Making History in Sudan

A trip to Sudan isn’t usually top of the list of destinations for school trips but students and staff from Gordon’s School in Surrey recently spent a week in the capital city of Khartoum.

**The visit is believed to be the first by a European school.**

The visit proved irresistible as the co-educational boarding school near Woking shares a unique history and connection with Sudan’s capital city Khartoum. For the School is the national memorial to the British war hero, philanthropist and martyr General Charles Gordon and was founded following his death in Khartoum in 1885.

The Surrey school also houses a huge bronze statue of General Gordon astride a camel, which originally graced a crossroads in Khartoum. And one of the Gordon Foundation trustees is Tom Gordon, great-great-great nephew of General Gordon!

The invitation for the historic visit came from Samia Omar and her husband Osama Daoud Abdellatif who co-founded the Khartoum International Community School (KICS). They were keen to establish links having discovered Gordon’s School when helping their son with a school project on General Gordon!

Then last summer Gordon’s School welcomed the then British Ambassador to Sudan, His Excellency Michael Aron.

The DAL Group of companies in Sudan which supports KICS part funded the trip, which included a boat trip along the Nile and to the Meroe Pyramids; tour of the National Republic Museum; camping in the desert; tea at the British Embassy. Along with their partners students also watched a screening of the film Khartoum, starring Charlton Heston, in the school’s amphitheatre.

Links were made with representatives of the Woman’s Education Partnership in Khartoum, a charity which funds women’s literacy classes, university scholarships, medical care, HIV/AIDS awareness and support and teacher training programmes. Each week students from KICS provide English language conversation classes to the women from WEPs.

Gordon’s students joined them as well and gave the women gifts of English grammar books and stationery.

A seminal moment came when Tom Gordon, General Charles Gordon’s great-great-great nephew, shook hands with a direct descendant of the Mahdi, currently Vice President and Minister for Trade (whose son was a Gordon’s School pupil in the late 1990’s!).

Now Gordon’s in England and KICS are determined to develop and maintain links. And an exchange visit is already planned!

In preparation for their trip, The David Buckland Trust paid for students and staff to learn basic Arabic language skills.

And students from both schools were buddied with each other and were communicating regularly before even meeting.

Once a draft programme was agreed, information was sent to parents of students in Years 10 to 13, making it clear this was to be no ordinary school trip. They were told ‘it will be a hot time of the year with some travel out of Khartoum, camping one night in the desert. Students would need to be aware of cultural sensitivities and be ready to participate willingly in all activities.’

Gordon’s advised that the trip would be of particular interest to students considering studying international politics/relations or development studies.

Victoria Wright an A-Level student at Gordon’s asked to go as she is keen to work with NGO’s in the future. While admitting: “It wasn’t my idea of a typical holiday destination”, she said she is already exploring the logistics of returning there.

“Everyone we met was so hospitable and friendly and approachable”.

“The hardest thing was driving through the desert and seeing these people living there. I don’t know how they survive. There was no water. It was quite shocking.”

She and the girl she was buddied up with are now firm friends and from the outset found a common interest in Manchester United Football Club. The two continue to keep in touch.

Letters from HM the Queen (Gordon’s School Patron) and the Lord Mayor of London (Vice President of the Gordon Foundation) were presented to KICS as well as a model of General Gordon on his camel. Tom Gordon planted a tree in the grounds of the Khartoum school to commemorate the visit.

In her welcome, Samia Omar enthused: “I believe it has been a truly enlightening and educational experience for all concerned. We hope very much that we will build lasting links between the schools and are already in conversations about different possibilities…”

David Lelliott, Charge d’Affaires at the British Embassy in Sudan has offered his support in the educational links between the two schools and it is hope that the new partnership will extend to further visits as well as placements for Gap students from Gordon’s; teacher experience and joint MUN (Model United Nations) activity.

For the Gordon’s School Bursar, Sue Meikle the highlight of the visit was the way the students interacted with the women from the Women’s Education Partnership Charity and helped them with their English conversation classes.

The whole experience had been “fantastic”, she said, adding that they had been welcomed wherever they went.

On his return, Tom Gordon commented: “It was a pioneering trip….I thought the students were brilliant. They entered into a world totally alien to them and threw themselves in head first and with enthusiasm. The way they mingled with KICS students and made friends was inspirational. They [the Gordon’s students] took everything thrown at them…”.

Describing his meeting with the Mahdi as “amazing” and “surreal”, Mr Gordon said: “It was the most incredible trip. Life changing for me finally to be in Khartoum and Sudan. Life changing.”

Richard Whittington, Chairman of Governors at Gordon’s School commented: “…we sincerely hope that this will be the start of a unique and valued partnership between our two schools, a partnership through which students in both schools may develop an understanding of issues beyond their immediate boundaries. Our heritage plays an important part in this school’s life and to know that we are providing this current generation of Gordon’s students with this opportunity is widely celebrated.”