

The one-humped camel in Southern Africa: use in Police, Postal Service and Tourism in Botswana, c.1900-2011

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Abstract

The one-humped camel has been introduced to many regions outside its natural area of distribution in North Africa, the Near and Middle East, as well as South Asia. Camels were imported into four separate entities in Southern Africa at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth-centuries. Colonial Botswana (or Bechuanaland Protectorate) was one of these but obtained camels mainly from the Cape of Good Hope (part of the Union of South Africa from 1910) as the territory was essentially administered from Cape Town. These animals were used by the police for regular patrols in the sandy Kgalagadi Desert and for postal deliveries. The police force continued to use camels on patrols until the 1970s and retained them until 2001. At this time the camels were handed over to local communities with the intention of developing a tourist industry based on camel safaris. Little is known about camel diseases in Botswana but antibodies to bluetongue virus were identified in the 1970s. In the early twenty-first century there are probably just over 200 camels in Botswana. This paper describes in detail the use of camels in police work, postal duties, and as a potential for tourism.

Introduction

The one-humped camel has been introduced as an exotic domestic species to many regions outside its natural area of distribution in North Africa, the Near and Middle East and South Asia (Wilson 1984:16-17). Towards the end of the nineteenth-century and at the beginning of the twentieth-century, camels were imported into the Southern Africa region from several countries for a wide range of purposes. It is believed that about 3000 camels in total were introduced into the Cape Colony, Zambia (Northern Rhodesia) and Zimbabwe (Southern Rhodesia), and Namibia then called German South West Africa (Grunow, 1961:44-49; Massman, 1981: 311-354; Wilson, 2009: 2-17; Wilson, 2007:22-24; and Wilson, 2012:1-2). Camels were imported to the Cape Colony mainly from Egypt and Sudan in small numbers with a view to testing their immunity to rinderpest and possibly to replace the large numbers of work oxen that died as a result of the disease in the 1890s but they ended up mainly doing police work. Imports to Zambia and Zimbabwe were independent of those to the Cape, were from India, and were expressly for police work. The largest number imported was to South West Africa, mainly from North Africa including Egypt, where their initial use was by the military and for transporting materials in the building of a railway.

No camels were imported independently into Botswana but some got there mainly due to the fact that Bechuanaland was effectively governed from the Cape Colony. Ironically, camels as true work animals provided service in Botswana long after they had ceased in this function in her neighbouring countries. This paper describes the import, subsequent history and use of camels in Botswana during and after the colonial period.

The Importation of Camels into Colonial Botswana

Macleod Robinson, Commissioner of Cape Police for No 2 District Kimberley, considered using camels in Botswana as early as 1898. In a letter to the Secretary of the Law Department written on 25 April 1898 he compared the environment of parts of Botswana to parts of Australia where he said camels had done well and he did 'really believe that camel transport will answer in Bechuanaland' (Cape Town Archives, AGR, Vol. 445, Ref. 3053, 25 April 1898). Because of the general shortage of camels in the region at that time nothing seems to have come of this initiative. Camels were used in Botswana shortly afterwards, crossing to Vryburg and Ganyesa from Kimberley. An official by

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the name Crowhurst wrote to the colonial veterinary surgeon stating that a bull camel went lame on this route and 'in my opinion will never be fit for any more work' although it was recommended the 'experiment of testing the usefulness of camels as transport animals be continued in Bechuanaland as I consider that strong sound animals should prove as successful as they do in Australia' (C Crowhurst MRCVS to D Hutcheon (Colonial Veterinary Surgeon) 30 July 1898, Cape Town Archives, AGR, Vol. 445, Ref. 2052). In response to a query about sending more camels from Uitvlugt (at Cape Town, having arrived there from the Canary Islands in February 1898) to Vryburg the Colonial Veterinary Surgeon replied in the negative as several camels were in advanced pregnancy.

Early in 1899 further consideration was given to using camels in Botswana when the Colonial Veterinary Surgeon of the Cape of Good Hope advised against camels recently imported there from the Canary Islands being sent to Botswana for service until they were fit to travel (Memorandum 25 March 1899 Colonial Veterinary Surgeon to Treasurer General, Cape Town Archives, AGR, Vol. 445, Ref. 3053). In a later memorandum dated 25 May 1899 the Cape Treasury wrote to the Under Secretary for Agriculture, referring to a letter dated 13 May, regarding the use of camels for the Zwart Modder to Mier Postal Services (Cape Town Archives, *ibid*). This indicated that, although the Treasury had not contemplated selling its camels, it would put them at the disposal of the post office for trials providing the post office paid the running costs and stipulating that if the trial was successful the post office should buy the camels at the original cost of £42. The Postmaster General wished to know urgently if this arrangement could be concluded as the existing contract for postal services expired on 30 June 1899 and failing use of camels then an ox-wagon service would need to be arranged (see account under postal services below). In March 1900 the headquarters of these camels was moved from Zwart Modder to Mier as pasture was more abundant and it would be easier to move them from Mier to Namibia in the event of an attempt by the Boers to capture them.

In the middle of 1901, the Cape of Good Hope conservator of forests wrote that he 'might perhaps suggest' to the under secretary for agriculture that camels kept on the Uitvlugt Forest Station be sent to the government area at Waddes Kraal (05 August 1901, *ibid*). At Uitvlugt the camels were eating pines and wattles and were more destructive than goats as they could reach higher whereas at Waddes Kraal the climate and vegetation were better suited to them. In an acerbic reply dated 10 July 1901 the under secretary himself stated that sending camels to Waddes Kraal was 'out of the question unless we want to make a present of them to [Christiaan Rudolf] de Wet and his friends' and added that they must stay at Uitvlugt until it was safe to send them to Botswana. Christiaan Rudolf De Wet was a Boer leader born around 1854 and died in 1922 and more mention on him is necessary. He was a Boer general, rebel leader and politician. He was a Field Cornet in the Anglo-Boer War of 1880-1881. From 1881 to 1896 he lived on his farm and in 1897 he became a member of the Volksraad (Parliament) of the South African Republic (Transvaal). He fought in the early battles of the South African War of 1899 to 1902 as a commandant and then as a general. He was considered the most formidable of the Boer guerrilla leaders, and continued his successful career to the end of the war, striking heavily where he could and evading every attempt to bring him to bay. He took an active part in the peace negotiations of 1902 (de Wet 1902). In 1907 he was elected to the first parliament of the Orange River Colony and was appointed minister of agriculture. De Wet was a leader in the rebellion of 1914 in what by then had become the Union of South Africa but was defeated by General Botha, taken prisoner, and sentenced to six years imprisonment and a fine of £2000. He was released after one year, giving a written promise to take no further part in politics.

On 24 September 1902, after the South African War had ended, the Under Secretary of Agriculture wrote to the Secretary of the Law Department informing him that one male and six female camels could be made available to the police in Botswana at cost. These costs were for one Egyptian male £53-13-1, for two Egyptian females £107-6-2, for two Senegal females £84 and for two offspring of the last included in the price of their dams, making a total of £244-19-3. On 18 October 1902 an internal memorandum written by the Under Secretary for Agriculture indicated that he was trying to

push the Law Department to take the offered camels. On 21 October the Attorney General wrote to the Under Secretary for Agriculture indicating that he was prepared to take over the seven camels for use in the Cape Police No 2 District (which included British Bechuanaland,) together with saddles and other necessary equipment plus any available competent camel drivers. Lt Col Robinson had been asked to take delivery on behalf of the Commissioner of Police at Kimberley whence the camels were to be forwarded. On 15 November 1902 Corporal AC Downes of Cape Police 2 District acknowledged receipt from the Forest Department of:

Table 1: Camels Received from the Forest Department in November 1902.

8 camels		
6 headstalls	no charge	
1 pack saddle	imported from Australia but price unknown, good condition	if original price can be ascertained should charge at least ½
1 riding saddle	also imported with pack saddle, good condition	
2 back harness	harness for 2 camels complete except 2 headpieces which went with 4 camels to Gordonia. Cannot find any trace of cost but think £20 - should now charge at least £15	
4 front harness		
4 bridles		

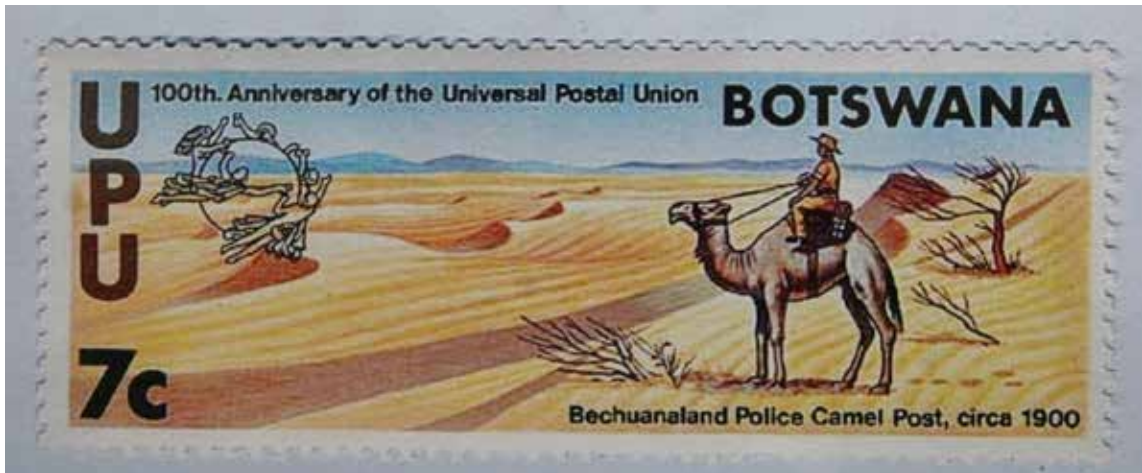
In the foregoing list, the notes on the right are in a different hand to the items on the left. These right hand notes were written by Brown, Forest Officer. A note dated 27 November 1902 (also written by Brown) pinned to the list and its annotations says that the camels arrived at Kimberley but that the handlers had been sent back ‘because the savage female has already sent one kaffir to hospital and considerably damaged another’.

In December 1904 consent was obtained from the Resident Commissioner of the British Protectorate (i.e. Bechuanaland Protectorate) for camels to transit the territory by rail from Rhodesia to the Cape of Good Hope (Colonial Veterinary Surgeon to Under Secretary for Agriculture, 11 November 1904, *ibid*). These camels were purchased by the Cape Administration from the British South Africa Police (in Zimbabwe) and arrangements for forage and other provender were to be made at Palapye (in the then Bechuanaland Protectorate about 150 km south of Francistown). The Regional Commissioner at Mafeking replied to a telegram sent on 18 November 1904 from the Colonial Secretary in Cape Town on 19 November granting permission for the camels to ‘pass through the protectorate by rail on the conditions you name’ (Cape Town Archives, CO 8237, Ref. X30).

The Use of Camels in the Police Service

Camels were used by the Cape Police No 2 District as early as 1897 when two were borrowed by the Attorney General's office from the Agriculture Department (Attorney General to Under Secretary of Agriculture, 13 July 1897, Cape Town Archives, AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2052). The latter offered to transfer 10 camels at a cost of £42 each but received a reply thanking him for his offer whilst stating that the two camels already at Kimberley 'will do at present as events transpiring in Bechuanaland mean police have no time for experiments'. Between 1898 and 1900 there was a series of exchanges of correspondence on the suitability or otherwise of camels for police work, on their behaviour and on their feeding habits and adaptation to the local food resources. Camels were in regular use by the police in Botswana at least as early as 1900 (see Figure 1). Some camels were lost due to unrecorded causes but in a memorandum dated 19 March 1901 and headed 'Use of Camels for Police Work in Bechuanaland', the Under Secretary of Agriculture wrote to the Secretary to the Law Department asking if the Attorney General was still disposed to carry on the experiment of using camels for police work as he understood that the results of this were of an encouraging nature (Cape Town Archives, AGR, Vol. 445, Ref. 3053). The writing of this memorandum was prompted by a letter from a certain EP Hartnung to Sir Pieter Faure (the Colonial Secretary) offering his private camels to the Cape administration for police service. (I have not been able to ascertain how Hartnung came to be in possession of the camels.) Two days later on 21 March the Commissioner of Police at Kimberley indicated that he was unable to take up the offer of Hartnung.

Figure 1: Botswana postage stamp commemorating camel police and 100 years of the Universal Postal Union



In the 1920s the Bechuanaland Police Force comprised eight European officers and 24 non-commissioned officers and men together with 250 African non-commissioned officers and men (Speight 1929:243-244). However, the number of camels in use at that time appears to be unknown. Mounted policemen were usually Basotho whereas foot patrols were undertaken by Batswana. The Basotho were engaged because they came from a horse-riding culture and spoke a language similar to Setswana (Tlou and Campbell 1997:235). In addition to regular police work the force was also in evidence on ceremonial occasions throughout much of its history (Figure 2). By 1960 the police force had increased in strength to personnel of about 370 of whom about 50 were Europeans.

Figure 2: Police Camel Patrol on a ceremonial duty. The reverse of the photograph is annotated ‘Camel escort on occasion [sic] of farewell visit by the High Commissioner Sir Percival Leisching: Tsabong, August 1956: Bechuanaland Protectorate Police. On right of group Sgt E. Rakgomo; Centre Sub-Inspector J.M.J. Leach’. (Photograph courtesy of Botswana National Archives and Records Service, Illustration No. 894)



The camel section was very active at this time (Figure 3). About 60 camels were still being used on active police work as late as the mid 1970s (Simpson 1979) although this function was probably halted shortly afterwards. Camels continued, however, to be owned by the police for some time after that.

Figure 3: Camel patrol group about 1960. The camel section was very active at this time. (Photograph courtesy of Botswana National Archives and Records Service, Illustration No 154)



The Camel Postal Service

The ‘Mier Camel Post’ was inaugurated in July 1899 replacing an ox-wagon service which itself had succeeded a weekly horseback service on the 95km stretch from Upington in the Cape Colony to Zwart Modder, and a fortnightly runner who carried the mail on to Rietfontein, some 3 km from the Namibian border where a post office was opened in 1895 (Cape Postal History 2005). The post office in Upington had been opened in 1882. The camel post covered the double stretch of about 160 km in five days. Rietfontein was also known as Mier but the actual village of Mier was about 30 km away and what was Mier District is now in Botswana. Two camels were used on each trip for safety, one being ridden, the other carrying mail in special saddle pouches.

As early as 6 August 1899 the Under Secretary for Agriculture at the Cape enquired of the Acting Treasurer as to the performance of the camels to which the latter replied on 24 August confirming

that the Post Master General had reported that they were performing well and being used “two and two by turn about” [that is, four animals were used alternately as pairs] (Cape Town Archives, AGR, Vol. 445, Ref. 3053). The camel post was a great success in part because the journey was completed in a much shorter time than the ox-wagon. The total annual cost of the service was £408.

However, the camel service was suspended from 9 March to 18 May 1900 during the South African War to prevent the animals being captured by raiding Boer commandos who were very active at the time in the Northern Cape. During this period the camels were taken across the border to Namibia. During the Bondelzwart campaign and related military activities in Namibia during the Herero War of 1904 (the ‘Nama Rebellion’) there was a great increase in the mail conveyed between Mier and Zwart Modder. As a result of the extra journey coupled with a prolonged drought the camels lost weight. This led to the Commissioner of Police assisting the post office by allowing mail to be carried by the camels used for police patrols.

In 1906 the camel post was again temporarily suspended to allow the animals to regain their strength but normal service was resumed in May 1907. The camel service was supplemented by the ox-wagon from October 1907 as two of the camels were incapacitated. A full camel service resumed on 1 February 1909 and continued uninterrupted until 31 March 1914 when it was permanently abandoned due to an inability to replace the camels. It should be noted that 1914 was the beginning of the First World War. The remaining animals were sold to the Department of Defence and the ox-wagon was again brought into service. The service used exclusively Cape of Good Hope stamps and postal stationery but one of the cancellers had the words MIER at the top and BB (British Bechuanaland) at the bottom. The Cape of Good Hope, Namibia, and British Bechuanaland were all served by the Mier Camel Post and some individual letters actually traversed all three territories (Figure 4).

Figure 4: A post card carried by the Mier Camel Post through three separate colonial territories



Camels in Post-independence Botswana

Two bull camels were imported by the Botswana Police from Northern Cape Province in South Africa in 1977. The purpose of this late importation was to introduce new blood lines to the Botswana camel population (personal communication with VR Simpson, 21 March 1980). In 1986 a large herd of camels was stationed in Tsabong (Figure 5) on the southern border of the country although it seems that by then they were not in active use. The police finally disposed of their remaining stock in 2001 when they were transferred to the Department of Tourism which is discussed below.

Figure 5: Camels at Tsabong, 1986



Source: RT Wilson

(Note: arrow brand of the Government on right stifle, BP (Botswana Police) above left stifle and individual identity on left neck)

Camels in Tourism Business

As in other Southern African countries the role of the camel in Botswana in the early twenty-first century is in tourism. An internet posting of 7 August 2005 was headed 'Looking for Camels' and read 'I am looking for trained camels about 3 of them to introduce in my farm in Southern Africa. Anyone who has camels in Botswana or Namibia for sale can you please contact me as soon as possible. africaguide.com'.

Camels 'inherited from the Botswana Police Service a few years ago' were distributed to local communities to allow them to undertake camel back and campsite safaris and youths were trained in camel activities (Daily News 8 February 2006). Some 155 camels were distributed in 2001 to the villages of Khawa (8 camels), Mahumo (8), Koinapu (9), Zutshwa (6), Ukhwi (13), Middlepits (8), Tshane (3), Lekgwabe (8) and Tsabong (92). This was phase one of a P2 million Tsabong tourism project that entailed fencing and clearing of a site and construction of kraals by the community. Phase

two would include construction of a gatehouse, an information office, and a curio shop, and further training and skills transfer would take place in this phase. Phase three would focus on introduction and market testing of the camel tourism product. A further 38 camels had been sold at a public auction in 2001 for a total of P250,000 (US\$39,500 at the then exchange rate) or an average of Pula 6580 (US\$ 1040) per head.

By 2011 some progress had been made with the tourism venture. A Camel Park established by the Botswana Tourism Organisation (BTO) in partnership with the Tsamama Community Trust and containing 213 camels was nearing completion although funding for construction had been deferred to 2011/2012 financial year (Daily News, 16 March 2011). In addition to short and long camel riding safaris there were plans for an annual camel race and using camels during ceremonial events to depict some of the old transport modes used in Kgalagadi. To help the project to succeed the BTO had engaged an expert from the Kenya Camel Association to train camels and teach the community on use of camels for milk, meat and leather products with a view to establishing a factory to process and produce camel by-products such as milk, yogurt, cheese and meat (Botswana Gazette, 16 March 2011).

There has been speculation (and some informal contacts) that Arabs from Dubai would participate in future races and might even be interested in buying Botswana camels which they believe are stronger and faster than their breeds. Kenya was also said to have shown interest in Botswana camels and has asked for a bull exchange to add a different breed to those they already have (Daily News, 9 September 2005).

Possibility of Diseases

As part of a general survey of the disease situation in livestock and the possibilities of cross-infection with wildlife bluetongue precipitating antibody was demonstrated in 81 per cent of camels (cattle 92 per cent, goats 83 per cent, sheep 36 per cent) (Simpson 1979: 44-45). Positive reactions for bluetongue were also recorded in wild game including impala (*Aepyceros melampus*), lechwe (*Kobus leche*), kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*), blue wildebeest (*Connochaetes taurinus*), gemsbok (*Oryx gazella*), springbok (*Antidorcas marsupialis*) and tsessebe (*Damaliscus lunatus*). Demonstration of antibodies means only that animals have been exposed to the virus and not that they can act as further transmitters of the disease or be clinically affected (indeed clinical affliction was usually seen only in exotic sheep).

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