

Portrait of Abercorn



Abercorn spreads itself over a wide area of well-treed land and many of the houses are attractively screened from their neighbours. In the foreground is the headquarters of the International Red Locust Control Service. On the right are Government offices. The long building on the left is the "Grasshopper Inn", formerly the Locust Control Service guesthouse. In the middle distance, beyond the residential area, is the commercial area and in the far distance the Mbulu suburb.

The town with a twinkle

Story by Tony Howard

Pictures by Christopher Mills

HOTELIER TED DAVIES looked out of his window at Abercorn. Turning into the yard was a London Green Line bus, about 6,000 miles off the Edenbridge to Horsham route. Ted Davies was mildly surprised. But then, he reflected, this *was* Abercorn and things like that could be expected. For Abercorn has a natural flair for the unusual, even the near-fantastic, and the lighthearted.

There were the big-city-type Bunny girls at the Abercorn Club; there is a complete absence of unmarried women under middle age among the town's European population of 200; there is *Abercornucopia*, the town's delightful and sophisticated little monthly newspaper, which has rapidly become an institution; and there is the intense civic pride, illustrated by the Gilbertian battle over the siting of the national war memorial with Abercorn's settlers fighting and

defeating the Government over the issue.

Abercorn has self-assurance, without pomposity or priggishness, but rooted in the sure knowledge that it is a very superior place. It is not just that it has one of the most beautiful settings in Central Africa with hills behind and attractive little Lake Chila in front; nor is it that the town has the distinction of being the most northerly in the country; nor that at 5,400 ft. it stands on higher ground than any other town in Zambia; nor that its climate is such that people need never go away for their health's sake.

Abercorn's real pride is its people. The town has always attracted the kind of people who are out of the ruck, individualists. Many of the European population are civil servants who live there because their work dictates it, but Abercorn remains a place where most people live from choice. "I don't believe



John Carlin, proprietor of The Lake Press Ltd. and editor of the excellent little monthly review, Abercornucopia. "Abercorn is essentially a humorous place," he says.

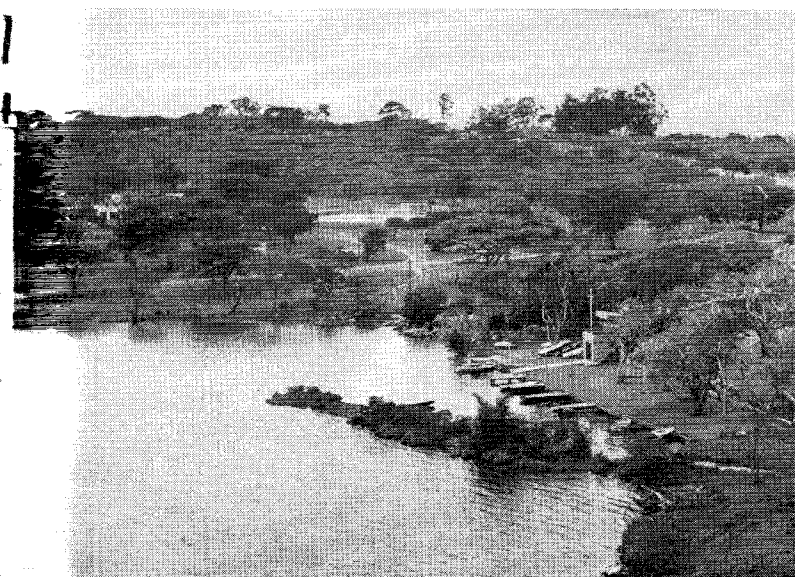


Ted Davies, of the Abercorn Arms bottle store and bar, looks back on the days when the premises were a residential hotel. "It was dilapidated — but it certainly had atmosphere," he says.

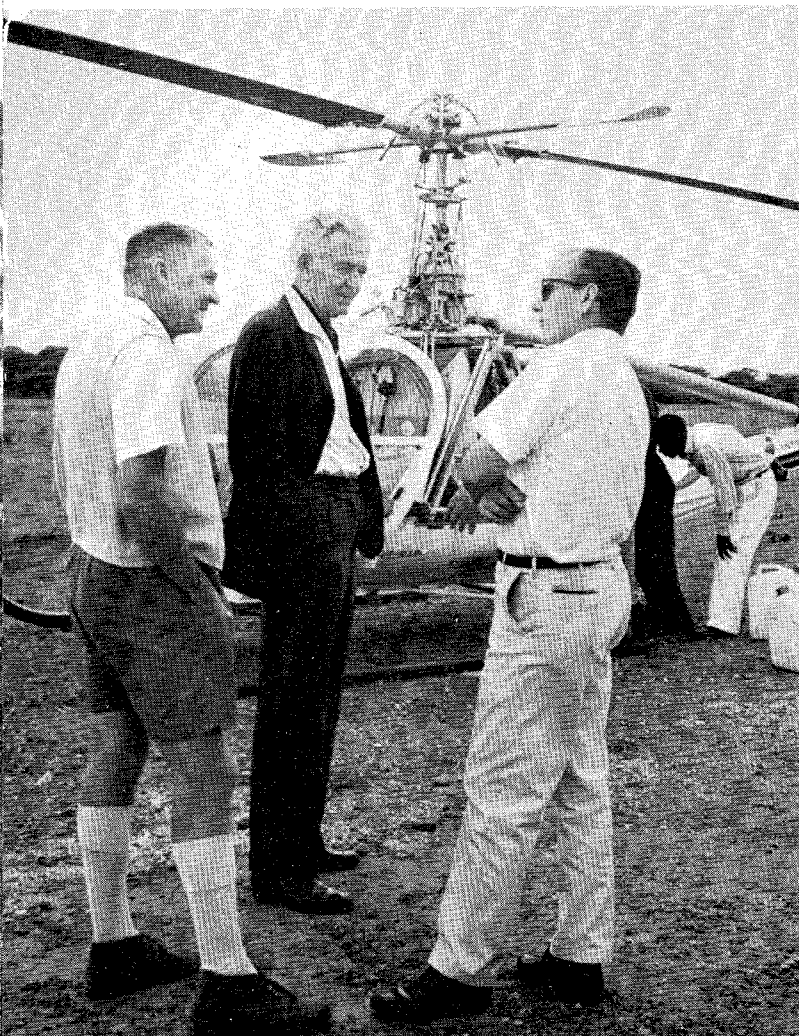
Amanda Lloyd, secretary of the Abercorn Club, and a leading member of its yacht section, believes that Abercorn has it all. "You just cannot be bored here," she says.



in its eye



A corner of Lake Chila showing the attractive setting of the Abercorn Club yacht section's boathouse and bar. Unlike most sailing clubs, this one has boats of its own which are at the disposal of members.



A powerful helicopter helps in the work of locust control directed from Abercorn and covering the marshlands of the Mweru swamp, and the swamps and plains of southern Tanzania. Here Karl Kuhne (left), administrative officer, and Charl du Plessis, director, talk to Bob Boughton (right), export sales manager of the Hiller Aircraft Company. Bob Boughton was at Abercorn to teach the service's fixed wing pilots to fly a helicopter. His verdict on his pupils: "Top notch. I couldn't ask for better."

you'll find a single person who doesn't like it," said Mrs. Amanda Lloyd, secretary of the Abercorn Club. She was very nearly right.

Lately there has been some thinning of the ranks in Abercorn.

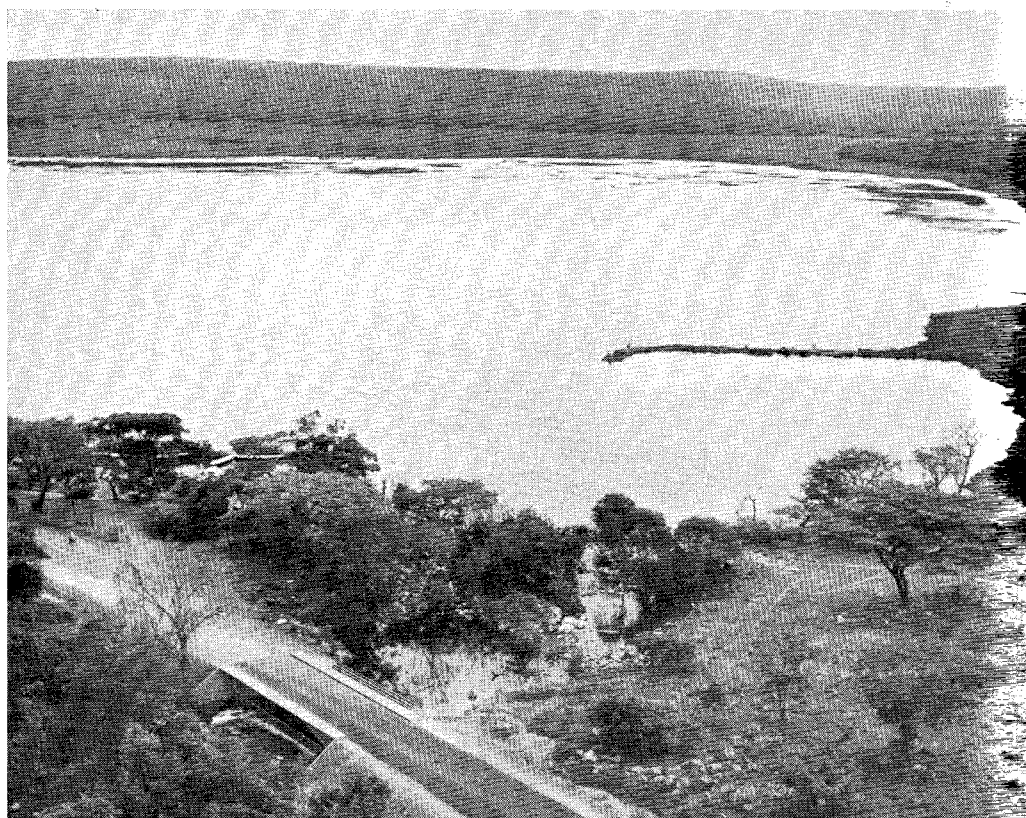
The Gamwell sisters, whose khaki-clad figures were part of the Abercorn scene for 35 years, have left; they were last heard of trying to buy one of the Channel Islands. Their 1928 Chevrolet, known fondly as "The Horse", has been magnificently caparisoned and put out to pasture in an Ndola motor car showroom. Their indomitable spirit lives on in the memories of their many friends in Abercorn.

Desmond Vesey-Fitzgerald, whose contribution to the natural history of Zambia has been greater than anyone else's and who has been described as the best all-round naturalist in Africa, has left his "house of many rooms" on the shores of Lake Chila to become scientific officer in the Tanzania National Parks department. *Abercornucopia* commented: "As Vesey has for so long been permanently domiciled here perhaps his departure may be regarded as the first example of the effect of the brain drain on the township".

Desmond Vesey-Fitzgerald was principal scientific officer of the International Red Locust Control Service. Many of his former colleagues based at Abercorn, headquarters of the service, have gone too. "We used to have a big staff and 79 vehicles," says Charl du Plessis, director of the service. "Now the days of long safaris have gone; a routine inspection tour that once took three weeks can be achieved in one day with an aircraft, and we are able to operate with a much smaller staff."

Another of Abercorn's old-timers, W. D. "Westy" Westwood, has sold his various business interests and has left the country. Since 1949 he had in succession taken over the Abercorn Arms and established his own butchery, trading store and transport service. His Katula Estate has now been taken over by the Outward Bound Trust; formerly the Lakeview Hotel, the estate has become the permanent headquarters of the trust in Zambia.

A handful of old residents remains. For the most part they stoutly deny that Abercorn is out of touch with changing conditions of Zambia, that it is the last outpost of the old colonial way of life and that it is fighting a losing battle to preserve outmoded ideas. They are proud to recall that in 1955 when the township had to



A helicopter pilot's view of little Lake Chila which provides Abercorn with water for sport and for drinking and contributes to the attractive appearance of the town.



Abercorn was proud of its once-flourishing coffee industry, as this picture, taken in the '30s outside the factory, demonstrates. Posing with the results of their crops are, from left, Harry ("Dick") Laskie, Margaret Kitchin, Jim Kitchin, Mrs. Laskie, and John Venning, former Provincial Commissioner and the man who led the Abercorn faction in the battle over the war memorial.

Mundia Yalenga, the postmaster, finds Abercorn a lonely place. He would prefer to live in Lusaka or in his home district of Kalabo, in Barotseland.



lodge 45 archaeologists for some days, a Ugandan and an Indian woman were the guests of two settler families, official hosts not being available.

"We are trying to maintain an Abercorn tradition," they say, "but that does not mean we are unreceptive to new ideas," Ripples spreading from Lusaka may take some time to disturb the calm surface of Lake Chila but the people of Abercorn are quick to remind the visitor that their proximity to the Tanzanian border and their position as a place of entry to the country has kept them in touch with a variety of cultures for a great many years. They have welcomed with pleasure an African medical officer and an African postmaster.

The Abercorn tradition has evolved over the last 75 years but this period represents only a grain or two of sand in the hour-glass of its long history.

Abercornucopia (a unique, if rather long title) once posed the question: Is Abercorn the oldest consistently inhabited township in Africa? It produced evidence from Lake Chila, linked with Dr. J. Desmond Clark's finds at the Kalambo Falls 22 miles away, to show that men lived at Abercorn more than 50,000 years ago, that late Stone Age people were there more than 10,000 years ago, and that there are numerous traces of later occupations.

"Few, if any town sites in Africa — perhaps in the world — have such a long record of human habitation", the paper claimed.

Abercorn's documented history belongs with the missionaries from the 1870's until the district came under official administration in 1892. In its early years the town was the centre of the Tanganyika province of North-Eastern Rhodesia and there remain two visible reminders of this period: the letter "T" on car registration plates and the name "Tanganyika Victoria Memorial Institute." For more than 60 years the institute has provided residents with a lending library, a meeting place and a centre for cultural activities.

In the years before the First World War Abercorn's residents were farmers, traders and hunters. Most of the farmers were young people and all of them had one thing in common: a sense of belonging to this remote corner of the country. A feeling of permanency developed so quickly that by 1914 there was already at least one accepted tradition — the May party, the big social event of the year. Usually the party lasted from three to five days, depending on the stamina of the guests. There was shooting, horse racing, cricket in Marshall Avenue, tennis and dancing. Guests brought their tents and camped at the boma. If they were lucky there was beer from German East Africa but in any event

there was whisky from Broken Hill at £5 a case.

The last of the May parties, in 1914, was brought to a triumphant conclusion with a fancy dress dinner. Three months later Abercorn, only 22 miles from German-occupied East Africa, wore dress of a different kind — battle dress — and had its first taste of war.

The newly-built prison — still in use today and classified as a national monument — was turned into a fort and the few European women and children were sent south. There were small skirmishes during August and the Germans attacked the town twice during September, shelling the fort. Reinforcements had arrived three hours before the second attack and the Germans were driven back over the border. Border skirmishes continued until August, 1915; after that there was no more fighting on Northern Rhodesia territory until General von Lettow-Vorbeck began his final drive south in 1918 — a drive cut short by the Armistice. Von Lettow returned to Abercorn where his askaris were disarmed.

Abercorn had long since stopped licking its wounds but memories of its days of glory were sharply stirred when the British South Africa Company proposed to erect a national war memorial — at Livingstone. The memorial was to commemorate all those in the territory, and in particular the many African supply carriers, who had died, on active service. Livingstone was chosen because it was then the capital, but Mr. J. H. Venning, who had recruited many of the Barotse carriers, successfully argued that Abercorn, the only town to come under fire, should have the monument.

Through one of those coincidences that pop up so often in Zambian history, Mr. Venning found himself at Abercorn as Provincial Commissioner soon after his argument was accepted. He was therefore asked to choose a site for the memorial and he placed it in the centre of the road reserve at the southern end of the township. The road occupied only half the reserve so that the monument stood at the roadside.

All was well for about 40 years. Then the road was surveyed and authority alleged that the monument had been wrongly sited, was not on the central line of the road reserve and would have to be moved.

Authority had failed to reckon with Mr. Venning, who, still very much alive, was maintaining an Abercorn tradition by having retired there. He opposed the move with forcible argument. Authority stood firm, perhaps blanching a little when Mr. Venning received the formidable, wholehearted support of the Gamwell sisters. Other residents joined the cause of Abercorn against the Government. It was wrong, they said, to talk of moving the

memorial to the boma. What significance did a colonial office site have in the history of the First World War? None. How much had the British Government given towards the cost of the memorial? Nothing. And in any case the whole thing was nonsense; the memorial was correctly sited. The alleged error, they suggested, was a bureaucratic excuse for removing it.

The battle was long, hard and at times furious. It ended when a definitive survey showed the memorial to be barely four inches out of alignment. It was left in position and a roundabout built to encircle it.

Between the wars the name of Abercorn became something to be reckoned with in coffee-growing circles — for quality if not for quantity. The crop was processed locally and there were exports to Britain. By 1933 nearly 400 acres were established but yields were never high, as growers — mostly retired people who did not depend on the crop — struggled with problems of irrigation, mulching and manuring. The Second World War virtually killed the industry. Growers who left their farms had to root up their coffee to prevent pests from multiplying and spreading disease. After the war prices were good but the growers hung back, expecting a depression. Now the Government is encouraging African farmers to take up the crop and the Misamfu Regional Experiment Station, near Kasama, provides expert advice and assistance.

Gradually, between the wars, Abercorn lost something of its remoteness. The first aeroplane to land in the territory, a Vickers

Vimy bomber, touched down in 1920 on its way to complete the first flight from Britain to the Cape, and the 'thirties saw the beginning of a regular airmail service.

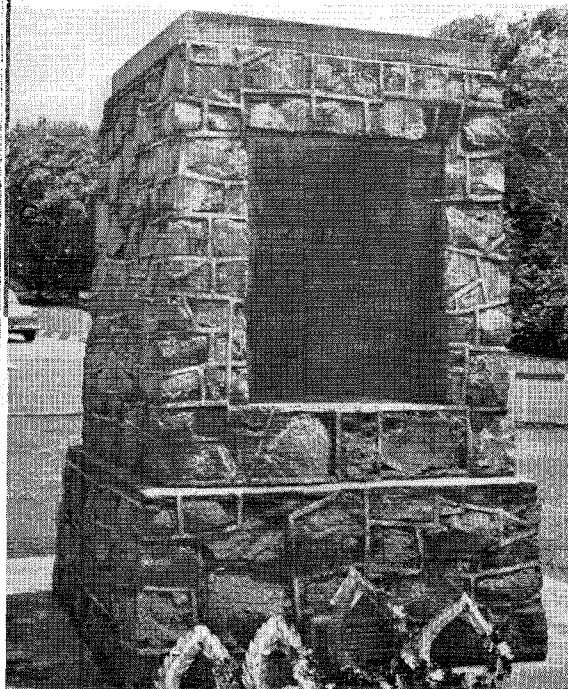
But Abercorn's appeal to the individualist was as strong as ever. Arthur Landry, the town's biggest property owner, arrived in 1937, with a background unusual even for Abercorn. For 15 years he had worn the flowing robes of the White Brothers, the unordained members of the society of White Fathers, biggest of the Catholic missionary societies. He had served in missions in Tunis and Algiers and had been sent by the society to Northern Rhodesia. "I left the White Fathers here in Abercorn because I wanted to be independent," he says.

Arthur Landry had been a diesel engineer before he joined the White Fathers and on his return to secular life this experience enabled him to become a Government engineer.

"Early in the war a camp was built at Abercorn to house 600 refugees from Poland," he recalls. "Almost all of them were women. They had travelled half round the world to get here; some had come through China and Siberia, others via Australia. One of my first jobs with the Government was to help set up the camp. In one year I built 104 two-roomed houses, a church, recreation room and two hospital wards."

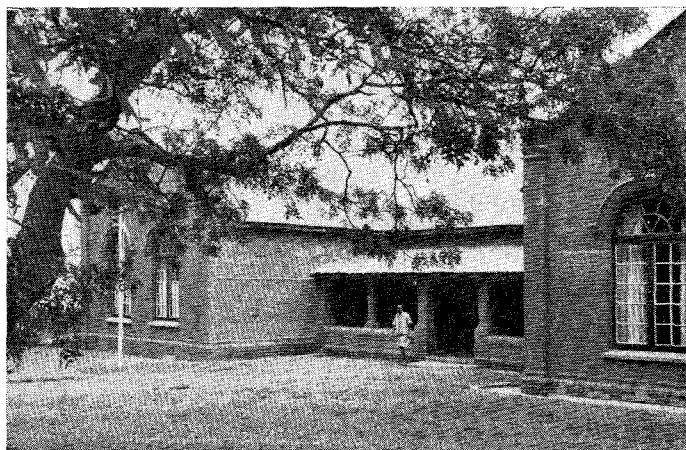
In 1941 Miss Eva Wight, a trained nurse from Kenya, arrived in Abercorn to take charge of the camp hospital. Two years later she became Mrs. Arthur Landry.

After the war Arthur Landry began to build up his trading

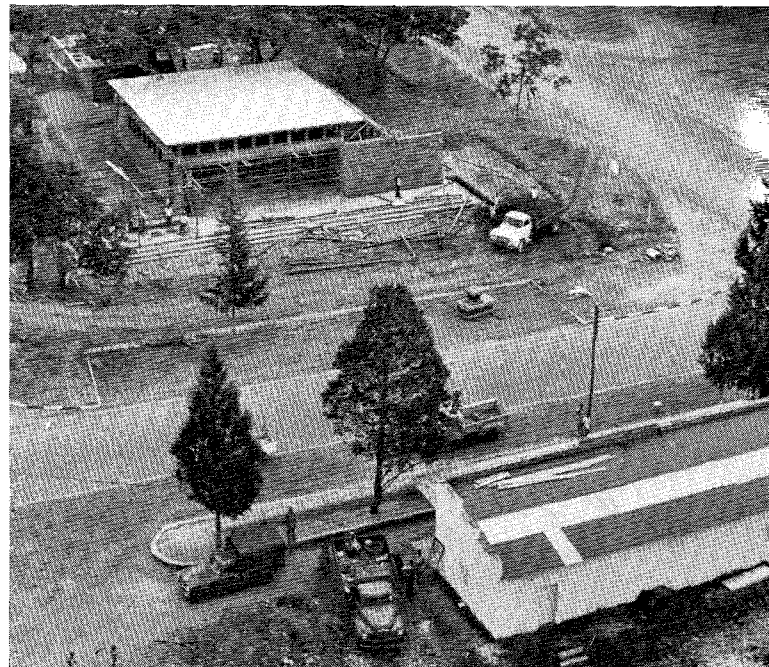


Left: Zambia's memorial to the dead of the First World War stands at Abercorn, the only town in the country to come under enemy fire. The memorial itself was the subject of a bitter dispute in which Abercorn successfully challenged the Government of the day.

Below: The Tanganyika Victoria Memorial Institute provides a centre for cultural activities. The original building was erected with money raised in London through the efforts of an early administrator, Robert Codrington, as a memorial to Queen Victoria.



Left: Mrs. Anne Parton, licensee of the Grasshopper Inn. With her husband, Peter Parton, of Chila Motors, she has tried hard to encourage tourism but results to date have been disappointing. Abercorn's biggest attraction to outsiders in the past year, she says, was a cabaret artist known as the "tassel tosser". "People came from Kasama, Fort Rosebery . . . all over the place. The crush was tremendous and the club made more profit in an evening than in a whole year."



interests. He started with a loan of £75 from the Government and today owns three stores in Abercorn and one at Mpulungu, a butchery, garage, farm and other property. "Abercorn has changed only in the last few years," he says. "We've got a new post office, a new boma and a tarmac road. The trouble is we don't get enough new people. And those who do come don't make the same effort as we used to make: in the old days we learned Bemba as a matter of course. All the same there is no better place in Zambia than this. We shall retire here."

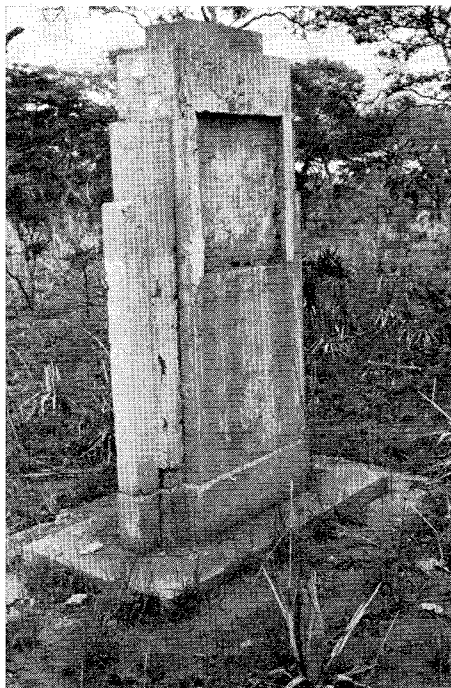
The 600 women who lived in the camp that Arthur Landry built have long since dispersed, and the camp itself has been reduced to a tangle of overgrown foundations. "There is a memorial in the bush nearby," we were told. We found it after a 15-minute search; the metal tablet had been ripped from its concrete housing and taken away. The story goes that the departing Poles took it themselves, presumably as a souvenir. A street sign, "Little Poland", is a solitary reminder of Abercorn's strangest invasion.

Post-war Abercorn received regular transfusions of young blood when the International Red Locust Control Service began seasonal recruiting of staff for work in the Rukwa Valley. Ted Davies, of the Abercorn Arms, recalls: "Most of them were youngsters — a lot of South Africans — and some of the toughest were theological students. Technical officers they were, but that's not what I called them when they lit a fire on the bar floor and did a Zulu war dance round it." The locust officers would descend in swarms on Ted Davies' bar after a long safari. "There was never any trouble but it was just like the Wild West: all we needed was a hitching rail outside."

Lawrence G. Green, the South African author, stayed at the Abercorn Arms for a week. In his book, *Great North Road*, he describes the arrival one day of a Green Line bus, still bearing the insignia of the London Passenger Transport Board. Capt. Woolls-King, a wealthy motor engineer, had left his luxury motor yacht in the Mediterranean, turned the bus into a motorized caravan, shipped it to Cape Town, and then driven it up the Great North Road. He parked it at the township entrance, lived in it and opened a garage. Green also wrote: "Beside the situtunga (head) in the bar was a buffalo head and an elephant's tail. But the human specimens at the Abercorn Arms Hotel were always more remarkable than the mammals on the wall." One of the "human specimens" was the Italian chef from the Woolls-Kings' yacht. They had rescued him from a Yugoslav prison camp and brought him to Abercorn.

The Abercorn Arms was closed as a residential hotel in 1962

Right: Damaged by souvenir hunters, this memorial commemorating the Polish refugee camp stands neglected in the bush. The metal tablet recording details of the camp has been ripped out and taken away.



Left: As a place of entry to the country Abercorn is a channel for large amounts of money. In three hours in one day the small Standard Bank agency handled £27,000. Now a new bank (seen here during construction) has been built; behind, among the trees, are living quarters for bank staff.

because the 40-year-old building no longer conformed to the standards of the Hotel Board. The bar and bottle store are still open but recently Ted Davies was shaking his head ruefully over the supplies position. "I had nothing in for five weeks," he said, "because the trucks from the Copperbelt broke down. I scraped through on beer but at one time had no cigarettes, spirits or wines."

Transport charges contribute largely to Abercorn's high cost of living. "It costs as much to carry a pound of cement as it does to carry a pound of caviar," says John Carlin, proprietor of The Lake Press Ltd. and editor of *Abercornucopia*. "Almost every aspect of living is affected by our distance from sources of supply. If you have an aching tooth here it can be really expensive. Urgent treatment will cost you a return air ticket to the Copperbelt, a night on the town and a hotel room — plus, of course, the dentist's fee."

John Carlin was not really in character when he made those remarks. In conversation, which is never dull, and in the lively columns of his paper, he is Abercorn's staunch protagonist. At Kasama, headquarters of the Northern Province, we had been told: "Abercorn is a dying town." The twinkle normally to be seen in John Carlin's eye brightens as he says: "Wishful thinking. They know we've always looked down on Kasama. This used to be provincial headquarters and the settlers here had a big say in the way the province was run." Kasama, he seems to suggest, still wears the mantle of power self-consciously, but has no hesitation in putting itself first when distributing the seeds of development in the province. In any case, he points out, the Standard Bank doesn't think it's dying or they wouldn't have put up the £25,000 building they have just occupied after five years of agency business.

John Carlin talks readily on the attractions of Abercorn. But for its remoteness, he believes, it would long since have become a centre for tourism. "This could be an ideal place for family holidays," he says, "particularly with Lake Tanganyika and the Kalambo Falls so close by. Here in the township, Lake Chila, which gives us our water supply, is free from bilharzia and the bream go up to 2½ lb. There is tennis, golf, sailing, badminton and bathing."

"The big snag is the 600-mile journey on gravel roads and the limited first-class accommodation. There is a site on the lake shore waiting for a hotel but it has a £30,000 building clause. Until we get the tourists we shan't get the hotel . . . it's really a vicious circle."

Until he arrived in Abercorn 15 years ago John Carlin had lived mainly in cities. Apart from service in the First War as an airship pilot and in the Second War with barrage balloons, he has been a newspaperman all his life: he was a reporter on *The Star*, Johannesburg, more than 40 years ago, and has been an editor in Beira, a managing editor in Lagos and a sub-editor in Fleet Street. Now, like other old residents, he finds that Abercorn and district can provide everything he wants from life. In his 15 years there he has spent only seven weeks away from the town — five of them were in hospital at Lusaka.

A contract for printing the Government newspaper *Lyashi* helps to keep his press busy and his lively mind finds a creative outlet in his monthly review, started two years ago as a hobby.

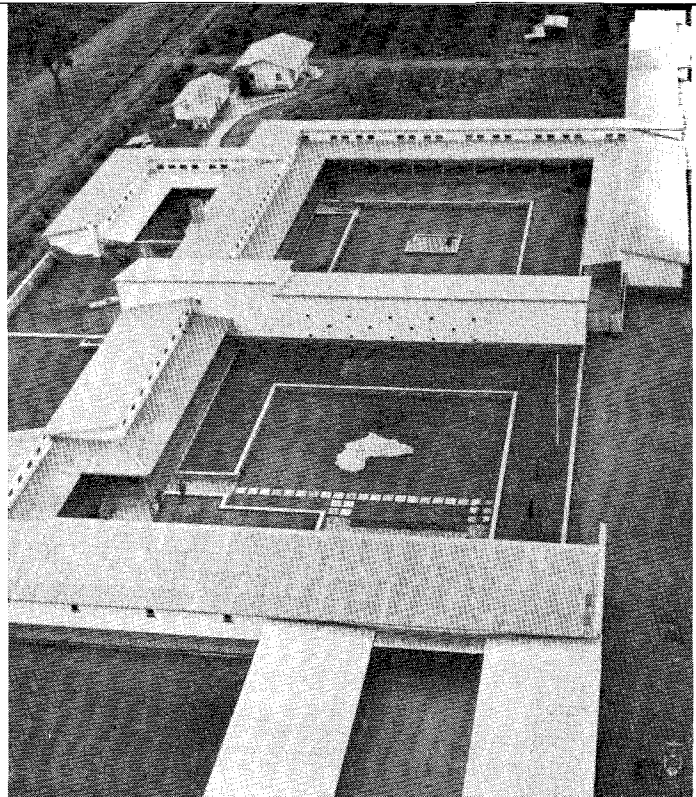
Abercornucopia does not make any money but it has become a social necessity and John Carlin could hardly stop publishing, even if he wanted to.

Younger residents share his enthusiasm for the town. Mrs. Amanda Lloyd, a gay and eloquent spokesman for the younger set, believes the town has so much to offer that no one can be bored there. "The big turnover in Government people means there always are new faces to be seen — and fresh talent for our theatre section." Last year the section put on six shows. When they staged a pantomime they decided to dispense with chorus so that there would be enough people left to form an audience. "We believe our standard is at least as high as the Copperbelt's," she says.

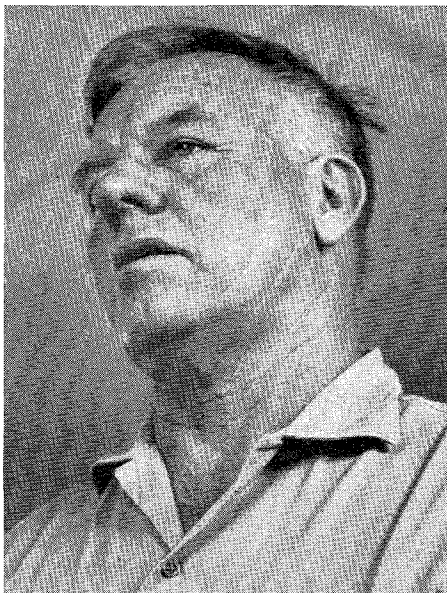
Amanda Lloyd and five of her friends became bunny girls for an evening at the yacht section Commodore's ball. "At the end of the evening we awarded our bunny girl tails to people who had worked hard for the club. They had to come up on stage to cut off the tails



Keen yacht section members are provincial fisheries officer Alan Bowmaker and his wife Jennifer. The yacht section owns four Graduate boats and sailing is a cheap sport.



Abercorn is the headquarters of a diocese of the Roman Catholic Church staffed by the White Fathers. Above is the White Fathers' Centre with living accommodation for the bishop, diocesan priests and guests; a church, offices and even mechanical workshops for a fleet of motor vehicles. The mosaic map of Africa in the first courtyard has a cross superimposed to symbolize the spreading of the faith in the continent.



Tommy Martin, Abercorn's only rancher, was a shift boss at Mufulira during the war. He owns 8,650 acres but only 150 head of cattle. At one time his herd was 400-strong but East Coast Fever took its toll. He sells beef locally and expects the market to improve when the new hospital and secondary school are built.

and receive a kiss. There were a few red faces but the evening was a tremendous success."

Early in our visit to Abercorn Amanda Lloyd had said: "I don't believe you'll find a single person who doesn't like it here." We did find one man, with a responsible job, who would prefer to live in many other places in Zambia: Mundia Yalenga, the postmaster. Before he took over his staff of 11 at Abercorn nine months ago, he had been postmaster at Senanga, in Barotseland, and at Katete and Fort Rosebery; in all he has nearly 23 years' service with the post office. "I find my life here is lonely," he says. "Most of my African friends live in the Mbulu suburb and I live some distance away in the main township. I have some European friends but I don't belong to the Abercorn Club. I would find it expensive — and I have nine children to educate, three of them away at boarding school."

We heard nothing but praise from Europeans in Abercorn for Mundia Yalenga's efficiency as a postmaster yet he himself was hoping for a transfer, preferably to the more cosmopolitan society of Lusaka or his home district, Kalabo, in Barotseland. His difficulties of loneliness, of being one step removed from most

of his friends, are not peculiar to the town in which he lives. Together with the rapidly-growing number of his counterparts in other branches of the civil service he represents a challenge to the adaptability of Zambia's small urban societies. Perhaps in the traditionalism of Abercorn, the problem is etched more deeply than elsewhere, but Abercorn, with its maturity and self-confidence, should surely give a lead to the rest.

Social activities in Abercorn must take note of the strange fact that no single girls live there. The hospital is staffed by nuns and there are no unmarried teachers. "We had two girls to stay with us for a few days," says Amanda Lloyd, "and found local bachelors dropping in for breakfast to make sure of staking a claim."

A 24-year-old bachelor, Chris Hyde, had been in Abercorn for only three months when we met him and was quite cheerful about the situation. "Nurses and teachers from Kasama drive up for the weekend," he says. "It's not so bad really."

Chris Hyde is possibly the youngest Town Management Board secretary in Zambia. His township area has a population of 3,500 Africans, 200 Europeans and about 20 Asians. Surprisingly, since the township has so much water to boat on and fish in, he found that Abercorn's biggest problem was its water supply.

"Obviously it's not a question of finding water," he says. "The problem has been in getting it from source to the higher ground in the township. Development plans will bring more houses, a new hospital and a new secondary school, and all will need water." A new reservoir near the lake together with a bigger high-level storage tank, are expected to solve the problem.

Other problems facing Abercorn may not be so easy to solve. There is cattle and diamond smuggling from Tanzania . . . the rising level of Lake Tanganyika which has flooded villages on the lakeshore . . . the possibility that the town may change its name in favour of something more African in flavour. There is the need to adapt to changing conditions while retaining all that is best in the old ways. Abercorn will need to go on displaying the qualities that have made it strong and self assured. It will also need what is perhaps its greatest asset — its sense of humour.

