
MEET THE MAN WHO BROUGHT AN ENTIRE ENGLISH LIBRARY TO TAJIKISTAN

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Qurghontepa was at the very edge of the Soviet Union, a dusty city in the baking plains of what is now southern Tajikistan, not far from the Afghan border. It is not, at first glance, the kind of place you would expect to find an English library with 30,000 books, everything from bedtime stories to illustrated guides to the gardens of England.

The books were transported wholesale from Kent, after a library in the area closed down a decade ago. They are part of Sworde Teppa, an English-language project designed to help give young Tajiks more opportunities in life.

Paul Marchant, 50, from Tonbridge, who runs Sworde Teppa, said: I heard that Kent county council were disposing of about 30,000 books, and so I did loads of trips in my dad's car to pick them up and had them shipped to Tajikistan in two containers.

Marchant is an entomologist who first came to Tajikistan in 1999 to research a project on the efficacy of mosquito nets. Initially, he started Sworde Teppa as an environmental organisation to help promote sustainable living. English lessons emerged as a sideline when it became clear that young people in Tajikistan had little option but to live in poverty at home or travel to Russia for low-paid, unskilled labour.

Gradually, English lessons became the organisation's main activity. More than 3,000 students have passed through the school over the past decade. A month of English classes at Sworde Teppa costs 80 somoni (£8), but almost half the students are eligible for free lessons. Groups of disabled children and orphans study free, and the school offers free classes for English teachers employed in state schools and universities to help improve their language skills.

Shahnoza Davlatzoda, 24, spent four years studying English at Sworde Teppa, which allowed her to apply for a business degree at the Kazakh-American University in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Having completed her course, she recently returned to Qurghontepa, where she hopes to find a job with a bank, but also plans to teach at the school.

Marchants presence in the city is reminiscent of the eccentric Victorian gentleman scholars who travelled the world during the colonial era. After 17 years in the country, he speaks hardly a word of Tajik and runs the school from an office adorned with portraits of various royals, and bunting depicting a smiling Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. One room is filled with butterflies and insects he has captured, as well as pickled snakes in jars and stuffed animals.

But Marchants life is far from luxurious: he has given everything to ensure the school stays open. Marchant has not travelled to Britain for nearly a decade due to an absence of funds and does not often visit Tajikistans capital, Dushanbe. Some of the teachers havent been paid for two months. It wouldnt be right for me to be dashing off on trips. If I had the money, I would use it to pay them, he said. He has spent all his savings on the school and subsists on a basic diet.

The school is required to pay business taxes, even though it is a non-profit organisation, and in 2016 it received just one donation of about \$100 from an academic based abroad. Otherwise, Sworde Teppa survives on a modest grant from the British embassy in Dushanbe and student fees.

Although Tajikistans president, Emomali Rahmon, said in a speech earlier this year that English is the language of the future and all civil servants should speak it by 2020, foreign language teaching in the country is of a low standard. Even Russian, widely spoken during the Soviet period, is dying out, but many Tajiks learn it while working as migrant labourers in Russia.

Amirali Norov, 25, teaches English at the local university, but said the standard among Sworde Teppa students is higher than that of the universitys teachers. He refused a request to move to the university full time because he did not want to leave the school.

Not everyone stays. One of the schools teachers recently moved to work in the far east of Russia, taking advantage of a Kremlin scheme that gives free land to those who populate isolated areas. Many successful students end up leaving the city to work elsewhere.

Marchant said: We do have a problem that when people do well, they leave us. But the whole point is to build capacity and give people more life options, so thats OK.

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