



# Karamoja: 80 years of Christian witness

**It has been 80 years since BCMS missionaries established a church in what is now the Diocese of Karamoja, Uganda. Former mission partners Norma Herd and Ruth Deeth (nee Stranex) explore those fascinating days of pioneer mission and the faithful vision of the individuals who made it happen.**



Recently Crosslinks mission partners in Uganda and Kenya have been based largely in theological colleges and urban centres; 80 years ago the work was in rural communities among the Karim-ojong, the Pokot (formally Suk), Samburu, Rendille, Boran and Taposo - the cattle-keeping peoples around Lake Rudolf (now Lake Turkana).

The visionary and pioneer who began this was Alfred Buxton. He was born into wealth and privilege, but left that all behind to join CT Studd in the Congo, and married CT Studd's daughter, Edith. They left the Congo after 15 years and Edith returned to England with their children, but Alfred went back to Africa to look for more unevangelised areas.

## AMBITION

With Hamilton Paget-Wilkes, Alfred arrived in Karamoja on 5 April 1929, the only semi-desert region in Uganda, bordering both Sudan and Kenya. Alfred had the ambition to evangelise the cattle people round Lake Rudolf, and discovering that the Governor of Uganda would allow only Anglican mis-

sions to work there, applied to the Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society (now Crosslinks) to sponsor him. BCMS was then only seven years old and had just received a gift of £5000 - a considerable sum for those days - which enabled the Council to fund Alfred and the first African mission for BCMS.

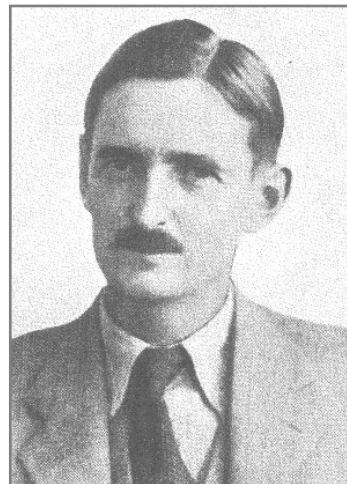
## LOTOME

Hamilton and Alfred established a centre at Lotome ('the place of the elephant'), 15 miles cross-country from Moroto, the Government Headquarters. It is probable that the District Commissioner didn't want the mission in the Headquarters; similarly Alfred and Hamilton preferred to be out among the villages. Although conditions

**“Alfred had the ambition to evangelise the cattle people round Lake Rudolf.”**

would have been hard there were some good water holes in the Manimani riverbed at Lotome.

They reasoned that Lotome could be used to reach the



Alfred Buxton

Karimojong and Turkana, and the first church was opened there in September 1929. In 2009 the Karamoja Church celebrated 80 years of Christian witness.

## SCHOOLS

Hamilton was left to develop Lotome and a Christian village was established with schools staffed by teachers from the Friends African Mission in Kenya. But Alfred was a safari man who inspired others, in many ways more like a 19th century missionary explorer. Initially he had reached Karamoja by car, but now preferred to move around remote areas by donkey. His load was simple: he carried

RUTH DEETH

camping equipment, a large cheese, tinned pineapples and a tea-strainer.

Alfred's vision was taking shape: he set out for Marsabit in Northern Kenya, East of Lake Rudolf. By 1931 work had begun, and the Rev and Mrs Eric Webster were able to develop it. Between 1934 and 1940, the Rev Laurence and his wife began in Kacheliba among the Pokot, and later moved to Nasokol. Charles and Jessie Scudder started the work among the Samburu people, and Rev E Patterson and Rev CAB Williams went to Southern Sudan, to work amongst the Taposa.

## NORTH

In 1931, Alfred himself felt a strong call from God to go north to Abyssinia (Ethiopia). He didn't tell BCMS of his plans but sent word after he had already gone, in case they refused his transfer. Alfred's vision was to bring biblical revival to the Orthodox Church. He wrote to his wife, "It is not wanderlust but unevangelised tribes-lust that drives me."

In 1936 all of the missionaries in Ethiopia were expelled following the Italian invasion. In October 1940 Alfred and his brother, Murray, met in Church House, London 'to continue their vision and plans for revival in the Church of England.' A high explosive bomb exploded and killed them all - a sudden end to a life lived for God.

## TESTAMENT

But the work in Lotome continued. Rev Bob and Mrs Doris Clarke worked there from 1932 to 1957. Churches were established and a dispensary and schools even as far away as Labwor and by 1939 Doris had produced a

draft of the New Testament in Karamojong.

- **Rev Bill Owen** produced a Hymn Book and, like Alfred, did much safari work.
- **Rev Bill and Mrs Helen Lane** opened up Labwor.
- **Mr and Mrs Alfred Fripp** worked in Lotome.
- **Rev and Mrs Victor Sheen**, (who today still hosts a Crosslinks prayer meeting) went to Kotido.
- **Jessie Bryden** was the longest serving missionary in Karamoja: 1936 to 1972. With a committee she worked on the New Testament translation.

It would be hard to record all of the BCMS partners who served in Karamoja. Their names will be familiar to those who prayed faithfully for them. Listed here are those who were there for ten years or so:

- **Peter and Liza Cox** began a medical pioneer hospital in Amudat; Lillian Singleton and Ruth Stranex were nurses there.
- **Derek and Nancy Williams** were in education.
- **Peter and Betty Cartwright** were pivotal in the Teachers' Training College and church.
- **Jim and Jean Rowland** began a much needed Agricultural scheme, now the Karamajong Development Department.
- **Brian and Norma Herd** saw Karamoja change from a parish to a

diocese, where Brian was the first bishop.

- **Sylvia Barton** and others developed schools for girls.

Ugandan pastors made a huge contribution, very often sacrificially, and still do today.

As Karamoja celebrates 80 years of Christian witness, Alfred Buxton we imagine would be encouraged and perhaps amazed to see two dioceses: Karamoja Diocese and North Karamoja Diocese. There are now over 35 pastors, many of whom are graduates. There are church buildings - though not in every centre and most needing repair. At Lotome there is a Diocesan Training Centre.

## NEEDY

Karamoja is still the same semi-desert region, the size of Wales but with a population of one million, and still a very needy place. Like some parts of Kenya there has been no harvest for three years and the people are dependant on food aid.

Economic progress has brought Kalashnikovs instead of spears. Although the government have done some disarming, cattle-raiding continues. Unlike the rest of Uganda, Karamoja has no reliable harvests or cash economy so pastors' salaries are seldom paid. Crosslinks helps support these salaries and assist with training.

**Perhaps our greatest contribution is to PRAY for Karamoja and other cattle areas, that the power of the gospel will change people and a stronger church will witness to the saving power of Jesus.**

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