

## Talk to IBBC on 9 July 2016 on The Basrah Museum by Sir Terence Clark

Britain has had something of a special association with Basra going back a long way; back, in fact, to 1635 when Britain made its first tentative entry into Turkish Arabia, as Iraq was then known. The East India Company led the way, apparently believing that its trade, which was hampered by numerous obstacles in Persia, might run more freely under the Turkish flag, it sent a ship to Basra with a small cargo of woollen cloth and trade was good. From this simple beginning developed a trading and political relationship that has continued off and on for getting on for 400 years.

In 1641 the East India Company secured from the Ottoman Governor ground near the custom house in Basra for an agency or factory and the promise of trade in pearls, Arabian horses and dates. As the returns were good it was decided to make the factory permanent. Basra became one of the EIC's most famous centres of exchange. This fortunate situation did not last for long, because Dutch competition became too strong, their goods flooded the market and the EIC decided in 1660 to close the factory. Trade continued on an occasional basis over the following years until about 1723 when a factory was again established at Basra. In 1764 the EIC representative was recognised by the Ottomans as the first British Consul and as the first among all foreign representatives. He enjoyed considerable powers and privileges: for example, the right to protect British merchants and travellers and to regulate the departure of British vessels; he and his staff were exempt from various Turkish taxes. In addition, he enjoyed immunity from arrest and freedom of travel within the country when 'he should be allowed to wear a white turban, sabre, bow or other warlike instruments'. At that time the Basra agency or factory was situated near the southern bank of the Ashar creek at a short distance from the Shatt al-Arab and a little to the east of the pasha's residence, which was roughly in the middle of the native town. There was also a country house or branch of the factory at '*Belvoir*' on the right bank of the Shatt al-Arab about four miles from Basra at that time. '*Belvoir*' was possibly identical with Ma'qil, where the EIC's resident later bought a property and resided.

Following Bonaparte's invasion of Egypt in 1798, the British government was very much exercised by the threat to its interests in Asia from the appearance of the French navy in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. The adequacy of British representation at Baghdad in the form of a native agency since 1781 was brought under review in 1798 and, after much discussion of moves to frustrate Bonaparte's plans, a British representative was appointed 'Resident at the Court of Baghdad'. But Baghdad was still secondary to Basra in importance for Britain.

The Ma'qil or *Belvoir* site had been in British possession since about 1775 and the British Consul had his residence there. The property also included storerooms, a coal depot, a wharf and a dock. British consuls continued to reside there until 1870, when they established a new residence some 2 miles outside Basra town, which was to remain in British possession for nearly a century. The consulate buildings, owned since 1895 but occupied since about 1870, became uninhabitable at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the foundations subsided, and in 1903 a fine new building was built on the same site. Responsibility for the place had been transferred from the Government of India to the British Government and the first British consul, albeit with the Polish name of Wratislaw, assumed charge in December 1898 but by now the post had come under the direct supervision of the Baghdad Consul General. The building remained in British

occupation until 1967, when relations with Iraq were temporarily broken over Britain's alleged support for Israel in the so-called Six Days War. The Consulate-General was reopened in 1968 and functioned until 1971, when relations were broken off again for Britain's perceived failure to prevent Iranian occupation of the Tunb islands belonging to the UAE. It remained closed thereafter for economic reasons. The building suffered damage from Iranian shelling in February/March 1986 and it suffered further depredation and looting in the aftermath of the occupation of Basra by British forces and the collapse of the Ba'athist regime in April 2003. It is now in a sorry state.

The special relationship between Britain and Basra was further strengthened in the two world wars. When war was declared on Turkey on 6 November 1914, a British/Indian advance guard was landed at Fao to move up the Shatt al-Arab to protect the refinery at Abadan on neutral Persian territory. The main expeditionary force followed and occupied Basra. There was then none of the looting and pillaging of the kind that marred the return of British forces in 2003, because special police units had been prepared in India and despatched to Basra to maintain law and order in the town as the expeditionary force continued the campaign to drive the Turks out of the Basra region. The consequences for not following that precedent in 2003 proved to be extremely damaging to Britain's image in southern Iraq.

The situation in Iraq at the beginning of WWII was complicated. The war in Europe was going badly for the Allies, the Axis powers were making open blandishments to Iraq and there was uncertainty in the country generally about whose side Iraq was on. The British government, alarmed at these developments, decided to secure Basra and as much as possible of Iraq's other centres and means of communication. Once again troops were despatched from India and remained in the country until 1947, with notably an air force base at Shuaiba, outside Basra, which was returned to Iraqi control only in April 1955.

After Coalition forces occupied Iraq in 2003, the Embassy was re-opened in Baghdad, albeit for security reasons on a different site within the so-called Green Zone from the former Embassy by the Tigris River, which was closed after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the Consulate-General was re-opened in Basra for the first time since 1971, albeit also for security reasons in a different location. Initially, it was co-located with the British military headquarters, first in downtown Basra (near the site of the new Museum) and then at Basra airport, where it remained until the British military withdrawal in April 2009. It was closed again in late 2011, as it was felt that the Embassy in Baghdad could cover adequately the south of Iraq and that, with the US military withdrawal from the south, it was hard to justify the very significant likely extra costs of assuring its security.

The British forces in the Coalition had primary responsibility for securing the Basra region and for a while had made use of one of former President Saddam Hussein's palaces, known as the Lakeside Palace on the outskirts of Basra, on the Shatt al-Arab, as a dining hall until they moved out to the camp near the airport. So it was already well known when the proposal to develop an Iraqi-British project to protect and promote cultural heritage in Southern Iraq was first mooted at a lunch in the British Museum in September 2007, involving Major General Barney White-Spunner, Neil MacGregor, then Director of the British Museum and Dr John Curtis, then Keeper of the Department of the Middle East at the British Museum. The lunch had been arranged to

provide Major-General White-Spunner with recent information about the state of Iraq's cultural heritage, as he was due to be deployed there in February 2008 as Commander-in-Chief of British troops and General Officer Commanding the Multi-National Division South-East. At the lunch, it was suggested that the greatest need would be to arrange for the inspection of archaeological sites and the protection/refurbishment of museums. General White-Spunner appointed Major Hugo Clarke as the manager of this project. In the course of 2008, the British Army visited and inspected all museums in their area of command, and decided that Basra offered the only chance of a viable project if the Lakeside Palace were converted into a new museum as part of the British legacy to Basra. Detailed plans of the Palace were drawn up by the Royal Engineers, and the army made contact with the young director of the existing Basrah Museum, Dr Qahtan al-Abeed, who at great personal risk made frequent visits to British army headquarters in their airport base. His life was threatened on a number of occasions. He embraced the project enthusiastically as the existing Basrah Museum was not fit for purpose. It was located in an old courtyard house, in poor condition, in an insecure part of the town, and was unsuitable for displaying and safeguarding high value archaeological and historical material. British army surveyors produced an estimate of the cost of refurbishing the Palace and fitting it out but the army withdrew from Basra a year later and the project would probably have foundered as there was no official British funding available to carry it forward.

However, Major Hugo Clarke approached Dr John Curtis to see if the British Museum might be able to help. The Museum was not in a position to undertake such a project directly but could supply expert advice. Dr Curtis, who was shortly to retire and to take up the position of Keeper for Special Projects at the Museum, agreed to explore with Dr Qahtan al-Abeed the possibilities of forming an independent body in the UK to raise the necessary funds. Dr al-Abeed welcomed the idea and Dr Curtis took some soundings among potentially interested bodies in the UK, such as the British Institute for the Study of Iraq and the British Iraqi Friendship Society, with the result that in December 2009 a small group of interested parties came together to discuss the way forward, as a consequence of which Dr Curtis and I paid a visit to Basra in April 2010 to see the Lakeside Palace and to discuss with the local authorities the possibilities of developing it as a museum.

Dr Curtis and I were very impressed with the building, which was beautifully decorated in the Moorish style with ornate carved woodwork and painted stucco and appeared in reasonably good condition, though we were concerned about some of the debris on the roof! Dr Curtis considered the configuration of the building eminently suitable for a museum. We had some preliminary discussions with the Basra authorities, who pledged their support. So we asked Mott MacDonald's representative in Basra to carry out a survey of the building and to give us a fresh estimate for its refurbishment as a museum. In June 2010 they produced a figure of \$3 m. for the refurbishment and a further \$2m. for the display cases, making a daunting total of \$5 m., though considerably less than the army's estimate of \$20 m.! The informal group felt that there were grounds for believing the project was feasible and that they could move forward to the next stage. In August 2010, they formally set up the Friends of the Basrah Museum, which was finally registered as a charity in November 2010, with a Board of Trustees, composed of myself as Chairman, Dr Curtis as Secretary, Ms Liane Butcher then of Petrofac as Treasurer, Ms Clare Bebbington then of BP, Dr Lamia al-Gailani, archaeologist, Dr Salah Al-Shaikhly, former Iraqi Ambassador to the UK and the Hon. Alice Walpole, then Consul-General in Basra.

The Board needed first to seek the formal agreement of the Iraqi authorities in Baghdad and Basra to make the Lakeside Palace available for a museum. On 1 December 2010, the Iraqis sent over a delegation, led by the Chairman of the State Board for Antiquities to sign with me a Memorandum of Understanding, providing the official basis for the museum project. This was followed by a large reception, courtesy of BP, in, appropriately enough, the Enlightenment Room of the British Museum, at which the appeal for funds was launched. The fund raising campaign among British companies working in Iraq, public institutions and private individuals with an interest in Iraq took time to organise. However in the course of 2011 the funds began to trickle in. BP pledged the major donation of \$.5 m. Other donations were made by Petrofac, Pulse Brands, the Control Risks Group and the Charlotte Bonham Carter Fund, as well as a number of private individuals,. The Basra Regional Government also agreed to pay \$1 m. towards the cost of the display cases and later pledged a further \$2.5 m. towards the refurbishment. The Iraqi authorities recognised that they would be responsible thereafter for the staffing and operating costs. They would also provide the objects for display, largely from Baghdad but also locally. So, the Board felt that the project could go ahead. Mott MacDonald agreed to oversee the management of the project. However further progress was thwarted by the unexpected news that the Basrah Investment Council had occupied the Lakeside Palace and could not move out until they had found alternative premises. This meant that we had to mark time for about a year and it was only in January 2012 that the building was vacated and we could instruct Mott MacDonald to reassess its situation and to prepare a programme of works, on the basis of which we were able to go out to tender and eventually appointed a local firm, Bur Alaman to do the work.

However, while we were planning to ensure that our funds would be concentrated in an identifiable element of the whole project, outside events threatened to derail it completely. First, it was proving difficult to find agreement in Baghdad on the formation of a new government with the consequence that there was no budget and large areas of public expenditure were put on hold. Then the oil price collapsed and there were no funds available anyway for the Basra Regional Government to make good its pledge of funds. This meant that we had only the funds raised in the UK. We decided nevertheless that we should propose to the Basra and Baghdad authorities that we should go ahead using our funds to secure the building as a whole and to prepare the Marbled Hall as a Basra exhibition with the adjacent Babylon Gallery as an education centre, leaving it to them to complete the project when funds became available. This was accepted as the only way to proceed and we went into detailed planning accordingly. We needed to appoint someone in Basra to supervise the work and on Mott MacDonald's recommendation we reached agreement early last year with Peter Hunt, one of their former employees in Basra, who had set up his own engineering consultancy there, HWH & Associates and was familiar with the project. Last June, Peter Hunt was back in London with bills of quantity for the restoration work, which he estimated would take only three months to complete. On that basis and taking into account the time it would take to install the display cases and to select the items for display with all the necessary signage in Arabic and English, we thought we could be looking at a launch date around the turn of the year. So, we cleared our lines again with the Baghdad and Basra authorities and gave the go-ahead. The refurbishment was indeed done before the end of last year but it has almost inevitably taken longer than expected to select the main items for display from the Iraq Museum in Baghdad and to prepare the signage, so that we have now set 27 September

as the date for the official opening - fingers crossed and inshallah! This was the scene this week and there is clearly a lot to be done to mount the opening exhibition depicting Basra's history from the Garden of Eden to Sindbad the Sailor through successive Hellenistic, Parthian, Sasanian and Arab civilisations.

The project will have taken six years to bring to fruition but we hope that at the end of the day we shall have achieved part of a much needed resource for southern Iraq, which in the fullness of time will set a new standard for the whole region. It will also serve as a positive demonstration of British support for the redevelopment of Iraq in the post-Saddam era. My deep regret is that we did not have the funds to finish the job; and we have had no indication from the Iraqis when they might have the funds to complete their part. If, however, we could secure another \$2- 2.5 m. in the coming months, everything is in place for us to carry out the rest of the work. So I am open to offers! I should add that we are preparing to bid for funds from the Government's recently announced Culture Protection Fund of £30 m. However, if we are unsuccessful, the Friends of the Basrah Museum will have to be wound up. But strong links have already been forged between the new Museum and the British Museum and the British Institute for the Study of Iraq (BISI), which will help to maintain and further develop the relationship with Britain into the future. BISI are indeed supporting the launch with a public workshop and conference in Basra on 28 and 29 September, which will be attended by a number of international experts, who will help to create resources for the Museum to draw upon and to explore options for future collaboration.