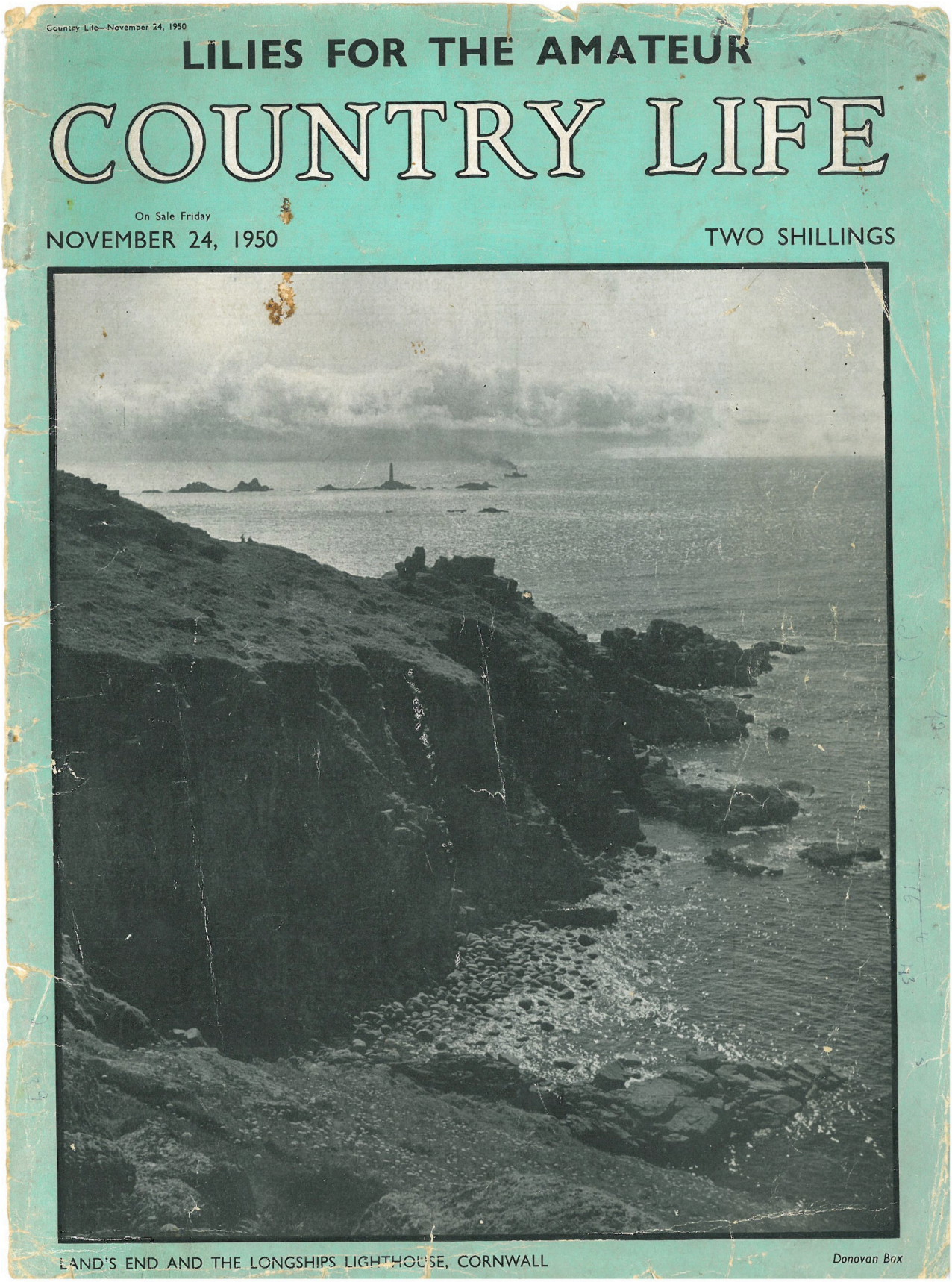
DHOWS in East Africa by Michael Chetham – was an account written for Country Life Magazine, following a three year tour in Zanzibar. The magazine covers the pleasure and joys of rural life and their environments as well as the concerns of rural people. It has a diverse readership which, although mainly UK based is also international



DHOWS IN EAST AFRICA

Written and Illustrated by MICHAEL CHETHAM

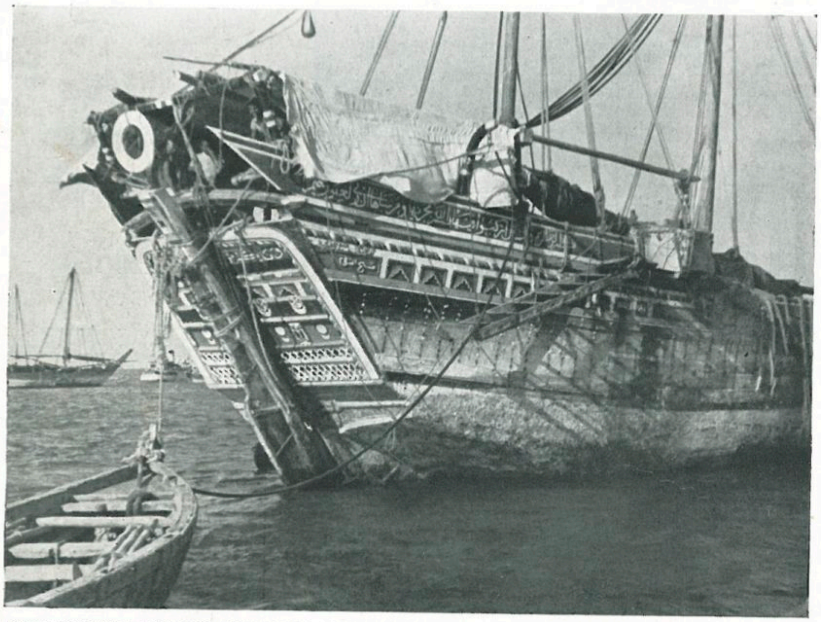
EVER since man ventured on the seas he has been driven by the winds and, from experience of these, and from the demands of the markets, have come the Trade Routes of the sea. In the tropics and sub-tropics these routes are marked and seasonal, and nowhere more so than in the Indian Ocean.

From November to February the wind blows from the north, and from May to August from the south. So, in November, from the Persian Gulf, come, as they have done for two thousand years, the dhows of Basra, Koweit, Baghdad and Bahrein, joining those of Muscat and Oman on their way to East Africa, where they meet those which have sailed from the Kuchi ports of India and from Mangalore.

In Lamu, Mombasa, Zanzibar and the other East African ports and even as far south as the Comoro Islands, the local inhabitants watch the wind, and when it has settled down from the north, they know that the dhows will soon come sailing in.

Truly there are few more lovely sights than the deep blue rolling Indian Ocean flecked with its breaking waves over which sweeps the north-east monsoon—or the *kaskazi* as the Swahilis call it—bearing a big dhow from the Persian Gulf. The dhow sweeps forward, her huge sail catching sun and shadow, her stem pushing the sea in creamy foam ahead of her while the crew of Arabs, Baluchis, Somalis, or Indians, gaze at the approaching

A DHOW FROM THE PERSIAN GULF RUNNING DOWN THE EAST AFRICAN COAST



THE SCROLL-BOARD OF THIS DHOW FROM JEDDAH BEARS AN INSCRIPTION FROM THE KORAN INVOKING MERCY ON THE SHIP AND THOSE THEREIN

THE STERN OF A ZANZIBAR COASTER

land. As she enters harbour conch shells are blown and her flag streams out in the wind. Her big sail is lowered and as the way is run off her, she heads into the wind or tide, and anchors.

Usually there is then a wait of several hours until the port health officer and the immigration officer board. They look principally for contagious and infectious diseases—nearly always finding a case or two of trachoma—and for evidence that all those who left the Gulf are still on board. One sometimes has suspicions that illegal immigrants may have been landed up the coast, or that some wealthy passenger may have been parted from his wealth and then have been pushed over the side to prevent his telling the tale.

When these unwelcome officials have departed, the long-boat is brought alongside and manned. These long-boats are often the pride of the *nahodha* (captain). They are extremely narrow and take from 12 to 20 men at the oars. They are frequently carved and painted. The blades of the oars are round and flat and the boat is propelled with short vicious stabs. Watch these boats as they leave the ship's side; by the helmsman in the stern sits the *nahodha*, and in the stem under the flag is the chanter. As soon as the long-boat is clear he starts his chant while the crew sit at their oars. Suddenly they all take one sharp stroke and then sit idle for several seconds while the chanter continues his plaint; then another stroke and a long pause, then more strokes at shorter intervals, until finally they are rowing furiously and have the long-boat tearing through the water. The chant becomes a phrase endlessly repeated and the oarsmen grunt or shout a word or two at the end of it as their blades hit the water. By this chanting they work themselves up to a high pitch of enthusiasm.

The *nahodha* then goes ashore, contacts his agents if he has any, and sets out to dispose of his cargo to the best advantage. The dhows will probably lie in port several weeks while the haggling is done in the coffee-shops in the bazaar. Dhows from the Persian Gulf bring cargoes of dates and carpets; those from India, Mangalore tiles, chests and prayer mats; and those that have passed Aden usually bring salt. The cargo sold, the crew is paid its share of the profit. The *nahodha* feeds his crew and rations their water, but there is no salary. All, however, share in the profit of the venture, according to their ability and experience. By an old custom each member of the crew is given space for a chest of his own which he may fill with trade goods to barter on his own account.

Then the crews go through the town to spend their money. Omanis with white *kanzus* (a garment somewhat like a night-shirt) and red caps showing above their turbans; Suris from Muscat with *kanzus* of ochre, brown and grey, with beautiful camel-hair shawls for turbans; tall Somalis with small, neat features; and

DHOWS AT ANCHOR IN THE HARBOUR AT ZANZIBAR

Indians with tarbush and shirts worn outside their trousers. They are a picturesque lot, but perfectly mannered, each with his curved dagger in his belt.

When the dhows have been unloaded they have two or three months to wait before they can return on the next monsoon. The first few weeks are usually spent in Zanzibar or Mombasa refitting and in the *nahodha's* negotiation for one or more short voyages along the East African coast.

In Zanzibar and Mombasa all during the hot season there are dhows at anchor, some dismasted, their masts floating in the water alongside to prevent them drying out and becoming brittle, others up on the reef for scraping and caulking and for a coat of *sifa* (shark-liver oil) to be applied on their bottoms; others up against the quay working cargo. Most of them, however, are at anchor, and one can row around them, read their names and inscriptions, note how they lie head-to-wind on twin anchors, and how their carved and ornamented poops rise and fall gently against the sky. At sunset the crew at their prayers are silhouetted against the western sky, a spiral of smoke rises from the cook-box on deck, and odours drift on the breeze, all kinds of odours—cloves, dried shark's flesh, old bilge, cooking smoke, and that indefinable *pot-pourri* of smells that proclaims the dhow and hints at everything she has ever done or carried.

By and large, the dhow folk are friendly people and, like all Moslems, they are invariably courteous. A shouted salutation is always returned, sometimes with an invitation to board. Before accepting any such invitation, the less agile should note whether there is a gangway or not. If there is not, it usually means hauling oneself up by a rope with assistance from one's hands and bare feet.

Once on board the dhow, the visitor is taken aft to the poop to meet the *nahodha* and, after solicitous enquiries regarding each other's health, one sits in the shade of an awning and has a smoke and a chat. Inevitably there will be delicious coffee—delicious if you like it black, unsweetened and aromatic. If you are a European and the invitation has been made in advance you will probably be offered tea—tea boiled in a kettle with tinned milk and sugar. It is incumbent upon you to drink it if you possibly can, for otherwise you are belittling your host's hospitality. Several plates of food will quite likely appear: almond and jasmine jelly, which is pleasant and very sweet, English biscuits, which may seem somewhat out of place, but at least are of known quality, and some pancakes at whose ingredients you can but guess.

Eat all you can and sigh gently and your host will be pleased. The giving of gifts in the East is much more of a feature in visiting than it is in England, so that if you intend to visit a dhow it is as well to take some small present with you, as you will also very likely be given some small gift as a memento of your visit.

No doubt you will be shown round. Most dhows follow the same basic pattern. There is one great hold, entered through a triangular hatch through which the mast is set. There is a half-deck two or three feet high under the poop, and then there is the poop itself. Sometimes the half-deck is high enough to allow one or two cabins at the stern. One of the first questions asked by the visitor is, "Where does the crew sleep?" The answer is "On deck or, when it is raining, beneath the half-deck." In stormy weather they feel safer and are handier on deck, and in fine weather they naturally prefer it. On deck, at either side at the break of the poop, are two large galvanised iron water-tanks, each of which holds 150 gallons. The mast or masts are raked well forward and the sail or sails hoisted on a balanced spar, the foot being made fast to the stem. Since this spar is longer than the dhow itself, and since the whole must be passed under the mast in going about, the navigational problems on entering or leaving harbour can be considerable, especially when one considers the great leeway that a dhow in ballast can make when reaching.

There are various types of dhow, the large ones being from 300-400 tons. I have heard of one of 500 tons but have never seen her. Of the big foreign-going Persian Gulf dhows there are three principal types. There are the boom dhows, usually twin-masted vessels built in Oman. These have canoe-like sterns and are low forward. The stem rises out of the water at an angle of 45 degs. and ends in a great edge-wise plank that rises high into the air. Often it is surmounted with a wooden model aeroplane complete with revolving propeller. Also from Oman come the *bedeni*. These boats have a high rudder-head, sharp stern, clipper bows and a mast that does not rake forward. The third type is the *baghala* which comes from Muscat. Here the stem-plank is curved well above the foredeck in a backward circle and on the top of the curve is a small wooden ring, the significance of which I have not been able to ascertain. It is, in itself, useless. The outstanding feature of the *baghala* is her square stern with its five windows. The *baghala* is believed to be a copy of the old Portuguese ships that first sailed round the Cape and into the Azanian and Arabian seas. She is a romantic-looking craft and strongly reminiscent of the 16th-century carvel.

The Arabs are great traditionalists, and, although they still build the sloping square sterns with five windows, it is a false stern built a couple of feet out from the real stern. The resulting narrow passage serves only as the *nahodha's* privy. These dhows are fast when running and reaching, although they lose much ground to leeward when reaching lightly laden. To windward they are almost helpless, particularly when there is a swell. I believe that if one tried pressing one of them to windward she might well be run under. Not so, however, with the Lamu coasters, which are as ugly a build as I have seen. Small—they rate from 50 to 90 tons—and decked with a roof of palm thatch, they have a straight vertical stem and bluffish bows and look remarkably like Brixham trawlers. I have heard a story that when one of H.M. survey ships was in these waters more than a century ago she landed her carpenter at Lamu, and he, with local help, built a small boat that would take parties to sound the shallows inside the reefs. He built this small craft after the pattern of a Brixham trawler, and she went to windward. Seeing the advantage of this, the builders in Lamu still copy this design of hull. Even the bowsprit points down to the sea. The rig, of course, is pure dhow—a mast raked forward and a single large triangular sail hoisted on a long spar.

The life of the average dhow is approximately 40 years. Some say that dhows never die; they just change slowly into new ones. As planks and ribs are broken or worn away they are replaced. When a section of keel is damaged it is taken out and a new section put in, new scroll-boards take the place of old ones, and so forth. So no doubt, there is considerable truth in the statement. A new dhow might cost £5,000 to-day, and, since the Arabs know nothing of moulding lofts, it is a considerable undertaking to build a new dhow.

Dhows are frequently family concerns. The

AN ARABIAN DHOW BEACHED FOR REPAIRS

owner may be a rich merchant, in which case the *nahodha* is probably a relation. On the other hand, the *nahodha* may himself be the owner, in which case he usually has a few close relatives among the crew.

By January, most of the dhows will have disposed of their cargoes, have been overhauled, and be ready for one or two short coastal voyages before the wind changes. While the crew has been busy with repairs, the *nahodha* has been visiting the Indian and Arab merchants in town trying to secure a coast-wise cargo. For example, a dhow that arrives in Mogadishu might carry a cargo of the produce of Somalia to Lamu or Mombasa; one that arrives at Tanga a cargo of timber for Dar-es-Salaam. Some dhows may, after struggling up wind from Zanzibar to Pemba, return again from that island with a cargo of cloves.

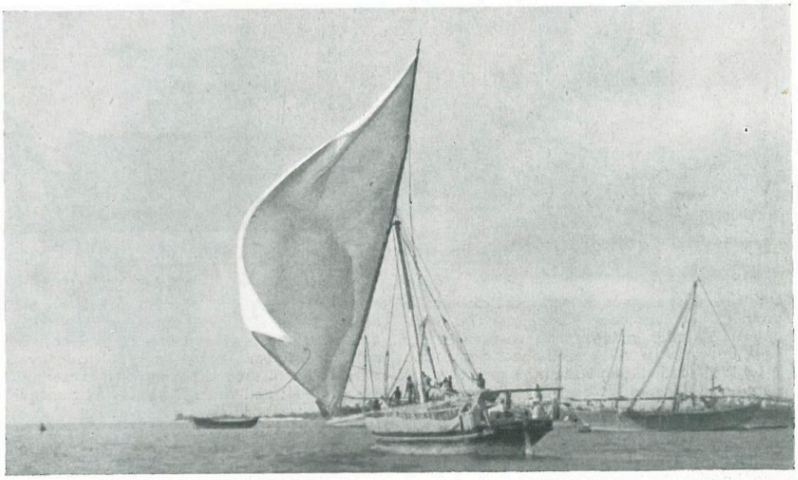
Although dhows generally have a hard job making any distance to windward, there is an easterly slant in the wind mornings and evenings which will allow them to make 20-30 miles a day. Most dhows try to use the last of the northern monsoon to run south to Simba Urangi in the Rufiji Delta to collect mangrove poles. This is not always very popular with the crews, since the work of cutting these poles in the tidal swamps is hard and unpleasant, but they are greatly in demand in Arab countries as building materials, as they are strong for their weight and not usually attacked by termites. These mangrove poles may be taken to Zanzibar for transhipment there to steamers bound for Jeddah, or taken by the dhows direct to ports in the Persian Gulf.

During April the number of dhows at anchor in the two main ports of Zanzibar and Mombasa increases considerably, as they assemble, like birds before a migration, from all the small ports along the coast to await the wind that will take them home. There is then much bargaining for freight-space. Apart from mangrove poles, the cargoes have in the past consisted mostly of food-stuffs, that is to say, grain, coconut oil and so forth, but during and since the war there has scarcely been enough food for the Swahilis, so the East African Governments have prohibited the export of food. Occasionally, an owner-*nahodha*, either because he is unable to find a cargo, or because a dhow fetches more in East Africa than it costs to build in the Gulf, sells his dhow and returns home by steamer.

During the war the loss of cargo was offset by the great demand for passages to Bombay among the Indian Community, for at that time it was exceedingly difficult to obtain steamer accommodation. Many dhows of 200 tons would take 50 passengers for £7 10s. each. The dhow provided only the water, and that was severely rationed. The passengers brought their own food and sleeping mats. The journey might take a month or six weeks and, undoubtedly, many passengers suffered hardships. The *nahodha*, to be allowed to take passengers, had to have a dhow master's certificate. I have seen bearded candidates at the shipping office in Mombasa struggling with charts and trying to decide how to hold a sextant. I asked one ancient how he found his way to Bombay. He replied that he went north, keeping the African coast in sight until a certain constellation came over the northern horizon. He then headed east-north-east until he felt that he was not far away from Bombay. Most *nahodhas*, however, are at home with charts and sextants. I asked one, an Indian, how he navigated. He showed me some charts, very battered and of ancient vintage, and a sextant, and told me he took a sight every noon. I asked to see his chronometer, but he had none to show me—merely a wrist-watch that kept very good time. "I know how far north and south I am," he said, "and as for going east and west, well, one is bound to bump into the coast sooner or later." He agreed that when he "knew the way" it was not difficult, but he would not go, for example, to the Comoro Islands, sextant or no, since not having been there before, he did not know the way.

As soon as the wind has settled down firmly from the south in April or May one by one the dhows hoist their yards, break out their great sails and head for home. Within a few days the crowded anchorages that once held 200 or more dhows will contain but a handful. These may be holding on for a month or two, risking the lighter winds that come in August and September, for the sake of taking what cargo may accumulate during that time and hoping to get a better price for it. Then they, too, are gone and the anchorages are empty.

A BAGHALA FROM THE PERSIAN GULF. The outstanding feature of this type of vessel is its square stern with five windows



A ZANZIBAR COASTER SETTING OUT TO COLLECT CLOVES FROM PEMBA

DHOW UNDER REPAIR