

Rex  
**Hancy**

In the  
countryside

Taverham

email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk



## Robins have not always had such a 'cuddly' image

So the robin came top of the popular poll to choose our national bird. I imagine this is the one species almost everyone in the country is able to name with accuracy giving the species a head start. My own suggestion was the barn owl after I had mentioned briefly some of the many adaptations contrived by evolution to make it one of the most efficient birds of prey.

I did not expect a rush to the polls to support my view and vote for the owl. When the results came out I was astonished rather than surprised to see my choice was next on the list to the winner. I read on. Children had been invited to cast their votes and the fictional owl in the Harry Potter series of books and films had won over that section of the populace. Far more important national choices are made on equally flimsy reasons.

The good folk of a Norfolk village in the pre-war period would have been astonished at such a result. I go so far as to say they would have been rather worried to see so many showing such regard for such an ominous bird. The robin was one of those creatures, together with the death-watch beetle for instance, which stood between this life and whatever lay beyond. A robin entering the house was a messenger of death. Efforts had to be made to usher it out in a firm but gentle manner so as not to offend.

Outside in the garden the cheerful song when other birds were silent and the cheeky manner of dashing in to pick up an insect from the turn of the spade ensured a grudging respect providing a reasonable distance was kept for most of the time. There was still a lingering association with the mischievous fairy creature of the woods, Robin Goodfellow. His mischief could easily turn into evil so he had to be propitiated and feared.

The turn in attitudes began when the robin became more and more associated with Christmas time and fare, especially on greetings cards.

Oddly, it was the nickname Robin Redbreasts, given to the red-coated delivery folk, which kicked off depictions of the bird on the messages.

# Making a bright future that's yellow



■ Gavin Paterson of Yellobric in a South African classroom.  
Picture: MATT KAY

She is 13, lives in a remote, rural and poor part of South Africa. Work is scarce, levels of attainment and literacy are low and prospects are in short supply.

Yet over the last few months Samantha Mabunda's reading ability, her understanding of English and literacy levels, has soared in a way which will significantly boost her education and chances of a job when she leaves school.

That is testament to a unique project, run by a Norfolk-based charity, which harnesses the potential of digital technology to make literature – and reading material in general – available to a generation of young African schoolchildren like Samantha.

"Improving the literacy of our students improves their prospects," explained Gavin Paterson, co-founder of Yellobric, a charity which delivers digital libraries through eBooks to schools in Africa.

"Education is the key to escaping poverty. Making the most of modern technology, Yellobric delivers educational texts in a low-cost and sustainable manner to where they are most needed. We aim to help communities sustain themselves without aid."

The charity works with students and teachers on a long-term basis, providing digital reading material, training and technical support.

Its digital devices, filled with educational content, can revolutionise the breadth, scope and effectiveness of teaching and "enrich the lives of thousands of students in sub-Saharan Africa who have never had the

A Norfolk charity is embracing technology to bring literacy to African schoolchildren and, as **MARK NICHOLLS** discovers, with impressive results.

educational materials to achieve literacy."

And a donation of 50p can deliver as many as 10 e-books.

Samantha goes to the Bondzeni High School at Bushbuckridge in Mpumalanga province.

It is the charity's flagship project, though Yellobric does have a number of other initiatives operating across Africa and has ambitions to further develop the education solutions it offers to disadvantaged pupils across the continent.

As is so often the case, it was an unexpected chance meeting which led to the creation of the charity. For Gavin, who divides his time between his charity work and running the family farm business at Smallburgh and Worstead in east Norfolk, that came during a five-month overland travel adventure down the west coast of Africa in 2009.

Having quit his job with a London-based property development firm, Gavin – now 34 – joined a group of intrepid travellers aboard a 14-tonne truck and embarked on a challenging journey across Morocco, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso,

■ A Bondzeni pupil with one of the e-readers Yellobric has provided to African schools.



Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, The Congo, Angola and Namibia, ending up in South Africa.

"It was challenging, potentially dangerous, stressful and despite having a guide and driver we had to look out for each other, camping and cooking our own food, but it was immensely rewarding too,"

recalled Gavin.

"It was like the Big Brother house on wheels, there were so many personalities and interesting people.

"Angola was tough and Nigeria was dangerous but there were also bizarre moments such as crossing from Mauritania into Mali. What transpired was that having left





■ Bondzeni pupils  
with Gavin Paterson.  
Pictures: SUBMITTED

Mauritania, the Mali border had closed for the night.

"We were stuck in this compound, in no-man's land which was also a minefield. It was almost New Year and we had nothing to celebrate with. But as is so often the case, the extraordinary happened.

"There was a squeak of wheels and out of the dark came a man on a bike with a crate of beer on his shoulder and we had something to celebrate with after all. We woke up the next day with the sun rising over the minefield and off we went."

It was in Nigeria that Gavin first had the realisation that he could help in Africa to ease the hardships people faced.

Having arrived at Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, the group found itself in need of a secure place to set up camp as they awaited visas for their onward destinations.

With the security situation in Nigeria deteriorating amid rumours of a coup, they had to stay longer than anticipated and the only safe place they could find was in the grounds of the Sheraton Hotel.

Gavin said: "We agreed with the manager of the hotel that if he allowed us to camp in his grounds, we would use his restaurant and facilities – and the pool – and spend money in his hotel.

"There was a man who played piano at the hotel, Babs and I got to know him. He was a self-taught musician and played for people who stayed in the hotel. They would get to know him too and bring him sheet music and he would learn to play the songs from that."

After a couple of days, he invited Gavin to visit his home in a slum area – a corrugated shack with no running water or table, just a bed.

"Unbelievably, in one corner was a recording studio system," said Gavin. "Babs was well-known in the slum and he would teach the children how to make music. They had this dream of escaping poverty through the music."

Back at the hotel, Gavin downloaded the sheet music for

**“The monitoring and evaluation also allows us to demonstrate that what we are doing is effective, it shows the school is increasing its literacy levels and we now need to expand the programme to other children**

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thousands of songs from a laptop, put them on a memory stick, and gave them to Babs so he could extend his repertoire.

He continued: "That made me realise how technology could be used to support such a community; they had computers and mobile phones and I realised this was a way to provide information."

That experience sowed the seed for Yellobric.

Back in the UK, Gavin began to formulate the idea of the charity with his mother Marcia, who is now a director of Yellobric and his co-founder Peter McCallum, who was also on the African trip.

The idea was to improve education through literacy to give young people in Africa more chance of getting a job and being able to contribute to their economy.

By September 2011 Gavin teamed up with Ian Graham, a Rotarian from Aylsham, who had experience of working with projects in Kenya.

"Through him we had an introduction to a school in Kenya and I travelled out there and set up a programme in a primary school with 20 e-readers, which meant we could provide many more books for much lower costs," he said.

From there, Yellobric partnered

other charities and worked in other schools across Africa, eventually securing charitable status in November 2011.

That process eventually led to Yellobric working with Bondzeni High School, in a poor area with a transient population, to deliver a programme of out-of-hours literacy classes.

An important element of that saw Yellobric work with 2Enable – an e-Learning platform available in Africa to support teachers and students - to deliver expert video lessons and other learning materials to schools.

Through its yellow-coloured e-readers (yellow bricks), the charity can provide tens of thousands of books to a school digitally and at a fraction of the cost of conventional novels and textbooks. So far, it has delivered more than 300,000 eBooks in three years of operations.

That support has extended to providing a fulltime employee in South Africa for the Project Bushbuck initiative, a former pupil Nhlamulo Duncan, and making available tablets, wifi and a projector to supplement the schools existing six computers and 80 Yellobric the e-readers, which are now being used during the school day.

Video lessons are also available and all is in line with the school syllabus with children streamed by ability rather than age.

The initiative supports textbooks and makes novels with relevant African content available for the children to read and improve their literacy.

"Part of the reason we embarked on the literacy programme was because the level of English at the school was very poor, and all lessons are taught in English" explained Gavin. "The teaching needed to

be supplemented but we also needed to increase our ability to monitor and evaluate the project."

That is achieved though annual literacy tests and weekly e-learning tests which Yellobric can monitor online from Norfolk or anywhere on the planet. It also has a team of mentors working online with pupils.

Gavin added: "That allows us to understand the gaps in knowledge and target teaching to address those gaps. The monitoring and evaluation also allows us to demonstrate that what we are doing is effective, it shows the school is increasing its literacy levels and we now need to expand the programme to other children."

Those literacy tests have demonstrated an increase the literacy by 13pc, with Samantha showing that some pupils have achieved outstanding progress with her literacy mark increasing from 41pc to 92pc on a test written by the South African department of education.

Through wireless technology, Yellobric can also resupply books

remotely.

The charity has a key sponsor in Strand Hanson merchant bankers and also raises money through charitable trusts and fund-raising events in Norfolk.

The flagship programme in South Africa is focused on improving literacy with students reading novels, while a second project in Ethiopia has seen the emphasis more on providing text books.

"We are now consolidating our efforts but want to expand programmes in both schools," said Gavin.

The next step for Yellobric is to further raise awareness of the charity and involve more people from Norfolk in donating and raising funds and becoming involved as mentors to assess pupils in South Africa through the e-learning platform.

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■ For more information about Yellobric, its work and to donate, visit [www.yellobric.com](http://www.yellobric.com), email Gavin directly on [gavin.paterson@yellobric.com](mailto:gavin.paterson@yellobric.com) or call 01692 536226.



■ Gavin Paterson with some of the African pupils which the Norfolk-based charity Yellobric has helped.