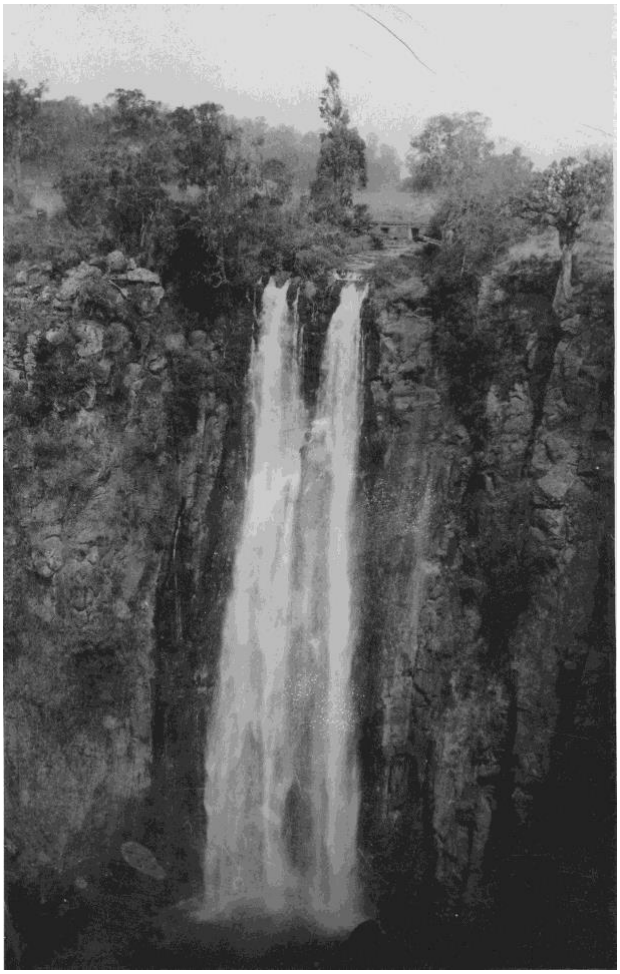
BARRY'S HOTEL, THOMSONS' FALLS 1930-1943

Returning from the Cape in 1928, after an unsuccessful diamond mining venture, Ernest Barraclough faced up to the failure of his farming venture in Essex. The farm was sold and the proceeds invested in equities. This was hardly good timing as the Great Depression was about to break upon the western world, taking stock market levels down to historically low levels and leaving many businesses bankrupt and millions out of work. Ernest decided to emigrate to Kenya Colony.

Travelling up-country Ernest decided that a hotel was needed in the neighbourhood of Thomson's Falls, a small settlement in the south-west corner of Laikipia district, at the northern foot of the Aberdare range and situated some 7,800 feet above mean sea level. There he found a perfect site to build one, immediately opposite the falls on the Ewaso Narok river which have a sheer drop of 243 feet and had been discovered by, and named after, the Scottish geologist and naturalist, Joseph Thomson, in 1883.



Thomson's Falls

Ernest engaged an architect and a building contractor and work started on clearing the ground to build the hotel, but Ernest's investments fell disastrously in value and his finances became parlous so at the beginning of 1931 he turned to his favourite brother for help. There followed six months of frantic correspondence between them with Ernest trying to persuade Bill to join him in the ownership of the hotel or to lend him the money to finish its construction. This correspondence gives a marvellous insight into Ernest's life and expectations in the colony at that time. As it is difficult to relate to the prices quoted by Ernest the author has used the UK Retail Price Index to show in parenthesis the current equivalent values.

“The hotel building is going on apace now……”

Ernest’s first letter to Bill is dated February 11th, 1931 and reads… ‘The hotel building is going on apace now and the architect says it ought to be finished by the end of June. Personally I think a couple of months added on to this will be more correct. I estimate that I will be at least £1,000 (£47,000) short of the necessary outlay”. Ernest then offered his brother a partnership in the hotel if he would put up the shortfall in funds to complete it. He wrote “I don’t know how you will take my suggestion or how it will appeal to you, but I have always felt that there may come a time when you and I might be in partnership in this country in some business or other and as I am putting my last penny into this hotel with every confidence to make it a success I feel that the time has arrived to put it up to you first to say yes, or to turn it down, as you please. As far as the details are concerned at the moment, I have contracted for the whole of the buildings, electric light, water supply to be

effected for the sum of £3,600 (£171,000). I estimate £1,000 (£47,000) for the furniture linen and plate, about £500 (£23,500) on the clearing of the site making of gardens, tennis courts and a further £1,000 (£47,000) to be expended on stocking, advertisement, and necessary expenses for the first six months after opening. Total £6,100 (£290,000). I could arrange a mortgage on the buildings, but in this connection I might say that the Government will be some time yet in preparing the title deeds of the actual site, and the buildings themselves won't be finished before July. Whatever you decide, would you mind letting me know quickly, as if the answer is No, I must set about making other arrangements. Would you mind cabling me as soon as you make your mind up to Barraclough, Thomson's Falls, Kenya and say just 'yes' or 'no' as the case may be'.

"I have had two topping safaris up country…"

Ernest on right with Rachel Bamber holding dog on his right.

Rachel Bamber and dog (seated third from left), Dorothy Meiklejohn (seated fifth from left), Jock Meiklejohn (seated third from right), Ernest (standing far right).

In the early 1930s Air Mail letters between England and Kenya took about two weeks to be delivered and cables even took several days. 'Ordinary' mail, which went by sea, took about a month to six weeks.

Ernest sent the copy of this letter under cover of a further letter written on 25th February, 1931 in which he said, inter alia, that the contractor guaranteed to finish the hotel by the end of May and that

he was living on the spot in one of the hotel bandas (cottages). He finished by saying 'Last week I went to Nanyuki for 2 days and on the way I ran into a herd of giraffe. I got out of the car and took a photo at about 50 yards range, but I don't think there will be much to see in it, as there were a lot of thorn trees about. This makes elephant, buffalo and giraffe that I have now seen of the big game species'. He signed his letter 'Cheerio, Yours, Barry', the first time he used the nick-name that he was to give to his hotel.

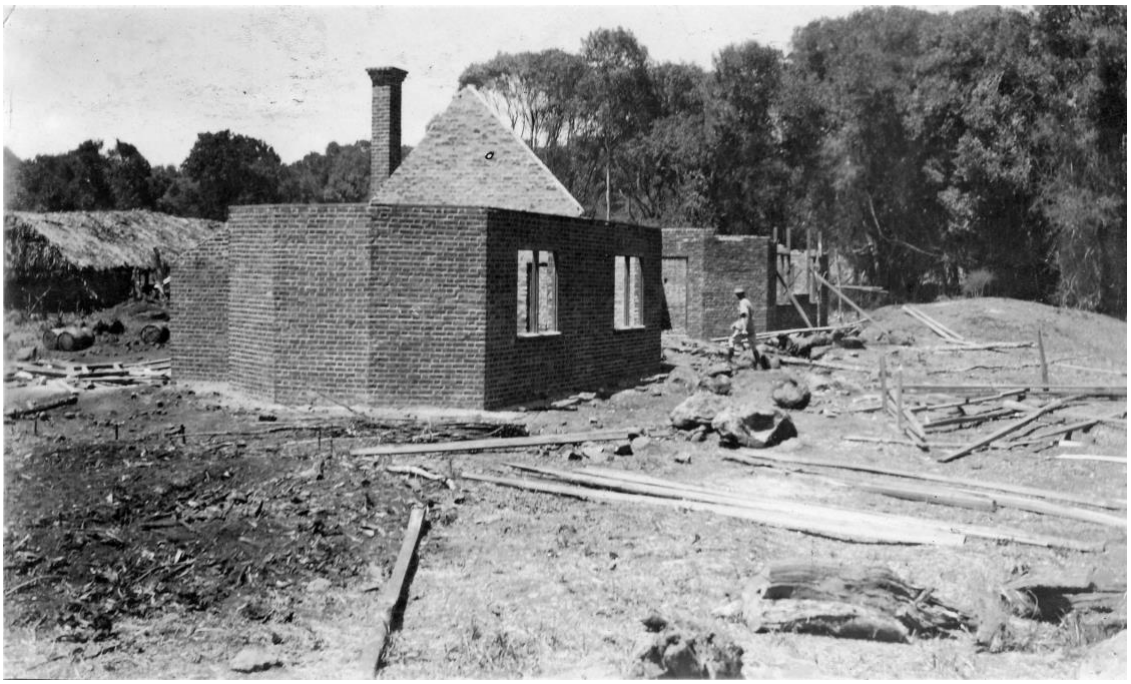
"I have had a jolly good time….what with fishing in the neighbourhood".

"Ernest fishing the Narok river with Jock and Dorothy Meiklejohn."

Ernest again wrote to Bill on 28th February doing his best to entice his brother to come out to Kenya to go into partnership together 'There is plenty of scope here for all sorts of activities both in work and in sport, whichever you like to take up. Personally I am so broke I've got to stick to work for most of my time, but I have lots of work to do in connection with the hotel and laying out an adjoining golf course, etc., etc. I have really had a jolly good time, what with two safaris at Xmas and January and shooting and fishing in the neighbourhood with polo and racing thrown in every now and then.

The cedar shingles go on the roof

There's lots of work to be done here. At present I have 20 natives working for me on the site at 12/- (£29) a month each and their 'posho' (rations) 2/6 (£5.94) each per month *(posho is maize meal, Ed.)* and what with making a road to the hotel, clearing the site, making gardens and fences, as well as tennis courts later on, one scarcely knows where to start. I do hope you will come out soon as much for your own benefit as possibly for mine, as I feel you will enjoy life out here far more than you would at home with all the restrictions, high cost of living, lack of sport except at prohibitive prices, etc., etc.. And if you do come out soon I want to make you comfortable and therefore I suggest that you have a banda like the one I am living in now on the hotel site, ie sitting room, bedroom and bathroom under one roof detached next to mine.



"I am having three bandas built at the moment……"

I am having three of these built at the moment which are part of the hotel scheme. I will have to have two and the other one will have to be reserved for visitors to the hotel (honeymoon couples!) as they are rather a feature of the place. And unless you had a banda you would have to go into one of the ordinary hotel bedrooms in the main building and walk along the passage every morning for your bath! The trouble about building another banda on my own on the chance of your coming out is this –I can't wait until I know definitely when you are coming out because the whole of the brick-making on the site will be finished in another six weeks or thereabouts and the contractor will then be closing down this part of the show and I will then start making two tennis courts on that particular part of the site as it is the only level spot large enough for two courts that I can find on the whole site. Which means that the bricks for an extra banda, if required, must be made within the next six weeks or not at all. The cost of a banda is £150 (£7,125) complete with bedroom, sitting room and bathroom (with bath) and there would probably be an extra £10 (£475) for laying extra pipes and tanks for water supply and electric light.

The hotel nears completion -1

We have got a fishing competition on at the Fishing Club here, each competitor names his own flies that he has to fish with throughout the competition and draws an opponent and if he beats him by the number of fish caught, each fishing the same day on the same stretch of river, he goes on to the next opponent and so on to the final. The prize is a fishing rod which I badly want, as I am using one given me, rather antiquated – but it landed me a 2 ¾ lb and ½ lb trout on the same cast the other day!'

The hotel nears completion - 2

Ernest's next letter, written on March 14th, 1931 and sent before he had received a reply to his original letter to Bill of February 11th showed that the pressure for more money was building up.
'I am now anxiously waiting to hear from you as to whether you will 'weigh in' on my hotel business with £2,000 (£95,000). I went down to Nairobi last week to make tentative enquiries from my solicitor as to the possibility of raising £2,000 (£95,000) on a mortgage of the hotel buildings, but he was very doubtful if it could be arranged and the Bank does not take on that class of business. So if you can see your way to agree it will take a great weight off my mind and enable me to carry on. By the middle of May I practically won't have a bean left and I will be more or less 'in the soup'. I am full of confidence that with the extra capital required the show will be a success, but at the present moment I am just carrying on clearing the site and making a road to the hotel with my 20 boys, and I can make no arrangements for the future without knowing that I have the extra capital to work on. In the meantime when I was in Nairobi last week, I secured several agencies with business firms for insurance and various goods as well as booking with Smith Mackenzie and Co., their agency here for sale of farms and marketing of wool. So you see I am working on the right lines but am sadly cramped with the lack of means to make a start, so sincerely hope you will be able to come in with me… everything is going strong but the shadow of what will happen if I can't raise £2,000 (£95,000) is looming very large and beginning to take the 'zip' out of me.'

No reply came from Bill so Ernest cabled him on 18th March asking for a cable reply. He then wrote again to Bill on the same day. His letter read 'I cabled you today asking you if you would please send a cabled reply to my letter of Feb 11th asking if you would kindly either advance me £2,000 (£95,000) or come in with me to this extent as a partner in my hotel here, and I am now anxiously waiting your reply which I do hope will be 'Yes', as I am getting very agitated indeed about my shortness of capital to make a start. In fact without the necessary extra capital I <u>cannot</u> make a start, as there is the furnishing to be completed, the staff engaged and many other things that require cash. I have taken all sorts of jobs in this district to bring kudos to my hotel – such as Chairman of the Township advisory Committee of Thomsons Falls (I am the only white man barring the policeman resident in the township at the moment) I have also taken on the job of building a golf-course here which ought to be a great asset to the hotel and various other jobs all with a view to increasing the value and income of my holding here and if they will have to be put aside by the lack of capital I require I don't know what is going to happen.

I enclose a few figures I have prepared re the hotel.

— Hotel at Thomsons Falls. — March 15. 1931.

Capital expended to date.

	£
Furniture.	359
25% Purchase Plot.	25
Clearing.	126
Tools.	20
Baths, Tanks &c.	19
Architect.	70
Contractor	1.700
	£ 2.319

Annual Expenditure to date.

	£ s.
Rent 1930.	25.
Rent 1931.	3
Tools.	5
Insurance.	2
Sundries.	£ 35

Estimated Total Capital Expenditure.

	£
Contractor for all Buildings.	3.600
Architect.	231
Furniture, linen, plate + crockery.	1.000
Clearing + making roads, garden, tennis courts, fencing &c. 20 boys wages + posho for 1 year.	180
Clearing by Contract.	60
Tools + implements, fencing material for fencing, tennis courts, Garden &c.	100
Baths, Electric light fittings &c.	50
Extra to Contractor for W.C. Temporary Kitchen, Hot Water to Bandas &c.	50
Balance purchase price of plot.	75
	£ 5346
Working Capital for one year as detailed.	545
Total	£ 5891

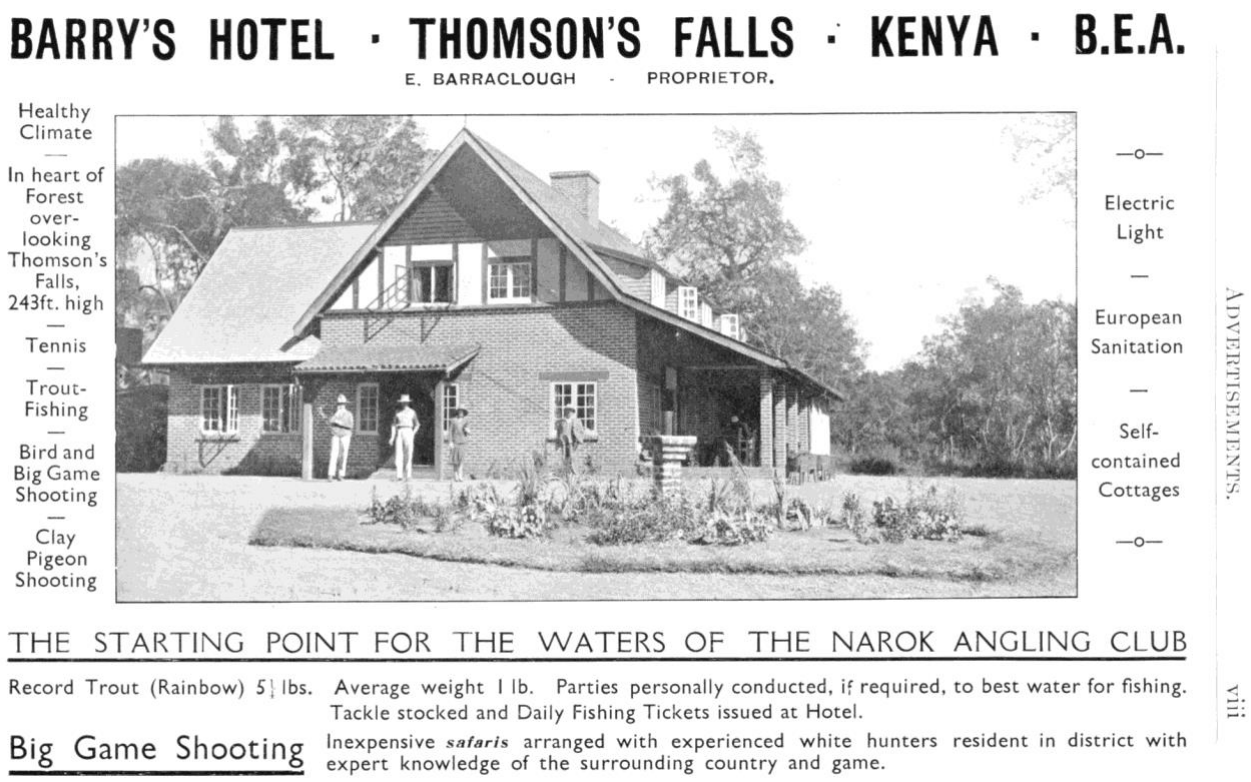
Estimated further working capital required for one year.

	£.
Rent.	25.
Insurance.	20
Stock.	100
Wages.	300
Advertisements	50
Liquor Licence.	50
	£ 545

He added a PS ‘Come out soon and keep me company’.

Bill decided that he could no longer withstand the onslaught from his elder brother and cabled Ernest on 14th April with the welcome news that he was arranging a temporary loan of £2,000 (£95,000). With the loan secured correspondence between Ernest and Bill ceased for the next three months during which time the hotel was completed and opened for business.

Barry's Hotel, officially opened on 1st August, 1931.

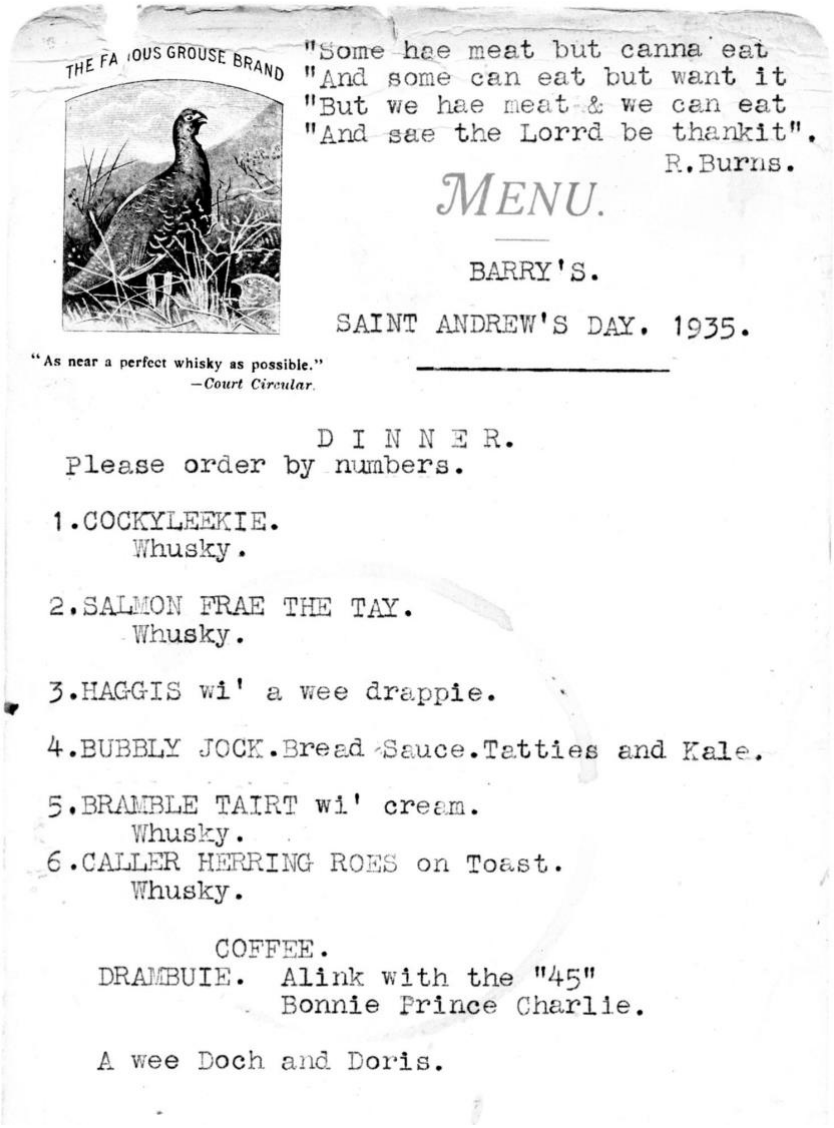


Advertisement for Barry's Hotel from "Angling in East Africa", 1933.

Ernest was a popular and very sociable hotelier and Barry's, with its bar, excellent dining room, tennis courts, and fishing (the nearby golf-course was not built until 1936), was the centre of Thomson's Falls' society. Among Ernest's closest friends were the farmers Jock and Dorothy Meiklejohn, whose farm was some 10 miles east of Thomson's Falls on the road to Nanyuki. Jock had seen service in the Royal Navy at Jutland and Dorothy had trained as a doctor at the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children. They lived a very spartan life trying to turn virgin Kenya bush into a viable farm, living in a mud and wattle collection of bandas with earth floors and very primitive facilities. During the early 1930s Dorothy's younger sister, Marjorie, visited her sister, and finding life in up-country Kenya to her liking, stayed on. Having learned the piano and violin (which she later taught) she quickly formed a band with another Kenya visitor, Wilfred Graham Moon, to play at local dances. As the band was half Marjorie's and half Moon's it was called "The Half Moon Band"! Romance blossomed between Ernest and Marjorie and they were married on 16th May, 1934, in the District Registry office at Nakuru, in the Rift Valley Province.

Ernest and Marjorie's wedding, 16th May, 1934. Jock and Dorothy Meiklejohn in attendance.

The hotel flourished with Marjorie giving Ernest the help he so desperately needed to make the hotel a success. Most of the money was taken in the bar but the dining room was also a great success and many a commemorative dinner was held at Barry's as this 1935 menu attests.



THE FA OUS GROUSE BRAND

"As near a perfect whisky as possible."
—*Court Circular.*

"Some hae meat but canna eat
"And some can eat but want it
"But we hae meat & we can eat
"And sae the Lorrd be thankit".
R.Burns.

MENU.

BARRY'S.

SAINT ANDREW'S DAY. 1935.

D I N N E R.
Please order by numbers.

1.COCKYLEEKIE.
Whusky.

2.SALMON FRAE THE TAY.
Whusky.

3.HAGGIS wi' a wee drappie.

4.BUBBLY JOCK.Bread Sauce.Tatties and Kale.

5.BRAMBLE TAIRT wi' cream.
Whusky.
6.CALLER HERRING ROES on Toast.
Whusky.

COFFEE.
DRAMBUIE. Alink with the "45"
Bonnie Prince Charlie.

A wee Doch and Doris.

During the war years Barry's Hotel was a popular staging post for Rhodesian and South African troops heading for the Abyssinian and North African campaigns and the bar walls and ceilings were completely covered with signatures and drawings of badges of the many regiments that stopped there. In the autumn of 1942, Ernest re-enlisted in the General Service Branch of the Army in Mombasa, reverting to the rank of Lieutenant (he had been a Major in WWI) in order to be able to serve as his age precluded him from joining up as a fighting soldier. While on duty Ernest contracted pneumonia. Penicillin had yet to be discovered and on 10th October, 1942, he died in Mombasa hospital with Marjorie at his side. He is buried in the Commonwealth War Graves section of Mombasa cemetery. Marjorie tried to run the hotel on her own but this proved to be impossible so she sold it the following year, re-married and moved to Northern Rhodesia. The hotel went through several changes of ownership and was re-named Nyahururu Lodge following Kenya's independence.

Martin Barraclough (Ernest's son, born Nairobi, 1936.)
December, 2013