

# Roger Horrell, diplomat who helped to transfer power in Rhodesia and was later a senior figure at MI6 – obituary

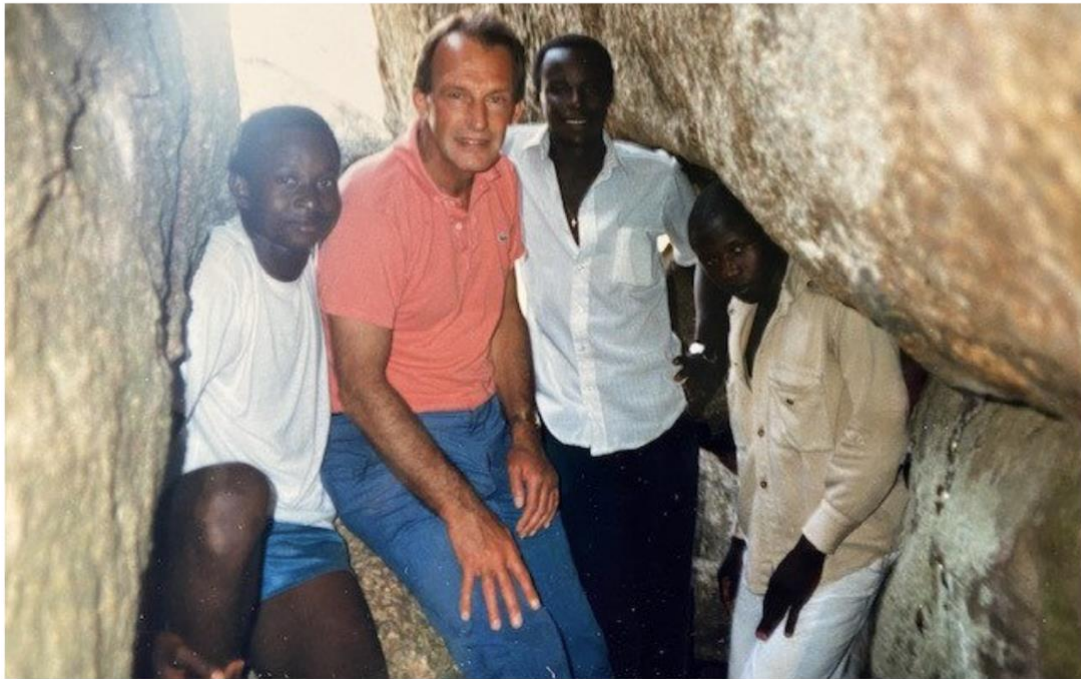
He was an SIS officer in Lusaka when the city was the centre of resistance to the Smith regime, and also forged good relations with the ANC

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*By Telegraph Obituaries*

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Roger Horrell in Africa: he had grown to love the continent during National Service in Kenya

Roger Horrell, who has died aged 85, was a senior MI6 officer who contributed significantly to the transfer of power from the white Rhodesian government to the black government of the newly independent Zimbabwe, culminating in the Lancaster House conference of 1979.

Africa became part of Horrell's life during National Service with the Devonshire Regiment at the time of the Mau Mau Emergency in Kenya. He fell in love with the country and developed an affection and respect for Africans. After leaving the army he joined the Colonial Service and in 1959 was posted back to Kenya as a District Officer. He served there until independence, winning the co-operation of often fiercely independent local chiefs through persuasion and subtlety.

On one occasion, however, he allowed himself to be influenced by a well-meaning Canadian woman into condemning witchcraft at a tribal

meeting. The result was mass defiance and a threatened riot, averted only by his promise to produce the District Commissioner promptly. The Commissioner, a devout Christian, wisely reassured the tribal chieftains that witchcraft would not be discouraged.

When Horrell handed over to his African successor his final report vividly illustrated the responsibilities of often youthful colonial officers – grazing schemes, irrigation, famine relief, elections, administration of justice, school building, encouraging school attendance, trade, sanitation, resolving land disputes, maintaining war graves, etc.

A constant problem, he said later, was dealing with criticism from some of the white settlers for focusing too much on the well-being of Africans.



On leaving the Colonial Service Horrell was recruited by the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, or MI6). After training he was posted to Dubai, then a British Protectorate, but his African experience was required and he was subsequently posted to Kampala, then, from 1976 to 1980, to Lusaka. Zambia was at the time home to militant refugees from the rebel Smith regime in Rhodesia, turning Lusaka into the centre of political resistance.

Ever since Smith's illegal declaration of independence in 1965 the issue of Rhodesia had made for strained and fractious relations between Britain and much of the Third World.

Lusaka became a focal point for British diplomacy in Africa and heading the MI6 station there was a key posting. Horrell made it his business to establish contacts with Rhodesian exiles of all tribes, shades and factions, getting to know them well and, in almost all cases, winning their confidence.

When Margaret Thatcher and Lord Carrington convened the Lancaster House conference in 1979 to negotiate the handover to majority rule in the new Zimbabwe, Horrell's work in winning the trust of the competing parties – and the intelligence he produced for the conveners – proved crucial.

Following Lusaka, Horrell spent the rest of his career in London. Given charge of MI6's African operations, he immediately faced a range of problems, from entrenched military rule in Nigeria, through two

insurgent wars in Angola and Mozambique, to maintaining stability in Zimbabwe, tackling the corrupt diversion of aid funds in various Commonwealth states, and finally to the process of change in South Africa.

He did much to improve the British government's understanding and acceptance of the key players in South Africa, deepening MI6's already well-established relationship with the ANC. This proved essential in supporting peaceful transition to majority rule.

Horrell was next appointed MI6's director of personnel and administration with a mandate to increase accountability and encourage a more self-critical culture, complementing the buccaneering ethos which, though responsible for many successes, needed modernising.



Although not universally welcomed at the time, this was later acknowledged to have improved both performance and accountability. It was also at this time that the Major government publicly acknowledged the existence of MI6, leading to its establishment by statute and to Parliamentary oversight.

In dealing with personnel matters, Horrell demonstrated a well-developed sense of fairness based on firm liberal foundations, displaying

sympathy and support for colleagues going through a wide range of personal and relationship issues.

That he was not chosen to become C – as the Chief of SIS is traditionally known – was a disappointment to many who had worked with him. It was felt at the time in Whitehall that there was need to bring on a new and younger generation of senior leaders, and so Horrell and most of his peers duly retired.

Roger Horrell was born on July 9 1935 at Dartmouth, the son of a butcher. Unusually, his father had knowledge of Latin and spoke French, a useful attribute when French and Belgian refugees arrived in the town in 1940. In February 1943 the German Luftwaffe raided Dartmouth and strafed the sea front, where young Roger was playing with a friend, narrowly missing them.

He attended Shebbear College, a private boarding school, where he excelled academically and in sport, playing rugby for Devon Schoolboys. He also had a talent for acting.

During his National Service he was Senior Under Officer at his Eaton Hall passing-out parade, receiving the Sword of Honour from Princess Margaret.

Following National Service, and with effective Latin tutoring from his father, he was accepted by Exeter College, Oxford, to read Modern History. He captained the college's rugby and cricket teams.

Horrell was appointed OBE in 1974 and CMG in 1988. His retirement was dogged by failing eyesight and worsening emphysema but he remained mentally active as an astute and talented bridge enthusiast, playing regularly at the Reform and Garrick clubs.

In 1970 he married Patricia Binns, with whom he had a daughter, and a son who predeceased him. He and his wife separated in 1975. Patricia and their daughter survive him.

**Roger Horrell, born July 9 1935, died May 21 2021**