STITCH BY STITCH, BEAD BY BEAD: A SHERBORNE CONNECTION WITH KENYA

When King Charles III announced his Birthday Honours for 2024, local philanthropist Jacqueline Comyn (Jax) was awarded an MBE in recognition of her dedication to supporting education in Kenya. This represents a hugely well-deserved tribute for her years of quiet determination and community-building. Sherborne is equally proud to have played a small part in supporting this remarkable journey.

As we emerged from the Covid years, Jax Comyn and I hatched a plan to create and stock beaded belts in House colours. This scheme gained momentum, permission was gained within the School, parents ordered the first belts by email and the School Shop began to take over sales. Pupils started wearing belts which reflected both their House spirit and their support of an inspirational cause. From September, Headmaster Simon Heard has made it compulsory for junior pupils to wear these beautifully crafted, intricate, colourful belts as part of their uniform.

The story is remarkable. Jax is the mother of Henry Comyn (d 09), a former Head Boy of Sherborne Boys – a legacy that stretches further back still, as her brother, Tony Batcup (d 82), was a Head of House. "I remember coming to Commem," says Jax, "and saw my brother in a straw boater, which I guess they wore in those days. Very smart and he was so proud!". And the connections run even deeper. When I came across Bushbells (www.bushbells.com), the enterprise Jax founded, I was struck by an unexpected link to Kenya, where I had once taught. To my astonishment, Enoch, the skilled artisan behind the collars and belts, turned out to be someone I had actually met years earlier during my time there.

Bushbells was born eighteen years ago, when Jax and her mother Anne began selling kikoys to raise funds for an extra classroom at a small rural village school in Watamu, on the Kenyan coast. It was a modest beginning, but the impact was profound. The

If you think you're too small to make a difference, try spending the night with a mosquito.

(African proverb)

initiative gave security and opportunity to Sammy, a gifted tailor who had recently been widowed and was raising three children by himself. Today, his eldest child is graduating from an international university in Nairobi, an extraordinary achievement considering his starting point.

The original Bushbells school was completed in 2014 and served around 200 children. When it eventually became self-sustaining, Jax and her team launched a sister school, *Bluebells*. Founded in 2016, it now boasts nine classrooms, a computer room, a magnificent library, and three outdoor learning spaces. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, Bluebells thrives. It supports 250 children with fourteen dedicated staff members and is known locally for its excellence.

The sale of Bushbells' belts to our pupils through the School Shop has had tangible results: funds have provided solar panels and fans for key school buildings at Bluebells; furnished the library with sturdy tables, and created outdoor reading areas. Anyone who visits Kenya - particularly Watamu where the schools are built, will recognise the warmth of the people, the beauty of the land, and the richness of the culture. Bluebells school now welcomes volunteers. Every item sold supports a meaningful missio - crafted stitch by stitch, bead by bead. And now Shirburnians have the opportunity to wear their belt with pride, as a symbol of opportunity, hope and the shared thread of humanity which connects us all.

Stephen Byrne
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