

Driving in Nyasaland: Corrugations and Dust

By Dot Farmery

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Driving in Nyasaland was rather like the Curate's egg, good in parts. Some of the views were fantastic, particularly travelling over the Vipya, which we did occasionally having been stationed at Mzimba and Mzuzu in our first tour, and the long straight roads with almost no traffic, apart from the pedestrians and rare cyclists, made for very relaxed driving conditions. However, on the

downside where the corrugations on the road, surfaces which varied from place to place or from one season to another and came as a shock when they were first encountered. Neither had I anticipated the dust; unpaved roads in England tended to be muddy and I never could imagine the clouds of red dirt that accompanied us on most of our travels.

When Doug arrived in Zomba in 1959, the country was in a state of Emergency and he was dispatched to Mzimba with immediate effect. Having been advised to obtain a vehicle, he hastily visited Conforzi's dealership in Blantyre where he found a limited choice of car. Taking into account his frame - tall and well built - and restricted by the depth of his pocket, he decided upon a newly imported Austin 30/35. Standing in the middle Blantyre, where all he could see was tarmac roads, he was completely unaware of the problems which the felt-lined roof would give us for the next few years. These became evident as soon as the tarmac ran out. The dust from the African roads was sucked into the car as it trundled along, and permeated the felt lining. This would then be dispersed liberally over the driver and passengers as the corrugations shook and rattled the car like an icing-sugar dispenser from the bowels of hell and we would emerge the colour of gingerbread men. It wasn't long before any journey attempted in the Farmery car had to be carefully prepared for; the necessity to cover our hair was obvious. Doug - a Yorkshireman - wore a flat cap, Vanessa was protected by broad-brimmed bonnets while I favoured the shower cup - but we never did find a way to prevent the coating of orange from clinging to our bare skin. What a glamorous trio we must have appeared as we arrived at any destination.

In those early months, apart from the long stretch from Mzimba to Blantyre - broken in Lilongwe - most of our driving was local. While in the north, we did, on one occasion, take part in a driving competition over the Vipya, which we won.

We were transferred to Mzuzu and almost our first introduction to the police concerned the car. Three or four days after our arrival, our houseboy seemed very surprised to see Doug at the breakfast table. "The gari-moto has gone," he repeated several times. Non-plussed, Doug went to investigate and, indeed, the khonde which served as a carport was empty. Having only met his superior officer of the day before, he reluctantly went to report the theft and his own stupidity - he had left his keys in the ignition. Far from admonishing him, Mr Kirkham left to his feet and dashed out of his office, saying, "*@%**\$!!! I'd better go and take mine out then".

At Mzuzu we discovered the advantages of being within reach of the Lake. We were able to get to Nkata Bay, which was fantastic, but the joy of a day at the beach and the chance of a swim was significantly tempered, for me, by the horrendous drive to reach it. The road clung to the hillside overlooking deep chasms and was only one vehicle wide. I was a nervous, pregnant passenger and was seated on the left side of the car. The outward

journey was unnerving, but the return was petrifying. We took this route many times during our two-year posting in Mzuzu and, although we never had a problem, I always approach it with dread.



At the beginning of our next tour we were sent to Ncheu and thankfully Doug decided to change the car so we returned to Confortzi's To make our choice. Somewhat surprisingly, given that the purchase of a new car was hardly an every day event, Doug noticed a heap of dusty, rolled-up maps languishing in the corner of the showroom. On closer inspection, he realised it was one of the early limited additions of Helen McClaren's beautiful Map of Nyasaland and asked the price. The sales assistant muttered a sum of approximately equivalent to the value of a daily newspaper in an offhand manner, and in one fell swoop we became the proud owners of a new Renault 8 which was lined with plastic (what joy!) and a map which accompanied us to the UK and has graced the walls of three houses, long outlasted the car.

The Renault 8 was interesting in that the engine was at the back and Doug took great pleasure in teasing the Africans by asking them to perform some small service that involved them opening the bonnet and discovering an empty space. The responses ranged from astonishment to hilarity, from bemusement to horror, and never failed to entertain him. While stationed at Ncheu, we made many journeys into Portuguese East Africa to purchase enormous bottles of Vinho Verde wine, but as the border was literally a few minutes down the road it will still only a short trip. However, this game little car also transported us from Nyasaland to South Africa and back, so it do some hard driving too. The only problem we ever encountered in it was during the rainy season; on a fraught drive to Blantyre after a few days in Cape McClear, the trailer we were towing jack-knifed on the mud-slick, slippery road and we careened from one side to the other for a good distance before eventually slithering to a halt. The Renault served us very well for several years, and when we left in 1969, Doug sold it to one of his sergeants.



While based in Blantyre, Doug had an unfortunate experience. He and A.N. Other were sent to pick up a prisoner to be escorted to Zomba and, having placed the prisoner in the police car, Doug's colleague stopped off at a roadside kiosk to buy some refreshments. Doug took advantage of the opportunity to relieve himself ... and the car took off with the prisoner driving. Both car and prisoner were not soon recovered, but two officers were severely reprimanded the following day. They let off steam by playing an unusually energetic game of squash and the incident was not referred to until many years later.

Once we were stationed in Blantyre, a veritable metropolis with a variety of venues to choose from, it was decided that the Donah should learn to drive. I was to be taught by Doug. The friction and trauma associated with husbands teaching wives to drive are well documented elsewhere, but learn to drive I did. At the time, Blantyre boasted only one set of traffic lights, and all the roads were fully tarmaced, so even the most trepidatious and reluctant learner could feel fairly confident driving around the centre. After a few weeks practice, a date was set for my test and, as it happened, it fell on the day Haile Selassie was due to arrive for his visit. As press/police liaison officer Doug was dressed in his No 1 uniform when you dropped me at the test centre - not much more than a field - and left me with a small African gentleman, having explained to him, "I have brought my wife to pass her driving test." I will never know whether or not this was a Freudian slip, as Doug's linguistic mix-up was not referred to again, but I did pass.

Something about motoring in Africa was unnoticed at the time, but which has impressed me since, was the immense knowledge and inventiveness of the car owners. In the absence of reliable motor mechanics and repair shops, particularly on the bush stations, problems nearly always had to be solved by oneself or an acquaintance; fortunately people were always willing to help each other out. I can remember that Doug's passion for tinkering with engines coming in useful very often - on one occasion he fixed the silencer with a lemonade can as we crossed the Vipya. I'm sure other old colonials will have similar memories of that make and do mentality which seems to have disappeared in this modern world of built-in obsolescence.

In 2017, in a traffic-clogged Britain, I (and I suspect, many others) look back on those jolting journeys we made through dusty Nyasaland with affection and nostalgic longing; hopefully we all appreciated just how lucky we were.

