

Building a house in Homabay,

Kenya July 2018



If you are reading this, we probably owe you a big THANKYOU for donating to this build and helping pull a family out of poverty. You also gave Dad and me an amazing life changing adventure too which we are very grateful for.

Sunday 22nd July – drive from Nairobi to Homabay

We set off early for our 9 hour drive, in mini buses, westwards to Homabay near Lake Victoria, which would be our base for the week.

Initially, Nairobi seemed pretty much like what you would expect a capital city to look like. There were skyscrapers, smart houses, apartments, decent roads and giant billboards advertising products in English (most Kenyans speak English fluently). However, the normal city scenes soon give way to the outskirts where for me the culture shock began. Most of the buildings seemed quite ramshackle, with lots of roadside stalls covered in polythene, selling vegetables and fruit, with people washing cars at the side of the road, using buckets of dirty water from the ditch. It was the first indication of the widespread poverty in Kenya. People and animals were living in piles of rubbish along the side of the road using scraps to make houses and trying to eke out a living by selling whatever they could grow or make. Vendors would have stalls by the roadside and many people waited at speed bumps to run up to car windows offering bags of produce. At one point I thought I saw a man buy a bundle of TNT, off a child through his window, but then I realised it was sugar cane not explosives.

Eventually, we got out into the countryside, which looked green and fertile. The people in the countryside looked slightly better off than those in the city slums as they had more animals, food and space.



We drove through the rift valley at one point which is a famous tectonic fissure running down Africa and contains the big five (leopards, lions, elephants, rhinos and buffalos).

We didn't see any of the big five there, but we did see groups of baboons and lots and lots of herds of sheep, goats and cows grazing at the side of the road and often being tended by children.

When we arrived in Homabay, we booked into our rooms and had an excellent meal in the top floor of the hotel that overlooked Lake Victoria. Then we got to know our team members and local guide James (the locals go by western names as well as their native names as we find them hard to pronounce). We learned more



about the family we were building the house for, the local culture and the build schedule, along with the health and safety briefing. The power did go out during the presentation though. This is a common occurrence in Kenya especially outside Nairobi but the hotels generator kicked in in a few minutes. Power cuts occurred daily for the rest of the trip.

Day 1 of building - Monday 23rd July

We Left the hotel for the building site about 8am, and then were stopped just outside of town by the police. We heard afterwards that this often results in a bribe, but we were let pass without one, because of all the Habitat T-shirts.

We soon turned off the main road onto dirt and gravel roads. We bounced around on these roads for about an hour enjoying what our driver referred to as the “African massage”. We passed people walking miles to school and work. Eventually, we turned off the road and went bouncing across field tracks and riverbeds to get the small settlement where the building site was located. We found out later, that most of the grownups had never in their lives left the area, and before the build, no motor vehicle had ever been to their village. In the end it took us over an hour and a half to cover twenty two kilometres.



When we arrived we were greeted with dozens of people cheering and waving branches and singing. We were welcomed out of the van and shook hands with everyone. We were then led to a gazebo that had been set up for us next to the build site. We sat down opposite the crowd of locals while the local village council gave speeches and introductions. We were introduced to Mama Penina who looked after two grandchildren and a niece

She is currently living in a two room crumbling mud hut and lives off goodwill from the community and odd jobs. Their diet consists of maize that is grown locally and pounded to a powder that is mixed with water and cooked

into something resembling tasteless mashed potatoes. Her water comes from a pump the government installed which is an hour round trip and the water must be boiled before drinking.





After the introductions we got to building. The materials were already on site and the builders had dug trenches and laid concrete, so our first job was mixing mortar with spades and ferrying bricks. The experienced builders on our team and locally hired ones, positioned the bricks and we filled in the gaps and put mortar on top.

Some of the local kids had taken the day off school to be part of the excitement, so we started getting to know them at lunch break. They were very happy but dressed in rags. Some of the group had brought along toys which the local children loved. They were also fascinated by digital phones and loved having their picture taken. We were also the first white people they had seen and were fascinated by our skin which they kept rubbing to see if the paint would come off.



We also had "tea" breaks. Which included Kenyan tea which seemed to involve boiling tea leaves, water, sterilised milk, coffee, sugar and hot chocolate together. We also had jam from a tin with triangular donuts.



Lunch was local dishes provided by a nearby catering college, which included beans, rice and stews. We all ate together in the tent. After grace, our group would choose from the buffet along with our bus drivers and the Habitat council. Then the locals would all get food too. After the first day we got five

courses of bricks up and drove back to the hotel tired. After a meal, reflections and a shower we collapsed and fell asleep.

Build Day 2 - Tuesday 24th July – building the concrete base.

We woke up sore but had another “African massage” on the way to the site.



Work started on site by levelling the ground and backfilling the trenches.

We then shovelled in earth by the barrowful to make the foundations inside the bricks level. Next we put rocks in, some of which needed smashing. I found it fun and tiring using a hammer to break rocks in half, the others soon decided to leave the smashing to me and Haoming (Chinese teenager educated in the UK) we used our teenage aggression to smash rocks to bits. After the rocks came a sandy dirt that we barrowed in while the builders set up side boards around the edges.

Over the dirt came plastic sheeting to block moisture. Over that came the concrete.



This day was the day we got the most done as we had thirty people working on the site and it was a cloudy day. We were also full of energy and many hands made light work. Also most of the work was low skilled labour that our team could do.



We moved hundreds of rocks and dozens off barrows of dirt then we mixed a ginormous batch of concrete and barrowed it onto the plastic. The recipe was nine bags of cement each one weighing about a small adult. Then came forty barrows of aggregate (gravel) and forty barrows of sand, along with two bathtubs worth of water. This was then mixed in a pit in the ground with spades.



The water we used for concrete didn't come from the government pump. That water was too precious and rationed. Instead there were four girls who spent all day carrying water in buckets on their head from a pond to the site. Michelle, a lady on our team, accompanied them on one of the trips and found it hard to carry water on her head. One of them asked her "how do you carry water to your house then [if

not on your head]". This was a culture shock as they couldn't comprehend having multiple taps in a house.



At the end of day two we had a mass photo over the fresh concrete that nobody thought we would manage to lay that day. We insisted the water girls were included as they were a vital but unsung part of the build.

Build Day 3 – Wednesday 25th – up go the walls

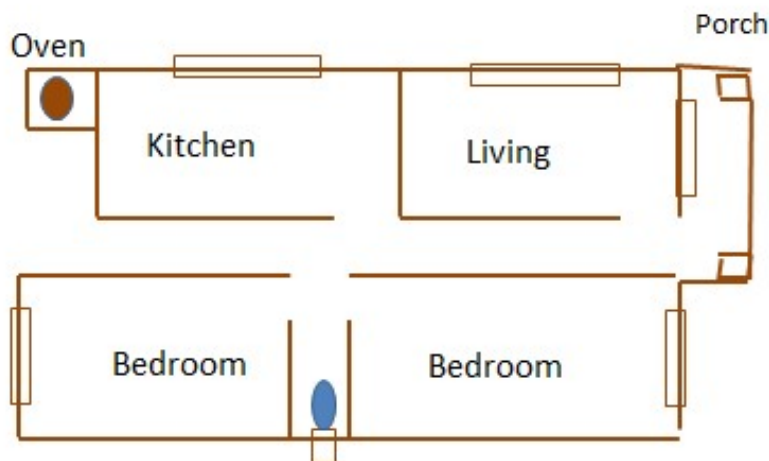


Build Day 4 – Thursday 26th – walls up to window height



We got 5 courses of bricks up today (maximum height allowed, to prevent the wall from becoming unstable). The walls were now too high to work on, so African scaffolding was put up. Long branches were bashed into the ground and home-made planks were nailed in place.

The house was going to include a porch, a living room, kitchen with oven/fireplace, 2 bedrooms and a simple toilet. No running water or electricity.



We had fallen into a routine by now. Get up, get breakfast, have a long African massage, build course of bricks, have a tea break, more bricks, lunch, more bricks then back to the hotel for a shower then dinner and reflections before sleep.

Build Day 5 – Friday 27th – preparing for a roof



We helped get the last course of bricks on the top of the wall, then worked on wiring together steel bars to make reinforcement for a concrete ring beam to go on top of the wall to tie the house together and give stability.

We noticed that the children's uniforms, although always clean were often worn out and torn. Having seen the stalls at the side of the road, I realised that most of the clothes they wore were second hand, probably from western clothes banks, which get exported for sale at low cost in developing countries. The builders had none of the protective gear we were wearing, gloves, boots, helmets, mostly wore ripped wellingtons or cracked and broken shoes or even plastic sandals, no gloves. We wore gloves at all times and had to pass bricks. The locals had no gloves and tossed bricks. I started off with a pair of strong material gloves that by the end of the first day were ruined so I switched to gardening gloves.



We wound metal wire round metal poles to create the ring bar that went on top of the walls. Either side, the builders nailed planks. The concrete would be poured into the trench and set around the metal that would strengthen it. This concrete ring bar would then support the roof.

We also did a bit of landscaping to make a slope up to the veranda.

Build Day 6 – finish up and closing ceremony



It had rained during the night, which made certain parts of the dirt road extremely muddy. A big lorry was stuck, which made getting past it very tricky. We got out and walked the last part of the route, across the fields to the building site. We passed the local drinking water bore hole pump where the villagers got their water. We also walked past the local public toilet - a

hole in the ground, surrounded by a wooden fence covered in dried banana leaves.

We were keen to get as much done as we could, so everyone was mucking in, mixing and carrying concrete, passing it to people on the scaffolding, to pour into the wooden troughs.





As it was the last day, the local people had been preparing a celebration for after lunch. There were official speeches of thanks, from the committee chairman and from Mama Penina, who everyone thought looked so happy and years younger than at the beginning of the week. This was rounded off by singing and dancing, which was amazing. The singing was so joyful

and loud!

The Habitat project manager translated some of the songs, explaining that mostly they were praising God for the miracle of sending people from thousands of miles away to build a house for a poor woman who had next to nothing. The build had also turned Kennedy, Mama Penina's alcoholic son, around. He was sober for the first time in years and was helping with the build, he had seen people from thousands of miles away helping his mother who he had abandoned his children with. He and the local builders would continue after we left to complete the house.



We were sad we couldn't get the roof on but the Habitat people told us we had set a record as no build had ever got the scaffolding up while the foreign team were still there. We also beat the American team from a previous build who had only got up to window sill level!





Reflections

On more than one occasion, the house build was referred to as a miracle. And what is a miracle? I believe it is when God makes use of people and resources in the world to do something which

ordinarily may seem impossible. Habitat in Kenya identified a village; the local committee chose Penina and her family; people across the UK donated to the fundraising and 14 lucky people got to travel out there and be part of the build team. The wider community pitched in and helped moving bricks, carrying water, mixing cement. In fact, some of the most enthusiastic helpers were our drivers (Tim and another Kennedy), who normally wouldn't have been expected to get dirty.

Compared to us, the people in that village have very little in the way of material things and money. But we have so much to learn from them. They take real enjoyment in the simple things like friendships, conversations, sharing food and they are very much present in the moment, not distracted as we are by so many things in our lives. It's clear they have a strong Christian faith, which naturally features in their everyday lives. They are not embarrassed by it, and they are always giving thanks for the good things they have in their lives.

It was an unforgettable experience working on the house build. There was an incredible team spirit, not just the Habitat team, but the local builders too and the people from the village. Building a house for one family had an impact on the whole village and the surrounding community.

It's made me appreciate more some of the things we take for granted, like having clean water coming out of the tap, a decent home to live in. So, if anyone is remotely interested in taking part in a Habitat build, I'd highly recommend you go for it. It's an experience of a lifetime.

Oliver & Darren Sampson