

Archibald E Filby – 1938 Expedition

By Nicola (nee Filby) Forshaw (Tree T02)



Archibald Edmund Filby, proclaimed “the World’s most travelled motorist”, was my uncle. He died before I was born and my father, naturally taciturn, rarely discussed his older brother.

My parents died in 1993, and I inherited a strange-looking and aged manuscript entitled 'Horizon Fever' by A. E. Filby. Without looking inside, I filed it away for future consideration. I had, after all, my own young family to raise and it would be another 20 years (80 since that **A.E. Filby -1938** expedition) before the manuscript would again see the light of day.

"Look what I found!" I said excitedly to my husband, brandishing the manuscript. We'd already collaborated in other books I'd written.

"I guess I'd better start typing," he muttered.

Three months later, he had transcribed the four hundred-page document. We read the manuscript in wonder as we shared Archie Filby's own account of his extraordinary expedition through Africa, a trip that took four years, from 1931 to 1935, from London to Cape Town and back again.

The result is a book that reveals a bygone age, and an astonishing exploration. It tells of missionaries, pygmies, big game, gold-mining, crossing the Sahara and swimming in the Nile with crocodiles. One of Archie's companions was a monkey called Congo. Another was a dog that adopted him, until it was killed and dragged up a tree by a leopard.

Attitudes in those days were very different and often shocking. For instance, big game hunting was popular. Archie refers to adult Africans as 'boys' or 'natives'. On one occasion an Egyptian guard is treated with unconscionable thoughtlessness, which would horrify us today. Despite this, Archie's affection and respect for the indigenous populace cannot be disputed. He is clearly fascinated by the languages, customs and cultures of the African tribes he encountered - from pygmies in the Congo to the Masai in Central Africa.



We changed nothing of the original manuscript. It is exactly as Archie typed it in 1938, undoubtedly at the behest of his newly-wedded wife, Miss Fay Taylor, also a writer, whom he met following a radio broadcast he made from London. Sadly, their marriage was to become a tragic love story as Archie succumbed to one last bout of malaria, and Fay arrived at his bedside one day too late.

Apart from a very few, the photos in the book are Archie's, taken more than 80 years ago. One can only imagine the difficulties he encountered in recording his travels using only primitive camera equipment. The captions beneath the pictures are Archie's own.

One final thought... Archie had little money. The trip to Cape Town in 1931 began in an ancient, sawn-in-half Rolls Royce, and was completed four years later in a 1922 Austin 20, the most modern of the four cars employed for the trip. The four thousand miles from Kenya to South Africa, undertaken in a Model T Ford, considered vintage even in 1931, is a testament to the car manufacturer, especially when one considers the appalling condition of the roads in Africa at that time.

I began by saying I never knew my Uncle Archie. Now I feel I do. I regret not having met him

in life, but his spirit lives on. Archie comes across as a courageous, feisty, quick-tempered, bossy little man, but full of fun, generous and never one to bear a grudge. I imagine his companions found him difficult to travel with, but he made friends easily and was much in demand by the Press and for radio and early television broadcasts.

Publishing his book, 'Horizon Fever' has been a pleasure, and a Filby family affair, as my son designed the cover. And I'm proud to tell the world about yet another famous, previously forgotten Filby!

Horizon Fever by A. E. Filby ISBN 978-1781766415