

DR GRAHAM'S HOMES, KALIMPONG

Friday, 14 May 2010

Love and Shalom from Kalimpong – as always.

Last Wednesday started early at 0400 hrs, as I succumbed to the dreaded 'Kalimpong Runs!' However, I count myself lucky that they only lasted some 24 hours and that I had reached my fifth week without any problems – not so for Philip and Eleanor, and for Kyle and Sarah who (K&S) were grounded for four days a few weeks ago. After the Senior Assembly I went and did the Kindergarten Assembly. As usual, after the Assembly the wee ones jostle for position for hugs and kisses and when little Glenda was pushed to the back of the queue, she just burst into tears – though she did eventually get a hug, and a few tickles! Philip, Eleanor and myself along with driver Juran, set off for the lovely State of Sikkim in the north, for a wee break. As we entered the area the boards welcomed us with "Sikkim – a Piece of Paradise on Earth" – and it really was.

On leaving West Bengal and entering the State of Sikkim, we had to go through a passport check – security is very tight. It was already very hot, although it was bit cooler as we climbed up the mountainside – the views were quite stunning. Lunch was taken at Namchi, a lovely town. This is only around 40 miles from Kalimpong and yet the difference is quite amazing – lovely streets, shops, litter bins. The roads were much better and some even had white lines, road signs and cats' eyes! We visited an amazing Temple, dedicated to Guru Padmasambhava before booking in at the New Dzongri Hotel in Ravangla – not a very pleasant place to stay!

On Thursday morning we set off for the capital of Sikkim, Gangtok, stopping off on the way at the Rabong Monastery (Budhist) and then visiting the tea gardens at Temi, where I bought some packets of tea. Lunch was taken at Singtam (yes, but which hymn do you want me to sing!). A lovely Chicken Biryani and Pilau Rice set me back a cool £1.50! We arrived in Gangtok just after 1600 hrs and booked in at the lovely Hotel Tibet, and had supper at the 'Gangtalk Restaurant', which was delicious, followed by a wee nightcap at our hotel. Friday started off very hot at 0730 hrs and from around 0600 hrs I had been following the General Election via BBC World News – and things were not looking good for 'Mister Broon'. Since then, as you now all know, we have the first coalition government for over 40 years. I had porridge (yes, porridge) for breakfast and then it was off to Rumtek. En route we visited the Ranka Lingdum Monastery and the Banjhakri Falls – quite stunning, before paying a visit to the Rumtek Monastery (Buddhist) at 1320 hrs, where a service was taking place – chanting, horns, praying, sacrificial food being prepared and incense/greenery burning. The centre houses some of the world's most unique scriptures and rare objects. It was then a quick visit to Saramsa Flower Pavilion (how Jim Colledge would have loved the cacti!), before returning to the hotel and having supper – again – at the 'Gangtalk', where I had a 'Burger and Fries' – what a pig!

It was an early start on Saturday at 0745 hrs as we had booked a trip to Tsango/Changu Lake, regarded as extremely holy. We had hoped to go further north to the Chinese Border but were not allowed to do this.

You are not allowed to take your own car/van to the Lake and so we booked through Potala Tours and Treks (just opposite the Hotel Tibet), who provided a 4x4, driver and guide. We followed the 'Old Silk Route' to Tibet, and within an hour had climbed

6,000 feet. Again, there was tight security with passport checks. It took around two hours to reach the lake, which was covered in low cloud, though it did lift and we were able to walk around the lake.

I tried to walk on the water but! Some people were being transported on Yaks, many of whom had their red, woolly horn warmers (the yaks, not the people). To the north you could see the snow-covered mountains of Nathula, and beyond these would have been Tibet and then China. The engineering and construction work taking place was quite amazing, at 12,000 ft – I'll tell you about it later. I'm sure I spotted a few M&J Ballantyne JCBs and a couple of Bennie the Joiner vans!

After tea and noodles we set off down the mountainside. The heavens opened and the place quickly turned into a quagmire, with some of the 4x4s struggling to get up the mountain. Because of the conditions we were 'stuck' for some 30 minutes, but we did eventually get back down and into Gangtok. The capital is an amazing town with a lovely shopping mall, a pedestrian precinct and many eating and drinking places. Before heading back to the hotel to collect our luggage, we went into the 'Baker's Café', where I had a Potato Massala Toastie and a Cappuccino, with Eleanor and Philip sharing a Chicken Pizza, though they thought that the chicken may have been bacon! However, they devoured the lot! We returned to the Hotel Tibet, loaded up and set off for Kalimpong. On the way home we stopped at Rangpo for a few things, where a litre of unleaded petrol would set you back Rs 48/- (around 82p).

And so it was back to Kalimpong and to DGH, where Amos and Sham had prepared a delicious Chicken Curry and Rice for us, which was preceded by equally delicious G&Ts and Kingfisher Beer.

Sunday began with worship in the Chapel, with the children singing wonderfully well, as usual. The hymns included "Come, children join to sing, Alleluia Amen", "I will sing the wondrous story", to a different tune which we would sing it to, "Give me oil in my lamp" and "Halle Halle". I then visited a few of the Boys' Cottages (you really can't visit the Girls' Cottages on your own) – Assam, Murray and Heathland. On arriving at Assam, I asked Polo how he had enjoyed his birthday on Wednesday. I had given him a little gift before I left for Sikkim. "Thank you for the presents, Sir. You must have read my mind." "Why do you say that, Polo?" "Sir, I was needing new underpants and socks!" He also got some chocolate, a book . . . and a packet of 'Polos'!

I then paid a quick visit to the hospital, where there were around 18 students, most of them watching the cartoon version of "Mr Bean on TV! As I mentioned in KALIMPONG5, I was treating Philip and Eleanor, Kyle and Sarah, Kevin, Claire and Moses to lunch at the Kalimpong Park Hotel. We had a lovely lunch after which we did a little shopping in town and gave the kids some treats. It was then back to DGH and to Jubilee House.

The kids left at just after 1700 hrs and I walked Kevin up to Willingdon Cottage, where I saw the other boys, mostly Class 12, who were watching a gushy romantic film on TV. I excused myself as there were 'kissing bits' in the film and I became very embarrassed!!!! I then paid quick visits to Wiston, Hart and Calcutta Cottages. There was no supper, as we had made complete pigs of ourselves at lunchtime. News filtered through that the much enjoyed and eagerly-awaited 'May Fair' scheduled for 15/16 May would not go ahead, because of political unrest and industrial action. This was a great disappointment to the children and staff. I had even bought myself a Kurta in Sikkim to wear at the Ball. Hopefully, it will go ahead

on 22/23 May, when I'll be back in Kelso. There will be a two-day strike this Saturday and Sunday; the only traffic which will be allowed to travel will be the military. Apparently last Saturday (8 May) in Kalimpong there had been demonstrations and as we were travelling to the Park Hotel on Sunday for lunch, we were caught up in traffic congestion and delays because of more demonstrations – some Gorkhaland supporters brandishing big sticks.

Monday started with the Senior Assembly. As I came out of the chapel I go chatting to a couple of tourists, who were across from Western Australia. As it turned out the man was brought up on the south side of Glasgow, though his parents had moved to Galashiels – and wait for it – now live in Yetholm!! I think their surname is Rogers/Rodger. I then went down for the Kindergarten Assembly. I had the entire 170 kids all to myself for half-an-hour, along with a couple of minders – the teachers were at a staff meeting. I was able to teach them 'Amen Siakudumisa', and I'll be introducing this to the main assemblies and at Sunday worship. One of the classes I took on Monday was 11B – Political Science – and so I was able to explain to them the intricacies of the British electoral system, and to update them on the recent General Election.

As I strolled around the dining room chatting, I heard the voice, "Sir, you are very handsome tonight." "Does that mean I normally look ugly?" "Oh no Sir, it is just that you look young, young tonight."

Tuesday saw the visit of His Excellency the Consul General of Japan and his entourage. The school band was out and the party were treated to renditions from the school choir, which were quite stunning. In the evening there was supper and drinks for the party at Jubilee House, which was most enjoyable. After school I played at football with some of the senior boys – I don't think they had ever seen legs as white as mine! White legs and a red face, with all the running around. My imminent departure is now becoming more apparent and more real. "But Sir, why not just extend your visa?" "Sir, can't you change your flights?" "Sir, you must stay for the May Ball." "But I must go home to the church." "But Sir, you have a church here." "Uncle, you can stay and be our football coach."

Wednesday was a particularly hot day, and many of the kids struggled in class with the intense heat. I had several classes, one being Class 9C for English Language. Towards the end of period I had said that I had spoken far too much, and that they could finish by doing some private study/reading. "No Sir, please keep talking." Many of them are desperate to learn . . . perhaps because my engagement with them is different to what they have been used to. I don't know. I also visited the wee ones at Lucia King, taking lollipops and the laptop. They were thrilled to see slides of themselves on the laptop. The redecoration/refurbishment of the hospital is going well, and it's looking well. New curtains have been chosen and will be delivered on Monday. It may not be totally completed by the time I leave, but I'll be up there a few times before I go. Everyone knows that the project has been possible through the generosity of everyone at KN&E. On one visit, Sister Sutherland said, "God bless you, Sir and your people. God will richly bless you."

Thursday began like Wednesday – very, very hot. At the Junior Assembly I was sitting in amongst Class 3 girls. Little Elena looked at me and said, "Sir, everyone is saying that you are leaving us. Is this true?" After the Kindergarten Assembly, on my way to the library to do a bit preparation, one of the Prefects gave me a note from the Home Science teacher. She is going to be out of school on Friday and she was wondering if I could take the Class 12 students, periods 1 and 2. I'll be attempting to do a Shepherd's Pie and a Pavlova with them – dangerous, or what?

Stop Press – all schools will be closed on Friday (today), this being associated with the political unrest. So much for my cookery lesson! I took the class on Thursday afternoon and had to tell them that we'd not be cooking on Friday. However, I had written up the recipes for them, and I said that if I could get one or two more supplies, that I would make the dishes at Jubilee House and bring them to school on Monday for them to sample. On Thursday I also had a Class 11 Accounts and Class 12 Commerce – just like the good old days! A Cottage Dance Competition is being held this afternoon and on Saturday, there will be two film matinees – 'Madagascar' for the Juniors at 1400 hrs and 'Romeo and Juliet' (starring Leonardo Di Caprio et al) for the Seniors at 1600 hrs.

My flight has been changed and so I'll be arriving in Newcastle on Friday, 21 May and not Thursday, but still at 1205 hrs.

A new website has been launched for the Homes. Please view it at:

www.drgrahamshomes.net

Please remember everyone in the Homes in your prayers, and until we all meet again, may He hold you in the palm of His hand.

With much love – as always.

Tom