

The official opening of

BAGRI

Baptist Primary School

Reporting on

The journey from
Ougadougou to Lawra

The official opening of
Bagri Baptist Primary
School

Discussions with project
manager Pastor Charles
Karbo

The future work of
the Savannah Education
Trust



Savannah
Education Trust

Notes of a visit to Ghana - October 2006

“Ouagadougou ... less

In October 2006, the Trustees of the Savannah Education Trust visited northern Ghana to attend the opening ceremony of Bagri Baptist Primary School. On previous visits we have travelled to northern Ghana via Ghana's capital, Accra. On this occasion, however, we flew via Burkina Faso – the country to the north of Ghana – which enabled a shorter trip. This report provides details of the visit.

Exotically-named Ouagadougou is less exciting than it sounds. The scruffy, remote, swelteringly hot capital of Burkina Faso was our entry point into West Africa – and the start of our journey to Bagri village. Our last visit in February 2005 was to assess the feasibility of building a school. This visit was to see the completed building and also to discuss future plans.

The manager of the school project, Pastor Charles Karbo, travelled from Ghana to meet us and we spent the night in Ouagadougou before leaving for Ghana soon after dawn. But when, in the first light of morning, we saw the vehicle, our hearts sank. The minibus was the sturdiest commercial vehicle available for hire in Lawra, Pastor Karbo's home town. But its windscreen was irreparably cracked, its tyres were bare and it was impossible to shut the windows. Across the front was the unusual slogan, “Still some friends.”

Soon after we left Ouagadougou the engine began spluttering, and we pulled to the side of the road. After the driver had spent 20 minutes of hard labour patching up the problem we returned to the road. The pattern continued on three or four occasions until we reached the town of Leo, about half way to the Ghanaian border.

From Leo we drove along mud tracks. The countryside was classically savannah and, at the end of the rainy season, the landscape was green and punctuated with small ponds filled with water lilies.

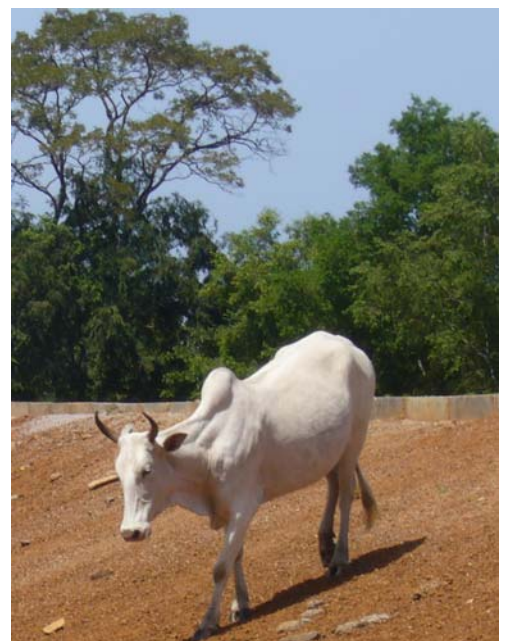
Occasionally we would pass goats, oxen or cows. At one point some monkeys scampered across the bush in front of us. But, in several hours of travelling between Leo and the border, we didn't pass a single vehicle. This emphasised the desperate poverty of Burkina: a country where just 13% of adults can read and where the life expectancy is 47. In its extreme poverty and in its culture the area around Bagri village is closer to Burkina than to the rest of Ghana.

As we suffered continual breakdowns in this remote region, we felt very concerned about how we would ever complete the journey. The driver concluded that the problem was caused by changing gear at low speed. Hence for the last 50 miles, we stayed in the same gear – desperately swerving at high speeds around potholes and animals in the road.

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Eventually we reached the border town of Hamale, passing bored-looking Burkina soldiers and eased through the border control. In this we were helped by a letter provided by the Lawra District Authority, asking that the “three British” be given “passage without let or hindrance”.

We were very thankful eventually to arrive at our destination, although tired and filthy, coated in fine dust from the road. The guesthouse was on the edge of Lawra, the main town in this area of north-west Ghana. It had been open only for a matter of weeks and we were the first guests.



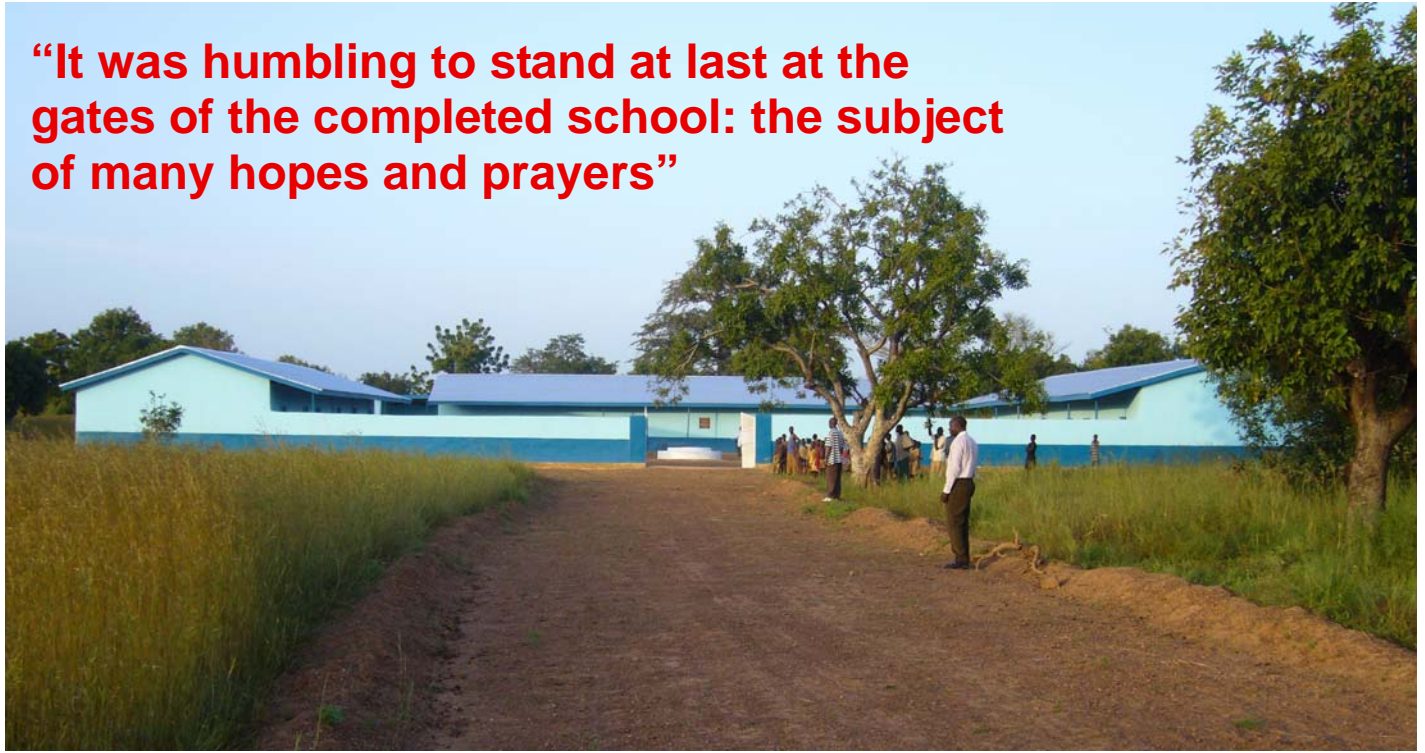
exciting than it sounds”



Clockwise from above: 'Patching up' on the road from Leo; catching up with Pastor Charles; the frontier at last; animals in the road



“It was humbling to stand at last at the gates of the completed school: the subject of many hopes and prayers”



After a cold shower, we drove with great anticipation to see the school in the nearby village of Bagri. In this part of Ghana at this time of year the dirt tracks cut through lush landscape: tall grass with acacia and fruit-laden baobab trees. In the fading light we caught a first glimpse of a blue building through the savannah's greenery. Soon we had turned off the mud track and up to the gates of Bagri Baptist Primary School. After a difficult journey, it was humbling to stand at last at the gates of the completed school: the subject of many hopes and prayers.

The school is entered through white gates, and is based around a large courtyard, bordered by a wall (at the front) and three blocks. To the left and right of the courtyard are classroom blocks, each containing three classes. The block which completes the courtyard at the back is a similar size but houses an assembly hall, headteacher's office, staff room and store area. Behind the school is a cookhouse (back left) and a borehole (back right). The buildings are painted a brilliant blue and were in pristine condition. It was clear that great care had been taken over the work, from the overall design to the meticulous joinery on doors and window shutters.

“An attractive school, absolutely suited to the needs of the children”

The mud core of the structure was built by the villagers, who were divided into three work groups - and who started at dawn each morning. Carpenters, plasterers and other skilled labourers from the local town of Lawra were used to complete the project. Given that construction did not start until November 2005 it was clear that the villagers had worked tremendously hard.

The overall impression was of a simple but attractive school, absolutely suited to the needs of the children. As we left the village the sun was setting on another hot and dusty African day, and children were arriving to collect clean water for their families at the school borehole.





The next morning we returned to Bagri for the official opening of the school buildings. The schoolchildren have, since September 2005, been using a temporary shelter and the chapel building. Prior to that there was no school for these children - indeed there was no possible future other than following parents into arduous subsistence farming. The excitement and delight at the new school was visible on the faces of pupils and parents, who slowly gathered at the school site.

Villagers came from both sides of the Black Volta river, which here forms the boundary with Burkina Faso. As the temperature rose to over 40°C (104°F) the crowds gathered in the shadow provided by the eaves of the school building. We were joined by officials from Lawra District Assembly and the local education office, and were greeted by the village elders.

The ceremony opened with prayer. Then there were a number of speeches: by Pastor Charles Karbo, the Director of the Education Office, the representative of the District Commissioner and by us. The speeches were interspersed by poems and songs performed by the children.

"If the purpose of education is to improve the living conditions of people in society", said the District Director of Education, "then I say 'congratulations', for you have chosen one of the most deprived communities. The inhabitants of Bagri are hardworking farmers and fishermen who have long asked the Education Office for the establishment of a school." He continued, "the establishment of the school has been sponsored by the Savannah Education Trust and we are happy with this timely intervention. It is our hope that the teachers will blend academic work with morality and provide teaching of acceptable behaviour in society to the pupils." He then gave a firm commitment to fund the ongoing costs of teachers for the school.

"If the purpose of education is to improve the living conditions of people in society then I say 'congratulations', for you have chosen one of the most deprived communities."

In a long (and rather political) speech the representative of the District Commissioner echoed these sentiments and welcomed the Trust as a "strategic partner who shares in our visions and dreams."

It was good to be able to address the crowd who had gathered – to acknowledge the goodness of God and the importance of a Christian education.

It was also an opportunity to reflect that many, many people in the UK had supported the school project, and to recognise the hard work of Pastor Charles Karbo. "This school is a great tribute to Bagri community. It is *your* school. You built it with *your* own hands. And it will provide an education for *your* children."

"This school is a great tribute to Bagri community. It is *your* school. You built it with *your* own hands. And it will provide an education for *your* children."

But the day belonged to the children and not the formal speech-makers. They were smartly dressed in blue uniforms: a blue dress for the girls, and beige shorts and blue shirt for the boys. Marching in through the white school gates, they sang a number of songs including one that ran:

"Mama, I want to go to school
I want to be a dentist, a doctor, a teacher
Not an illiterate".

At the end of the speeches and children's performances, we were presented (amidst much noise) with tribal robes. The ribbon on the front gate was cut and a plaque was unveiled:

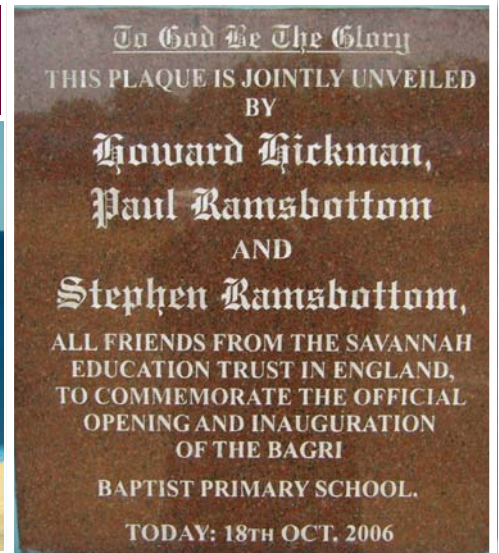
"To God be the glory, this plaque is jointly unveiled by... friends from the Savannah Education Trust in England to commemorate the official opening and inauguration of the Bagri Baptist Primary School, 18 October 2006."

The villagers then began dancing around the flagpole in the centre of the courtyard. Some young men from across the river in Burkina, carrying various agricultural tools, continued dancing until coated in sweat. The formalities were now complete. We left the school with the noise of xylophones and drums still sounding and the hot air thick with the dust created by dancing feet pounding the earth.

Back at Lawra, we were joined for a meal by the administrative and political dignitaries who had attended the ceremony. We were pleased to have an opportunity to talk to them, and to hear again their willingness to provide the school's running costs as well as their sympathy for the ethos of a Christian school.

The electricity for the district failed mid way through the evening (and a backup generator failed 30 minutes later). But the darkness gave us a clear view of an electric storm that swept across the area, lighting the night sky and bringing strong winds and a violent downpour of rain.

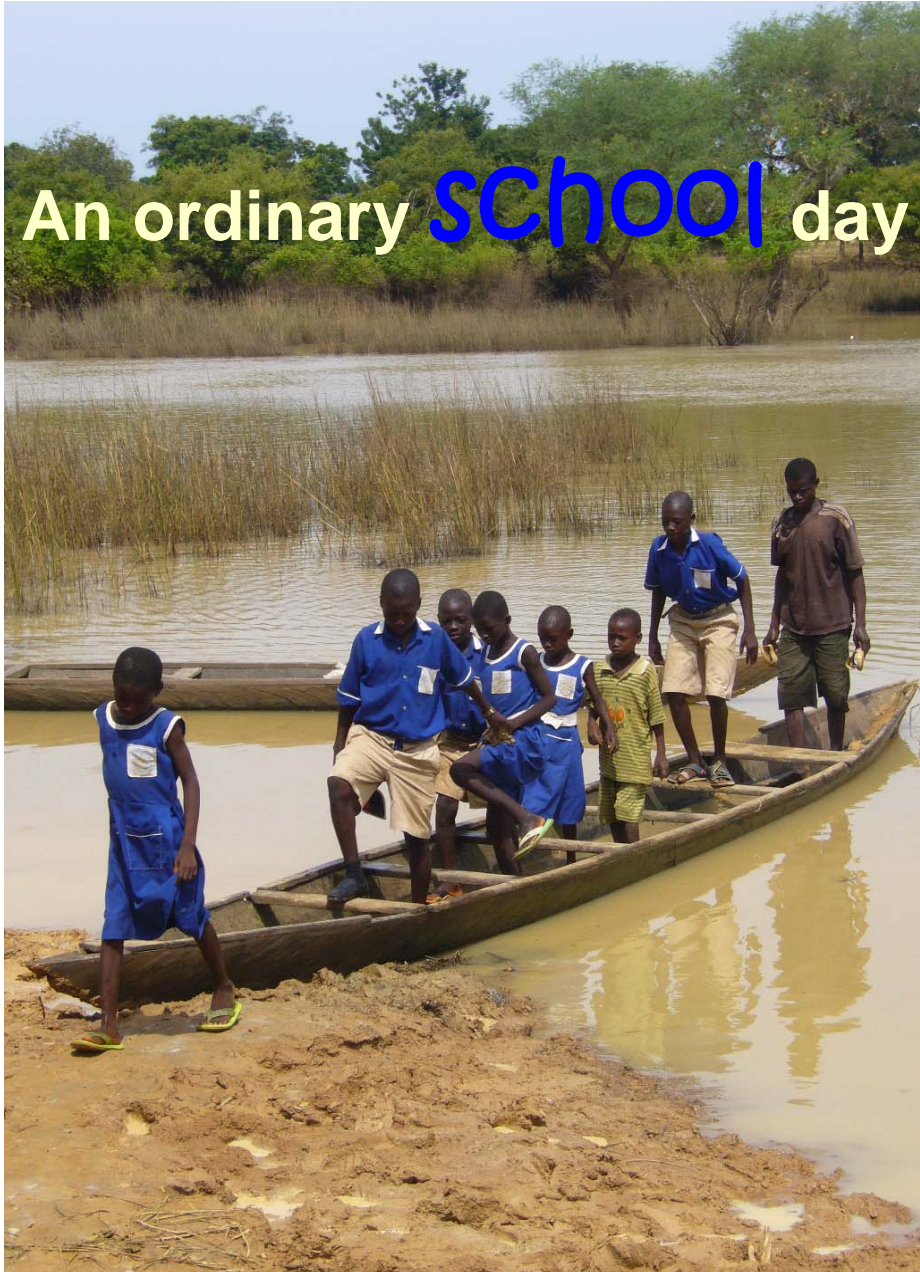
The opening ceremony



Clockwise from top: The trustees in ceremonial dress; the unveiled plaque; a performance by pupils; officials from the Ghana Education Service; the community celebrates; pupils marching; a future pupil?



An ordinary school day



After the excitement of the opening ceremony our last full day in Ghana gave us an opportunity to see an ordinary day at the school. When we had last visited the village, eighteen months ago, the children were obviously malnourished and poorly clothed - spending much of their time in the bush looking for food. It was good to see them marching across the bush in their bright uniforms, eager to arrive at school. Those who come from the Burkina side of the village have to travel by boat and we went down to the riverside to see children arrive in a shallow canoe. At this time of year, just after harvest, the river overflows its banks. At other, drier, times of year, the children can simply wade across the water. As we watched, many of the children drank the filthy river water: an example of a practice that should, with time, be eradicated by the school.

On arrival at school, the children assemble in the main courtyard, before going to their separate classes. There are currently three classes, containing some 100 children each. The government are paying for two teachers (including the headteacher), and the school is being assisted by three further assistants – who have received scholarships from the Trust and who will, if the Lord will, eventually train as teachers. The school is governed by the Baptist chapel (which is about 200 metres further up the main track through the village) and the church is responsible for the religious education.

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We visited a class, and saw them enthusiastically learning English. We also took the opportunity to talk to one of the older girls, called Fati Imoru. She walks nearly two miles to school each morning, and is from a family with four girls and two boys. As well as attending school she has to fulfil her household chores: including sweeping the house and supplying the family with water from the borehole. She told us that her favourite food is beans, and when she had the opportunity she enjoys clapping and skipping. Her ambition, she said, is "to become a teacher or a nurse". Interestingly at the end of our conversation we learnt that she comes from a Muslim family. It is clear that all the families in the village have welcomed the new school in their midst.

The provision of a meal for each child each day, paid for by the Trust, has allowed the poorest children (including girls, who are often overlooked) to attend school. It was moving to watch at lunchtime as the children lined up with containers that they had brought from home. The cook, whose wages are paid by the villagers, had produced a huge cauldron of rice and beans. This meal not only keeps the children from being hungry, but also helps free their parents to send them to school – on schooldays they know their children will be fed. It was rather touching that a number of the pupils came over to us and offered to share their small portion. The most obvious signs of malnourishment – such as swollen stomachs – were already absent in these children.

Following the simple lunch, we walked a little way into the savannah to meet the local tailor, who is also a deacon at the Baptist church. Working on an old-style treadle sewing machine he creates the school uniforms. The Trust has provided the funds to buy the material, and parents pay for the tailor's labour. In some cases, however, where parents are so poor they cannot even afford these modest costs, the Trust has contributed the full cost of the uniform. In this way, no child is excluded from school because of extreme poverty. Of course, the scheme also helps to provide employment for the tailor.

Opposite: The ferry from Burkina and the walk to school. **This page from top:** Fati at home and school; class P2; two of the five scholarship students







The compound of mud buildings that formed the tailor's house is typical of houses in this village. The main cluster of small buildings is grouped around a courtyard, typically containing a smouldering fire as well as pots, pans and the graves of ancestors. Off the courtyard are various outhouses storing other earthen vessels, and sometimes goats, guineafowl or chicken. A crude, wooden ladder leads up to the roof where corn is drying. There is no furniture in the house: adults and children alike sleep on the floor, highly susceptible to malaria, onchocerciasis (river blindness) or other insect-borne diseases. Despite their extreme poverty, the tailor's family wrapped a small present of guinea-fowl eggs for us to take with us.



The afternoon was spent at the guesthouse, talking to Pastor Charles Karbo and Sammy Dapilah, a trained accountant, who is now helping Pastor Karbo with the work. We were pleased to receive detailed documentation relating to the building work, including receipts and a set of accounts. The afternoon also gave an opportunity to discuss future work.

While the school building is fully functioning, it is clear that it would be improved by further facilities: teachers' accommodation, a nursery block for younger children and toilets. It is planned to build three modest houses for the teachers and their families. This would ease the pressure on teachers, who all currently have to cycle long distances to school. It will also make it easier to recruit to this remote region, and provide a welcome help for teachers struggling on very low salaries. The nursery block is similarly more important than might at first be apparent. In this region parents of necessity work in the fields, and the older children (particularly girls) are often required to look after the younger children. A nursery block is therefore crucial to ensure full attendance of all children at school throughout the year.

During the course of the afternoon and evening, a succession of people from the local Education Office and District Assembly came to visit us. Each new arrival ordered a round of Coca Cola (which in Africa comes in traditional glass bottles). Whilst grateful, by the time we reached double figures we found the Coke

hard to stomach. There seemed to be a genuine appreciation of the work of the Trust, as well as many requests to continue helping in the future. We discussed the future path at some length with Pastor Karbo, and agreed that the immediate priority is to ensure that the school at Bagri continues to function properly. We indicated, however, that – subject to the Lord's will – it might be possible to consider a further Baptist primary school in another village in the future.

Throughout the week, we had been concerned about our return journey to Ouagadougou – conscious of the possibility of missing our flight due to an unreliable vehicle. It appeared, however, impossible to rent any alternative transport. We were therefore very thankful on the evening before our departure to learn that the paramount chief of Lawra (also a top Ghanaian civil servant) had lent us his vehicle: a sturdy four wheel drive.

“The children of Bagri village – despite the great hardship of their lives – now have a Christian school providing a basic education and a simple meal each day”

On our last morning we set off at 5am and had an uneventful five hour journey back to Ouagadougou, spending the afternoon in Burkina's bustling capital. There was a delay on the return flight but, after landing in Niger and changing in Paris (having missed our connecting flight) we were soon reunited with our families again.

We were thankful to return safely. We felt it a great privilege to be able to see the beautiful school building at Bagri and to spend time talking to Pastor Charles Karbo and others involved in the project. Above all, we are thankful to be able to report back to supporters that the children of Bagri village – despite the great hardship of their lives – now have a Christian school providing a basic education and a simple meal each day.





For more information, and the opportunity to donate, please look at our website www.savannaheducationtrust.org or contact:

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