

Memories of Iraq 1985-90

Sir Terence Clark

In March 1985, my wife and I set off from London to drive to Baghdad on my appointment there as Ambassador. We little imagined that it would be nearly five years before we were once more on the move by road – to Oman – in late January 1990. During those tumultuous years of the Iraq/Iran war and its aftermath, I had to adjust to working in a country that in so many respects was more like one of the Soviet satellites behind the Iron Curtain. In those closed societies, contact between foreign diplomats and the local population was positively discouraged.

Fortunately, I had already had experience of living and working in such conditions, and I knew that the best way to proceed was to establish what the limits on normal practice were and then to adjust to them. I soon found, for example, that although movement outside Baghdad involved making a detailed application for a travel permit two weeks beforehand, once obtained it could be used fairly elastically. So it was that I gradually managed to explore this vast country and acquire in the process an understanding of its complexities and a basis of knowledge for interpreting developments.

Our initiation was not at all encouraging. Even before leaving London, many of our friends had commiserated with us on a posting to a country under a brutal dictatorship locked in a war of attrition with Iran. As we drove across Turkey, the news became increasingly alarming, with reports of Iranian air raids on Baghdad airport, to which British Airways announced it would stop flying. Our daughter was supposed to be arriving there a week or so later; and we knew we would have to unscramble rapidly all our plans for her.

The road to the Iraqi border became a nightmare. In pouring rain, we negotiated our way through a never-ending stream of oil tankers coming out of Iraq and equally heavily laden juggernauts toiling in the opposite direction, with all the imports which could no longer enter by sea through the Gulf port of Basra. Worse was to come! Having reached our new home in Baghdad with an enormous sigh of relief, we suffered the shattering experience in the middle of the night of a strike nearby by an Iranian ballistic missile. This was the first of 69 such explosions while we were there. What a welcome to Baghdad, known historically in Arabic as *Madinat as-Salaam* (The City of Peace)!

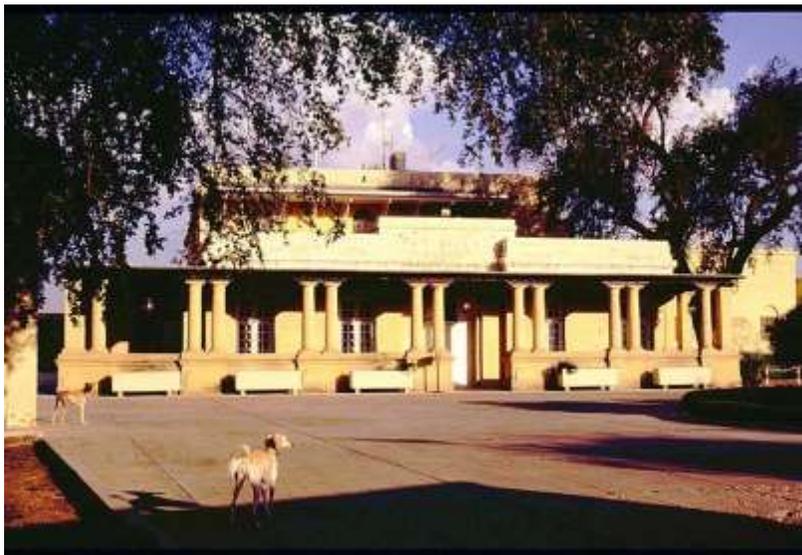


Image 1 - The British Embassy, Baghdad

My predecessor had described to me the state of virtual siege in which he had worked. Much of the area around the Embassy, once a maze of old houses with typical protruding wooden *Shanashil* windows, had been demolished and redeveloped. Action was in train on a Diplomatic Service Inspector's devastating report on the deterioration of the fabric of the former Ottoman mansion, known as Qasr Kadhim Pasha, which had housed our diplomatic representation in Baghdad since it was purchased in 1921. It was therefore with some trepidation that I paid my first visit to the Embassy. It proved an unexpectedly uplifting experience. The area round about had been transformed into a clean, modern estate with wide, tree-lined boulevards, and the Embassy had been completely renovated. I was met by a group of cheerful and dedicated British and local staff, working in surroundings redolent of the history of the British in Iraq. I felt a thrill as I passed through the portals to my office, where many illustrious names in British diplomacy had sat and looked out over the mighty Tigris.

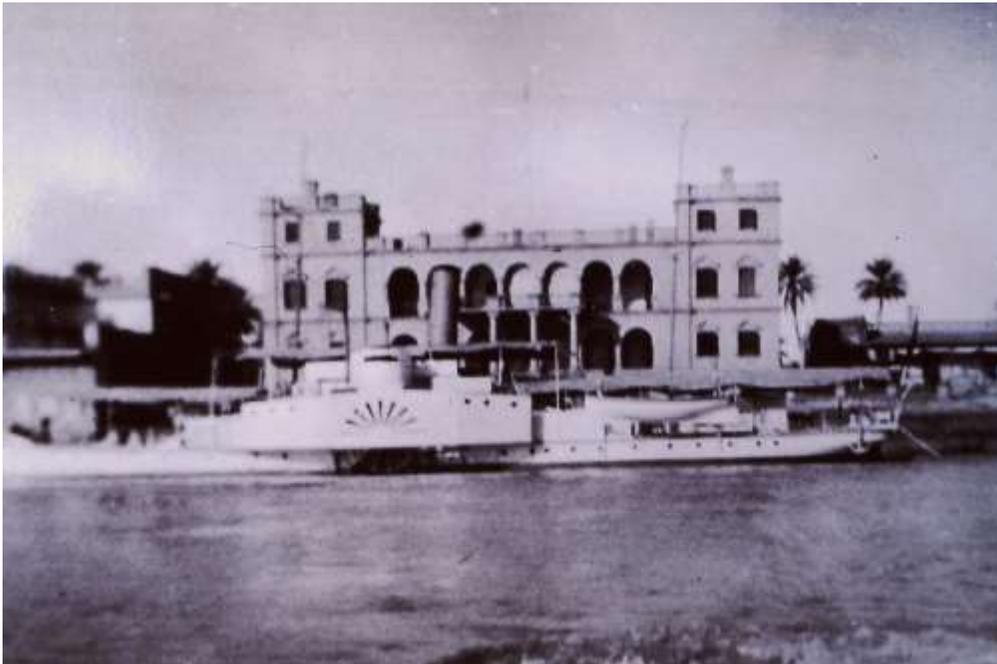


Image 2 - The former British Residency, Baghdad, as photographed by Gertrude Bell in 1911. Reproduced by permission of the Gertrude Bell Librarian, University of Newcastle

The riverfront opposite had not yet been changed by development and was marked by a number of buildings that were of particular interest in the history of Anglo-Iraqi relations. First among them was the once imposing edifice of the former British Residency, which had become the General Headquarters of the British forces in Mesopotamia in the First World War. This photograph by Gertrude Bell shows how it looked before the War – complete with the Resident's yacht! I asked for and rather to my surprise obtained permission to visit this former centre of British imperialism. In the meantime it had lost the towers at either end, which had become unstable, and had been converted into a museum of national costumes. As I went round, I was amused as my enthusiastic escort pointed out that this room was the room of “Miss Bell” and that room was the office of “Kokkus”, as Gertrude Bell, Oriental Counsellor, and Sir Percy Cox, Civil Commissioner, were generally known by the Iraqis 60 years previously. On the appointment of Sir Percy as the first British High Commissioner after the War, it was decided to establish him and his staff in the newly acquired Qasr Kadhim Pasha, where in turn he was eventually succeeded by the first British Ambassador in 1931.

To one side stood the grand residence of Sir Percy and his successors, which along with much else was sadly destroyed in the revolution of 1958. Only the billiard room remained, which subsequently became the Embassy club. However, the coat of arms and a plaque that had once formed part of the equestrian monument to General Maude, the liberator of Baghdad from the Turks in 1917, and had also been torn down in the revolution of 1958, had been rescued at the time and re-erected inside the courtyard of the Embassy. I also arranged for the re-erection there of a plaque that had once stood in the former British Consulate-General in Basra, commemorating 20 members of the Chesney expedition who had perished when the paddle steamer “*Tigris*” had sunk in 1836 while examining the possibilities for navigation on the Euphrates.



Image 3 - Equestrian statue of General Maude outside the Embassy gates before 1958. By permission of Mrs Fraser

I was intrigued to discover that standing immediately next to the old High Commission was the house of the first Iraqi Prime Minister, Abdul Rahman al-Gailani. It was not hard to see why many Iraqis thought then that, whatever the appearances of independence, the British were still directing affairs – as indeed they were! Even when the High Commission moved across the river the Iraqis noted little change in British influence and called the High Commissioner “*Mukhtar dhak as-Saub*”, which might be loosely translated as “the Boss across the river”! Jokingly, Iraqis would refer to me by this title, or as *Abu Naji*, a nickname which seems to have derived either from Gertrude Bell’s close friend and mentor on local affairs, whose name was Naji, or from our employment of many Iraqi Jews, among whom the name Naji was very common.

I was even more intrigued to discover just a little further along the riverbank the site of a much earlier British Residency, once occupied by the great British Orientalist, Claudius James Rich, who was the first British Consul-General from 1808-21. It had been converted into a hotel, now sadly demolished and replaced by the Baghdad Chamber of Commerce. However, next to it stood the home of Rich’s British Surgeon, which I was astonished to find was still called locally *Bait al-Hakim* (the doctor’s house)! On the opposite side of the street was another imposing building still called *Bait Lynch*, after the British Lynch family, who had set up the first navigation company operating on the Tigris in 1841.

However, in the early days many British travellers to Baghdad would come down the river from Mosul on a *kelek*, a simple wooden raft built on inflated goatskins. They would land at the pontoon bridge that then spanned the river and make their way gratefully to the British Residency for some home comforts after the rigours of their journey. Wartime restrictions prevented us from attempting such a journey, or indeed any kind of activity on the river, which remained nonetheless the focus of the city's life. By night, the banks were alive with cafes and restaurants and we were free to mingle with Iraqis enjoying the local speciality of *Mazgouf*. A huge fish of the carp family found in the Tigris would be selected alive from a tank, split in two and skewered on wooden spits in an upright position for grilling in front of a wood fire. By day, the bustling souq lay along the far bank and a stroll down River Street would bring us into contact with all the sights, smells and sounds of the Orient and one or two unusual features reflecting the cosmopolitan make-up of this big city.



Image 4 - "John the Baptist"

One of our favourites was known as “John the Baptist”. He was a silversmith who made the distinctive Amara silverware inlaid with designs in black, a trade peculiar to members of the sect known as Sabaeans or Mandeans, mistakenly referred to by Westerners as the Christians of St. John the Baptist. This little-known sect, neither Christian nor Muslim, had their own Syriac-type language and required running water for their rites, so they tended to be found living along the twin rivers. I once saw a Sabaeen wedding performed by the side of the Embassy, in which the bride and groom with their families and friends, all dressed in pure white cotton wraps, entered into the river and immersed themselves in the muddy water as part of their nuptial rituals.

Further down the souq were the carpet cleaners, who pounded Persian rugs with poles to beat out the dust before scrubbing them with soap powder and dousing them with water from the river – always a colourful and vibrant sight. In the stream of people came vendors with wooden trolleys selling whatever fruit and vegetables were in season, including such unfamiliar delicacies as *Nabuq*, a small green kind of apple, *Chimmeh*, gritty black truffles or *Shalghram*, turnips boiled with date syrup. The physiognomies of the people showed their different origins. Tall Bedouin, their aquiline features swathed in black or red chequered headcloths, strode along with their waggling camel sticks and their swaying gold-trimmed brown abayas. Broad-shouldered, baggy –trousered Kurds, sometimes with blue or green eyes, carried great loads of merchandise on their back, held in place by a woven band passed round their forehead. Black-gowned women fluttered by, some with tribal tattoo marks on their face and others with blue eyes betraying their Caucasian blood.

The end point of our stroll was always the carpet souq. Here it was always peaceful, and the merchants, who became our friends, would offer tea as refreshment – and show their latest acquisitions. For centuries pilgrims have come to Baghdad and the holy cities of Kerbela, Najaf and Samarra, selling their prayer rugs and carpets to pay their way. Carpets and rugs have also been traded with the Caucasus and Iran, or manufactured locally by the Kurds in the north and the Bedouin around Samawa in the south. So there was always the prospect of learning about the different types, and occasionally of finding something unusual to buy. The souq was also a good place to get the feel of how the real economy was doing.



Image 5- The great arch at Ctesiphon

To escape the oppressive atmosphere of Baghdad, we would often turn to the nearest centre of attraction for an afternoon's visit outside the city, the great arch of the banqueting hall of the imposing palace at Ctesiphon. This is attributed to the Sasanian King Khusraw 1, who reigned in the middle of the 6th century AD, but it is probable that he rebuilt the ruin of the palace of a 3rd-century Sasanian king called Sapor. At over 33m high and more than 23m across, the arch is said to be still the widest single-span vault of unreinforced brickwork in the world. It never failed to impress. Moreover, just across the river were the ruins of another former capital, Saluqiya (Seleucia), where a walk with my Salukis provided both a reminder of another great civilisation that once flourished here and an opportunity to meet contemporary Iraqis informally.

About 100km north of Baghdad on the east bank of the Tigris stands Samarra, which was another great favourite of ours. Samarra is one of the four places of pilgrimage for the Shia, who come to worship under the golden dome over the shrines of the 10th and 11th Imams, Ali al-Hadi and Hasan al-Askari. But our goal was always old Samarra. The Abbasid Caliph Muatasim decided he did not like Baghdad and built a magnificent new capital at Samarra, which for some 60 years in the 9th century was the wonder of the age. It was meticulously planned on a geometric grid system with 20-mile-long boulevards dividing up the palaces, residential and commercial areas, mosques, barracks, stadium, racecourse, and a deer park, where I used to exercise my Salukis, though the deer were long gone. Much of it was being excavated and restored while we were there and the great spiral minaret of the vast Friday mosque, clearly echoing the ziggurats of ancient Mesopotamia, and the Caliph's palaces on either side of the river, conveyed some idea of its earlier grandeur.

Samarra is said to derive from the Arabic *surra man ra'a* – 'happy was he who saw it'. However, for the nearly 10,000 British and Indian soldiers captured by the Turks at Kut al-Amara in one of the most ignominious defeats for Britain of WW1, it cannot have been such a happy sight. They were conveyed here by train and, as the line ended there, they were forced to walk into internment in Turkey, most of them succumbing to fatigue and disease on the way. Iraq has many legacies from WW1, such as cemeteries full of memorials to men from Indian Army units with such evocative names as Skinner's Horse, but one that made a vivid impression on me was a curious monument shaped like Cleopatra's needle that I discovered standing all alone on a hilltop in the Jabal Hamrin.

I took my duties as Honorary Vice-President of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq very seriously, and tried to visit all the sites with which British archaeologists were associated. Within half a day's drive south of Baghdad there were so many archaeological sites that we were spoilt for choice for a Friday's excursion. These visits were made all the more pleasurable and useful when digging was going on. Then we could use the dig camp as a base for seeing our Consular charges and for exploring wider in areas where there were few facilities for visitors. So we saw the great ziggurat at Aqar Quf, still standing nearly 60 m high, though it was even higher when it was built as the focus of the great Kassite city in the 2nd millennium BC.

From there to Babylon and its famous lion was only a short journey, but the contrast could not have been sharper. Babylon is a vast site, only a fraction of which has been excavated. When we first went there it required an expert guide to point out the mud-brick foundations of temples and palaces among the dusty spoil heaps and pits left by the first German excavators. By the time we left Iraq, Babylon had been rebuilt by an army of Sudanese and Egyptian labourers with dazzling yellow bricks up to a height of 30m or more. It was rumoured that every fifth brick bore Saddam Hussain's name, in emulation of Nebuchadnezzar, who ruled Babylon in the 7th century BC. Saddam liked to present himself as one of his successors, and one evening when we were attending the official opening of new

Babylon, an incident occurred that must have caused a few heads to roll. Dominating the opening procession of young men and women in Babylonian costumes were two tall palm trees, each displaying a huge portrait in profile – Nebuchadnezzar to the left, bearing a remarkable resemblance to Saddam on the right. But suddenly, to the huge amusement of foreign observers, Saddam’s portrait began to slip slowly down the tree. Little figures could be seen trying desperately to hoist it up again, but to no avail. Was it the curse of Nebuchadnezzar on this impostor? We also witnessed the construction of three artificial hills, bulldozed to a height of 75m, on which it was planned to recreate the famous hanging gardens, with the modern touch of a lift to the top and a cable car connecting them. Westerners generally looked askance at redevelopment of such dubious authenticity, but for the crowds of Iraqis, who flocked there to walk and picnic, it created a much more vivid impression of their glorious past.



Image 6 - The rebuilt walls of Babylon

After the winter in Iraq, which could be surprisingly cold and wet, it was always a delight to head north in time for the Kurdish spring festival of Naw Ruz. The countryside would be green and covered with wild flowers for a brief period before the onset of the ferocious heat of summer. One springtime found me near Lalish, the spiritual centre of the Yazidis, and I joined in the festivities there. The shrine of Shaikh Adi is set in a delightfully green wooded valley north of Mosul. I had to leave my car at a small stone bridge and walk the rest of the way over holy ground in my stockinged feet. The ground was muddy and my Ambassadorial feet looked less than dignified as I sat down cross-legged at lunch with the Mir, their hereditary leader. I was taken to their sanctuary, whose portal is decorated with mystic signs, including a large black snake. Inside it was pitch dark, except for a little light in one corner coming from spluttering wicks dipped in a saucer of oil to illuminate the simple tomb of Shaikh Adi. My guide was a villainous-looking eunuch with long ringlets hanging from his temples. He was in charge of the sanctuary and the women who worked there. I was happy for him to lead me out into the sunlight again and on to the neighbouring shrine of Shaikh Shams ad-Din, below whose fluted dome was a pool of crystal clear holy water, fed, it was claimed, direct from the sacred spring of Zemzem at Mecca!



Image 7 - Entrance to tomb of Shaikh Adi at Lalish

The mountainous area around Mosul is full of different sects. In addition to the Yazidis, there are, for example, the Shebeks, who are believed to be Kurdish Shia but have their own dialect and no mosques. Then there are the Failis, who are certainly Kurdish Shia. Unfamiliar denominations of Christians are also to be found: Syriac Orthodox Nestorians and Jacobites, with their corresponding Uniate branches, Syriac Catholics and Chaldeans. I was fortunate enough to be present when the late Chaldean Patriarch Badaweel was installed in a glittering open-air ceremony in Baghdad, attended by representatives of the far-flung communities in Australia and the United States. As the Christians emigrate to these distant lands both through economic necessity and, increasingly, Muslim fanaticism, so these once flourishing churches and monasteries decline. We used to visit Mar Mattai, a Syriac Orthodox monastery not far from Mosul, which stands high on a hill with a sweeping view down to the plain below. With only a handful of monks left at that time, it continued only with a heavy government subsidy, and I noted that it was visited on high days and holidays by local people of different religious persuasions as a kind of national monument.



Image 8 - Mar Mattai Monastery

Just a few kilometres away to the southeast is one of the most impressive sites in Iraq, the great Assyrian capital of Nimrud. In the middle of the 19th century, the British archaeologist Austen Henry Layard excavated the colossal winged bull-men and stone reliefs of scenes from the triumphs of the Assyrian kings with such ringing names as Sargon, Ashurbanipal and Shalmaneser, which now amaze visitors to the British Museum. Fortunately, some of the reliefs were reburied and excavated again a century later by another generation of British archaeologists under Max Mallowan, to be exposed in situ for the Iraqis to see. Max Mallowan was the husband of the crime novelist Agatha Christie, who wrote *Murder in Mesopotamia*, drawing on her experiences there. I was shown a small locked room on the site where, I was told, she used to write and where her straw hat still hung on a hook behind the door. Sadly, after the key was produced and the door opened, there was no hat! Sometime later, the Iraqi archaeologist who showed us round noticed a depression in the tiled floor of one of the palace buildings. Suspecting a hidden chamber underneath, he instituted a dig and was rewarded with the most spectacular find of kilos of dazzling gold jewellery, ornamenting the remains of an Assyrian princess, which we later saw displayed in Baghdad.



Image 9 - A carved relief at Nimrud

To the southwest of Mosul lies an equally but differently impressive site, the great city of Hatra. It is generally ascribed to the Parthians but its origins go back much farther to Assyrian times. It is unlike any other site in Iraq because the monumental buildings are built of stone rather than mud brick. The Greeks and Romans were here, and their influence can be seen in the statues to their gods – Apollo, Hercules, Eros, Hermes and Poseidon. Hatra survived many attacks throughout its history, but finally succumbed to the Sasanian King Sapor in AD 241, and was left as a ruin until its restoration in modern times.

In Mosul itself, we often dropped in at the dig house whenever teams from the British Museum were living there. It was set inside the walls of another Assyrian capital, that of Sennacherib at Nineveh. Little remains above ground to indicate the splendour of the palaces, libraries and gardens that he built, but high walls still surround the city. Once while we were there, British archaeologists uncovered one of the gates into the city which had collapsed in an onslaught, burying beneath it the soldiers and their equipment for nearly 2,400 years.



Image 10 – Hatra

An onslaught of a different kind once took place on the former British Consulate in Mosul. In April 1939 demonstrators had stormed the building, believing nationalist propaganda that the British had been implicated in the death of King Ghazi in a driving accident. Consul Monck-Mason had gone out onto the steps to reason with them but was felled from behind by a pickaxe with such force that it not only killed him but also knocked a hole in the steps. I discovered the old Consulate with its distinctively crenellated roof still standing not far from the main railway station. The owner kindly showed me around, referring to his sitting-room as ‘the Consul’s office’ and the adjacent room as ‘the accountant’s office’. He confirmed the hole in the steps but said he had repaired the damage. I later found Monck-Mason’s grave in a little cemetery off the road to Telafar to the west of Mosul.



Image 11 - The former British Consulate in Mosul

Telafar was itself another jewel to explore. It is a small, mainly Turkoman, town dominated by a restored Ottoman castle. From its flat roof you have one of the most evocative views as the sun sets to the west over the great plain of the Jazirah, throwing into relief more than 200 mounds, each representing a site that was occupied in antiquity. Nowhere else in Iraq, a country so abundant in archaeological sites, conveys such a striking impression of continuous civilisation over millennia. British archaeologists were excavating one of these mounds, called Tell al-Hawa, and it was a moment of great excitement on our first visit to stumble on a piece of a cuneiform tablet, as we toiled up the steep slopes to the acropolis on top. A number of such tablets were found, which identified this part of the site as a temple restored by the Assyrian King Shalmaneser III in the 9th century BC.



Image 12 - Former synagogue in Ana

I once drove right across the Jazirah from Telafar to the Euphrates, and found that the Chinese were building a great network of raised canals for sweet water and ditches for saline water to irrigate what was planned to be Iraq's breadbasket. The Euphrates had already been dammed in two places, creating an enormous lake at Haditha, where great wooden waterwheels once lifted the river water to irrigate the land. Another lake was forming behind the dam at Ana and we hurried to explore this picturesque old town before it disappeared under the water forever. Its 14th-century mosque with its distinctive octagonal minaret was being rescued by sawing it into sections for re-erection in the new Ana, but its much older synagogue and other fine old buildings were eventually inundated.

Lower down the Euphrates, we once mounted an expedition to retrace the old camel mail route that came that way from Damascus. We started from a pretty oasis called Ain Za'zu and struck out due west to find the old staging posts along the route. A Bedouin guide showed us the way to the first at Qasr Khubbaz. We camped with his words about a wolf that had killed some 50 head of sheep there a day or so before ringing in our ears. We saw the huge wolf pads in the mud. Another Bedouin led us on to the next post in the desert at 'Amij where his family was camped and his wife was weaving on a primitive loom. From there we navigated across the sands to the Wadi Hawran and down to Rutba, a fascinating town in the triangle bounded by Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria. It has been an important staging post for centuries, as the stone-lined Roman wells bear witness.

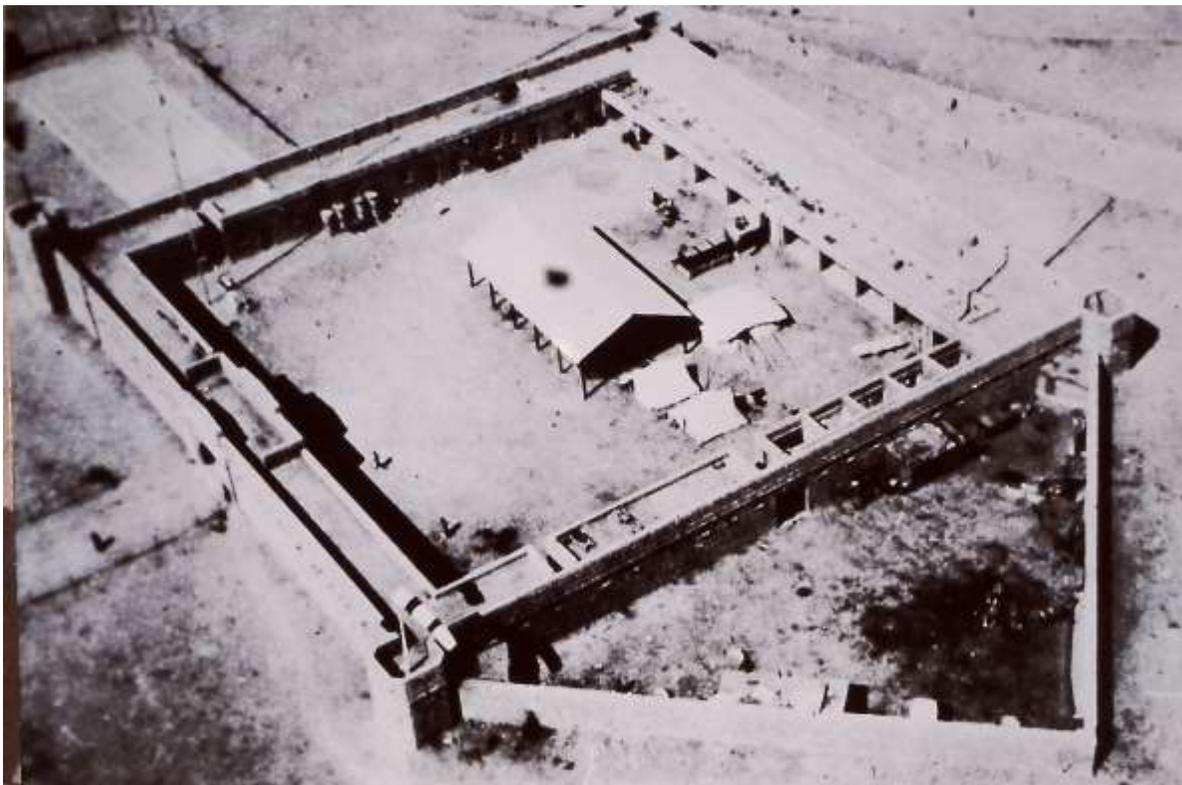


Image 13 - The Nairn Resthouse in Rutba in the 1950s. By permission of Mrs Fraser

We set out to find the old staging post of the Nairn Bus Company, which after WWI until the 1950s ran a regular service, at first of cars and later of articulated buses, from Beirut to Damascus and across the desert to Baghdad. We found a four-square crenelated building that looked right and was indeed right, though it was now the police station. Nevertheless, I enquired whether we might look round and a delighted Commander showed us the former travellers' rooms around a central courtyard, which had been turned into prisoner cells.

From Rutba back to Baghdad there is now a six-lane highway, but it follows the old Nairn route to Falluja and Ramadi. Between these two towns stands a restored khan, one of many along the main routes across Iraq. It is known as Khan al-Nuqta or Khan Dhari. On visiting it, I recalled that it was here that on 12 August 1920 a distinguished British army officer, Colonel Gerald Leachman, was murdered with a shot in the back at the order of the local Shaikh Dhari. It was a signal for a revolt of the tribes along the Euphrates and for a while anarchy reigned.



Image 14 - Ukhaidhir castle

Other pilgrim khans we used to visit were Khan al-Ruba' and Khan al-Nusf, respectively a quarter and a half of the way from Kerbela to Najaf. Sometimes we would strike out straight across the desert from Najaf to Khan al-'Atshan, which is believed to have been an Abbasid hunting palace, and from there we would navigate our way across the sand to the lonely Abbasid tower called Minar Mjidda, before dropping down from the plateau towards the shimmering waters of Lake Razzaza. Here stands the 8th-century Arab castle of Ukhaidhir and close by the ruins of a 4th-century church, as a reminder that at that time the Arab tribes in this area were Christian. Once, when we were camping there, we were awoken by a great commotion, as my Salukis had ambushed a fierce wild cat, later identified as the very rare Gordon's wild cat (*Felis sylvestris gordonii*).

To get a feel of the Shia heartland, we would often visit the historic towns of Kerbela, Najaf and Kufa. On one occasion at Kerbela, one of the Sayyids, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, volunteered to take us inside the shrine of Hussain ibn Ali, martyred here in AD 680 in a battle that led to the great divide between the Sunnis and the Shia. This was exceptional for non-Muslims. The shrine lies below a shimmering golden dome on the outside and a glittering mirror mosaic in the *Muqarnas* or stalactite style on the inside. At the tomb itself, supplicants clung to the surrounding grille, whispering prayers, perhaps for someone whom they had recently buried in the bewildering cemetery nearby in the Wadi al-Salaam, where the graves stand in serried ranks pointing towards Mecca. The pictures of young men attached to them bore silent witness to the thousands of casualties of the war with Iran.



Image 15 - Marsh Arabs

One day, as we drove into Kerbela, we were astonished to see that a square near the shrine was covered with thousands of live ducks and coots, secured by string round their legs. It was the migration season and they had been caught on the nearby marshes. We later arranged a trip from Chubaish into the marshes, which were accessible only in daylight, as at night they were the haunt of marauding bands of deserters and rebels. Even so, we had to have an armed escort as we took to the water in a *Mashhuf*, one of the local high-prowed canoes that conveyed us swiftly through the narrow passages in the high reeds. Here and there were clearings, where the marsh Arabs had established their *Mudhif*, distinctively arched thatched houses, and eked out a living from fishing and the husbandry of their water buffalo. Of course, we also had to go to the showpiece of Saddam's Village, to which piped water and electricity had been supplied, as well as a floating school and clinic.



Image 16 - Former British Consulate, Basra

From the marshes, the nearest place to stay was Basra. It could, however, be a dangerous place at that time, as it was within easy shelling distance of Iran. Basra was where British involvement in Iraq had begun through the East India Company in 1635. I could not find any vestiges of the old Residency or the coaling station we once had there but I did locate the former British Consulate-General, sadly in ruins. I also found the old Shatt al-Arab Hotel, still full of relics of former colonial times, when visitors from India invariably stayed there.

Before leaving Iraq, I determined to fill in two remaining blanks on my mental map of British diplomatic representation in the country: the former Consulate in Kirkuk and the Vice-Consulate in Diana. Kirkuk was easy to visit, as we had dealings from time to time with the oil company there. I was unable to find the Consulate but it was like stepping back half a century when I entered the oil company's clubhouse. The wood-panelled bar and furniture dated back to the era when the largely British-owned Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) ran operations here. Some of the older engineers spoke nostalgically of those good old days, though they were justly proud of their proven ability to run the show themselves. Of course, we had to go to the famous Baba Gurgur well, where it all began in the late 1920s, to see the oil bubbling up through the ground, as it has been doing since far back in antiquity. Kirkuk citadel is also famous as one of several places claiming to be the oldest site of continuous human occupation. It stands on a high mound dominating the town and once housed a colourful community, predominantly of Kurds and Turkomans, but it was deliberately and roughly Arabised by Saddam's regime to ensure the loyalty of the people in such an economically vital area.



Image 17 - Rowanduz Gorge

Getting to Diana was much more difficult, as it lies in the Rowanduz Gorge not far from the border with Iran. Although by then the war with Iran was over, it remained a sensitive area. My Kurdish driver and I were in the area one day and drove up from Sulaimaniya to Arbil, which also lays claim to be the oldest continuously inhabited town, and Sarsang, once a ski resort, to enter the Gorge. As

we drove along the British-built Hamilton Road, it was late in the year and the autumnal colours of the trees on the steep slopes, down which torrents cascaded from the snow-topped mountains, made it hard to imagine that this was the Middle East. Eventually, we reached Diana, which is in a most dramatic setting, nestling on a ledge overlooking the torrent in the bottom of the Gorge far below. I chanced upon the village priest, an Assyrian, who took me to the site of the Vice-Consulate, unfortunately transformed into a helipad. The post had been opened in the days of the British Mandate, when there had been prospects of developing trade between Iraq and Iran through the Gorge. It never materialised, and the lonely Vice-Consul before WWII spent his time writing learned reports on the blood feuds and politics of the warring Kurds.

We departed Iraq eventually in the full expectation of returning to revisit friends and exploring even more widely on our way home from the Gulf in 1994. However, the cataclysmic invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1991 changed all that, and we were left with only the memories of a fascinating country and a warm and generous people, who deserved better than their fate.