

# Profile



At just 27, **Claire Gott** has set up a charity, is on the ICE Council and a Green Construction Board working group, and is a design manager for one of the great challenges of the age in the UK – the redevelopment of London Bridge Station. Oh, and she has an MBE. Jackie Whitelaw went to meet WSP | Parsons Brinckerhoff's engineering dynamo.



**"Always follow your passions,"** says Claire Gott, a graduate member of The Institution of Structural Engineers. That's what she has done from an early age and it has already been paying dividends in her short career so far.

Her current job is as a design manager with WSP | Parsons Brinckerhoff on the reconstruction of London Bridge Station, leading a multidisciplinary team of 15. Alongside that, she is the founder of charity Cameroon Catalyst, sits on the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) Council as a graduate member and is on the promotions working group of the Green Construction Board. Luckily for her, her employer encourages her extracurricular activity and in the case of the charity, in particular, is an active supporter.

## Making a difference

Cameroon Catalyst is the reason Gott was awarded her MBE in the 2015 New Year's Honours List. She received the award from HRH The Prince of Wales, another enthusiastic supporter of Africa. And it is worth starting any discussion on her career right there.

The charity's work focuses on a largely ignored country, in aid terms, which is not torn apart by war but still has plenty of people suffering in a clear cycle of poverty. Cameroon Catalyst works on

annual projects that give villages new facilities which meet clear needs and will help raise the quality of life of the local people.

The charity was founded in 2009 by Gott and fellow student, Emily Hill, when both were still students at Southampton University, but its roots go back further than that for Gott.

From a young age she had always had a desire to make a difference. Ultimately, that was why she studied engineering and architecture at university, a decision encouraged by a school trip aged 17 to Africa. "I was very lucky," she says. "We went on safari, climbed Mount Kilimanjaro, but we also helped refurbish an orphanage in Tanzania. I was studying physics, design technology and maths, but realised from that just how valuable practical skills could be."

The move into engineering was not a given, however.

## Why engineering?

"My dad was a mechanical engineer and if it hadn't been for him and a good careers adviser, I would never have known to look down the engineering route for a future career."

She studied the combined course because she wanted a complete understanding of the skills that go into successful construction projects. "It was pretty intense – you are studying civil engineering to honours level and your architecture Part 1, which equals seven years' work in four. It was a slog, but it was worth it."

The breadth of study also helped Gott realise that her bent was more as an engineer than architect. "I'm the kind of person who likes a 'yes' or 'no' answer and to come up with practical solutions."

It was in her last year of the course that she remembered the reason she was studying it, which was to get out there and make a difference. "I realised that if I didn't do something quickly, before I was wrapped up in the world of work, I'd lose the impetus." And Cameroon Catalyst was born; it is still based on the Southampton University campus.

## MBE

From work with one village in Cameroon – Bambouti – the charity is now helping 10 more and is partnered with international architecture charity Article 25 and Hydrogeologists Without Borders. WSP | Parsons Brinckerhoff has become a corporate member of Article 25 and is now closely involved with the work being done by Cameroon Catalyst.

It's a remarkable achievement in just six years and services to civil engineering and charitable work in Cameroon is the citation behind Gott's MBE. "I have no idea who suggested me, but I'd like to say thank you," she says.

A national honour is a useful thing to have in the aid world, it turns out. “The MBE is proving very helpful when dealing with other NGOs. It is recognition that we are a serious charity and will deliver on what we say, and it has started to make a difference.”

WSP | Parsons Brinckerhoff gives Gott unpaid leave every other year to go out to Cameroon and help with projects, but it is also offering her opportunity at home.

### Career steps

The consultant gave Gott her first job. “I had worked with contractor Costain on summer placements but I decided I wanted to be at the front end of construction projects. WSP | Parsons Brinckerhoff was working on some amazing projects when I was looking for my first post – not least the Shard – and it had some strong core values, including support for sustainability, which attracted me.”

Gott started in the structures team at the Birmingham office. “I spent three years working on some great projects such as the Cambridge Fire Station, Alder Hey Hospital and Birmingham Gateway. But I wanted to move into design management and schemes where I could use all my skills and work with a full multidisciplinary team.”

London Bridge Station redevelopment offers all of that and more. It is arguably the most challenging job in London, but potentially one of the most rewarding. “We are changing the passenger experience,” Gott says. “It is not just the business of getting from A to B but how passengers experience that while they are doing it. So we are transforming the station, flooding it with natural light, for instance, as well as engaging with retail operations. It is being transformed into a hub and a destination.”

### More to come

The consultant’s sustainability credentials attracted Gott to the business in the first place and her enthusiasm for the subject has been allowed to develop. She is a member of the promotion working group of the Green Construction Board, which is driving forward the government’s low-carbon construction action plan.

“It is an opportunity to drive change,” Gott says, “but in bite-sized pieces. Everyone is aware that it is the right thing to do, but not everyone understands the business benefits.”

Gott has also been elected to the ICE Council as a graduate member, responsible for representing the interests of graduates and students. And she chairs the ICE’s Inspiration Panel, which has been established to work out how to inspire the next generation of engineers.

She has been lucky in her own mentors, she says. “I have had great line managers and mentors who have given me honest guidance – in particular the WSP | Parsons Brinckerhoff project director at London Bridge, Adrian Tooth, and Malcolm Davidson, who heads the firm’s Birmingham structures team. “They have both been very understanding of how I wanted to shape my career and in helping me get my charterhip last year. That is a tough process and sometimes we underestimate what we expect graduates to do for that, while they are working.”

Her ambitions for the future include: “continuing to work on fantastic projects” and “to go to Sweden [where her employer has a big business] to learn from them about sustainability and about their approach to rail projects”.

There have been no regrets in her career so far. “I have always put my mind to something and done it.”

There is a lot more to come from Claire Gott, you suspect.

## Cameroon Catalyst



January Hope Medical Center

Cameroon Catalyst was established in 2009 and formed a relationship with Cameroon-based charity Mosame Trust, which was working in the village of Bambouti, located in rural eastern Cameroon. The village is predominantly a subsistence farming-based community, with a recent influx of refugees from the neighbouring country. Prior to Cameroon Catalyst’s involvement in the village, a lack of basic medical supplies was identified as a major problem, as well as poor access to educational facilities.

Cameroon Catalyst and the Mosame Trust worked to develop a five-year plan for Bambouti, which was completed in 2014. Five successful projects have been completed by Cameroon Catalyst and the local builders in Bambouti: a medical centre, a carpentry and mechanical skills workshop, a primary school, an electricity hub and new housing.

The charity is now rolling out the model to 10 more villages in the surrounding area.

[www.camerooncatalyst.org](http://www.camerooncatalyst.org)