



## Wimbledon College Group in South India

**A** group from Wimbledon College travelled to Southern India with the aid of the Bursary Fund. Here is their story...

Nothing prepares you for India! Before leaving we had spent several months preparing for our visit but from the moment we stepped out of the airport in Bangalore on the evening of 8th July our senses were reeling, the noises, the smells, the vast number of people and the traffic were like nothing we had ever experienced.

We were met by Fr Eric and Sister Sophie, two of our hosts and taken to the hostel where we would stay for the next few days and there we had the first of the Indian meals which would be our diet for the next four weeks.

During our first days in Bangalore we went through an induction process with talks on Indian culture, the caste system, the role of women and the plight of the dalits. We went into the city centre where we met some street children and this was a challenging and emotional experience for us all.

The children were very small, maybe only five or six years old, at first they were begging sweets and money from us but it soon became clear that they also wanted attention as well so we spent some time talking to them and playing with them and it was a real wrench to leave them. Faced with this poverty some of us began to wonder what it was going to be like in the village where all the people would be poor.

On our last day we visited different temples to get an understanding of the different religions of India. We visited a mosque, a Jain temple, a Hindu temple and a Sikh temple. We had talks in each of them and learned a lot about the different faiths but also about inter-faith work.

Soon it was time to start our journey to Pannur. If the airport had been an eye-opener the railway station was a real adventure. We were the only westerners and as such a real source of interest to the hundreds of people on the platform. The train was great fun, we were in a carriage full of bunks and as we settled for the night time journey, hawkers came through the carriages selling drinks and food. Eventually we settled down to sleep and at 4.30 in the morning we were woken as we approached Raichur.

We got off the train in the dark and had

to pick our way over the bodies of people sleeping on the platform - they were not waiting for a train, this was their home.

Once on the bus we made our way slowly along a very poor road towards Pannur, two hours away. As we made our way out of Raichur we saw a pack of dogs chase and kill one of the wild pigs which wander around the streets of the towns, it wasn't a pleasant start to the day.

Daylight started to lift as we drove, along the roadside we saw evidence of the villages, the houses were mud and straw, animals lived alongside the people. Again we wondered what we had let ourselves in for and as we approached Pannur the noise in the bus became less

During the two weeks we built a volleyball court, two gardens, dug three feet deep holes to plant mango and cashew nut trees, dug a huge pond and fountain, because Fr Eric wanted the children to have beauty in their lives as well as a school, and painted the temporary school building. We also collected stones from the quarry to build the foundations of the new school. It was exhausting work but fun.

All too soon it was time to leave Pannur to go on the next part of our journey, a pilgrimage to Goa. After another extraordinary train journey, this time during the day, we arrived at the Jesuit Retreat House in Goa late at night. The next day we awoke to find ourselves on a headland

overlooking an amazing beach. We had Morning Prayer on the beach and then some time to ourselves. For a few hours we felt like tourists. In the afternoon we travelled into Old Goa and visited the Bom Jesu Church, where the uncorrupted body of St Francis Xavier is kept. Because we had two Jesuits travelling

with us we were allowed to have Mass in the Chapel where the saint's body rests. We were also invited to meet the Jesuits who look after the church.

The next day it was time to travel back to Bangalore, there was some time for shopping and then we spent an afternoon evaluating the experience. We also spent the Feast of St Ignatius with the novices in the Jesuit Seminary. This was a really interesting day as they were the same age as us. It was fascinating to find that the Jesuits are inundated with volunteers, unlike in Britain.

It was an amazing four weeks, we worked hard and got to know others in the group and ourselves much better. We met the most astonishing people, the Jesuits who were inspiring, the people of the villages who were welcoming and generous despite having nothing, and the children whom we will never forget. We did a lot of work, played and lost two cricket matches, one of which was reported on local TV, and made lots of new friends. We also went on a very long faith journey. For each of us in different ways it was a life changing experience.

**Signed: Tom Jepps, Stephen Taylor, James Greenwood, Ben Mottershead, Mario Gibezzi, Tomek Lasocki**



The group and some of their artwork outside the temporary school structure in Manvi

and less. Then we arrived, as we drove into the compound the bus was surrounded by a mass of smiling and shouting children.

We got off the bus; our bags were taken from us and we found ourselves trying to communicate with these engaging and energetic youngsters.

Two of our teachers had been the previous year and were remembered by many of the children. Mrs Wheatley sat down and the children started to sing to her, they did this for an hour before they stopped!

We settled into a pattern. The day started at 6am when the children got up and did 'yoga', then there was Morning Prayer with the children, breakfast was followed by work, we piled into two jeeps and travelled the 15kms to Manvi to work on the school which was being constructed. Mid afternoon we would return, shower and rest. Then when the children had finished school we would spend time playing games with them and teaching them English. At 7.15 we would have Mass with the children, an extraordinarily joyous affair filled with their singing of bajans. After that would be dinner some free time and then bed after our own group night prayer.