

*JKH in 1974 in Botswana. Already by then, an overpopulation of elephant had caused considerable destruction of habitat - a problem that still needs to be addressed today.*

# Botswana Beginnings: The Birth of the Safari Industry (1962-1968)

*By John Kingsley-Heath*

*The country we know today as Botswana became a British protectorate known as Bechuanaland, in 1885 under Queen Victoria as a result of treaties made with all the tribal chiefs of the country.*



*All photos courtesy of John Kingsley-Heath from his book, **Hunting the Dangerous Game of Africa**, published by Sycamore Island Books in 1998, and now out of print.*

In 1923, Khama the Great, the paramount chief of Bechuanaland, died. His son, Seretse was only four years old at the time, and so his uncle, Tshekedi, ruled as regent on his behalf. Tshekedi, a man of high moral convictions, attracted international attention when he had a white construction worker, Phineas McIntosh, flogged at his kgotla (native court) for his consistently appalling moral behaviour. Such exercise of authority was forbidden under the terms of the protectorate agreement. A naval unit with field guns was dispatched and Tshekedi was dismissed. After a successful defence of his actions, he was later reinstated.

In the meantime, Seretse Khama married a Miss Ruth Williams in London in 1948, which resulted in his being debarred from taking up his chieftom. He returned to Bechuanaland in 1958 as a private citizen. But on September 13, 1966, Bechuanaland achieved independence, with Sir Seretse Khama (knighted by Queen Elizabeth) as president of 600,000 citizens, or 2.5 persons per square mile.

In the five years prior to independence, the British had helped establish a system of law and order and public services. As the Protectorate had been administered from Mafeking, South Africa, there was no capital, and they could hardly grant independence to a country without a seat of government, the British hurriedly chose Gabarone, which sported a police post, railway station, and a few dwellings for housing the local cattle traders. A dam was built, and out of the surrounding acacia bush arose the legislative assembly building and other government departmental buildings.

To me, a former colonial administrator, it was nothing short of a miracle; but the British were not exactly lacking in experience in sorting out such problems.

In 1960, there was one game ranger and six

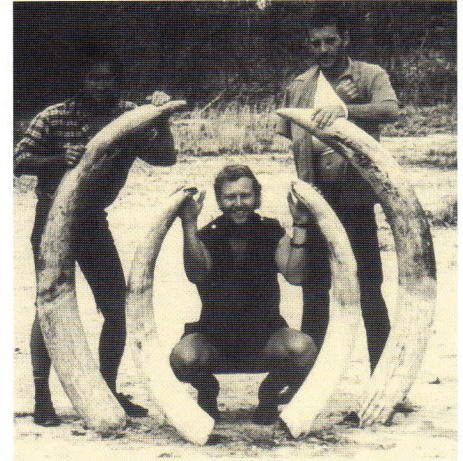


*Aerial view of Maun. In the early '60s, Maun's population included only some 120 Europeans. Even the District Commissioner's office and the police post were mere grass-roof rondavels.*

game scouts for the whole of Bechuanaland protectorate. Major P. Bromfield, a former Ghurka Regiment Officer, appointed in 1956, was in charge. There were no tarmac roads or any man-made roads to speak of in the entire country. Yet soon enough, Bechuanaland's most fabulous asset - wildlife - was brought to public attention through great explorers and hunters like Livingstone, Selous, Baines and Andersson, whose travels and writings were already legendary.

The Kalahari Desert was largely unknown, and the Okavango swamps and upper reaches of the Chobe and its riverine connections to Angola were almost unknown, as maps were still both incomplete and often inaccurate. Until 1961, the only hunting activities were occasional government authorized safaris and parties of meat hunters from South Africa. However, stories of Bechuanaland's huge game resources began to attract the attention of PHs from East Africa who were keeping their ears to the ground and eyes to the future.

In East Africa, the already booming safari



*Team of three. PHs Dougie Wright, Simon Paul and Cecil Riggs, with the tusks of Simon's 100-lb tusker on the outside.*

business was an intensely competitive field, and independence to Kenya, in 1962, brought unwanted official corruption and favouritism in the handing out of Game Control Areas. By this time, the five larger safari companies already had an established clientele from which to draw their hunting clients. Some PHs were almost a company within a company, their clients returning regularly to hunt with them.

The uncertainties of the future of safari hunting in East Africa caused several PHs to think of booking their repeat clients into untouched territories with a whole spectrum of new game species. Bechuanaland beckoned.

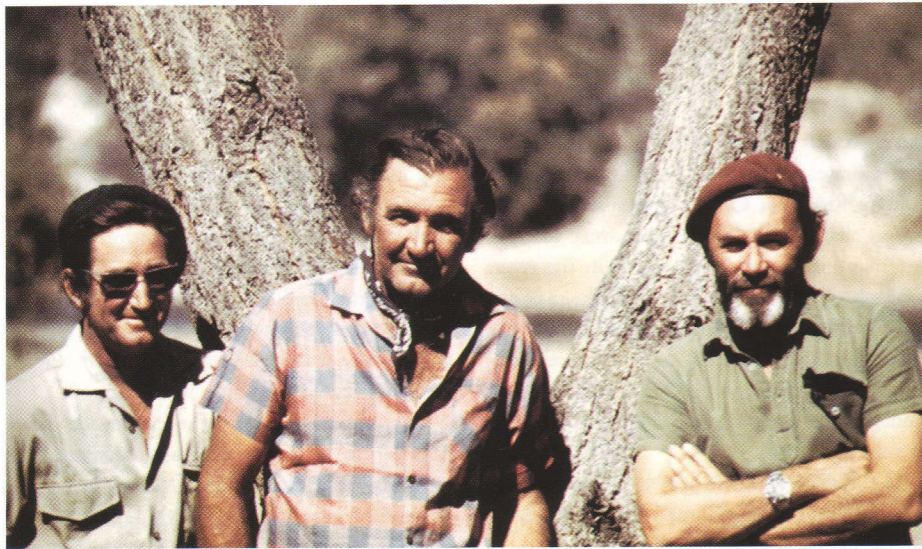
In 1962, one of the first PHs to recognize this potential was Andrew Holmberg. Andrew had left *Ker-Downey Safaris* in 1955, and with Harry Selby and several other hunters, formed *Selby and Holmberg*. By mutual consent, they subsequently disbanded their company, leaving Andrew on his own and Harry to rejoin Ker and Downey, becoming *Ker, Downey and Selby Safaris*.

After narrowly escaping with his life from





*Buffalo massing before the rains in October-November 1966.*



*PHs Dougie Wright, Lionel Palmer and John Kingsley-Heath. For 10 years, Palmer and Heath were the sole partners of Safari South, with Wright as their right-hand man.*



*A gathering of the Botswana 'Big 17'*  
*Back row: Neville Peake, John Kingsley-Heath, Harry Selby, Lionel Palmer, Soren Lindstrom, Peter Becker, Willie Engelbrecht, Peter Hepburn, Mark Kyriacou.*  
*Front row: Kevin Chadwick, Charles Williams, Daryl Dandridge, Don Lindsay, Dougie Wright, Basie Maartens, Cecil Riggs, Willie Phillips.*

an air crash (in the company of the Henderson brothers) on the Kwai River in the eastern Okavango, Andrew and his brother, Eric, a surveyor, formed their own company based in Rhodesia and commenced big-game safari hunting in Bechuanaland.

Selby was only a few months behind him, and set up KDS in Maun, renting the Witwatersrand Labour Recruiting Organization base as a headquarters for their operations, and securing government permission to operate in the River Kwai area. George Barrington and John Dugmore, both senior staff from KDS in Kenya, soon joined him.

By 1963, Pat Hepburn had been appointed game warden in Kasane for the whole of the northern area. Shortly after, Mike Slogrove was appointed game warden based in Maun to cover the Okavango and central areas.

Almost simultaneously, Jack Blacklaws of *Hunters' Africa*, and John Lawrence, chairman of the Eastern African Professional Hunters' Association also arrived in Bechuanaland, deciding to operate out of Kasane, where a small hotel offered a suitable headquarters. In addition, Eric Rundgren, who had left KDS, went into business with the Henderson brothers of Rhodesia, and began operating on the eastern side of Bechuanaland.

In 1963, I was asked by KDS, of which I was a director and shareholder, to make a survey of Mozambique's potential, with a view to buying into *Mozambique Safari Landia* - owned by the Arbreu brothers and run by the redoubtable 'Baron' Werner von Alvensleben. (Despite some potential there, on my recommendation, KDS decided that it wouldn't be viable.) Meanwhile, David Ommanney had taken my car to Maun and joined me there.

I met Lionel Palmer and Bill Siebert, who together had formed *Safari South PTY Ltd.* based in South Africa and done several safaris in the western areas of the Okavango Swamps - one with the Bates family from Chicago. Subsequently, George Bates was to return to Botswana as owner of *Oryx Safaris* in partnership with Tony Challis. Tragically, George, Tony and Boet Danhauser were all killed in an air crash in South Africa. (Ed: The company, *Micheletti & Bates Safaris*, had already been bought by an Italian client of PH Dave Sandenberg, who ran it until he, too, was killed in an aeroplane crash near Moremi Game Reserve. It was subsequently absorbed into Hunter's' Africa, then owned by Clayton Williams and managed by Gordon Cundill and based in Kasane.)

In 1964, having completed two safaris in the KDS hunting concessions, I decided it was no longer for me. Frank Miller and I joined *Safari South* in Bechuanaland, while simultaneously opening our own company in East Africa.

Between 1962 and 1966, I was closely involved



with the newly formed game departments, headed by Lawrence Tennant, a qualified veterinarian and former chief game warden in Uganda, and Alec Campbell, his deputy. At the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, the permanent secretary, Mike Hawkins, was anxious that the budding safari industry should thrive. The combination of the intelligence and efforts of these three government servants was remarkably successful and brought a completely new atmosphere to the annual negotiations for concession areas and game quotas, as well as the establishment of game reserves and national parks.

Compared with the attitude of some East African governments, to be supported in the endeavour to establish a viable, long-term safari industry with a secure future, was indeed a novel experience. This, along with the wise and honest approach of the industry players, brought out the best in everyone involved with safaris at that time. As a result, wildlife utilization, management and conservation were fully supported.

Unfortunately, Botswana evolved into a country dedicated to cattle ranching. EEC contracts were given out; veterinary fences that interfered with game migrations were extended,

causing the death of countless wild animals. On my first visit to the Kuki Cordon, south of Maun, I saw for the first time a stack of animal bones, as big as a two-story house, being collected for transport to the bone meal factory in Lobatsi. And any animal within rifle shot of the fence was shot: greater kudu, gemsbok, red hartebeest, wildebeest, zebra, giraffe – all to be turned into biltong for South African consumption.

In 1968, Jack Blacklaws brought a Cessna 180 into Botswana. I'd have done the same, but found the cost beyond reason. Then I met Mike Cawood, who had a Piper 235 and brought it out to Maun. Quickly and easily, we constructed airstrips in our hunting areas.

Between the sand and the non-existence of roads, our vehicles and their gearboxes were destroyed. In 1964, the drive from Kasane or Francistown to Maun took two full days; in summer, it was best to travel at night.

Meanwhile, Harry Selby had developed the Kwai River Lodge, and put in a large airstrip. Changes were also taking place at *Safari South*, too. Dennis Blackbeard, from one of the country's oldest established trading families, joined us. The firm 'Blackbeard and Hepburn' represent the great-grandson of the Blackbeard,

who acted as mediator in the flogging of Phineas McIntosh. Peter Hepburn is the son of Pat Hepburn, the first game ranger posted to Kasane.

About this time, Frank Miller decided to return to Tanzania, and Bill Siebert saw new pastures in South Africa, leaving Lionel Palmer and myself as the sole partners of *Safari South 1966 Ltd.*

Independence was disastrous for Mozambique. An old friend, Wally Johnson, and his son, Walter, who was only 17-years-old when I met him on the Savé River Concession, joined us. Adel Moolman, Mike Cawood's next door neighbour, was another new arrival.

In 1966, the Tanzanian government gave all South Africans 24 hours to leave the country. Whilst chairman of the Tanganyika Professional Hunters' Association, I had been instrumental in seeing that Willy Engelbrecht obtained his PH licence. Now, with only 12 hours of freedom left, stranded with his truck and safari car, he implored me to let him join us in Maun. Though I had no work for him at the moment, he was there when I returned to Maun a few months later. By this time, we had three aircraft, and Bill Wixley had joined us with his Airline Transport Pilot's Licence.



Our headquarters in Maun was located in the old South African wartime-operated meteorological station building next to the airport, and our concessions were in the Batawana tribal area. It was largely due to Dougie Wright and Lionel Palmer that our good relations with paramount chief of Batawana, Letslatebe II, and his *kgotla*, or assembly of tribal elders, that these concession leases were granted to us on an annual basis.

Wright had been part of *Safari South* from its inception. The son of one of Bechuanaland's very early traders who'd set up shop in Nokeneng on the west side of the Okavango swamps, Dougie spoke the Bushman and Tswana languages. His regular success in obtaining outstanding trophies contributed greatly to the success of our safari operation.

The history of hunting in Botswana would not be complete without mention of the Kays family. Tom Kays, who lived in Maun with his wife Rose and children (Phyllis, Ronnie and Kenny) died only recently - well into his late nineties. He founded a garage and traded in cattle. Tom and Adam Riley founded Riley's Hotel, next door to the garage. Phyllis married Lionel Palmer, who has also since passed away. Their son, Terry Palmer, is a hard-working PH, still living in Maun. Ronnie spent several years as a PH and continues to run a first-rate garage. The Kays were wonderfully helpful to those seeking to establish themselves in the early days. Kenny, the youngest, helped Harry Selby get established in 1962, as well as Gordon Plant, who came down from Kenya.

The development of the safari industry could not have been done without the support of Cronje Wilmot and his son, Bobby, who both had crocodile licences for the Okavango in the late '50s and early '60s. After Cronje's death, Bobby was hospitality itself at Crocodile Camp, 10 miles east of Maun on the Tamalakhane River.

In 1969, my 19-year-old godson, Simon Paul, came out from England and joined our company - an adventure that has kept him in Botswana ever since.

Once, when my wife, Sue, and I were heading for the Botletle River and fighting the sand on the Kumaga track, we'd already made camp for the night, when the wildebeest and zebra migration came through, knocking out the guide ropes, flattening our tent. We spent a miserable night in the dust-filled Land Rover. Next day, heading cross-country for the river, we met a young man looking for lost cattle, riding bareback on a rough-looking horse and accompanied by a Bushman. That young man was Mark Kyriacou, today one of Botswana's major outfitters. His father had trekked up to Maun to trade between the wars.

By 1974, the five major safari companies



*Loading the truck - weighing at least 10 tons - onto the ferry over the Zambezi at Kazengula to cross from northern Rhodesia to Bechuanaland. A time for prayer. 1968*

had been through several two- and four-year concession lease periods. Jack Blacklaws had died of sleeping sickness; Andrew Holmberg had returned to Kenya to run horse and camel safaris in the Northern Frontier District. Lawrence Tennant had retired, and Alec Campbell had taken over. Bobby Wilmot had died of snakebite. Otherwise, all the main players were still there, and investment and profits grew. A hardtop calcrete road now reached Maun, making Francistown only a day's drive away. Banks and food stores had arrived in Maun, and housing was going up for all kinds of international aid organizations.

The dawn of a new era was upon us: Diamonds had been discovered in Orapa; opencast mining commenced. In only 10 years, the country had been transformed. Big-game hunting was a major contributor to the country's economy from 1968.

Through it all, Riley's Bar provided the wild side to life, characterized by Jumping Jack Frickie, and other unforgettables. "Are you married or do you live on the other side of the river?" was a current phrase, and divorces, maulings, murders and suicides amongst the 120 Europeans were part of life. Maun, at times, was reminiscent of a Wild West movie set.

Change seemed imminent. Alec Campbell's departure from the helm of Wildlife & National Parks to Curator of the National Museum was cause for some concern. The pressure on the Okavango to eradicate tsetse fly in order to develop the cattle industry - without consulting those involved with wildlife or weighing the consequences - caused widespread resentment in the safari industry.

It resulted in my selling *Safari South 1966 Pty Ltd* and its subsidiary companies, Botswana Air Safaris and Charter and Botswana Wildlife Lodges, thus forsaking my commitment, with the agreement of my partner, Lionel Palmer, to Botswana.

Over the next few years, the water levels running out of the Okavango swamps became reduced to an extent not experienced in living memory, shrinking the swamps to one-third their previous size. Lake Ngami had been

dry for nearly 20 years. The Botletle river, that for some 120 miles was 100 yards wide and 15 - 20 feet deep, has been dry for the same period, tremendously reducing the huge game migrations from the Kalahari to northern Botswana; the lions that used to chew the tyres of our aircraft parked near our beautiful camp on its banks are gone, along with the monster crocodiles, and the abundance of fish upon which they grew fat. Sandgrouse no longer drink there; their nests no longer grace the savannah lands to the east and west of the river. Lake Dow's birdlife has gone elsewhere, too. Water no longer reaches the Kwai river, and the Mababi Depression and the Selinda Savuti channels have not seen water for many years. Countless thousands of wild animals have died.

Instability in Angola, insecurity and poaching in the Caprivi Strip, severe elephant culling in Zimbabwe, together have resulted in Botswana's overpopulation of elephant. Their hunger has severely damaged the fragile tree coverage of the sandy soil of the north.

Yet Botswana's wildlife is still enjoyed and appreciated by those who do not know how much more wildlife there was back when District Commissioner Clark's Maun office and the police post were but grass-roof rondavels, and there weren't but five 'European' houses fit for habitation.

It was a great dream and a great adventure to be given 35,000 square miles in which to hunt and develop a safari industry. It was a life that would never be exchanged or regretted by any and all involved.

"I shall carry into the catacombs of age photographically lined on the tablets of my mind when a yesterday has faded from its page." *Bab Ballads. S. Gilbert.*

*John Kingsley-Heath studied history, law and economics at Trinity College Cambridge University. District Commissioner, Tanganyika; Director and shareholder in Ker & Downey Safaris; founder of Safari South (1966) Pty Ltd; PH in Kenya, Tanzania, Botswana and Uganda, where he also served as Assistant Director of National Parks; JKH continues to lead photo and birds shooting safaris. 🦋*