

OLD AFRICA

STORIES *from* EAST AFRICA'S PAST

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PATTERSON AND TSAVO MAN-EATER - 1898

Kibwezi Duka Mekatilili and Giriama Uprising

Slave Becomes Preacher British Consulates in Zanzibar

1912 East African Diary Schoolboy Meets British Lions



QUIRKY MEETS
KENYATTA
PAGE 32



BOOK ON
RUMURUTI
PAGE 38



PHOTO ALBUM
HISTORIC DAR
PAGE 44

WIN!
2 Nights for 2 at
SATAO CAMP
Quiz on page 40

GOLF THEN AND NOW - MERU

by Jerry Haigh

In 1966 the nine-hole golf course in the middle of Meru town had almost died. Scrawny zebu cattle grazed across the scrubby grass and the greens (browns) looked like a partly ploughed miniature garden plot.

By January 1967 the trend was being reversed. The two main drivers (pun intended) of this effort were John Dell, a schoolteacher from Kaaga, and Yogesh Patel, one of three doctors at the district hospital. Their steady work paid off. When I arrived that month the course was playable, after a fashion. A dozen or so of us regulars tried to get nine holes in after work or on the weekend.

The course backed on to the Meru Sports Club, with the first tee no more than ten metres from the western side of the building. The first and second holes were both short par-4s of about 330 yards (300 metres these days) running parallel to and either side of the murrum road running up the hill.

A ragtag team of boys, ranging from 10 to about 14 years of age, stood waiting by the club hoping to be employed as caddies. They soon grasped the idea that there were a few shillings available for an hour to 90 minutes work.



Wally, the Great Dane and Mastiff cross rolls over so Jerry Haigh can scratch his tummy. Wally was an additional hazard near the fourth brown, especially to the young caddies. (Photo courtesy of Jerry Haigh)

None of us players had pull-behind trolleys or the huge bags that one sees today. A good thing, for some of the smaller boys might have had trouble hefting the latter.

The grazing cattle obviated the need for any sort of mowing. However, they did force us to establish a unanimously agreed upon local rule. It permitted the pick-up and cleaning of any ball that came to rest in any of the deposits of processed grass left by those beasts. Even the Royal & Ancient in Scotland might have allowed that. After all, the consequences of having to play 'as it lies' did not really appeal.

The first hole was pretty straight forward, just up the hill, over a shallow and harmless little bunker, filled not with sand, but loose murrum. Alongside each brown lay a swatch of sacking nailed to a five-foot board with a piece of string tied at each end. Before one attempted to putt, the caddy would drag this contraption in ever increasing circles from centre near the hole to the perimeter. This was intended to smooth out the surface and eliminate, as far as possible, the footprints of those cattle.

To get to the second tee one had to cross a road that ran straight west and drive straight back downhill, the brown being right opposite the club. This was the first time one could get into trouble. A right hander's sliced drive would either clatter in amongst the stand of big trees that lined the Kazita River, or go into the water and vanish for ever.

The third hole was only about 80 yards long. Sounds easy, eh! Not so much. The shortest iron in the bag had to be hit with great precision. It was a blind shot. The brown was hidden behind half a dozen tall gums and a few random banana plants that lined the usually dry watercourse (it only got wet during the rains). The gap was narrow. Very narrow. A low shot clipped the banana trees or bounced off a trunk or two. The slightest deviation, slice or hook, usually led to a lost ball despite the efforts of those eager boys.

On the north side of this unusual obstacle the course was more-or-less free of natural or designed hazards. Only one bunker for the next five holes.

The longest hole, the fourth, a par-4 of

almost 400 yards, involved a dogleg round the Anglican Church. A low hook would skim across the grass like a jet-propelled missile, skim the kei-apple hedge and smack into the church wall.

I could see the third and fifth browns from the house I shared with agricultural officer Tim Roberts, (HG2 on the map). I'm guessing that the HG2 signboard at the entrance indicates that it was the second house built for government personnel in the early days of European administration.

During my four-and-a-half years as District Veterinary Officer (DVO) Meru there was one extra challenge. Not so much for the golfer, but certainly for the caddies. The fourth brown was less than 20 yards from the house that my doctor girl friend, later fiancé, later still wife Joanne, shared with nurse Edith Tilly. Edith also lived with a huge, sloppy,

solid, Great Dane cross Mastiff dog named Wally.

Wally would waddle out from the garden, cross the jacaranda lined road to greet anyone who came by. After a few loud barks accompanied by a wagging tail he would roll over to have his tummy scratched.

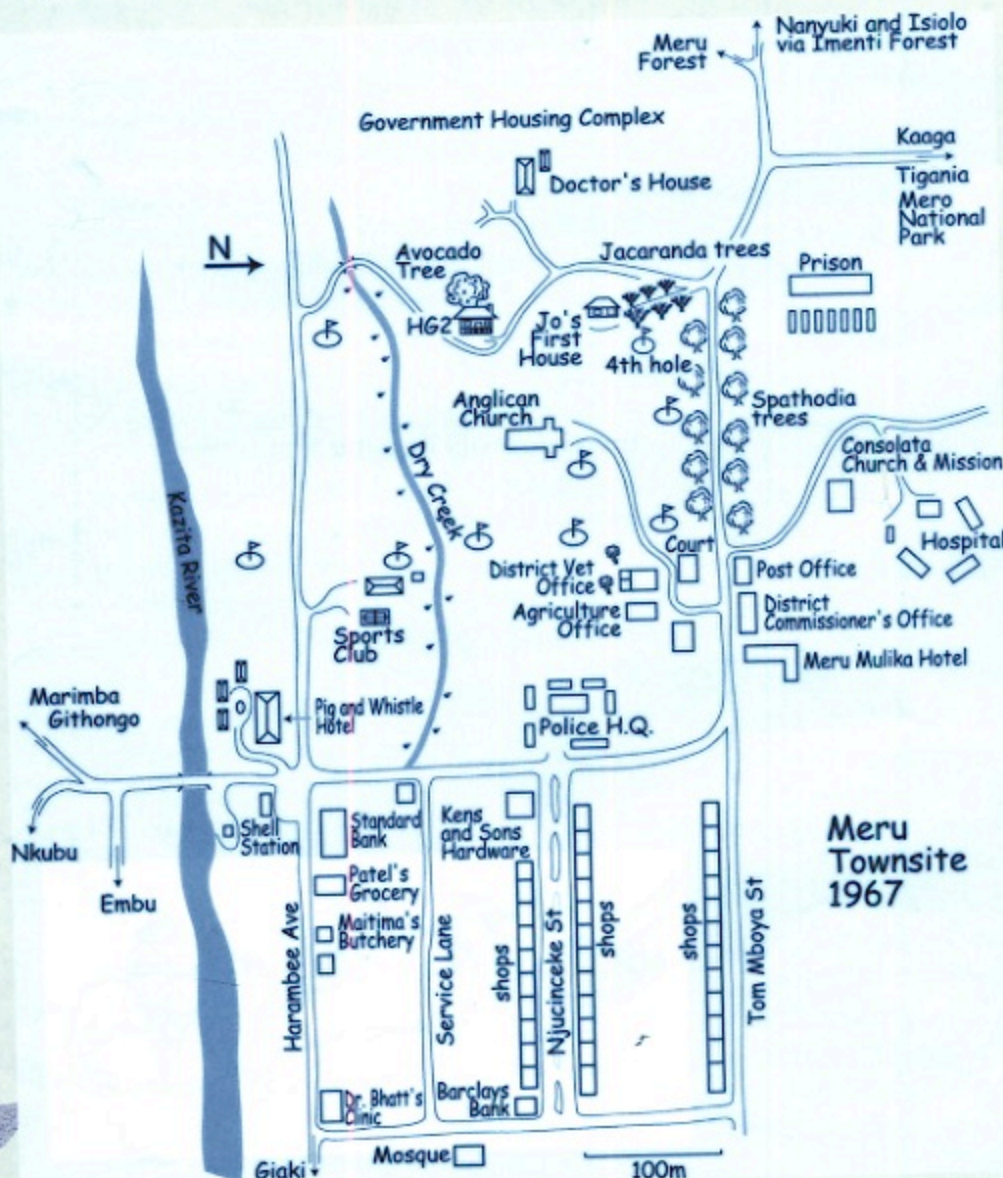
This was all very well for the golfers, but the boys were justifiably terrified. This was not only because of the noise and Wally's size but also because of his habit of trying to put his forepaws on one's shoulders so as to give a slobbery greeting.

The next four holes criss-crossed the slope. The seventh required the same degree of care with the approach shot as the fourth because a shank also had the chance of shelling the church. I never heard the shattering of glass, but the potential was there.

The ninth went back across the dry watercourse and required the same amount of care with accuracy as the third.

I particularly recall a couple of rounds of my own. One evening I went round in 29! What golfer would not be delighted with that? Just to prove that this was no fluke I set off again the next evening. Not only did birdies elude me, but I managed to scare up a pair of pied crows. The banana trees and bushes between tee and brown on the third and ninth holes took a battering. My score has conveniently departed the confines of my skull, but it was certainly not 29.

When we returned to Meru in 2000 the course had vanished. New houses filled the field and no cattle grazed or left fertilizer for the gardens.



Meru town and its golf course in 1967. (This map appears at the start of Chapter 9 in Jerry Haigh's book *Wrestling with Rhinos*.)