

'When we arrived at the first soup kitchen there were 500 elderly people waiting in the bitter cold'

For 15 years Christine Metcalfe has been handing out vital aid in Bulgaria. **Danny Longhorn** reports on her latest trip



MERCY MISSION: Christine Metcalfe looks through photos from her recent trip to Bulgaria. Picture: Jerome Ellerby



SUPPORT: Christine meets orphan children in Kichevo.

Christine couldn't walk away from plea

BULGARIAN Aid began for Christine Metcalfe when she witnessed first-hand the poverty in the country.

On a visit to two orphanages in Rousse she found 160 boys and girls, mostly teenagers, who were begging for something to eat.

As a parent and grandparent, she couldn't walk away from that plea and arranged for food to be brought immediately and for a Greek Rotary Club to send more later in the year.

Christine then had the idea of knitting a warm sweater for each child and bought the wool and persuaded friends to join her.

Bulgaria, the following year they took a lorry, but in the years since aid has been sent by sea in containers.

The aid has included all kinds of clothing and shoes for all ages, cutlery, toiletries, educational and soft toys, wheelchairs and living aids for the disabled.

Bulgarian Aid has also sent across woodwork and gardening tools, sewing machines, computers, musical instruments, prams and baby clothes.

Through the Rotary Foundation Matching Grants the Hull Rotary Club has provided a laundry for a home for girls in Rousse and purchased a tractor to help train handicapped young people to work in farming.

WHEN Christine Metcalfe saw the poverty suffered by elderly people living in Bulgaria, she knew she had to help.

Many, having worked all of their lives, now found themselves in need, living on a pension in the region of 150 lev (£65) a month and unable to feed themselves properly.

"Three years ago a great need was identified among elderly people," said Christine, who co-founded Cottingham-based Bulgarian Aid.

"Most of them women - widows - usually live alone in a two-roomed flat in a concrete block.

"They have to pay rent, water and electricity bills every month or they are cut off.

"Travelling over there for weeks at a time, shopping in the markets, we were very aware of the price of foodstuffs.

"These elderly people have no chance of supplementing their income and are only living on bread and yoghurt."

While residents in this region were celebrating Christmas, Christine was out distributing donations to poor people in Bulgaria.

It was a campaign which started when she sent a load of aid in 1998, after she was shown around two orphanages in the Bulgarian city of Rousse.

She was surrounded by hundreds of children poorly dressed, badly fed and with little hope for the future.

It was all part of a fact-finding mission after hearing about the plight of people in the country from Bulgarian Rotarian delegates at a conference.



FUNDING: Christine at St Jones day care centre for special needs children in Varna.

The items in the container handed out last month - filled in part by Market Rasen Rotarians - included 20 pallets of food, 550 boxes packed with medical equipment, more than 1,000 nurses uniforms, clothing, toys, walking aids and tables.

"It was a very different Christmas for me but was a very fulfilling one," said Christine, who described the gratitude of all the recipients as humbling.

"They were grateful for so little in comparison with what we have in Britain, it makes you want to help them again.

"The helpers are not well-off by our standards but are working to help those less fortunate."

While in Bulgaria, Christine also helped distribute food to vulnerable old people and served food at the soup kitchens.

"What an eye-opener. I never thought I would see soup kitchens on this scale. These people are really in need," she said.

"When we arrived at the first soup kitchen there were 500 people mostly elderly, waiting, in the bitter cold weather. Some of them had been there for two hours, they had seen the donation being delivered and decided to wait."

During that afternoon, each one of the 500 received a food parcel, dry foods like spaghetti and packet soups, tinned fish, vegetables, cereals, long-life milk and some treats like biscuit or chocolate bars.

"They were all very grateful and the volunteers at the scheme gave heartfelt thanks, saying the donation must have been heaven sent," said Christine.

"Until they heard about the donation they had no idea how they were going to provide food for Christmas Day and Boxing Day to the 800 people registered with them.

"Another scheme, at St Michael's Church in



TREATS: Christine gives out chocolate to the elderly at the soup kitchen.

Varna, provides food at the weekends. This also received a donation.

"We went along to witness 150 people, again most elderly, queuing up for a yoghurt carton of good vegetable soup, a small loaf of bread and a carton of yoghurt.

"Most of them consumed the soup and bread immediately standing near the tables in the church garden, taking the yoghurt home for later."

The food is obtained from the charity Hisfood, which is based near Market Rasen. Manufacturers and supermarkets donate their excess food through the charity and a donation is made to Hisfood for the handling.

"The 20 pallets of high-quality food, plus the carriage of the container, usually around £2,700, as the Bulgarian port charges are also paid, costs approximately £5,700," said Christine.

"But the food is worth maybe ten times more than that. The hope it brings is incalculable.

"Judging by the emails we have received from Varna, the need is becoming even greater, so Bulgarian Aid is committed to sending another container of food aid as soon as possible and will welcome any donations or offers of help."

Email info@bulgarianrelief.co.uk or visit www.bulgarianrelief.co.uk for more details.

In Brief

Plans to transform city furniture store into flats

HULL: A former furniture store could be transformed into apartments. A planning application has been submitted to Hull City Council seeking permission to turn the old Walmesley's Furniture Store in Paragon Street into two luxury apartments.

The plans for the three-storey building include two, two bedroom apartments on the upper floors and a communal residential entrance on the ground floor, which was once the shop.

Nu Architects, the firm handling the application, states: "We believe this will enhance the facade of the building bringing unity between the ground and upper floors and lessening the impact of the 20th-century shop front."

Project is music to ears

HULL: A new project to help young musicians is being launched next month.

The BlackBolt Project is a social initiative giving budding musicians the chance to develop their talent through a three-week course, which culminates in a major showcasing event.

Each performance is filmed in HD and the film footage is then available via the project's in-house record label BlackBolt Records, which is available in 140 online stores in 70 countries.

The launch will see performances of themes music from television, film and games industries with the New Age Orchestra 2014 on Saturday, February 22, at the Albemarle Music Centre in Ferensway.

All proceeds will be donated to The Youth Music Service. Visit www.blackdenbolton.co.uk for tickets.

Swap seeds and secrets

HULL: Green-fingered gardeners are invited to swap their seeds and secrets at an event next month.

The Freedom Centre in Preston Road is hosting the Green Prosperity Seed Swap Day on Saturday, February 1.

There will be expert gardening speakers from across the country, different types of seeds available to buy or swap, local food and children's activities.

Times have yet to be confirmed but visit www.freedomcentre.info for more information.

Place on parish council

EAST RIDING: There is a vacancy for a councillor on Reedness Parish Council.

Electors are invited to write to the chief executive of East Riding Parish Council requesting a by-election.

If the council receives fewer than ten letters by Thursday, February 6, existing members will vote in the new councillor themselves.

Write to the chief executive of East Riding of Yorkshire Council at County Hall, Beverley, East Yorkshire, HU17 9BA.

Contact Sarah Belton, Oak Lodge, Goole Road, Hook, Goole, DN14 5NN for more information.

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VITAL: Elderly people queuing at the soup kitchen.

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