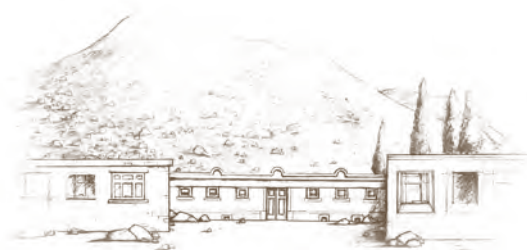




Ladakh:

expanding the Founder's vision beyond our borders

Oli Wettern (*G*, 2006-11)



In the summer of 2012, a flight from Delhi touched down in Leh, the capital city of the former Himalayan Kingdom of Ladakh, today a region of India's politically troubled state of Kashmir. Thirty young Wykehamists in Sixth Book II stepped off the plane, ready to begin an unusual mission: to help in the construction of a nunnery in the small village of Basgo, an hour's drive to the north-west.

Until the group arrived, the local townspeople and the young nuns themselves, who ranged in age from 5 to 26 years old, were undertaking construction of the nunnery. The boys brought their energy and manpower, and their involvement pushed construction ahead by several months in just a couple of weeks. More importantly, however, they were also responsible for the entire funding of the project. They had raised around £40,000 during the year through a number of self-started initiatives, including running, cycling and rowing in the School gym the 5,000-odd miles that separate Winchester and Ladakh.

Winchester College's association with the nunnery in Ladakh was brokered by the Lotus Flower Trust, a charity which was formed in 2008 to work in 'remote and impoverished communities in India.' The Trust's stated objective for the end of 2013 is to have completed 21 projects, helping more than 2,000 children and their families through the construction of schools, housing and community centres to promote education, safety and security. With over a third of Indians living on less than \$1.25 each day, there is clearly an urgent and considerable need for this type of help.

David Baldwin (*Housemaster F*, 1981-96) first introduced the School to the Lotus Flower Trust through John Hunt, a former Marks & Spencer plc executive of 25 years, and now CEO of the Trust. Since the School's first involvement, two projects – including the Ladakh nunnery, lasting two years each – have been completed by four groups of Wykehamists. A fifth group in as many years will be heading out to northern India this summer to begin the construction phase of a third project, the building of The Himalayan International School in Massoorie, also to be run in collaboration with the Trust.



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‘There are two key elements to these projects from the perspective of the boys,’ says Oli Wettren, a member of the India team in 2010, and a member of staff on the Ladakh team in 2012. ‘The first is that the boys have the opportunity to gain exposure to a part of the world they don’t necessarily know very well.’ The value of this aspect of a young Wykehamist’s education is obvious. Broadening horizons and opening minds to the world beyond the typical English public school has long been a hallmark of a Winchester education, and is one of the few defining characteristics of the otherwise difficult-to-describe Div, unique to Winchester.

To this end, although the charitable endeavour was very much the primary focus of the boys’ time in India, the scope of the trip extended beyond it. There was also time for some cultural exploration, including the challenge of climbing the 20,182ft peak, Stok Kangri, which two thirds of the boys achieved.

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It’s clear speaking to him that the experience was not just one that offered him and his fellow Wykehamists some new perspectives on the world, although no doubt the insights they gained were valuable in themselves. There is something more profound that comes through – a sense of achievement and pride at having accomplished something that few schoolboys can lay claim to.



Long after these young Wykehamists have left Ladakh, and even after the second group comes and goes a year later having put the finishing touches to the project and inaugurated the nunnery, a real and tangible legacy is established. When William of Wykeham founded Winchester, one of his stated objectives was to educate boys to exercise leadership in society. An integral part of his vision was to provide access to education, irrespective of the social background of the scholars. Whilst certainly premature to begin to speak of the achievement of the Ladakh teams in similar terms to that of our founder, the fact is that fifty young girls in northern India will be able to enjoy the gift of an education, by the good grace, hard work and determination of two groups of Wykehamists. There is every hope and expectation that the nunnery will continue to provide a safe and prosperous home for young nuns in the region for many years to come.

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In future years, as long as Winchester can manage to keep the momentum going, more boys will fund and construct further facilities in this needy but beautiful and fascinating part of the world.

It is a great tribute to the School that, more than six centuries after William of Wykeham realised his vision and founded Winchester College, the young men who benefit from his initiative go out into the world – far beyond the borders and relative comfort of Hampshire – to deliver their own implementation of that same vision. ■

- 1 Members of the Ladakh 2012 team and nuns, or nunlets as they became affectionately known, at the team's campsite.
- 2 Poplar branches being sorted for firewood before being loaded onto the roof for winter storage.
- 3 Crossing one of the many tributaries of the Indus River.
- 4 The Ladakh 2013 team outside one of the new buildings funded by both teams' efforts.
- 5 The view at 20,182 feet on the summit of Stok Kangri.