

Phillips, Ernest Bernard (1892–1977)

RACHEL NORMA SURRIDGE, AND JOHN CHARLES SURRIDGE

Rachel Norma Surridge (nee Phillips) was the second daughter of E. B. Phillips. She was born in Kendu, Kenya. Rachel qualified as a teacher. In 1952 she married a young minister, Ronald Herbert Surridge, and together they served as missionaries in Nigeria and Ghana. Rachel taught in Adventist schools in British Union Conference and gave secretarial support to her husband when he served as Irish Mission president and North England Conference president.

John Charles Surridge is the second son of Ronald Herbert Surridge and Rachel Norma Surridge (nee Phillips). Born in London, he spent the formative five years of his childhood in West Africa with his missionary parents. After obtaining a first degree in electronics, Surridge attended Newbold College, and then served as a minister in Wales. He has also served as communication director and executive secretary of the British Union Conference.

Ernest Bernard Phillips, evangelist and teacher, was born in Stroud, Kent, on November 20, 1892, the youngest son of 10 children. His father was a regimental sergeant major in the Royal Marines.¹

Phillips, with several members of his family, became a Seventh-day Adventist, and in 1907 went to Stanborough Park Missionary Training College and completed the theological course. Although only a teenager, he held a series of Bible studies in Chatham, where a Mr. Bailey attended, was converted, went to study at Stanborough College, and finally became an ordained minister.

In 1912 Phillips answered a call to mission service, attended a short course in tropical medicine at Livingstone College, and at the age of 19 sailed on the SS Field Marshall to Mombasa. He commenced his ministry in Kenya Colony, East Africa, working in Kisumu, Gendia, and Weary Hill. He established the Karunga Mission station on Lake Victoria which, because of unhealthy conditions, was closed, the buildings dismantled, and the material used to build Kanyadota Mission. Much of the time he worked alone, and he later said that he even envied people in prison, because they at least had someone with whom to converse. However, he learned Swahili and Luo, becoming fluent in each, and translated many parts of the New Testament into these local languages.

During the First World War, when the Germans invaded South Nyansa, English missionaries were evacuated to a camp near the Kaimosi Station of the Society of Friends, not far from Kisumu. After the war many mission stations had been looted and damaged, and there was an uphill task of rebuilding. Phillips took part in brick building, carpentry, and cabinet making while helping to reconstruct a hospital. In 1917 he worked in Kamagambo, a mission station, some 40 miles inland, southeast of Gendia, where 37 people were baptized.

Phillips came home on his first furlough in 1920, and graduated from the ministerial course at Stanborough College. He held a campaign at Cambridge, and met a young woman with whom he had been corresponding, Lily Hugill, a student at Stanborough College. On June 22, 1921, they married, and on December 18 of that year they sailed from Southampton to Mombasa to begin mission service together.

They were appointed to reestablish the Busegwe station in Tanganyika (in present-day Tanzania), and worked there for several years. Their daughter, Joyce was born in 1923, and in 1925 a son, Bernard. Ernest was often away from home, mostly on foot, visiting and preaching. Supplies were difficult to obtain, mail from and to England took a long time, and they felt a keen sense of isolation. However, many were baptized and joined the church at Busegwe, and in 1926 Ernest was ordained to the gospel ministry at Gendia by W. W. Armstrong.



Ernest Bernard Phillips, March 25, 1947.
From the private collection of Rachel Norma Surridge.

The Phillips family returned home on furlough in 1927 to stay with Ernest's parents in Kent. While in England, their son Bernard died in an accident. He was buried in Gillingham, and the bereaved family returned to more mission service in Tanganyika, where Ernest was in charge of the Mwagala Mission station.

Tanganyika was a difficult area because of the climate and isolation. However, the Phillips family remained there from 1927 to 1931. Their nearest English neighbors were Harry and Ada Robson, who were at Ntusu Station many, many miles away. In 1928, a second daughter, Rachel, was born to Ernest and Lily at Kendu hospital in Kenya, which had been opened in 1925 by Dr. G. A. S. Madgwick.

Phillips made much of the furniture in their simple home. They faced constant problems of obtaining suitable food for the baby and drinking water for the family. They washed clothes in river water, as drinking water supplied from a 400-gallon water tank was too precious to use for washing. In fact, Ernest applied to the Mission board for an extra corrugated iron tank, but there no funds were available.

Their problem was that when the water tank was full, during the rainy season, the heavy pressure of the water caused it to spring leaks, often in awkward places. On one occasion Phillips took one tank down three times to fix the leaks which were difficult to solder. "But the Lord blesses us greatly in spite of the difficulties of getting supplies etc", Lily Phillips wrote. Lily taught the local women principles and practices to better care for themselves, their homes, and their families.

The greatest difficulty of isolation was reaching a doctor in times of illness. Late in 1930, Lily Phillips became ill with blackwater fever. The Phillips family had planned to return to England for Joyce' education, as she was nearly eight years old, no British education was available in that part of Tanganyika for children of that age. Lily was so ill that she could not walk or sit, so the back seat of the Robson's car was removed and replaced by sacks filled with sand for her to lie on. The journey to the nearest hospital took two days, through swollen rivers and rough roads. Though they reached the European hospital at Mwanza, on January 28, 1931, Lily Phillips died, and was buried there in the British section of the cemetery.

Ernest Phillips and his daughters stayed with the Robsons for several weeks while their few possessions were packed, then returned to England, where they stayed for a while at Ernest's parents' home on Canterbury Street in Gillingham.

Sometime later, Principal W. G. C. Murdoch appointed Phillips to teach at Newbold Missionary College. From 1931 to 1957 he gave unbroken service there. In 1933 he married Alice Gordon, a Bible worker from Glasgow. Their daughter Clemency was born in 1936.

While teaching at Newbold, Phillips began an extensive course of studies by correspondence at London University. He gained a bachelor's degree in 1936, a Master of Theology in 1939, and a diploma in Education from Oxford University in 1941. He was the first Seventh-day Adventist in Britain to obtain senior degrees in theology. He taught many subjects at Newbold College including New Testament Greek, Hebrew, Psychology, Church History, English History, Bible Survey, Epistles, and Bible Doctrines. He was affectionately known among his Greek students as "Philippos," and was admired for his sense of humor, his kindness, and his concern for all his students.

During three consecutive summer months, while not teaching students, Phillips ran evangelistic meetings in Hull, Leeds, and Sheffield.

After 26 years of service to Newbold College, Phillips was called to minister in the Irish Mission, and then in North England. He finally retired to the village of Binfield in 1963, where he continued to write articles for *Our Times* magazine, and sold many of them to people in the village. He taught Greek classes, counseled and ministered to married students at the college, and held Bible studies and prayer meetings in his own home.

He was once asked by his son-in-law, "You have made many sacrifices in your life. Would you do the same again?" He replied simply, "How can I say to my Savior when we meet, that I have made sacrifices for Him when they are compared with all that He has done for me?"

Ernest Phillips died after a short illness on June 4, 1977.

SOURCES

Surrige, Rachel, and David Marshall. "E. B. Phillips: A Window on Mission Life." *British Advent Messenger*, Vol 111, No.17 (2006). Accessed via https://www.andrews.edu/library/car/cardigital/Periodicals/Messenger_British_Union/2006/2006_17.pdf

Surrige, Rachel. "Life of Ernest Bernard Phillips" by Rachel Surrige. Accessed via <http://www.adventisthistory.org.uk/documents/ebphillips01.php>.

NOTES

The information in this article is based on the personal knowledge of daughter Rachel Surridge and draws on her previous articles: Rachel Surridge and David Marshall, "E. B. Phillips: A Window on Mission Life," *British Advent Messenger*, Vol 111, No. 17, 12,13 (2006), accessed via https://www.andrews.edu/library/car/cardigital/Periodicals/Messenger_British_Union/2006/2006_17.pdf; and "Life of Ernest Bernard Phillips" by Rachel Surridge accessed via <http://www.adventisthistory.org.uk/documents/ebphillips01.php?>

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