

MASHONALAND VIA KHAMA'S COUNTRY

PART I : UP TO MACLOUTSIE

The "Cape to Cairo" thrust of British imperialism during the latter part of the nineteenth century took many parts and required many agents for its fulfilment. The British South Africa Company was the major force in Central Africa but Rhodes was not working alone and a student of this period will become aware of the cooperation that existed between the Company, the Cape government, the administration of British Bechuanaland, the Imperial authorities themselves, the resident commissioners in the Protectorate and the Trans-Protectorate, the missionaries and even, on occasion, the rival companies. The only groups excluded from the club were the Boer republics and those blacks who, like Lobengula, did not feel the plan served their best interests.

An example of such cooperation is seen in the expansion of the Bechuanaland posts in the late 1880's and early 1890's to meet the requirements of Rhodes' pioneers assembling at Macloutsie in the far east of the Protectorate and, later, when they settled on the Mashonaland highveld. The early mails from the Protectorate were carried by private missionary posts to Zeerust in the Transvaal and it was late 1887 before Mafeking was connected to Kimberley by post cart and March, 1888 before the missionary mails were taking this route. The Moffat runner route was introduced in August, 1888 but partly supplanted in the latter part of 1889 by the Bechuanaland Exploration Company's weekly mail and passenger service from Mafeking to Shoshong using mules placed in the Protectorate by the B.S.A. Company during their concession hunting trips to Bulawayo. Within a month or two Khama had moved from Shoshong to Palapye (Palachwe-Khamastown) and this became the terminus of the new service. The main purpose of these mails was to serve Khama's country, the Tati Concession and Matabeleland and they have been dealt with in more detail in "Matabeleland - The Pre-war Mails".

During 1890 the Pioneer Column formed at Macloutsie and, together with a contingent of Bechuanaland Border Police, created a large and entirely new population that required efficient mail services. They were seventy miles from the Palapye mail terminus and at first the Chartered Company organised its own mail connection. On 8 July, 1890 the Secretary at Kimberley wrote to the High Commissioner in Cape Town -

"I have the honour to state (that) we are sending two Scotch carts, with hood and seat to act as Post carts from Palapye to Macloutsie, as Lt. Col. Pennefather informs us, that unless this is done, the postal service between these two places will completely break down, the mails being so heavy, and there being only one old cart at the Colonel's disposal, for the postal service.

(I ask) whether in view of there being a considerable number of Imperial Police at Macloutsie, (the High Commissioner) will sanction the Bechuanaland Government defraying a portion, say one third, of the necessary expenditure.

We understand from Sir Frederick Carrington, that he has addressed a communication on the subject to His Excellency."⁽¹⁾

In later correspondence Pennefather indicated that while at Macloutsie he "arranged with Khama a service of native despatch riders direct from Palapye to Macloutsie; the men were not paid but got rations for themselves and horses".⁽²⁾ This was probably the start of the dual mail system that was used on other routes in future - despatch riders to carry the important messages and slower post carts to move the routine bulk mails.

One aspect which the Company had not foreseen was the reluctance of their recruits to pay the Protectorate delivery charges, originally introduced to subsidise the Moffat runner route. The charges were still in force although the mails arrived at Macloutsie independently of the Moffat service. To avoid the delivery charge the Company police had their letters addressed to the Company offices in Kimberley who were forced to bag the mails and forward them onto Macloutsie as general freight. Kimberley became overburdened with these mails and in desperation the Secretary wrote to Postmaster Moffat at Palapye on 19 July, 1890 -

"On the 10th instant I sent you the following telegram which I now beg to confirm:

'Please from date, charge to Company postage on letters and newspapers going to members of the Chartered Company's Police Force, that is, twopence per letter and penny per paper. This applies to letters to and from, in effect we will pay the Protectorate charge.'

Your accounts should be initialled by the Paymaster at Macloutsie and sent down to us when they will be paid to your order."⁽³⁾

well

By August the Column was ^{well} on its way and a Major Tye had been appointed the Chief Commissariat, Transport and Postal Officer. He was to fulfil his function from Tuli and became, effectively, the country's first Postmaster-General. Tye was given detailed written instructions by the Secretary, Kimberley regarding his postal duties and the parts relating to the Palapye connection are of interest, particularly paragraphs 4 & 12 -

"4. Now that the Company's forces are concentrated at Tuli, and efficient postcarts have been sent up, we think the Company's letters should go direct from Palapye to Tuli and not via the Bechuanaland Border Police Camp at Matlaputla (Macloutsie). The Chief (Khama) should be asked to permit us to make a straight road from Palapye to Tuli; Short stages should be introduced with trotting oxen, and the whole under the charge of an N.C.O. with selected natives. It is of the utmost importance that this should be done to ensure speedy transit of mails to and from Tuli and Palapye.

12. On reconsideration Mr Rhodes thinks that as it is as well to keep as far as possible in touch with the Bechuanaland Border Police, and as the distance saved by avoiding Matlaputla would be very inconsiderable the post route from Palapye to Tuli should run as before via Macloutsie:"⁽⁴⁾

Maybe His Excellency had failed to cover the requested one third of the costs of the new service and Rhodes was ready to abandon the Imperial police to their own devices - before he thought better of it. After all, they had been stationed in this eastern corner of the Protectorate as a back up to the Chartered Company's police and were to remain as a reserve force for a time.

Meanwhile the Company's telegraph system was moving north through the Protectorate and offices had been opened at Mafeking, Ramoutsa, Gaberones, Mochudi and Palla. On 20 October, 1890 Kimberley informed London that

".....the telegraph line has reached a point some fifteen miles beyond Palapye, to which town the telegraph line is

now open for the convenience of the public.

By an arrangement made with the Bechuanaland Government our telegraph clerk there will also be appointed Postmaster in return for their paying a portion of his salary."⁽⁵⁾

I doubt the clerk realised he was taking over from someone who is now one of postal history's most celebrated postmasters.

On 10th March, 1891 the Bechuanaland Exploration Company extended its Mafeking-Palapye service to Macloutsie, supplanting the post carts operated by the Company police between the latter two places. Most of the mails would have been destined for Mashonaland but the contract was placed by the Postmaster-General of British Bechuanaland and the subsidy for the weekly Mafeking-Macloutsie trip was set at £7 000 per annum.⁽⁶⁾ As outgoing Mashonaland mail was franked with Bechuanaland stamps it was quite reasonable to expect Bechuanaland to carry the cost of the service but no doubt the Imperial authorities were prodded into it by Rhodes. In the same way that the new service had supplanted the Company post carts, so Macloutsie supplanted Palapye as the terminus of the Gubulawayo and Tati mails - but this is another story and the subject of another chapter.

On 12 August, 1891 Cape Town advised London -

"..... Mails leave Cape Town for Mashonaland on Fridays (the English mail generally arrives on Wednesdays) and are conveyed by rail to Vryburg, leaving there again on Monday mornings at 9 a.m. by post cart, and arriving at Macloutsie the following Monday night at 10 p.m."

Down mails left Macloutsie at noon Tuesdays "arriving at Vryburg on Thursday at 7 a.m. in the next week, and Cape Town on Sunday nights (delivery Monday mornings)".⁽⁷⁾

Throughout this period the Chartered Company had been running its own post carts between Macloutsie and Tuli (see Part II - The Missing Link) but this final leg to the border was taken over by the Bechuanaland Exploration Company on 1 January, 1892 in terms of a separate contract between it and the Chartered Company. The Mashonaland Herald and Zambesian Times of 6 August, 1892 carried the following advertisement -

"BECHUANALAND EXPLORATION COMPANY'S
FAST MAIL COACHES

Tuli to Vryburg via Macloutsie, Palapye, Fort Gaberones & Mafeking
Carrying the Protectorate and Mashonaland Mails run in conjunction
with the B.S.A. Co's post carts to and from Tuli.

The fastest route for Europe

Agents:	SALISBURY	The Bechuanaland Trading Association
	TULI	The Tuli Trading Association"

At the end of 1892 the authorities resolved not to renew the Bechuanaland Exploration Company's contract, due to expire on 28 March, 1893, but to award a contract to the Wirsing Brothers at a reduced annual subsidy of £5 960 for the Mafeking-Macloutsie section. The Wirsings were to be allowed to use oxen - a retrograde step later to be regretted.⁽⁸⁾ The Wirsings were either unable or not prepared to cover the short Macloutsie-Tuli leg and the Zeederbergs stepped in to fill this gap (see Part II). At first the press was quite enthusiastic -

"The contract for the weekly mail service from Vryburg, via Mafeking, to Macloutsie, and the bi-weekly service between Vryburg and Mafeking, has been secured by Messrs Wirsing Bros., who will take over the work at the end of March. We congratulate this well known firm on having secured the contract, and trust that the passenger traffic by this route to Mashonaland, aided by the railway extension, will increase and help to make the work payable. It will be impossible for the new contractors to improve on the way the service has been conducted by the Bechuanaland Exploration Company; but we have no doubt that Messrs Wirsing Bros., whose "Northern Express" passenger coaches have been run on such admirable lines, will keep this - the largest and most difficult mail and passenger coach service in South Africa - fully up to the mark."⁽⁹⁾

By the end of the year the comments were less complimentary. An editorial in the Rhodesia Herald of 1 December, 1893 about Transvaal mails ended with -

"As for the Cape mail it continues to crawl up by the Bechuanaland route taking sixteen days instead of eleven."

There was considerable public pressure at this time to switch the

mails to the faster Transvaal route but there was even greater pressure from Cape Town to keep the mails in Bechuanaland and away from the Boer republics. The latter view prevailed - the Imperial authorities making the point that they paid all the mail contract costs in Bechuanaland although the Chartered Company was now receiving the revenue from the use of its own postage stamps on outgoing mails. Money talked!

Meanwhile the Matabele war had been fought and Bulawayo occupied. The decision was made to divert the Mashonaland mails from the Tuli route to the Bulawayo-Charter route and Macloutsie's significance as a mail terminus was to end. However the Chartered Company ^{was} ~~were~~ unable to arrange a Bulawayo-Charter-Salisbury service before the Mafeking-Macloutsie ^{contract} ~~came up for renewal~~ ^{expired} on 28 March, 1894 and it was necessary to renew it. The Transvaal contractors boycotted the tender offer in the belief that they could force the Mashonaland mails onto the Pietersburg-Pretoria route and as a result the contract was re-offered to the Wirsings.

The Bechuanaland posts had been taken over by the Cape government on 1 April, 1893 and the new contract was signed by French, the Cape Postmaster-General. It was to extend for three years and provided for the northern terminus to be switched from Macloutsie to Bulawayo on 1 August, 1894 - at which time Bezuidenhout's service would be ready to take the mails onto Salisbury. After the switch Macloutsie would receive its mails by a "light service" from the main line at Palapye. There would no longer be an onward connection to Tuli. (10)

Macloutsie's part in getting the mails into and out of Rhodesia had ended but it was still to play a significant role on the telegraph side, particularly after the construction of the Mangwe-Macloutsie line. The future routeing of Macloutsie's own small mails is really a Bechuana-land story but it is of interest that the settlement was served by runner from Tuli during the years 1897-1900⁽¹¹⁾ and that the Chartered Company telegraphist acted as postmaster during 1898 and 1899.⁽¹²⁾

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. NA: L05/2/2
2. NA: L05/2/4. Letter from Pennefather to Kimberley dated 30 September, 1890 at Fort Salisbury.
3. NA: CT2/11. When the Moffat runner route was introduced by notice in the "Bechuanaland News" of 8 August, 1888 the delivery charges within the Protectorate were set at 2d for both letters and newspapers. Presumably the newspaper charge was reduced to 1d at some later stage.
4. NA: L05/2/3
5. NA: L05/2/4. Also see RA: 1839-1892.
6. NA: CT1/17/2/3. Although the service commenced 10 March, 1891 the contract was only signed at Port Elizabeth on 28 October, 1891. It called for the use of "no fewer than four able and sound horses or mules". A similar contract for a Vryburg-Mafeking service commenced on the same day with a subsidy of £1 500. The railhead had now reached Vryburg from Kimberley.
7. NA: L05/2/11
8. NA: CT1/17/2/3. The contract was signed at Vryburg on 3 January, 1893 and was between Walter Middleton Wirsing and Henry Frank Wirsing trading under the style of Messrs Wirsing Brothers and the Postmaster-General of British Bechuanaland. It provided for "the conveyance of mails between Mafeking and Macloutsie via Palapye and between the main line and Kanye in 8 hours and the main line and Molopolole in 9 hours once a week each way". The main line journey was to take 150 hours (the same period as allowed to the Bechuanaland Exploration Co. in the earlier contract). The contract was to commence on 29 March, 1893 and to terminate on 28 March, 1894. A similar contract was signed between the same parties on the same day for "the conveyance of mails between Vryburg and Mafeking via Setlagoli twice a week each way". The subsidy was set at £1 000 and the time allowed 24 hours. Once again it allowed the use of oxen.
9. Rhodesia Herald : 28 January, 1893
10. NA: CT1/17/2/6 for the contract details and CT1/17/2/2 (letter from French to Secretary, Cape Town dated 9.6.94) for the intentions of the contract. Although the Wirsings tendered on 24 March, 1894 for a service that commenced 29 March, 1894 the contract was only signed at Mafeking on 11 September. In the meantime there had been much dickerings about whether to have one contract for the section within Bechuanaland and a further one for the run into Matabeleland. At one stage a separate contract was drawn up between the Wirsings and the Chartered Company for a service from Tati to Bulawayo but it was not proceeded with (see CT1/17/2/3). The contract finally agreed upon provided for the carriage

of mails between "Mafeking and Bulawayo, between Palapye and Macloutsie, between the Main Line and Kanye (in eight hours), and between the Main Line and Molopolole (in nine hours)". It was to be performed once a week each way in covered carts on springs with no fewer than four horses, mules or oxen each. The subsidy was set at £8 300 with 183 hours allowed for the Mafeking to Bulawayo run and 150 hours for Mafeking to Macloutsie. It further provided that - "Between 29 March, 1894 and 31 July, 1894 the subsidy for the Mafeking-Macloutsie service with branch posts to Kanye and Molopolole shall be at the rate of £6 000 per annum, and between 1 May, 1894 and 31 July, 1894, a further subsidy at the rate of £2 000 per annum shall be payable for a light service (with a maximum limit of 500lbs) between Palapye and Bulawayo via Tati. The full contract subsidy to become payable from 1 August, 1894 when the Main Line of Posts maintained by the B.S.A. Company is transferred from the Macloutsie-Tuli route to the Bulawayo-Charter route". At this point the "light service" would be switched to the Palapye-Macloutsie run. In an agreement between French and Harris signed at Cape Town on 24 September, 1894 the Chartered Company agreed to pay the major portion of the costs north of Palapye.

11. PMG: 31.3.98; 30.9.98; 31.3.99; 30.9.99; 31.3.00.
12. NA: P6/2/1; L04/1/2