

Mombasa—the Gateway to Kenya & Uganda

By GEORGE BULKELEY.

“ The proper designation of the Port of Mombasa is 'Mombasa' Goods not marked
Mombasa

(Old Port) will be landed at Kilindini Harbour."—Official Gazette.

Old Port of Mombasa! The centuries dream, On your rose-tinted battlements, Memories teem.
Tales of antiquity, pain and iniquity, Tyrant and massacre, plotter and scheme, New Port of
Mombasa! With deep water quay, Processions of shipping steam in from the sea, Discharge and
shipment by modern equipment, Pilot them out again, unceasingly, Old Town of Mombasa! You
still bear the scar, Of frequent bombardment by ships from afar, Portugal's glory and Arabic story;
Pageant of Sultanate, Clamour of War, New Town of Mombasa! And what can you show? Many
new houses stand row upon row, Too young for history, legend or mystery, Give you God-Speed,
as the years come and go, Kenya! Uganda! Your trade streams afar: Debtor to Ocean for all that
you are. Gateway to Highland stands Mombasa Inland, Bluewater end of the old K.U.R.

Mombasa possesses all the romantic essentials. A coral island in four degrees south latitude; its
palm trees glistening under the tropic sun or swaying to the swing of the monsoon winds, and
with the red flag of the Sultan of Zanzibar floating over its ancient citadel—nothing is lacking.

The entrance channel from the Indian Ocean is flanked on either side by coral reefs. These extend
for many miles to the north and south and their lagoons at low tide display a kaleidoscope of
warm colour steaming into the land-locked harbour, the strategical importance of which is the
despair of the amateur artist.

Mombasa Island in the old cut-throat days is at once apparent; while the brave happenings of the
past speak from its crumbling fortifications and from the dhows which still throng its blue
waterways.

Mombasa Island is the principal seaport through, which Kenya and Uganda receives and
distributes their trade. It lies like a pearl within a mouth of land which encircles two thirds of its
coastline.

Connection with the essential island feature which is the charm of Mombasa and has in the past
formed her main protection against enemies. The long immunity of the island from epidemics is
also, no doubt, due in no small measure to its encirclement by tidal salt water.

The seacoast of Kenya, from the Tanganyika border to a little north of Lamu, is known as Kenya
Protectorate. It is a tropical strip ten miles in width by about 240 long, and forms the last of the
African mainland possessions of the Sultan of Zanzibar. It is administered by the Government of
Kenya. North and south of Mombasa are a number of small coastal ports, many of which, such as
Malindi and Lamu—are known to history. It was at Malindi that Vasco de Gama raised the pillar in
1408 which is still a conspicuous mark on the headland there; while Lamu is an untouched Arab
town with narrow streets, high interconnecting houses and a central fort. The glory has departed

from these old ports, but with the agricultural development of the rich coastal strip which must eventually materialize, they will reawaken.

Mombasa has been a trading port since the dawn of navigation on the Indian Ocean. Hindu navigators probably came first. The Land of Punt, now known as Somaliland immediately to the north of Kenya—carried on an ancient trade in spices with Egypt, whose Pharaoh in mainland was for centuries by boat and canoe ferries. Then came the railway bridge and later, pontoon motor ferries on the sites of the ancient ones. Now a combined railway and road causeway has just been completed. This has a short central bridge which preserves for all time about 612 B.C. sent a Phoenician fleet to circumnavigate Africa. The Arab settlements along the East Coast of Africa commenced in about 740 A.D. Ivory and slaves formed its staple exports for centuries. From Kilwa in south Tanganyika to the Cape of Spices (Gardafui,) the whole East African Coast in the past has been the scene of every phase of these traffics, at once romantic and horrible—and only awaits such a pen as that of Mr. Rafael Sabatini to live again in glowing pages.

Mombasa itself seems to have been a considerable seaport as far back as the Middle Ages, when we find it described by one Duarte Barbosa, writing in the year 1512. He said: "Mombasa is a handsome city of the Moors, very large and beautiful; built of high and handsome houses of stone and whitewash and with very good streets. It is a town of a great trade in goods, and has a good port where there are many ships, both those which sail for Sofala and those that come from Cambay and Malindi, and others which sail to the islands of Chancibar, Maufia and Penda." The island is perennially green and the colouring of cliff, sea, sky and land is remarkable for its clearness of tone. A distinguished painter who was on a visit in 1928 stated that he had seldom seen colour values so true as at Mombasa. Every kind of tropical flowering shrub will grow in the disintegrated coral soil, but a sheltered garden is necessary, as the strong southwest wind strips the leaves from all small bushes. Where shelter is found, the flame tree, hibiscus, alamander, oleander and many others bloom in vivid colour: the frangipani even braves the sea front winds and the mauve bougainvilla will grow luxuriantly on the sheltered side of a house. As with most tropical flowers, the dust and dryness of the hot season quickly dulls their brightness; but there are some sheltered old gardens which are a delight to see.

The island is full of interest and has a historical and oriental atmosphere that even modern town-planning is unlikely to disturb. It should be viewed from water as well as from land, and there is nothing more pleasant than to encircle it by motor launch, either in its brilliant sunlight or when silvered under the African moon. The large fort, built by the Portuguese in 1593, is in very good preservation and stands at the entrance to the Old Harbour, along the shore of which is piled the old Arab town with its narrow but cool streets and now crumbling houses and shops in which a busy bazaar trade is carried on. Of public buildings, the Anglican Cathedral has a really beautiful interior. Like that at Zanzibar, it is built in the Arabian, or Moorish style. Other public buildings are of mixed architectural designs. It will be unfortunate if some distinctive type of architecture, suiting the East African Coast both climatically and historically—cannot be evolved before the modern growth of the port towns has gone too far. The railway station at Lorenzo Marques, Government House at Dar-es-Salaam, the Anglican Cathedral and Government House, Mombasa, are diverse architectural examples which at once strike the eye. One thing is apparent: the architecture of northern Europe is unsuitable and out of place. So far as Mombasa is concerned,

the coolest houses are undoubtedly the oldest ones with their deep verandahs, thick walls and high ceilings.

Mombasa has the largest population of any town in Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika. About 35,000 persons find their home on the island, which has no appearance of being overcrowded. This large population is made up of Europeans, Arabs, Indians and Africans, with a small sprinkling of Japanese and Chinese. The European community numbers about 1,000. For a tropical seacoast, the climate and health of Mombasa are unusually good. The two monsoons mark the climatic changes. With the boisterous south west wind comes the cooler weather, while the hotter accompanies the north east breezes- People from the Kenya Highlands usually like the cool weather, but many Mombasa residents prefer the hot season. Nobody walks in Mombasa when they can ride: the motor car is ubiquitous and the roads are very good.

For the tourist or visitor there is a great deal to interest, both historically and in the present day life and colour of the island. The local name for Mombasa, is Kisiwa ya M'vita, or the Island of War, and well has it earned the description. From the time of its early colonisation by the Oman Arabs from Muscat, the island endured a long succession of sieges, onslaughts and massacres, with the Arabs and the Portuguese in general as alternate aggressors. A famous incident was the 31 months siege of the fort from March, 1695, until September, 1697. At its commencement there were 50 Europeans and probably about 1,000 others in the fort, which has, to this day, an inexhaustible well of water, and in the spacious courtyard of which the besieged no doubt grew grain for food. When the Arabs took the fort there were 11 men and 2 women left. A Portuguese fleet from Goa arrived two days later but, seeing the Arab flag flying — departed.

An underground passage connected the large fort with the outlying fortification on Ras Serani, near to where the lighthouse now stands. The opening in the fort is closed and no doubt the whole passage has largely fallen in, but the old steps to the sea cave at Ras Serani can be descended and what is left of the entrance at that end seen. It is of interest to note that the fortification at Ras Serani was built not by the Arabs or the Portuguese, but by a Turkish corsair named Ali Bey, as a protection against the Wazimba tribe who had overrun East Africa from the Zambesi river and were encamped at the time at Makupa on the mainland.

An early description of the African East Coast well indicates the essential slowness of change among the inhabitants of the countries washed by the Indian Ocean- In the logbook of a Greek sailor who brought a ship into these waters in about A.D. 60, he writes about the islands of the Zanzibar archipelago, which lie some 80 miles south west of Mombasa. He says, among other things: " In this place there are sewn boats, and canoes hollowed from single logs, which they use for fishing and for catching tortoise (turtle ?). In this island they also catch fish in a peculiar way in wicker baskets (traps?) which they fasten across the channel openings." These three items are common objects in Mombasa waters to-day.

In the year 1887, after a long period of quiescent Arab rule, Sir (then Mr.) William Mackinnon obtained a trading concession from the Sultan of Zanzibar relative to his possessions on the mainland north of what is now the Tanganyika border, and the British East African Association was formed under Royal Charter. In 1890 the historical exchange of Heligoland, off the coast of Germany, for the area claimed by that country between Kipini and Kismayu on the East African

Coast — was made by Great Britain. The sphere of influence of the Chartered Company spread rapidly, with its headquarters at Mombasa. After eight years of arduous and self-sacrificing work, the Company sold its rights and assets to the British Government, since when the development of Kenya and Uganda has proceeded with ever increasing rapidity. Three years later, in 1898, came the commencement of an epoch- making undertaking, the Railway. As the present Governor of Kenya, Sir Edward Grigg, has written: “ Kenya was never conquered by arms. It was won by the Railway. The civilisation which is now-spreading in the heart of darkest Africa is based on Railways. There was no hope of permanently civilising that vast and still primeval region until the Railways came. No hope would survive if the Railways went.”

At this point it is of interest to read what a former member of the Kenya administrative service, Mr. C. W. Hobley, C.M.G., says of Mombasa in 1891, in his book, “ Kenya—from Chartered Company to Crown Colony.” He says: “ Mombasa was a curious place in those days. Its extent was very limited- There was a town wall. The fort was garrisoned by about 100 wild Hadramathis nicknamed Kiroboto, the fleas, armed with long jezails, who were commanded by a venerable old Arab gentle man called the Jemadar, and assisted by another called the Akida, on whom we occasionally called for a chai and a cup of coffee.

Once outside the narrow lanes of the Native town, no roads, other than narrow footpaths, existed. Even the path to Kilindini was only about four feet wide and passed through jungle the whole way. The jungle was infested with puff adders, and one invariably saw several during an evening’s walk . . . Leopards roamed the town at night, snatching an odd goat here and there Some two years after my arrival, I took part in a lion hunt on the Island.”

With the development of Kenya and Uganda, and the growth of their trade; shipping, which had been of very small volume prior to 1900, began to be attracted to Mombasa. The port has two natural Harbours; the one off the Old Town to the north of the Island and the other at Kilindini on its south west. At first, steamships entered the Old Harbour and lay at anchor under the walls of the Old Town. Passengers came ashore in rowboats and clambered up the steep spiral incline to the Custom House and roadways above.

Cargo was dealt with by lighters. Two short jetties were built at the Old Harbour and steam cranes mounted thereon.

Those early days of development must have been well worth living. Full of inconvenience, no doubt, but full too of colour and interest. Men whose names are now famous occupied the lofty offices round Government Square in the Old Town and carried on there the business of Government.

As late as 1926 the Custom House was still there, its offices overhanging the Old Harbour; while the Port Captain was also accommodated in a building next door with his office high above the street, and walked his quarter deck on the flat roof of a lower storey, thereby gaining an unrivalled view of the charming Old Harbour, with its palm trees and its quaint jumble of multi-coloured houses—and of the big dhows from the Persian Gulf sailing in after their long voyage (as they do to-day) with drums beating, flags flying and the crew chanting; the captain sitting cross-legged beside the wheel.

While the Custom House and the Port Marine Offices remained in their picturesque surroundings by the Old Harbour for so long, steamships began to desert it many years back for the greater area, depth of anchorage and generally better cargo conveniences at Kilindini Harbour, the beginning of whose development commenced in 1898, when the British Government decided to build the railway and the materials for its construction began to be landed at Kilindini. A small semi-circular jetty was first built and a few steam cranes mounted thereon. Such was the birth, 32 years ago, of the far reaching transport administration now known as the Kenya and Uganda Railways and Harbours, and such the inception of Kilindini Harbour as it is to-day.

The railway grew apace. Its beginning was scrapped in favour of a wider gauge; it was restarted and eventually reached what is now Kisumu on the eastern shore of Lake Victoria. It never reached Uganda itself until 1929, but a fleet of steamships on the Lake formed the necessary connecting link with that Protectorate. The first of these vessels, the " Sir William Mackinnon," was carried piecemeal over the 500 miles from Mombasa to the Lake, no part being made larger or heavier than a native porter could carry.

Trade grew, and a stone lighter age quay was constructed at Kilindini in 1909, having a row of steam cranes and a steel and galvanized iron transit shed behind. Up to 1926 the whole of the increasing trade of Kenya and Uganda was dealt with across this quay and over a small privately owned wharf which was built later at another part of Kilindini Harbour known as M'Baraki. All cargo was lightered from and to shipping lying at anchor in the Harbour. Then, in 1914, came the war and all the facilities of the port were enlisted to that grim end. Prodigies of handling were performed at Kilindini under the equatorial sun by men whose overseas leave would ordinarily have been long overdue. The work was done and done well: every demand was met. In the years to come there should not be forgotten these civilians of all nationalities who carried on at Kilindini in the lighters and on the quay, forming one isolated unit of that great brigade who deserved so well of their Country during the years 1914 to 1918.

The war passed to its close and, once more, East Africa got down to the business of agriculture. Kenya and Uganda trade, after a brief depression, multiplied with great rapidity. By 1924 the situation at Kilindini had become difficult. By 1925 it was desperate" When the history of the Port of Mombasa comes to be written in all its historical and lively detail, a tribute should be paid to the supervisory staff at Kilindini who struggled at that time with cargoes far too great for the facilities ashore to deal with and quite impossible of orderly handling and disposition.

In the meantime, however, a better order of things was in preparation. A few years before the war, men of vision in Kenya saw clearly that the increasing overseas trade of that country and of Uganda could not forever be subjected to double-handling, breakage and exposure in lighters followed by a wild scramble in inadequate sheds ashore, and that, to secure the minimum of handling in the shortest possible elapsed time between ship and railway, a deep water quay must be constructed and equipped with modern cranes and commodious transit sheds. For so young a country, this called for courage and faith in the future. Fortunately neither was lacking. A survey was made, but the war crashed in and the intended development was, perforce, left in abeyance for the time being in face of the urgent and immediate issue.

In 1920 however, the provision of a first two-berth increment of a deep water quay and transit shed system at Kilindini Harbour was definitely put in hand. Drawings had been prepared by the

consulting engineers, Messrs. Coode, Fitz-Maurice, Wilson and Mitchell. Tenders being called for, the contract was let to Messrs. Pauling and Company, the founder of which, Mr. George Pauling, was associated with the early South and Central African railway construction initiated by Mr. Cecil Rhodes. The engineers and contractors have formed a happy and efficient team for the whole of the deep water quay and shed construction up to the present date.

As staged in the foregoing, the congestion of cargo at Kilindini Harbour became serious in 1925. So serious was it that the contractors were asked to allow a portion of No. 1-transit shed to be utilized before its construction was completed. This was done; the volume of cargo was given shelter and despatch, and all breathed again. But not for long.

Early in 1926, No. 1 deep water quay berth and double-storey transit shed were handed over for the use of the Port, but only in conjunction with lighters, arrangements not having then been made for ships to come alongside. In July 1926, No. 2 berth and shed were handed over. About this time the s.s "Clan Mackenzie" was due to arrive from Great Britain with locomotive boilers aboard for the Kenya and Uganda Railway. Arrangements were, therefore, made to bring her alongside the new quay and land her boilers direct. On August 1st, she laid alongside, her captain having dressed ship for the occasion. The agents of the Clan Line dispensed hospitality aboard and the deep water quay system was declared duly initiated. A piece of plate was later sent to Captain Young, to mark the occasion, by the late General Manager of the Kenya and Uganda Railways and Harbours, Sir Christian Felling.

Later in the same month, a request was received from the Holland Afrika Lijn for their s.s "Reitfontein" to be berthed alongside; this was done and she thus became the first vessel to deal with passengers and general cargo at the new quay berths. After this, both ships and trade came along thick and fast. The first two births increment of the improved Harbour facilities was completed not one day too soon; for in 1927 and again in 1928, the port once more became seriously congested at the New Year, a period when heavy imports and exports coincide.

In May, 1927, a contract was placed for two more quay berths with accompanying transit sheds and electric crane equipment. The first of these was handed over in January, 1929, and the second in June 1929. In the meantime, it had become apparent that four berths would not be quite adequate for a trade which bid fair to reach a million tons per annum in the not far distant future, and a further increment, No. 5 was put in hand. This berth with its great double-storey ferro-concrete transit shed. sit shed (probably the largest in Africa) will be brought into use early in 1931. These Harbour works, together with a bulk oil jetty also now under construction, will, on completion represent a capital expenditure of roughly three and a half million pounds sterling and no further extension is contemplated at present. There is space for two more deep water quay berths and transit sheds along the present alignment.

After the eventual completion of this, any further extension of the waterside facilities will involve the commencement of a fresh alignment further south, which will initiate yet another epoch in the history of the Port of Mombasa. Beyond stating that the new deep water quay and transit sheds are served by no less than 68 electric cranes; a detailed description of the port facilities which are now available for passengers and cargoes at Kilindini Harbour would be out of place in an Annual such as this; furthermore space does not permit of their inclusion. The illustrations which

accompany these notes must speak for themselves. A few figures illustrating the rapid growth of Mombasa's port trade will, however, be of interest.

Taking values first; the total import and export trade of Mombasa has been as follows:—

March 31st,	1906	,,,	£ 976,449
March 31st,	1913		£ 4,094,693 -
Dec. 31st,	1922		£ 9,994,444
Dec. 31st,	1926		£17,208,483
Dec. 31st,	1929		£19,837,583

The position relative to shipping, tonnages and passengers was as follows for the same years:—

Mombasa is a symbol of what is happening in Africa. Only yesterday, a palm beach “ with the warm waves low lapping to-day, a busy seaport where the flags of all the world may be seen. Only yesterday an open plain where wild creatures roamed in the silence: to-day a busy city with railways radiating into the blue distances. East Africa; the Rhodesians; and Nyasaland form the last great area of the world's surface where the beneficial activities of modern science are still moving at pioneer speed. It used to be said that when Cecil Rhodes stood at Capetown, his shadow reached to the Zambesi. The sun of those earlier days has sunk a little lower and that great shadow has grown longer. We can now see that it reaches the Nile, across which the railway development of Africa which he initiated is about to pass.