

## **The Working Experience in Africa.**

Throughout my working life in the sales of electrical accessories made to British Standards, many countries in Africa which were related to British Standards, and were very important markets for British manufacturers. These countries included Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and Sudan.

My first African visit was in the early 1970's to East Africa to Kenya and Uganda at the time of Idi Amin. That visit to Uganda (Kampala) was in fact the only visit I made because of the ongoing chaos in the country which was very sad and disturbing and really prohibited ongoing business.

However, visits to Kenya continued throughout most my working until my retirement in 2002. Although business was not always easy, our agents who were English, were very kind and generous and showed me lovely parts of wildlife Game Parks in the Nairobi area. I was also able to visit Mombasa and the Game Park where Princess Elizabeth was years before, on anniversary of her Father's death. The Hotel was celebrating that occasion with a super including roast beef and Yorkshire pudding as a main course followed by apple pie and custard!! The evening was interrupted by a very interesting disturbance by a herd of elephants, we left our tables to look at them looking at us!! Whilst in Nairobi over weekends I often attended the Services at the Cathedral of All Saints. The Services for English were always rather "reserved" however the Services for local people were full of local life and amazing energy! They were quite an experience.



It was on 18<sup>th</sup> April 1972 that I was involved in a very tragic air crash. It was an East African Airways VC10 flying from Nairobi via Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) to London. Taking off from



Addis Ababa, the nose wheel blew up and the plane could not stop before the end of the runway which went down a steep slope. The front of the aircraft was immediately ripped off as was the port wing and the tail of the aircraft together with the four engines. The only way to escape was through the gap where the front of the aircraft had been ripped off having killed the first class passengers.

As I was at the front the economy section, I was one of the first people to escape and jump 20 feet onto a barbed wire fence and just ran as fast as I could up a hill listening to all the chaotic sounds. Looking back as I stopped, the plane completely blew up into flames and there was tragedy all around. I just stood there with no shoes on, a hanky in one pocket, a pound coin in the other pocket and no passport. That experience all those years ago is as vivid in my mind now, as it was all those years ago. There were well over 60 people killed including many children coming back to the UK from Zimbabwe. The British Embassy in Addis Ababa were wonderful in sorting so many of the survivors out and getting us home but that is another story.



Just to the west of Ethiopia is Sudan, a country where over the years we had a great deal of business but it was not easy owing to the nature of the economy at that time. However, I came to know our Agent very well who came to the UK from time to time. During the times I was in Khartoum, I came to know the Coptic Church there which was very friendly and interesting. It was a very interesting experience when Liz and I were in the chemists at Heartlands Hospital waiting for her prescription, we found ourselves sitting next to a Coptic group of people waiting too, sitting with their priest. We had much to share and the priest gave me a beautiful crucifix together with a lovely set of rosary prayer beads, which I still have.



Moving down the east coast of Africa, I made various visits to Tanzania, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Business in these areas was not very strong as British Standards in electrical accessories although used, were not so popular in general. However, Liz and I had a wonderful holiday in South Africa in 2008 where we stayed in Cape Town and visited various very special areas including spectacular game parks.

Moving over to West Africa, the main countries of business were Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria. These countries could be described as really African in their populations and origins although having their own characters. Sierra Leone was the smaller of the markets which I visited on several occasions. However, Ghana was a more important market and became a more regular place to visit. The Ghanaians were very friendly to deal with although the country was not based on a rich economy and therefore business was not



easy. I remember one of my visits to West Africa in December many years ago, the final part of the visit was from Nigeria to Ghana from where I was to fly back to the UK in time for Christmas. Unfortunately, all flights were delayed for some reason and I had to stay in Ghana at the hotel in Accra for Christmas. Although the weather was very warm, it was very quiet with only a sandwich for Christmas Lunch!!

Finally moving on to Nigeria, this is a completely different country in every way! In many ways it was a complete nightmare. Lagos was the capital city when I first started visiting, as Abuja the new capital city as it is now, was being built. Lagos was always crammed full of people, children, dogs, chickens, all types of vehicles of all ages, motorcycles, bicycles all crowding down streets trying to avoid the open sewage channels at the sides, in all the humid heat!! However, the huge challenge of the environment was the huge amount of business that was there as far as the sale of electrical products was concerned.



Many of the competitors in this business field, did not wish to take up the challenge of travelling to and within Nigeria for safety and health reasons which was quite understandable. In the first instance, I was very fortunate that the agent we were working with had a resident English person working in Lagos with whom I immediately linked up with and was able to work with for years and develop the business. This was not only in Lagos but also in the north of Nigeria in Kano and Kaduna but also in Benin City, Ibadan, and Lagos.

The conditions in Lagos were the same in most places in Nigeria and had quite an effect on one's health and general condition!! There were many times of quite serious tummy upsets which were not helped with power cuts and water cuts of some lengths in hotels which were worsened by the ongoing high humidity!! I suppose my situation was helped in those days by being of much younger years!! Despite all these problems, the business challenge was always exciting and rewarding with all the different relationships that were made with the customers and the Nigerian traditions. A great deal had to be learnt about their way of life and their understanding of it. Over all the years I spent in Nigeria, I somehow became quite close to the Nigerian people. Although they could be very aggressive there was another side to them if you looked for it. One of our best customers was called Reuben Nwaka who I came to know very well. However, there was a time when he built up rather a serious debt with us and although we were covered by Credit Insurance, business had to cease until the debt was cleared. This was a difficult time but when I was with Reuben in his home village discussing the situation with him and resolving the problem, I will always remember him saying to me "Mr. Palmer, do you realise that you were once a Nigerian? When I asked him "Why?", he answered "because you understand us". This answer is based on their believe in the constant progression of life through continuing rebirth. This was followed by his offering to me of a wonderful



Peace Offering of a beautiful wooden carving of the bust of an African Lady which I still treasure at Rose Cottage.

There was another rather special occasion, the atmosphere of which is still with me. I believe it was in the small town of Bali in the eastern part of Nigeria where I was making a brief visit to meet a customer there. As I was walking from the hotel down the street to the customer, I became very aware that I was the only "white" person around and created a unique fascination for so many local children who just surrounded me and

followed me down the street!! The children had no aggression whatsoever and gave me the feeling of uniqueness and at the same time great humility. It was an unforgettable experience.

I think it very unlikely that I will be returning to any part of Africa again, but I suppose over 30 years of business is enough, especially having been retired for nearly twenty years now! I will always remember planning the trips to Nigeria and being quite unsure about going there again but always on arrival, remember enjoying a very special unique atmosphere which I could always accept!

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14<sup>th</sup> September 2021.