

A SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK THAT THE CAIRN TEAM IS CARRYING OUT IN NEPAL

David and Joanna Thomas are much involved in the CAIRN Trust [www.cairntrust.org] but what exactly is it? Here is a short brief, but do look at the web site as well.



In essence it is a UK registered educational charity that we started in 2007. It operates in Nepal the foothills of the Western Himalayas in much the same areas that the 2nd and 6th Gurkhas were recruited from. It works through existing NGOs rather than setting up its own organisation with all the overheads that would involve.

In its early days the charity was a Thomas family led affair. David, Joanna, Tobyn and Ben Thomas were trustees and the ex-officio members were the heads of our four school PTAs. This was essential because the main fundraising effort came through our schools and from generous donations from parents. What really got us off to a good start was a superb effort by Nick Spencer, that indomitable mountaineer and friend of John and Annabelle Chapple's, who climbed Aconcagua in Chile for his 70th birthday and raised over £100,000. It was instrumental in getting us going.

What has CAIRN achieved so far?

We have built 20 schools, through the Pahar Trust Nepal [PTN] and another 3 through the Gurkha Welfare Scheme [GWS] in Mirkot, Pyarjung and Katari.

This is one of our earlier and bigger ones in Bhujung, a large Gurung community in Kaski that was also G/Maj Surendraman Gurung's [dec] village. The children are assembled for the start of the day at 1000hrs and doing PE before being marched into their classrooms. We have since also built a primary school and a hostel there as well



CAIRN has installed 35 libraries [18 of them thanks to funding from Kadoorie].

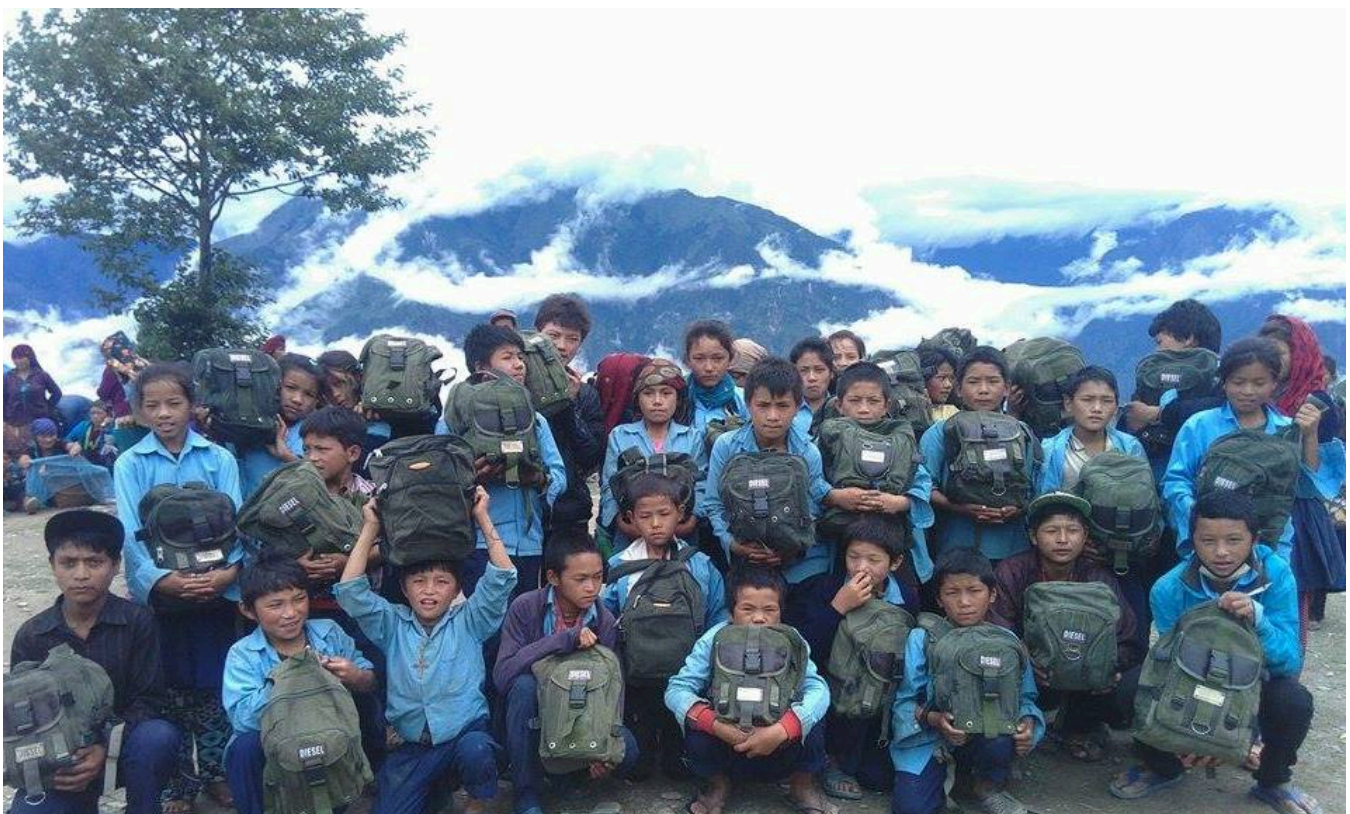


Having ready access to books and being able to sit on a carpet to read them is a real novelty for hill children. Few have access to books beyond the textbooks used in school. The children's attention to the text and pictures is clear in this photo.

Libraries are installed by a redoubtable young Gurung girl named Balkashi Gurung with her two assistants. Their enthusiasm and energy is truly astonishing. It is not just a question of getting books and furniture to the village and putting books on shelves. A librarian has to be

trained and the whole school and the community trained in the use of the books as well. Not least is the starting of a library fund to which the villagers must contribute against the day when CAIRN's five-year installation programme ends.

CAIRN also looks after the education of 950 of the poorest children in the areas where we operate by making sure they have all they need to go to school from shoes to satchels; from pencils to pens. Below are some typical recipients; these ones are from Kerauja and were entitled to an emergency distribution after the earthquakes:



This huge administrative burden is carried out by SATHI an NGO that was set up through the dedication and initiative of Trish Ginelly. Trish is American and has lived for many years in Pokhara. Up to 100 of the poorest children in each VDC in which we operate are selected through their village school and then a home visit from a SATHI social worker. Satchels are named and packed up with uniforms and all the materials that each individual needs for school. This in itself is a logistical nightmare, but the bags then have to be taken to the village by bus, jeep, or mule and at last carried in by the older children or their parents for the final leg. It works! Children's

attendance and results improve because they are not kept at home to work or look after animals when their parents cannot afford to provide them with what they need.

Nonetheless, the children's progress is monitored; if they accept the benefit and do not come to school regularly they are warned and then taken off the list. It is a hard life in the hills! On top of that, for nearly two years thanks to Trish Ginelly and her SATHI team we have been able to help another 1,850 children in North Gorkha whose homes were struck down by the 2015 earthquake.

Then there is the question of improving teaching. We started two years ago with the youngest children under the banner of CEY [CAIRN Early Years]. The effort here has been led by Joanna, now 76, who has been round all the 19 participating hill schools. Her aim is to train teachers to follow the Nepali curriculum by encouraging pupils to become independent through interactive learning, using Montessori materials. More training is needed but the results so far have been startling. Children who have no toys at home now want to come to school to experiment, learn and play with the equipment that they are given. It is a complete change in attitude, not only on the part of the children but parents and teachers as well. Aruna Sherchan who runs the Fulbari Montessori School that is close to the British Camp in Pokhara has been an immense help.

Liz Woodcock the Development Director is the person round whom the whole of the charity now revolves. She operates from a small office in Wandsworth and is much helped by Alice Higgins a recently joined Newcastle graduate, and Amanda Kennet a Thomas's parent.

The CAIRN board has also been strengthened and reorganized. Ben Thomas is now the Chairman while Toby Thomas who did his first trek in Nepal nearly 50 years aged 18 months, is the CEO.



Toby Thomas on his first trek in Nepal in 1967 that lasted for five weeks with Lalbahadur Gurung his porter!

Thomas's parents Rebecca Redding and Amanda Bathurst have been joined as trustees by Anne Griffith with her invaluable experience of Gurkhas and Nepal.



Anne Griffiths and her 'mindes' from her days with the 6th QEO Gurkha Rifles

Katie Hargreaves ex-Price Waterhouse, and another Thomas's parent, brings to the Board financial experience that is second to none. Aaron Barbour the director of the Katherine Low Settlement, Battersea, has also joined recently with his enormous expertise in raising funds. David and Joanna, are now Joint Presidents and still actively involved but not executively.

In the Lent holidays of each year we carry out an adventurous visit to Nepal for CAIRN supporters with families and staff. We trek for a week round Annapurna starting and finishing at Pokhara and visiting some our schools and libraries en route.

The next phase is to raft down the Seti Khola with a night at the Seti River Camp, which is a delight. The next day seeing everyone floating down the final rapids - but in their lifejackets!



First rapids after leaving Damauli. Fun but not terrifying!

Then it is Kasara Camp for Chitwan's wildlife, riding and washing elephants.



Through the water hyacinths.....



Elephant shower in the river.....

Then back to Kathmandu for its sights and home.



*Willow Rundell aboard the chariot
in Baktapur Durbar Square, where most of the
old houses are still shored up after the
earthquake*

It is always a very successful trip packed into a fortnight. Next year Tobyn is looking at the possibility of doing something similar but tougher in the East.

Next year is CAIRN's 10th Anniversary and we will be making an exceptional effort to raise funds and to push out CAIRN's boundaries. The Trust is well set up now for its next decade and the fascination of Nepal with its diverse people, mountains, rivers and forests is set to enthrall the coming generations just as it has for us in the past.

DAVID THOMAS
February 2017

