

Lebone Village A bit of Heaven on Earth

Cass and I celebrated our Golden Wedding Anniversary in Sept. 2012, and because of work commitments in South Africa, Roy Booth, who was the Best Man at our wedding was unable to join us. Instead he invited us to stay with him and his wife Shirley, in Cape Town and so we flew out there in January, 2013.

I had heard lots about the Lebone orphanage, in Bloemfontein, from Tom and Jan Luke. Tom was a Deacon in the South West Cumbria Methodist Circuit at the time, and he and Jan had visited Lebone quite a few times, always telling us of the wonderful work and progress they had seen during their stay. I was also privileged to sponsor one of the boys Siphso Busby, and was kept informed of his progress. Sadly Siphso became very ill in 2011 and was in and out of hospital over several months. Whilst he was ill, Avril and Willem Snyman, the administrators of Lebone Village, were touring England and other European countries, and visited Barrow-in-Furness. I was able to talk to Avril about Siphso, and she forewarned me that the doctors had told her he was very very ill, and may not be there when she got back to South Africa. He finally passed away in Sept, and I felt very saddened that he had so short a life, but knew he had been loved very much at Lebone, and they had done everything possible to make his last few months special. I was thankful that he no longer suffered and was safe in the arms of Jesus. I still read the Lebone Light with great interest and always marvelled at the continuing progress, and amazing wonders being achieved at Lebone, but felt I had somehow become detached without Siphso.

When we reached Cape Town, we spent time with Roy and Shirley and I felt we were so near to Lebone that it would be wonderful to go and see for ourselves this amazing place. After contacting Avril and Willem, Cass and I decided to hire a car and motor up to Bloemfontein to visit Lebone Village, 1,000 ks away but not a difficult journey, for, as soon as we left Cape Town, we were on the N1 a major road, the whole journey. We took two days to travel there, and arrived early on Wednesday, 30th January, finding Avril and Willem's home courtesy of Mrs. Satnav. On our arrival we were made to feel so very welcome, by Avril (Willem was already at work), who said we were to sleep in the garden room – a little haven in their grounds, so we were immediately made to feel very much at 'home'.

My knowledge of the origins of Lebone was a bit sketchy so Avril explained to both of us, just how it had all begun, by Jaine Rist's love of children and the fear of what would happen to all the orphans, caused by the loss of their parents through AIDS. The story was so intense and Avril's reluctance to get involved for almost two years, was very moving. Finally after many months of inner turmoil – to use Avril's own words, she said yes to God's call and agreed to open Lebone House – which seemed an impossible task at the time. Willem offered to help out one day, when Avril was taken into hospital and realised that he also was also desperately needed at Lebone, so gave up his job and joined Avril in this great challenge.

After we had settled into our Garden Room, Avril drove us out to Lebone Village (its new status), and we were able to see for ourselves just how the tiny seed had grown and flourished over those 12 years, into a Garden of Eden.

Our first impression was a very welcoming gateway with a huge picture of happy children. Lots of trees and flowers everywhere, and gardeners busy in the fields. The impression of joy stayed with us all that day and the next, the love was so strong from everyone – especially the children – that we were overwhelmed by it all. . As Avril parked the car we met Brian, who has alzheimers, and is busy chipping paint off a large flower pot, 'his job' – which seems to give him great satisfaction and allows his wife to work as a volunteer gardener.

The main entrance leads to a reception area, in the new admin block, where the walls are covered with a montage of photographs and newspaper clippings of events at Lebone. Each year South Africa celebrates Mandela Day, where people are challenged to do something special for others. One of Lebone's extra special helpers was Morgan Freeman the American actor who visited and helped paint a room on a Mandela Day. The admin block has well equipped offices, printing room, and a kitchen. From here we could see a massive orchard which give them very necessary fruit for the children and staff. Fields are full of nourishing vegetables, and 'the tunnel'– a huge greenhouse, to grow extra food was impressive. As with most farming they have their problems, too much rain has caused the crops outside to drown, too much sun has made the tunnel food wilt!! but Willem ever the optimist continues to overcome these difficulties.

When we met Willem, we knew at once where Avril received her practical support and love. He was so welcoming, with his following of dogs, who seemed devoted to him and moved only when he did. They consisted of a great dane, which affectionately would 'lean' against you and trap you up against a wall, much to Willem's delight, who would roar with laughter. Then there was a white Alsatian, a beautiful animal which he had rescued when it had been shot in the leg, and an assortment of medium to smaller dogs, equally devoted to him. His job that day, was putting up guttering, which later he told us hadn't happened, as he had been called to see to so many other jobs, and this apparently was the way of things. Next day he was installing a large tank with a pump to catch rain water, off the roof of a huge workshop where Willem kept his 'big boy toys' the electric welder, and metal working tools, to name but a few. As diesel fuel, was shooting up in price he was fitting a 1,000 litre diesel tank, for use in the vehicles and farm vehicles – and the cost to fill this was huge, 'We'll need R7,000 to fill it' he tells Avril'– 'I haven't got it says Avril' and once again they rely on their great faith to find the money – which I found very humbling. They have a large shed where originally 100 chickens gave them sufficient eggs for the children and to be sold for extra income – the chickens were also sold off when too old to lay. Sadly through theft the number of chickens is now down in number.

Avril introduced us to LuLu, a much treasured member of staff, who took us around to show us what was happening at the moment. So much activity everywhere. The children have always slept in dormitories but now an old block was being changed into new bed rooms, singles and doubles for the older children, to give them 'space' to study and relax. Outside the new bedrooms – was the original entrance, and I notice plaques hanging in the trees – these turn out to be in memory of sponsors who are no longer with us and I noted the name of Bill Spears on one of them. Happy sounds and lovely aromas were coming from the bakery where smiling faces greet us. This is another way of raising revenue, as well as food for the children. I wonder where the children are, the older ones are at school, Lulu explains, which I should have realised, but then she takes us to see the little ones– and what a beautiful sight – lots of activity. The preschoolers are playing outside on swings and on the climbing frame, and also in and on top of the shell of a car, all looking so happy and busy. As soon as we got out our cameras they started to smile, wave and shout CHEESE!! wow. There is just one little girl standing alone, who isn't joining in, and I learn that she is quite new and shy – I just felt drawn to her. Next day she allowed me to hold her hand and I felt so much love for her, it was amazing. Maybe I will be allowed to sponsor her – she is called Kqotsofatso. We learn that there were 100 children at Lebone at one time, but now just 64, as they are sometimes returned to the care of their wider families, which is wonderful, but sadly does not always work out for the best.

We are driven to see the city of Bloemfontein by Lulu's husband John who acts as the Lebone driver. He takes us up to the highest point of the city, where recently a huge sculpture of Nelson Mandela has been erected. He is one of South Africa's most famous and loved person, having given so much of his life to help bring the people out of the difficult times of apartheid. We can see 360° of the town from here, but have to make a dash for the car, as the heavens open. John drives us then to a park and on the large lawn is an awesome sight – an army of bronze statues 'matching' towards us, depicting all the people who have played an important part in South Africa's history.

We learn from Avril that fontein means fountain (or spring) in Afrikaans, and bloem means flowers – so Bloemfontein was built where blossoms bloomed around a water supply. This explains why we have driven through so many towns with fontein as part of their name – the early Dutch settlers obviously set up camp where there was a water supply – and so the towns were born.

Later the school bus appears, and brings the older children home from school, and returns some of the little ones to their own homes, they do not all sleep at Lebone. I am introduced to the older children and ask if any of them remember Tom and Jan Luke, a sea of hands shoot up, and I realise that Tom and Jan have made a real impression on these children. Lulu introduces each of the children by name, which I find daunting as I know I will find it very difficult to remember even one. She points out the twins, who I remember were taken in as very premature babies, but are now healthy 6 year olds. One of the older boys Pule, comes to talk to me and he has written a letter to Tom and Jan and asks me if I can give it to them. I tell them we are leaving for England soon, and another of the older girls asks me if it is cold there and will I need a jumper, three sometimes I say, and a coat, a hat, gloves and boots, she finds it difficult to take in.

The school bus is the second one they have had, as their first bus was stolen from the grounds – a huge hole cut in the fencing and the bus taken. Quite astonishingly they are given a much bigger and better bus quite soon afterwards, God seems to provide all the time. This new one is now kept bolted to the floor at night and they have had razor wire installed around the perimeter, and were also having surveillance cameras fitted. We were to see later that secure premises was a must in many areas of South Africa.

On our second day, Cass goes off with Willem, to help, and take some photographs and I go along to the classrooms to spend time with the children. The staff and resident children are waiting for the bus to bring in the other pre-schoolers. I try doing some action songs with them, and they respond well – even adding some more verses to one song, which they seem to know better than me (like the song - by your pupils you'll be taught). We end up playing ring a roses – and of course the falling down bit is the best bit, I am delighted. As the bus children arrive the children give in their school bags, with their lunches and its 'toilet time'. I was touched to see one of the more extrovert little girl, take Kgotofatso's hand, and lead her into the toilet, pull down her knickers and sit her on the potty, so caring.

Cass and I had brought two tins of chocolates and two small jars of sweets from home and we went into the play ground and the children were asked to line up to receive these. One of the staff handed out the chocolates and I offered the sweets to another line of children. It was very moving to see one little boy, who pulled out two sweets stuck together, but he didn't put them both into his own mouth, but pulled them apart and gave one to another little chap at his side – such a simple act but one of love. The children line up for class after chanting with one of the teachers. I do not appreciate what they are saying at first, then realise the teacher is saying The

bible says 'love one another' and the each child turns to the next one and gives them a big hug.

I sit in with the little one's class and enjoy watching them colouring, then go into the middle class where the teacher is showing them drawings of parts of the body and asking them to colour them a certain colour, which they have to select from their pencil boxes – these I note are empty food tins – what a good idea. Reminds me of how we improvised in playgroup days. One by one the children disappear, and I realise they've gone to the toilet, teacher goes with them and one of the smarter boys in the class takes over and follows on with the lesson!!

Later the school bus brings the older children back home, and I take the other tin of chocolates to share with them. The children were having a snack – which I guess children all over the world do after school, and receive the chocolates with thanks. Somehow the chocolates stretch a long way, to all the children and around the volunteers and staff as well – (just like feeding the 5,000) some left over for another day,

The morning we leave Avril and Willem's we noticed a bird flapping in their swimming pool, Avril fishes it out with a large scoop and takes it to 'Dr Willem' 'he will know what to do!' It was only a baby bird, but Willem declares it strong enough to survive. Perhaps all the children in Lebone are like little birds, and their lives have been scooped up, by Avril and Willem, who take them into their care and nurture them in the Lebone nest of love.

Then its time to leave, and I weep, feeling so overwhelmed by having been touched by Avril and Willem's love, and sharing for such a short time the challenge they were living each and every day. I felt we had been so privileged to share just a very short time at Lebone, and to witness the miracles performed by Avril and Willem and their staff, not only for the children but so many volunteers and their families. The initial pebble of love was thrown into the pool by Jaine and the ripples have spread so far, and just keep spreading. To go to Lebone Village was akin to visiting a bit of Heaven on earth.