

A LONDON GIRL IN THE WILDS OF AFRICA

By Joyce Harling

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I suppose if I thought about it at all I presumed that bread grew on trees! After all, as a young girl living and working in London all I had to do for a loaf of bread was to buy it in a shop.

I arrived newly married, in Nyasaland in 1960 with my husband Derek whom I had met and married whilst he was on six months' leave from the Nyasaland Police Force. We were posted to Mzimba in the northern part of the country. The first few days were spent in the Government Rest House after which we moved into the house that had been allocated to us. It was a modern brick house with the appearance of having all mod-cons including the latest in electric light fittings. Marvellous – except there was no electricity.



Then I found that I was not only expected to make my own bread but to make it on a Dover fuel stove, which I remember my grandmother had had in the dim distant past. We had a houseboy, Luciano, whom my husband had employed whilst a bachelor. I asked him where the temperature gauge was located on the oven as I wanted a medium to hot oven. He silently opened the oven door, put in his hand, and announced that the oven was now at the correct temperature. I must say he was never wrong.

I was so inexperienced that my first loaf could have been mistaken for a rock; not realising that the recipe I had was for fresh yeast. I, of course, only had dried yeast and did not know that only half the quantity was needed. Fortunately, I was a fast learner!

All drinking water had to be first boiled and then put into a stone filter. Fresh milk was very suspect. An African would arrive with several bottles (of dubious cleanliness) of milk. Before purchasing it was always as well to boil it first to see if the milk rose in the saucepan. If it did not then it was a good guess that it was only part milk, the rest being topped up from the local river which was full of bilharzia - very nasty. Therefore, I learned from experience that it was wise to use tinned milk at all times.

Shopping was a huge difficulty. Fresh meat was available from the African market but as it was killed and sold within hours (no refrigeration) the meat was so tough it was hardly edible. A pressure cooker was indispensable in making it more palatable. The only fresh vegetables that were in ready supply were cabbages and tomatoes. Potatoes were unobtainable but rice plentiful. I had to get used to buying chickens live which usually arrived strapped to the rear of a bicycle. I learnt to examine them for how much flesh they had on them, if reasonable, purchase the poor thing which the houseboy then proceeded to kill and pluck.

We had no real shops in Mzimba, just a collection of shops owned by Indians. These catered solely for the African population. Consequently we were very reliant on packaged and canned groceries - vegetables, butter, milk, etc. - sent up from Blantyre by bus. However the order had to be placed three months in advance - so no forgetting anything!

Of course, the fact of having no electricity meant, ipso facto, the days of refrigeration and doing the laundry and ironing as I knew them were now over. No washing machine, of

course. All laundry done by hand in the bath. A small fridge run by paraffin - no freezer - and an iron powered by (I could take my pick) charcoal or paraffin. Both had hazards: the



paraffin had a habit of leaking over the clothes and the charcoal required a strong arm to 'swing' it to cool the hot embers inside otherwise one tended to end up with burnt offerings as clothes. Luckily I had my secret weapon - the long suffering houseboy. He did wonders with the laundry and in using both types of irons. This was just as well as everything - and I mean everything - that was dried outside had to be ironed - every square inch. If any was missed, putzi flies were liable to hatch and burrow into once unsuspecting skin. A very painful experience. Particular care, of course, had to be taken with babies' nappies - no disposable

nappies in those days. Putzi fly eggs were undetectable to the naked eye and were laid on the washing whilst outside drying. I suppose the mother putzi fly thought this would give her offspring a better start in life.

Having children had its own special hazards which I discovered when I was expecting my first child. Antenatal examinations were carried out by our local doctor Alan Pugh. He at the time was an Englishman who worked for the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland and was stationed at the African Hospital in Mzimba. Expatriates had no local hospital – the nearest being in Lilongwe – approx 200 miles away. The rule was that two weeks before the anticipated birth one flew to Lilongwe, stayed with friends or acquaintances (or some poor unsuspecting stranger) until the imminent birth when you were then admitted to Lilongwe Hospital. This worked very well indeed as long as the baby had read the rules! My baby, unfortunately, had not.

I was booked to fly to Lilongwe on a Monday in mid December - a good three weeks prior to the anticipated birth date. I awoke at 5:30 a.m. the proceeding Friday, knowing that this baby had a will of its own and was not prepared to wait. It was the rainy season; the doctor was on ulendo and all the roads in and out of Mzimba impassable. When I woke my husband to give him the glad news he jumped out of bed, dressed and promptly disappeared! I sent the houseboy to my neighbour who came post haste to offer assistance. Luckily she had two children of her own and, in a past life, had been a children's nurse. She took charge and began boiling lots of water!.

Eventually my disappearing husband returned. He had been seeking help from the health authorities by police radio. Luckily (for me) there had been a medical emergency in Mzuzu the day before and a doctor had been flown there to cope with it. He was just about to return to Zomba when he was diverted to me in Mzimba. He was undecided, whether or not there was time to fly me to Lilongwe but in the end he bravely decided to risk delivering a baby in midair in a five seater Beaver aircraft. Needless to say the pilot did not appreciate this decision! But we made it. However I then discovered that all the hospital doctors were also on ulendo. It was obviously a conspiracy! But the semi-retired doctor, who was in charge of administration at the hospital, was called and all was well. Shortly after arriving at Lilongwe hospital my very premature baby daughter, Susan, was born.

I will always be grateful to the wonderful medical staff at Lilongwe Hospital. They were brilliant, both nurses and the doctor - Dr Mowat Sword. All very seasoned and experienced in the ways of working in Africa with few mod-cons. For Instance no incubator for a very tiny premature baby. However I could not have been in safer or more capable hands

I went on to have two sons. The first, Mark, whilst living in Mzuzu - this entailed a journey, by car to Lilongwe accompanied by the same said doctor mentioned above, and his wife, Betty - a retired midwife. The second, Richard, whilst I was living just a stone's throw from Lilongwe hospital. Neither of these births had any drama attached to them so I must

conclude that boys are much more compliant and more thorough when he comes to reading the rules.

The baptism of our daughter presented a bit of a problem. Our 'parish priest' - an Anglican (Church of England as it was then) visited us in Mzimba once every six months from Likoma Island (that is if the boat in which he came was not blown off course) and so we were resigned to the fact that we would have to wait until she was six months old or more before she could be christened.

When she was a few weeks old we were informed Bishop Frank Thorn would be coming from Likoma Island and passing through Mzimba in the coming week, on his way to a conference in Zomba and could he stay a couple of nights with us? Of course we agreed and it was wonderful to host such a humble and holy man. In discussions after dinner one evening he asked if our daughter been baptised yet. We told him, no, we are waiting on a visit from Fr Hadow. The Bishop, very quietly asked if there was any reason why he could not baptise her. We, of course, said no, no objection at all. However this meant that we had to do some quick improvising. In Mzimba we had no church and it followed that we had no baptismal font either. Quickly we substituted the mud hut that was the Court House for the church and a glass fruit bowl - bought in a market in England - for the font. I still have that fruit ball more than 50 years after the event. This was the final evidence that this baby never did anything by the book!

I have already mentioned one of my neighbours, but living on the other side of us was a young bachelor policeman - Terry Young - Special Branch I seem to remember. Shortly after arrival in Mzimba he asked us to dinner. This was very kind of him for food was in very short supply as I've mentioned. We had a lovely evening during the course of which I excused myself to 'powder my nose'. The chimbuzi was, as always, the smallest room in the house and totally unremarkable in every way except that it contained the telephone! You've guessed it, whilst I was in there it rang. This, of course put me in a very embarrassing position in more ways than one. The logic behind the placement of the telephone was simple; as the house was only occupied by him, a bachelor, it was he would always answer it and after all it was the only room in the house where he could not readily access it if it were elsewhere.

The said same neighbour was posted to Mzuzu around the same time as us. As I said, there was no electricity in Mzimba but, luxury upon luxury, in Mzuzu we had electricity for two hours at lunchtime and dinner time in order that the brand new electric ovens, recently installed in the kitchen, could be used - no more Dover stoves! The said ex-neighbour arrived home for his lunch on the day after his move only to be met with the news that there was no lunch. The houseboy complained that the oven was no use. He explained that, although faithfully he had lit a fire in the electrical oven, it had failed to heat up, so he could not cook lunch!

However, I am getting ahead of myself. We were in Mzimba for two years. During which time there was much adjusting to be done by this London girl who had only known city life. It was not only the domestic scene that took some getting used to, but also being the wife of a policeman. When he was 'on duty' the telephone was likely to ring in the middle of the night to report an incident or to call him out to a serious crime in one of the villages, near or far. Soon this was accepted as part of life. However, when we were disturbed unnecessarily I did become rather 'cranky'. Two incidents come to mind. One night the telephone rang and the young African constable reported that, 'Bwana the lamp it is 'flickering'. Of course he was told to fill the lamp with paraffin and he would then have no more trouble.

The second night the same constable rang to tell us that the flag was at half mast. This time he was told in no uncertain terms not to ring in the middle of the night again unless it

was something really serious. A couple of days later my husband arrived at the police station first thing in the morning to find that two of the brick pillars supporting the khonde had been demolished! Obviously the fact that a vehicle had collided with the police station in the middle of the night was not thought sufficiently serious to report! This made me realise how wonderfully unworldly Nyasalanders were and how careful we had to be when dealing with them.

There are many highlights of which memories are made. The wonderful people I met; the part-time job I did (as a Central African Airways Agent) and the hilarious incidents whilst I weighed in not only the baggage and freight but the passengers as well - and the best memories of all - going to Lake Nyasa for holidays.

From Mzimba - and later Mzuzu - the nearest access to the lakeshore was Nkata Bay. We always stayed with the local policeman and his wife in their beautiful residence with views across the lake. What wonderful holidays. Later postings enabled us to visit the lake at Salima, Monkey Bay and Cape Maclear. My children learnt to swim in the lake and still, to this day, I have never seen a more beautiful spot.

I have referred to our posting to Mzuzu, the regional centre of the north. We went there after our two years in Mzimba. The drive across the Vipya Plateau to Mzuzu was beautiful



and the house allocated to us there, although almost a duplicate of the one we had in Mzimba, was different in one way. The large garden looked out across the Plateau. It was absolutely beautifully situated and gave me never ending pleasure. Life was easier in Mzuzu as we had more facilities - the electricity regime I have already mentioned. But this did not make a tremendous difference. We also had shops which catered for the needs of expatriates. We could buy meat in a butcher's shop, complete with a deep freeze, and also purchase a limited number of groceries. What luxury!

It was to Mzuzu that I brought home my second child who was able to be baptised, without any undue drama, in the local Anglican Church, Saint Marks - albeit after waiting six months for Fr. Hadow. After a year in Mzuzu this tour of duty came to an end and we set out on our six months leave and headed to England. This involved driving to Cape Town and thence by ship (Union, Castle Line) to England.

On our return we were first posted to Limbe but this only lasted a few months before we were sent to Lilongwe - a flat, dusty town in the centre of the country, which today is the capital of Malawi.

Lilongwe was a quite different experience, luxurious in comparison to Mzimba and Mzuzu. We were allocated a lovely old traditional colonial home set in large grounds. We had electricity 24 hours a day and it was here that my second son was born. Our access to the Lake was via Salima or Monkey Bay and many wonderful holidays were spent there. In addition I was able to join the local amateur dramatic club. Since my student days I had

studied drama but since my marriage had had no opportunity to practice it. This was a very important step forward for me, personally.

We had an Anglican church and a permanent priest in residence. Up until this time, although baptised in the Church of England, I was a member of the Methodist Church. However, because there was no Methodist Church in Malawi, I worshipped in the Anglican Church. My husband was an Anglican and I decided that for family conformity I should be confirmed an Anglican. I was prepared for this by our resident priest - Fr. Leonard - and I would be confirmed by Bishop Arden. But when it came to the ceremony - well this would be in Chinyanja and I was to join 30 other confirmees, all Malawians.

I was a bit taken aback at this news, but was given an English translation of the service and told not to worry - it would be O.K. Well, it was more than O.K. - it was fantastic. I was accepted warmly by the other candidates and was completely blown away by the massed voices of the congregation joining together in their wonderful hymns of praise. My confirmation was, I believe, unique and is one of the most cherished memories that I have of my time in Malawi.

Whilst on the subject of the church I must tell the story of the arrival of our new resident priest to take the place of Fr. Leonard who had been posted to Zomba. Fr. Leonard was British, as were all the Anglican clergy at that time with the exception of Bishop Donald Arden, who was Australian.

We were asked to meet off the plane, and to host, our replacement priest who was an Episcopalian newly arrived from America - Jackson C. Biggers, from Biggersville, Jackson, Mississippi. He arrived one Saturday morning at Lilongwe Airport. This coincided with an invitation to a cocktail party that night which we had accepted. I hastily rang our intended hostess to explain that we would not be able to come as we would have a priest in tow. I was told - not to worry, bring him along. So we set out for the airport not knowing what to expect. As the plane disgorged its passengers I scanned them for a likely priest. None materialised. All the passengers but one headed away. The one that was left looked, to me, like a Mississippi riverboat gambler. He had on a wide rimmed hat, a black and white checked suit and a pencil thin black tie. Disconcerted we greeted him and took him home.

That evening he accompanied us to the cocktail party. After introductions our hostess passed around the drinks, offering him an orange juice in deference to his calling. He looked around at what others were drinking and then said, politely, no thank you, I'd like a goddammed whisky! That night I served dinner. After the main course I rose to get the dessert. He stopped me saying 'can we wait awhile while I have an intercourse cigarette'!

These were my first impressions of Fr. Jack Biggers, who became our much loved friend, godfather to my 'Lilongwe' son, and ultimately the much revered Bishop of Malawi - Bishop Jack.

It was here in Lilongwe in 1964 that I was present for the celebrations of the granting of Independence and Nyasaland became Malawi. What a day that was! I wondered how it would affect us but things seem to go on as normal and at the end of our tour of duty in Lilongwe, and after another long leave in England, we were posted to Zomba.

Beautiful Zomba nestling in the foothills of Zomba Mountain. We lived in the Police Headquarters where my children were able to play with other 'police' children of their own age. One of their great joys was to walk down to the Police Band rooms to hear the band rehearse and watch them marching. The two eldest children attended Sir Harry Johnson School - the hours being from 7:30 a.m. to 12 noon. Each afternoon we were able to utilise the facilities of the swimming pool - what a boon that was. Also I once more was able to participate in drama and I remember one hot Christmas (1967, I think) directing the play 'The Holly and the Ivy', which takes place in the Norfolk country vicarage at Christmas

time, with a cast stoically performing in heavy winter clothes. How they did not die of heat exhaustion I do not know - they deserved a medal.

We left our German Shepherd pet dog in Lilongwe with 'minders' whilst on leave and now we faced the problem of bringing the dog - Flash - to join us in Zomba. Driving to Lilongwe to collect him was deemed to be impractical for many reasons. Then a solution was offered. A police friend of ours, Brian Burgess, was a pilot and owned his own small aircraft. He offered to fly me to Lilongwe one Saturday, where we would spend the night



with some friends who owned a tobacco plantation, and return the next day with Flash. This sounded fun. I obtained a sedative from the Vet to give to Flash to make sure he would remain comatose during the flight. All seemed right. Brian and I took off from Zomba airfield as planned. After we had been flying for several minutes and had reached our cruising height, I was suddenly aware that things were not quite right. The passenger door, next to me, was not completely closed and was rattling alarmingly. It could have sprung open at any minute! In an

alarmed voice I acquainted Brian with this fact. He seemed not at all concerned and just leant across me, opened the door and slammed it shut. I don't think he ever realized just how I felt when I saw the drop of several thousand feet below me in the seconds that the door was open! The rest of the trip was uneventful and, I am glad to say, Flash slept beautifully all the way back to Zomba.

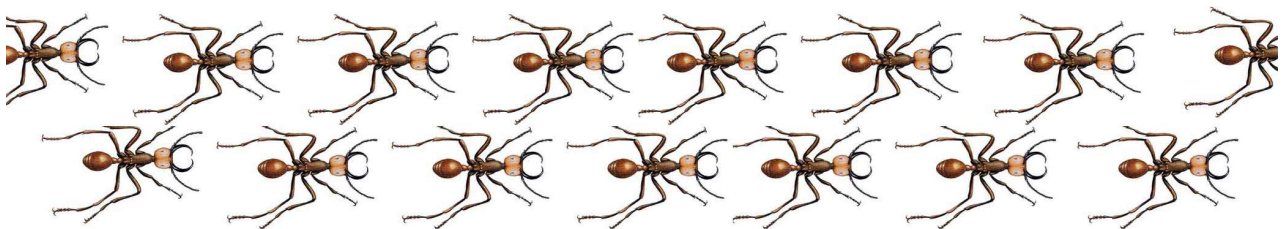
We continued to have the most wonderful holidays at the lake either at Cape Maclear or Monkey Bay. What magical times they were, and with so many memories. I had my first experience of water skiing at Cape Maclean, not realising that not only a first experience for me, but also for my small daughter, who howled as she saw her mother, in her eyes,

disappearing forever across the lake. Another memory of a distressed child - when my younger son at approx. three years old, whilst playing on the edge of the lake at Monkey Bay, suddenly saw in front of him, only a few yards away, a hippopotamus emerge from the water. This alarmed not only the



child but his parents as well! Unfortunately it had the effect of alienating my son from entering any water for several years.

Soon we knew that this would be our last posting as our days in Malawi were coming to an end. We began preparing for our departure. My father had just died and we invited my mother to come out to Malawi and then share our journey home to England. She was another London girl, having spent her entire life there and knowing nothing else. You can imagine her reaction to many things I now took for granted. Geckos running up the walls and hiding behind pictures and minute green frogs attached to mirrors. To say she was horrified would be an understatement. We took her with us when we rented a KAR cottage on Zomba Mountain for our last holiday there. She loved the mountain and I congratulated myself on the success of the enterprise. I was premature. One night she called out that something had woken her, falling on her from the ceiling. I got out of bed, swinging my feet



to the floor - right into a column of soldier ants. These were what was falling on my poor mother, as they marched across the ceiling above her head. When all the lights were turned on there they were, a determined lengthy column, marching through the house. The

next morning there was no option but for us to move out whilst they took over knowing it could be days or weeks before they finished their journey

The other story concerning my mother was when we finally left Malawi by train from Blantyre to Beira. As we were approaching the Zambezi we were told that there would be a short stop before crossing the bridge to enable the train to be searched. Apparently Frelimo rebels were active in the area and sometimes hid under the train. I was awoken in the middle of the night by my very alarmed mother telling me that rebels had captured the train! Of course the large uniformed men walking up and down the corridors were members of the army and only doing their duty. It took quite a time to convince her of this fact!

I have talked of adjustment. All of us, of course, had to adjust to a totally different way of life. But we did adjust until the 'different way' became our norm. Living in Nyasaland taught me a great many things: self reliance above all else, but also to take pleasure from small things and to appreciate a more basic and simple way of life. This London girl ended up loving the nine years spent in beautiful Nyasaland, bringing up my family among its simple and friendly people. In 1969 it was with tears in my eyes and much sadness in my heart that I saw the sun go down over Lake Malawi for the last time.

