THE OUTPOST AT ABERCORN

Abercorn, the northernmost settlement in Zambia, was named after the Duke of Abercorn, president of the British South Africa Company from 1890 to 1913, and established by Harry Johnston, "Her Majesty's Commissioner and Consul General for the Territories under British influence to the North of the Zambezi." Johnston was chiefly engaged in fighting the Yao slave dealers in the south of Nyasaland and had few resources to spare for the northern area between Lake Tanganyika and Lake Nyasa. However, he despatched an administrator, Hugh ("Tambalika") Marshall with a detachment of Sikhs, a supply of postage and revenue stamps, and orders to build a stockade which was completed in 1893. Occupation of the area by hunters, traders, cattle buyers, and other settlers from the south did not begin until the time of the South African War, and the period 1900-1902 probably saw the Abercorn district at the peak of its development. When a meeting was held in 1902 to discuss the form of a memorial to Queen Victoria, no fewer than 25 settlers were present to decide on the building of the Tanganyika Victoria Memorial Institute (so named because Abercorn was headquarters of the then Tanganyika district). But the building of the institute also illustrated Abercorn's fatal flaw, its isolation. Despite all the help that traders and administration alike could give, the problems of communication and transport ensured that two years were to pass before the building was complete.

The difficulties of getting to—or from—Abercorn were chronicled by a member of a party which came up from Durban in 1901 as forerunners of an ambitious scheme sponsored by the Administration for the settlement of 25 families on farms surveyed by Marshall and provided with the nucleus of their herds—30 cows. The advance party, under the leadership of Ralph Chiappini, included two doctors, John Deacon, Charles Blyth, a nurse and Chiappini's fiancee. The first stage of their journey was by ship from Durban to Chinde at the mouth of the Zambezi and then, after a few days, by steamer up the river and to Blantyre. From Blantyre the party travelled by small boat and in machilas to Fort Johnston where it waited in vain for the magistrate to return from a hunting trip and marry the Chiappinis. At length they set off for Karonga by steamer along Lake Nyasa, and at Karonga a further three weeks passed while they hired carriers and arranged the steeply climbing journey to the plateau. Scarcely had they arrived at Abercorn when Chiappini died of blackwater, his widow returned to Durban, the nurse joined the government services, and Deacon went elephant hunting. A family following close behind was hastily diverted to Fort Jameson, and Blyth was the only settler left. He took up his 2,000 acres in the Saisi Valley nearby, calling his farm "Jericho", and successfully applied for the 60 cattle intended for Deacon and Chiappini.

The cattle flourished and by May 1904 Blyth was sufficiently established to marry the nurse from the Chiappini expedition. She recalled in her old age that they began by living in the store room with a grass shelter as a sitting room. "We soon got the foundations of the house started, and it was not very long before we were settled in three nice-sized rooms and two lean-tos, one for a dressing room and the other a kitchen. We had the rooms ceilinged with large black beams and dagga pressed through strips of bamboo laid above the beams and whitewashed. . . Eventually we enlarged the house very considerably and had a lovely garden which was terraced with a good lawn and then lower still was a mass of dahlias and flowering shrubs. It was most wonderful soil and everything grew at a great pace. We got 26 and 28 bags of maize to the acre and wheat seed was four inches high in a few days. The great

trouble was there was no market to sell cattle—they had to be trekked to Broken Hill or Salisbury which took two months.

"Money was very scarce in our early days and we lived off the produce of the land to a very large extent. We made our own soap and starch and had our own wheat which was ground at the mission for us. We got very sweet little wild tomatoes and Cape gooseberries. Eventually we grew strawberries, rhubarb, granadillas etc. so we always had plenty of fruit and the most delicious bananas, while tea, sugar, white flour and candles and paraffin were the chief things we had to buy. . .we used to send every six months. . ." The life was not, of course, entirely idyllic: the Orne Gliemans, a Danish family which lived at Itimbwe farm in the Saisi Valley from 1927 to 1946 killed over 100 leopards in that time, and in one year two lions killed over 30 head of cattle.

Not far behind the Blyths was Gordon Lobb, who found himself bored by clerking on the stock exchange after the excitements of the South African War, and leapt at the suggestion of young Hugh Cleaver at a yeomanry dinner that they should join forces and go to Abercorn where Charles Blyth was "growing rubber." (Blyth experimented, at the Adminstration's request, with plantation rubber, but it was a failure there and everywhere else in the country.) Lobb and Cleaver (brother of two well-known *Punch* artists of the day) set out from Harwich to Salisbury at a cost of £22 10s each, and then took a train to Ayrshire mine where they recruited carriers and set off for Feira by cycle. At Feira Lobb caught fever and there was a delay of two weeks while they slept in a tent and ate at George Watkin's hotel. From Feira they travelled up the Pungwe river to the Grey brothers' farm, across the Luangwa and to Fort Jameson, and at last to Abercorn in May 1905.

Cleaver was killed by lightning on the Marshalls' verandah within two months of his arrival, but Lobb established himself in the Saisi Valley at a farm he called "Mula". Half a century later, Lobb recalled the happy little community led by Hugh Marshall who, unusually in the district service, spent 17 years there before being transferred on promotion, and brought a sense of permanency which enabled Lobb to speak in terms of tradition. "There had always been a party at Abercorn in May" he wrote of 1914. "We little thought that the party given by the C.W. Blyths and ourselves on my farm in the Saisi Valley in May 1914 was to be the last of its kind. . .It had always been given by the Provincial Commissioner before.

Tambalika and Mrs. Marshall asked everybody in the district on these occasions. It lasted three to five days and was the great social event of the year. The first one I ever attended was in 1906. We used to have a shoot on the range at 200, 300 and 500 yards against Fort Jameson, each on our own range. It was great fun waiting for the other score to come in by wire to see who had won. I had a slight go of fever just before May 1914 and did not go down to the range with the others. On the way down I met an ostrich. I had never met one before and had been told they could rip you open with their spurs, so I ran like the deuce, and looking over my shoulder ran into a tree and fell to the ground. The bird stood and looked at me with a peculiar expression on its face, and I stayed down until I was rescued by a boy who knew the bird. I did not know until afterwards that it was a tame one belonging to Tambalika. . .

"As I had a steeplechase course on the farm two and half miles long with eight jumps, plus a

water jump, and a nine-hole golf course and tennis court, I suggested to the Blyths that we might give the party that year for a change, and give the Boma a rest. This was arranged. Of course, everybody wanted to ride, but as we had not enough horses to go round we did the best we could to let as many as we could ride. I let Woods the vet as top weight ride my best horse, Lumsden, who was full of tricks and knew about things. He said he could make the weight and trained on Epsom salts. He did this so well that on the day of the race he had to dash with the horse behind an anthill at the side of the course and had to stay there until he felt like coming home. . .Woods made up for it by winning the golf. . .People brought their own tents and camped round the house. None of the missionaries accepted our invitation as I suppose horse racing was not in their line. We managed to get some quite good beer from Kasanga in German East Africa from the Indians. Beer was more or less unheard of in those days, but one could get plenty of whisky from Broken Hill at £5 a case (good days, those). We played golf and tennis in the afternoons. Racing took place in the mornings. To get the right weights my wife made weight cloths which we filled up with cartridges. We had a large spring balance with a very big tray to sit on, all very professional. We had jackets and caps of our chosen colours. Boots, mostly mine, I lent to the others. Woods borrowed an old pair, but could not get out of them so had to have them cut off and I was glad they were my worst ones. We ended up the last night with a fancy dress dinner. The beer just lasted out."

The war, then only a few months off, brought some sharp engagements to the Abercorn district (in one of them, Lobb's house and furniture were burnt down), and there in 1918 the German commander, General von Lettow Vorbeck, surrendered.

At their height, the May parties were attended by a score or more of men, women and children, but as Lobb lamented, the tradition was not renewed after the war and "Abercorn took a long time to recover." In fact it never fully recovered. The few old hands who remained were joined by some new blood, but more commonly by retired members of the administration. It was two of the old hands, the brothers Ronald and Lionel Smith, who claimed to be the first to grow coffee at Abercorn and thus bring the district's last brief flowering. In this venture the Smiths were joined by, among others, two of the better-known characters of the district's latter days, the Gamwell sisters, Marion and Hope. After serving as ambulance drivers and in the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY) in the First World War, they drove down from Nairobi in a second-hand Rugby car in October 1928. They reached Abercorn on December 19 after what they stoically described as a "strenuous" journey, meaning only to spend a couple of days before driving south. But the wife of the district commissioner, Philip Jelf, persuaded them to stay in a room at the Victoria Memorial Institute which she was at that moment decorating, until after the Christmas party. "At the party, most of the residents wanted to know why we were going as they proposed to make it a famous coffee centre. It seemed a very pleasant spot; we spent about six weeks camping about the neighbourhood, made a rough map of the farm and proceeded to Salisbury to take it up. . ."

Preliminary trials with coffee seemed promising, but hardly had the settlers established their trees than the pestilential white borer began to wipe them out. A satisfactory solution was found by the agricultural officer and the entomologist, but prices had fallen in the meantime,

and the thin stream of new settlement began to dry up. At its height there were scarcely more than a dozen growers with about 400 acres between them and a crop of 30 tons, most of which was exported to London, where the British South Africa Company proudly served it at their board luncheons. The growers bravely set up a co-operative and tinned their product for local consumption, but the coming of war in 1939 spelt the end. The Gamwell sisters, who had developed a second string by extracting essential oils from a wild plant, were called up at once (Marion ended the war commanding the FANY headquarters, Hope was second in command of training). Like others their estates were temporarily abandoned and their coffee trees uprooted to prevent the spread of disease. After the war, a few farmers and ranchers and retired officials remained. The former editor of an English language newspaper in Beira, T.C. Carlin, set up a small printing business which for a while produced *Abercornucopia,* the district's own newpaper. In the 1950s, the Federal Government made some effort to encourage white settlement of the Crown land in the Abercorn district for political ends, but it was doomed to failure. In the 1970s the Misses Gamwell left: it was the end of an era.

Despite the beauty of the surroundings, the cool perfection of its climate, the pleasures of boating on its own Lake Chila, the proximity of one of Africa's great Lakes, Tanganyika, —despite all its advantages, Abercorn was beaten by its old enemy, isolation. It never achieved the prosperity and population that tobacco brought, however briefly, to Fort Jameson, and for this reason not even Fort Jameson's level of robust eccentrics. Now called Mbala, Abercorn is still looking for its role—a character in search of an author.