

50th Anniversary Photography Exhibition



Oman in the 1990s: Duke of Edinburgh,
Wilfred Thesiger and the Gulf War

1990-1994



THE ANGLO-OMANI SOCIETY

الجمعية البريطانية العمانية

As Oman developed economically and constitutionally, the relationship with Britain continued to widen and deepen. Following the exchange of State Visits senior members of the Royal Family became regular visitors to the Sultanate as did Ministers, leaders of the armed forces, business people, academics and specialists in many fields; the number of British travellers and tourists also increased steadily.

The Prime Minister, John Major noted during HM The Sultan's private visit to Britain in 1992 "The Sultan is a very senior ruler in the region and I very much value the advice and assistance that we receive from him on so many matters."

Sir Terence Clark, KBE, CMG, CVO was Ambassador to Oman 1990-1994 after serving as Ambassador to Iraq 1985-1989. Sir Terence Clark entered HM Diplomatic Service in 1955. He studied Arabic at SOAS and MECAS before embarking on a career largely in or dealing with the Arab world, interspersed with service in Europe and the Foreign Office.



Sir Terence Clark Presentation of Credentials 1990.

To learn more about this period of maturation for the Anglo-Omani relationship, the Anglo-Omani Society spoke to Sir Terence Clark about his experiences during his years as ambassador.

This article touches upon the many developments occurring in Oman during the early 1990s including the Gulf War, the royal visits from the UK, the reunion of Sir Wilfred Thesiger in Oman, the growing business and technical exchanges between Oman and the UK, and the moving of the Embassy from its historical premises in Muscat.

Sir Terence Clark Interview

What was your first contact with Oman?

I suppose I really began a long way back because my first Gulf posting after studying Arabic at the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies (MECAS) in Lebanon was to the British Political Residency in Bahrain which at that time had oversight over all the British diplomatic missions down the Gulf from Kuwait to Muscat. So, sitting in the Residency I was in almost daily contact with all these missions and became acquainted with Muscat under the then Sultan, HM Sultan Said.

But I first came to Oman at the beginning of 1972 when Muscat had become a revitalized capital city after the assumption of power by HM Sultan Qaboos. It had been decided to upgrade our mission from a Consulate-General to an Embassy. Donald Hawley had been sent in as the first Ambassador, and I was posted in to be his deputy for two years to help establish a proper functioning Embassy.

When did you take up the Ambassadorship in Oman?

I came to Muscat at the beginning of 1990 from Baghdad, where I had been Ambassador for nearly 5 years, including the last 3 years of the Iraq/Iran war, so I was more than ready to return to a country I knew well.

I drove there with my wife and our two Iraqi Saluki hounds, so that I could touch base with my colleagues in Kuwait, Bahrain, Doha and Abu Dhabi along the way; and it meant we could arrive with our own car and needed personal effects to start business straight away. On arrival, I found that I would be able to present my Credentials to the Sultan about a month later, so that meant I would be fully operational from an early stage.

Presenting Credentials was a very grand affair at the new al-Alam Palace, next door to the Embassy, where in full Diplomatic Service uniform, I was received to take the salute in front of a military band playing the two National Anthems, before I was ushered into the magnificent marbled hall with features in gold to hand my Credentials to the Sultan, making a short speech, recalling among other things the forthcoming celebration of the 200th anniversary of our treaty relations and my own previous acquaintance with Oman. The Sultan made a gracious reply. I presented my senior staff and then I had a private conversation with HM. It was all a far cry from the days when Donald Hawley presented his Credentials as the first British Ambassador in the modest villa in old Muscat, where Leslie Chauncy, a former British Consul-General and later adviser to the previous Sultan, had once lived.

My formal introduction to Oman was made much easier by the fact that I knew very well many of the leading figures who had been relatively junior officials twenty years before, so that I could phone them directly and arrange a chat with them informally. I was also helped by an early visit by Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd and accompanied him on a call on the Sultan in Salalah and on others in Muscat. All the while I was engaged in a busy programme of formal calls on all the Ministers and visits to all parts of Oman from Musandam to Dhofar so that I could submit within 3 months a formal despatch giving my first impressions of Oman in general and the excellent state of Anglo-Omani relations in particular.

Al-Alam Palace located in Old Muscat



Was it soon after this period that the Gulf War began?

Yes, this pleasant interlude was broken by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990 and I and my staff had to concentrate on the preparations to receive on 13 August a squadron of RAF Jaguars and some Nimrod surveillance aircraft to be based initially at Seeb Airport. We also had to deal with a number of British frigates operating up and down the Gulf to intercept illegal shipping to Iraq. Sometimes they would escort them into Muscat Harbour where we would have to deal with them. This led to a series of visits by senior military figures and Defence Secretary Tom King, all of whom needed to see the Sultan, who was down in Salalah for the summer. I remember in the middle of all this toing and froing, I had to accommodate twice the Duke of Gloucester on transit stops overnight. The long-standing and close defence relationship was fully tested as the RAF units were settled in and ships of the Royal Navy were supported on their periodic visits while monitoring hostile Iraqi shipping in the Gulf region.



Visit of Defence Secretary Tom King in August 1990

Do you remember HM Sultan Qaboos's response to these events?

Well, Kuwaiti-Omani relations traditionally were very close. The heads of state and ministers all knew each other very well, so it was a terrible shock to the system when Iraq quite unexpectedly occupied Kuwait. Oman has always played a role of intermediary, not only in Gulf regional affairs but also on a wider plane. Even during the time of the occupation and the aftermath, Oman maintained relations with Iraq, and Iran for that matter, in order to use its good offices if there was an opportunity during that time. So, there was lots for us to talk to the Sultan and his ministers about.

During this time there was also a Royal Visit to Oman from the Duke of Edinburgh, what do you remember of that visit?

In the rising tension in the Gulf, a three-day visit by the Duke of Edinburgh in December came as a welcome diversion and an occasion to demonstrate the close relationship between our two monarchies. The Duke of Edinburgh flew himself in, I might say, and landed his own plane at Seeb airport. He stayed at the Sultan's Palace at Bait al-Baraka, but he spent the first evening with us at the Embassy, where he unveiled a plaque recording the 100th anniversary of the Embassy building before a reception for leading members of the British and Omani communities and a private dinner with us.



The next day was equally busy with a visit to the RAF Nimrods after which he opened officially the new Embassy Commercial Section established in Ruwi to be closer to the business hub of Muscat and Matrah. In the afternoon, he attended a horse show, which he loved, before a grand dinner with the Sultan, when he presented him with a splendid representation of a Mesopotamian cuneiform tablet in the British Museum recording the earliest known mention of ancient Oman as Magan.



Reflecting his wildlife interests, his last full day with us was spent on a visit to the Oryx preservation project at Yalooni in the Jiddat al-Harasis, where he was delighted to see these magnificent creatures in their native habitat and to hear about the measures so successfully taken to preserve them. A final dinner with us at the Embassy for leading local figures, when he engaged everyone in conversation, rounded off a highly successful visit to promote a range of UK interests.



HRH presents to HM a replica of a Mesopotamian cylinder tablet.

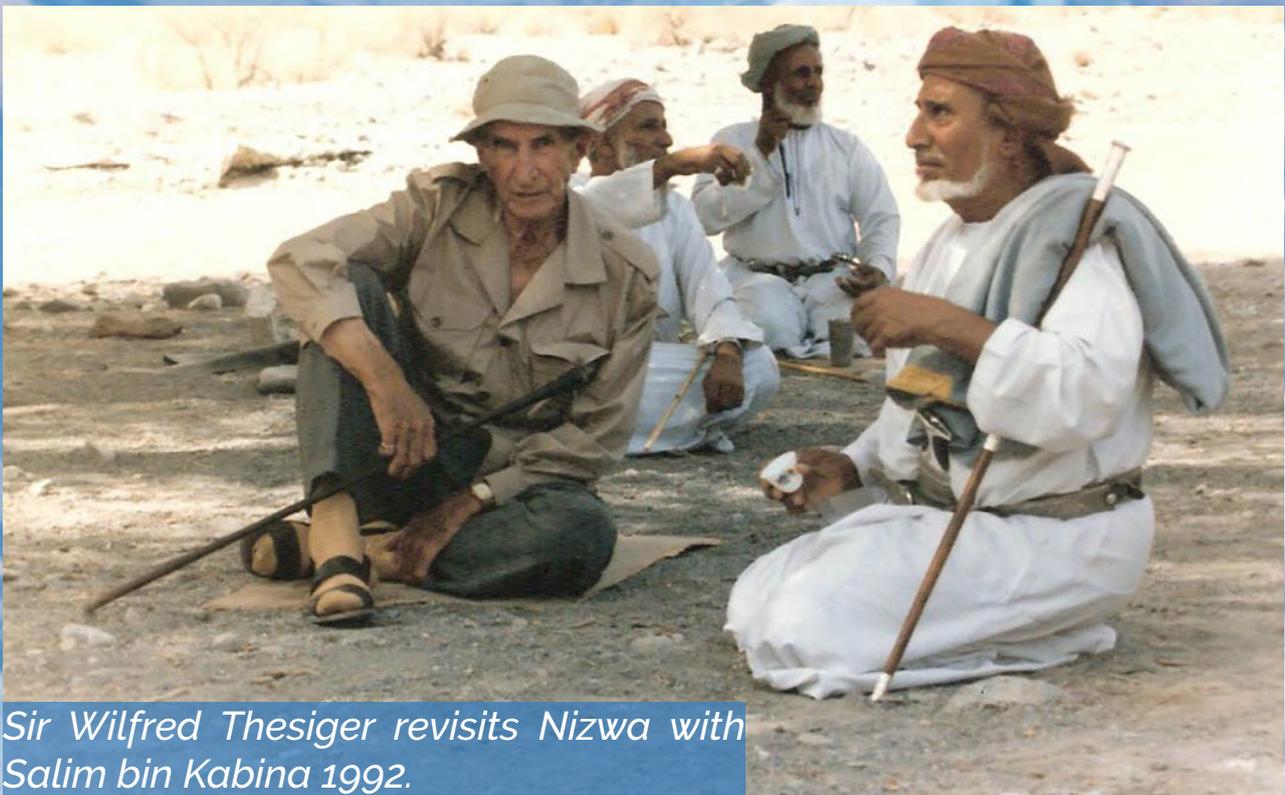
And was it soon after you had another official visit?

Yes, we had hardly recovered our breath – with our first Christmas and New Year in Muscat – when on 8 January our newly elected Prime Minister John Major paid a short visit, incidentally his first overseas visit as PM, to acquaint himself of the situation in the Gulf and to bolster local support for the Coalition against Iraq. He had an intense discussion with the Sultan over dinner and before departure the next morning visited the RAF Nimrods. He was also kind enough to take my eldest son on his aircraft home, as all Gulf airports were closed to international flights from 8 January in advance of the imminent opening of hostilities by the Coalition against Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. From then on and especially after the beginning of the ground offensive on 23 February, it was a period of intense political activity.

What was work like after the Gulf War?

It was a great relief all around when it was all over and I was able to pay a short visit to London for a meeting of the Anglo-Omani Joint Commission between Douglas Hogg, Minister for the Middle East and Yusuf Alawi, Omani Minister responsible for foreign affairs and their delegations. We met alternately in London and in Muscat, and it was London's turn, so I seized the chance to get back to London for about a week.

While I was in London, I visited the home of Wilfred Thesiger to speak with him and select some of his brilliant photos of his crossing of the Empty Quarter from October 1946 to February 1947, which the British Council planned to exhibit in Muscat and Salalah later in the year. This proved to be a very popular event, particularly for the younger generation of Omanis, for whom the old way of life in the desert portrayed so graphically in his b/w photos was largely unfamiliar.



Sir Wilfred Thesiger revisits Nizwa with Salim bin Kabina 1992.

Thesiger came out to open the exhibition in Muscat and received huge media attention as he was reunited with his Omani companions from that epic journey. We invited up to the Embassy all his former companions on the journey for a traditional Omani lunch and Thesiger and his companions were absolutely delighted.



HRH the Duke of Edinburgh bird watching in Dhofar

The exhibition then moved down to Salalah and was given a further boost by the Duke of Edinburgh performing the official opening during a fortuitous visit to Dhofar to break a long journey home. He also visited the British School there. But he was keen to do some bird watching and we spent a couple of days visiting the wooded areas along the Dhofar coast and the mountains behind. I always remember the look on his face when he was presented suddenly with a glass of foaming camel's milk! But he was a real trooper and took it all in good part by downing it. For the rest of his visit he showed his impressive knowledge of wildlife and kept us and his Omani hosts amused with tales of his worldwide travels.

Another royal visitor followed not long after at the beginning of 1992, when Prince Charles came for 3 days, during which he went on board HMS Sheffield on a working visit to Oman and had lunch with the Sultan. He also unveiled a plaque to mark the 20th anniversary of the British Council in Oman and saw something of measures being taken to preserve Oman's wildlife.

But then I heard that he wanted to relax a little and see something of Oman's scenic beauty. So, we paid an overnight trip down the coast to see the turtles coming in at night to lay their eggs on the shore. And then we flew up into the Jebel al-Akhdar the next day, and I took him on a walking tour around the top of the mountain where he was able to do a bit of watercolour painting. Although he found it a little difficult because every time he set up his easel to paint a scene, along would come a local Omani and, whereas as some people would walk behind the painter and look over his shoulder, the local Omani would walk around the front and immediately would want to talk to the Prince and ask him how he was. But it was all in good humour and his visit was all good for the Anglo-Omani relationship.



HRH Prince Charles visit to the British Council in February 1992.

Beyond the military and security relationship around the Gulf War what did your work focus on during your Ambassadorship?

Well, the relationship was indeed not all about defence. At this time Oman was bent on developing its resources and diversifying away from its dependence on oil exports. We could help through advice and training. For example, the Minister for Trade Richard Needham brought out a delegation of some 30 businessmen to forge new links with local businesses. The Minister for Energy Tim Eggar also came to co-chair with his Omani counterpart a seminar on technical exchange. Britain's close links to Oman's energy sector were given a further boost around that time when Shell was chosen as the partner to develop Oman's LNG business.



Tim Eggar MP, Minister for Energy and HE Maqbool bin Ali Sultan, Minister for Commerce and Industry

With the help of the British Council, we were also active in sending talented young Omanis to study in the UK under the British Scholarships for Oman scheme, funded by British businesses in Oman. Among them was the future Minister of Oil and Gas who gained his PhD on a BSO scholarship in the UK. In close collaboration with the British Council we also encouraged cultural and sporting links, such as visits by the BBC young musicians of the year, and contacts with the Football Association, including a visit by England's under-16s eleven for matches with their Omani counterparts.

What do you remember about the end of your ambassadorship, were there any important changes occurring during that time?

Yes, well it was against the background of this historically close relationship that a fundamental change was set in train. For some time the situation of the Embassy within the confines of old Muscat was becoming increasingly anachronistic. A new capital had sprung up in the more spacious area further up the Batinah coast. We were the only Embassy left in old Muscat: all the others were located in a new diplomatic quarter at al-Khuwair close to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other Ministries and the airport at Seeb. The Sultan had also indicated to us that he would like to redevelop old Muscat to accommodate a new palace on the waterfront for visiting heads of state and other dignitaries.

After much thought on our side and discussion with the Omanis, we came to the conclusion that we should accept the Omanis' generous offer of a new site for the Embassy at al-Khuwair, a superb site for a new Residence at al-Rawdha and financial compensation to effect the transfer. I duly signed an agreement at the beginning of 1993 to bring this all about; and from then on work proceeded apace, so much so that by the time I left Oman in June 1994, the shell of the new Embassy was up and I was able to deposit under the entrance a time capsule full of artefacts of the time to mark the occasion.



Sir Terence Clark depositing a time capsule in the new Embassy building in May 1994.



Sir Terence Clark's farewell audience with HM Sultan Qaboos and Sayyid Haitham bin Tarik in June 1994.

Leaving Oman was a very emotional moment for me. I had spent altogether about 6 ½ years of my life in the country and had forged many close friendships. In a long farewell audience of the Sultan, he revealed to me some of the changes he was planning for the future of the country and the succession in due course. He made it clear that he valued the partnership with the UK and looked to us to continue to provide the support that had stood both countries in good stead for centuries.

My family and I will always look back with pleasure on our time in Oman. We have been back many times since and have enjoyed these opportunities to renew contact with our warm-hearted and generous friends in a country that has made astonishing progress since the days I first knew it. I am glad that even in our rapidly changing world the fundamentals of our close relationship remain in place and seem likely to endure "unshook", as the treaty of 1800 said, "till the end of time or the sun and the moon cease in their revolving career".