

Memories of DMJ

Sr June Bell.

In 1948, my Mum, Dad and I at last were able to move back to our house in Shirley, Croydon after 8 years living with my grandparents in Hertfordshire (during and a bit after the war) where I had passed a scholarship to Cheshunt Grammar School which was co-educational. So I needed to find a new school to go to. Croydon High School I knew had paying pupils as well as scholarship girls, so I did not want to go there because I thought there may be pressure to buy special equipment etc which my parents could not well afford. Selhurst Grammar would have meant two buses each journey and I used to get sick on buses. So it meant trying Coloma, which by then was a Voluntary-aided Grammar School. On arrival for my interview, I looked up at the Board displaying the name of the school: 'Ladies of Mary – Convent Grammar School for young ladies'. I thought 'oops, hardly me!' While waiting for the interview another girl said she also was not a Catholic, she was a Christian!! I at least knew enough to know that Catholics were Christians... I had never spoken to a nun before, although I had seen some while living near Hoddesdon, so I was terrified at the thought. Anyway when I arrived at the interview I found her less intimidating than my previous Headmaster. She looked at my school report and seemed quite pleased, saying it looked as if I could be a Maths or language teacher - prophetic! Anyway I was accepted. I found out later that Mother Mary Cuthbert had only just become the headmistress.



Archbishop Amissah

In 1973, Sister Barbara Batten (who was then a member of the General Team) was asked to take over the responsibility for the formation of the Infant Jesus Sisters in Cape Coast, Ghana, from the Holy Child Sisters. Archbishop Amissah of Cape Coast had begun the Diocesan Congregation a few years earlier. It was thought that a companion should be sent with Barbara, so the Archbishop was asked what role he would like fulfilled. He said he needed a Maths or Science teacher for St Teresa's Minor Seminary at Amisano, near Elmina which is a few miles along the coast from Cape Coast. So I was asked if I would be prepared to go there. Well, when I was in the Novitiate in Forest Hill, there was the missioning of the first five Sisters going to Uganda and at that time I'd said Africa was too hot and if I were to be a missionary it would have to be somewhere cold! Now there was the prospect of going to Ghana (formerly the

Gold Coast) which had been called 'the white man's grave' and not only hot, but very humid too!! Anyway I agreed to try it for a year, which in the end stretched to ten years! In October of that year, Barbara and I were waiting for our visas when Archbishop Amissah, who was in London at the time, managed to finish the process and arranged for us to fly on the same flight as himself to Accra in mid-October.

On arrival at Accra I remember feeling as though I'd been wrapped in a hot, wet blanket! I couldn't see properly because of the heat and just followed the Archbishop. He took us to a Guest House in the University of Legon. It was stiflingly hot, so we tried the air conditioning, but it made such a racket that we turned it off again! It was very difficult to sleep as there were so many strange noises - some sounded like children screaming! It was the sound made by a tree bear apparently.

During our journey from the airport I remember being shocked by the Archbishop's way of speaking to people - like a medieval despot! I discovered later that in fact he was very concerned about people, especially his driver. One can't go by first impressions! He was always good to us and expressed his gratitude for what we had done. When I left he gave me a gold cross and chain.

The next day the Archbishop took us to Cape Coast. Barbara then went to the Infant Jesus Convent to be initiated into their ways while the Holy Child Sister was still there. I went to the Holy Child Community where they had a secondary school for girls. In that community was Sister Mary Clara Eales who had been teaching at Amisano for a year already. She was also a convert and before she entered she had worked for the BBC where she met Janet Brown who had later entered with the DMJ – small world! Clara and I were picked up each morning to be taken to Amisano and were brought back again in the afternoon. As we drove in that first day, I could see many of the boys looking curiously at the car, wondering what this new teacher was going to be like! Some said "You are very fresh" - i.e. I had pink cheeks! Some said "You are too fat"! Later I discovered that they used 'too' often when they meant 'very'.

The Amisano driver was an interesting character. Although the road along the coast was made-up (done for Queen Elizabeth's visit several years earlier), the road from Elmina to Amisano was just marram and full of potholes. In the dry season everything around was covered in orange dust whereas in the rainy season it became a sea of mud with huge puddles (some more like lakes!) and cars often got stuck trying to pass through. The local children were very happy to help push the car! Anyway our driver drove bare-foot and the way he moved around the potholes was amazing. When he was not driving, he would lie on a low brick wall, just one brick's width and go fast asleep! No-one ever saw him eat, but they said he drank akpeteshie, made from fermented and distilled palm wine. Fr Bergervoet, our science teacher said he used it for his science experiments as it was nearer pure alcohol than what is usually obtained for the lab! The driver also sometimes went hunting at night. One time he brought us a small deer! I was able to watch some of the preparation of it – a split in the hide, then a blow through to loosen the skin which was then removed and the animal cut up to be cooked for our supper that evening. That was the freshest meat I'd ever eaten and I think the first venison. It was absolutely delicious!

It was very difficult to get to sleep at night because of the heat, but after several days, I went to lie down when we got back about 2 p.m. and fell fast asleep, only waking when it was already dark and almost supper time!

One 'first' while at Holy Child was to go out to join the pupils in watching a film outside in the evening. It was slightly cooler in the evenings.

After about a fortnight, I moved up to the Infant Jesus convent which was at the top of the hill. Some of the Sisters and postulants made altar breads and I often helped too in the evenings. The postulants tried to teach me a bit of Fante (the local language). One evening one of the Sisters

Sr. Felicia, Sr. June and Sr. Teresa Clements...Plus pets.



(Felicia) sat on a stool to work at the altar breads and sat on a scorpion which bit her. They say that scorpion bites are the most painful of bites and necessitates a visit to the hospital for an injection. Somewhat embarrassing on this occasion!

There was also a dog called Justice. She gave birth to puppies while I was there - right under my room, so I

heard a racket, went down and found the little ones on the concrete floor. I was afraid she would get aggressive if I touched the puppies, but I managed to ease something into the area for them to lie on. Eventually all went quiet again. Felicia always took over care of pets, so she looked after them from then on.

At one time, Sister Felicia acquired a monkey and tied it to a tree with a long rope. I remember it lifting up my skirt as if to look under it! It probably wanted to groom me by removing any fleas etc!! One day everything had been prepared for Mass and the cruets with the water and wine were there ready when the monkey escaped from its tether, got into the chapel and drank the wine! It was so funny afterwards watching it run and jump around, quite drunk!

One effect of the heat and humidity was a vast amount of insects, many of them biting and some so small you couldn't see them, but felt the bite! One time I had a hard lump on my leg which we suspected was the result of a bite, so I went down to the Holy Child school nurse. She immersed my leg in what felt like boiling water, then into a bucket of cold water! Anyway I survived.

That was the year of the petrol crisis, so eventually the Rector of the seminary, Father Van der Laar, a Dutch S.M.A. decided that two rooms should be vacated on the ground floor so that Sister Clara and I could stay there during the week and return to Cape Coast at the weekends to save on the petrol used taking us to and fro each day.

Soon after that, I got my first attack of malaria. Since the girls at Holy Child had 'flu at the time, I thought at first it was that, but it was soon obvious that it was malaria. One of the priests and one of the sixth-formers, Bobby Benson, came to see me. It was very kind, but I felt so awful I didn't want to see anybody!

The first time I stayed at Amisano at the weekend, we had Benediction and the altar cloth and the servers' cassocks were all pristine white, but it had rained in the afternoon and they'd put on the lights and of course there were masses of flies (or flying ants) which went to the lights then fell all over the altar and the boys. I really thought I would be on my way home after that!

Another time I was there for Benediction, I popped to the loo first and saw a snake (tiny) in the loo!! I hurriedly went to the next - door loo! Later on a tiny snake was seen slithering along the verandah.



Amisano

We had mosquito netting on the windows, but there must have been some torn netting in the corridor as I always had lots of them in my room. I tried killing them using the flat of my hand, but they usually escaped so I then tried using the back of my hand which was more effective. I used to kill them on the netting before going to Mass in the morning - one day I counted 40!! Sister Clara and I often played some kind of game in the evening and I was always plagued with the mosquitoes whereas she was not. I found out that she did not sweat as much as she should and certainly nothing like I did!

One All Saints' Day I went to Elmina beach with some of the boys (and presumably other Staff). The sand was so hot it burnt my feet as I walked. I got into the sea and wanted to keep under the

water, but some of the boys asked me to teach them to swim, so I held them up to get used to floating. Of course I was then sunburnt. The next day, I went into class and the boys said: "Sister, you're red!". They'd probably never seen a white person with sunburn before. I just said: "And you're black!" (very politically incorrect these days!).

During the Christmas holidays I went to Cape Coast University for a Maths course. I was surprised how advanced the Maths was. There, I found the Ghanaians hesitant to talk to me - so different from everyone I had met so far, especially the villagers who didn't understand English, but would always greet us with a smile and handshake. We were served our dinner on a plate and at first it seemed huge, but I soon learned (as the Ghanaians would say) to eat it all by the time the course ended!

During the 'Summer' holidays, I went for another Maths course in Kumasi. I was assured that I could stay in a room while the occupant was away. However she returned in the evening! Everything was amicably resolved. The course was for teachers and I found that many understood very little Maths! The journey back by bus was something like four hours. I wanted to go to the toilet, but was afraid to get out of the bus when it did make a 'comfort stop' in case it would go before I'd found my way back! The rest of the journey was somewhat uncomfortable, but I arrived home safely!!

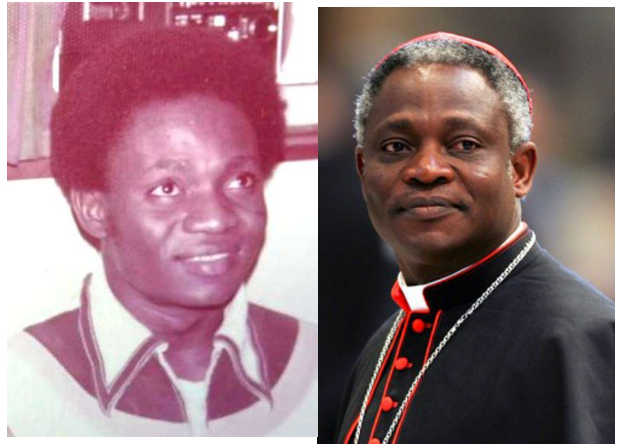
It was around May 1974 that Barbara left to go to England and then on to California where there were meetings. I don't think it was a Chapter, but a Plenary of some kind. We were expecting her back I think in September or October. I had a letter from a Sister which said Barbara had a bad cold which went to her chest and had a clot on her lung (after she returned from California). However I knew that Sister had a tendency to exaggerate or be a bit 'imaginative' and since I heard nothing from anyone else, I was not too worried. I had just returned to Amisano for the Autumn term when a telegram arrived to say Barbara had died. You can imagine the shock to me and to the Infant Jesus Sisters! Then one day, I was in class when the Archbishop came and said "You're coming with me to Accra to meet Sister Peg"! It meant a stay overnight, so I had to rush and get my things, then travel to Accra with the Arch. I had no idea who Peg was at that time - she had been known as Mary de Fatima before I think, but we'd never met as she'd been in Uganda. I can't remember too much about it except the Arch taking us to a Lebanese restaurant for a meal. He had several Lebanese friends.

After a while some bungalows were built – one for the Ghanaian priests, one for us Sisters and one for the Holy Cross brothers. As time went on the Dutch SMA Fathers retired to Holland and a Holy Cross Brother became the Rector. Later still, Father Martin Essilfie was appointed Rector and eventually the Holy Cross Brothers also left. Sister Clara went to Nigeria where she had originally intended to go ten years before! That left me as the only white person on the compound.

In the early days, Father Matthias Nketsiah joined the Staff having finished his studies in the States, but he didn't stay long as he was appointed to a parish. Sister Clara and I felt sorry for him as there were no other young priests and only one elderly Ghanaian priest who soon moved on, so we invited him to come and play Scrabble with us. He also tried to teach us a bit of Fante – not very successfully, I'm afraid. One time while I was home on leave staying with my parents in Angmering, he came to England and actually stayed the night with us. Now he is the Archbishop of Cape Coast.

In 1980, I travelled with Sister Felicia to the Keta-Ho region to attend the ordination of one of my first sixth form class – Cletus Egbi. That was an experience – the whole village celebrated for about a week, but we didn't stay that long. Later on he became the Health Administrator for his diocese and in that capacity he met Mark Mantey who is well known by the DMJ. A few years ago he was made a Monsignor. He has been to England a few times and has come to visit me here. The last time was last year. 1980 was also the year that Pope John Paul II visited Ghana and I went to the Cathedral in Accra for that occasion. Cloth was produced at that time with his image on the design. I made a dress out of it.

Another young priest who came to Amisano to teach after his studies in the States was Peter Turkson. He was chosen to preach at the Silver Jubilee of Archbishop Amissah and I remember thinking he did a brilliant job. He was also a great tease! He went to Rome for further studies and returned to Amisano for a short time before going on to the Major Seminary. When Archbishop Amissah died as a result of a car crash, Turkson was appointed Archbishop of Cape Coast. One year he came over as chief celebrant for the International Mass at Southwark Cathedral, so I went and met him. He still had his sense of humour! Later he was made a Cardinal and then was called to Rome to be in charge of Faith and Justice. When Pope Benedict retired our newspapers had Turkson as his most likely successor. The media are not always correct in their predictions!



While I was still at Amisano, another of my first sixth form class came to teach there. I remember him challenging me to a race during the Sports Day during my first year! I said I couldn't run in that heat for a few inches, never mind yards!

Since I left, several of my former pupils have taught at Amisano, some of them have been the Rector.

There was one time in the holidays, I was out working in the garden and I saw a cobra slithering along the wall of the bungalow. Fr Martin Essilfie threw a bunch of cassava sticks at it. Even he was afraid to go near. Eventually, he managed to kill it. Another time I was in our sitting room and caught movement out of the corner of my eye and then saw a green snake wrapped round a plant I had in there. I went to get help, but I don't think it was poisonous, just a green tree snake. Another time, Sr Clara and I had been playing cards in my room in the evening and there were no lights. Clara returned to her room and felt a splash directed at her eye. She washed it and thought perhaps it was a frog or something. The next day she saw movement and it was a big snake. She came out to get help and some of the boys and priests came to look. They couldn't see anything, but saw there was a big box, so suspected it might be in there, so they gingerly dragged the box into the verandah, using sticks and things. When they poked at it the snake appeared to a grand reception of flying sticks etc. which eventually killed it. Another time I saw a golden snake slithering over the beds where I'd planted tomatoes and cucumbers, but it disappeared into the bush. The tomatoes and cucumbers didn't come to anything– watering had to be done by carrying buckets from the house (as long as we had running water!), so I was waging a losing battle. The pineapples did well though. It was tough weeding between them though and I often

had arms covered in scratches, but the taste of a fresh, ripe pineapple was well worth it! Sweet and juicy without the acidity that is in those bought here.



Srs. Regine, Peg,	Joan Maria , Jen and June
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As years went by more DMJ came to Ghana and we would often meet up in Ofoase or more often Akim Swedru. One time at Ofoase I remember an army of ants passing through the house late in the evening when it was dark. Bridie Doherty was there at the time and what she didn't call those while trying to get rid of them.....!

Another time I remember it raining when we didn't have running water and a Sister went out of a side door in her swimming costume to have a shower!

One time in Akim Swedru Corinne gave an injection in my rear, probably for malaria.

Before I eventually left Ghana Peg took me on a grand tour taking in Kumasi, Bolgatanga (where we visited two Anglican Sisters we had previously met in Cape Coast), Tamale and Wa (where Sister Carrol Regina worked in the Diocesan Library). We even managed to take a detour into Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso). The North of the country is very different. It is a very dry heat there. It is necessary to drink lots of water. I can remember picking up a glass from a shelf and it was hot. Any washing done would dry in a matter of minutes!

One final memory of Ghana is a competition I had with one of my former students to see who could eat the most fufu (made of yam or cassava and plantain, cooked and pounded – very hard work!). When I first arrived, I thought it looked like putty and tried just a little, but I gradually managed to eat more. The Ghanaians use their hands to eat it, taking a portion and dipping it in the sauce or soup, but I never did – I liked more of the soup! Anyway, I didn't win the competition, but I did hold my own pretty well, eating a large portion!