

# The torch bearers

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## How pioneers set the pace

**EXACTLY 91 years, five months and three weeks today a group of 200 Africans attended a church service at Kibwezi in a temporary church built by six youthful White missionaries.**

All except two were below 30 years of age and had instructions to set up a private Christian mission in the heart of the territory that was being administered by the Imperial British East African Company (IBEAC) on behalf of the British Government.

They were to establish what was to be called East African Scottish Mission. The idea had been conceived by Sir William Mackinnon — chairman of IBEA Company — and Alexander Low Bruce, a director of the same company and son-in-law of the famous explorer, Dr. David Livingstone.

Dr. James Stewart, the only ordained clergyman led the British party comprising Thomas Watson an evangelist, a carpenter John Linton, engineer John Grieg, storekeeper Cornelius Rahman and their guide and safarimaster, Dr. Robert Unwin Moffatt George Wilson.

They defied original instructions to set up a mission at Dagoretti and instead embarked on the Kibwezi ven-

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ture. This action was later to cost them dearly in terms of expenditure and human life.

For after only 13 months, the only survivor of the original missionary party was Thomas Watson. Grieg died of dysentery in January 1893, Linton remained sick throughout the year, Rahman had to be repatriated after a sort of breakdown while Wilson left to take charge of the Mombasa-Kibwezi Road.

This situation forced the young pioneers to revert to the original instructions of setting up the mission at Dagoretti.

### Influence

The stage had already been set for this. In 1890, Captain F.D. Lugard led a strong expedition of IBEAC sent to Uganda to consolidate British influence there.

On October 10, 1890, Lugard reached Dagoretti. Here he met the local leader Waiyaki wa Hinga and the two entered into blood brotherhood according to Kikuyu custom.

Lugard signed a treaty with Waiyaki and built a fort on a site now occupied by Kihumo Church. The fort, which in effect became an occupying garrison, was later named Fort Smith after Eric Smith, who re-established it in 1892. It had been destroyed by the Gikuyu people, following bloody encounters with the White invaders.

With a new endowment trust of £40,000 from the Free Church of Scotland, Watson came back to Kikuyu to open up negotiations for the purchase of the site — he and Dr. Wilson had examined in 1895 near Lugard's old fort.

By this time, Waiyaki's son Munyua had become the head of the *Mbari ya Hinga*. (Hinga clan) and he refused to offer the intended site. According to Munyua, the site was cursed since blood had been shed there. He said it would bring misfortune to the occupant and did not want this to happen to Watson, his friend.

Instead, he offered Baraniki, a small sub-ridge further down the Dagoretti valley and overlooked on both sides by higher ground. Some reports have it



The Church of Church... built from 1928 to 1933 through self-help efforts.

that Munyua wanted the mission to be sited there so that he could keep its activities under observation.

In 1898, Watson bought the Baraniki site by paying Munyua trade goods valued at 149 rupees and eight annas. A further amount of trade goods to the value of 22 rupees was paid for a small addition to the acreage.

The land transfer cost another 10 rupees in form of Government stamp duty and clearing of land and building began straightaway.

This version of the land deal is, however, contradicted by another one which says that Rev. Dr. D. C.R. Scot arrived in Kikuyu on December 21, 1901 with the task of developing Kikuyu (Church of Scotland) mission on 'evangelistic, medical, educational and industrial lines.'

According to this version, Scot applied for and was granted by the Protectorate Government a total of 3,000 acres, of which 1,000 was freehold and 2,000 was on a 99-year lease. There are no records of any consultation with the *Mbari ya Hinga* which had acquired rights on the land around Kikuyu.

The original church at Kikuyu-Watson-Scott Memorial Church—which was dedicated in 1909 is the oldest Presbyterian church building still standing anywhere in East Africa, said the Rt. Rev. John Gat, the Moderator of the General Assembly of the P.C.E.A.

At the time it was being put up, there were only 11 communicants who served about 250 people.

Having established a base, the Church of Scotland in Kenya prospered and spread out like a bush fire. From the meagre number of 11 communicants in 1890, the figures rose to 504 at

the start of World War I in 1918 and to 6,069 by 1928.

Rev. Dr. J. W. Arthur, who arrived at Thogoto in 1907 to head both the Kikuyu Church and hospital, spearheaded a move to get an alternative place of worship. A church under trees was set up near the Watson-Scott Memorial Church.

### Services

The new church was locally called *Coci wa miti-ini* (the church at the trees) because communicants conducted services under a canopy of trees.

In a bid to overcome these problems that worshippers faced in the open-air services, Dr. Arthur and his Kirk Session mooted the idea of building a big church. The decision to build the now famous Church of the Torch was made and arrangements set in motion. Construction work for the new church building started in 1928.

Dr. Arthur led the project and the campaign for raising funds. Master Mason John Gordon is credited with training the local people in masonry with Dr. Arthur emphasising the need for the locals to take pride of building their own church.

Local artisans handled all the stone work with a very high level of craftsmanship and the general public assisted in carrying the stones obtained nearby, preparing the groundwork and small donations of an average of Shs. 3.

It was a big task which at some stage forced Dr. Arthur to go back to Britain and lobby for financial support from the Women's Guild, the Boys' Brigade as well as from the mother church. Aid was also solicited from individuals.

The construction work took five years after strenuous efforts by the White missionaries and the indigenous population. The total financial cost of the Church of Torch amounted to Shs. 700,000.

Since its dedication 50 years ago, the Church of the Torch has served many useful purposes to the whole of the P.C.E.A. church in Kenya serving as the nucleus from which the church spread throughout East Africa.

On March 7, 1926, Musa Gitau Njuguna, Benjamin Githiara Waiyaki and Joshua Matenjwa Cege became the first Africans to be ordained ministers of the church. By January 10, 1943, the number of African ministers reached 24.

### Autonomy

1943 was also a significant year for the Church. After strenuous efforts, a constitution was finally adopted setting up the Presbyterian church of East Africa, thus becoming independent from the church of Scotland with a few exceptions.

By 1956, the P.C.E.A. gained total autonomy by creating its own General Assembly. From then on it no longer needed to send its decisions to the mother church in Britain for verification.

As the Church of the Torch 'in darkness' celebrates its Golden Jubilee on September 11, the P.C.E.A. leadership and its 600,000 strong communicants look back with pride at the tremendous success in spreading the Gospel in this part of the world.



Rev. John Gat next to the pillar showing the expansion of PCEA.