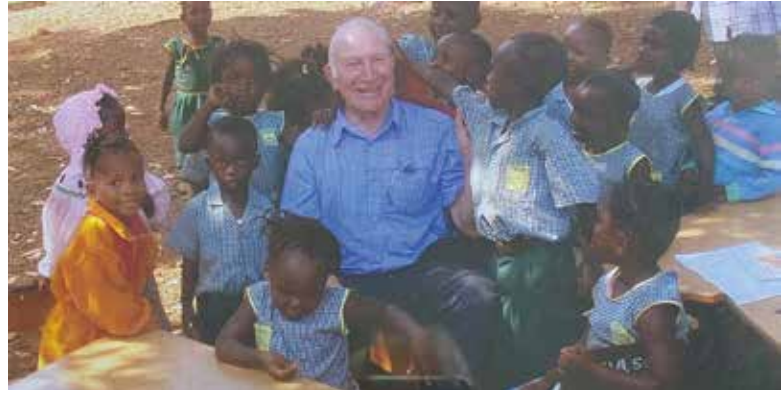


Ever Ready

In the Footsteps of Civil War



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My grandfather, Dr Laurence Read, having graduated with a degree in Zoology & Botany and taught Biology in London, moved to Sierra Leone in 1967 to help those less fortunate. There, he became Principal of Peninsula Secondary School in Waterloo. Situated roughly twenty miles east of Freetown, it is the country's sixth largest city.

Sierra Leone is about the size of Wales and has a population of 6.3 million and a long association with Britain, having been a settlement for freed slaves in the eighteenth century. 23 languages are spoken, reflecting settlers from across Africa. It achieved independence from the British Empire in 1971.

After teaching for several years, my grandfather returned home and studied medicine at St Bartholomew's Hospital, London. He became a consultant in paediatric orthopaedics, pioneering a treatment for congenital club foot. One of the first patients to receive his treatment subsequently competed in the Paralympics and carried the Olympic torch through Worcestershire in 2012 in recognition of his achievement.

In March 1991, civil war began in Sierra Leone. Rebels sought to overthrow Joseph Momoh's government and seize control of the 'Blood Diamond' – gemstones mined under brutal conditions – trade. They seized diamond-rich areas, using the proceeds to finance insurgency. Approximately 20,000 children were forcibly recruited for combat and

mining. During the late 1990s and early 2000s it was estimated 4% of the world's diamond production comprised Blood Diamonds from Sierra Leone. Notwithstanding, GDP per capita fell to \$174 in 2001.

On 6 January 1999, rebel forces murdered, mutilated and raped thousands of civilians in Freetown. It took three weeks for West African peacekeeping troops to restore order. Aided by a UN mandate and Guinean air support, the British Operation Palliser finally retook the capital. In January 2002, President Kabbah declared the civil war over.

It had claimed 75,000 lives, caused 500,000 Sierra Leoneans to become refugees and displaced half the country's population. Waterloo suffered particularly, owing to its strategic position. During the war, Sierra Leone was anointed the world's poorest country by the UN, reflecting the breakdown of authority and services including medicine and education. Life expectancy fell to 41.8 years and 1,270 primary schools were destroyed. By 2001, 67% of children under sixteen were not in education.

Laurie Read retired from the NHS in 2005. On an exploratory visit to Waterloo with his wife, he found houses torched, people murdered, and Peninsula Secondary School ransacked by rebel soldiers who had burned desks, chairs and books and stolen anything useful.

During this visit, to their surprise, a member of staff in their hotel – a student he had taught forty years before – exclaimed, "Dr Read, you came back". News spread, and the following evening dozens of former students appeared to reminisce over beers and discuss the atrocities and cost of repair.

Returning to the UK, Dr Read founded the Waterloo Schools Charity to redevelop nursery, primary and secondary education through three associated schools. The charity works through local organisations including the District Council, chiefs, and elders of the township, the schools' boards of governors and the Peninsula School Old Student's Association (POSA). Many members of POSA were students when Laurie was Principal and hold important positions in Waterloo and Freetown.

When I was a child, my family and many in the Worcestershire community where my grandfather lived filled containers with classroom equipment to be shipped to Waterloo. Later, my sister visited with my grandfather to teach, and overheard one man say to another, "I think I may propose to the new pretty blonde teacher". His friend replied, "Ask the other lady, not her; she is Dr Read's granddaughter and off-limits".

Laurie returned to Sierra Leone, working as a trauma and orthopaedic surgeon for two years, and offered his services to the Cambodian 'Killing Fields'.

His charity receives income through direct debits and ad hoc fundraising. The donations have funded clean-water pumps, teachers, learning materials and a nursery playground.

When my grandfather died in 2014, his widow and other trustees established the Dr Read Bursary, which supports Sierra Leonean children through university. One beneficiary, Kenneth Kromanty, is now one of the charity's trustees.

We are keen to continue the Waterloo Schools Charity. More information can be found here: waterloo-schools.org.