



## The Club Lives On

*The Mombasa Club, oldest club in Kenya, has just celebrated its centenary year in style. Judy Aldrick was there.*

It is extraordinary how 'the Club', that uniquely English institution which flourishes wherever a few Englishmen come together in foreign parts, has proved so durable. In the nineteenth century clubs existed only in England and in British colonies, but nowadays they are to be found all over the world. The idea of the club has never been more popular. The cosy comforts and easy companionship of club life seem to hold a special attraction in today's ever more impersonal society. Club memberships are increasingly sought after; and long after the demise of Empire and Colony, the club lives on as one of England's more successful exports.

The Mombasa Club is no exception, and in 1997 celebrated

one hundred years of continuous existence. The oldest club in Kenya, Mombasa Club was in fact started in 1896, but it was only in the following year, 1897, that the Club House was built on its present site next to Fort Jesus and the Old Town, overlooking the entrance to the Old Dhow Harbour. Well appointed with views out to sea as well as over land, the Club has stood on this spot for a hundred years, an enduring landmark of Mombasa town. The original Club House, a simple bungalow consisting only of a bar and a few rooms where billiards and cards could be played, has been considerably extended and altered over the years as membership and membership requirements have grown, but the underlying struc-

ture still endures and the tradition of the Club lives on undimmed.

The Mombasa Club was founded by Rex Boustead, an enterprising trader who had been running an import/export business in Zanzibar since 1872. Sensing a new direction in the winds of fortune, he opened a branch in Mombasa in 1892. When a Colonial administration replaced the ailing private chartered company IBEACO (Imperial British East Africa Company) in 1895, he was handily placed to profit from the resulting rash of new business opportunities. In 1896, when Mombasa was chosen as the starting point for the Uganda Railway and the sleepy coastal town was transformed into the busiest port on the East African coast, Rex Boustead was up and running. Starting out as agent for the CMS (Church Missionary Society), he was soon

## EAST AFRICA

### THE MOMBASA CLUB.

The social side of British East Africa is well catered for by the Mombasa Club, which was established as far back as 1897. Its original members only numbered 60, but its prosperity may be gauged from the fact that this number now stands at 560.

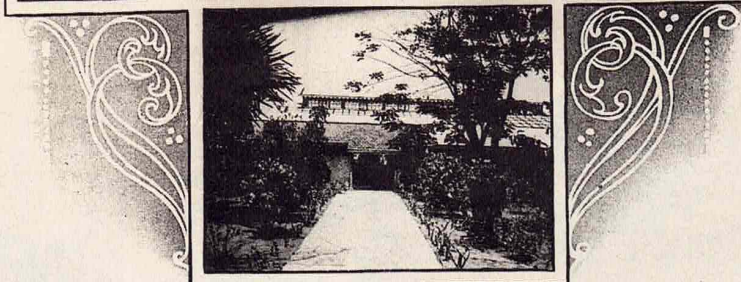
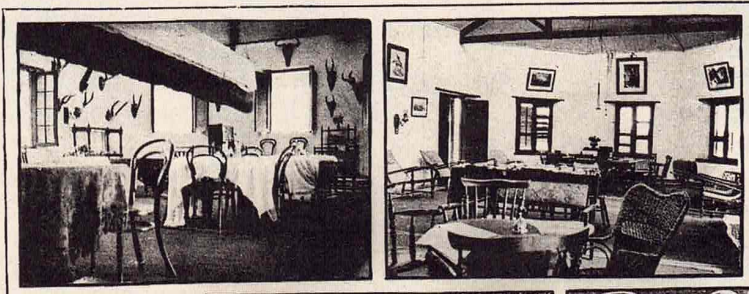
All gentlemen of European and American nationality or extraction, resident in East

bedrooms. A good selection of papers is received weekly, and everything is done by the proprietors, Messrs. Boustead Brothers, to make members comfortable. Ladies introduced by members may make use of the premises, exclusive of the billiard and card-rooms, up to 8 p.m., and Thursday evenings being kept as guest nights, they may on those occasions be invited to dinner. Reciprocal arrangements with

### AFRICA HOTEL.

The oldest hotel in Mombasa is in da Gama Street. It has one of the positions in the town, facing the sea, close to the Post Office and Custom House.

The hotel contains 12 bedrooms, dining-room, a large verandah overlooking harbour and open sea, and a bar sitting-room. Only the best brand liquor are kept, and there is a good billiard



DINING-ROOM.

THE CLUB.

READING-ROOM.

Africa, are eligible to join it, the subscription being: full members, Rs. 11 per month; temporary members, Rs. 11 per month; naval members, Rs. 2 per week; and naval members (gun-room rank), Rs. 1 per week. The entrance fee for full members is Rs. 50, payable one-half on election and the balance within three months.

The Club premises of stone and iron, situated on the sea-front, include a billiard-

room, and the Zanzibar Club have been entered into, and these are fully appreciated by members of both Clubs.

### THE GERMAN CONSULATE.

Herr Ernst Schmidt, of the German Consular Service, is at present Acting Vice-Consul. He has no business connections. There is one secretary, Herr Franz Ficker.

table. The kitchen and rooms are under the supervision of Mrs. Schwentfisch, wife of the proprietor. Passengers are specially catered for, and the rates are reasonable.

Meanwhile, a new hotel is being built on the Kilindini Road. It will contain 20 rooms and possess every comfort and convenience. There will be large dining-rooms, and smoke rooms, billiard-room

*A spread of photographs by G J Lake accompanied this listing for Mombasa Club in the early guide book, British East Africa: Its History, Peoples, Commerce, Industries and Resources, compiled by Somerset Playne, edited by Holderness Gale, and published in 1909 by Unwin Bros.*

working for the Colonial government and supplying porters to carry goods up-country. With his brother Jack, he opened Mombasa Stores, the first safari outfitters in Mombasa.

In those early days Mombasa was a predominantly Muslim town and Europeans were thin on the ground, numbering fewer than a hundred in all. C R De Souza, a Goan, ran a liquor store in Thika Street and it was there that the Europeans began to congregate after a thirsty day at the office. Rex Boustead, though, had a better idea, and took to inviting friends and colleagues to his office in the Old Town for drinks and a chat after office hours. In this way he

kept abreast of new business developments, while offering fellow Europeans a less public meeting place in which to indulge their Western habits.

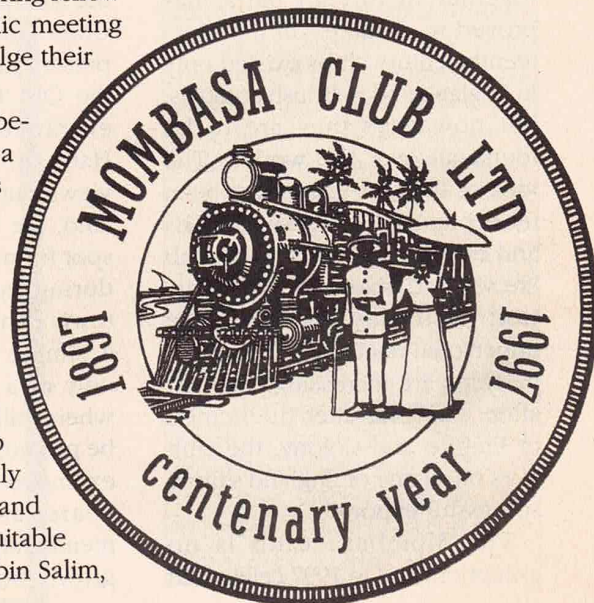
From these modest beginnings the idea for a Mombasa club was formed. So popular were the gatherings that the office premises were quickly outgrown and Boustead had to search around for land on which to build a club house. Land was readily available at the time, and with little difficulty a suitable plot was chosen. Ali bin Salim,

the son of the Sultan of Zanzibar's chief representative in Mombasa, proved most accommodating and the plot was leased, with one stipulation only, that the date palm thereon should be left standing and that only he and his immediate family should be allowed to gather its fruits. In those days date palms, which were rare in Mombasa, were prized more highly than the land on which they stood. The legendary palm tree stood on the forecourt of the Club until 1986 when it split its trunk and toppled over.

By 1898 the new Club House was open and the first general meeting took place on Saturday, January 28 of that year in the billiard room with one C H Crauford in the Chair. Sadly all that remains of this historic meeting is a brief record of the members who were voted on to the Committee.

Turning to contemporary sources for descriptions of what the Club was like in those early years, Drumkey writing in 1909 reports that

The Mombasa Club (proprietary) was founded in 1896 and was moved to its present excellent site in Vasco da Gama Street in the following year. The buildings comprise a fine reading room, a billiard room containing tables and residential accommodation for members and their friends.



A guide book to British East Africa produced in that same year had this to say:

The social side of British East Africa is well catered for by the Mombasa Club. Its original members numbered only 60 but its prosperity may be gauged from the fact that this number now stands at 560.

All gentlemen of European and American nationality and extraction resident in East Africa are eligible to join it. The subscription being: full members R[upees] 11 per month, naval members Rs 2 per week and naval members (gun-room rank), Rs 1 per week. The entrance fee for full members is Rs 50 payable one-half on election and the balance within three months.

The club premises of stone and iron situated on the sea-front, include a billiard-room with three tables, a dining room, a reading room, a card room and seven bedrooms. A good selection of papers is received weekly, and everything is done by the proprietors, Messrs. Boustead Brothers to make members comfortable. Ladies introduced by members may



*'Holiest of Holies': the Men's Bar at Mombasa Club, as it appears today.*

make use of the premises, exclusive of the billiard and card-rooms up to 8 p.m. and Thursday evenings being kept as guest nights, they may on those occasions be invited to dinner. Reciprocal arrangements with the Zanzibar club have been entered into and these are fully appreciated by members of both clubs.

In 1905 a second storey had been added to provide accommodation for visitors. Pictures of the interior taken soon after the refurbishments show the dining room, its walls hung with hun-ting trophies and its tables decked in spotless white tablecloths elegantly laid with silver cutlery, and the reading room with its comfortable chairs and a selection of newspapers only a few weeks old.

The Mombasa Club prided itself in being a gentleman's club after the traditional English mode, which frowned on 'other races', and on women and 'the lower classes'. Its exclusivity was buttressed by a system of quaint rules and regulations quite baffling to the uninitiated. One of the most notorious of these was the 'ejection rule', which stipulated that when a bell was rung at a certain time all women had to leave the premises forthwith. This rule was modified in the 1920s with the emancipation of women, but even now in 1998 the Club retains many antiquated notions and is conservative in the extreme. The racial barrier has been lifted, but restrictions still remain on access for women while children are strictly excluded. New members



*This image, from a missionary album, is thought to have been taken in c. 1900 by W D Young. In it, the Mombasa Club is the modest structure in the foreground with the famous lone date palm on its compound. Behind this is the original go-down of the pioneering Goan-run enterprise, East Africa Stores; and behind that are the old waterfront customs sheds.*

can be proposed only by members with full voting rights and applications are scrutinised in committee, a procedure that can take many months. The 'Holiest of Holies' is still the Men's Bar where on Mondays — Club Night — influential Mombasa businessmen meet to discuss the outcome of the Tea Auction and the news of this commodity's shipping and transportation. Wives are expected to console themselves with tattered copies of *Country Life* while sipping gin and tonics on the upstairs verandah.

Time, however, waits for no man, and changes have inevitably occurred even to the Mombasa Club. In 1931 a salt-water swimming pool was built, a daring innovation in its time and one that remains in full operation today and is still very popular with members. A squash court soon followed, and in 1938 a third storey was added to keep pace with the increasing demand for accommodation. In 1949 a cocktail bar was opened on the second

floor, and in 1981/2 an extension was built to house the library and another four bedrooms above it, so bringing to thirty-seven the number of rooms available at present to Club members and their friends.

Ownership of the Club stayed in private hands until 1958 when one J L Bryson arranged for its purchase on behalf of members. It was bought from the company of Boustead and Clarke which was then winding up its East African operations. Rex Boustead had himself retired long before, but a partner P H Clarke had been carrying on the business with J Shankland acting as his managing director in the final years.

The centenary year, 1997, saw further changes. A new Men's Bar was built with magnificent views over Mombasa Channel. A new kitchen replaced the old bar, and the wing outside the entrance, which formerly housed the kitchens, was done away with altogether, greatly improving the appearance of the forecourt while

creating much needed extra space in the car park. The entrance was rebuilt and a new wood-block floor laid on the ground floor.

The Club is suddenly looking very smart indeed. In the evenings twinkling lights illuminate the building and its gardens, and the Club takes on a fairy quality quite in keeping with its anachronistic conventions.

Committees worked hard during 1997 to lay on special entertainments to commemorate the Club's centenary. These included a cocktail party, an Indian Night, a Ladies' Night in the Men's Bar, various gala dinners, plus swimming competitions and an African night to conclude the festivities. A photographic exhibition featuring views of old Mombasa and of the Club itself hangs in the reading room, amid colourful centenary decorations. There is a festive air about the place which, it is hoped, will carry enthusiasm for the Club and its traditions forward into the twenty-first century. ■



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