

The Groundnut Scheme: A Boy's Eye View

Introduction

Whilst some of you will know as much as I do, and more, about the ill-fated Groundnut Scheme, others might know very little since it was all over and done with before most of us were more than young children.

The scheme was the bright idea of the United Africa Company, part of Lever Brothers, and the post-war Labour government to boost food supplies, provide employment, particularly for the many ex-service personnel who had served in the tropics, and aid the development of Tanganyika, which Britain governed as a Trust Territory on behalf of the United Nations. At the conclusion of WW1 the then League of Nations had mandated Britain to take over the government of what had been German East Africa and had not Hitler behaved as he did, it was likely that the territory would have reverted to German rule in the 1930's. The Groundnut Scheme also operated in West Africa but I know little about that and will concentrate on Tanganyika.

The government established the Overseas Food Corporation and mounted a large scale recruitment campaign, looking not only for engineers, mechanics and, possibly, farmers, but also admin and support staff, secretaries, nurses etc. My Dad had spent 7 or 8 years in the 1930's, working for the United Africa Company in the Belgian Congo, as soon as he had qualified as an accountant in the north of England. Like many of us, he got the Africa bug and so he leapt at the opportunity to return when he saw the OFC advertisements. With many other applicants, but by no means all, he was motivated by a firm desire to help the development of the people of Tanganyika.

My Sources

After being foolish enough to offer this topic to Alan towards the end of the last U3AC year, it happened that a number of sources fell into my lap, as it were. I had thought I would be relying on my memory and on what I have absorbed over the years. But over the summer I began looking at some old papers and diaries from my Dad, who died in 1970, which my sister had passed on to me. I found a diary of his 3 day flight out, his first impressions and his early travels, from late 1948 to mid



1949 when the rest of the family followed on a Union Castle mailboat. and anchored in the magnificent harbour in Dar es Salaam. In this picture it is a BI line ship occupying 'F' berth, from which little motor boats took us ashore.

As a second source, I found letters and some photographs amongst papers of my late aunt, who had spent a year staying with us 1951-52, over the period when my Dad left the OFC, in disillusionment, and set up in private practice as an accountant in Dar es Salaam. She had sent circular letters home to friends at intervals. Unfortunately, the second of these, which would have been the most illuminating seems to have got lost. However, she did also have a few small, black and white photos to add to the few that I still had. When I came back to England in 1956 for secondary education, my parents packed all my possessions in a large wooden crate and sent it by sea. When we unpacked it at my aunt's house we found it had been opened and many items stolen. My photo album was there but many pictures were ruined.

Source number 3 came to me through a chance conversation at a dinner at Westminster College where I was placed next to Isobel Fox, wife of the former University Librarian, Peter Fox. She asked me about my life in Africa and then explained that her Irish Uncle had gone to Tanganyika as a newly qualified vet in the final years of WW2, and had published a book of his life there, and subsequent career. She has lent me a copy of Destination 5, and I have found it fascinating, stirring my own memories and filling out many gaps.

My Memories

As I have said, we travelled by sea, on the Llandoverly Castle, right round the Cape and up the East coast to Dar es Salaam; my mother, 3 older sisters, 1 very young brother and me, and spent a few weeks in a



hotel in Kurasini, the non-government residential area of Dar es Salaam, and very close to where we later had a house ourselves. I guess my Dad had work to attend to, whilst we seem to have been on holiday, as this picture on the beach at Oyster Bay, indicates. I was 6 at the time and my brother was 1. Then we set out

West, on the slow, two and a half day, rail journey of about 600 miles, on the German built, 1 metre gauge railway, right across Tanganyika to Urambo. Urambo and Kongwa, shown in green, were the two main plantation areas but there was also much development down in the extreme south east at Nachingwea, with plans to build a deep water harbour at Mtwara. I am told that if you were to hunt around in the bush in that area and around Kongwa you would find

rusting spares for caterpillar tractors and bulldozers, bringing to mind stories of incompetent supply lines to the Crimea, described in

Tanzania



Wikipedia as, 'an iconic symbol of logistical, medical and tactical failures and mismanagement' The *Groundnut Scheme* was just such another. 'When will they ever learn?' Vet Robert Lee, on a visit to Kongwa 40 years later, writes of complete, rusting, tractors being half buried in the sand. Drivers were paid by the hour their engines were running, so left them hidden, to go drinking and then couldn't find them!

When we reached Urambo we found that we were to live in one of a number of military style messes.



Not here to illustrate my cycling proficiency, but to show the ex-Army tents in the background, set in a square with a central mess for all users. Our home, for the next 9 months, was a large square tent as a living room with smaller tents, set up on grass walls, on three sides, as bedrooms. The toilet was a wooden hut out at the back and I well remember the first evening when my Dad took me there and emphasized that I should always take a torch and look for snakes lurking under the rim. Later in life, in SW Zimbabwe, I built dozens of a more sophisticated version of pit latrines. The bath was a zinc tub in the living room, filled with water heated in a primitive donkey boiler and carried in. I think we each took a dip one, after the other. My Mum tried to enhance the rather inadequate food in the mess by making us drop scones on a primus stove. When the canvas of the tents began to rot and to leak, the solution was to erect a thatched roof right over the whole thing, with thatching walls along the sides. This gave a shaded play area for my small brother, but also an ideal home for snakes and insects.

All of this provided a wonderful play ground for me and the other children but was an absolute nightmare for my poor Mum, especially as

my Dad was frequently absent, visiting Kongwa and other places. I remember one incident when 2 of his colleagues casually told my Mum that his return would be delayed for a few more days, with no awareness of the distress it caused her. Very soon my 2 oldest sisters were sent to boarding schools in Kenya. The local school was, I am told, so appalling that my sister and I were only there for a few days before my Mum found another wife who was a teacher for us for a few months. My main memories of the school building were meeting there for cubs and, on Saturday mornings, to watch Cowboy films with all the other kids.



Inevitably our vehicle was one of those recently developed Landrovers in which we bumped around the dirt roads and visited the 'Units'. For me, however, it was a wonderful stage coach, parked in our garden, with an imaginary team of horses racing across the prairie.

After a few months living in the gradually rotting tents, we moved into our smart, new house. Because of our large family, it was about the biggest in the place. One consequence of this was that when we were away at boarding school, my parents were asked to host any OFC visitors. One of these was John Strachey himself, the Minister of Food in the Labour government, the man in charge of the Scheme. Now it so happened that my Dad had stood as a Liberal



candidate in the 1947 General Election and by chance, shortly before the visit of the great man, I had discovered a box of stickers saying 'Vote Liberal' and had stuck these up all over the house! I do not remember the consequences.



Back to groundnuts, with apologies to Pathe News. Apart from ex-Army trucks used as buses and for most other transport, the other vehicles we saw were those of the bush bashers. This was how the scrubland and light forest of the area was cleared for planting. A heavy chain was dragged between

two caterpillar tractors and then a third bulldozer, with a high bar, came along behind and pushed any stubborn tree out of the ground. This happened in the wet season while the ground was soft. The bush was left to dry out when the rains ended, and then was burnt. One of my most vivid, searing, memories is of driving with a raging fire on one side and virgin bush on the other and a whole zoo of terrified animals racing across the road in front of us.

This aerial view, taken from Irish Vet Robert Lee's book with the permission of his niece, shows the scale of the land clearing. This is actually at Kongwa, but very similar 'units' were cleared all around Urambo. Instead



of starting with a small trial, as advised, the OFC launched on a grandiose scale, planned as a military campaign by ex-military officers. The general manager in Urambo was Captain C E Lucas-Phillips, who had commanded HMS Amethyst as it escaped down the Yangtse River, who wrote one of the better war stories about it. I have a memory of spending Christmas Day 1949 at their house, with a huge, red polished verandah on which my brother slipped and cut his head badly. My Dad's diary tells of the antipathy between the Groundnut staff and government officials and Vet Robert Lee confirms this from his side, especially as all their warnings and the advice of many years' experience of the area were ignored. For instance, they told the small planning team that the vast area of flat land near Mpapwa, which had been selected as the major development centred on Kongwa, had the lowest and least consistent rainfall in the whole of Tanganyika, which might explain why it was almost uninhabited. The Department of Agriculture had suggested that a trial of 20,000 acres of groundnuts, in a rotation with other food crops, would be appropriate but here the United Africa Company insisted that the scheme cleared about half a million acres. They had seen the soil after the rains when it seemed ideal. They didn't realise that, come harvest time, it would be like concrete, with the groundnuts incarcerated in it. They had seen local farmers successfully growing groundnuts so their vast scheme must succeed. The investment by the British taxpayer in the scheme was more than £24 million, an enormous sum at that time. By the end, I think it became £49 million.



Vet Robert Lee returned to the area in the early 1990's, 40 years on, and found vast areas of over-grazed, seriously eroded land, with no return of the covering of thorn bush that had been destroyed, no sign of groundnuts and virtually no

sign of Kongwa either, apart from rusting tractors. Military leaders plan campaigns to lead to quick fix victories, not to long-term, sustainable outcomes. The groundnut scheme might have been planned as a long-term development but it certainly turned into a short-lived, very expensive, disaster. Were there any lasting benefits, one might ask? As so often, these were not the intended ones, but the scheme did bring into Tanganyika a substantial number of skilled people with a real interest in the development of Tanganyika for the sake of its people rather than to boost the profits of Unilever. Many of these stayed and made their contribution towards the early independence of the country.

IF TIME



To complete the small boy's story, at the age of 7 he went to join his



older sister as a pupil at the newly opened Southern Highlands School, situated between Iringa and Mbeya. This was on the lines of an English prep school (except that it was far sighted enough to be co-ed), by two young Oxford graduates who used their war gratuities to set it up. Getting there involved a day and a night in the train, whether from Urambo in the West or Dar es Salaam on the coast, with breakfast in the Dodoma Hotel, then a day's bus journey down the Great North Road, including a tortuous section of escarpment along the Rift Valley, and tea, if we got there on time, at the Iringa Hotel, then 60 more miles to Sao Hill and the school. In the early days the bus was a typical 1940's charabanc, with frequent breakdowns, totally inadequate for the dirt roads, and the last part of the journey was by a small convoy of cars, provided by the staff and local farmers. Soon these were replaced by 'the Great White Monsters', powerful, diesel vehicles, though even these got stuck in the river beds in the wet season. But eventually we reached

The Southern Highlands School. This was really more like a large family than a school. There were 24 of us when I got there. In the end, soon after independence, the number had reached about 72, I believe. Then the buildings were sold to the Lutheran Mission as a vocational training school and I was privileged to re-visit briefly in 2011 when on a visit to the extreme North of Zambia, and found the outward appearance very much as I had remembered it and the vocational school still running. An enterprising



local business woman had established a new Southern Highlands School close by, for the children of more wealthy Tanzanians.