

SPECIAL CAMPAIGN Join Kent on Sunday's drive to send books



Welcome to Kent, but not as you know it

By **BERNARD GINNS**

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AT the end of a bumpy road on the southern tip of Sierra Leone's Western Peninsula is a fishing village.

The village is known for its old slave house, redbrick church and colourful buildings. It has beautiful, pristine beaches that were once popular with tourists. Around 800 people live in this place, an hour's drive south from the capital, Freetown.

It is called Kent. And it is the focus of Kent on Sunday's special campaign, launched today to help the children of Kent enjoy a better future.

Sierra Leone, in West Africa, is officially one of the poorest countries in the world. It was devastated by a brutal nine-year civil war that brought death to 250,000 people and destroyed most of the country's infrastructure.

Today the former colony is in a challenging process of peace-building and reconstruction assisted by Britain, which has pumped £90 million into the country in the last three years. So far, two elections have taken place since the war ended.

But problems remain with poverty, official corruption, national debt and disease. For men, the average life span is 38 and the average wage is the lowest in the world. Despite the abundance of minerals – Sierra Leone is famous for diamonds – the country is extremely poor.

Educational materials are few. Children



learn to read from old newspaper articles that cut out and distributed. Compared to their counterparts in the Garden of England, their life chances are very few.

Robert Collett, an official at the British High Commission in the capital Freetown, told KoS about the challenges facing the village of Kent, once a popular tourist destination before the civil war.

"Its pristine beaches, beautiful mountain backdrop and friendly population attracted tens of thousands of international tourists each year, many of them from France. Sadly, the region's flourishing tourist industry came to a halt during the war and its main source of income was lost.

"But after five years of peace and stability the tourists are beginning to return and the

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to help African schoolchildren in the village of Kent in Sierra Leone



NAMESAKE: (l-r), The fishing village of Kent in Sierra Leone, with its palm trees and golden sands; the red-bricked church and the old slave house which is now used as the village school

people of Kent are seeing the benefits. New hotels and boat tour companies are reopening around Kent, bringing with them much-needed jobs and investment. Many of these companies are based upon foreign investment, but a number are community-led enterprises.

"Despite Kent's huge potential, the tourists have yet to return in large numbers. Until they do, Kent will continue to suffer from many development challenges that are common throughout Sierra Leone. The majority of the community are unemployed or under-employed, access to health care is very limited and its schools need investment and teaching materials."

To help our county's namesake, this newspaper is gathering books and stationery to send to the Kent school. Mr Collett, who visited the village before Christmas, said our appeal could "turn around the education experience of these children and give them much-needed learning resources that they simply do not have at the moment".

History

The school was established in 1928 in the village's old slave house. Inside, the three classrooms each have a blackboard and a row of benches. But the 200 or so pupils attending do not have books, paper or pens.

Balogun Williams, 74, who is secretary to the village leader, Tunde Savage, told KoS the history of the settlement.

"Kent was founded in the 17th century. After that the slaves came in. [The Europeans] deposited the slaves in Kent. They started shipping them to the European countries. That was between the 17th and 18th centuries. They were buying the slaves from the villages around and they brought them to

Kent. They built a place for them. That place is still here, the slave yard, where the school is now. The bottom of the school is where they were staying. They would collect them from there and take them by boat to Europe."

Europeans used Sierra Leone as a source for slaves but by the 1780s, freed slaves began to settle in the country. Britain, which led the world in abolishing slavery in 1807, helped establish Freetown as a haven for freed slaves.

'The RUF swept through the country, leaving a trail of death and destruction. Drug-crazed child soldiers mutilated thousands'

The city grew as more freed slaves settled, including many Africans who had fought for the British during the Napoleonic wars. Sierra Leone's links with Britain continued and it became a British Crown Colony in 1808, remaining so until its independence in 1961.

Like the rest of the country, Kent suffered during the civil war. The conflict was started in 1991 by the Revolutionary United Front, which wanted to overthrow the Government. Diamonds were sold to buy arms. The RUF swept through the country, leaving a trail of death and destruction, displacing two million

people. It is estimated 300,000 people lost their lives. Drug-crazed child soldiers mutilated tens of thousands. Amputations were widespread during the war: victims were asked if they wanted "long-sleeves or short-sleeves".

In Kent, Mr Williams recalled how RUF soldiers warned villagers: "We are coming to burn your houses, we are coming to destroy you, we are coming to cut your arms." Some hid in the cemetery, others fled by boat to nearby Banana Island, where they hid until the RUF had left. "The war affected us greatly," said Mr Williams.

Beautiful

Today, the population of Kent is between 700-800, half of whom are children. Like Kent in England, Kent in Sierra Leone is surrounded on most sides by water. According to Mr Williams, it is a beautiful village. But there are problems with the water supply and there is a lack of electricity. The main work is fishing and, he said, "Kent fish are the best in Sierra Leone."

According to Mr Collett of the High Commission, the people of Sierra Leone have a huge affinity with the British. "It is a country which was administered for a long time by the UK and it is part of the Commonwealth. The people are extremely friendly and everyone waves at you but it is very run down with hardly any decent roads or facilities for people. The country is waiting with hope for change."

KoS spoke to Peter Penfold, the High Commissioner from 1997-2000. He said: "I think things are better now than when I was there. At least now nobody is going around killing and hacking off arms, legs and hands but it's still a pretty grim way of life for people. Life is very tough, yet amazingly people

remain cheerful and enthusiastic."

He added: "I know Kent. In its day it was rather an attractive little village and the peninsula was quite well developed for tourism."

Mr Penfold has maintained links with the country since he left and is currently UK chairman of the Milton Margai school for the blind in Sierra Leone. The school is twinned with Dorton House school for the blind in Sevenoaks.

The Secretary of State for International Development, Hilary Benn, explained in a statement for KoS how our campaign can help. He said: "Although the number of children in primary school in Sierra Leone has increased since the end of the war, about 375,000 children are still not able to go to school."

"Education helps transform lives, banishing ignorance and improving opportunities. Building links across the world, sharing experiences, knowledge and learning will help us tackle the challenge of providing education for all."

This year sees the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slavery, a campaign led by William Wilberforce, an MP who worked with Sir Charles Middleton of Teston, Kent, to put an end to the trade.

Our special campaign will gather school books for the children of Kent. These books will be transported to Sierra Leone later this year. Readers who would like to donate books or writing equipment can phone 01303 817 100 or email bernard.ginns@kosmedia.co.uk.

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