

KIIRA COLLEGE NEWS

THE NILE OBSERVATORY APPEAL TO CELEBRATE THE COLLEGE'S 50th ANNIVERSARY

Most Old Hamptonians will know of the link the school has built up with Kiira College in Uganda, a link that was set up by Mike Godfrey back in the 90s, now run by Jonathan Owen of the Biology Department since Mike's retirement. An increasing number of Old Hamptonians will know of the link first hand from spending part of their GAP year there. Demand for placements at Kiira dipped for a while but it is most encouraging that once again the link is proving increasingly popular and there is now competition for the limited placements we can offer. This year two boys arrived in February for six months and next year we will have three going, selected from six applications.

In 2000 Stewart Coulter visited Kiira with the Physics lab technician David Hughes to provide Kiira with a telescope, a 10" Dobsonian, (a basic 10" reflecting telescope on a swivel-and-tilt mount). It is a telescope which gives you the maximum optics for your money, it is as simple as it gets. The first evening we set the telescope up we were invaded by Kiira boys keen to see the moon close up for the first time as you will see in the accompanying pictures. Hundreds of boys enjoyed the views but asking around the next day it turned out to be a smaller number of boys going around again and again, enthralled by the sight! Kiira College is a boarding school sited 30 miles N of the equator where it gets dark at 7 pm all year round, perfect for astronomy. Now, nearly ten years on and it is time to upgrade what they have. We have ambitious plans for an observatory, which as far as we can tell would be the best in the country. Summer 2009 is a good time for the project: Kiira's 50th anniversary is celebrated on the 18 July this summer and 26 July marks the 400th anniversary of the first recorded astronomical observation made using a telescope (consequently 2009 has been designated the International Year of Astronomy: IYA 2009). Now in case you are thinking it was by Galileo, think again (read on below for Hampton's putative connection to Galileo...). The first recorded use of an astronomical telescope was in fact by an Englishman just a few miles from Hampton: Thomas Harriot. He was the first person to record observations of the Moon with a telescope. He carried them out at Syon House, Brentford on 26 July 1609, beating Galileo to it by nearly six months. And being first matters in science as much as anywhere else. Watch out for the public celebrations at Syon House on July 26 this year. So the two anniversaries would come together with this project and would draw out the *international* aspect nicely.

The observatory would be constructed from Interlocking Stabilised Soil Blocks (ISSB), an *eco-brick* I will call it, which earned its developer, Dr Musaazi of Makerere University, Kampala a Presidential Science Excellence Award in 2007. The brick was developed for construction and for rainwater harvesting. Locally available inorganic earth, *murrum* is the principal ingredient. The bricks do not require firing, nor the same quantity of cement as alternative building blocks, thus reducing CO₂ costs significantly without loss of integrity - it is important that the project should be in harmony with the Hampton's green credentials. There are three options for the roof: a run-off design (an apex roof on rollers and moved away to the side during use), a conical roof (mimicking the roof style of a traditional hut) and a full dome. These options are currently being looked at, all have their own pros and cons but I have enlisted the help of a friend who has recently authored a very well received book on observatory construction.

The option selected depends on the funding raised (we are talking about a few £1000's, the minimum required is about £1500 and the maximum is limited to what would be proportionate) and this is where Old Hamptonians can help. The boys at Hampton have raised a good pot of money that will underwrite the project but better if other sources support the project. The Royal Astronomical Society have been approached. I am asking if any OH would like to offer assistance, any donations would be most gratefully received. And if you would like any further information, do please ask.

Finally, I can't pass on the opportunity to tell a story of why, when teaching, you have to be careful with what you say, it might be misinterpreted. Mention Galileo in a Physics lesson to the younger ones and you can be sure someone will chip in with a *Galileo Galileo*, usually at high pitch. Brian May OH (who incidentally acted as Patron for our 2000 project) will be relieved to hear that his ditty is as well known by the current generation as it ever was! I am more than ready at this point – and have been for decades now - to say who Galileo was and how important a Physicist he proved to be. I go on to extol Brian May as a Physicist, one who went on to study Physics and Astronomy at University and who has recently completed his PhD, a copy of which we have in the Department. The interjection actually provides a great opportunity to tell the boys a couple of important and interesting things. “*Now, where was I? Oh yes...*” and then I get back to the lesson, job done, role models held high.

At the end of the lesson this little first year, not the most attentive in the class, came up to me and enquired... “*Sir, did you say you taught Galileo?*”

Uganda topped the list of countries displaying a positive attitude towards Science and Technology in international research recently (ROSE - Schreiner and Sjoberg 2004). They don't have much of it. Let us hope we can offer Kiira the best of the options we have and with your help we will and encourage them positively in their pursuit of science to better their country and their own futures through the oldest and to many, the most inspirational science of all: astronomy.

Stewart Coulter
Physics Department
One time teacher to Galileo