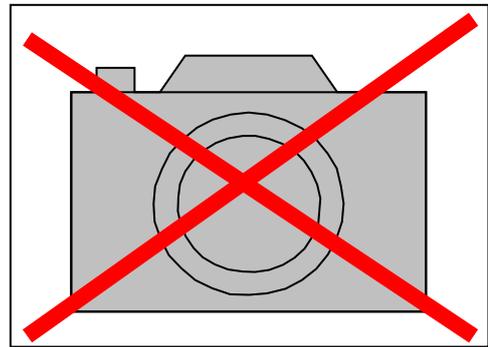


## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Gambia

The Republic of the Gambia is an independent country (as of 1965) found on the West coast of sub-Saharan Africa, (the smallest on the mainland,) surrounded on all borders with Senegal, except where Gambia meets the sea. There is no physical border between Senegal and The Gambia, so border control takes the form of frequent military and police checkpoints on the roads. This is also a check on drug smuggling and so common questions included where we were from, where we were going and why; our encounters with the military were quite intimidating as they were carrying guns and the rule on not taking any photographs of them is taken very seriously, as Ms Richards discovered. Despite this, The Gambia's nickname as the smiling coast of Africa is well earned, as the country's public are famously friendly.



The president of The Gambia is H.E. Sheikh Professor Alhaji Dr Yahya Jammeh, who is also the Minister for Defence and lives in a palace in the capital, Banjul. Banjul was originally established as the military outpost of Bathurst in 1816 by the British.



The president has zero tolerance for homosexuality; a crime which receives severe punishment. In October 2013, the president removed The Gambia from the Commonwealth of Nations due to resentment of Western interference. On our travels around The Gambia, we noticed lots of propaganda posters favouring the president, a method that would work especially well in rural areas where there is little access to current media, in maintaining the president's totalitarian regime of 20 years.

We also noticed that on billboards next to new developments, funding was often attributed to the Republic of China.

As soon as you leave the close vicinity of Banjul, the landscape of The Gambia is unspoilt by roads; major routes have either been resurfaced or are in the process of being resurfaced, something which

we were grateful for on our long jeep rides. However smaller roads, and those around buildings, remain dirt tracks, this combined with there been no surfaced pavements and it being the dry season during our visit, made everywhere very dry and dusty. This was certainly the case in Illiassa and other rural villages, even when we were walking around the residential areas of Banjul.

Travel in Gambia is also affected by being split by its namesake, The River Gambia, which remains without bridges due to varied water levels and river width dependent on the season. Therefore crossing the river requires using a ferry or a small boat. On our journey to Illiassa, which included crossing from the South bank to the North bank, we avoided using the ferry between Banjul and Barra, as it is notoriously slow and unreliable. Instead we travelled along the South bank to Soma and took a ferry across to Farafenni; this would have proved much quicker except there was a ninety minute wait while we waited for a coach to be helped off the ferry. Upon disembarking from the ferry and driving into Farafenni, we were shocked by over a mile's worth of lorries waiting to use the ferry, as this route is also used to cross between North and South Senegal. For the majority of the population, the main mode of transportation is walking; occasionally we would see bicycles being used, but the roads remained relatively unclogged by motor traffic.

We were constantly immersed in new culture and experiences, some of which included bemusing encounters with the local wild life. We had to look no further than the hotel's grounds where there was an abundance of unfamiliar birds (including committees of vultures) and monkeys roaming around. Our guide, who was with us on the motorized canoe journey to Tendaba camp, was keen to point out birds, a shy crocodile and black river dolphins to us. Upon arriving at Illiassa we were treated to a donkey cart



ride into the village; we had seen this being a common mode of local transportation of goods. Goats and chicken were also frequent sights, sometimes even lying in the middle of the road. Termite mounds were seen in rural areas, where they are problems due to their destruction of crops. The presence of mosquitoes, although they are much more of a problem in the wet season, was a constant shadow on our trip, as we had to be careful to remember our malaria tablets, to use the mosquito nets over the beds up-country and to apply plenty of repellent spray.

Agriculture is the main industry of the Gambia and this was apparent as soon as we entered the rural area that covers the majority of the country. The climate of the Gambia is tropical. There is a hot and rainy season, normally from June until November, but from then until May there are cooler temperatures with less precipitation. Whilst at the school we saw the children eating white powder out of the fruits that were growing on a nearby tree. The fruit of the upside down trees is incredibly popular as the white powder is very sweet, and sometimes it is mixed with water to make a sweet and creamy drink.

## Chapter 2: The city of Banjul

As we walked through Banjul we were greeted by local children who were smiling and waving at the novelty of white people in their village! We noticed that often the older children were looking after their younger siblings, and most were wearing remains of western clothing and running around in bare feet. Having stepped out of the tourist area we really got a sense of what it must be like to live in such conditions. The heat was blistering and so the walk was a conscious effort; we really began to appreciate our own privileges. Despite this, we were pleasantly surprised to see that everyone still seemed to have a smile on his or her face. The children were most welcoming, insisting on following us and holding our hands as we journeyed through the village and in to the market.



The market itself was quite an overwhelming experience. There was a variety of goods on offer, from western beach towels to traditional local fish. It seemed to us to be a social place as well as a centre for business, as each stall was crowded with family members and friends, including the children. We were continuously hassled by locals desperately trying to make a sale, and were confronted with a strong smell of fish just before we escaped in to the dusty streets.

As we explored the city, we noticed that a lot of the buildings were dilapidated. Most houses had tin roofs making them look like shanties. Moreover, most of the buildings were low. The tallest building was Arch 22 and we had the opportunity to visit it. The building commemorates Gambia's independence from the UK and was built in 1996. It stands on eight columns and has three floors; on the second floor there is a gallery which provides a panorama of the city, with the view extending down to the sea port of Banjul. The building is no complex architectural beauty but is simple in structure. Nonetheless the building is a very significant symbol of independence for Gambia and serves as a gateway into its capital.

There was a large contrast between the dusty roads and run-down houses in some parts of the city and the new roads and the presidential houses in other parts. However, one thing we did notice was that there was evidence of improvement. We noticed that many new roads were in the process of being built. Areas of the city seemed haphazard but at the same time there was a sense of order amongst the people. Seeing how people lived in Gambia and the conditions of the roads and houses gave us a sense of perspective. It highlighted to us the difference between these people's lives and our lives in England. Despite this massive contrast, there still seemed to be evidence of progress throughout the city of Banjul; there seemed to be a sense of hope.



### Chapter 3: Painting Mama Tamba

Our aim was to be able to provide a new kitchen for Mama Tamba Nursery School, and also buy a milling machine for the local women in order for them to be able to process rice faster. To do this we did various fund raising activities over the past 12 months, including a bag pack, a Greek barbeque, Zumbathon, cake sales, Khandoker charity evening and a sponsored rock climb.

Before going to Gambia, Ellie and Isabella prepared vinyl stickers that we used to decorate the walls of the school along with our own paint and brushes. The nursery is located in a small village called Illiassa, inland from the capital Banjul. To get there, we woke up at 5am and travelled by jeep, ferry and donkey cart. The journey took about 7 hours altogether but we passed time on the jeeps with Miss O’Neal’s psychology games and lots of singing. When we arrived just outside the village we were greeted by lots of local children and to cries of ‘toubab’ which means white person, and rode on donkey carts through the village to the nursery school.



At the nursery school we had two separate rooms to paint. One of the classrooms needed redecorating, and we also had to paint the new kitchen and storeroom that our money had funded.



In the classroom we started by whitewashing over the older fading designs. We had to put the rollers we’d been given onto long sticks in order to paint the high classroom walls, and also had help from Lamin’s son Pap who was very enthusiastic, ending up with more paint on himself than on the walls! Whilst painting, we noticed clumps of what we thought was mud on the walls, so asked some of the men to help remove them. However, after they’d whacked them with brooms we quickly realised they

were’n’t clumps of mud but were in fact spiders’ nests when lots of spiders and dead maggots came out of them. Once we’d finished whitewashing we had to wait for the paint to dry after a failed attempt to start painting too early. On one wall Sophie and Esther painted a large tree, refreshing a previous year’s design as the whitewash didn’t cover the brown of the tree trunk properly. Everyone else focused on painting a rainbow over the blackboard and flowers and vines over the windows. We planned to stick vinyl shapes and numbers on another wall, but after they wouldn’t stick properly that plan had to be altered and we painted round the vinyls instead, just using them as a template.





In the new kitchen and storeroom we had to paint both rooms. Hattie and Charlotte had to whitewash the storeroom in sauna-like conditions due to its lack of windows whilst also contending with the paint fumes and a broken roller. More paint ended up on the floor than the walls as it required multiple coats before it was even visible on the walls. In the kitchen we had to use brown oil paint to cover the walls, so had to adapt

the wall design slightly. The oil paint stained so we had to take off our shoes before painting, and use plenty of white spirit to get it off our hands and arms at the end. On one wall we all painted a large sunset background, and then left it to dry. Then Charlotte, Roshni and Isabel painted fruit on the other walls, Hattie wrote out the store room sign, and Ellie painted the black base over the sunset scene. Once that had dried we stuck the black vinyl animal silhouettes onto the wall to finish it off. The vinyl stuck fairly well, if only temporarily!



When we finished painting Tamba seemed very happy with our efforts, and the children were impressed with their newly decorated classroom.



## Chapter 4: Lessons at the Nursery School

Having prepared the lesson plans weeks in advance, the Gambia Team 2013 was eager to teach the enthusiastic Mama Tamba children. Split into 3 groups – according to age group, we incorporated the activities accordingly: bracelets and tiaras (age 3-4), puppets (age 5-6) and drums and paper plates (age 7-8).

The language barrier was the most difficult challenge of them all and made the activities, especially for the younger group seemingly more difficult. Helen, Sheanna, Izzy and Sophie had the joy to teach the youngest of the Mama Tamba children. After speaking to Helen and Sheanna, they said that although the language barrier was challenging, the children found making the bracelets easier to understand. We believe this is because of the Gambian culture and it was a familiar concept for them. The crowns were harder, however with a bit of glue and sparkle of glitter, by the end of the day we saw the children beaming and gloating around the playground with their fantastically crafted crowns and bracelets.



Charlotte, Hattie, Isabel and Ellie felt it was important to encourage the children to be proud of who they are and so had the idea of teaching the children how to make puppets of themselves. The first obstacle was correctly distributing the wooden spoons that acted as a base of the puppets. This is



because at Mama Tamba, boys were only allowed to share with boys and girls to share with girls due to their Islamic beliefs. When the spoon was bare it was difficult for the children to understand the activity, but as they placed the t-shirts, trousers and skirts onto the spoons, the children eyes gleamed with excitement as they recognised that the spoons were little people. With a bit of encouragement, the children were able to stick on the hair and draw on the face of the puppets all by themselves. It was delightful to see the children clinging

onto their puppets proudly; like it was their most prized possession. Charlotte, Hattie, Isabel and Ellie said it was a wonderful and enlightening experience

The final activity – the eldest group were taught by Nikki, Naomi, Esther and Roshni. At first they had troubles starting their lesson when all four of them realised half of the equipment had not flown out with them to The Gambia! (oops) As they're Withington Girls' at heart, they improvised, and with success! They intertwined two instruments together to make one: the 'rainforest drum' for the boys. This incorporated the instrument the girls unfortunately could not make – a rainforest stick, due to lack of beads, however they



had the correct equipment to make the drum (thank goodness) and in the lids of the drum added a few beads, thus creating a new instrument, the rainforest drum. The rainforest drum was extremely popular among the class, all the other children not on the boys table decided to move and join in because they wanted a go. The concept of the rainforest drum fitted in well with the Gambian culture and all the boys drummed away with happiness and laughter. It was an eye-opening and inspiring experience to see how the children had so much joy from an instrument made out of paper cups and rubber bands. The other table – the girls, made paper plates. Another improvisation which worked! The girls loved decorating their plates with feathers hanging from the plate, attached to string, and glitter dazzling away on the paper plate. The girls and boys were constantly showing off their new possession and wanted to decorate them more to make them even better. The children adored both activities and it was incredible to help them decorate something which meant so much to them. Nikki, Naomi, Esther and Roshni will never forget that memorable lesson



The head master of Mama Tamba was ironically called Tamba, however this is not how the name came about. The chief of the village whom funded land for the school to be built was named Mama Tamba and so the name is in tribute of him. Tamba greeted the Gambia Team 2013 with arms wide open and the children singing from afar. One of the favourite tunes for the Gambian team girls was 'there's a melody in my heart... for you and me.' The girls felt privileged to help Tamba with his objective, which are similar to those of WGS: maintaining a friendly and welcoming environment and for the kids to have a thirst for knowledge. The girls were amazed at how efficiently and incredibly Tamba was running the nursery.

We are so thankful and happy that Withington has supported and funded such an amazing institute for so many years. We will never forget this experience, it will always be in our hearts, and we are so lucky to have had the trip of a lifetime!!



# MY FARM

## Chapter 5: Visiting My Farm

We had the opportunity to visit a unique fruitful haven located in the middle of desolate wasteland. The name; My Farm. The project; Sustainable farming. The project, run by Kelly, was set up 2 years ago and has experienced great success, employing up to ten local people. The aim of the project is to educate and help local Gambian people to develop their skills and knowledge of agriculture. This is undoubtedly an appropriate technique as it encourages people to develop their understanding of a field that they are familiar with farming. Gambia's economy is very much dependent on the agricultural industry hence why taking a grass roots approach to developing the farming sector is a sustainable approach.

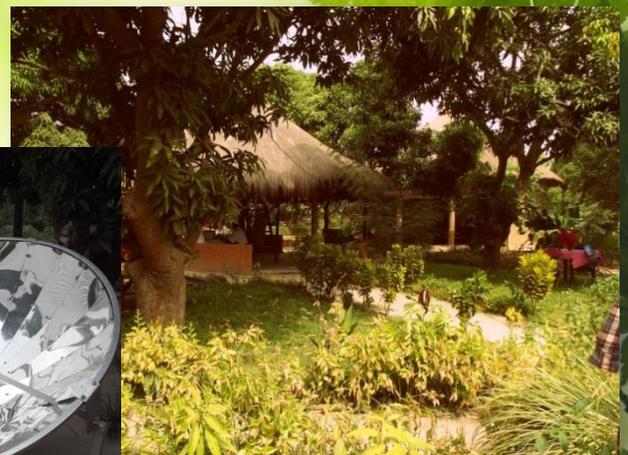
One thing on which My Farm prides itself is the environmental sustainability it has achieved in the two years it has been open. The predominant source of energy on the farm is solar, which a suitable technique as there is abundance of sunlight in The Gambia. Kelly has invested in several parabolic solar dishes which channel the focal rays of the sun in order to create heat energy which is used for the cooking facilities. Despite the fact Gambia has a dry season; My Farm never suffers from a water shortage. The entire water system only cost 200,000 Dalasi, which equates to approximately £3,200, and through the use of a solar pump it generates 22,000 litres of water a day. We could see from the large trees and vivacious colours that the crops flourish in such a healthy environment, and as a result there is often a surplus amount of crops which can be sold for cheaper prices to the local community.

Alongside the farming, Kelly also runs an education centre on the site which we were able to visit. As well as agricultural education, children can visit the centre. The idea is that what they do at My Farm ties in their school education and their home upbringing. The facilities were stunning; lessons were carried out in the beautiful and clean huts and students have access to iPads so that they can practise logic, audio and maths puzzles. Kelly made sure that we understood that My Farm is not just a farm; she aims to supply her volunteers with skills in agriculture as well as in other areas. These other areas include making the products that she sells on her market stall shop. Using the produce grown by My Farm, Kelly teaches her students how to make body butter and soap.

We saw the students in the final stage of the soap making session, as they scooped the mixture into flower shaped moulds. It seemed that Kelly had also taught them about profit margins as the students made sure that every morsel of soap mixture was placed into the moulds and not wasted! The volunteers seemed to take their lessons and job very seriously, making sure that they followed the guidelines strictly. They also seemed to enjoy the project, as they were more than willing to guide us through the process of soap making and show us all the different designs and scented soaps that they had made themselves in their lessons. Not only do the students feel pride as a result of their efforts but they also receive a certificate when they complete their training, which essentially improves their job prospects and provides them with the incentive to move away from the traditional farming jobs and onto higher things.

### Soap Recipe for 40 Bars

- 3 litres of palm oil
- 500 g caustic soda (they had to wear gloves as this is corrosive)
- 1 litre of water
- 100g bees wax
- 30 g honey
- 30 ml flavour



## Chapter 6: Gambian culture

### Superstition and voodoo

One of the prominent cultural differences we noticed between the Gambia and the UK was the heavy belief in magic. It was interesting to discover how most people trusted voodoo for major things such as healing. For example, we met a lady at the craft store who had broken her leg. Having the widely held opinion of the hospitals being inefficient and a waste of time, she turned her efforts to the local native doctor. This doctor performed voodoo by breaking a chicken's leg, which she had to keep by her at all times. As the chicken's leg was broken, she claimed that she could feel her bone growing back in her leg. We also learnt that she is not alone in her choice in healthcare and that most people also go to the native doctor for healthcare, who claims that the use of voodoo and magic can restore health.

Many people in the Gambia also believe in using Juju beads for various reasons. We learnt that there are different types of beads for different purposes including, safety over baby and mother during pregnancy, health and safety. We witnessed the use of these beads first hand at the graduation ceremony of the computer centre. The men wearing the beads around their neck demonstrated the powers of the beads by using sharp knives on their bodies leaving no wounds. However after looking at the knives ourselves, the majority of us were doubtful as to how sharp they were.



### Kachikally Crocodile Pool



On the outskirts of Banjul, we visited the sacred Kachikally crocodile pool. We learnt here about the service offered to couples who had difficulty conceiving a child. This service consisted of the women bathing in water from the crocodile pool. If successful in conceiving a child following on from this service, the couple will have an obligation to give their child the nickname Kachikally after the centre itself. In terms of cultural differences, it is clear that the traditional opinion of the woman

being solely responsible for conceiving a child is still widely held as the service does not involve the man or his fertility being treated at all.

The centre originally belonged to the Bojang family and is 500 years old, however now it is a communal centre which provides funding for the local village. Both the entry fees and donations are donated to the community to help pay for things like food and schooling etc. They are able to donate all of the proceeds due to the fact that all workers at the centre are volunteers.

Apart from the cultural side of the centre, we also learned about the crocodiles. Over 100kg of fish are fed at 7am every morning to ensure that they are full and therefore will not harm the visitors or workers. As well as this, due to the average crocodile laying 60-80 eggs, their population is heavily monitored and controlled by destroying most of the eggs to keep the population constant at around 200. It needs to be carefully monitored as well as the average lifespan of a crocodile is 100 years old. After destroying eggs, some of the crocodiles become upset and go into mourning. We learnt that as a result of this, they become dangerous and can take it out of other crocodiles and humans and are therefore isolated as we saw with one particular female.

### Music and dancing

A big part of the Gambian culture included music and dancing. We learnt that it is a big part of people's lives there and is therefore incorporated into many ceremonies ranging from weddings to funerals to circumcisions. As well as being part of important life events, it is also used as a way of bonding and inclusion of all generations. At the Tendaba river camp, it was heart warming to see everyone taking part in the dancing, including ourselves, and having a good time. We noticed that many of the songs are improvised or sung in a call and response manner. In terms of instruments we also realised that the voice is the main instrument used in terms of pitched instruments accompanied by the traditional African drums.



We saw that communities and families ranging from all ages danced. The sense of family is strong in Gambia, many aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, children and grandparents could all live under one roof. It is tradition that each first born male is named Lamin and for females they are named Miriam. Many of the males make sacrifices of having their own family if their female relations lose a husband and need a man to help raise the children and pay for the family to survive. They carry their burdens as a family.

### Smiling Coast

We noticed another large difference between The Gambia and England. The people were incredibly friendly and openly ready to make conversation gaining the nickname 'Gambia – the smiling coast of Africa'. The children we drove past in the villages are not used to seeing people of other ethnicities and readily shouted 'Tubaab' translating as 'white person' in their excitement.

### Food

The majority of meals incorporated some of the local fish from Gambia. The most common fished and used are Barracuda fish, Butterfish and Lady Fish. This is due to Gambia being situated on the coast of Africa making it easier to sell and distribute in the country. A lot of the food also included onions, commonly grown in Gambia, as well as potatoes and rice, a part of their staple diet. Not to forget the thorough use of spices and herbs that gives the country's food its distinct flavour.

