



'To be able to reduce stigma we went door to door, village to village, chief to chief. When people understood [it's] curable, treatment is free and it is not easy to catch, the stigma stopped,' says 45-year-old Kofi Nyarko at his home in Ankaful Village, Cape Coast, where he lives with his wife and four children



# BREAKING

# BOUNDARIES

The Joan Wakelin Bursary aided Matilda Temperley's compelling study of Ghanaian communities tackling the stigma of leprosy. And it proves, hears Gemma Padley, that there's no place like home

**V**isiting Ghana in December 2016, Matilda Temperley was surprised by what she found. A member of the community had just rejoined their village after 40 years in a leprosy colony to a mood of celebration being repeated in locations across the west African country.

'It was wonderful to see these people returning home after however many years,' says Temperley. '[They] represent real hope in the fight against stigma.'

Her project in Ghana was made possible when she received the Joan Wakelin Bursary, awarded by the Society and *The Guardian* in memory of photojournalist and Fenton Medalist Joan Wakelin HonFRPS. Each year, one recipient is offered £2,000 to produce a photographic essay on an overseas documentary issue.

Temperley was determined to focus on the work being done to combat negative attitudes to those affected by

leprosy, rather than on the disease itself. This meant documenting people as individuals, rather than their disabilities. The chronic contagious disease affects the skin, mucous membranes, and nerves, causing discolouration and lumps on the skin. In severe cases it brings disfigurement and deformities.

The disease is now largely confined to tropical Africa and Asia. The World Health Organization (WHO) notes: 'Leprosy has afflicted humanity since time immemorial. It once affected every continent and it has left behind a terrifying image in history and human memory – of mutilation, rejection and exclusion from society ... Between one and two million people are visibly disabled due to past and present leprosy.'

Temperley, who worked in Ghana with a fixer and the NGOs Uniting to Combat Neglected Tropical Diseases and Sightsavers, says: 'People in these communities recognise that leprosy is totally curable. It might leave some



Samuel Otoo, 50, is treated for a foot ulcer, a complication of having had leprosy in the past. He lives with his family

physical effects if it isn't caught in time, but people can go back to their families and lead normal lives, which was not the case a few decades ago.

'It's important to show we're making [progress] in these types of diseases. It shows they're worth investing in and that the international community is doing such incredible [work]. Everyone needs to know what a positive impact [from] international aid looks like ... These are huge success stories that are changing millions of lives. They should be told and celebrated.'

While the stigma of leprosy persists on a global level, there is progress. 'With an increased commitment spearheaded by the WHO, campaigns in [affected] countries, and with people affected by leprosy having a key role, the success will continue,' says Temperley. 'With political will and local engagement we can overcome thousands of years of stigma.'

Temperley's passion for the project has twin roots. Having studied a master's in the control of infectious diseases at the London School of Tropical Medicine, Temperley began her professional life as a scientist and researcher, working in Uganda, east Africa. She took up photography when she realised being a scientist wasn't for her.

'I was young and impatient and didn't want to be on computers the whole time,' she recalls. 'Photography was something I'd always liked but never thought was a valid

career ... Part of [the draw] was I looked at things differently when I had a camera in my hand. It gave me a different life experience because I was really looking.'

After returning from Uganda in the mid-2000s, Temperley moved to London to follow her dream of working as a photographer. 'I didn't know anything about the industry or any photographers,' she says. 'I came back with utter naivety and I only managed because of that naivety. If I had thought about it long and hard, and done my research, I would have been far too intimidated to give it a go.'

At around this time Temperley, who grew up on a cider farm in Somerset, where she now lives, was photographing circus events and performers – another topic that has long fascinated her. Her work was on show in London at the Roundhouse during the 2008 edition of CircusFest, and she credits the experience as kick-starting 'absolutely everything'.

The common thread throughout her work is marginalised communities, she says. She has covered topics from human rights abuses in the Omo Valley in Ethiopia to burlesque dancers in Las Vegas and, closer to home, the disastrous Somerset floods in January 2014, all of which she has made into books. Her latest, published this summer, is *The League of Exotic Dancers: Legends from American Burlesque*. The floods work was especially significant for Temperley, however.



**PROFILE**  
**MATILDA TEMPERLEY**  
Work by the 2016 Joan Wakelin Bursary recipient has appeared in publications including The Guardian, The Telegraph and National Geographic



Ekua Ketsewa is welcomed home by some of her younger relatives after her more than 40-year absence

Ekua Ketsewa, 76, gets acquainted with her relatives after returning to the village of Assin Bosomadwe where she was born. She lived in Eyindakrom leprosy camp for 41 years



'You can travel all over the world, but the closer you are to home and the more you know about something you have a great advantage [since you can bring] so much sincerity,' she says. 'I came back from Asia and was photographing the floods because I realised it was an event we had never seen before in Somerset. My grandfather's house was one of the first to be flooded. Villagers were saying we needed to get [the story] in the press because no-one was talking about it.'

After contacting local news agencies with her images and getting nowhere, Temperley tried a handful of newspapers and had a breakthrough. After one published her images, others followed suit. The situation rapidly became political, she recalls, with the

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Environment Agency calling the floods a natural disaster but farmers and other locals believing otherwise. 'It took about a month of being flooded before the press had the 'right' story – the story the people of Somerset knew: that [the cause] was the complete mismanagement of our drainage ditch. We were all campaigning for the truth to be out there.'

Winning the Vic Odden Award in 2015 for her floods work brought a

sense of recognition to something that began as a personal challenge. 'It gave me validation at a time when I was lagging a bit.' The award also gave Temperley the confidence to persevere with another project – *Omo: Change In The Valley*. About the people of the southern Ethiopian region, the 'labour of love' was 10 years in the making.

Receiving the Joan Wakelin Bursary a year later strengthened her profile and enabled her to pursue another project she cared deeply about. 'It encourages you as a photographer and helps to get your name out there, which is important,' she says. 'To have people share their stories with you is a great privilege.'

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