MALAWI 2026 DAILY DIARY



In May 2026, I joined a team of volunteers travelling to Malawi with the Tongole Foundation to support a school development project.

Returning for a second time after taking part in a similar initiative in 2024, I was delighted to once again contribute to improving educational facilities for the local community.

The ten-day project brought together volunteers, teachers, workers and children, creating lasting memories and making a meaningful difference. The diary that follows captures my day-to-day experiences, reflections and highlights from my time in Malawi.

All this work depends on the generosity of our friends and supporters, and we are extremely grateful to each and every one of you. Every contribution, whatever the size, makes a genuine and lasting difference so if you would like to make a donation, please head over to my Just Giving page
https://www.justgiving.com/page/robinandwill-tongole2026

Thank you!

DAY 0 (May 27): Today was all about getting ready to start work tomorrow!

The travel to Malawi is long winded and tiring but ends in a fantastic short flight in a Cessna from the airport in Lilongwe to the dirt landing strip in the Nkhotakota Reserve. The roads in Malawi are so awful that driving from the airport to the remote villages that we are seeking to help takes so long it is impractical for a trip like ours. Getting resources to the remote communities who need it (particularly when Malawi is in the middle of a diesel crisis due to what is happening in the Middle East) is one of The Tongole Foundation's ongoing challenges. Having Bentry Kalanga on the ground is a real help!

We spent our time sorting out donations, organising the tools we brought (including the paintbrushes kindly donated by @woosterbrushuk) and catching up from the travel (it's long). It's good to have a game-plan ahead of starting work tomorrow. I think we are all eager to get cracking!











DAY 1 (May 28): Today was the first day on site. It was a case of seeing what stages the projects were at: the newly repaired deputy head teacher's house, the two new teachers houses, a brand new school block including staff room and head teachers office and the second teacher's house that was *supposed* to be a restoration but due to only mud holding the bricks in place, the floor completely broken in half and huge cracks from top to bottom, it turned into a demolition and rebuild!

This school is definitely different to the one we took on in 2024. While there are many similarities (smiling children, outdoor lessons and very basic amenities), Chankhokwe School is spread over a wider area. The school blocks sit to the side of their uneven, dirt playing fields: the so-called football pitch and netball court of which, due to the hill the football pitch was on, if you stood in either goal you couldn't see the goal keeper in the opposite goal!

Once the Tongole Foundation's work has been completed at their school, they will have some of the best teachers' accommodation in the area, helping them to attract talent. The school will also finally have classrooms for every age group they teach allowing lessons to continue in the rains. Historically, without classrooms they would simply have to stop the schooling and send the children home whenever it rained.

We made a good start on the school blocks and the renovated teacher's house. Tomorrow, we hope to be able to finish the head teacher's house and get the first coat of paint on those *dreaded* windows. We definitely remember them from 2024…







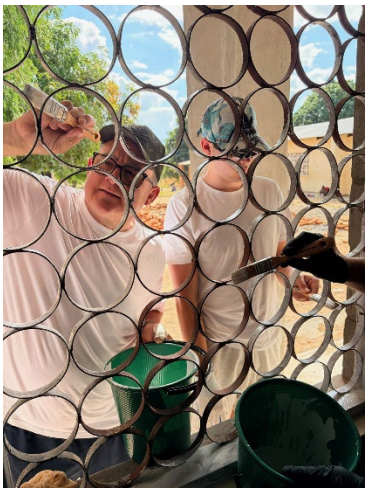


DAY 2 (May 29): We're already getting accustomed to being on site. After arriving, we went straight into finishing the jobs we started yesterday. Whilst it felt like we have made a major dent in the Head Teacher's house, we quickly found that the 'snagging' (trim, windows etc.) was a much more time-consuming job than anticipated.

Equally time consuming are the metal, circular windows in the school block. We remember these from 2024. By the end of the day, they had been sanded and primed ready for the first coat of paint tomorrow. We are all hoping that one coat of paint will be enough.

We also *hope* to be at the stage where tomorrow will see us finishing off the doors and windows in the school block alongside the final few pieces with the head teacher's house. That will allow us to focus on the second school block that is nearing completion.






DAY 3 (May 30): Today we focused on the school block. It was, yet again, window day! After yesterday's prep, we were able to crack on with the gloss coat hoping that *one* would be enough. The Wooster brushes have made the job a lot easier!

We also sorted out the external painting complete with the highly stylish grey stripe and black bottom border.

Some of us went to a local secondary school and presented sanitary pants donated by Freedom4Girls which they were really excited about. Each girl was able to pick three pairs. The team did a presentation to the classroom explaining how to look after and use the pants. The longevity of the pants is a key draw. As girls often miss class for sanitary reasons when they are on their periods, this is life changing for some.








DAY 4 (May 31): For some of the group, today started early for a Sunday 'off day.' We wanted to get some food in before we hiked the nearby Kaskusu mountain. The aim is to leave early enough to avoid the heat of the day whilst also getting some extra sleep with the hopes of recharging before heading back on site.

We ended up leaving the lodge at 8 taking kayaks to cross the river both crocs and hippos call home. Lead by the ranger and Tongole Lodge manager Emmanuel, we made our way up the mountain on Elephant and animal paths. Thankfully, we had the odd break as Yohane taught us about the local flora and fauna. The final stretch was steep but completely worth it! The views from the top are stunning!!!

It took us longer than expected to go up and down meaning we hit the heat of the day. Lunch tasted extra special after the work we put in.

The day ended with 'sundowners' which entails a kayak up the river keeping an eye out for animals and insects we learned about over the last few nights sitting around the campfire at Tongole Lodge.









DAY 5 (June 1): Today was another beautiful day back at the school. Thankfully, the windows look good! With the windows complete, it was a day of black line painting. Here, properties have a 'baseboard' of gloss paint to help protect the walls when mopping out the rooms. By the end of the day, we got to be pretty good at cutting in those black lines! There was nowhere to hide.

We also sorted out the wooden doors that are made of very hard wood. After one hour, Matt managed to plane a classroom door down enough to open smoothly.

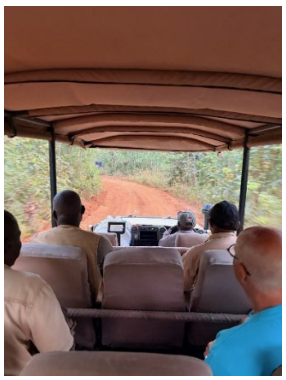
As we sat for lunch, we also watched the children warm up for football practice which was a good harbinger for their skills as tomorrow is Football match day!

To add to the excitement, three vehicles broke down on our way home. Most of us were in an African Parks safari vehicle. We passed the Tongole Land Rover thinking they had pulled aside to let us pass (driving in the dust of another vehicle in Africa is not fun!) not realising that they had, in fact, broken down. Further on, we then came across Bentry, David and Chris stuck half way up a steep hill, strange we thought! Naturally we pulled over only to find out the vehicle had suddenly lost power but assumed the Landy would soon be following and they could either sort the issue or tow them back to Tongole, whoops, that wasn't to be meaning a very late return for both vehicles and teams.

With communication in the bush being what it is, we learned all of this after they turned up at the lodge *hours* after we expected them. Thankfully, they turned up just before dark (there is a hard rule do *not* drive at night).

Fingers crossed we have enough vehicles to get on site tomorrow. We're all keen for the football and netball matches to go ahead?




DAY 6 (June 2): Today is games day!

Today started as 'usual' now that we are getting into the swing of our on-site days at Chankhokwe School. As we complete stages of the renovations and build, we are gaining an understanding of what comes next. The head teacher's house has finally been completed, and we managed to get through quite a lot of painting on the school block we are renovating. Some of the outdoor painting was *sweltering*.

Having put in our morning shift of painting, we broke for lunch with enough time to ready ourselves for the afternoon's activities: playing football and netball against the local team. It was great fun!!! Team Tongole consisted of volunteers alongside some of the Tongole Lodge team. We played against the local school team who were *excellent*. Their ample supporters (the rest of the school) flooded the pitch with every goal.

It is amazing how good the kids are; you can imagine how skilled they would be on a real pitch with shoes rather than on an undulating dirt pitch/court in bare feet.

Sport is certainly a common language! Playing together has been an amazing cohesive experience.











DAY 7 (June 3): School visit and lake Malawi day.

We started off nice and early by going back to the project we took on in 2024 at Mwalawa Tongole School where we built two blocks and a teacher's house. It was really emotional going back there and seeing the children making use of the classrooms. This school has *900* children indicating that there must be over 100 children per classroom. Their noise was joyous.

This is another school that is also supported by Mary's Meals who ensure each child gets at least one meal a day.

Next, we visited the original Tongole build where the foundation created and built Chilimani School from nothing. The building continues to hold up well!

To round off the day, we visited Lake Malawi for lunch driving through Nkhotakota (the closest town to Tongole) before returning to the park in the dark. While it was lovely to see the sunset en route, the roads are so poor that driving at night is dangerous. Thankfully, we had no vehicle issues!









DAY 8 (June 4): Today was another lovely breakfast to fuel us for a day of tidying up and finishing the new school block, the school renovation and the teacher's house. It was a series of jobs like:

- the grey around the front of each school block to be sure they all match and tie in together. The grey helps mask the 1,000 of fingerprints that will cross the front of the building each day
- The strip of black at the bottom of each classroom, room in the teacher's house and front of the classroom blocks.
- Rehanging doors so they open smoothly and stopped denting the walls. By this point, Matt's plane was dull!
- Tidying up the blackboard surrounds and adding chalk holders. Here, blackboards are actually made with concrete thrown directly onto the wall.
- Touching up the gloss on those dreaded/beloved windows.
- Tidying up the painting on the doors.
- Going back over the walls to correct any drips. This is a never-ending job!

They are all time consuming but make a *BIG* difference to the final product. We want these children to have an aspirational space to learn in.

Chris and Tim also visited local schools to drop off football kit for their local teams including the Little Gunners. Football is a huge part of life here!! The donations Chris accumulated through his various football connections will make *many* children happy.









DAY 9 (June 5): Today, the new school blocks and teacher's house that we were able to finish were handed over to the local community in an assembly organised by Chankhokwe School where senior members of the local villages spoke alongside representatives from the school board and the students themselves. Highlights include the school choir (who were excellent), poems written and performed by students and a speech by a promising young student named Geoffrey. Remember: these are only primary school students who are performing in English as their second language.

We ended the handover ceremony with a walk though of the buildings we have completed and the sites where work remains including:

- finishing the first ever semi-detached teacher's house that will give the school accommodation for two more teachers - potentially women?
- The re-build of the decrepit teacher's house we had knocked down literally using our hands, preserved the bricks, re-dug the foundations and we are now supporting the rebuild.

Due to the diesel shortage across Malawi, these two builds were not completed by the time we arrived. Supplies simply could not be delivered to the site on time. Thankfully, due to the ongoing fundraising, local building and painting teams ought to be able to finish the work overseen by Bentry and the Tongole community liaison officers who all live in Malawi.

A highlight for me was chatting to the deputy headmaster Innocent, his wife Mercy and their children Nancy and Peter. Since we were able to complete their home, in three days they will be moving back in. Knowing that these sites will be put to good use is what this trip is all about!











DAY 10 (June 6): Yesterday had some big emotional highs and lows at the school followed by the traditional Tongole celebration party with traditional Malawian entertainment, speeches and tears!

Today was a day to settle and rest before we head back to the UK. I find it always takes some time for me to digest my time in Malawi at these schools within communities who have so *little* but still have so much heart. I think we are all feeling emotionally wane.

As a fitting end to our emotional and tiring trip, the Tongole Lodge team organised sunset drinks at a waterfall a short drive and walk from the lodge. It gave a fitting opportunity to toast all those who have supported the trip: by donating to our fundraising pages, sending over much needed supplies to be distributed amongst the children, looking after us at the Lodge (including keeping us well fed), organising everything (a big logistical challenge for The Tongole Foundation team) and taking time out of their busy lives and personal resources to fly over to Malawi and get the work done! 'Team Tongole 2026' has been full of fantastic people. As a group who worked together and got on so well, we got a lot more done encouraging and often egging each other on all for a very good cause.

Tomorrow, we leave with hearts that will be sad to leave this beautiful, generous country but knowing that we (and *all* those who have supported this trip) HAVE made a difference to *hundreds* of children's lives. Like children everywhere, they are the future.



