – the less conscientious teachers had already cashed theirs! We won't get paid until the next lot of money comes in (after Christmas). I'm OK because I have got Le 60 (£30) from the British Council to replace my bike which was stolen six weeks ago. The new one has yet to materialise. John is practically broke, and makes do with bread and water whilst sorrowfully eying my delicacies with envy. No, kidding apart, we should get a cash loan from the principal when we plead our case.

Heavy plant constructing the Makeni "by-pass"

Life here is pretty noisy at present. The "expressway" which we used on our way to Freetown is now being extended eastwards to Sefadu/Koidu, the diamond mining centre. Known facetiously as the "Makeni By-pass" (I mean, who would want to bypass Makeni?), it passes within 200 yds of our front door. We will have to cross it (as will all the boys from town) on our way to school. It seems to be financed by the Germans but it is being built by a British-Leonean consortium (Taylor-Woodrow, I think). Eventually it will continue

via Segbwema (I like that name) and Kailahun (pronounced "Ky-larn") to become part of the Trans-African Highway.

The earth-moving equipment is akin to that encountered in motorway construction in UK and kicks up a helluva racket. I had a chat with one of the engineers (a German guy) who appreciated the opportunity to speak German and I complained (in fun) about the noise. He replied (also in fun) "*Ze neokonial Britisch steel try to get in ze vay of ze progress*".

Sue has just dropped by to say they are slaughtering a pig tomorrow, and do we want any. We ordered 8lbs (mixed cuts) at 22½p per lb. Now this doesn't happen very often and we are getting tired of beef and the occasional rubber vulture (chicken). Liver will be pleasant for a change. Prices are going up and beef, at present 20p/lb is expected to rise to 25p by Christmas. We can get canned luncheon meat at 15p for 12 oz., but that is imported from China.

Our dog should arrive pretty soon. Called Benjamin (Bengy) he has quite taken to me. The most common animals (vertebrates) we see are toads and lizards (the latter skate about all over the place and are often found in our bedrooms). They are harmless but being insectivorous, they are welcome.

As far as other animals are concerned, they are not really a danger. Green mambas are not uncommon (and very poisonous) but they glide away in the opposite direction, should you meet one. There are supposed to be wildcats around but I haven't yet met anyone who has actually seen one.

The worst things are the Soldier Ants – big, black, sting like mad (but not poisonous). I've only been attacked once (on my ascent of Mena Hill way back in August) and then not badly. Sugar ants (small) are everywhere. If you leave a bowl of sugar unattended, it is very soon black with them. Flies are few. There are plenty of small green/white spiders, and some cockroaches – 2 in long. Moths and butterflies (mostly very pretty) abound, the occasional praying mantises and stick insects, both of which cling to the florescent light tube. Scorpions are rare, but we have been warned to shake out our shoes before putting them on in the morning. A rule of thumb seems to be: "The painfulness of a scorpion's sting is inversely proportional to its size in boots". The sausage fly is too daft to sting. It would probably like to, but hasn't a clue as to which part of its anatomy it would use.

There are some bats. As for birds, there are ruddy great vultures all over the shop, preacher birds (similar to our magpies in size and colouring), and the village weaver: gold yellow and red, about thrush size. We are kept awake by the shrill chirping of the crickets, but there is no dawn chorus – only the noise of the kids next door!

Letter 13 "Christmas Parties, Stamps"
Wednesday 13 December 1972 Makeni

Christmas cards are a rare commodity here – or interesting ones, anyway. Most cards have reindeer or Caucasian Father Christmases. Or snow scenes (snow is even rarer here than in England). We had carol singers around the other night – yes, at night: 2 a.m. to be precise. "See amid the winter snow" they sang. I give up.

I am thinking of popping over to Abidjan (Ivory Coast) for, or just after Christmas. There are difficulties involved in getting there – like where to stay *en route*. It is nothing like Iran or Afghanistan for getting doss-houses for the night. If I go, I'll go alone, because everybody seems to be so apathetic about travelling. A guy I know from London, Adrian Stafford, a pharmacist by trade, is working at the (famous) Methodist Mission Hospital at Dabou (20 miles from Abidjan. So I thought he might like a visit. They are apparently £15,000 in the red at present, not that I can help very much with my volunteer's pittance, but it might cheer them up a little. The other problem is visas. It is said that they can be obtained in Freetown in a couple of days, but you have to haggle like hell (cross their palms with silver), especially at this time of year. Actually, it is the Sierra Leonean re-entry visa which is the trouble. I may have to abandon things, it all depends…

The Leonean Post Office has just issued new stamps! These are rather orthodox – not the self-adhesive, crinkle-cut monstrosities we had got used to. Those apparently cost too much to produce. The Post Master General, we hear has been sacked (and is probably languishing in clink by now). The chap smiling on the new stamps is none other than Dr Siaka Stevens, president of this country (at present). I don't think the picture is very flattering – he looked

somewhat better when I saw him in real life. It looks as if he is beginning to suffer from goitre. "Stevens" is not a typical tribal name, but he is not a Creole. It would seem that he is of mixed pedigree and he adopted the name to escape any tribal prejudices. His attempt to rename the country has obviously been postponed.

John and I went to a wedding celebration at Kanu's house the other day. It was basically just another excuse for a booze-up, I think. I was able to shake hands with the Minister of the Interior who was present (probably another of Mr Kanu's minions.) The only other person of interest there (apart from John and self) was a Russian girl with whom I held a halting conversation in German/Russian. God knows what she was doing there. Her German and my Russian didn't stretch to finding out. Suffice it to say, we were the only non-Africans.

Letter 14 "Travel Fever"

Sunday 17 December 1972 Makeni (Started in)

I am awaiting transport into Freetown – I've managed to get myself a lift once again in a Peace Corps Land Rover (hence saving myself 80p for the bus fare). It is good to have that travelling feeling again (itchy feet did I hear you say?) and I have got just 3 weeks to spare, and about £60 to see me through (Mr Kanu being forthcoming with the loan!) – should be more than ample. Provided I get the necessary visas tomorrow, I'll leave on Tuesday morning.

Everybody here is on the move. Two Peace Corps friends are hitching (in the European sense of the word) into Freetown later today. They are off to Timbuktu (honestly) which is in Mali but they may get down to Accra by New Year's Eve. There is a weekly flight from Freetown to Bamako the Malian capital (by "Interflug", the East German airline) but the only way back is via East Berlin – with a 6 night stopover. If I get through to Dabou, I may go on to meet them at the Peace Corps Office in Accra. Ghana is the next country along! I doubt it though, because I would only have about 7 days to get all the way back to Makeni for the start of the new term. Pushing it a bit.

My lift to Freetown yesterday arrived about 2 hours late and I only just managed to find the guy I am staying with. Perhaps I should have hitched too.

I went to get my re-entry visa at 9 a.m. They said "come back this afternoon" but I appealed, saying I need it NOW. I got the visa at 11.30 (wonders will never cease) and I have been able to buy dollars (Liberia uses the US $) at the official rate of £1=$2.50. I then went to the Liberian Embassy where I "just missed" the ambassador responsible, but my passport will be ready at 2 p.m. Then I went to the Ivorian embassy to check that I didn't need a visa – which is correct. The Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire) is an external territory of France and because of the Common Market (or something), the British are exempt from visas.

So I am leaving on the 8:30 a.m. bus to Bo (Tuesday 19th) and should be in Abidjan by 23rd / 24th December, with a little bit of luck. I hope the guy, Adrian Stafford, is there when I get there. If not, I am sure that the rest of the mission will be overjoyed to see me!

Map of my journey from Freetown to Abidjan and back
Christmas 1972-New Year 1973

My last business before I leave is to drop into the British Council. Adrian Thomas, the VSO liaison officer is an absolute pain. I met him at the Cathedral yesterday evening (where they were putting on the "Messiah") and he refused to listen to me, saying I should come in to the office to register my temporary leaving the country. He knew I would be pushed for time. He used to be a VSO too!

Letter 15

There is no letter 15. Instead I wrote a postcard from Abidjan – which doesn't appear to have survived.

Letter 16 "Abidjan Travel Report: There and Back Again"

Friday 5 January 1973 Makeni

Well, I'm back in good old Sierra Leone all safe and well, like. They were short of aerogrammes at the Post Office here, with only a few discoloured, dog-eared ones left. I suggested they let me have one half-price, but since you only pay for the postage, the aerogramme itself is free. Needless to say, they didn't get my joke!

Lorry to Zimmi (with my red rucksack visible on roof)

The River Mano Ferry (Sierra Leone - Liberia border)

The journey was very rough (and I am used to rough journeys), about 1500 km (900 miles) each way.

I went overland – but only about half of the way is reasonably surfaced, the rest is very bad. There are indeed stretches where there is no road at all – just a track, where you have to walk, 'cos the lorry might tip over if you are on it, and even if you're not. There are log bridges which have received no maintenance since goodness knows when.

Dug-out on the River Mano

The two actual borders (both rivers) are even worse – you have to take a ferry or dug-out canoe and since there is no alternative, they charge exorbitant rates – 20p for 100 yds. Since the ferry operators ply their trade between the border posts of the two separate countries, they are operating in no-man's-land – they do not feel themselves obliged to comply with the laws of either.

The trip Freetown-Dabou took 6 days going, and 4½ coming back. I took the bus from Freetown to Bo and then a podapoda on to Pujehun (50 miles or so), where I spent a night with fellow VSO

ELWA Gospel Radio Station, Monrovia, and its beach

Tom Daniel (fellow IC Physics student). The next day (December 20th) I crossed the border and got as far as Monrovia. Looking for somewhere to stay, I asked a taxi driver about accommodation. He took me to an American run Gospel Radio station about 6 miles out of town. ELWA: "Eternal Love Winning Africa" is right on the coast and has an idyllic, tropical beach. By this time it was getting dark and so I went into the gatehouse and explained the situation. They were very friendly, as good Christians should be, and said that the English doctor, John Cowen, could probably help.

Liberian taxi on the road to Sanniquellie

No sooner than we had been introduced than he was called out to sew back on the thumb of the son of one of the missionaries who, there for the Christmas holidays, had come off a motorbike – which he shouldn't have been riding anyway. The doctor/surgeon came back 90 minutes later reporting the operation was successful – and the patient still alive. By this time I had had supper and chatted at length to his rather home-sick wife, Hillary (they were from Buckfastleigh), as she put their 2 year old toddler to bed. They were really great to me. When asked what I owed them, they replied, they

Cloth stall and lorry park in Ganta

would be very grateful if I could get a couple of Michelin roadmaps for them, because theirs had been stolen, and they weren't available, even in Monrovia. Abidjan would certainly have them.

Sanniquellie "Town Centre" with market

Unfortunately, I didn't have the Liberian exit visa, necessary for leaving the country. By pulling strings, Pete Ackley, an ELWA staff member, was able to get me the necessary piece of paper in double-quick time. Praise the Lord!

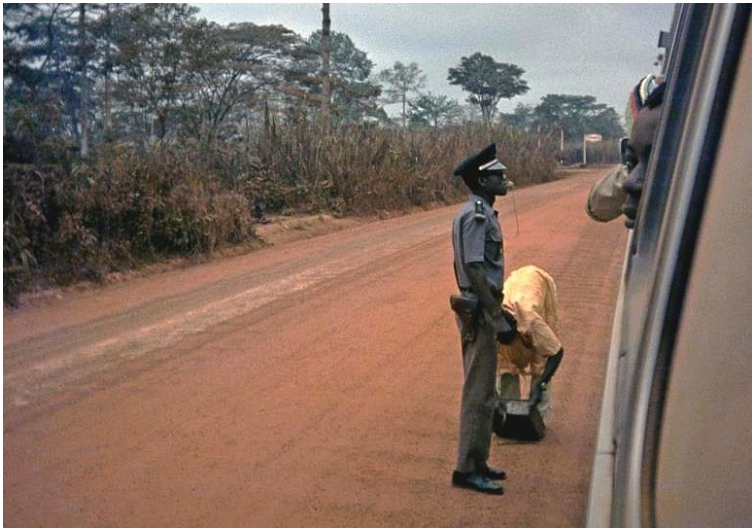
In Monrovia he found me a taxi which I shared with a Peace Corps who, like me, was heading for Sanniquellie 200 miles NE of Monrovia. There is no road along the Atlantic coast – the detour inland is the only way to get further east. It seemed to me, as I sped along the laterite road, that Liberia is not so much a country as one giant rubber plantation owed by the Firestone Company. Arriving in Sanniquellie mid-afternoon we soon found a Peace Corps house where we could both sleep. There were several Peace Corps living in town and they spontaneously threw a party, happy to have a couple of visitors, isolated as they were. Boy, they really needed no excuse to celebrate!

Having changed dollars (Liberia does not have its own currency and uses US$) for CFA francs (the common currency of the former French colonies in West Africa) with one of the Peace Corps. Bob, my travelling companion, and I set off early the following morning (December 22nd) in a small lorry to tackle the Ivorian border at Danané. We had been warned that the road was in very bad condition and it would not be easy to cross the border. If the worst came to the worst, we should return to Sanniquellie and spend Christmas there.

"Bridge" on the road from Sanniquellie to the Ivorean border

The road was the worst I had ever experienced anywhere. The passengers had to get out and walk several times – sometimes for their own safety: the lorry nearly turned over twice. At the border, a river again, there were four more Americans who had

The Liberia-Ivory Coast border, the Nuon River



Police Check on the road from Man to Daloa

Refueling stop in Daloa. Smiles sell

just arrived on another lorry. Together we persuaded the border guards to let us cross – we had all the necessary paper work, but they were hoping for (and got) a "Christmas bonus". So it took us nearly 14 hours in all to get from Sanniquellie to Man, just 120 miles. The six of us stayed in a modern hotel but by taking 2 triple rooms we managed to keep the cost down. It was too late to get bus tickets that evening and so the following morning I set out early to try to find a means of transport to Abidjan. Being just before Christmas, the buses were all full. In the end I booked a seat for the following morning, Christmas Eve, leaving Man at 4:30 a.m.

I was up at 4 a.m. and walked the 10 minutes to the bus station. The bus didn't leave until 6 a.m. – was it late or a misunderstanding? I don't know. Anyway I had a chance for an early morning snack at the bus station to warm up! It is cool until around 10 a.m. and, because firstly the buses and lorries don't have heating and secondly, it rained (in) some of the time. I was cold! It took 11 hours (including stops) to cover the 350 miles to Dabou and I arrived at 5:30 p.m.

Canoeing on the Dabou lagoon

I soon found Adrian, the friend from London, who is working as a pharmacist at the hospital. No, they hadn't received my letter, but yes, they were happy to see me. I had a room in no time,

took a shower, and he and an off-duty nurse took me out in their canoe – all before evening meal.

I had a great Christmas with Adrian and the staff. We sang carols (*en française, naturellement*). Suffice it to say I enjoyed the change from Sierra Leone, even if my bottom had suffered from the journey.

Abidjan, or at least parts of it, is almost Europe. There were even (white) French women working the tills in the supermarket, whilst modern SAVIEM buses operate a city service – to timetable. The buses not only have air-conditioning, but (French) classical music was being played discreetly on the public-address system.

I had a very strange, almost otherworldly, experience, whilst walking a downtown boulevard. A man I thought I knew came towards me we greeted each other. He was convinced that he knew me as well, and so we repaired to a nearby hostelry (as one does under such circumstances) to discuss things over a cup of coffee. He was from Guildford, working for an NGO in Ivory Coast. We compared biographies and came to the conclusion, that we had no idea when – or where – our paths could possibly have crossed. So after a light lunch of croissants and salad, we went our separate ways– and never met again.

French-built city buses on a boulevard

A shady boulevard and a high rise hotel across the lagoon

Dabou Mission Hospital and Methodist Church

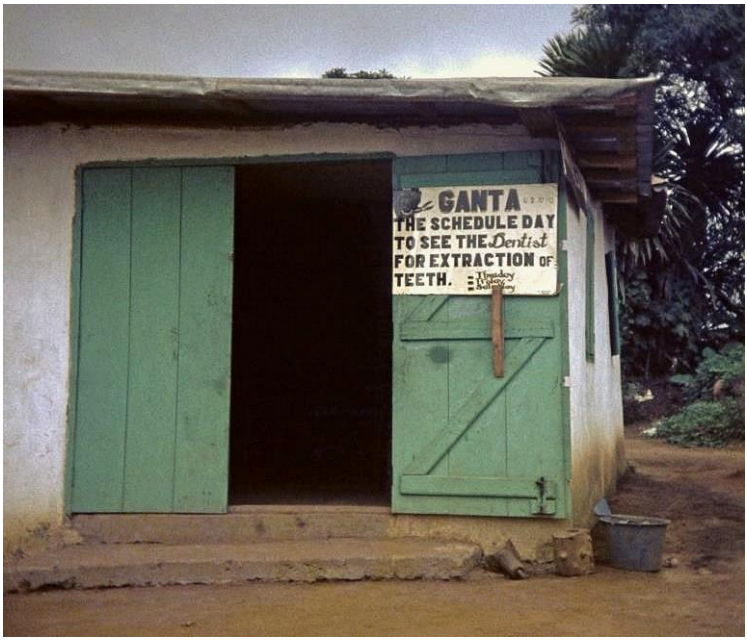
My *mille kilo* Citroën in Abidjan, nearly ready for departure

I came back to Sierra Leone the same route (let's face it, there is no other route). I took a taxi from Dabou into Abidjan early on Saturday morning (December 30th) and soon found a *mille kilo* (minibus) in the lorry park going to Man. Peter, the Dabou surgeon, had given me the names of a Swiss couple who worked in a Bible Mission ("*mission biblique*") in Man. Unfortunately they were not at home, but a spare room was soon found for me in a French mission-run orphanage ("*l'orphelinat de Man*") nearby.

I crossed the Ivorian/Liberian border on New Year's Eve. They had mislaid the official stamp, so the details had to be written into my passport by hand – a lengthy procedure. I celebrated the New Year with the same group of Peace Corps in Sanniquellie – they were eager to hear of my experiences in Ivory Coast.

Border post near Danané (Ivory Coast - Liberia)

City limits: ‘Sanniquellie bids you farewell’



Ganta dentist and a Firestone rubber tapping plantation

At a police post in the middle of nowhere the following day (January 1st 1973), they noticed that I did not have the correct stamp in my passport (the Liberian border police had decided to take New Year's Eve off and so there was no-one there to deal with the necessary bureaucracy). The matter was settled over a few beakers of palm wine (during which time we drank to England, the Queen, Liberia, the US President Nixon, eternal Anglo-Liberian friendship – and just about anything which came into our increasingly befuddled heads) and $2 "holiday pay".

I stayed at ELWA, Monrovia again as arranged – they were pleased with the maps I had bought for them in Abidjan. It was bath night, so having waited for baby Richard, wife Hillary and doctor John to complete their ablutions I was the fourth in the tub. It wasn't that they were being unkind towards me; it was a matter of common sense. I had so much sand in my clothes, that it was only fair I should wait my turn. They had no hot running water, but an immersion heater designed to boil a cup of tea sufficed. Boy was I happy when I finally got my bath.

Mano River. That dug-out again, this time with passengers

The exit visa was again arranged with a little help (and a dollar note) from my ELWA friend Pete who clearly has plenty of experience with the Immigration Office. I was back in Pujehun by early afternoon. I took a podapoda to Bo, where the VSOs spontaneously decided to celebrate the New Year again. Of course, I was invited to stay. After what turned out to be a very short night, during which time I invited all and sundry to visit us, I found an early lorry to take me directly to Makeni (100 miles, 4 hours), and I was back home by Wednesday (January 3rd) lunchtime – only to find out that electricity (and water) were "off". I was able to wash the dust from my body with a pail of water from the well – in the back garden – and retired to bed to sleep off the stresses and strains of the previous days (and nights).

Since then, normal service (i.e.: sporadic water and electricity) has been restored!

Home sweet home: the end of a journey ritual. On this occasion the water was ON, albeit only a trickle

Letter 17 "Tim and Barbara … and a Tif"

Thursday 11 January 1973 Makeni "Upper Mathanko Street"

There had apparently been problems with the postal service over the holiday period – various letters had not got through and those which had, had been subject to irregular delays. Ruth (girlfriend) had accepted an invitation to spend a few days holiday with my parents (and sister) and was apparently suitably impressed with Exmoor and the Somerset Coast, even in the middle of winter. She even climbed Dunkery Hill/Beacon in the fog with my Dad, a person who was suspicious of foreigners, especially young and female, at the best of times. At least she hasn't broken with me!

Ah yes, tifs! We got done good and proper last Sunday night (January 7th-8th). Two friends who teach in a Methodist School in Kailahun called in on us on Sunday and begged a bed for the night (it is the done thing to put up other volunteers, charging them a standard 50c – 25p) and so we gave them the boys' room – school has not yet restarted.

Tim and Barbara are married VSOs (unusual) and share a huge blue Honda 175cc motorbike (rather than a Honda 50 each). Barbara heard noises about 3 a.m., but thinking it was John or me up and about, ignored it at first. But when their door opened and a torch shone in their faces, they realised something was amiss. The tif, in answer to the question "Wadya thin' yer doin?" (from a rather sleepy Tim) implied he should stay quiet or he would "get it". He grabbed Barbara's handbag from the chair and fled.

The first I knew was a tap on the door and a surprisingly composed Tim saying "I hate to wake you up like this, but we've just been tifed." I woke John and together we checked around the house to see what had gone (while Barbara made a pot of tea for us all). We were so surprised that by the time we were respectably dressed, the tif could have been far away.

Unfortunately, Abu had done a lot of washing on Sunday (as a Moslem, he had Fridays off) and a lot of clothes were in the back room, waiting to be ironed. Practically all had been taken. Also gone was a new bath towel I had bought to replace one which I had left somewhere *en route* to Abidjan.

Our losses were:

- Barbara and Tim: handbag, wedding photos, Alien Registration Cards, passports, £10 cash
- John: Practically all his clothes worth ~£45
- Self: Pair of light trousers, one short sleeved shirt, 3 pairs of socks, bath towel worth ~£5

Most of my washing had been done on Thursday, the day after my arrival home and were nicely folded in my cupboard. Unfortunately, Barbara's handbag also contained her anti-baby pills. These may be the most difficult to replace.

We went to the police station early Monday morning, since we were claiming on our insurance and important documents were missing. Otherwise, we wouldn't have bothered. They sent 2 CID men, a finger print expert, a photographer and an ordinary constable to investigate. They couldn't find any fingerprints (not even ours). It took them half an hour to find the point of entry, ignoring our suggestions. The tif had got in via the bathroom (it is not lockable and only accessible from outside the back door). There is no way from there into the rest of the house … except by cutting a hole in the ceiling, avoiding the rafters, and a second on the other side of the wall, in our living room/lounge. From there it is but a short way to the washroom, where he collected the clothes (and my razor, which he left in his haste to escape Tim).

To the boys' room where Tim and Barbara had been sleeping it is only a few steps. The back door has no lock, but can be double bolted from the inside. In the confusion which followed he (tif) managed to unbolt this and thereby make his escape. Obviously he hadn't realised we had visitors and assumed the spare room was empty, due to the school holidays. He didn't notice the motorbike, which we had wheeled in to the parlour – for safety. So John and I were spared a direct nocturnal visit.

It was just as well we weren't tifed the previous night. Judith from Magburaka, who had dropped in to see how my trip had gone – she knows Adrian from Dabou as well – and wish us a happy new year, had been kipping there.

I'm quite busy these days in the school. I teach 6 lessons on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, 5 on Wednesday and 2 on Friday (both afternoon). Mr Kanu still seems satisfied with my work

– he had already asked me if I would extend my stay for a second year – and now I have inherited 3rd form Physics form Ray, the Peace Corps, who, after 2½ years fighting the system has cracked up under the strain, and will depart as soon as arrangements have been made. All rather sad. I give extra classes in the evenings (for those who are motivated and might just have a chance of scraping through O-levels) as well, so what with marking and preparing work, I do not have much spare time – well, only to write to my parents, Ruth and a couple of other favourites.

The walk home: Mabanta Road looking towards Mena Hill

The cloth I sent to Ruth seems to have arrived in London intact. I was worried about having it tifed before it left the country. Parcels are pretty roughly treated – but I used about ½ mile of string and the American friend who watched me tie it up asked "What do you think you are, a bl**dy sailor?"

My hair has benefitted from the break and now seems pretty healthy – almost as long as during my "Angela Davis" days.) I lack the 3kW fan heater I used to use in London, but even long hair dries very quickly here. I am sure my mother and Ruth would really like it

– and my father hate it. The Afro hair style is not prevalent here – so it is out of the ordinary, even for the locals.

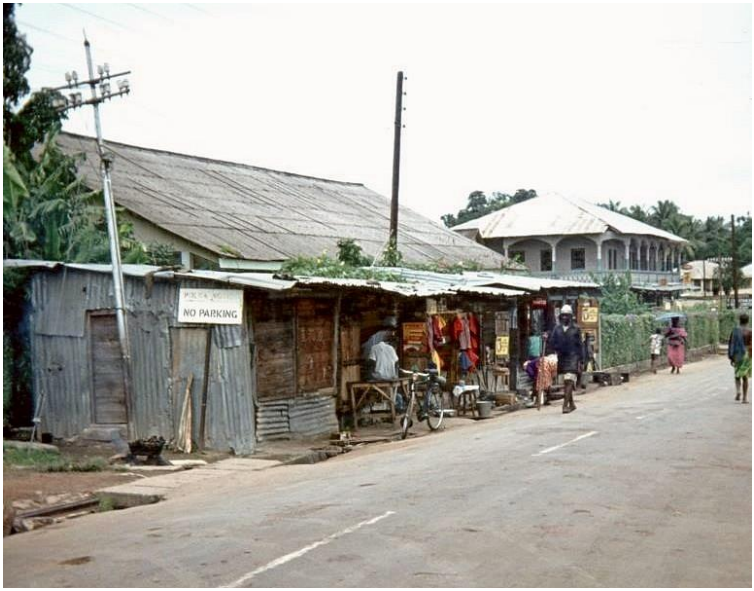
Letter 18 "Teacher Trouble, Desperate Principal"
Thursday 25 January 1973 Makeni

A couple of days ago we were able to buy some Dutch bacon in the supermarket. Pork is taboo here, due to the large number of Moslems around. But somehow Choithrams (Indian run, and therefore Sikh or Hindu) had got hold of some and were selling it at 35p for a ½lb. Expensive but delicious, we decided we deserved such luxury. We ate it on Friday when Abu, our Moslem steward, was off. I cooked it myself because John's culinary skills are even more limited than mine. Egg and bacon! Fantastic!

Shoe stall in Independence Square

On a more sombre note: I have got rather a cold/cough at the moment. The Harmattan (cold wind from the Sahara) has been the

coldest and longest in living memory (note: “living memory” is normally no longer than about 6 months here, but I assume they used it in the European sense).



Stalls in Station Road with Choitrams in background

I am now back teaching again full steam. We do not have a “half-term” as such, but we do seem to have odd days off at the slightest provocation (religious, political, whims of the president, etc.) The weather is beginning to heat up – mid-nineties today at noon, the sun was beating down mercilessly. The weather reports from London (BBC), clear blue skies and heavy frost overnight, are noted with envy.

I am up on 29 lessons a week (plus 3-4 extras) – more than any other teacher in the school. The main reason is that with Ray unable to take the strain, there is no other reliable Physics teacher in the school. Raman, the Indian contract teacher does nothing except exert his authority. I have taken a severe disliking to him. I can’t say he likes me much either – the feelings are mutual. He looks on me as a hippie (which of course I was in a way, only a couple of years ago), and when I tried to get through to him by talking about my

experiences in India (only the positive, flattering ones naturally), it didn't improve matters.

He avoids actual teaching as far as possible, habitually turning up late to his 5th form classes (O-level pupils). He has forbidden me to give extra lessons – but to be honest; the boys don't have a chance, otherwise. Mr Kanu is increasing his pressure on me to stay for another year, saying he might even be able to take Ruth on (as a contract teacher – although her English is far from perfect, she is at least a qualified teacher). He even expressed interest in having my sister as an A-level French teacher. My god, the man is desperate. Contract teachers are well paid. I said I would sound everyone out, but as long as I can't be on amiable terms with Raman, the answer is a definite "no". How do I break the news to him?

I particularly enjoy the extra lessons. Originally intended to give a bit of extra help in Physics to the fourth year, the numbers have dwindled somewhat and the subjects covered broadened out. They ask questions and I try to answer them. After all, it is not part of my official teaching regime, and I can teach what I want to. Kanu turned up one evening to see what was going on, and noticed I had written a number of Latin words on the board. As I pointed out to him in the ensuing discussion, a few of the boys have an enormous appetite for knowledge, and if I can help them extend their interests, then I do.

In the end, he gave me a mild reprimand for ignoring dress code (I was bare foot and in shorts, instead of long trousers and sandals). It was the boys who were wearing long trousers – banned by school uniform rules. We were warned in particular of the dangers of going bare foot. Apparently you can easily pick up "jiggers" – a particularly nasty parasite which attack your feet. I have never met anybody, foreign or native, who suffers from them. On my bedroom door there is a sign proclaiming: "Happiness is… walking barefoot through the grass". The grass here is not really suitable for walking barefoot through.

Despite all this, I am enjoying teaching. I am no longer bored by gaps in the day! I now have an assistant – a student doing teaching practice (!) What a laugh! I have not had any formal training and I just rely on common sense to get me through. At least he is eager, quite a pleasant young man actually…

Letter 19 "Tifing and Our Steward's Woman-Palava"
Friday 2 February 1973 Makeni

It is fairly early in the morning (about 7 a.m.) and I have been awoken by wailing from the mosque. They are real cheats – they play recordings of their chants through loudspeakers rather than climb up the minarets to sing "live". We live about ¾ mile from the mosque and ("Allah be praised!") rarely hear the damn thing. Those who live closer aren't so lucky.

We had "visitors" again on Thursday night – twice now in three weeks! We didn't hear them this time, but they took quite a few of the boys' clothes – most of Mohammed's in fact. He/they stole my briefcase with text books, slide rule, etc. They must have opened it because we found them next morning strewn about in the grass outside – which was a blessing. My shirt scene is now pretty bad actually. When I went to the school, the principal didn't like my scruffy appearance and asked what was up. So we told him about the tifing and Mr Kanu made noises of unfounded suspicion about our steward, Abu.

Kanu phoned the police (unknown to us) to get search warrants. First I knew about it was when I was collected from school (dragged out of our lessons) by Kanu and three policemen (one plain-clothed), who then accompanied us to our humble abode. Abu was entertaining one of his lady friends in our house at the time. The police took them and us to Abu's house (which was very ramshackle). His wife (one of them) was very annoyed. They searched the house, and then went to his lady friend's, which was in an even worse state of repair.

As we had expected, nothing was found in either house. Tifs aren't that daft, you know. Abu was certainly not the tif, because had we caught him in the act, we would have recognised him. He might have been an accomplice or a supplier of information, but I doubt that. When I got back to our house I was met by the second wife (remember: Abu is Moslem), who started swearing (we assumed by her body language and loud voice that she was swearing) at us in Temne (the local tribal language) thinking that we (and not Mr Kanu, who was, like John, now back at school) had sent the police to arrest him.

So Abu was now beset by three women (his two wives and his lady friend). Poor old Abu, he was really going through it! When John came along and saw the fracas, he said he had heard from other sources that Abu was not reliable and we should get rid of him. It was the end of the month and John sacked him on the spot. I remained unconvinced. So we are now without a cook, and with an "enemy" (Abu).

Abu wasn't a bad cook: if he had not been so surly and smiled a bit more, then that would have been better. But he was efficient (or as near as you can get to efficiency here). So now I have taken over the cooking (aided and abetted by the boys, who now have to do the shopping, cleaning, washing for us). John is a bit on the lazy side, at least as far as domestic duties are concerned. He is an excellent teacher, though.

On Friday afternoon there was no school again. President Siaka Stevens was in town, this time to officially open the Lunsar-Makeni highway, also known as the Makeni by-pass, which was built (and now completed) on time! The boys lined the road and cheered the presidential cortege as instructed. Dr Stevens seemed to enjoy mixing with "his" people, although he is hated by most of them – all of them, that is, except for those minions profiting directly or indirectly from him.

There is an election coming up (date not finally fixed) and he wants to, indeed he will, win it by fair means or foul. He is supported by the thugs from Guinea-Conakry (under the control of his buddy Sheku Turay) – most of the Leonean opposition has been languishing in gaol for years.

Although it is early days yet, I am beginning to think about my return to civilisation. The summer term ends on July 13th. I expect to fly back to London about a week later and spend a few days organising my re-entry into college, and hopefully solving my accommodation problem. I then propose to spend a few days with my parents before I go to Switzerland for a couple of weeks. A direct flight to Zurich would be possible, but I would be expected to pay about half, because VSO has a discount on British Caledonian flights, and this of course would not apply. Maybe I could get a connecting flight from Lisbon? I don't know.

The Harmattan is over now, so the days get really hot. To replace the stolen shirts, I have had a couple of Paisley patterned

shirts made up for me: 63c for the cloth and 60c for the tailoring – two made-to-measure shirts for 60p!

My finances aren't too bad. I am making a little headway: we are not supposed to save, it being "against the spirit of volunteering".

Letter 20 "Express Delivery, Evening Life"
Thursday 8 February 1973 Makeni

Yesterday (February 7th) I received a letter from England, postmarked Minehead, 7:45 p.m. on February 4th, which was double-quick time – less than 72 hours! I guess it must have made the overnight train up to London on Sunday, caught the Monday afternoon British Caledonian flight from Gatwick which arrives in Lungi (Freetown) midday on Tuesday, was "sorted" and brought up to Makeni on the Wednesday post lorry. Ray, who is still around, emptied the Post Box at 5 p.m. and delivered same into my hands at 5:30 p.m. Shows it can be done!

Obviously the pleasures of spring are at hand. Even the Beeb, which normally sounds so zomboid when broadcasting their world news, managed to squeeze in the comment "it is a beautiful clear morning here in London", thus confirming that their announcers are at least semi-human.

The weather here continues to be hot. One wonders why they need weathermen at all here. Just saying "Today's weather? – same as yesterday's" would hit the nail on the head 95% of the time. (Pause to make a cup of tea – the kettle is boiling on the hob (well gas ring)). I pick up the aerogram I am writing, which has fluttered to the floor, thanks to the evening breeze.

Enter Gilbert and Sullivan rear stage left under the arm of John (the Beeb is broadcasting the "Gilbert and Sullivan" story). One Bob Holden, broken arm in sling, a student studying the psychology of the Mende people (a "real" academic and not a volunteer), sticks his head in, enquiring on the whereabouts of two Peace Corps (American volunteers) and gets directed thither. Yes the weather here is hot – the temperature in the Physics Labs reached a maximum of 96° F this afternoon. I've put on weight and now tip the scales at 10st 3lb, which is only 8lb less than I used to be in England,

and up from 9st 5lb some time back. I'm feeling pretty fit and well, at least when it is not too hot.

Oh yes, I am suffering from an ailment known as "prickly heat", caused by too much sweating and not enough washing in plain water. I cover myself with soap suds every time, which I shouldn't. And if the water supply suddenly decides to go off… It feels like pin pricks under the skin and occurs at random times and in random places – usually on the torso and especially after hot food and drinks. Hardly bothers me, but I have just enjoyed my cuppa – hence my mentioning it. Cure? None really, although cold showers are supposed to alleviate the symptoms to some degree. There is no water at present.

About our tifings: It may have been the same person, it may not. The courts (well the police) are still out on that one.

Letter 21 "Journey Home Plans, Sports Day, Water Supply"

Friday 16 February 1973 Makeni

It would seem that the season of parties is upon us, the latest one being in Magburaka. I decided not to show up because they tend to be exclusively for volunteers. Things start well enough with a serious exchange of experiences, later turn to complaints about life in general – and Sierra Leone in particular – and finally deteriorate thanks to an excess of alcohol. I don't need that.

If you want to talk seriously about the problems of living as a volunteer in Sierra Leone then a small group is far better. So John (who let's face it, is definitely not a party type) and I invited Bob and Trevear (also not party types) over for a beer and we talked long into the night. That was a welcome change.

They also had a chance to admire my artwork (map of England) which after 4 months work (on and off) is now completed. Trevear, being Cornish, inspected Cornwall very critically and made a few suggestions for improvement (he is a teacher of course).

Preparing a lesson in my room, the wall decorated with my map

Getting out the atlas for reference, I came to the conclusion that he was splitting hairs.

We also got round to discussing summer plans. I had noticed the change coming for some time. Gradually the volunteers are beginning to count the weeks until "furlough". Sad. Bob is considering going home overland this summer, rather than flying, and I rather fancy accompanying with him. There are a couple of other VSOs interested in joining us. Nothing has been decided – because for one thing I don't know whether I'll be required in London. Bob has to be in Germany in the second week of August (his mother is German), which would give us a maximum of 4 weeks or so for the trip. I would then travel home to England via Zurich. At

the moment we are assuming that we will be coming via the Sahara and so we are in an all-out save mode, to get some money together.

The plan is to fly to Bamako (in Mali) with the East German airline, Interflug, as there is no direct route for whites in that direction (via Guinea-Conakry). The alternative would be via Abidjan and that is very slow. From Bamako we would travel via Mopti, Timbuktu, Gao and then cross the Algerian Sahara to Algiers, take a boat over the Mediterranean to Genoa and thence to Switzerland. It'll probably be my last chance to cross the desert for some time. I would get £60 from VSO to do it (in lieu of my flight ticket home). Bob is experienced, having travelled in West Africa (Ivory Coast, Upper Volta and Niger) and so am I. So we both know what we are taking on – and we know we are up to it. I have crossed deserts before. My main objection to travelling overland – border crossings – doesn't really count, because after landing in Bamako there is only one involved: Mali-Algeria.

It was sports day at school today, although some events had taken place yesterday. Things are taken very seriously but the

The contestants entering the arena

The Mena House Team (and a few interlopers)

The final sprint in the 3 mile race

Tug'o'war

amount of show which goes on (and the amount of cheating) is incredible. The three mile event, for instance, had 25 starters of which at least 15 entered only to show off – they dropped out exhausted after completing only a few laps. Only 5 were really serious contenders and the battle for second place between one of "my" sixth formers and a fifth former who lives in another VSO house was really exciting. Jacob, my sixth former was impeded by friends of the other runners. Imagine 3 miles with the temperature in the 90s. In the tug-of-war, a dubious decision was given against one team, captained by Faramah – another of my sixth formers. Faramah, a gentle giant of a boy (man?) – untypically let out an irate tirade of highly insulting language (I am told – I didn't understand him) at one of the judges and his team was promptly disqualified.

I'm sitting on the back porch this time in shorts. I am soo white, it is unbelievable. It is far too hot for sunbathing here – the sun burns, rather than browns. Just waiting for dinner and listening to Jimmy Saville on "la service française de la BéBéCé", yes speaking French. His accent is pretty bad, so bad that I understand him. He has a regular programme on Sunday evenings, and with

Guinea-Conakry, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Mali, Upper Volta and Niger (all officially French speaking nations) within earshot, the potential listenership must be enormous.

The very erratic water supply has resumed unexpectedly and it is a case of rushing to the shower while you have the chance. At first, the water is really hot: the water pipes are laid just below the surface and water that stands in the pipes gets hot too! You never know how long the water supply will stay on. If you are under the shower when the pressure starts to fall, you've just got time to rush to the tap outside (6ft lower) and wash off the worst of the soap until the flow there is also reduced to a trickle. There is always a bucket of water to hand, just in case. I was able to wash my hair as well – it is so long now, that the principal has made negative comments – and the boys, used to a short frizz – positive ones.

I received a couple of films my sister had sent. I guess I was lucky, because according to Ray, the Post Master was eying them suspiciously. I had the necessary duty exemption forms so there was nothing he could do. Wretch!

Letter 22 "End of Dry Season, Blessings, Vagaries of Public Transport"

Friday 2 March 1973 Makeni

The cinema is always fit for a surprise and the latest film to be shown here was "Easy Rider". You could feel the mood of the audience – the fantastic scenery of the American West and the animosity growing between white-trash and white-hippie, with every mile which passes as the bikers travel on towards the "Deep South". And the realisation that the US might be all right for those doing well, but for the rest, especially the Blacks, the poverty is crass.

Here the scenery is gradually changing. Looking out of my bedroom window I watch the people as they pass. The women and children carrying firewood (rather than fruit) on their heads in the evening – most people cook over wood fires and only the richer can afford to buy kerosene. And propane gas in cylinders is only for the very rich – like us. After 3 months without rain, the hills are still fairly green but the grass along the roadside is mostly dry and yellow. They periodically set fire to the grass, because at present a

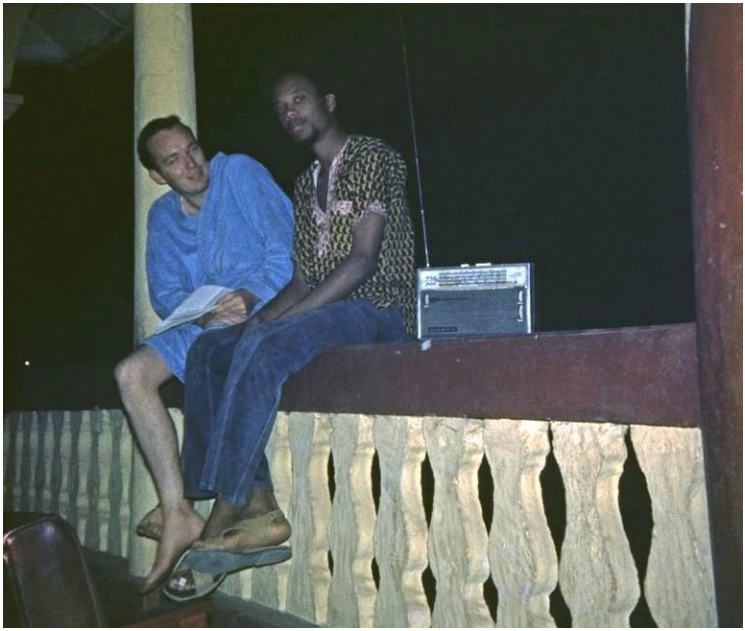
bush fire can still be controlled fairly well. Later on it will not be so easy because the grass will be parched, and if the undergrowth also goes up in flames, the fire is virtually impossible to put out. On top of that, soon there won't be any water to spare. The fires also drive out animals (which can be eaten) and snakes – some of which are dangerous.

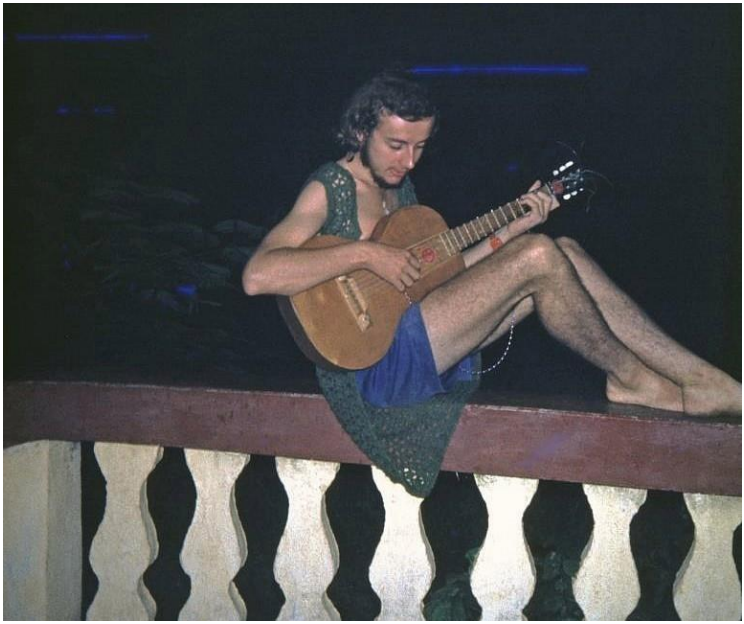
Children dancing in front of the fire

We keep our shutters closed during the day so that the house is still relatively cool when we come home in the evening. It is pleasant on the veranda in the evening and we can sit out until late (if we don't have any preparing/marking to do). Then we talk or sing – my guitar comes in useful.

Let us count our blessings first:

1. I'm listening to the Beeb which is playing a lot of Beatles music today – "Magical Mystery Tour" – which is quite cheering
2. The Lincoln by-election (Dick Taverne) result caused quite a stir among the VSOs, as did the SNP results.





Long evenings on the veranda: John and Larry, and my guitar

3. I've now been here six months which in itself is grounds enough for a celebration, because funnily enough several other VSOs, John for instance, are also celebrating the half year. (Pause to sing along with the radio).
4. The guy I stayed with when I arrived in Freetown thought he would pay me an (unannounced) "courtesy visit". His car broke down near Makeni and it was 11:30 p.m. last night when he banged on our door looking for accommodation. So I had to oblige. Good to see a different (white) face, though.

There are two things which are clouding my brow:

1. Firstly I have a nasty boil on the index finger of my right hand. I had a scratch and somehow it got infected. It is not only painful, but it makes it difficult to write – especially on the blackboard because my arm aches when I raise my hand.
2. Secondly: Electricity, or rather the lack of it. It is latish and therefore dark and I am writing by candlelight which means I have to keep the windows closed so the candle doesn't blow out. The power cut started at the beginning of the week – no ice-cold water, no lights. This means we have prowlers at night. Well every-one does, but we ex-pats seem to attract more than our fair share. We usually keep our veranda well-lit at night.

   The electrical absenteeism means our "butter" (Summer County Marge) is liquid. Also, the waterworks require electricity to pump water and operate its water purification equipment (usually pretty efficiently). So we have no water either. The wells are low – I haven't seen rain since November, except in Côte d'Ivoire – and the water is muddy and contaminated with god only knows what.

   We have to boil it for 10 minutes and the sediment then clogs our filter badly – so I am using filter funnels and papers seconded from the Chemistry labs. All the same, it took me 2½ hours to filter a

day's supply of drinking water: 1½ gallons. Because we can't get cold drinks, we tend to drink a lot of tea, which at least quenches one's thirst. I don't fancy lukewarm Coke or Vimto, but I guess those companies are doing well all the same.

Closed windows also keep mosquitoes out, although we can buy mosquito coils, which are supposed to keep insects at bay. I'm not so sure. They smoulder like joss sticks and give off an awful smell. But do they actually help? John, who is a pipe smoker, reckons that pipe smoke is just as good and, according to him, doesn't smell so bad. I am not convinced that he is right on either count!

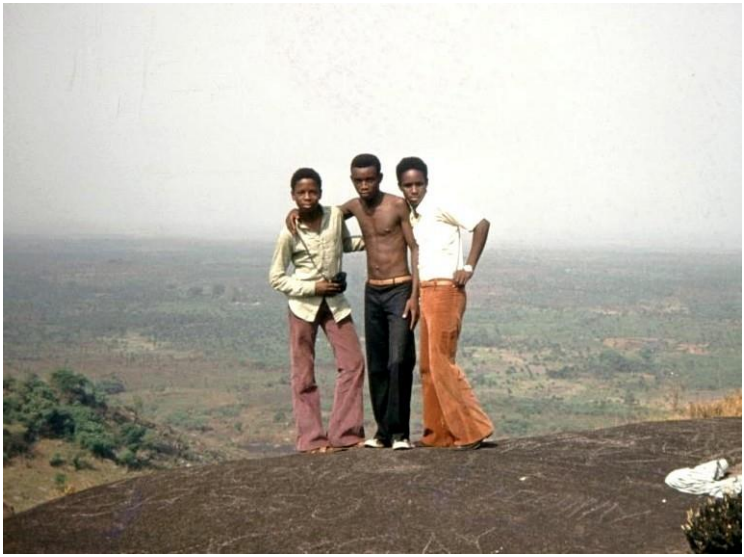
Fruit is pretty well non-existent – I paid a cent each for small limes, when only a week ago you could get a big grapefruit for that price. Oranges are just about over – they are actually now vaguely orange in colour, rather than the usual yellow/green. We had a glut of pineapples and pawpaws not so long ago, but now they are only faint memories.

The temperature tops the 100° F level every day now – and it is even hotter in the labs. The sun is very high in the sky at noon these days – virtually directly overhead. In about 6 weeks we will be "south" of the sun. That is, it still rises in the east and sets in the west of course, but it passes to the north of us. I am even more grateful that my mop of long hair protects my head from the worst of the sun. John went native a long time ago and visits a local barber for a skinhead cut.

The St Augustine staff roll is on the increase, at least as far as volunteers are concerned. Roberto, an Italian, has joined the three VSOs, Bob, Trevear and Ian, together with CUSO Marcel. Just exactly what Roberto's job involves is not quite clear to me. His English is not particularly good, but Trevear has taken it upon himself to give him a crash course, using methods which are rather unorthodox.

I went to Magburaka again this afternoon. I am beginning to know the road very well, every pothole and corrugation, although it has been improved a little since the Makeni by-pass was opened. I spent a long time at the lorry park trying to find a taxi/podapoda – usually they are two-a-penny between Makeni and Magburaka.

Mena Hill in the dry season with Mohammed and Saidu



Dry season haze: Bailor, Saidu and Mohammed on Mena Hill

Unfortunately when I at last found a taxi, the driver was nearly out of petrol. So first of all we had to find a petrol station. Makeni has about 10 in all, so that shouldn't have been a problem. However, most petrol stations only have electric pumps. You see the problem. Interestingly enough, in this land of blackouts, very few petrol stations have hand pumps. And on top of that, because the driver was short on cash, he wanted to be paid for the journey in advance – which is decidedly not the done thing. We capitulated – had to. With all five passengers paying up front we were finally ready to go. And we made it to Magburaka. We later found out that there was a general shortage of petrol in Sierra Leone – and indeed even in the less-uncivilised world (the 1973 oil crisis).

Unfortunately the return journey was not much easier. One of the Peace Corps, who has occasionally ferried me out to Judith's (when she wasn't expecting me) on his motorbike, had business in Makeni in the evening and brought me back. Dangerous though taxi/podapoda journeys are in this country, I think I'll find an excuse, the next time he offers – and take "public transport". As soon as dusk falls, driving becomes a nightmare.

The student teacher is now coming to the end of his teaching practice and his limitations are beginning to show. I think I will have some catching up to do although I had given extra (explanatory) lessons after school, so that the boys wouldn't lose the thread completely. There are one or two areas of Maths where, I too, have to catch up – the books are all full of "New Mathematics" which, whilst being fun and interesting in itself, does not really provide the basics for Physics.

Our dog ("Archimedes" according to me, "Plato" according to John) made only a brief appearance and is at present undergoing treatment for distemper. Perhaps when (and if) he ever returns, he will be more successful in discouraging the tifs. We'll have to see.

Letter 23 "Teachers, How to Catch a Tif, Kanu in London" Thursday 8 March 1973 Makeni

Unfortunately, the boil I referred to in my previous letter has been causing me a lot of problems. Being on the index finger of my right hand it has severely affected my hand writing, which, at the

best of times is rather poor and has now deteriorated to such an extent that it is hardly legible – even for me. What does one do under such circumstances? One goes round to see Sue. The VSO nurse had a look at it, "ummed" and "aahed", and in the end she put some sort of ointment on it. To cut a long story short, and it is no reflection on her ointment or on her nursing abilities, it turned really nasty. So two days later she took me to her leprosy clinic (she has a Beetle at her disposal!) and gave me a shot of penicillin (in the behind! – one mustn't be too coy about these matters!) – and also some antibiotic capsules.

It is still sore and weeping like mad, but it does appear to be improving at last. Cheers to Alexander Fleming! I have to bathe it in warm salt water and Dettol three times a day. Teaching has been bad, since I am supposed to use my right hand as little as possible. It is a case of cutting down on the "chalk" and increasing the "talk". Actually, when I write on the board, my writing with my left hand is as good as with my right – well nearly.

I had a good day today – I was scheduled for 4 lessons and ended up with 7 non-stop. In fact I went on teaching for an additional ½ hour at the end of the day – although that was extra-curricular technology – on how to make cartoon films. About half a dozen really interested pupils took part.

I am getting even more cynical about the local teachers. Most of them have chips on their shoulders and are, at times, real bullies. I am rarely in the staff room – I can't stand the bickering and the noise. John has been boycotting the staff room since Christmas. No wonder that at the last staff meeting, Mr Kanu pointed me out as an example to the other teachers, in that even when I wasn't teaching, I was always "pottering around the labs". Quaint language. I wouldn't dare say that – it sounds racist. But coming from him…

Actually I had found old distilling apparatus and am busy producing pineapple moonshine for my fellow VSOs. No, I mustn't fib, but the thought had crossed my mind more than once…

On Friday morning we realised we were running out of bread, and being Friday Abu was not around. Accusations of tifing have been withdrawn due to lack of evidence – and the need for a reliable steward – he has been reinstated. We asked the boys Mohammed and Saidu, who are always eager to help, to pop over to the market to buy some bread and a couple of other things. 10

Meet the neighbours: aggressive urchins and primary schoolkids

minutes later, Saidu, quite out of breath, suddenly burst in to say that Mohammed had seen a man wearing his (stolen) shirt – but hadn't approached him. John went to the market to meet Mohammed, while I cycled to the police station – with Saidu on the crossbar. That caused quite a stir amongst the locals!

Two policemen (they spend most of the day in the police station rather than "on the beat") then headed towards the market with us (needless to say, the police do not have access to a car – or even a bike). Despite all the confusion and delay they actually managed to apprehend the tif! At first, the tif did not want to take the police to his house, but when the police threatened to hand him over to the 250 strong crowd (which always form, when something "exciting" happens) he changed his mind, demanding police protection. It is somewhat surprising, that, although many are not averse to minor pilfering, they are very much against a tif who is caught. Lynchings have been known. We made our statements – and then went home to a celebratory breakfast – with fresh bread.

The tracking down of the real tif exonerated Abu further and helped restore our faith in him!

Well, we now have water again, at least some of the time – and electricity too, though again not 24 hours a day. So at least the showering/refrigerating/lighting problem is no longer so acute.

The continuing drought means that the air is full of dust and it is very hazy most of the time. Although there are no clouds as such, the sun is just an indistinct bright area of the sky. Looking out in the evening, the hills in the distance are just a darker shade of grey. It is 9:45 p.m. and still hot (90° F) and John has just suggested I join him for a beer on the veranda and listen to "Just a Minute" on the radio. He always has good ideas. I guess I am a change from the police who are his usual drinking pals. Half an hour later: Oh well that was a pleasant interlude: Derek Nimmo, Clement Freud, and Sheila Hancock. As John Cleese would put it: "another half hour of mild undergraduate humour".

I have come to regard my mud-brick house in Upper Mathanko Street as my home in a weird sort of way. It is not my castle however, because anyone who so wishes, can enter it virtually *ad libitum.* Which reminds me: Alexander Howden (Insurers) have written to inform me that "the sum of £12.14 has been paid into the given account in full settlement of your recent claim". Kind of them.

My passport is now nearly full so it has got to go to the British High Commission in Freetown to have extra pages sewn in, especially if I cross the Sahara on the way home.

We hadn't seen Mr Kanu for a week or so and were wondering what had happened to him. He lives very close to us and we see him (or at least his car) most days. Apparently he had been in London to visit his brother who was having problems with his wife. What the problems were he didn't divulge.

Anyway, he had found time to visit Foyles and had stocked up with books. Some time ago he had asked us what books we would recommend, especially for the A-level students. He wasn't very pleased with the weather in England, expressing surprise that we British actually like the weather. I replied that we didn't actually like it, but it always gives us something to talk about. It was rather a case of peaceful co-existence. He still reckoned I was crazy. When I pointed out some of the disadvantages of Sierra Leone – snakes, mosquitoes, storms, lack of electricity, he admitted I had a point.

I am beginning to like, and admire, Mr Kanu – we have a similar sense of humour. He once told me that I had the same humour as my predecessor. On the question of weather, many people still really believe that the streets of London are paved with gold. Our response is to take an ice-cube out of the fridge (assuming we have electricity) and explain that, in winter at least, the streets are covered with that rather than gold.

Now that he is back, we have electricity again, and that is by no means coincidental. There are three electricity generators in Makeni and two had been out of operation (i.e. requiring maintenance, probably minor) for some time. This put such a strain on the third power unit that it too had given up the ghost. It is a well-known fact, that if two generators are down, then a third breakdown exacerbates rather than alleviates the situation. Kanu is a very influential man around here and he quickly set things in motion and, hey presto, we at least our side of town has power. We even have street lighting (of sorts), whist other parts of the town have no current whatsoever.

I have just been informed by Mike Ryan (VSO head office in London) that the British Council Representative in Nairobi (sic) reckons I am doing pretty well, etc. etc. I have heard from others, that he is not always sure about who is doing what and where, but I

assumed he knew that I am Sierra Leone and thus under the auspices of the Freetown British Council Office. It is true, that I haven't seen or heard from Adrian Thomas, the rather self-opinionated British Council Officer, for some time. But I hadn't heard either, that he had left this West African backwater for an important job in East Africa.

Saidu came in a half-hour ago, saying he had lost the key to the padlock which helps to secure our fragile front door. I told him not to come back until he had found it. And here he is – with it. God only knows how he managed because it is dark outside. Anyway: Cause for a celebratory Coke. I think he would have preferred palm wine.

Letter 23a "Lethargy, Sue's Nursing Skills"

Friday 16 March 1973 Makeni (the letter which apparently was temporarily lost by parents)

A General Election has been called for Sierra Leone on 29th March – that's less than two weeks away. I can't see the government arranging things so quickly – it doesn't give them enough time to intimidate the people. Watch for fireworks all the same!

It is still hot and dry – we've been without rain for over four months. The monotony of the climate leaves a lot to be desired! They say that too much of anything is bad for one – especially if there isn't the slightest hint of a break to relieve it. It makes even normally highly energetic guys like self feel like curling up and sleeping 24 hours a day. When roused, I can still summon up enough energy to overcome my lethargy, but given the alternatives of doing something or sleeping, I normally plump for the latter. Don't worry, I am fit and well, not ill.

My teaching hasn't gone too well this week, mainly due to the side effects of my finger: It gets in the way, I can't (or couldn't) write properly and to be honest it was a bit of a worry. Things don't seem to heal so well or so quickly in this climate. If I let the air get to it, I am worried that I let dust, germs - and even flies – get to it too. The skin which had become taut burst last Saturday. It looked ghastly, but Sue, who had hurriedly been sent for and came forthwith, said "good" which cheered me up no end. The wound is now clean (and dressed) and the tendons which were pushed aside

by the boil seem to be gradually returning to their correct positions and the hole is beginning to fill.

I have quite a bit of freedom of movement and I can actually hold a pen, a piece of chalk in it now. I am a little apprehensive though because I am unable to straighten it completely. The latest report by the two nurses (Sue and Helena), who have been good all the way along, say it will improve further, but I may have a nasty scar for some time. To crown it all, I cut my thumb on a glass on Monday evening. It bled profusely because there were tiny splinters of glass in the wound. Thanks again to Sue for removing them.

Letter 24 "First Rain, Cause of Water Cuts, Lorry Drivers"

Friday 23 March 1973 Makeni

The third day of spring (in Europe) and here in Makeni we actually had the first rain of the season, two days ago! Halleluja! The last time I experienced rain was on January 1st in Monrovia (Liberia). It wasn't much, about 10 minutes of heavy drizzle but it sure is a sign that "the times (well seasons) they are a-changing!" Last night it poured for 20 minutes or so – well it kept on for some time. Beautiful sound. It was enough to wash the dust off the roof, anyway.

My right hand is nearly back to normal, and they say the scar will gradually fade – I won't lose my good looks permanently. I don't know what I would have done if I had been really out in the bush. I enjoyed being pampered by the nurses (who wouldn't?). Looking back, I couldn't have been in better hands. They spent no end of time lancing it, soaking it in special concoctions and dressing it. You can't be too careful here. Most of the finger is still a different colour but that should tone down. I can't straighten it completely yet, or bend it as much as I could. I am playing my guitar a fair amount which is very good exercise – a perfect therapy. It attracts the locals, but I don't know that they will ever come to fully appreciate Dylan, Cohen and Fairport Convention. Anyway, John and I had the nurses round last night for a "thanksgiving" candle-light dinner. Not that we had any romantic aspirations – the electricity was off again!

We have now discovered the reason for our lack of electricity. It transpires that the chief engineer was killed in a road accident some moons ago and so when things went wrong with the generator, due to lack of maintenance, no one had the foggiest idea of how to fix it. As far as the earlier problems with the water supply are concerned, when something in the pump broke down, they had to order spare parts from England… The people here just have no foresight. They just go on and on doing nothing until the catastrophe strikes. Maybe we are over cautious – I don't know what is better. Or maybe they are just like us! "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die". I think that is a universal Judo-Christian-Moslem sentiment.

As far as the roads are concerned, things are pretty scary. The locals have a tendency to show off, drive carelessly and far too fast around town and should they get caught, a small bribe settles things. The death toll is frightening: about 4 deaths a day in a country of 2½ million and only about 20,000 road vehicles. The lorry/podapoda drivers are the worst, often racing each other overland, egged on by cheering passengers. Most of the drivers know each other of course: the same lorries ply the same route day after day and I suppose it is a case of familiarity breeding contempt.

The drivers are also careless (or ignorant) in other respects. On one occasion, a lorry I was in was low on fuel, and the driver had to beg fuel from a fellow driver. They syphoned diesel out of one tank into bucket, and when I realised that the driver was going to pour the diesel into the tank of my lorry, I scrambled to get out (at the risk of losing my seat). He had a cigarette (lit) dangling from the corner of his mouth…

It will soon be Easter, and I would like to go exploring – get away from the Makeni and see a bit more of the country. Tim and Barbara have invited me over to Kailahun – they have stayed with us twice (the second time was at the beginning of January, when we were visited by tifs). It is about 200 miles each way, via Bo and Kenema.

As an alternative, a group of us have been considering climbing Bintumani at over 6000ft, the highest peak in Sierra Leone. Situated in the Loma Mountains close to the Guinean border, it is apparently not too difficult to climb, but one should reckon on 3-4 days. It is very remote and just getting to the base is in itself quite an

adventure. There is only one village within striking distance, so there is also the question of transport from "civilisation" to be looked at. They say the road is too bad for podapoda – there aren't enough passengers to fill one anyway. So you have to take a motorbike-taxi from Kenema. Apparently it is possible to hire local guides and this is highly recommended. And permission must be obtained from the village chief – which is also time-consuming. Don't forget a "dash".

Right now, I have another trip planned! It is Friday morning and as always I have few lessons on Fridays – the rest of the week is overcrowded. I'm off to Judith's (in Magburaka) this evening. She has been invited over to the Baptist Mission in Bumbuna and thought I might like to come with her for company (and protection on the way) – Bumbuna is renowned for its spectacular waterfall on the Rokel River.

Letter 25 "A Weekend in Bumbuna"
Friday 30 March 1973 Makeni

The General Election planned for yesterday, as expected, did not happen. Something about ballot box security, although in Sierra Leone few people worry about the niceties of ballot boxes.

I have got a busy morning ahead of me. Post this aerogram at the post office (for the Friday lorry to Freetown – the next one isn't until Monday), get to the bank and do some shopping, all before 12 noon. Interruption to have a look at an aircraft: they are pretty rare around here. Sierra Leone Airways (a subsidiary of British Caledonian) fly to Sefadu/Koidu daily, because of the diamond mines there, but the planes usually fly well to the south of Makeni. There is an airport (well a flat piece of land where aircraft occasionally landed in the days of the Raj) 12 miles from here on the road to Magburaka.

The weekend was very interesting. I went down to Judith's on Friday evening so we could make an early start on her Honda 50 the following morning. It is about 40 miles from Magburaka to Bumbuna along a gravel track. Due to the high iron oxide content, the gravel – known as laterite – is dark orange in colour. It is very dusty and, especially during the dry season, the dust dissipates 20 ft

The Tonkolili Bridge on the road to Bumbuna

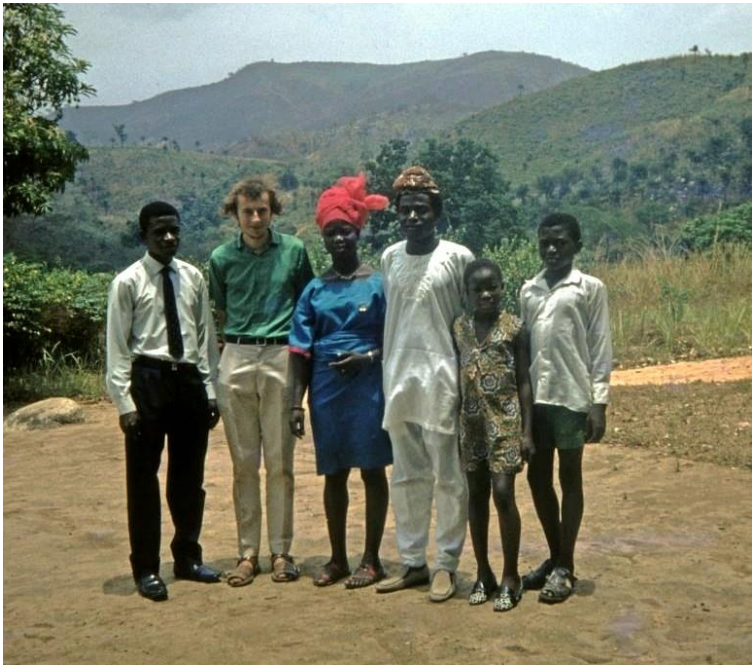
or more into the "hedgerows", the leaves of the plants tend, as a result, to be dark red rather than green.

The "road" follows a deep valley right up into the hills. The main attraction in Bumbuna is its waterfall, which at this time of year (end of dry season) is pretty. In the wet season, so I have heard, it is just brute force – the beauty gone. The other attraction is the Mission. Judith knows the Baptist Missionary well. Actually he is Nigerian and a real "character". Saturday afternoon we went up into the hills around Bumbuna – the road is atrocious with 1in3 gradients in many places, rocks jutting out of the dirt (not even laterite) surface here and there, with sheer cliffs everywhere. In one area the heat was incredible. Much of the undergrowth had been burnt back and there are blackened stumps sticking out of the ashes. I don't

think I have ever been in such a desolate, lifeless place. There weren't even any flies. And the sun! Such a contrast from the nearby pleasant wooded valleys with streams and shade.

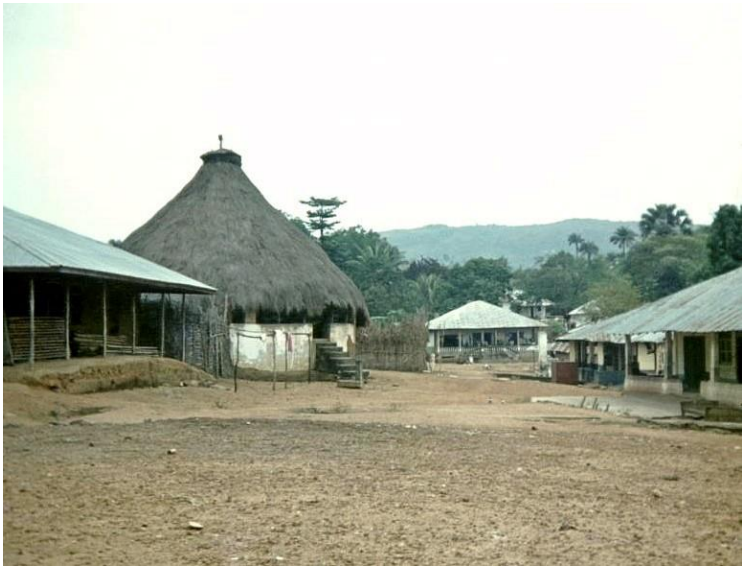
We then went on to a former iron ore mining area – and got into conversation with several old locals who spoke reasonable English. They looked back to the "good old days" before the mines closed in 1961 (the year the British left). They dream of reopening the mines – "tomorrow" – i.e. at some unspecified date in the future. There are vague plans to dam the river. A hydroelectric power station would apparently supply enough electricity for the whole of Sierra Leone plus large areas of the two neighbouring countries – Liberia and Guinea-Conakry.

We spent the night in the "rectory", the missionary, assuming we were a pair putting us together in the only guest bedroom. Hasha! We were mildly amused. After attending the

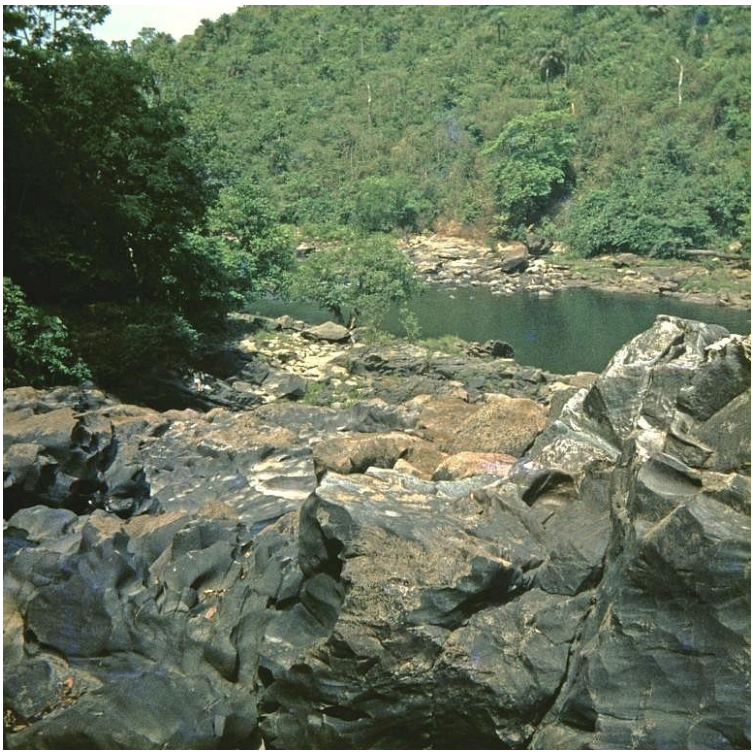


Bumbuna's (Nigerian) mission family

Bumbuna Post Office



Bumbuna's traditional circular meeting house



Bumbuna Falls as seen from the top (note: dry season)

Sunday Service in Bumbuna Baptist Church (similar to the AWM services in Makeni) we left for Magburaka getting back before dark.

We had a minor accident on the way, coming off the Honda 50 and landing in a ditch. My toe got caught between the rear mudguard and tyre – it took nearly 10 minutes to get out of our awkward position, but there was nobody about and no traffic came past. So it was neither dangerous nor embarrassing. Apart from slight grazes and my bruised toe, we were not injured. It has left me with a slight limp, though.

The problem with the laterite roads is that they corrugate crosswise with time/use. If you go to slowly then you are really shaken about. Go too fast and you nearly take off. The trick is to go

at a speed which resonates with the springs of your vehicle. Once you hit the right speed, it feels fairly smooth. The only problem is that travelling at that speed tends to make the corrugations worse. When starting you have to accelerate through speeds which are uncomfortable before you attain the optimal speed. The roads are supposed to be scraped (or graded) at regular intervals, but this doesn't seem to happen. The Krio word for the corrugations is "tepgollup": "step-gallop" in English. Rather quaint, notoso (don't you think)?

Hazy Bumbuna: Judith and her famous Honda 50

On a completely different note, we (John and I) should have been in court on Monday for the trial of our tif, but it has been postponed for a month. We don't know why. At this rate they will have to bring me back from the UK to give evidence!

Letter 26 "Health, Sahara Plans, Hitch-Hike to Lunsar"
Tuesday 3 April 1973 Makeni

The index finger on my right hand is now practically healed and although there is a nasty scar I am not really hampered by it. As far as the incident with the glass is concerned, it broke in my left hand which I was using more than usual. It has also healed well – no permanent damage. At present I am having a bit of a problem with my right big toe, having lost some skin when we came off Judith's Honda. But that is only a minor inconvenience. Remember, I have two able nurses to look after me. Generally speaking, I am very well – I am not getting as much exercise as I am used to in England, but that is to be expected.

If I didn't have other plans, I might be tempted to accept the principal's offer to stay on for a second year. It's a good life, I am respected and treated well – I have a steward doing all the work – and the people wave happily to me wherever I go. The Indian supply teacher at last seems to accept me, and so by avoiding each other as much as possible, even that problem seems to be resolved. The British Council Representative, Adrian, has at last replaced my bike (a chrome plated affair, Chinese rather than the black Raleigh which was stolen so many months ago) so I don't have to walk everywhere any more. He was also trying to entice me to stay.

I now doubt very much if I will be able to cross the Sahara. Firstly Bob, whose idea it originally was, is suffering from anaemia and the cause is not clear. Secondly there is the time factor. When we started to look into transport and plan the route, we realised we had to reckon on up to 5 weeks for the journey! If we leave Freetown at the earliest possible date (there is only one flight a week to Bamako) I would only make it to Zurich in mid-August, and I wouldn't get to England before late August, early September. That doesn't leave much time to get things organised before term starts. So it now seems unlikely, although I am sorely tempted to take the chance. Initial interest from other volunteers to travel with us also seems to have waned.

I actually managed to hitch the 40 miles down to Lunsar on Saturday. Hitching is difficult and not popular, but it is the cheapest (and if you are lucky, fastest) way to get around. There is very little

traffic, but any white person (and there are a disproportionate number of white car drivers) would take you without thinking twice. VSOs are so well liked that even the few blacks who own (or drive) cars are happy to pick you up. I don't think that the locals (blacks) are likely to be so lucky, should they try to hitch.

As it was, a police car took me down (just as well, because there check points set up by local militia groups due to the impending election) and a Delco (British Mining Company) Engineer brought me back. When I got back Mohammed and Saidu couldn't believe that I had got that far, without paying a cent.

Letter 27 "More about Lunsar, Exams, Extra Lessons"
Friday 13 April 1973 Makeni

Life has been pretty routine these last few weeks, almost monotonous. Lunsar was certainly an exception and so I will elucidate!

I went to Lunsar for the weekend because I wanted to look over the iron-ore (hematite) mine in nearby Marampa. The mining company, Delco, is British owned. There are some 100 European families living in the compound there. Most of them are highly paid engineers and other specialists, and as far as possible they avoid unnecessary contact with the Sierra Leoneans, most of whom are Temnes. The VSO I stayed with hasn't a very good opinion of our countrymen. He is teaching the children of the African employees, since they have no access to the company school. Due to the mining activities, it really is a dirty place – even the European Compound. The mine itself is a scar on the landscape.

Ore is transported by narrow-gauge (3ft 6in) railway to the harbour at Pepel, where it is loaded onto ships for export. This is the only railway left in Sierra Leone these days; the other lines (including a branch to Magburaka and Makeni) have been phased out in the last few years. These were very narrow gauge (2ft 6in), not much wider than the Welsh slate railways, and apparently very slow and unreliable, even when in operation.

I had heard it was possible to ride the rails down to Pepel. Although basically a freight railway, passengers were occasionally taken (probably on the footplate). After making fruitless enquiries

amongst the British staff, I realised the best bet was to cut out the red tape and go to the station in the hope of "dashing" a local employee. No joy, I'm afraid.

I'm in the middle of marking exams at the moment. I have done 140 of the 220 manuscripts handed in. The third form marks were interesting. Just a few of the class actually passed the exam, but there were exceptions. The top boy got 98% and I wondered whether to give him 100% – just one avoidable slip prevented it. There are a few pupils who are really very good. One or two, like the abovementioned boy, Thomas Koroma, and the Nigerian boy in the second form, Razaq Adé – one of the boys I am paying school fees for – would, if they were in England at a British school, be of genius level – or nearly so. All the other boys vary between "not very good" and "poor". What chance do they have? It is almost depressing.

"Koroma" is a typical Temne name, along with "Komara", "Kamara", and "Kanu" (like our beloved principal). All very confusing. Actually most of the names are probably the same and the variety comes from mis-spellings. Many boys adopt English forenames. Since birth certificates are not issued in the provinces, people can change their names at will. Dates of birth are also seldom known, the season (or perhaps month) and maybe the year (± 2).

Razaq Adé ("Adé" is like the Scottish "Mac" or Irish "O'" meaning "son of". I think the name of his father got forgotten some way along the line) together with another 2nd year boy, Baylor Barrie, (he also calls himself "Jim Brown" – but I am not even certain that Barrie is the name he was born with) are regular evening visitors at 12 Upper Mathanko Street. They will talk and listen for hours about anything and everything, ask questions and soak up any knowledge which I (or John) are willing to impart. Razaq has a grapefruit tree next to his house, and often brings fresh juicy grapefruits as "payment" for the extra tuition and although I assure him that it is unnecessary, I am not sorry: they are delicious.

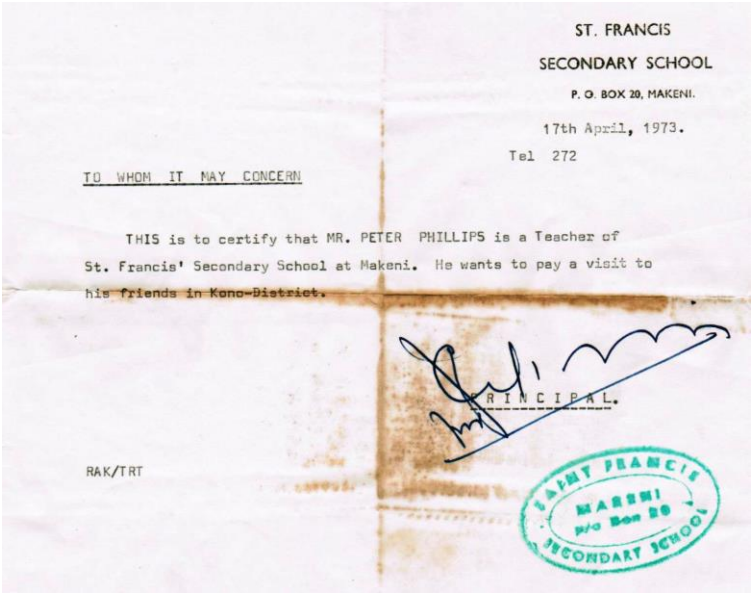
John also joins in at times, although I am not sure the boys are really interested in the seven wives of Henry VIIIth. On one occasion Mohammed asked facetiously whether King Henry was a Moslem, with so many wives, and whether that was the reason why he formed his own church. Saidu listens in sometimes, but he is clearly out of his depth.

Whilst Saidu's family is virtually illiterate, Mohammed's is not. Mohammed even writes to his father occasionally – in Fula – using Arabic script. He also has a Christian "uncle" – when writing to him he also writes in Fula, using Latin script.

The fourth form should have finished their exam for me so I'll wander over to collect their papers. More work!

As I think I have mentioned before, I hate Fridays. The steward, being Moslem, has Fridays off, so the place gets more and more untidy. Heat breeds lethargy (and mosquitoes) and with corrected papers to be sorted out – and others to be marked – the house is becoming disordered.

Letter 28 "Easter in Kailahun, Political Turmoil"
Tuesday 24 April 1973 Makeni



ST. FRANCIS
SECONDARY SCHOOL
P. O. BOX 20, MAKENI.

17th April, 1973.
Tel 272

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

THIS is to certify that MR. PETER PHILLIPS is a Teacher of St. Francis' Secondary School at Makeni. He wants to pay a visit to his friends in Kono-District.

PRINCIPAL.

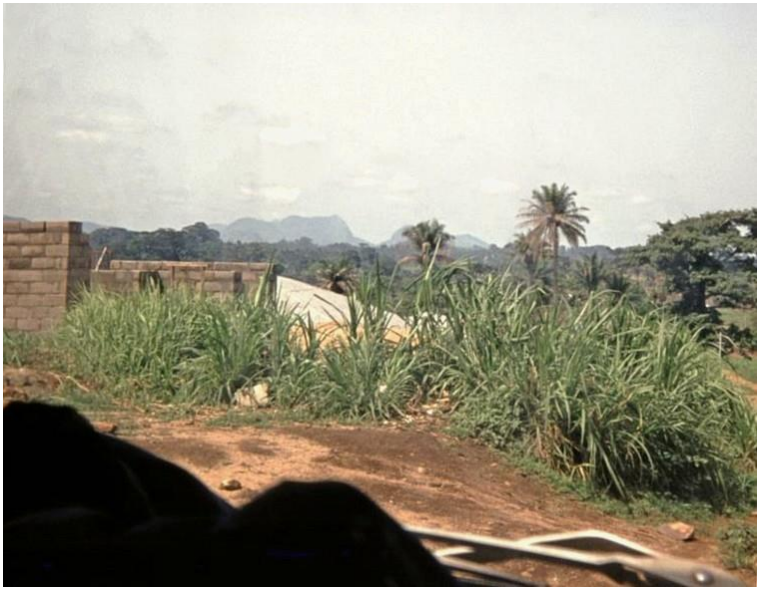
RAK/TRT

ST FRANCIS MAKENI P/O Box 20 SECONDARY SCHOOL

Not leaving anything to chance: *Carnet de Passage*

Exams are now over and I have just got back from spending Easter over in Kailahun which is in the far east of the country, close

to the borders with Guinea-Conakry and Liberia. I had been invited to stay with a VSOs couple, Tim and Barbara, who were tifed, losing passports and anti-baby pills (amongst other things) when they stayed with us in Makeni at the beginning of January. It is Tim's second year in Kailahun, and Barbara's first. Previously she had spent a year in Algeria – they got married last summer and she transferred to Sierra Leone.



Kailahun Hills from a distance

I travelled down to Bo with Judith who was on her way down to spend Easter with friends at the Mission Hospital in Segbwema – supposed to be the best hospital in Sierra Leone after the Connaught Government Hospital in Freetown. I had pulled a back muscle playing squash (!) a week or so earlier and the atrocious road conditions between Magburaka and Bo made the lorry journey a painful experience. At one point there was a sudden shriek from the passengers in the lorry cab and turning round I caught sight of a huge black cobra receding into the distance, reared up ready to strike. The lorry was too fast! The snake had obviously not been injured.

Due to my back, I decided to break my journey in Bo and spend the night with some VSOs there. The following morning I had recovered sufficiently to tackle the 60 miles to Kenema by taxi (50p) from where I found a podapoda to take me on to Kailahun (about 65 miles, again 50p). I got there late on Maundy Thursday afternoon (April 19th) none the worse for wear, my backache having more or less gone.

Tim and Barbara live on the Methodist Mission complex, in a real house. It really seemed like a home, no doubt because they are married. The Methodist minister, Richard, had married them while on leave in GB. I went to the service on Thursday evening where they celebrated Communion in true Methodist style, using defizzed Vimto (a soft drink made from blackcurrant juice) instead of wine. When I realised they were all going to drink from the same chalice (wiping the rim with paper hanky in between) I made sure I was second (after Richard) to partake. I was shocked that he then took a

Easter parade: Richard, Br. Felim and Anglican Priest

second sip at the end. Was this some sort of test of courage? I don't know.

On Friday morning there was a "procession of witness" around the town. It was an ecumenical (Catholic/Methodist) event. Rev. Richard prayed for the Pope and Brother Felim prayed for the (Methodist) Chairman of the District – and even for the Chairman of Conference (Methodist Conference in UK). Actually, relations between the denominations are extremely cordial and Felim is Tim's bridge partner. The Anglican minister was also around but stayed aloof most of the time. About 250 adults (and lots of children) took part in the gathering – not bad for a town with an estimated population of 7,000, and which is considered to be a Moslem stronghold.

Friday (Good Friday) afternoon we went to the Guinean border, a mile or so north of the town. The actual border is the south bank of the river Moa (which is barely a stream at this time of year). So if you paddle, wade or swim, you are actually in Guinea-Conakry. Their President, Sekou-Touré, is a bit of a Commie and anti-Western – but we didn't see any Guineans. A woman, who was having a bath (rather than a bathe) in the stream called out and waved to us, despite being "as God made her". She was not in the least embarrassed. She chatted away with Richard in the local language, Mende, obviously about church business. When we left, the Reverend tried to explain her position in the church by saying: "Look at it like this, in England she would be the very vociferous leader of one of two rival women's groups". We understood.

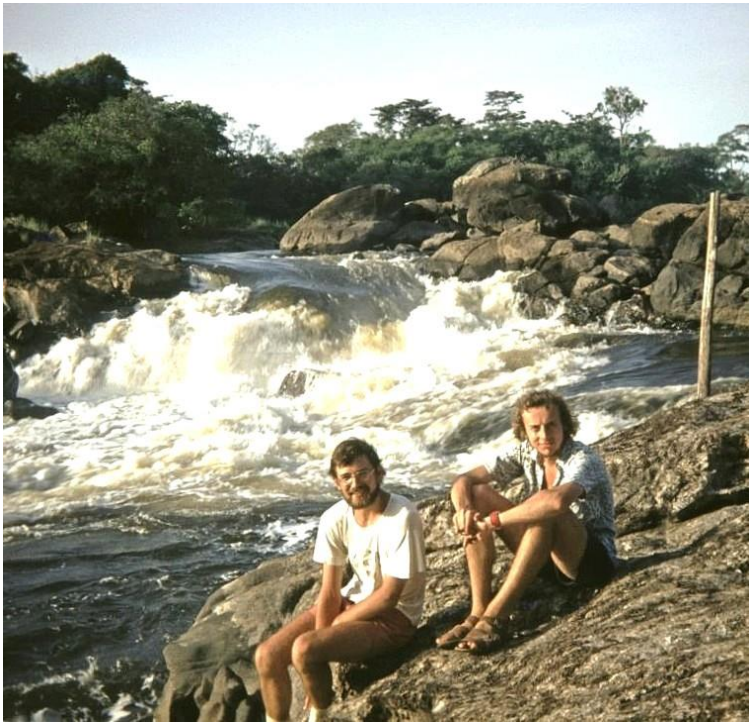
On Saturday we wanted to climb a mountain (well, hill) a few miles from the town. It had rained in the night so visibility was very good. Practically the whole ex-pat community (and Judith, who had come on from Segbwema) decided to come with us and so 9 "pumwees" (as the Mende people call Whites) set off on 5 motorbikes for the village at its base. This caused quite a stir! After a long chat and the obligatory cups of palm wine with the village chief, permission was refused on the grounds that due to the pending General Election, the country was in a state of emergency and 9 pumwees on top of a mountain constituted an illegal gathering etc.etc.

So we went on a 60 mile tour through the hills instead. In the afternoon we visited a waterfall, again on the Guinean border. This

Tim, Richard and Judith take a welcome break on the tour

Tim and the Honda 125

was traditionally a place of human sacrifice to appease the water gods. We were shocked to learn that the last human sacrifice (a young girl, of course) took place in 1943! We thought that this was an unduly barbaric superstition, until someone reminded us of the barbaric killings going on in Europe at the time, and for no purpose – not even superstition.



Tim and self at the "Virgin Falls"

Sunday morning (Easter Sunday) I went up to Koindu with Brother Felim who was reading Mass there. We also got to the tri-national Sunday market and I bought some interesting stuff, including a traditional Mali (desert) blanket. Being woven from goat hair, it is extremely scratchy. I got on very well with Felim and enjoyed talking to him. In the afternoon I went to prison with Richard – he also takes services there on Sunday afternoons. He speaks mostly English, and a teacher from the mission school

translates (“turns” as it is referred to) for him. But he also knows a fair amount of Mende.

After that he went on to take a service in the local hospital. At least I was able to help out with the singing! All the tribal languages are written phonetically, so with a little practice it is possible to speak any language you want, even if you haven’t a clue what you are saying. In the evening Richard had to take a service in a village church, not far from the Guinea-Conakry border. It was a unique experience to be celebrating Holy Communion in a mud church with nobody able to speak English, and me knowing no word in Mende – except “pumwee”.

Judith and I left Kailahun at 6:15 a.m. on (Easter) Monday morning, only to hear about fighting going on in Bo between the supporters of rival political parties. Later we heard there was trouble

Koindu’s tri-national market: cloth stall

Spice stall in the market

in Kenema too. News travels fast via the "bush telephone"! Information about anything important is passed on by the lorry, taxi and podapoda drivers. They signal to oncoming traffic, whereupon both vehicles stop (blocking the road) and there then ensue lengthy discussions (or even arguments). Of course we didn't understand a thing, but a young policeman in the podapoda was happy to practice his English and translated for us.

So it was with some trepidation that we arrived in Kenema only to find the situation had quietened down. Bo was also calm by the time we got there. We dropped Judith off in Magburaka but as we were approaching Makeni we were stopped by red-shirted APC supporters who demanded to see our luggage.

The APC ("All Peoples Congress") says it wants to represent all the various tribes/groups, which, just as in "civilised" countries is a load of old cobblers. They are just as sectarian as all the other

groups. I was rudimentarily "frisked" but my rucksack, being red, just got a friendly nod from the road block ringleader. I got the impression that they didn't want any trouble with a "Pisscor". Assuming the election is free and fair, they had nothing to gain from threatening a foreigner. The "palaver" is between various African factions who show no animosity towards whites. But you can never be certain that things are not suddenly going to turn "ugly".

After dark last night things got very noisy, with barricades being set up all over the place. I didn't venture out. John, however, went out with a drinking buddy (a policeman) and when he got back, he was visibly shaken, saying (typical John-understatement) things were not looking too good (quoting John Cleese again "The peasants are revolting!").

Nominations closed today for anyone wishing to stand for election, and there were plenty of "fireworks". Apparently the clashes were caused by various groups attempting to prevent rival candidates from registering. I don't know how successful they were. All the stores and markets in Makeni were closed – in fact they hadn't been open since I left for Kailahun. Things were a lot quieter up there. We are fairly short of food at the moment, but being on the outskirts of the town – between the food producers and the markets, we are the least likely to starve. At least bread and fruit should be available.

I don't know how many men (and they are virtually all men) were prevented from registering. But things have calmed down this evening (Tuesday). Lorry loads of "red-shirts" were seen leaving direction Freetown. By the way, there is no significance to be attached to the colour red. The wearers were neither more nor less Communist in political persuasion than any other group. This country is 90% illiterate and so colours (and symbols) reach more people than the written word.

Now we hope things will be quiet until the fateful day: the general election is set for May 11th. Provided the elections are not postponed again (March 29th was the original date), that is the day of danger to look out for.

Letter 29 "Court Trial, Kabala, a Chimp named 'Charles'"
Saturday 5 May 1973 Makeni

Things have calmed down considerably after the "Easter uprising".

I was in court on Monday (April 30th) morning, the hearing having been postponed from the end of March. The case still didn't come up, despite our having to wait for 5 hours in the sun (in shirts, ties and jackets as required and expected of Europeans). The case was postponed till next Monday. I asked the clerk of the court whether it would not be possible to bring it forward a bit because I was a teacher and didn't like keep missing out on lessons. He was very nice about it and agreed to squeeze it in this morning – first thing (like an obliging dentist).

The court house is over on the other side of town, and the only way to get there is to walk – or cycle. John hasn't got a bike – maybe he can't even ride, because he has never asked to borrow it. In the meantime he has acquired the knack of sitting on the crossbar, usually sucking on his pipe and making adamant comments on the passing scenery, whilst muggins does all the hard work. He is always very nonchalant about things. Actually, the town is virtually flat, so once we get going, it doesn't require that much energy on my part. It always raises smiles of disbelief from the locals: two "omportos" on one bike, the one getting in a sweat, the other lording it up.

The clerk of the court was as good as his word and the law process took its course. We agreed to have the case heard by a magistrate (rather than a judge, which would have delayed matters even further). And by pleading guilty, the tifman would get a lower sentence in return. After that it was a pure formality.

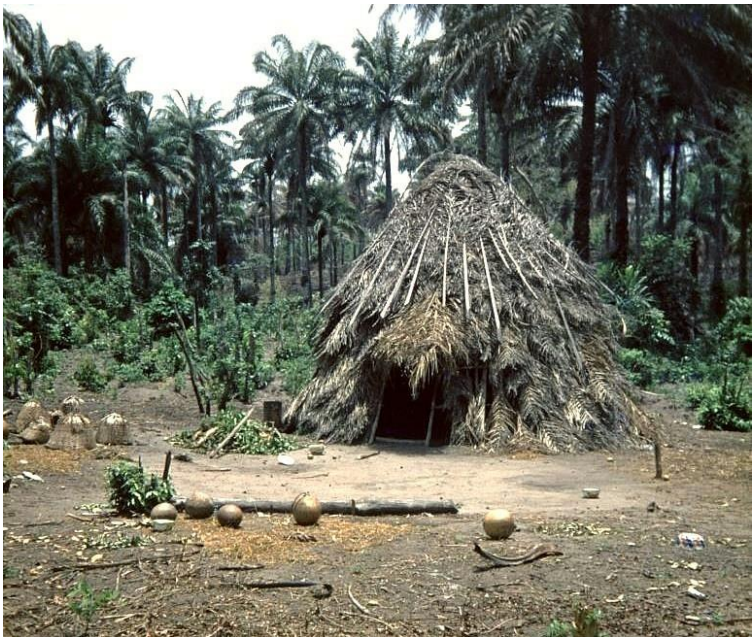
John and the boys were asked to wait outside (they could still see and hear everything that was going on, court being held in a round roofed but wall-less building) whilst I alone had to give testimony. I just repeated the statement I had already given to the police and they checked my nationality, profession and name – which somehow had been recorded as "Mr Petter David Philip" (I've long since given up bothering to correct people and answer to whatever name is aimed in my direction).

The accused, one Mohammed Jabbie, was offered the opportunity to question me – and didn't. I signed my statement. The magistrate asked Jabbie once again, if he pleaded guilty – or not guilty. He said "guilty". After all, the stolen goods had been found in his possession – and that was proof enough. John and the boys took no further part in the proceedings (despite Mohammed saying "I hate this man" and wanting it to go on record). The magistrate deliberated (no doubt for form's sake) for a couple of minutes, before passing sentence: 18 months. One point worthy of note: Before giving evidence, I was given the option of swearing on the Bible or Koran.

To be quite honest, I felt really sorry for the guy. He just didn't have a chance in the case – or in life in general. There was I, in collar, tie, cord jacket, listing the things he had stolen, which to me were of very little value, and there was he, perhaps owning little more than what he stood up in. Now he's in gaol for 18 months, well 12 if he's lucky. My insurance covered me, and I got some of my stuff back anyway, so I wasn't really that much out of pocket. Neither was John nor the boys – they also had their clothes returned. The law was apparently upheld (was he really the tif, or just unlucky to be caught with stolen goods?) but I can hardly think that justice was done.

We weren't interested in the fellow being prosecuted, let alone gaoled. But there was nothing we could do. Prison certainly isn't going to improve him. It was probably not even his first offence. No education, can't read or write, no money to pay for schooling, so the odds were stacked heavily against him. He's got to live somehow, and that's the only way for him – and so many more like him. "There but for fortune…" Had he been rich and famous, he would probably not been up before the beak in the first place.

I spent last weekend in Kabala. It took 9 hours to get there from Makeni – 73 miles! So I was feeling pretty sore by the time I got there (10:30 p.m.). Not only did it rain ("heavy showers"!) twice, but we had to get out several times to help push the lorry back onto the (muddy) road, or up the hills. I stayed at a VSO house for three nights and spent the two days in between walking in the hills and enjoying the cooler air – the town is nearly 1600 ft above sea level and the hills rise to 2500 ft. The VSOs I stayed with had a pet chimpanzee, flippantly named "Charles" after the Prince of Wales. When set down on the floor it ran to the nearest person and hugged



Jungle shelter near Kabala (with gourds for palm wine)

their leg. Given half a chance it climbed up to your hip and put its arms around their neck. I found it quite charming and ridiculously human. Chimps make good pets (it would seem) although they are apparently impossible to housetrain.

The return journey to Makeni went much better. A Lebanese guy, Elias, with a Land Rover, who was headed for Freetown, invited all and sundry to come along with him. He picked up six of us at 5:30 a.m. (!) and we were quite a merry troupe. He was extremely friendly – usually the Lebanese here are unfriendly towards Europeans – he had spent several years in America and spoke perfect English – well American. He owned the pet shop in Freetown(!), which had supplied Charles and he had wanted to check up on him. Now that's what I call "after sales service"!

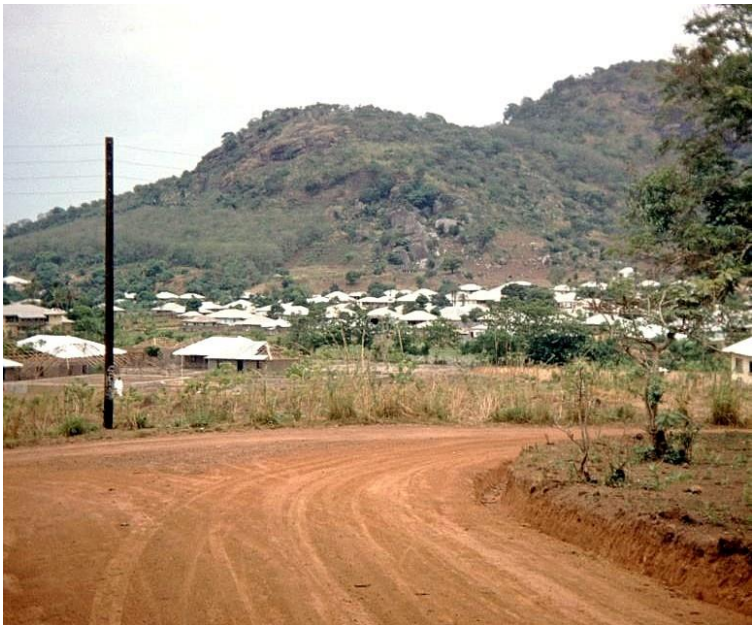
School finally started again on Wednesday – but virtually nobody (pupils or teachers) turned up and even today there were only about 80 (of 590) boys around. School proper will no doubt commence on Monday, should the quorum be reached by then. This

term is just 10 weeks long and with the last two reserved for end of year exams – that only gives 8 weeks to get a whole term's work done. Impossible!

Kabala: Secretary bird in a plantation

I am sitting on my veranda, listening to the crickets chirp, flicking off the occasional insect which has landed on my bare torso. The moon is still young and at 8:15 p.m. the thin crescent (virtually horizontal) is sinking (virtually vertically) towards the western horizon. Seeing the moon every evening, one gets a feel for its phases in relation to the background of stars. Sunrise is about 6:45 a.m., sunset 7:15 p.m. The days are about the same length throughout the year – which is just as well as they are hot enough as it is.

We welcome the cool of the evening. The sun rises and sets almost vertically so there is no long dawn or dusk, maybe 10 minutes. The sun rises in the east of course and goes distinctly to the north of us before setting in the west! There will be an eclipse of the



Kabala: Mountain settlement

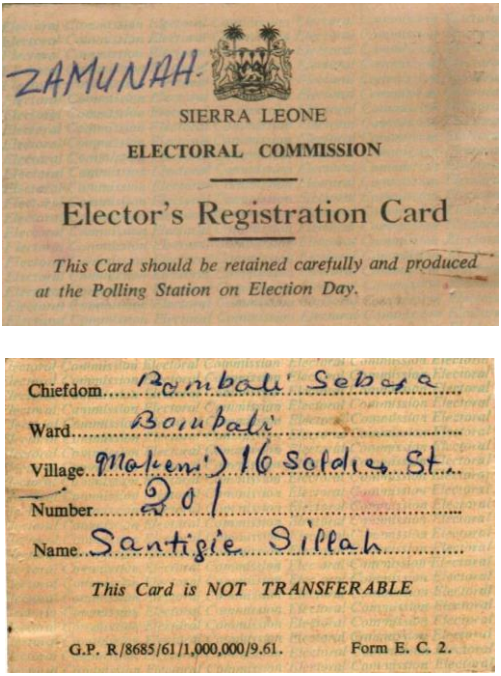
sun on June 30th (not total), but it is something to look forward to – and prepare the boys.

Abu, our steward and cook, has cooked and I am hungry.

Letter 30 "Election Troubles, Mr Kanu's Troubles, School Troubles"

Saturday 12 May 1973 Makeni

I have a feeling that postal services are interrupted at present with few letters getting through, probably due to the General Election (for what it is worth), which took place yesterday. 84 of 85 seats were won by the "All People's Congress" (APC), one by an independent. The main opposition, the "Sierra Leone People's Party" (SLPP) – an offshoot of the APC – boycotted the elections due to intimidation (which we witnessed) and apparent rigging (highly likely). Only 4 constituencies were contested. Each of the 12 districts also has a "Paramount Chief" (a bit like the British "House


ZAMUNAH

SIERRA LEONE

ELECTORAL COMMISSION

Elector's Registration Card

This Card should be retained carefully and produced at the Polling Station on Election Day.

Chiefdom Bombali Sebora

Ward Bombali

Village Makeni) 16 Soldier St.

Number 201

Name Santigie Sillah

This Card is NOT TRANSFERABLE

G.P. R/8685/61/1,000,000/9.61. Form E. C. 2.

Elector's Registration Card – found in the mud
How did he come to lose it?

of Lords" and these also sit in parliament. Democracy as practised here is a farce.

The cricket season has started in England (the noble game is unknown here, where "sport" is synonymous with "football") and John and I regularly listen to the lunchtime, teatime and end of play scores. We even listened to the FA Cup Final: Sunderland beating Leeds, good grief.

School is now back in full swing, although Mr Kanu, who two weeks ago was in a brief exchange of ideals with a few Nasties in connection with the Election (he ended up in hospital), is nowhere to be seen. The skirmish only ended when he backed up his car and took a run at them. He appears to have fled the country, apparently to avoid a court case (for dangerous driving), but more likely to escape a vendetta by the thugs. So the school, which is usually in a laxish state, is worse than ever. It has been the norm for some time

that the indigenous staff does not attend afternoon lessons too often (even when they have to teach). Now boys in the lower classes (1-3 years) tend to wander off at lunch time too.

The vice-principal (Mr Fernandez) is an Indian who, apart from being ultra-inefficient, currying favour with us Whites, just doesn't command the respect of the other teachers. This it would seem is mainly if not entirely a race problem. John, Larry and I, plus one or two others have sworn him our allegiance, but we are in a difficult position, because we are being accused of banding together with other ex-pats against the Africans. Poor old Fernandez now has the additional problem that Ramanandan (aka as Raman) – the 'other' physics teacher, who doesn't like me anyway – seems to be set on a "coup" (a power struggle anyway) within the school, and I am stuck between the two. Fernandez would like to know from me what Raman is playing at, which puts me in an awkward position.

Fernandez, poor fellow, now thinks everybody is against him, except John, Larry, self and Theresa (the African school secretary. So we go round to see him, to try to calm him down with a chat. With the GCEs coming up, it would be good if all the staff would rally round him, at least for the time being. Or as one of the other teachers put it: "St Francis is in danger of losing its reputation."

Apart from that life is fine. We have just discovered a way of having a hot (well, warm) bath – cold showers are OK but don't really clean you). We fill up the outside trough in the morning with cold water and by 6 p.m. it is fairly warm, perfect to relax in. Our plot is surrounded by corrugated iron fencing so we are ensured a degree of privacy. The last real bath I had was on New Year's Day in Monrovia – where I went in fourth.

I am just recovering from a mild stomach upset, nothing much. It cleared up within 2 days of my starting taking anti-diarrhoea tablets. They work wonders but leave you sulphurous burps.

I got a lot of bumph today on trans-Saharan travel, and that has helped me to decide. Basically July-August seem to be the worst time of year to go.

Firstly: water on the Niger is very low, so that instead of gliding down the river on a boat, you bump along badly maintained tracks on the back of badly maintained lorries.

Home delivery Makeni-style: banana lady with baby on her back

Secondly: trade is poor at present and few lorries make the desert crossing. The trade is basically sheep going north (Mali to Algiers) and salt, dates etc. coming south. The chief time for travel is October to March. Travel itself is very cheap: £14 for 1'500 miles of desert including food (cooked by the lorry driver) and accommodation (sleeping bag under the lorry!).

The present drought in the Sahel zone has exacerbated the situation. The state of affairs in Sierra Leone, and in the school would not cause me any qualms about leaving early. I would forfeit part of my back pay.

Letter 31 "Mostly Personal"
Thursday 17 May 1973 Makeni (abridged)

It is interesting that very little news of the political turmoil in Sierra Leone seems to have leaked out into the rest of the world. No doubt there were enough other world events to fill the papers, and radio and TV news bulletins. We self-censored because we didn't know to what degree our mail was being tampered with. Unfortunately Makeni was one of the main trouble centres – it may be the fifth largest town in the country but censuses are not common – and not very reliable either. The greater the apparent population, the more is paid out in subsidises for infrastructure – and the more is expected in taxes. It's a double edged sword!

By simply keeping our heads down and ourselves out of sight we neither saw nor heard much of the troubles. Further information concerning our beloved principal has now leaked out. He was very badly beaten up and spent 10 days in hospital – under armed guard. Whether the guards were there to prevent him from being injured – or escaping – we do not know. He has now fled to the country (apparently to Italy) maybe for good.

Letter 32 "Diet, Wildlife, German Motorcyclist, Stamps and Coins"
Friday 25 May 1973 Makeni

Sierra Leone has only 2 seasons – wet and dry – each about 5 months long. In between there are four or five weeks transition when the season doesn't seem sure as to which of the two it is supposed to be. There are other subtle changes though. As the longest day approaches, the sun is noticeably to the north at mid-day. The length of daylight doesn't change much through the year.

There are changes in fruit availability. We are a bit of short at present – bananas cost ½p each, like pawpaws. We can get tinned fruit at Choithrams (supermarket). We occasionally get tinned rhubarb. Rather sweet but nice for a change. We can also get Wall's ice cream bricks for 40c and Wall's pork chipolatas (8 oz. pack) for the occasional fry-up.

There is a fair amount of wild life around, and sometimes in the house. Chickens (not really wild) tend to wander in and out, and two nights back, while we were sitting on the veranda reading, a ruddy great rat (12in from nose to tail) waddled up the steps into the house, nosed around a bit before being chased out by Saidu and Mohammed. I think they would have skinned and cooked it had they managed to catch it. Here you can't be too squeamish – at least it would have been meat, a source of protein usually absent from the diet of the locals. It was also quite fat, and had it been well cooked, it would no doubt have been OK.

On my way to school I saw a snake which I couldn't identify. Black and green mambas are fairly common. They are both poisonous, an untreated bite by a black mamba is considered fatal within hours. But they are usually wary of humans (we are a bit big to eat) and skit away if they hear (or feel) you coming. Actually they are probably more common than one imagines.

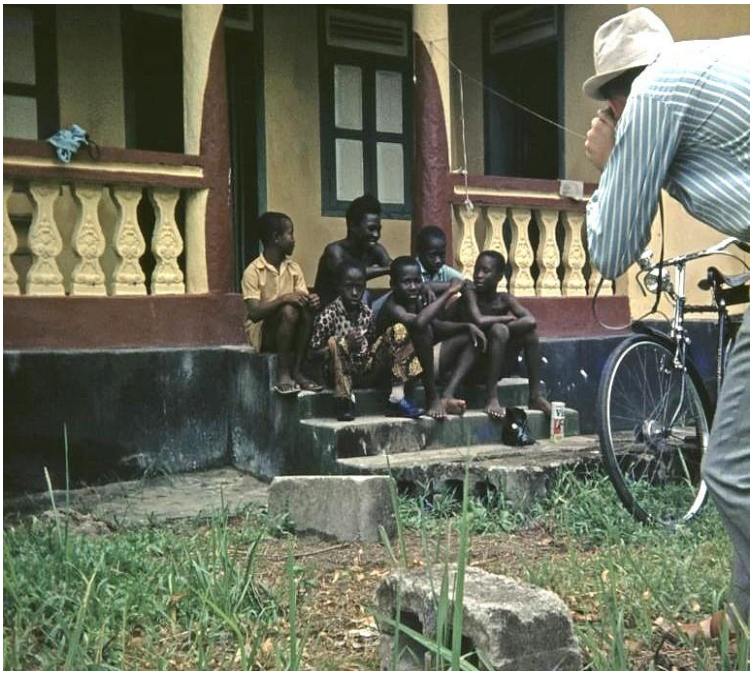
This afternoon on my way to school I met an unknown "omporto" with a very old motorbike. I thought it had broken down because he was sitting under a tree at the side of the road, surrounded by 20-30 St Francis boys. I asked him how he was and suggested that, should he still be around after my lesson he should come over for a chat and a beer. Such occurrences are few and far between and should be taken advantage of. He replied that he was not in a hurry and so 45 minutes later – he was still sitting under the tree where I had left him. I took him back to the house.

He told me he was German and had spent most of the last seven years touring Africa on his motorbike, which was now clearly the worse for wear. A couple of years ago he had had to go to Germany due to illness (unspecified), but had returned as soon as had recovered enough. In his late 20s, he had visited practically every sub-Saharan African country. It was really great to talk to someone so different, and he was grateful for the opportunity to talk German – and the tea and biscuits I offered. He was pleasant despite – or maybe because of – the hard life he had been living.

On the topic of rats, he said he had eaten practically every sort of "bush tucker" – from camel to snake (I wouldn't imagine there is much flesh on a snake) – and including rat. Said it tasted a bit like rabbit. He had had some unpleasant experiences on his travels, the worst of which being trouble with bandits in Ethiopia

five years earlier which ended with his petrol tank being riddled with bullet holes. He had also fallen into the hands of rebels in Angola. They had let him go as soon as they realised he was of no use to them, even financially. On the question of accommodation he declined, saying he ought to be getting on. Where to? No idea – except that he wanted, eventually, to go back to his parents in Frankfurt. When did he expect to get there? No idea: The last I saw was a cloud of dust following him down the road towards Lunsar. It takes all sorts.

On the question of stamps, there was a new issue several months ago. The new stamps are gummed rather than being self-adhesive like the predecessors, which given the damp climate here is a "Bad Idea". By the way, the coins bear the effigy of Sir Milton Margai, first prime minister of Sierra Leone. This was a "Good Idea", since coins last longer and cost more to replace. Sir Milton died about 9 years ago, so he can no longer be considered a



John photographing "our" boys in the back yard

rival. Dr Siaka Stevens was Sierra Leone's third prime minister and later its first president.

Letter 33 "Food, Exams, Diaspora"
Friday 1 June 1973 Makeni

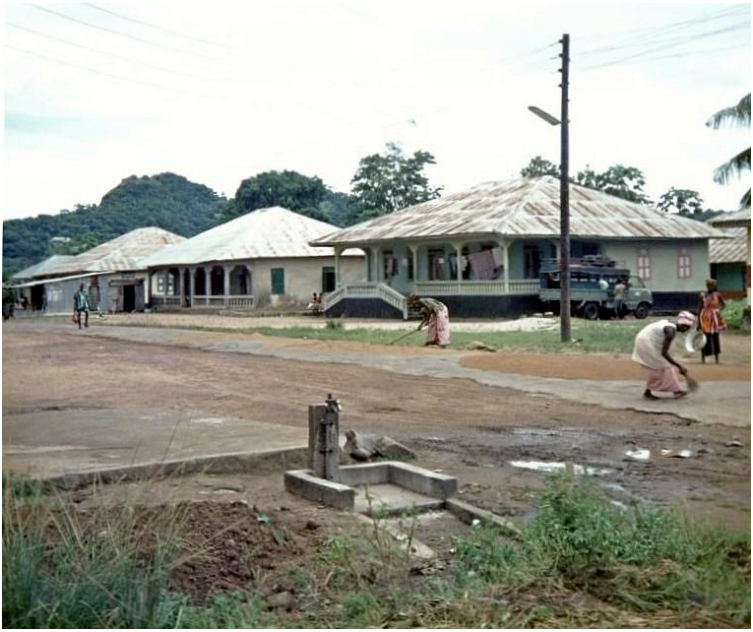
I am listening to a Liberian Pop station – the batteries in the transistor radio are nearly flat, so although reception is good, the sound is distorted.

It is Friday morning and it is rather cool – we've hardly seen the sun these last few days – it has been rather overcast of late, reflecting the mood in the country! Actually, it is still mild (lower 80s) but there is a stiff breeze which makes the air feel cool. I think I have acclimatised completely and feel the heat no more than the locals. In fact I did some sun-bathing a week or so ago. That startles the locals rather. They ask you why you are doing it and if you reply you want to get brown, they seem to think you are either stupid – or taking the mickey.

I am getting rather tired of "rice chop" now, and also shepherd's pie which we make from time to time. We usually mince our meat anyway because it is so tough. We assume it is beef. We can get potatoes (from Kabala) at times and so we can concoct a sort of SP. The school keeps rabbits, but they are for Biology purposes. My friend Raman, the Indian Physics teacher, who is also responsible for Biology – I can't rival him there – eyes me suspiciously if he sees me looking at them when I pass their hutches. The tif instinct is very strong.

The boys start their O-levels today. English Language is first on the list and we were besieged last night by 5th formers seeking advice on essay writing, how to best answer comprehension questions etc. This attitude is typical. What they think the purpose of the five years at school was for, I don't honestly know. They leave everything far too late – but then so do many non-Africans. I remember just before Christmas I wrote "250 days to O-levels" on the blackboard and it was about time to actually get down to work. They laughed at me. Now they realise that Father Time has flashed by.

What can I do about it? Good grief, I've tried, but sometimes I have felt that I have been banging my head against a mud wall – and it hurts. John, in his wisdom, suggested they went home and got some sleep, so they would at least be fit and wide-awake for the exam. But I think they were under the impression, that by visiting us, we might give them better marks than they deserved. No, we said, the system does not work like that. It may have helped during the internal exams, but we had no influence over GCEs. The papers would be packed in parcels and sent to Europe to be marked by two independent examiners, neither of whom would know anything about them, not even their names. Disappointed, they withdrew.



Rice drying: So that is why there is grit in the rice!

I have extended my wardrobe in that I have had a pair of brushed cord trousers made to measure for me. They are a pleasant shade of Deep Purple (my favourite colour) and cost about £2 for material and tailoring. I am also having another pair of smart black flares made, and also a couple of shirts. These will be made from traditional Sierra Leone gara cloth – a sort of tie-dyed linen. The

making of it is a cottage industry. After tie-dying, it is beaten with wooden batons. The whole family sit around a log over which the cloth is draped and drum away together in various intricate rhythms. Of an evening, drumming can be heard all over the town. I have also bought some purple/light blue gara cloth which I may have made up in the popular casual "Apollo" style.

A cottage industry: Children hammering Gara cloth

There are now just 6 weeks left before I fly home. In a way, I'll be sorry to leave – I have become quite attached to the place. It has been good fun for a year and I wouldn't have missed it for worlds. To come in without training, teach practically non-stop in a strange land, with a strange culture and to strange people after three years of cotton wool in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea was a great challenge and change.

I certainly got into the swing of things before Christmas and a lot of people take longer to settle down. I am being replaced by another John (to keep my present housemate John company) – could be confusing. Judith is staying on but Tom Daniel (fellow IC Physics

student teaching down in Pujehun) has become rather attached to a CUSO (Canadian Volunteer, like Helena) and is off to Toronto to do a doctorate. It happens to the best of us. Now the diaspora is setting in!

Letter 34 "Various Musings, Thunder Storm"
Friday 8 June 1973 Makeni

"Let us go then, you and I,
When evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster shells:"

TS Eliot: The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock
Recited (once again) by fellow VSO, John Barwell.

***Man**, medium build, dark complexion, brown eyes, short black curly hair, sprawls on desk behind grill.*

*Enter right, tall, thin, pallid **youth**, descending from a chrome plated Raleigh bicycle. Brushes hair out of mouth and approaches former:*

***Youth**: You get aerogram?*
***Man** (still sprawling): Aerogram dun dun*
***Youth**: You get Sevencentstamp?*
***Man** (Yawns): Sevencentstamp no day*
***Youth**: Hasha*

Moral: If you want to communicate by post in this country, you must either hoard aerograms – or use airmail paper and 15 cent stamps.

A Life in the Day

"We have managed to arrange that almost every year for the last two years"

Mr RA Kanu during masters' meeting in December.

Just three (of many snippets) which I am likely to remember when I think back on my year in Makeni. A year which I can look back on as being fairly successful – well at least I think so. A parting of the ways is now imminent. Time is now going all too quickly and I've got a fair amount still to get done. The time for reflection will no doubt come.

Africa is such a cross-section of customs, ways of life and people. The centre of Makeni with Barclay's Bank, Choithrams Supermarket and cinema is vaguely reminiscent of a smallish, none-too-clean town in one of England's less affluent areas. The faces are different, the clothes are different, the smells are different, but nevertheless the similarity remains.

It paints quite a picture: the twice daily green, cream and blue Mercedes buses (national colours) to and from Freetown, the taxis, lorries, podapoda (or mammy wagons), decorated with paintings and slogans appropriate and less appropriate (one of my favourites which is frequently seen in Makeni proclaims "Man suffer, Woman enjoy") filled to overflowing with humanity and all its trappings:- bags, cases, sacks, chickens pushed under benches, sheep and goats as well, sometimes tied to the roof racks.

A few miles out in the bush and everything is different. Mud houses, straw or corrugated iron roofs, medicine men selling jujus, women, babes on back and children working (and playing in the fields). Drums everywhere. Last night we heard the drums beating from a nearby village for several hours, god only knows why.

The rainy season is in full flood – literally. I nearly got drowned yesterday evening in a thunder storm. I took a couple of extra lessons – impromptu affairs – late yesterday afternoon with the fourth form (due to GCE-exams, I don't teach the fifth form any more, which gives me extra time to give lessons to those younger pupils who are interested in the world). 10 minutes before the lesson was due to end (not that I had to adhere to any timetable, of course – I could talk and answer questions all night) it started chucking it down. I decided not to wait until the storm was over – sometimes storms hang around the Makeni hills and go on for hours. So I ran the quarter mile home, navigating several lakes which I swear hadn't been there earlier on in the day, jumping various drainage gullies which had burst their banks.

Storm brewing: Typical cumulonimbus clouds over Mena Hill

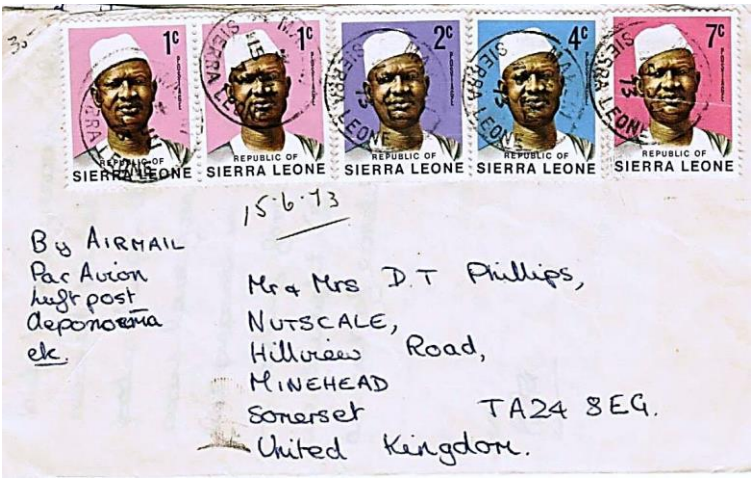
The weight of water nearly dragged my shorts off. The air was so thick with water that even a gentle inhalation filled the nose with water. The sensation was one of leaden oppression – I don't know how else to describe it. When I got in, I went to have a shower – to dry off.

Letter 35 "Volunteers' Party"
Friday 15 June 1973 Makeni

Still no aerograms and not even 15 cent stamps this time, so I got the post clerk to rake though his drawers until he got stamps together to the right postage. I think it gave him quite an exercise in mental arithmetic. He got it right in the end so this time you have got five Siaka Stevens for the price of one, and I hope the beautiful mixture of colours doesn't blow your postman's mind.

We had a big party in Makeni last weekend – VSOs, CUSOs, Peace Corps – a sort of end of year fling at a Peace Corps house. It was really very good – volunteers from all over Sierra

Leone. It's been yonks since I saw so many white faces together. They had a very good selection of music – mostly African – and there was just enough rain to keep the temperature bearable. It really gets terribly hot when you've got a lot of humanity together and people seem to sweat profusely – but nobody cares! I, like other people who are leaving soon, realised again how attached I have come to the place and the people, warts and all.



Stamp collection: Siaka Stevens in multipack (Letter 35 envelope)

Sometimes I feel I should have extended for a second year, but it is a bit late now to change my mind. I guess I was lucky to have had the chance to come here at all. Under other circumstance I may well have stayed on longer. Sierra Leone used to be renowned for the large number of volunteers who did a second (or even third year – like Ray), but this time round a lot of people have terminated after just one year – for a variety of reasons. In fact, two VSO guys were repatriated during the year.

Like all parties here, the one on Saturday evening attracted a lot of attention from the locals. Most stood around the door just staring – they had probably never seen so many omportos together before. And of course, the more enterprising tried to cash in on the event, setting up stalls with fruit, doughnuts and cigarettes (5p for 10) in the front yard. One or two boys tried to slip into the house

when nobody was looking, to see what they could get away with. They didn't get past unnoticed. Oh well!

They even have held an end of year party at the school – boys from St Francis and girls from St Joseph – I wonder what the nuns think about that. I do not understand why the dance was in the afternoon, when the temperatures are highest. The children were all dressed in their school uniforms - maybe to deter gate-crashers. School uniforms were introduced by the Dutch, adopted under the British and are still in use. A pity really, because the local cloth is so brightly coloured.

My main worry is leaving the sixth formers. Despite the fact that teaching proper didn't get going until mid-October and I had to make some of the equipment for the practicals myself, we did get about half way through the A-level course. I pity my successor who will have to take over where I left off. I like the 6 sixth formers – they are all pleasant, eager guys. It seems terribly hard on them that a new man has got to play himself in. A-level teaching is no place for amateurs; which of course was what I also was when I started.

Our fruit supply is still not too good. We sometimes get a pineapple, but strangely enough they are almost as expensive as those I bought in Hammersmith Market last summer. God only knows how the locals survive. The cost of living is exploding at present – the price of staple foods has risen by a third in the last 2 months. There is plenty of tinned food in the supermarket – mostly imported from China. The term "Peking Duck" takes on a completely new meaning. We haven't been tempted.

Letter 36 "Bath, Fernandez Plans, Mr Kanu's Return"
Thursday 21 June 1973 Makeni

The BBC reported that London is in the middle of a heatwave – 82° F. That was warmer than here, where in the wet season it rarely exceeds 85° F and some days it is only 75° F – and then it feels pretty chilly. The last 2 days (and nights) have been hot and the high humidity makes sleeping difficult. I have back ache because I haven't turned my mattress for some time. I need a good hot Radox bath. But there are no hot baths in Makeni and no Radox either. Judith has a bath in Magburaka – and an electric geyser for

hot water. It is a long way to go for a bath – and ups the electricity bill. Serial bathing (as in Monrovia) would perhaps be a possibility, but she has never offered – and I never suggested it. Such a suggestion might be open to misinterpretation! What was the slogan a few summers back? "Save water, bath with a friend".

Today was my last day of teaching as such – next week is revision and the week after is reserved for internal exams – GCEs for the fifth form have been underway for some time. The last week is a time for going through old exam papers ("model answers"), preparing school reports and a general wrapping up of things. Apparently this is only a formality and nobody turns up for school anyway. Reports are not really worth much – they can easily be forged, few parents can actually read them and most boys don't get jobs on the basis of their education anyway.

My plans for summer are still not finalised. I may well be on the British Caledonian flight which arrives July 19th at 8:10 p.m. which is a damned awkward time. If I then go up to Victoria and cadge a floor at my sister's for a couple of nights, I could get a fair amount of business settled. Then I'll hitch down to Somerset for a few days, before going off to Switzerland (hitching probably) to see if my girlfriend is still my girlfriend – and how her year in London, and mine in Africa have altered us.

Mr Fernandez (ex-vice-principal and now principal *ad interim*) thinks I deserve August pay as well, which is against VSO rules. These supply teachers are real moneygrubbers. He thinks a lot of me and hopes I may still change my mind at this late hour and stay on as a contract teacher as well. Raman, my rival, is apparently now *persona non grata* and he still needs another Physics teacher in addition to John, my VSO replacement. He even expressed a hope that in a couple of years I might be back and he could arrange a contract, government permitting. He says it would be worth a try.

Since I have been here I have got used to riding (other people's) Honda 50s and I am considering getting one when I am back in London. I couldn't be without a pushbike, though. The heavy all-chrome single speed Raleigh with safety handlebars and lever brakes is the Rolls Royce of Makeni – but I wouldn't be seen dead on it in England.

Mr Kanu, our (once and future?) principal, suddenly turned up this morning, much to everyone's extreme surprise – and most

people's delight. We thought he was mad to try and flee the country so early. According to the London "Times" between 100 and 200 people in all were killed by the militia gangs in Kissy (part of Freetown), Port Loko (between Makeni and Freetown) and Kono (in the Eastern Province diamond mining area). We reckon that is a bit high, but they are all areas with few volunteers and so we don't know too much.

Mr Kanu's daughters back home in Makeni after their flight

Kanu, by the way, had been in Italy – Turin. It is good to have his daughters around again – Mary (8), Miriam and Miranda (twins, 6). They often came by when they had nothing better to do and were great fun. We don't know whether he will be reinstated – he is on bail at present, pending trial. He is very streetwise, a "survivor", with "friends in high places". I wish him well.

Letter 37 "The Burden of Exams, Goats, and an Eclipse"
Thursday 28 June 1973 Makeni

I haven't been too well of late. I have had a lot of backache this last week and, thinking my bed might be a on the soft side – it does sag a bit – I put boards between the mattress and the bedstead. Up until now, I had had no problems and I found it strange, that they should start so late in the day/year. Then I developed a bad headache and found that sleeping on the cold concrete floor brought some relief. But I had to get up in between and walk around. The following night I slept from 7:30 in the evening until 7 in the morning, although I got up a couple of times to walk around because of my back. I felt so ill that I paid nurse Sue a visit and at once she suspected malaria, my second bout.

There are a lot of mosquitoes at the best of times, but now with the rain and a lot of surface water everywhere, they have started breeding in no uncertain fashion. Despite mosquito nets, they still find ways in. In the evening they fly around quite happily, but in the mornings they can barely stay in the air. Squash one and your fingers and thumb go bright red. That's <u>your</u> blood! She waved her magic wand and, together with some tablets she gave me ("these might help") I was better in no time. Thank you Florence – I mean Sue!

Today is my last day of teaching! I have survived! What a feeling of relief. But the work is not over, by any means. Now come the exams – for those not taking O-Levels. That gives a lot of work. Firstly you have to set the exams – not easy. You have to start with a couple of simple questions, so as not to discourage even the worst pupils too soon. Then those boring hours of invigilation. I remember how my history teacher used to go to sleep giving lessons. When he had to oversee exams, he was out like a light. He has my sympathy.

And then correcting the papers. I have 97 boys in the third class, and as a result 97 papers to correct. Even when the marks have been awarded, the problems are not over. Because we live near the school – and the boys know where we live – they come by, to complain about their marks and plead with us to give the a few more points, so that they at least get a pass (and can continue next year). If you give a mark of 45% (50% is necessary), they can be very obstinate, giving all manner of excuses as to why they failed to get

those last few essential points. One boy said that unless I upped his mark a couple more notches**,** Melanie (a Peace Corps) who had paid his school fees the previous year, would stop financing him. I had a chat with Melanie and she told me that the year before he also been a "borderline case". She understood my predicament and said "*hasha!*"

So the teachers are subjected to pleas, threats and even promises ("I send my sister to you this evening"). Of course that is "no-go", but I don't know how many of my colleagues capitulate to these tactics. A perk of the job? Who am I to judge?

The principal is of the opinion, that when more than half the boys pass, the exam was too easy. When less than half pass, then we, the teachers, have not done our job. The perfect Catch-22. Many of the questions are "multiple choice", the answers being "A", "B", "C", "D" or "E". They are liked by the boys, because their written English is not put to the test (the exams are about Physics, not English!), and I like them, because they are easy (and quick) to mark. You are not always battling against illegible handwriting and poor (or non-existent) grammar.

Amongst my pupils I have a blind boy, who, surprisingly, is one of the better pupils. St Francis is very much geared to the "disadvantaged" pupils and a former student, a half-blind Albino, was called in to type his exams into a Brail machine! Albinos are not common, but they are around – they really stick out in the crowd. I don't think they are harassed here as they seem to be in other African countries. In Magburaka there is a partial albino teenage girl – black torso and head, white limbs. Now that is disturbing.

Most exams are timed to 2 hours, and I told the boys in advance that it they finished in less than 1½ hours they couldn't have answered all the questions fully. But many walk out after an hour without even rereading their answers – some, no doubt to impress their friends.

On Saturday we had a solar eclipse. In Sierra Leone it was only partial, the regions with totality lying to the north. In one of my general knowledge extra-curricular evening classes some weeks back I had warned the boys that there was a partial eclipse due and tried to explain it to them as best I could with chalk and talk, and an orange, a lime and grapefruit. I also blackened a few sheets of glass with candle carbon to aid observation, but the altostratus clouds

made it possible to see the disk of the sun, without endangering the eyes.

During the event itself, we had quite a number of visitors (including passers-by in the street) wondering what the hell we were looking at. Unfortunately an eclipse is way outside the intellectual grasp of the "man in the bar"/"woman in the market". "The moon between the earth and the sun? – you gotta be kiddin'". John reckons that the phenomenon might arouse some sort of superstition, as indeed it did in Europe before the age of enlightenment, and that a shaman or two might suggest sacrificing a goat. As he cynically put it: "I guess there is any number of sheep in this neck of the woods today deeply regretting the eclipse."

Talking of sheep and goats: it is not always easy to differentiate between the two species – they look very similar. The trick, they say, is to look at the tail. The tail of a goat points up, whilst the tail of the sheep is directed downward. The mnemonic: a sheep is destined for heaven and is therefore ascending and pulling its tail up with it. The goat is destined for hell and … yes, you've got it. This has something to do with the biblical "separating the sheep from the goats". Which is all very well in theory, but in practise it is not always clear if the tail is down … or up.

My flight home has now been confirmed. I'm flying home with Sue and as she has to go to Victoria as well, I'll arrange to meet my sister there. I guess British Caledonian is reliable, but what if there is a rail strike?

We don't have rail strikes here but again we have been without electricity (and water) for a day or so, so I want to get this letter done before dark. It is annoying because no amount of deodorant can get rid of the smell of sweat. And only a bucket of filthy water each to wash in. The water, filtered of course, tastes foul because it is lukewarm. It is palatable if iced, but our fridge doesn't run on faith alone.

A group of us went to the cinema on Saturday (when the electricity wasn't OFF) where the 1969 film "Battle of Britain" – censored as always – was on the programme. It is a superb reconstruction of August/September 1940, which of course my parents experienced first hand – in SE London. The star-studded cast (around Sir Lawrence Olivier) portrayed vividly the agony, suffering and suspense of the real thing. The film was made in 1970 to

commemorate the 30th anniversary. The locals nearly freaked out at the sight of so many planes.

Letter 38 "Last Letter – Farewells"
Sunday 6 July 1973 Makeni

This has got to be the last letter I write from Sierra Leone!

I remember some time ago, thinking that this place would drive me mad, if I wasn't already insane. Well, survived I have, but I will leave it up to my family, friends and in particular my girlfriend Ruth in Europe, to pass judgement on my sanity.

I have had quite a blitz on my possessions. I have given away two very old shirts I brought with me from England, together with my plimsolls and a couple of pairs of socks to Saidu (he seems pretty happy with them). What doesn't fit him will be passed on to his brothers or other relatives. My books I have donated to the school library, and given away my stationery. As far as footwear is concerned, I only have my old suede shoes and sandals left. John bought my old desert boots off me (for a symbolic cent) some time ago, as they were a bit big for me, anyway) and the sandals have been repaired so many times, there is hardly any of the originals left. I still hope to get stuff together to bring home, though unfortunately Sierra Leone is a handicraft vacuum, and any foreign things are very expensive – and not very authentic!

Getting rid of unnecessary belongings is one thing, acquiring souvenirs to take home is another. For some time I had seen an elderly neighbour working at his loom every day, watching as the panel of Temne cloth gradually grew in length. When I mentioned it to Saidu, he suggested that we went to see if he had enough for a bedspread. The man was overjoyed by our visit and said yes, he would be delighted to make it up for me. I went back a couple of days later to pick up the cloth and barter in true Temne fashion. When I got back, Saidu asked me what I had paid for it. Proud of my haggling, I told him. His face fell. Did I realise how much time and effort, not to mention the cost of the raw materials had gone into its making.

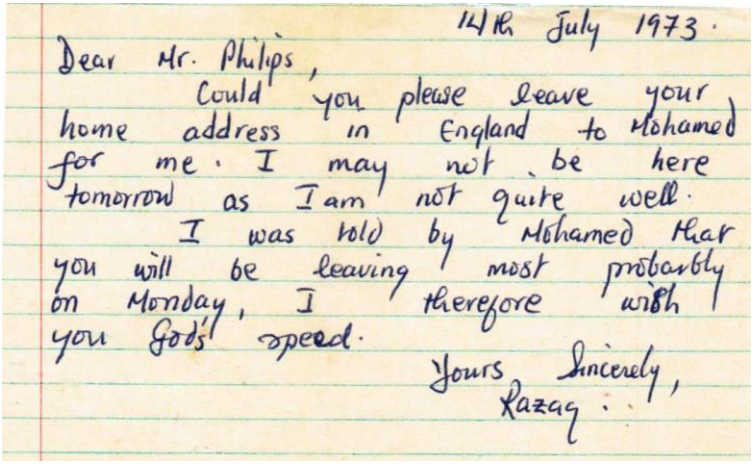
Shamed by my "success" I went back to see the man – and doubled the price. The old man was delighted and, with Saidu

helping translate, we (all three) shared a gourd of palm wine. As Saidu pointed out, the man came from a generation which did not dare argue with omportos. I was grateful for his sensible advice.

My hand-woven Temne cloth, 50 years on

My other souvenir I had acquired somewhat earlier from a travelling craftsman. The Mendes (of southern Sierra Leone) are renowned for their carving ability. I caught sight of her, a buxom young Mende woman, hewn from a block of ebony, and again, I probably paid too much for her. She had adorned the bookshelf in my bedroom for some time and, in honour of my sorely missed girlfriend, John had suggested facetiously I should name her Ruth, or, to avoid any confusion, "Ruth 2" (see frontispiece).

Exams are well over now. I finished my marking a few days ago but it took ages. I am suffering from yet another cold at the moment – remember the thunderstorm I reported a short while ago? I think I had more colds this year than I have in a normal year in England! We have very few hours of electricity at present. Water isn't too plentiful but we catch it in buckets as it comes off the roof during storms.



14th July 1973.

Dear Mr. Philips,

Could you please leave your home address in England to Mohamed for me. I may not be here tomorrow as I am not quite well.

I was told by Mohamed that you will be leaving most probably on Monday, I therefore wish you Gods speed.

Yours Sincerely,
Razaq.

Razaq's final note

The volunteer population is steadily declining. Trevear and Bob have left for Kano (Nigeria) from where they still hope to be able to cross the Sahara with Trevear's brother – though it is by no means certain they will manage it. The situation is precarious and Bob was in the final stages of malaria when I last saw him. We hope he recovers before they leave Kano (Nigeria) on July 12th.

Helena, the CUSO nurse together with most of the Peace Corps in this part of town has left, and so only John, Sue and I are still around here. Sue isn't too happy about being left alone in the house with all her stuff (including medical), although her dog, "Yessir" is excellent. John and I look in from time to time. She is off to Freetown at the weekend for some farewell party, and so I'll go and sleep in her house, to hold the fort, so's to speak and fight off any intruders. Pink Floyd, played at full blast, has a known repellent effect on would-be tifs. The temptation to tif is great – everyone knows that the Pisscor are about to fly out, taking a lot of presents for family and friends with them.

Mohammed left for Freetown yesterday. He thinks he is too good for St Francis Secondary School – he may well be right – although like most people who consider themselves to be super-intelligent, well yes, he ain't bad, but super-intelligent? No. He thinks he can pick up a scholarship, *Inshallah*, or dupe someone into

supporting him. I have a feeling though, that come September he will be back in Makeni.

Saidu, well Saidu. I really like the boy, standing as he does in Mohammed's shadow. I told him I would pay his fees next year, and John, who is doing a second year, has agreed to have him back in the house. So he's set for the next year, *Deus voluntas*. If a week is a long time in politics, a year is an eternity in Africa.

I'm still being visited by pupils hoping for an upgrade but as they say: "Hope springs eternal in the human breast". It is distressing for me, but I know I must set an example. At least, those, who in my opinion deserved to pass and be given a chance, made it.

Amnata (our orange/coconut sales girl) and a couple of friends came by for a drink of iced water and a chat (in Krio). They must be about 7 or 8 years old. They knew we were about to leave and they wanted to sing for John and me. We didn't understand a word, but even John was moved to tears…

I have kitchen duty so I'll cook supper now: Soup, spaghetti bolognaise and then rhubarb (yet again), this time with custard. We are eating European tonight because it is Sunday, and the rice is beginning to turn my stomach a bit at the moment.

I haven't had my flight plans confirmed, but I doubt whether anything will change, so late in the day.

See you!

Over and out!

Letter 38a "The Letter which Never Was" (Based on two letters sent to girlfriend Ruth from England)

On Saturday I finally left Makeni, having seen to a couple of matters (like packing) on Friday. On Friday evening I also made a bonfire to burn everything which is non-essential. That included all my school, and other, notes which were not destined to the school archive, as well as all correspondence from family and friends, unsentimental bastard that I am.

I had grown very attached to my guitar, having been able to improve my playing during my stay here. It had started suffering from the climate (it had been much repaired and "improved" long before it fell into my hands) and so in the end I decided to abandon it

to its fate – and buy a new one back in Europe. Various books I gave away, including "the Observers Book of the Weather", a primary school prize (!) which I donated to a very grateful Bohboh.

The last four days in Freetown were full of everything – and nothing. I stayed the last few days with a VSO near Freetown and went exploring the region, to find out what I had missed in the metropolis. There were five of us sleeping on her floor, all flying home on the same flight as me. She is going to travel along the coast towards Nigeria and was eager for any tips I could give her. I wrote letters of introduction to my friends in Monrovia (doctor and family) and Dabou (pharmacist).

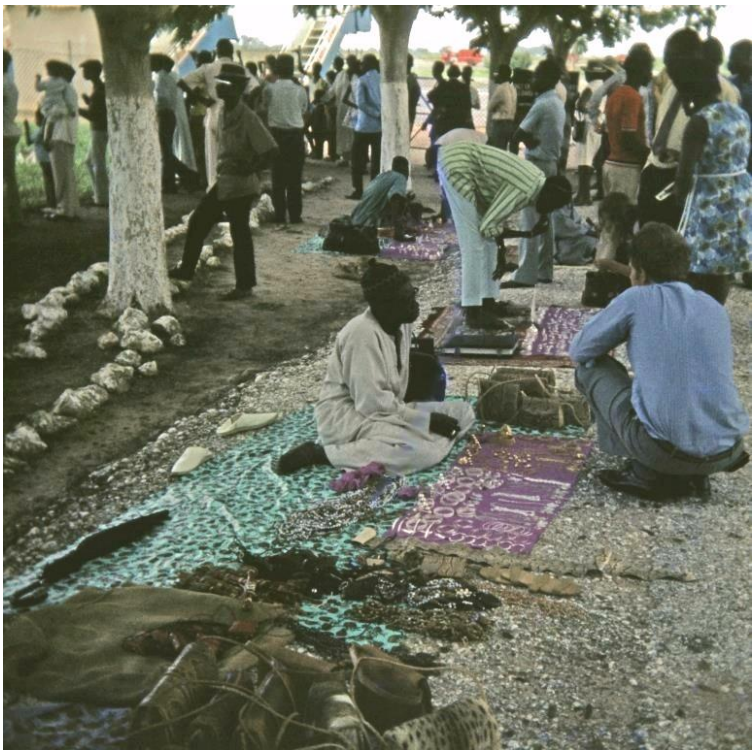
I enjoy travelling, but I will be very relieved when I am on that plane home.

Homeward bound: British Caledonian BAC1-11 at Lungi

The plane leaves Lungi at 9 a.m. on Wednesday (18th July 1973), which is terribly early, taking into consideration that the airport is on the north side of the Rokel River, and Freetown is in the south. The journey to the airport necessitates the crossing of the river by ferry from Kissy (downtown Freetown) to Tagrin. It is not

particularly reliable. And then there is always the possibility of "formalities" at the border, which have been known to delay things.

We spent most of the last evening in a Freetown bar (I think), just dropping by our host's house to pick up our luggage, thus dispensing with the horrors of alarm clocks and early rising.



Banjul Airport market (The Gambia)

The flight home was uneventful. We took the same route we had come (without the overnight stay in the Canaries – showing it is possible). With stopovers in Bathurst (The Gambia, where the market traders arranged their wares a few yards from the BAC 1-11), Las Palmas (where we shivered on the runway) and Lisbon (where we were not allowed to disembark) we arrived in Gatwick at 20:10 p.m. Of the VSOs on the plane, I only knew Liz Glass and Sue (the Makeni nurse) – and the four with whom I had spent the last days in

Freetown. I suddenly realised I had no money – I had donated my last Leones to a legless beggar at the ferry terminal.

Luckily, my sister did not let me down and agreed to pay my fare to London. Culture shock was something I had been warned about, but all those white face, clean underground trains, the bright lights of Islington. I was home – but was it home? After 10 months I was beginning to think that "Sierra Leone is mine, but it ain't home, England's home, but it ain't mine no more" (apologies due to Neil Diamond). And now this.

Epilogue

My year in Makeni was a time-island. I had gone to Sierra Leone knowing only two fellow volunteers, both Imperial College Graduates: fellow Physicist Tom in Pujehun near Bo, and Botanist Judith down the road in Magburaka. I had got to know so many people whilst in Africa, but I never met any of them again.

I wrote to my former house mate John a couple of times afterwards, but correspondence soon ceased.

I kept up contact with Saidu for over ten years, paying his school fees and accommodation whilst he was at St Francis School and later his tuition fees, when he went on to study at Njala University's School of Agriculture. I insisted that his studies were relevant to Sierra Leone. In the 1980s communication became difficult due increasing internal problems within the country. As a member of a minority tribe (Limba) with a university degree he would have been a prime target for the ruling clique and their militia. We do not know what fate he suffered. Suffice it to say, we have not heard from him in over 30 years and we must fear the worst

Whilst writing up this account, I had often thought about the main characters involved, in particular John, Bob, Sue, Judith and Trevear. I did what one does these days, if they are looking for something: fgi! The first 3 all drew blanks, but I came across a botanist on the internet whose profile fitted perfectly. In January 2022, I wrote a carefully phrased mail to the person in question, explaining in a fair amount of detail who I was, and why I was trying to contact her. If she was not the sought after individual, or she was

but, after nearly 50 years, had no inclination to re-establish contact, then she should ignore my mail and dispose of it accordingly.

Peter in Gara shirt with girlfriend Ruth at the Lai da Rims (near Santa Maria im Münstertal, Switzerland, August 1973)

As is a lady's prerogative, she kept me waiting. I had almost given up hope when I received a mail from Judith Allinson in April 2022, which included a photo and details of Mathora Secondary School for Girls in Magburaka, where she had taught.

And then my son, Thomas, came across Trevear Penrose on LinkedIn. He is now Senior Education Adviser for EU Budget Support. His daughter lives fairly close to us in Switzerland and so we hope to meet up at some time in the near future. He was able to provide a few photos which I reproduce with his permission.

Finally in answer to a mail I sent to the Gospel Radio Station (ELWA) in Monrovia, I got a mail from Karen Ackley, whose father Pete had been able to iron out a couple of problems with Liberian

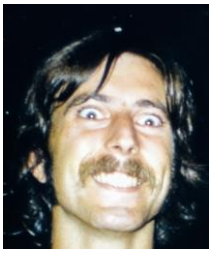
Immigration. She also supplied me with the mail address of Dick, the toddler in whose bathwater I washed away the dust of the road. Who knows, I may yet get a reply.

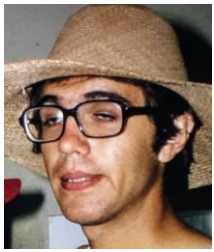
As for ex-VSO Peter, after settling one or two things for his re-entry into Imperial College (London), he left for Switzerland arriving in Zurich on August 1st (1973) which happens to be the Swiss National Holiday – he mistakenly thought that the flags had been hung out to welcome him. Girlfriend Ruth, was waiting (!) and after a few days with her family in the Bernese Alps, there then followed a couple of weeks youth hostelling and hiking in her native Grisons (SE Switzerland, near the Austrian and Italian borders).

In spring 1974 Post-Graduate Peter applied for and got an exchange studentship to study at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH), Zurich, basically to get to know his girlfriend better. Exchange-Student Peter married his girlfriend in spring 1975 in Zurich, where, nearly 50 years later, they still live.

Appendix: Photos by and © Trevear Penrose


The Nurses Helena (CUSO) and Sue (VSO)





Ian, Bob (both VSO) and Roberto in party mood