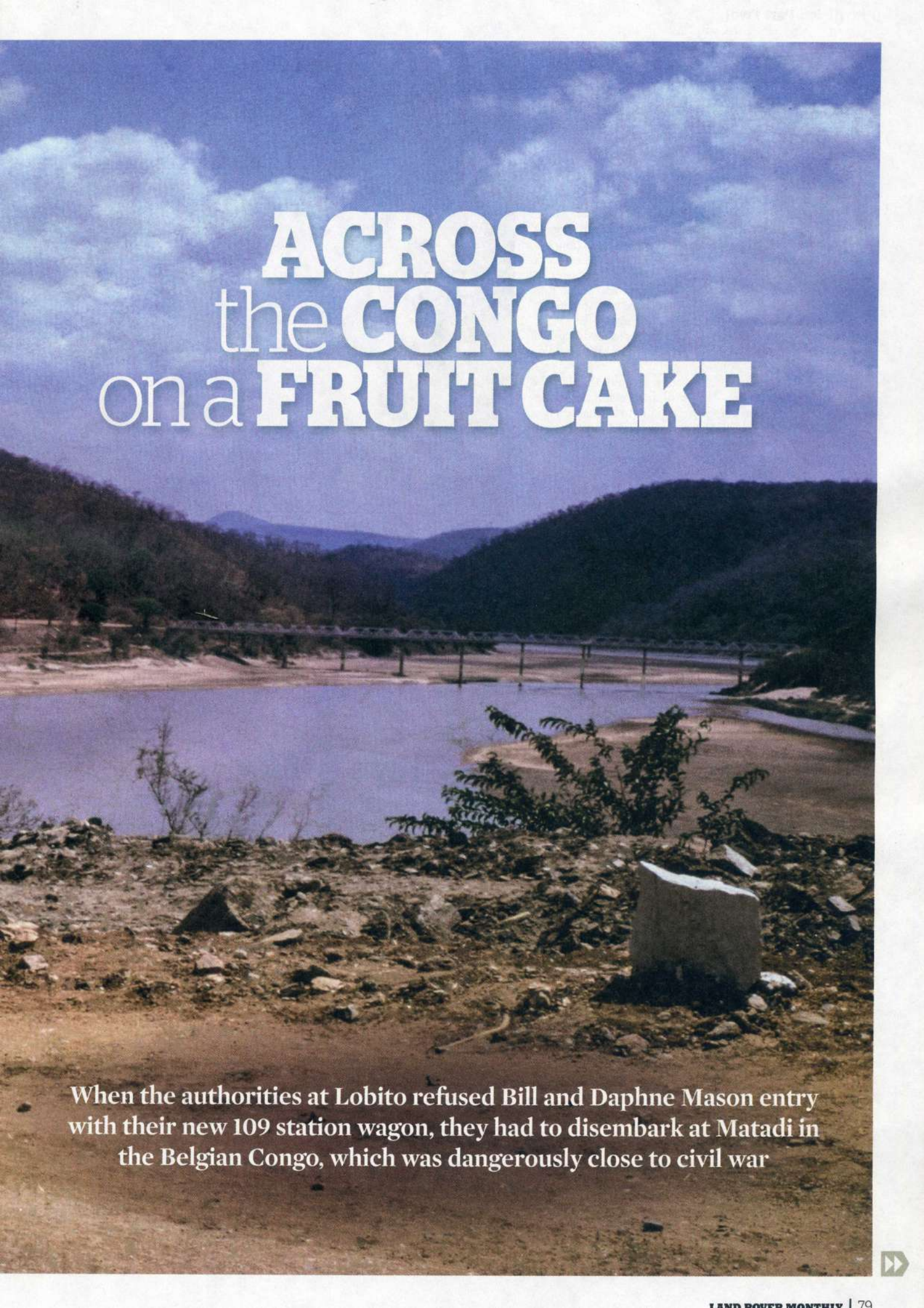




Story: Gary Pusey Pictures: Mason Family Archive and The Dunsfold Collection



ACROSS the CONGO on a **FRUIT CAKE**

When the authorities at Lobito refused Bill and Daphne Mason entry with their new 109 station wagon, they had to disembark at Matadi in the Belgian Congo, which was dangerously close to civil war

Bill and Daphne watched from the quayside at Matadi as their Land Rover, shackled to a pallet, was craned out of the ship's hold. Their luggage was stowed separately and it took several hours to gather everything together and find the relevant customs official to sign their entry documents. They needed to arrange for their battery to be filled with acid and water, and it was only then that Bill realised there was something wrong with the steering. The 109 had been tied down for the 16 day voyage, but someone in the docks at Antwerp had used the steering rod rather than the axle, and the rod was severely bent.

Further delays ensued while they located the Lloyd's representative to register their insurance claim, and they were referred to a local garage for repairs to be made. They were also told that there had been serious civil disturbances in various parts of the country, connected to the various factions positioning themselves for power ahead of the granting of independence in June that year.

Bill was advised to keep driving, stopping for essentials only, and to avoid driving at night and stay overnight in towns where there was a European presence. No doubt this was sound advice in the circumstances, but would prove easier said than done. It was an inauspicious start to what would be a journey of some 2000 miles. At least they were able to obtain a map.

It was late afternoon before they were ready to depart, and they were pleased to be on their way. The atmosphere in Matadi was oppressive, with extreme heat and humidity, and even though they were experienced Africa hands they found it all but unbearable. They filled the tank and loaded as many jerry cans as they could carry, together with water and provisions which included a fruit cake in a tin that Bill's mother had made for them for the journey.

Their route would take them initially from Matadi to Thysville (now Mbanza-Ngungu), a distance of 146 miles, where they planned to spend the night. The tarmac ran out after 30 miles, but the dirt road was good and, as darkness fell, they decided to press on. It was Daphne who spotted that the coolant temperature had suddenly rocketed to the top of the gauge. Bill wrote in his journal: 'I stopped immediately and lifted the bonnet, and was alarmed to find water running out of the radiator. When I undid the cap the steam almost blew it off.'

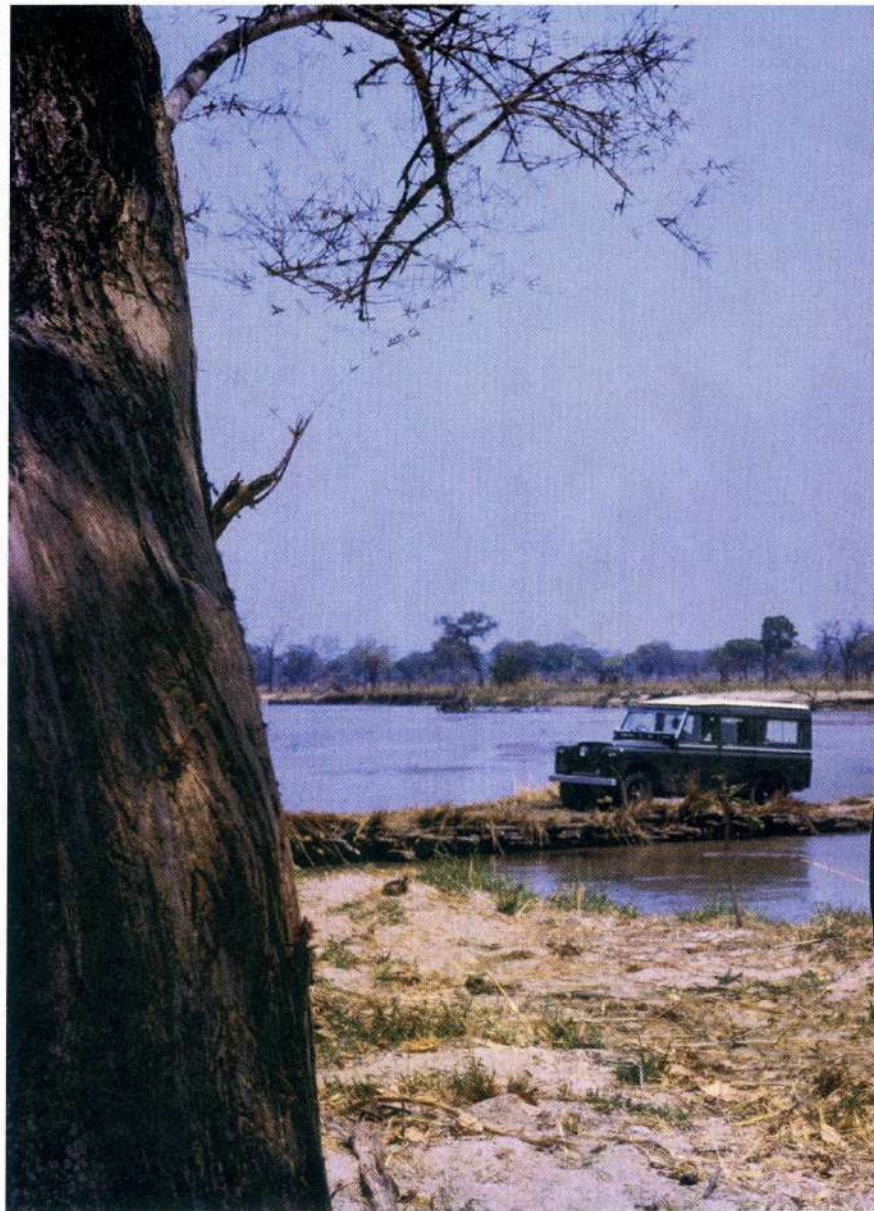
The radiator was almost completely dry, but careful inspection by torchlight showed no damage to the rad or the hoses, and then Bill spotted that the drain tap had been damaged, presumably when the radiator had been drained by the dockers at Antwerp. Bill wrote: 'Using a piece of wire, I found that I could hold the tap in such a position that the leak was reduced to a trickle.' Fortunately, this repair held all the way to Ndola.

They reached Thysville and parked up on the outskirts of the town. Dinner was tomato soup, a ham roll and a cup of tea, and Daphne spent the night on the front seats while Bill slept on a lilo on top of their luggage.

Back on the road

They were back on the road early the following morning, but the tarmac ran out after a few miles and they were to discover just how bad the rural roads could be. Bill wrote in his journal: 'The surface varied from deep, fine sand which had been built into huge ridges by the few trucks that use this road, to harder surfaces which were breaking-up and leaving dangerously large rock projections. Huge gullies had been cut by rainwater every 25 yards on some sections'. Progress was slow.

Prior to leaving Matadi, they had been told that this section of the route would be dangerous. There had already been violent incidents connected with the struggle for



independence, particularly between rival ethnic and tribal groups vying for supremacy. After independence was granted in June 1960, this rivalry escalated rapidly and led to civil war. Bill and Daphne were lucky and did not experience any animosity, although they did not stop until they reached PokoKabaka several hours later. Signs of impending change were evident on the ferry they had to cross to reach the town. Most ferries at the time were run by the colonial government and were supposed to be free, but the Congolese operators felt sufficiently empowered to demand payment before they would take the Land Rover across.

Bill and Daphne drove on to Kenge, where they intended to spend the night in the station wagon. The roads remained very difficult to negotiate, and Bill wrote in his journal: 'Soon after dark, we found it was as much as we could do to keep going, even in the Land Rover. We had innumerable hair-raising experiences when the steering failed to hold and we would find ourselves broadsiding to the side of the road.'

At Kenge, they found a spot to park and had prepared their dinner, when several Congolese appeared around the car. Clearly agitated, it became obvious that they were insisting that Bill should leave the area immediately. Bill decided this was the right thing to do, and drove a few miles out of town before parking up to eat their now cold dinner. Neither slept that night, and as they were preparing to leave the following morning another Congolese appeared and similarly made it clear that their presence was not welcomed.

After refuelling back at Kenge, they set off for their destination that day, Kikwit, and despite the nervousness

Precarious river crossings were the norm off the beaten track in Africa

“There were no further incidents other than multiple river crossings”

caused by their encounters the previous night there were no further incidents, other than multiple river crossings by a variety of cable-operated or punted ferries.

The following morning they departed early, and immediately had to cross the Kwilu River via a motorised ferry. On the other side, they faced what Bill thought were the most difficult 20 miles of the entire journey. ‘It was pouring with rain,’ he wrote, ‘and the road was very muddy. I had the greatest difficulty controlling the Land Rover. Many, many times I was convinced we would get stuck and have to wait until the surface dried.’ They pressed on regardless.

Soon they came to a bridge but found the near bank had washed away. ‘We found a gap of several feet between the road and the bridge,’ Bill wrote. ‘As good fortune would have it, we found a piece of wood just wide and strong enough to support the Rover’s wheels. Daphne got onto the bridge and guided me so that the wheels did not slip off the wood. I was very relieved when we succeeded.’

Into the jungle

Eventually the road improved, but they found themselves driving through thick jungle where the trees and creepers met overhead, creating a twisting, humid green tunnel that seemed to go on forever. They began to think they may have taken a wrong turning when, out of nowhere, there appeared in a small clearing a tiny hospital, presided over by a Catholic missionary. It was a fortunate meeting, because not only could he confirm they were on the right road, he could also provide them with directions regarding an imminent road junction which, when they eventually reached it, was so confusing that they would undoubtedly have gone the wrong way.

Several hours later, on the outskirts of Luluabourg (now Kananga), they found the road blocked by a barrier presided over by an army officer brandishing a revolver, who demanded to see their pass. Only now did they learn that travel in the Congo required a pass issued by the military. The officer quizzed them extensively but seemed more interested in whether they had seen any signs of insurrection. ‘Eventually,’ Bill wrote, ‘he came to the conclusion that the only thing to do was let us pass, and he wished us bon voyage.’

Luluabourg had already seen a great deal of rioting, and the hostility was palpable as Bill drove through the large township that sprawled across the main road to the town centre. Within weeks, the area would be the centre of dreadful tribal conflict, described at the time by the 23-year-old American journalist D’Lynn Waldron as ‘a nightmare of

Armed guard welcome in dangerous times



Battered but unbeaten: the couple's 109 Station Wagon



“All their belongings, their children, dog, parrots and station wagon were shipped from Mozambique”

In the 1960s there were no such things as ro-ro ferries

horror.’ It took them two more days to reach Élisabethville (now Lubumbashi) and the journey was marked by appalling roads made worse by a particularly heavy storm. ‘The road became completely covered in water within minutes,’ Bill wrote. ‘It was almost impossible to see out, and having the windows shut the interior became unbearably sticky. We could only travel very slowly as in many places the water was up to a foot deep.’ Later, they were stopped by armed Congolese militia but the men appeared to lose interest when Bill and Daphne pretended that they spoke no French.

They pressed on towards the border with Northern Rhodesia. ‘Once more the road was dreadful,’ Bill wrote in his journal, ‘and to add to the discomfort it was pouring heavens-hard, but we pushed on as fast as possible. Large potholes covered the surface of the road and as we crashed through each of them a huge fountain of muddy water would splash up over the roof. I was compelled to look out of the side window as the mud on the windscreen was too thick for the wipers to clear it.’

They finally crossed the border after being delayed for several hours while the Congolese border guards insisted on the Land Rover being unloaded, and every item of baggage searched. Bill was furious, but times were changing in colonial Africa.

The station wagon was Bill and Daphne’s only car between 1959 and 1966, and they enjoyed several more safaris in it,



Bill and Daphne in 1960s Africa



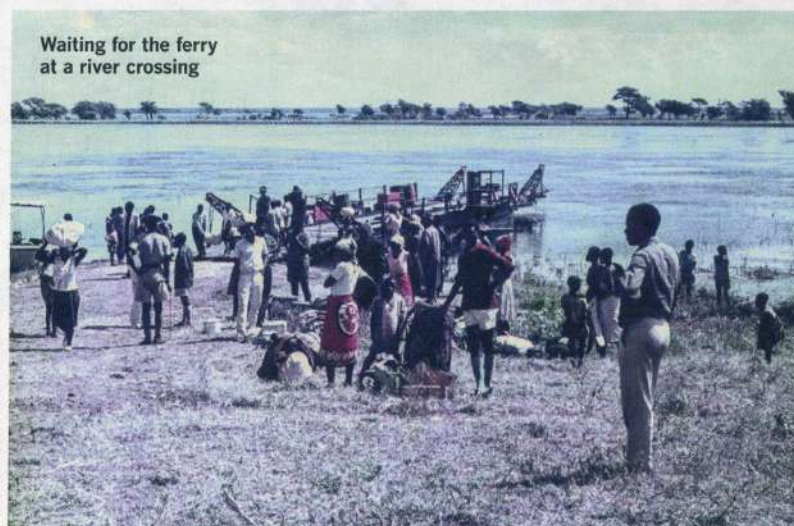
A lost era of colonial Africa



Entertainment on the deck of a 1960s liner



Deep ruts were a hazard on the unsurfaced roads



Waiting for the ferry at a river crossing

including a drive across Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and South Africa to Cape Town. Northern Rhodesia gained independence in 1964, becoming Zambia, and Bill and Daphne decided to return to the UK in 1966. All their belongings, their children, dog, parrots and the station wagon were shipped from Mozambique via the Suez Canal to the UK.

They stayed for just six months before Bill decided that he preferred to be in Zambia but, when they returned, the faithful Land Rover was left in the UK, stored temporarily in a field under a tarpaulin. They planned to ship it to Zambia at some point, but this never happened, and instead it became a place of pilgrimage when they and their children returned to the UK from time to time. It was eventually sold in the early 1970s.

Bill often wondered what had happened to his old Land Rover. It was always his ambition to write a book about his journey from Matadi to Ndola, which he planned to call *Across the Congo on a Fruit Cake*. Sadly, Daphne passed away in 2010 and Bill in 2014, but it was a very great pleasure to reunite their children Myles, Jackie and Lynette, and their families, with the station wagon at this year's Dunsfold Collection Land Rover Show. As Lynette said of her parents' journey: "They were very lucky to get through unscathed. If they had travelled just that little bit later, well who knows, I dread to think."