

A regular advertisement in a free north Dublin newspaper reads “You have met the spoofers now meet the Real Roofers”, well Detective Garda John Byrne, Gardai Mairéad Holly IPA, Stephen Cullen IPA all attached to Lucan Garda Station, detective Garda Aidan d’Ardis of Ballistics Section, Technical Bureau and a group of Irish friends are certainly no spoofers, they are builders, roofers and decorators with an established and growing international reputation. Their services do not appear in the golden pages, for their collective expertise is available only for philanthropic projects on behalf of the Friends From Ireland Charity, they are currently assisting a charity called “Working for the Children of Watamu”, of which John Byrne is a trustee.



Edwin S. Handcock

By Edwin Handcock



FINGAL

When The Irish came to Watamu

Watamu is a small village on the north coast of Kenya, overlooking the Indian Ocean situated 120 kms north of Mombassa. The name *Watamu* means *Sweet People* in Swahili, this stems from the days when Arab slave traders plundered the area distributing candy to entice the natives and then capturing them as slaves. Prior to the 1990's the village was a haven of tranquillity for the natives until the tourist trade decided to take advantage of their majestic 7km long beach of white sand and its

coral reefs. Fortunately the area is part of the Watamu Marine National Park and is protected from exploitation. The weather is dictated by the Trade Winds, hot during the north eastern Kaskazi, cool and wet during the southern Kusi.

Our story begins in January 2002, when Sue Hayward and husband Dave from Lancashire, UK, visited a school in Watamu. They were shocked when they saw 130 toddlers sitting on cold stone floors in ramshackle buildings learning their arithmetic by counting pebbles, no desks or chairs, no books, pencils, paper, or blackboards. They returned to England and established “Working for the Children of Watamu” as a registered charity. They subsequently added three new classrooms as the number of children had now more than trebled, installed electricity, computers, lighting, fans, library and supplied all the necessary aids that teachers require. However there was one vitally important requirement lacking, and that was a proper roof to keep out the rain.

While all this was going on John Byrne and a group of volunteers went to Namibia in September 2005 with the ISPC and built an adventure playground for disadvantaged children in the remote desert region of

Spitzcoppe. John had previously been involved in the Hilary Hunter Kenya Fund and was anxious to get involved in building projects in that country. Incidentally John and his wife Niamh spent their honeymoon in Kenya in 1998. In March 2006 he made contact with Sue Hayward and informed her that his group was looking for a new working charity project, with the result that they agreed to raise the necessary funds to travel to Watamu and roof the junior school buildings. In September 2006 a group of 19 Irish volunteers not only roofed the school but painted it and to the sheer delight of the children constructed an adventure playground for them. The bushes which can be seen growing in the school grounds are known locally as *Forty Remedies* for their medicinal properties.

The charity then decided to build a secondary school in order to complete the children's education prior to entering the workforce; it was also felt that the school was a place of safety away from the temptations of the street, the hazards of living on the beaches and most importantly the lure of tourist cash in return for services that should never be known to children. In March 2007 a team of volunteers from our *Friends From Ireland* group drawn from all walks of life including D/Garda John Byrne, Gardai Mairéad Holly IPA, Stephen Cullen IPA and D/Garda Aidan d'Ardis returned to Watamu where they



Roofless secondary school on 12/03/07. Note medicine bushes preserved in playground.

roofed and completed the new school consisting of five classrooms, decorated it and made desks, chairs, cupboards etc. However before this task could be undertaken, they had to fund the project and I can do no better than quote verbatim John's colourful description of the ingenious endeavours of the group to successfully finance the programme;-

"It never ceases to amaze me the lengths that our volunteers will go to in their efforts to raise money for these projects. So far for example, they have raised cash for the kids by running marathons, playing poker, selling cakes, shaving heads, waxing unmentionable parts of their bodies, some lads have dressed as women and run around the streets of Dublin, there were music sessions, race nights, quiz nights, they had wine tasting evenings, they have packed bags in stores, stood in the downpours outside churches, pubs, sports clubs and schools, jumped into, not only the Irish sea, but the Atlantic Ocean at Christmas, jumped out of airplanes, bungi jumped, ran 10K underground, sold raffle tickets, filled sponsorship cards, begged from family, friends and colleagues, and they have rattled boxes, buckets and tins under the noses of everyone they have encountered. To them all I say a huge thank you".

They created history on the far side of the African continent by holding a remarkable St.Patrick's Day parade in Watamu, the likes of which had never been witnessed by the locals before. In Kenya parades are usually politically motivated, therefore permission had to be obtained from the local Chief of Police who had never heard of St Patrick. John gave him a history lesson on our patron Saint and explained the custom of parading in his honour wherever the



D/Gda Aidan d'Ardis and Gda Stephen Cullen IPA

Irish were gathered together and further stated that the march would include four Irish police officers including one dressed as the Saint. Permission was duly granted with the chief shaking his head and stating "You Irish-you are crazy".

The parade was led by a prancing six foot St.Patrick alias Aidan d'Ardis festooned in green, white and orange with matching hat, flowing white beard, waving a large tri-coloured hand and blowing a horn. The Irish volunteers were joined by all the children of the village, many dressed in their school uniforms accompanied by their teachers, some on foot others on bicycles, others proudly carrying Irish flags, local musicians joined the procession, the adults lined the streets and watched in amazement as the parade progressed through the village to the beat of African drums.

One local elder stated that they had never before seen anyone march just for fun, let alone with children, teachers, flags and a Saint, the Irish it seems are a strange race. He also assured John that the event would become part of local folklore and be retold again and again in a story for others to hear. So in years to come a Kenyan "seanchai" will sit beneath an acacia tree and retell the legend of "the day the Irish came to Watamu-and they brought St.Patrick too".

The next project in Watamu for the Friends From Ireland group will be the building and equipping of two workshops, as not all those who finish school will have an academic qualification. The boys will be taught such trades as electrician, carpentry, cobbling, woodwork, metalwork, building etc, and the girls will learn about hairdressing, dressmaking, the use of sewing machines etc.



Finished secondary school on 22/03/07



D/Gda John Byrne, Lucan

Sadly there are many orphans in Watamu due to diseases such as aids and malaria, some are just abandoned, unwanted, unloved, and others are being cared for by brothers and sisters who in reality are no more than mere children themselves. The charity has acquired land and plans are in hand to alleviate this situation by funding and building what many would call an orphanage, but which they prefer to describe as a "Happy Home", for there will be nothing Dickensonian about it. In Sue Hayward's words "*Ours will be a happy home, if you stand outside you will hear laughter and singing, when you enter there will be happy, healthy smiling faces, they will go to sleep at night in a bed and wake up to a breakfast*".

The volunteers who work for this charity receive no expenses whatsoever; they must pay their own way in full and raise the finance to purchase the building materials that they will need, this is real grass roots charity in action. In relation to the construction of the Happy Home I quote from John, "*This will be a huge undertaking in terms of fundraising and as a building project all hands will be required, so be warned, conscription may be on its way (however we may allow you*

to buy yourself out for a reasonable donation)" Is there a diplomatic hint here for more IPA readers to get involved? Those who answer the call are assured of a warm welcome.

John has now registered "Friends From Ireland" as a new Irish charity. Because of the ventures that they have undertaken he has been requested by other charities to assist them in renovation or building programmes in various African communities ranging from coastal villages to clinics in the bush. They will undertake projects, source materials, local labour and tradesmen to assist their volunteers. The strength of this charity comes from the dedication of their volunteers who fundraise and participate directly in the projects on site.

The charity is looking for funding and volunteers. To become involved you don't need a trade, just enthusiasm and a sense of adventure. In John's words "don't give me that age stuff or the I can't really do



The playground built in Namibia

anything line, if you are willing and would enjoy working within an African community then contact me, if you would like to make a donation or fund raise-contact me, if you are just curious-contact me, so far I have heard many say they were useless, but when they were finished on one of the projects they promptly went home and went DIY mad".

The charity has set up a bank account, AIB Acc.No.19361015 sort code 93-35-62. Their website is www.FriendsFromIreland.ie John can be contacted on mobile 086 2434128 or email johnab@eircom.net. Those in the job can contact him at the Incident Room in Lucan Garda Station 01-6667300.



St Patrick's Day Parade in Watamu



St Patrick impersonating Aidan d'Ardis



St Patrick escorted by friends