

# Interview

## *A trip to see the Prince of Wales*

(S. T. Bizley, with the help of her sister N. W. Ormond, and with a postscript recorded in Eshowe. All as told to W. H. Bizley.)

*Remembering back seventy years, to the sensations and curiosities of a seven-year-old, is a rather different thing from keeping a diary in the style of Mary Moore. The following is an account of a somewhat composite journey, which, almost by chance, caught 'Princy' on his one-day visit to Eshowe.*

*What a different world had come about in the 33 years since Mary Moore's journey. The Anglo-Boer War and the First World War had come and gone. In the Union of South Africa, the last post-cart service ran, says Brian Godbold, in Mountains, Bullets and Blessings, (p.74) — in 1921, from Izingolweni in Natal via Bizana and Lusikisiki, to Port St Johns.*

In 1923 Smuts was ousted, and the Nationalist-Labour 'pact' government came in. My mother, a married woman teacher, found herself out of a job. Our family set-up was such that she had to take temporary posts wherever she could find them. So we took up residence in Umzinto in 1924. The atmosphere was like the Southern United States — a bell rang at 3 a.m. to rouse up the labour and start the day on the Reynolds Brothers' Sugar Estate.

I was seven at the time. Mr Leisegang — brother of a Norwegian missionary, and the owner now of the general store, the butchery and the bakery in Umzinto — told my mother that, at the end of the year, a post would become available at the Teachers' Training College of the Umpumulo Mission, run by the Lutheran mission Society. Hence the roundabout trip to Zululand. But, at the same time, excitement was building up in Natal for the 1925 royal visit of the Prince of Wales. My sister confused this with a children's book on whales. A piece of whale vertebra had been made into a chair for our back verandah. Why should one not go and see the Prince of Whales . . . ?

After fitting various items of luggage into the train, we travelled down the branch-line to Kelso. This line ran next to the Umzinto River, and at one point, through a deep gorge. A suspension bridge stretched far above us. We knew it from the top view, since you had to cross it when you visited the farm 'Selborne' (a very upmarket estate today!) It was just wide enough to take a cane truck, a vehicle with no sides, to the frame of which one clung for dear life. This contraption was pushed across the narrow-gauge rails by two Africans fitted out in mud sacks, who loped from sleeper to sleeper, while the passengers looked warily through the rails to catch a view of the river far below.

Kelso, being a junction with the Port Shepstone-Durban line, provided one

with a cup of tea in a dining room. The ticket-examiner for our trip was Mr Meyer — in the 1920s, the first Afrikaner we had known on the South Coast service. He was a very helpful man, and later, as commuting schoolchildren, we called him ‘Uncle’. From Kelso, we headed north, through Park Rynie with its pine trees, to Scottburgh. Scottburgh station was then nothing but a three-sided corrugated iron hut. It was rapidly becoming the chief holiday drawcard on the South Coast. Until 1931 it was notable for the annual holiday migration of the Reef Jewish community. I remember once when we left Durban with quite a few parcels packed in our compartment, someone next to us whispered ‘must be yids’. Those beach Julys were great entertainment: very talented Wits. students put on excellent beach concerts. But later, in 1931, when the Scottburgh Health Committee wanted to impose a beach charge, the visitors moved on to Margate, and Scottburgh lost out.

At that time the line north of Scottburgh ran right along the seaside, and then turned inland and ran along the Umpambinyoni river. It went all the way up to the sugar mill, then crossed the river, then turned back to the coast. From Renishaw on there was thick coastal bush, with occasional buck, partridge, quail, and, of course, monkeys. I would see suddenly the white sailing ship ‘Pamir’, beautifully visible from the train. On to Umkomaas, where there was a lengthy tea-stop at the ‘Dorothy’. Here, Horace and Clarice Jackson radiated good cheer under the most cramped conditions. When the station was upgraded in 1930, they would take possession of a proper tearoom. Along with girdle scones and doughnuts came poetry:

Horace and Clarice desire it known  
Their tea is delicious — it standeth alone.

On through the string of resorts went the train: through Umgababa, with its popular hotel run by the Blackies, to Winkelspruit, recognisable even then by its long line of Norfolk pines. As the journey went on, toys had to be fetched down from the rack to keep children quiet — gas balloons that settled on the compartment ceiling, or celluloid ducks, which were all the rage. Past the ‘Pot Luck Palace’ at Warner Bach, through Umbogintwini with its view of the African Explosives factory (plenty of monkeys chattering in the trees at this point.) The smell in the air would tell when you reached Merebank and the factory for ‘Natal Cane By-Products’: it was saturated with the scent of treacle, processed here for methylated spirits. Then through the Mobeni swamps, where the water came up to the railway line at ankle depth. Here you could see wading gangs of Africans making channels for draining the Isipingo Flats. Then the Mobeni produce gardens, stretching all the way to Clairwood: probably the main coastal industry of the Indian community. From the train you could see merchants with baskets walking toward Durban. We used to spot dozens of scarecrows in the gardens as the train whisked along, and we amused ourselves trying to work which domestic materials they were constructed from.

Now we approached South Coast Junction (later Rossburgh), where the line for the interior met the coastal route. A derelict Indian temple, washed down in the 1917 floods, lay in the Umlazi River. This was a timely warning for us, since there was prolonged flooding during this 1924/5 summer of the Prince’s visit. As one neared Durban, the view from the train around the present Stellawood Cemetery, and up to where Howard College now stands, was of nothing but the wildest coastal bush. But as one approached the harbour, we

got exciting glimpses of the shipping at Maydon Wharf — pine planks being off-loaded from Norway. Then there was always a long signal-stop at Berea Road bridge, before we got the right of way for a slow, dignified arrival in Durban Station.

Cries met one along the platforms from hotel porters, all touting for custom. White station porters charged 3d to transfer your baggage from the guard's van to a ricksha or taxi. In fact, our luggage — which was due for temporary residence at my aunt's house on the Berea — went by ricksha. Despite the steep climb to the Berea, the ricksha was invariably waiting for us (in Clyde Avenue off Musgrave Road) when we arrived by tram (I can still remember the tramfare: 2d per adult, 1d per child.) In the streets of Durban, by the way, we became aware of the preparations for the Prince's visit — electrical illuminations were being assembled, and I can remember a big 'E' all done in glass. Souvenirs were on sale, and we were each given a small plaster bust of 'Princy'. In fact, whilst staying with my Aunt, our mother took us up to a wild point on the Berea from which we could watch the arrival of HMS Hood and HMS Repulse. Durban was a tidal harbour, and in 1925 the sand bar still prevented ships of that size from entering the port. Of course, the Prince was not on board at all, being busy touring the country on the royal train.

On to Stanger. Our train only left at 11.00 p.m., so we had to book our luggage in at the left luggage office. Then it was time for 'bioscope', before boarding the train for the journey. Next to the post office, on the corner of Pine and Gardiner Streets, was the Empire Cinema. I remember that the film was 'Monsieur Beaucaire', and that I revelled in the 17th Century costume. But we children soon fell asleep, oblivious even to Rudolph Valentino, the star of that film. Thence to the station and the luggage office, and thence to the train and the 'Stanger' coach, which would be shunted off in the early hours of the morning. We were sufficiently awake on departure from Durban to note the train's creaking progress over Umgeni Bridge. Several bridges had come down as a result of the floods, and the Railways were taking no chances.

Breakfast next morning was at the Royal Hotel, Stanger. This was owned by Mr and Mrs Driman, people of such dignity that they would not allow a 'tin Lizzy' to be parked in front of their establishment. And now began the steep journey inland, right to the foot of Mt. Sabiyazi. We were conveyed on an Indian-owned bus — not much longer than a truck, with square mesh wire carrying canvas for a roof. It had planks along the side for seats, and was completely open at the back. My mother held us close to protect us from expectorated betelnut! Past Kearsney, with its magnificent tea plantations stretching up the hills, we eventually arrived at the Mapumulo store, where Mr Mann gave us a most acceptable lunch. After that he took us in his car to Umpumulo Institution. We were given a little backroom, with mattresses of hessian and hay. With three other children, we were taken in hand by Alfride Dahle, the pastor's daughter, who was to be our teacher, and who was also the pianist for the College.

My mother was very happily employed at Mpumulo, but we noticed that the Scandinavians were not much affected with enthusiasm for the Prince's visit. They were a straitlaced lot who seemed to spend hours teaching black students how to spin blue and gold cloth into the Swedish flag. On the staff there was one young South African, son of a missionary in Umtata, who thought Mpumulo was awfully dull. He caused a bit of a stir. His Decca portable gramophone was in the habit of blaring out a song with the words 'I'm going to bring a watermelon to my girl tonight' (based on the progressive principle that

‘When I took an orange she let me hold her hand’.) This uncharacteristic music had an unexpected influence. When the Mapumulo Institute brass band processed up the steep hill to the church, you can imagine how our jaws dropped when the band suddenly gave out — in perfect harmony — an evening rendering of ‘I’m going to bring a watermelon to my girl tonight’! The Mpumulo choir, by the way, was excellently trained by Mr Mpanze, who was to become a leading light in Natal educational circles.

Mr Titlestad arrived in Mr Leisegang’s place, and he offered to take us up to Eshowe to see the Prince. The danger was that there had been excessive floods. One had to pay £1 to go across the temporary Tugela Bridge — a construction of strapped planks and no sides — in order to raise money for a new bridge. I remember the muddy roads: those in the front seat had a lucky escape at one point when the car skidded, and an overhanging tree shattered the windshield.

All was festive in Eshowe. As we approached, we passed little knots of warriors, scantily clad in lush skins, and wearing magnificent head-dresses of sakabula feathers, on their way to the town. One warrior particularly stood out: he was wearing a python skin, carefully cured, and draped in descending spirals around him. It shone like silver.

Eventually the car was parked, and we took up positions in sight of a high covered platform. Soon a figure in a red coat and a plumed helmet with soft white feathers — the uniform of the Welsh Guards — arrived and duly made a speech. Then he handed out gold-knobbed walking sticks to senior chiefs. But in terms of sheer spectacle he was no match for what was to come. After he had left for lunch, the ground-swell of ululating dancers began. When the Prince’s party returned, he — the chief officer of the Empire, in grey suit and Homburg — was totally eclipsed by Solomon of the Zulus, who arrived in an enormous blue open car with leopard skins hanging over the back. The dancers, magnificently dressed in monkey-skin beshus and sakabula feathers, surged forward and rolled back like breakers of the sea. Advancing and then receding, they were frightening and yet thrilling — quite unforgettable. And you can imagine what a thrill it was for me to see, standing out in all that seething mass, the beautiful python skin dress that I had spotted on the road that morning, shining, now, in the midst of the dance.

Eventually it was over. The captains and the kings departed, and we ordinary mortals slowly made our way back to where the car was parked. In the company of many weary warriors, we gradually made our way out of Eshowe. But there was another treat in store. I don’t know exactly where we were, but, as the sun sank behind the hills, we looked down into a valley where you could see the glinting railway line. And there, like a small model, was the White Train, snaking its way back to Durban.

You can guess how weary we were when we reached Mpumulo. The dance had been hypnotic: I have no difficulty in picturing it to this day.

*Some further childhood memories of the Prince’s visit to Eshowe were made available to me by the kind offices of Jenny Hawke, now Curator of the Eshowe Museum. W.H.B.*

The visit of the Prince of Wales to Eshowe, June 5–7 1925, still has quite a bit of local lore surrounding it. That plumed helmet, for instance, mentioned in the

narrative above, made a great impression on the Zulu audience. So much of an impression, in fact, that when George VI came in 1947, 'folk memory' was considerably put out at the sight of the much humbler peaked cap of the King's naval uniform. In fact a certain disappointment was actually articulated, it is said, by the 'imbongi' during the official dance.

How to employ a Prince, when you've only got him for three days! Honor Braatvedt tells how he planted a little Norfolk Pine sapling outside the Courthouse with a silver spade. Three months later the local farmers noticed that the royal tree was looking decidedly sick. So, in the dark of night (so as not to impugn the worthiness of the royal planter) the sick tree was secretly transplanted, and a fresh specimen put in its place. The replacement still stands, but, as a matter of fact, the real 'royal tree' revived and lasted another fifty years, until it had to be cut down!

How many railway stations in South Africa can boast that they were opened by royalty? A national book of records might one day show that this honour goes to a humble sugar siding, so humble that it has never been mentioned in any timetable. 'Eshowe North', in 1925, was the last point on a purely industrial sugar line extending north of the town. Yet to that humble spot, in June 1925, came the royal cavalcade and the chief officer of the Empire. Maurice Williams, who was then four years old, remembers the splendidly shiny steam engine, its brasswork catching the sun, which advanced slowly down the rails as the Prince dramatically cut the tape. Then the assembled company got on to some passenger coaches behind the engine, and were reversed back to Eshowe! So the only passenger train that ever departed 'Eshowe North' — which for the next sixty years was nothing more than a cane rig and a shed — was a 'Royal Train'!

Edward, the most eligible bachelor in the world, was (outside the rituals of office) a man of the swinging twenties. And Eshowe made sure that he did not have a dull time. Maurice Williams remembers gazing on in four-year-old wonder at the cavortings on the golf course, where (with the Prince as spectator) there took place a game of 'musical cars'. (One imagines that only the Sugar Baronage could lay on such a show.) You accelerated your Pontiac or Chevy round the green with a 'captured' maiden on board, and, when the brass band stopped the music, you exchanged said maiden with another.

Jenny Hawke is descended, on her mother's side, from the Adams family. In 1925 Charlie and Una Adams were Mayor and Mayoress of Eshowe, and during the Prince's visit, hosted the royal guest at a somewhat riotous evening at their home 'Norwood'. Jenny understands that her grandfather would shout 'Squeeze, Squeeze!' to the Zulu wine steward, to get the last drop from the wine-bottles. No wonder the evening ended with HRH and the Mayor up on the large Norwood dining table doing a mad dance . . .

And this before the final day, and the royal presentation to Solomon ('Paramount Chief'. as he was then called.) With such goings-on the night before, no wonder the gold-topped walking stick, now exhibited at Eshowe Museum, doesn't match the one in the official photograph . . .