

A Fisheries Officer on Lake Victoria

Des. Kelsall

In 1948 I went out to East Africa as a Fisheries Officer in the Colonial Fisheries Service to join the newly-established Lake Victoria Fisheries Service. This Service was responsible for the whole Lake, some 26,000 square miles, which was split between Tanganyika (roughly 50%),) Uganda (roughly 35%) and Kenya (roughly 15%) by area. Uganda and Kenya had catch records covering a number of years, but there were no such records in Tanganyika and our brief was to discover what fisheries existed and what they were catching. We were also responsible for suggesting and implementing any improvements in the types of net used, fishing techniques and the treatment of fish landed

I travelled to Mwanza at the south end of the Lake in Tanganyika, where the Department's H.Q. was located. The staff at the time of my arrival consisted of the Chief Fisheries Officer, Lt. Cdr. George Cole R.N.R., an African clerk/typist of dubious skills and a Head Fish Guard, Kitwara Irinje by name, a wonderful, elderly man who had served in the Police in the days when Tanganyika was a German Colony.

Some weeks after arriving in Mwanza I was provided with a 45-foot motor fishing vessel, a wooden craft built in South Africa and shipped up to Mombasa for carriage by rail to the East African Railways and Harbours dockyard at Kisumu, Kenya, in the north-eastern corner of the Lake. There, a 72 h.p. Widdop diesel engine had been installed and a wheelhouse and internal accommodation had been built. The engine was large, cumbersome and not particularly efficient but it was all that had been available at the time. Trials carried out on completion proved that the vessel was capable of about 9 knots.

My Boss told me to get out and to start discovering what was happening in the fisheries of the Tanganyika waters of the Lake. Talk about a "broad brief"! I had some 13,000 square miles of Lake and 1500 miles of shoreline to investigate!

I quickly developed a monthly working routine under which I spent two weeks on safari in the boat, now christened *Heron*, and two weeks in the office, dealing with the inevitable "bumf" and admin. The safari work was fascinating and took me into some remote corners of the Lake, especially at the south-west end where the Africans had seldom, if ever, seen a European before. A hydrographic survey had been carried out, 50 years previously, by a Captain Whitehouse R.N. and the available Admiralty charts were based on his work. Over the years, changes had taken place on the Lake and hazards such as reefs existed where none were shown on the chart, making navigation sometimes hazardous and the Kelvin & Hughes recording echo sounder fitted to the boat often invaluable.

There were, I soon found, three main types of fishery, gill nets of 2½ to 5" mesh which were set between moorings to fish either near the surface or on the bottom, draft (or seine) nets of small mesh hauled on long ropes usually over a sandy bottom, and "traditional" fisheries which used home made basketwork traps of several types and which operated close to the shore or in the mouth of a stream or river. Catches varied widely, according to the type of gear and the area where nets were fished. The main catch, taken principally in the larger-mesh gill nets, was Tilapia, a Cichlid fish rather like a freshwater bream. A bye-catch here was catfish (*Clarias* sp. And *Bagrus* sp.), Barbel and Lungfish, a curious creature which had to come to the surface to breathe and which drowned if kept under water – an unusual trait in a fish! The smaller mesh gill nets caught mainly a Cyprinid fish called Labeo, the heaviest catches being made at the mouth of streams when they were in flood during the rains.

It soon became clear that most of the gill nets used were hand-braided from J. & P. Coates' cotton sewing thread, at a cost of only seven shillings & sixpence per net. Machine-made flax nets were available but cost 30/- per net. Coir rope and locally available materials were used to mount the nets and the useful life of these cotton nets seldom exceeded a month.

As an experiment, a supply of hand-made nylon nets was obtained from South Africa. I was given some of these and told to sell them to any interested fisherman "at cost", which was Shs. 75 per net. Compared to the cost of a locally made net, this posed a tough sales problem! However, after some thought I developed a technique which seemed to work. Equipped with a few nets and a ball of the twine from which they were made, I would visit a lakeside fishing camp, where I gathered the fishermen under a shady tree. I would briefly explain the advantages of the new nets and allow the fishermen to handle them. To demonstrate the strength of the twine I would then break off a yard or so from the ball, using the dodge of snapping parcel twine, which made it seem easy to break, and hand it to the man nearest me, inviting him to try to break it as I had just done. He would carefully wind it several times around one index finger and then round the other and give it a tremendous jerk, clearly expecting it to snap as it had done with me. Alas, all that happened was that the twine inflicted a deep cut on one or both of his fingers, from which the blood dripped. Howls of mirth from all his friends, who accused him of being just a weakling. I would then confirm this, by snapping the twine again using the same dodge.

This rather cruel demonstration seemed to convince the fishermen of the remarkable quality of the twine. (They were, like all fishermen, pretty shrewd judges!) One or two would hesitantly come forward, tendering cash and innocently suggesting a discount on the price (which I could not give). They would take a single net to try and evidently had no difficulty over finding the necessary cash. Set as part of a fleet of ordinary cotton nets, the nylon net, by reason of the softness and lower visibility of the nylon, would invariably catch more fish than the nets on either side of it. This led to the nylon nets being christened "chapa sumaku" (magnet brand) because they seemed to draw fish into them. As their effectiveness became known among the fishermen there was an increasing demand for these magical nets and it was not long before I had sold all my quota of 50.

(On a historical note, so great did the demand for these nets become over the next two or three years, that the Japanese, never slow to spot a developing market, were exporting to East Africa large quantities of various sizes of nylon nets which retailed at a fraction of the cost of the British-made equivalent. They eventually set up a net factory in Dar-es-salaam, the prices went lower still and the British manufacturers were priced out of the market.)

The time came to take *Heron* up to the Railways & Harbours dockyard at Kisumu, Kenya, to have her slipped for cleaning and painting her bottom. With my wife, Joan, in company, we set out on the three-day voyage from Mwanza at the south end of the Lake. The evening of the second day found us anchored under the 7000-foot mountains near the entrance to the Kavirondo Gulf, at the head of which Kisumu lay, only a morning's run away. (As Lake Victoria lies at roughly 4000 feet above sea level, these mountains were effectively about 3000 feet above Lake level.)

The following morning when we were ready to get under way I called down to Omari the Engineer (who rejoiced in the title of "Bwana Chifu") telling him to start up. The starter ground, the engine turned over, then....BANG!!

Inspection revealed that the drive to the plunger-type engine cooling water pump, a 3" brass rod, had fractured. Even an emergency repair was out of the question and the engine could not operate without cooling water. I had a conference with Omari and Sadiki the Cox'n. We were well off the

route followed by the Lake steamers and the rough mountain country ashore, plus the distance involved, precluded a journey on foot to seek help from Kisumu.

It was Sadiki, with his experience of native dhows, who came up with an idea. Could we not rig up a sail from the old tarpaulin which was stowed in the hold? We went to work at once to see what might be done in this direction. Fortunately we had on board a stout pole, used for punting the boat in confined spaces. By lacing one side of the old tarpaulin to this to act as a yard and bracing the corners of the other side back with ropes we achieved what looked like a workable rig, though clearly only with the wind right aft. This raised a problem. We had anchored in a stretch of water between Rusinga Island and the mainland, intending to take a shortcut through a narrow, shallow, dog-legged passage ahead, to reach the entrance to the Kavirondo Gulf. We could not now "back out", so to speak, against the prevailing wind, in order to go round the south side of Rusinga Island to enter the Gulf. Equally impossible was to sail the 45-foot craft on her jury rig through the dog-leg passage ahead.. It was Omari who cracked this problem. He suggested that, if he removed the cooling water gallery pipe running along the cylinder head he would be able to fill up the engine's water jacket by hand and then replace the pipe. He reckoned that, running at a tick-over, the engine could be used for some time before it heated up. It was a desperate solution but the only one open to us.

I had our dinghy lowered and put two men in it, one of them with a sounding pole. The depth in the channel was only 6½ feet, *Heron's* draught being 5½ feet, so we could obtain continuous soundings to guide the vessel through, as she proceeded with the engine just ticking over. The anchor was raised before the engine was started and we headed into the channel with me at the wheel. The dog-leg was reached and successfully rounded and almost before we realised it we were through to the far side of the passage, where, with a sigh of relief, I dropped anchor and hoisted the dinghy. By then the engine was sizzling a bit and steam was coming out of the cooling water outlet in a jet, but it appeared that no harm had been done. We were now in a position to bear away into the Gulf before the afternoon wind which had begun to blow quite strongly. Our makeshift rig was hoisted on the mast and by dint of rotating it towards the beam we managed to get *Heron* before the wind and moving towards distant Kisumu. She picked up speed until I estimated (by the time-honoured method of dropping a floating marker over the bow and timing its passage to the stern) that she was doing about three knots. As the wind strengthened during the afternoon the speed crept up a little and a rumbling noise became audible which I realised was the propeller being rotated by the boat's movement through the water. Around 4 o'clock the wind began to die and steerage way was quickly lost, so that we had to anchor for the night, not far off the shore, in order to be out of the way of any Lake steamer which might come our way.

The following day we were able to get under way a little earlier, being on our intended track. The tarpaulin sail was not beautiful but it worked. Joan sat on deck under the awning with her sewing. Presently, looking up at the sail, she suggested that the cabin carpet might usefully be hoisted below the tarpaulin as an additional sail. This was done, using one of the dinghy's oars as a yard, and the coir matting bellied out in the wind, though I don't think it greatly increased the boat's speed. Again, we headed inshore for the night.

This was the pattern for the next few days, each one taking us a little closer to Kisumu. Joan did a big wash one day and it was hung out in the rigging to dry, so that *Heron* looked a real rag-bag, between the sails and the washing. I think Arthur Ransome would have hooted if he could have seen us!

On the fifth day a new problem arose. We had almost used up our supply of foodstuffs, not expecting to be so long on the way. We had a basket of ripe mangoes which we were taking as a present to friends in Kisumu and we had to broach these to top off our dry bread. That night we set several nets near the boat, hoping to catch something to make a meal of the following day. This we were lucky enough to do.

Finally, after a week under sail, we arrived off Head Office at the old BOAC dock, opposite Kisumu town and, in order to get alongside the landing stage, employed the same dodge of filling up the engine's water jacket by hand and then running at a tick-over until we were able to tie up. We soon found that we were considered long overdue and a search operation was about to be mounted. The view among the officers of the Railways and Harbours ships was that we had done very well to get the boat to her destination under her jury rig and I think that the crew was justly proud of themselves.

A few weeks after returning to Mwanza from Kisumu, my Boss called me into his office one morning.

"Do you know where Godziba Island is?" he asked. In fact I did know, This small island was shown on the Admiralty chart, roughly in the centre of Lake Victoria, 35 miles or so from the nearest part of the mainland .It was barely a mile long and half a mile wide. I gave George this rather sketchy information.

"I don't even know if it is inhabited," he said, "and I want to go and have a look at it. The Provincial Commissioner and the District Commissioner, Bukoba, in whose District it lies, would like to come too. They can both get away for a few days the week after next. Please arrange a trip on that basis."

There were only two bunks in *Heron's* cabin, so two of us would have to sleep on mattresses on the cabin top, no great hardship in that climate. This was not a trip on which my wife Joan could accompany me, and she concentrated on ensuring that we would have ample stores aboard.

The day of departure came and we sailed soon after 10 a.m. I intended to proceed to the westernmost tip of Ukerewe Island, which projects from the eastern shore of the Lake. From there it would be about 4½ hours steaming to reach the island.

Once we had left the tip of Ukerewe Island astern, we were in the open waters of the Lake where a moderate swell was rolling down from the north-west. *Heron* pitched steadily as we steamed into this, white spray flying from her bows and glittering in the sunshine. Soon Ukerewe Island sank below the horizon and we were all gazing ahead, waiting for the first sight of land . It was Sadiki the Cox'n who spotted it first and gave a shout. A tiny, blue pimple peeped above the horizon, gradually growing into a small, low-lying island as we drew nearer. I headed for a small bay on the north-west side which appeared to have the most shelter from the swells. Shabani, one of the crew, was swinging the lead up in the bows but it was not until we were quite close to the shore that he got bottom at 20 feet. He said that it felt rocky. I finally anchored in 12 feet of water and we waited to see what local reaction would be to our arrival.

After a quarter of an hour we saw a canoe putting out from a small beach at the head of the bay. We could see that the paddlers were making no effort to paddle in a concerted fashion; it was every man for himself! The canoe came alongside us and George leaned over and greeted them. He got a reply of some sort, but it was immediately clear that all the men in the canoe were pickled to the eyebrows. George told them: "This is a great occasion for you. Your District Commissioner from Bukoba has come to visit you." This information was greeted with loud , drunken laughter and unintelligible remarks. Jock, the DC shrugged and turned to the Provincial Commissioner. "I don't seem to cut much ice with them," he said. "You have a go and see if you can get anywhere."

The PC, who was a big man, well over six feet, stood up and introduced himself in fluent Ki-Swahili, only to be greeted with even more uproarious merriment and comments. "It's no good," he remarked , "We'll just have to leave them to sober up before we can get anywhere with them." George, however, did manage to get across to them the information that we should be coming ashore the next morning to hold a baraza (meeting) at the Headman's house.

The PC was a keen ornithologist and was interested to see cormorants and white egrets nesting together in the scrubby trees, apparently quite amicably. The crew launched our dinghy and went off to set some nets with a view to discovering what kinds of fish – if any – were to be found in these waters.

We passed a rather uneasy night. From time to time I could hear the unpleasant, grating sound of the anchor dragging on the rocky bottom and around 3 a.m. I had to call the crew out, start the engine and take the boat out to a safe distance offshore before anchoring again.

In the morning we went ashore. We ascertained from a fisherman the whereabouts of the Headman's house and made our way there. The Headman met us on the way and apologised for not having come down to the landing to meet us, saying that he had only just received the message advising him of our coming. His house turned out to be one of a group of huts towards the north end of the island, with a swept area of earth in the middle. Stools were produced for us and the PC opened the meeting.

It was explained by the Headman that the island's population was seasonally increased by the influx of fishermen from the Bukoba area on the west shore of the Lake. Mention was made of the kind of fish caught, mainly various species of Catfish. There were complaints about the infrequency of visits by the District Officer and a score of other problems all the usual things that always come up at such meetings. Fortunately, having both the PC and the DC present, it was possible to deal with most of them to the satisfaction of the fifteen or twenty men present.

Towards the end of the meeting, it emerged that the PC would be going to UK shortly on home leave. The Headman's wife excused herself and went into her hut, to return shortly and to curtsy to the PC and press into his hands a bright one-shilling coin, explaining that this was "to enable him to have a good time on his home leave." To her, a shilling was quite a lot of money and we all thought that her gesture was a delightful and generous one and rather touching.

The meeting finally broke up and, accompanied by the Headman, we returned to the landing place and boarded *Heron* to leave on our next "ocean crossing", this time westward to Bukoba..

While we had been at the meeting, the crew had recovered the nets set the previous evening. They were delighted to find that they had made quite a heavy catch of, mainly, two species of catfish and a few large Barbel. These fish would be sun-dried and taken back to Mwanza.