

HOLIDAY TURNED INTO MERCY MISSION

TRIP'S QUAKE RELIEF

WHEN a devastating earthquake hit the Sichuan province of China just a couple of weeks before an Oxfordshire man planned to visit the country, everyone assumed he would cancel his trip.

However, 66-year-old photographer John Henshall, who lives in Stanford in the Vale, decided to forgo his holiday to help others.

Mr Henshall collected more than £1,500 from friends and family before setting off to Chengdu to buy much-needed supplies for some of the children whose schools and homes were destroyed by the quake.

He said: "When the earthquake happened everyone said 'Are you going to cancel your trip?' But I decided not to chicken out and to go anyway.

"There was nowhere to go touring so I decided to take aid relief out there and try to help."

By Fran Bardsley

It was Mr Henshall's seventh visit to the country.

He met up with local travel agent Angie Wong to identify what would be needed and where to take it.

He said: "We decided to take things for the children because many of the schools were destroyed, so they have nothing. We wanted to bring a smile to their faces."

They went to a wholesale market and loaded two vans with everything from school supplies to sports equipment, mosquito repellent to sanitary supplies.

They drove up into the mountains to some of the most affected communities and dropped off much-needed supplies to a school operating under canvas in the town of Shifang.

He said: "When you see the scale of it — with mile after mile of destruction — it is totally overwhelming.

"The world has forgotten about it, but people there have to cope with it on a daily basis."

He also visited a mosque nearby which had been left in a dangerous state by the tremors and found 40 Muslim families taking shelter.

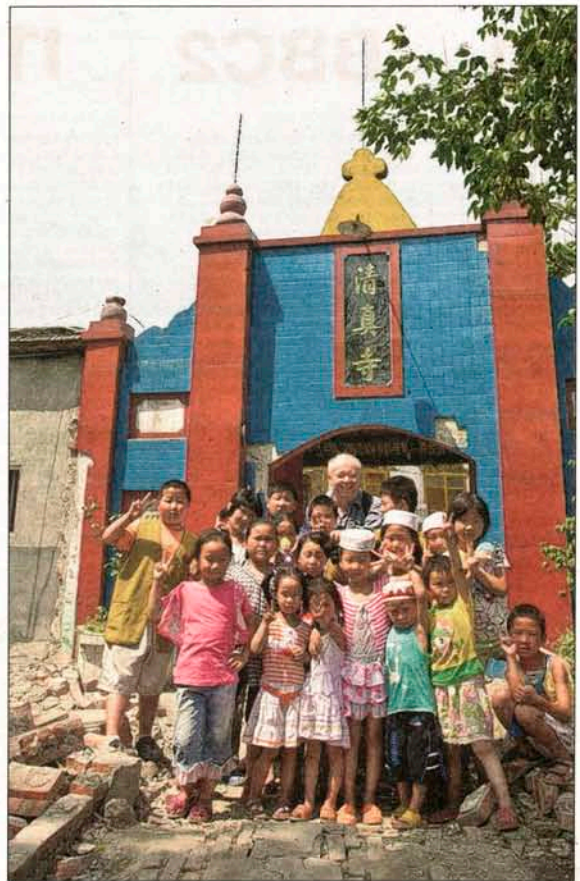
He said: "They were so welcoming and invited us to lunch, despite the state they were in."

Mr Henshall described how the "empty" faces of many of those left with nothing by the earthquake could be transformed by little things, like the items he was able to hand over.

He said: "It was one of the most profound experiences I have ever had in my life."

Thousands of people were killed in the May 12 earthquake and tens of thousands left homeless in the wake of the disaster.

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MOVING: John Henshall with children in Chengdu



CARRYING ON: John Henshall's photographs of life after the earthquake in Sichuan province