

Date: Sunday 2nd October

Event: Calais Aid Run

Companions, Staff and Volunteers: Pan, Anthony, Kieran, Danny, Panos, Daniella, Tony, Jenny, Shirley, Michael, Becky, Nicola, Hameed, Laura

Mission: Deliver aid to the homeless residents of the Jungle refugee/migrant camp in Calais.

Written by volunteer Laura.

A bit about the companions... The St Albans Emmaus companions are amazing individuals. Not only have they overcome their own hardships and created better lives for themselves, but regularly throughout the year they drive vanloads of donations to destitute people on the other side of the Channel. It is the companions who make the trips to the Jungle a success, with their combined manpower and collaborative team spirit. They sort the donations at St Albans HQ, rejecting the high heels and the inappropriate underwear, sizing the trainers, boxing the clothes and loading the vans. They get up early on the Sunday morning, while the rest of the neighbourhood is sleeping soundly, organise the vans and set off on the two-hour drive to Dover. They take the vans through customs on the English side, onto and off the ferries, and again through customs on the French side. They navigate the Calais streets, the driving on the right, the French road signs. They speak with the French police, negotiating access to the camp. They steer the vans over the uneven wasteland of the Jungle, through the mud, the potholes, and the puddles. All this they do for free.



The events of the day... On Sunday we headed out with St Albans Emmaus on their 15th trip to the Jungle. We sat together drinking hot drinks on the ferry crossing, and the companions were cheerful and chatty, talking about the last time they'd been to Calais and anticipating what lay in store that day. We disembarked and drove through the ominous customs area, finally escaping into the French flatlands and driving to our first destination, the Care4Calais warehouse. When we arrived Clare Moseley, the Care4Calais founder, informed us we'd just missed the celebrity of the day, Will.i.am from the Black Eyed Peas, who'd come over to re-record the band's famous song, "Where Is The Love?" in the middle of the Jungle. If only that earlier ferry hadn't been cancelled! The camp is no stranger to celebrities, playing host to a number of high-profile individuals, including Jude Law and Jeremy Corbyn.

But we were not there to celeb spot, we were there to distribute aid. The warehouses looked fairly well-stocked but we were informed donations were drying up, especially now the media is reporting the imminent closure of the camp and the seemingly inevitable dispersal of its residents. Some have left the camp already and in Paris there is a growing number of people camped out in the north of the city. But with 10,000 residents currently still residing in the Jungle the need for donations is greater than ever.



We started loading our vans for the first distribution of the day, shoes. Shoes are top of the priority list for camp residents. As the weather gets colder good footwear becomes ever more essential. These are people who are on their feet all day, living in an unhygienic environment strewn with rubbish. When we got to the south entrance to the camp we were stopped by some police who were hanging out there, each one decked out in a protective vest, wearing a belt adorned with baton and pistol. For some unexplained reason we were not allowed to drive in unless we had passports, which some of us had left behind at the warehouse, so we got out of our vehicles and set off on foot. The south side is completely clear now except for two structures: a well-built school, standing resolutely at the brow of a hillock, and the Eritrean church, still intact after all these months, surviving storms, fires and even bulldozers.



We pulled up our van and began the distribution. The residents had already started lining up, trying to get a spot near the front. We formed an aisle either side of the queue, holding hands to make sure it remained one-person wide. Care4Calais has a new system of distribution, with volunteers going through the camp a day in advance and handing out tickets to people who need shoes, telling them the time and location of an upcoming distribution spot. This proved effective on the day, although there were a few ticketless souls who hung around until the very end, hoping for a bit of luck. But the shoes ran out, as they always do, and the van drove back to the warehouse to stock up on more donations.



“Darfur, Libya, Italy, Calais...”

A Sudanese man was listing the places he'd been through en route to northern France. We stood outside his three-person tent where seven people were living. A tall man, probably only a teenager, emerged from the interior and started pulling his sandals on. Another man poked his head out between the canvas flaps and said hello. I asked them if they'd known each other in Sudan. They shook their heads, “We met here.” They started boiling water in a blackened, tarnished kettle, perched on a makeshift stove. They wanted to give me tea, but my volunteer team were calling me. I said “Goodbye, good luck”. The first man held up a hand in farewell.

We walked through the vibrant main streets of the camp, passing an amazing little garden where someone had lovingly grown vegetables, trusting the neighbours not to pinch them. We passed the brightly coloured Kids Café where large parrots adorned the walls, and finally came to the Khyber Darbar Restaurant, where we stopped for a break while we waited for the next distribution call. People were drinking tea and the smell of cooking wafted through from the kitchen area. A long-term volunteer started telling us disturbing stories about what happens at night in the camp. About the frequent tear gassing in the evenings, and the patrols around the perimeter of the camp. About the right-wing fascists who enter the tents at night, looking for people to brutalise, which the police turn a blind eye to. And about the reported rapes, allegedly carried out by the police on camp residents. Sad and sobering stories.

Another day in Calais drew to a close, as we completed our final distribution, this time 300 sets

of new socks, T shirts and pants, and headed out of the camp. We bade farewell to Clare's team, climbed into our convoy of cars and vans, and headed home across the Channel. Until next time when hopefully local government won't have destroyed these small signs of hope?



The long queue near the Eritrean church.
Words: Laura Smith

The team at the Care4 Calais warehouse.
Photos: Hameed Mozaffari Chinjani