

## The origins of Kisumu



"Kisumu was located on a rocky ridge covered with thorn bush, before it was cleared and roads were cut," so wrote Charles Hobley a colonial administrator in 1900. On 20 December 1901, Florence Preston the wife of the engineer drove the last nail in the last sleeper by the shores of Lake Victoria and Port Florence came into being.

However it was only called Port Florence for a year, and then it reverted back to its former name - Kisumu. It is the original Dholuo name meaning a place to look for food, a translation I get from the panels put up at the Kisumu Museum to show the Kisumu then and now - going through a hundred years of history.

### **The old harbour office still stands where it was.**

The midday sun in Kisumu is burning hot and humid. I think I'm standing somewhere near where the lady drove the nail into the sleeper, almost a hundred years ago. The original sleeper

seems to be buried under layers of soil that we are standing on and the original booking office for the passengers to get onto the ships that sailed the lake, has its foundations hidden in the tall reeds, where weaver birds are busy weaving beautiful nests hanging like lampshades, by the water's edge.

It must have been quite an event then - from the black and white photograph of the lady doing the deed. Today, there's no officialdom - it's just Saul Matengo, the yard master, me and the birds and curious passersby wondering what I'm doing there. However there's great excitement as Kisumu celebrates its centenary with the presidents of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania attending.

I ignore the overhead sun - might as well see the rest of the harbour, I reason to myself. The lake turns from shades of deep blue to opaque grey and thankfully brews up a welcome breeze. The harbour overlooks the beautiful Maragoli Hills full of granite rocks lining the lake on the opposite side. The first steam ships built in Kisumu in 1905 were the SS Sybila and the SS Nyanza. There's an amusing story that goes with the launch of the SS Nyanza - a picture which tells the story. It's December 1907. The picture permeates the atmosphere, the pomp and grandeur of that day. The African police guard of honour stand smart by the ship, White men in suits and women in long dresses carrying parasols. And then to the dismay of all, the narrative reads, "Nyanza" refused to go down the slipway until later when all had retired to lunch, there was a rumble and on running out they found it had launched itself. Everybody rushed from the club to board and anchor her! It's also the year that the English statesman Winston Churchill visited Kisumu - but whether he was there for this purpose or for any other reason, is not quite clear.

Kisumu became the most important harbour on the lake and enjoyed prosperity until the collapse of the East African Community in 1977. The only ship standing now at the harbour is a cargo ship with men naked to the waist, dripping sweat, carrying loads of gunny sacks to be shipped to the neighbouring countries. What became of SS Sybil and SS Nyanza would be interesting to find out. A beautiful white-washed passenger ship lies broken by the quayside and seems to be sinking lower into the water as time passes by.

Ships for passengers sailed the lake for many years between the three countries - Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania and cruises on the lake were regal affairs. Passenger services ceased in the early 1990s, so I'm told.

Despite the breeze, the heat is so intense. It would have helped to have the club where everyone was sipping cold drinks when the SS Nyanza began to quietly slip into the water. Like anyone proud of his or her yard, Saul wants me to walk the link span - it's the last thing and then I can go, he promises.

The wrought iron link span is a ferry terminal connecting the ship to the wagon ferry to offload its wares. It's really interesting. The link span can be lowered or raised depending on the height of the ship and leads on to the railway track.

The water sparkles with dashes of diamonds racing with the waves. Pied kingfishers dive for fish and local fishermen throw the line for silver-finned tilapias. I can see Sunset Hotel from the linkspan and the green shoreline. Near the Hotel is Impala Park, home for the remnant herd of Impala (which used to be common in Kisumu) and stray leopards held in captivity till they can be released elsewhere. During the British rule, Impala Park was called Connaught Parade, in a picture dated 1913, a graceful place for the fair ladies with their parasols to walk along the shores of the lake.

We drive out through Kendu Road, connecting onto the main street of Kisumu (no longer a town but a city) Oginga Odinga Road. A tall Town Clock stands in the middle of the road. It was unveiled on 19 August 1938 by the then Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Kenya HE Chief Marshall Sir Robert Brooke-Pophan. The Town Clock was built in memory of Kassim Lakha who arrived in East Africa in 1871 and died in Kampala in 1910. It was erected by his sons Mohamed, Alibhai, Hassan and Rahimtulla Kassim, so reads the inscription on the Town Clock which seems not to have been wound up for some time.

Driving through the main street, looking up at the quaint one storey buildings, many seem to have been built during the 1930s - speaking of a booming period.

It's such a contrast - Kibuye Traders Market is a beehive of activity with anything from reed mkekakas (mats) to imported second-hand clothes (mitumba)- shoes and clothes being sold in the open air and fried fish and sun-dried omenas (tiny silver fish) served in the little food kiosks with interesting names - The People's Hotel, Dubai Hotel and a whole stream of others. Kenyatta Highway where the market is located was then known as Victoria Road - the black and white photograph shows a quaint tree-lined avenue devoid of cars and two English gentlemen out on a stroll. It's so busy this morning with battered taxis and matatus ferrying their passengers from Kajulu or Kakamega to the town centre or beyond.

In a book entitled "Two Indian Travellers East Africa 1902-1905," published by The Friends of Fort Jesus, Ebrahim N. Adamji travels to Kisumu to try and retrieve a family debt. Taking advantage of the passenger train which has just begun services in 1902 between Mombasa and Kisumu, he lands in Kisumu. The station had not yet been built but the administration is run from tents. There's a dense jungle but even then there is a bazaar with about ten to fifteen shops belonging to Khojas (Ismailis), Punjabis and Goans. Kisumu is also an important stop-over for traders and ivory is one of the major commodities. Pictures show huge tusks framing people!

Around the same time, another Indian traveller, Sorabji Darookhanawala, starts his journey from Zanzibar to Kisumu and further beyond. He is of a more polished nature, travelling inland to see what business opportunities there are. When he arrives in Kisumu, he writes that he has the opportunity to learn about the Kavirondo, who are of Bantu origin living on the eastern corner of Lake Victoria. He admires them greatly. In the southern part of the Kavirondo live the Jaluos whose language is from the upper Nile, similar to the Acholi. Of all the tribes he meets, he is most impressed with the Kavirondo because they live according to the Zoroastrian principles of Good Thoughts, Good Work and Good Deeds. However, our good man thought he would impart some civilization to these noble people and told them that they should wear clothes instead of skins. But he, instead greatly offended them.

#### **Fact file on Kisumu:**

Visit Kisumu. It's a really interesting town full of character and situated at a strategic place where you can explore the islands in the lake or the area.

Visit Kisumu Museum. It has interesting exhibits of the people, life and the wildlife found in the area. Visit Kisumu Municipal Market built in 1935, it's great to shop for pots and vegetables in season.

The Uganda Railway took six years to build between 1896 and 1901.

It stretched from Mombasa to Kisumu, a distance of 931 kilometres.

31,983 Indian workers came from India. 2,493 died in the construction. That is 4 workers died for each mile. The workers built Salisbury Bridge, over 1,200 feet long, joining Mombasa Island to the mainland; 35 viaducts in the Rift Valley, and 1,280 smaller bridges and culverts. All this was done by hand.