

The X-Philes No.11

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I spent a couple of very enjoyable hours the other week talking about crosswords with Barbara Hall who edits and sets the puzzles for the Sunday Times, a job she has done for nearly 30 years.

Barbara is, as far as I know, Britain's longest serving (though not quite oldest) crossword compiler. She had her first puzzle published in 1938 in what was then the Evening News, and has been at it pretty constantly ever since.

The stories I enjoyed most were those she told about the time she spent in Zambia

where, in addition to serving as agony aunt for the African Mail, she set puzzles in English and at least four other African languages.

I thought of her this week when I scanned the Ghanaian papers for a crossword. I'm in Kumasi, the ancient capital of Ashanti, where I'm attending the Annual General Meeting of Kuapa Kokoo. "Kuapa" is a cooperative of about 40,000 cocoa farmers and I helped to set up the marketing company in London that sells their brand of Fairtrade chocolate.

Well, crosswords are

not that big in Ghana. On first asking I was shown People and Places, a kind of gossip rag that had a simple wordsearch. My hosts, unhappy at my disappointment (and clearly suspecting that the heat had diminished my tenuous grasp on reality), then rootled through all the other dailies in search of a puzzle. Nothing in the Daily Graphic. The cupboard of the Daily Guide was similarly bare. It was only when we turned, not quite in desperation, to the Mirror that we found Elite Word Puzzle No. 127 by

Ekow Michaels.

This was a "concise" rather than a cryptic puzzle and while some clues erred on the side of simplicity ("The capital of Kenya (7)", for instance), there were others that made me pause. "Tony ___ (5)." Now that rings a bell. Tony. Tony. No, don't tell me. Tall chap. Came to Ghana once, made all sorts of promises about what he would do for African farmers and was never seen again.

Blair. That's it. Tony Blair.

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