

The best days of my life

Simon Watkinson talks to Miss Rachael Bennett about her time with TLM on the Island of Happy Healing near Hong Kong from 1953-1957

When I first met Rachael Bennett at her home in Lowestoft on a flaming June day last year, I noticed a mischievous sense of fun in her smile. During a jovial lunch overlooking the sea, the mood relaxed even more as she related stories about her work with TLM and some wonderful experiences with leprosy patients.

Before ever contemplating overseas work, Rachael had trained as a teacher and social worker and had completed some theological training. She first felt the call to serve in the mission field at the age of twenty-five, but was very hesitant as she didn't really want to go. However, at the end of the war she dutifully sailed out to China, along with twenty-nine other civilians, on a troop ship carrying some 2,000 military personnel. 'As we weren't supposed to fraternise, it was all very interesting!' Rachael smiled, explaining that the journey had taken four weeks.

Once in China, she worked for the Methodist Church as an area supervisor for women workers in Kwong Dang province, as well as co-ordinating the



Enjoying her sunny garden, Rachael with the embroidered cushion given to her by the island's inhabitants when she left

training for women evangelists. 'We stayed for a while after the Communist uprising and then left China,' she remembered. Around this time she heard that a project to help leprosy affected people, who had been expelled from China after the 1949 revolution and were wandering aimlessly around Hong Kong, was about to start up in the island's Sandy Bay area. By chance, she then met TLM's Dr Neil Frazer, the pioneering project's director, who invited her to work with him. 'He wanted a translator with the Chinese dialect that I had,' Rachael said.

The Government had given Dr Frazer some land on the beach at Sandy Bay and here he set up a home for leprosy sufferers, with educational and handicraft facilities, in three Nissen huts. This was next to the back of a funeral parlour where the coffins were stacked before burial. After a while, a less sinister location was provided.

'Hong Kong residents also objected to accommodating a leprosy centre, so we were allocated an island which hadn't been occupied since the end

of the war. This later became known as the Island of Happy Healing,' she told me. 'When patients first came to the island, they would say, "Well, we don't know who Jesus is, but nobody else cares!"'

With roughly 500 leprosy affected people on the island, spare time was obviously scarce. 'We were all so busy that as soon as my head hit the pillow at night, I fell asleep. I ran the staff mess, a school, a handicraft industry for disabled patients and also kept all the social welfare records,' Rachael explained.



Mr Man on his marriage to Miss Kok, a teacher on the island whose hands and feet had been badly damaged by leprosy

army officer and had very badly clawed hands. Man had been converted under the Lutheran preaching on the island and was accepted at a Theological College in Hong Kong to train as a Lutheran Minister. 'When he went to join the other students at meal

times, they saw his disabled hands and all got up to go and sit somewhere else, so he said, "that didn't worry me - there was all the more food for me!" He qualified and married and then became a pastor of a Lutheran Church at Kowloon.

'Many of our cured patients who had become Christians worshipped at his church. Man was very special as he knew what they'd been through,' she said. 'I used to take my dog to church and would sit at the back with other staff. If he thought the sermon was going on too long, he would stroll up to the front and growl,' she remembered with a laugh.

'We once accepted a gift from the Hong Kong Jockey Club,' Rachael admitted. 'Headquarters were very upset so Dr Neil wrote to them saying that if the Mission could supply us with an equivalent amount then we'd stop receiving such gifts! Alas, they never did.'

'Living in a community with leprosy sufferers who all had disfigurements had an effect on me,' Rachael told me. 'When I used to go to Hong Kong on my day off I used to think, "What's wrong with all these people? They don't look like my lot!"'

After leaving Hong Kong in 1957, Rachael never returned.

'When it was over, that was it,' she said. 'But I was very fortunate to be in a "pioneering" situation. They were the best days of my life.'

Testimony that God never leads us into anything for which he hasn't equipped us. ■

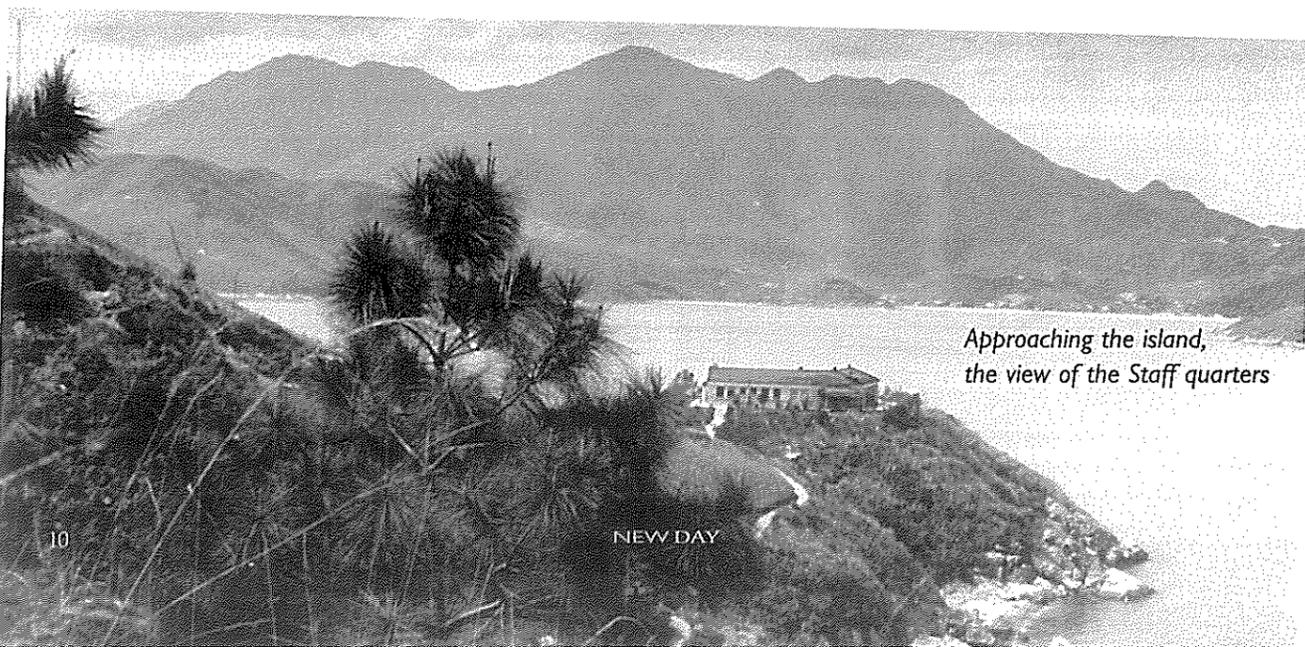
An avid TLM supporter, Rachael is also a keen 'trimmer' of stamps. She is now learning New Testament Greek.

Considering she loathes gardening, her well-manicured garden must be the envy of Lowestoft.

Rather than just curing leprosy sufferers, TLM is also committed to helping them overcome the stigma of leprosy and to restoring their confidence and dignity through vocational training



Seven- and eight-year-old Day school pupils



Approaching the island, the view of the Staff quarters