

discovery

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MAJOR SIR GERALD PORTAL
1858 - 1894

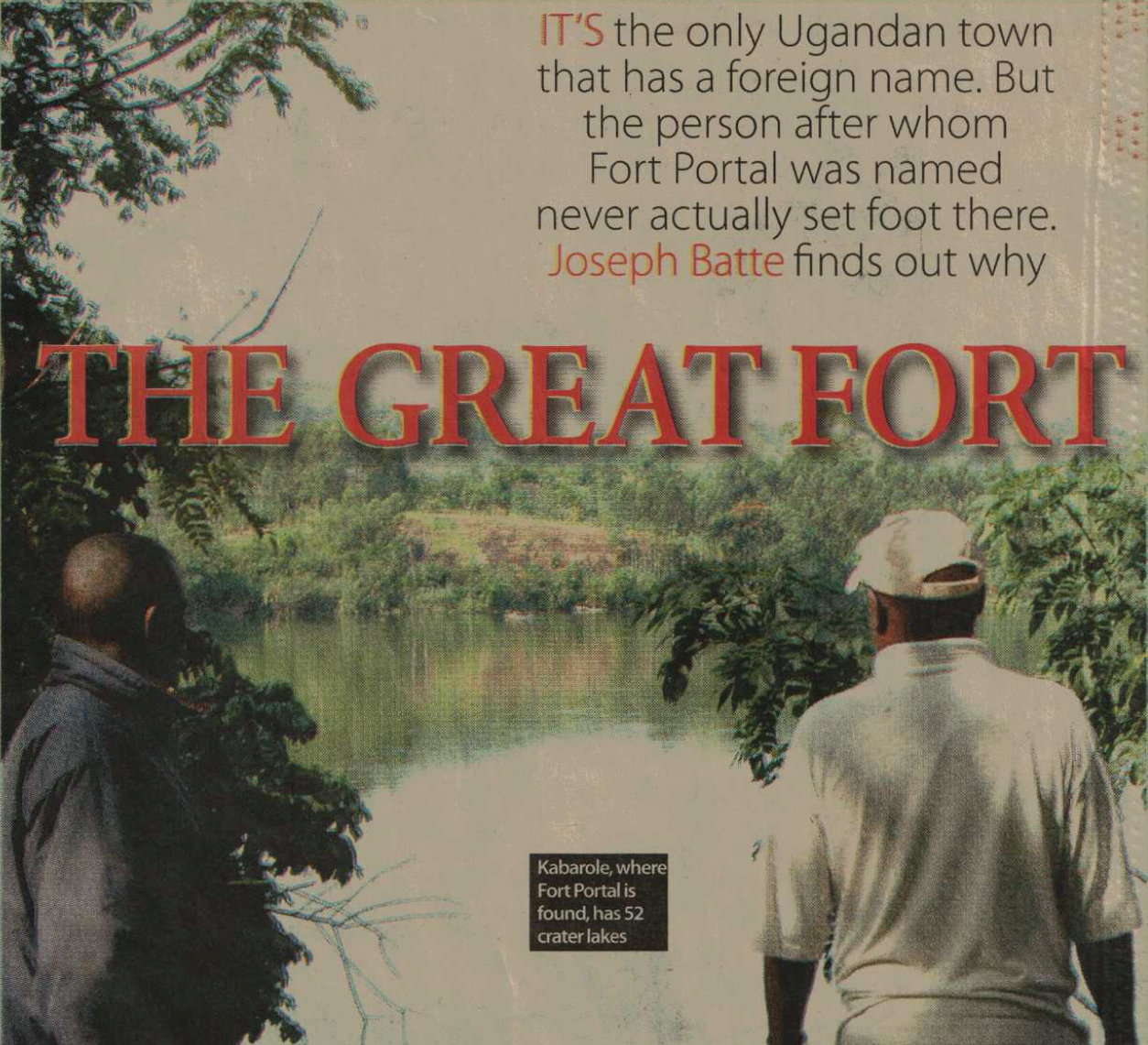


FORT PORTAL

The only town with an English name

IT'S the only Ugandan town that has a foreign name. But the person after whom Fort Portal was named never actually set foot there. Joseph Batte finds out why

THE GREAT FORT



Kabarole, where Fort Portal is found, has 52 crater lakes

Did you know that all the towns in Uganda have local names, except one? Can you hazard a guess? Well, Fort Portal is that town. Besides sounding foreign, there must be more to that name — Fort Portal.

The journey to *Footi*, as the locals fondly call it, usually lasts three hours. Unfortunately for me, on this particular occasion — because of the road works — I had to endure a five-hour bus ride.

As soon as we hit the outskirts of Kampala, the real Uganda begins to unfold like a carpet. The lush-green rolling countryside races past as our bus heads towards our destination. Save for the dusty bumpy stretch between Busega to Mityana, which is still

under construction, the rest of the journey, from Mityana town, is generally an all-smooth affair since the road is still in fabulous condition, having been constructed in 2007.

Fort Portal is different from many towns in the country in more ways than just the name. It is situated at an elevation of about 5,000 feet (1,500 metres), making it one of the coolest towns in the country. The air is fresher.

My first impression of Fort Portal is that it is a town on the move. It is not as crowded as Kampala. There are no sickening sights of smelly piles of rubbish littering the clean streets. Neither are the roads dotted with stomach-upsetting potholes. No wonder it currently enjoys the enviable

reputation of the cleanest town in Uganda.

New buildings are sprouting up everywhere. Old tin-roofed shops that date back to the 1930s and 1960s line the streets and maintain an old colonial charm, unlike Kampala, where such old buildings are being razed in the name of modernity and replaced with concrete structures.

Walking on the streets, I'm touched by the unflinching hospitality of the Batooro, who claim a linguistic and cultural heritage that is closely related to the Banyoro. They call out each other using pet names — Amooti, Adyeeri, Akiiki. Omukama Oyo Nyimba's palace perched atop a hill offers a million dollar view of Fort Portal town and its environs.



Hotel Cornerstone on Ruhandika Street



Career

Unlike Captain Lugard, who was trained at the famed Sandhurst and commissioned in 1878, Portal was not a career soldier

HISTORICAL DISTORTION

I'm here to find out how this small beautiful town got its name. The following day I decide to go and have a look at the template that will provide a good proportion of the answer to the questions — Sir Gerald Portal's statue stands on the traffic island on the main street. The statue was shifted from the centre of the roundabout where it used to stand near the Stanbic (Former UCB) bank to this spot.

The statue paints a picture of a battle-hardened soldier holding a gun, and seems to be keeping watch over Fort Portal. At the foot of the statue is a plaque that reads:

"MAJOR SIR GERALD PORTAL 1858-1894 FROM WHOM THIS TOWN DERIVES ITS NAME."

Something is seriously wrong here. Sir Gerald Portal dressed in a military uniform and holding a gun? How can this be when Sir Gerald Portal never held a position in the army, let alone underwent military training? Unlike Captain Lugard, who was trained at the famed Sandhurst and commissioned in 1878, Portal was not a career soldier.

How then was the rank of Major bestowed on him? Besides, during his stay in Uganda he never set foot in Fort Portal. How then did the town get to be named after him?



Death

Sir Gerald Portal died of Malaria soon after his return to England

SIR GERALD PORTAL

He was born in 1858 in Laverstoke, Hampshire, England. He went to the prestigious Eton College, which has educated boys for nearly six centuries and "still continues to develop King Henry VI's original vision of providing distinctive education to any talented boy".

After college, he chose to join the Foreign Service in 1879. The following year, in 1880 he was sent to Rome.

In June 1882, he was posted to Cairo, Egypt, where he was attached to the Consulate-General. He was present at the bombardment of Alexandria. In the sum-

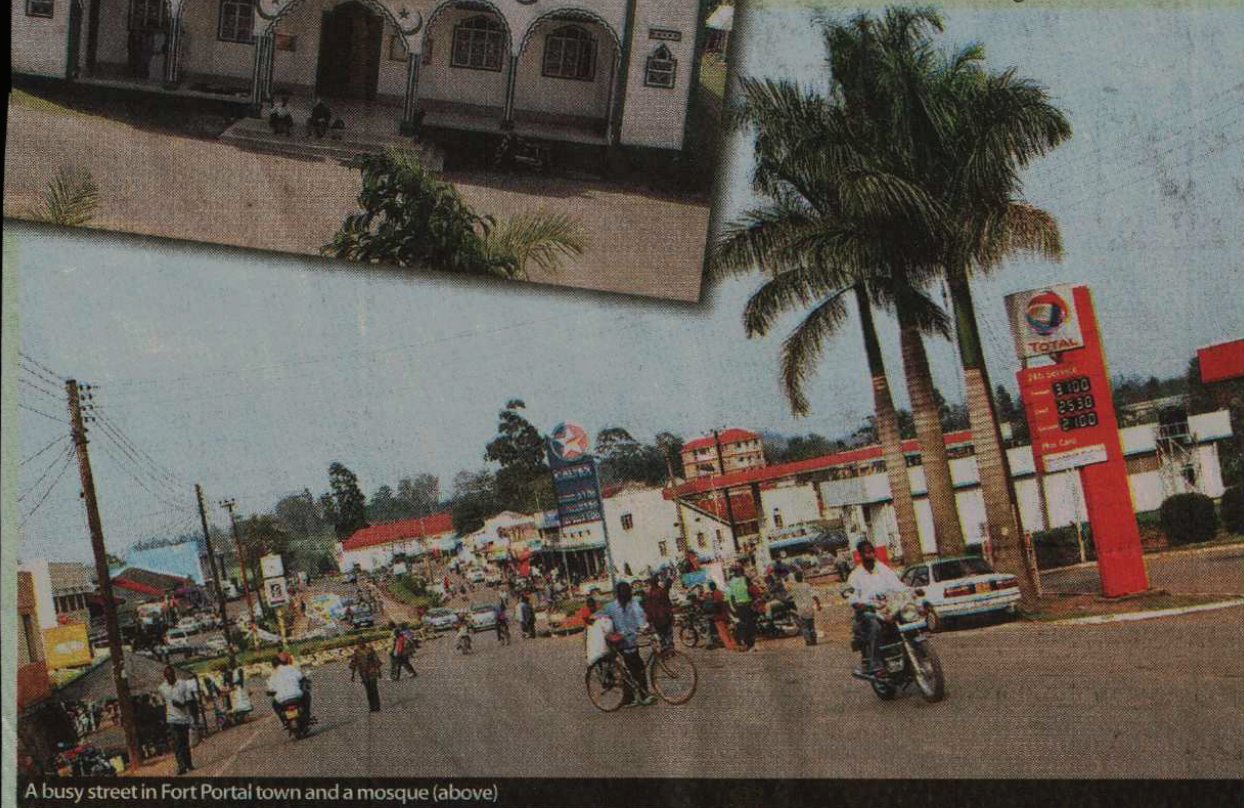
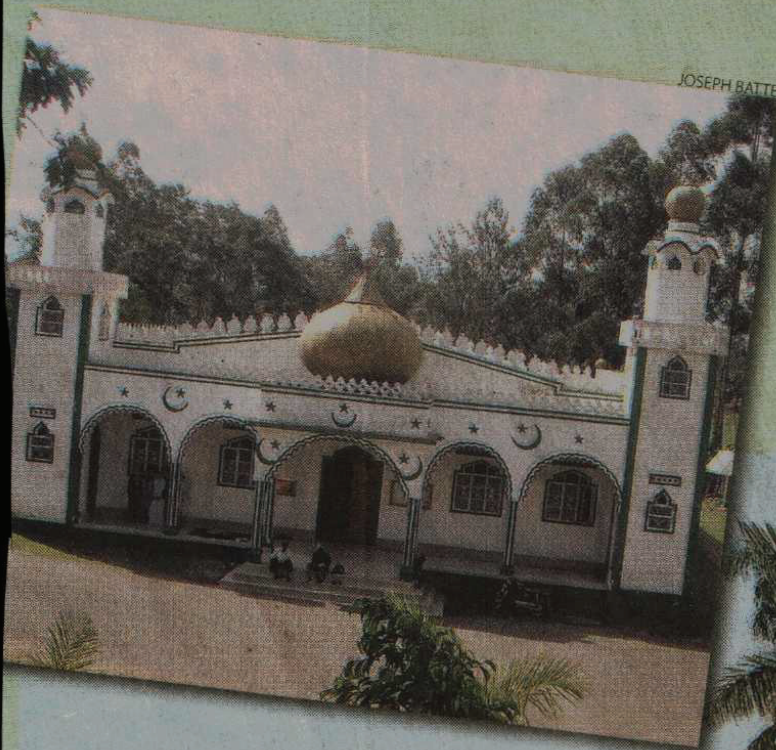
mers of 1886 and 1887, during Lord Cromer's absence, he took charge of the Residency.

On October 17, 1887, he was directed to attempt reconciliation between the King of Abyssinia and the Italian Government. Eventually he climbed the ranks to become Chargé d'affaires in 1888.

In 1889, he became first the Acting Consul-General and then the Consul-General of Zanzibar in 1891. His duties expanded to include German East Africa in June 1891 and the British East Africa in 1892.

Sir Gerald Portal came to Uganda in late 1892 to assess whether the country should be retained or evacuated. He recommended that Britain should not pull out. Among other issues, he reasoned that pulling out of Uganda would put the locals who had converted to Christianity and the missionaries in grave danger.

In short, he never held a gun as a soldier. On the contrary, his favourite weapon was the pen. He wrote two books, *My Mission to Abyssinia* and *The British Mission to Uganda*. He died of malaria on January 25, 1894 soon after his return to England.



A busy street in Fort Portal town and a mosque (above)



Paradise

In the morning it offers panoramic greens, blues and oranges that make you feel like you are strolling in paradise



Lugard Road. Inset is the club at the barracks that was called Fort Gerry

THE NAME

Fort Portal was founded in 1893. According to Rev. Richard Baguma, a former regent of Toro and an authority on the history of Toro and Uganda, "Originally it was called Fort Gerry, a name that was given to the town by Capt. Frederick Lugard."

"But we trace the history of the town back to the time when Omukama Kasagama had been banished to Masaka by Omukama Kabalega of Bunyoro, who was not happy with the dissenting princes of Toro. Toro was part of Bunyoro Kitara Kingdom at the time.

"Kasagama was driven out of Toro and he sought refuge in Masaka, where he met Zacharia Kisingiri, who introduced him to Capt. Lugard. On August 14, 1891 Captain Lugard brought Kabalega's constant harassment of Toro to an end when he defeated him with the help of ruthless Nubian mercenaries."

The descendants of these mercenaries form Toro's Nubian community that is found in Fort Portal today.

Captain Lugard was instrumental in returning Toro Kingdom to its rightful heir Omubiito (Prince) Kasagama, who became Daudi Kyebambe Kasagama, Toro's first modern-day Omukama. For his gallant effort, a road was named after him.

Baguma says when Kasagama returned from exile, he built a palace on the hill overlooking the town and named it Kabarole which in Rutooro means 'let them see'. He also made a royal drum and named it *Bahemukira Ataase*, loosely translated to mean: "Those who thought I would die in exile celebrated too soon."

Kabarole thus became the name of the town, while Fort Gerry was the name of a barracks across River Mpanga at Boma, where Toro Club stands today. The name was also a symbol of British rule.

HOW THE TOWN DEVELOPED

By 1900, Fort Portal was expanding rapidly. Its development was helped by trade in food and cash crops. In 1930 Europeans and Indians came to set up large tea estates, shops as well as residential premises.

The growth of the town was also helped by the establishment in 1952 of the railway line from Mombasa to as far as Kasese for the transportation of Copper from Kilembe mines.

Today it's a base for foreign tourists who visit national parks and other attractions in western Uganda. Apparently Kabarole District alone has over 52 crater lakes.

The place offers some of the best scenic views in the country. In the morning it offers panoramic greens, blues and oranges that make you feel like you are strolling in paradise. Next time you are in *Footi*, just remember that it's named after a famous diplomat, not a career soldier. ■



Omukama Kyebambe Kasagama subsequently became respected and honoured by the locals and the colonial government. He was open minded enough to embrace the colonial masters' ways like education and Christianity.

Queen Victoria honoured him with a special medal emblazoned with his name in appreciation of his refusal to join forces with the Nubian soldiers who started an uprising against the colonial government.

WHAT HAPPENED TO CAPTAIN LUGARD?

After two years of trying to maintain order in Uganda, Captain Lugard was posted to Nigeria, where he negotiated treaties in 1894, eventually becoming the Commissioner for the Hinterland of Nigeria in 1897 and High Commissioner of Northern Nigeria in 1900.

In 1907 he became Governor of Hong Kong, where he was largely responsible for the creation of the Uni-

versity of Hong Kong in 1911. He died in 1945.

After two years in Uganda, Captain Lugard had left a string of forts with up to 4,000 Sudanese soldiers in Toro alone. These soldiers were under the control of Captain De Winton (De Winton Road in Kampala was named after him).

Michael Hodd, in his *East Africa Handbook: A Travel Guide*, reveals that originally, Sir Gerald Portal wanted these soldiers to be withdrawn. De Winton died in 1892 and the following year, Sir Gerald Portal sent a young British officer called Major Roderick Owen to discuss these plans with Omukama Kasagama.

On his return to Kampala, Owen convinced Sir Gerald Portal that, instead of leaving Toro completely, only some of the Sudanese troops should be withdrawn and a new fort built.

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A view of Toro palace from Fort Portal town

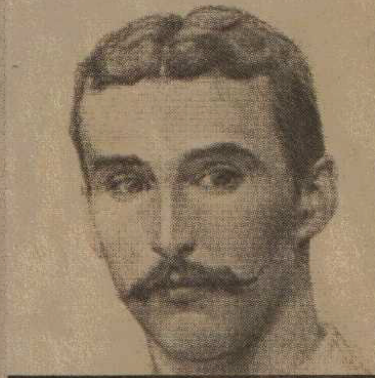
How the name stuck

BY JOSEPH BATTE

The British authorities at the turn of the century changed the name Fort Gerry to Fort Portal. In 1900, the administrator of the territory was Sir Henry Hamilton Johnson K. C. B. He was Her Majesty's Special Commissioner and Commander-in-Chief for the British Protectorate and the adjoining territories representing the government of the Queen of Great Britain and Ireland and the Empress of India. He signed an agreement with 'Kabaka of Toro' (as he was referred to in the Toro Agreement) Daudi Kabaka Kasagama! Fort Gerry, as the place was originally known, was named post-humously after Sir Gerald Portal, the British Consul General of Zanzibar. He arrived in Buganda in late 1892 to formalise the protectorate. On his way back to Britain a few months later, he died of malaria.

ORIGINAL FORT PORTAL

A traveller called Norma Lorrimer who went to the town in 1913 and called it Toro, described it as consisting of six bungalows, a bank, the Boma, huts for a few KARs (King's African Rifles), the Indian Bazaar, a native settlement and a splendid market at the bottom of the hill, which still stands today opposite the Gardens Restaurant.



A portrait of Sir Gerald Portal

Although Sir Gerald Portal never set foot in Fort Gerry or Fort Portal, the name has stuck. In fact, Portal never came within a 100km square radius of the town. The town was simply named after him because he hoisted the British Union Jack at Old Kampala in 1893, replacing the flag of the Imperial British East African Company, (IBEAC) which effectively made Uganda a British Protectorate. The move in the 1980s to rename towns to reflect the name of the district did not affect Fort Portal.

IDI AMIN ERA

The regime was characterised by the attempt to do away with the colonial legacy. As a result, Amin renamed some water bodies, places and streets in Kampala after his friends like

Siad Barre, Bokassa and Mobutu. Interestingly, in 1974 when Uganda was re-organised into 10 provinces — Central, Busoga, Eastern, Karamoja, Nile, North Buganda, South Buganda, Northern, Southern and Western — the provincial capital of western Uganda was located in Fort Portal. For an unexplained reason, the name of the town was not changed.

MISREPRESENTATION

In 2008, Sir Gerald Portal's statue was removed from the original position where it was situated in the middle of the round-about opposite former UCB (now Stanbic Bank), during the construction of the Fort Portal-Hima road.

The town authorities were reluctant to put it back, which prompted protests from the British community in Fort Portal. Eventually, the Fort Portal Municipality administration relented and allocated space for construction of the statue on the traffic island on Balya Road.

However, the statue, which was constructed last year with funds raised by the British community and Ugandans of British descent in the area, is a complete misrepresentation of Sir Gerald Portal, who did not have a military rank, nor did he wear a military uniform or have a gun. He was a diplomat in the strict sense of the word. ■

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FORT GERRY BECOMES FORT PORTAL

In 1900, Omukama Kyebambe Kasagama signed an agreement with Sir H. Johnstone, making Toro part of the British Protectorate. In memory of Sir Gerald Portal, who hoisted the Union Jack at Old Kampala declaring British rule over Uganda on April 1, 1893, the name of the town was subsequently changed from Fort Gerry to Fort Portal in 1900.

According to *The Hansard* of June 1, 1893, a telegram reporting that historic event was published in *The Berliner Tageblatt* of Germany.

Nevertheless, the honour was not misplaced. Although Sir Gerald Portal never set foot in Fort Portal, he contributed decisively in convincing the British government to adopt Lugard's plan that these parts should become part of the British Empire. He was also instrumental in the signing of agreements with leaders of the kingdoms of Uganda which led to the formalising of the protectorate status of the country. ■



Fort Portal-Kasese road



The foundation stone of Fort Portal at Boma Golf Club