

# REVIEW 2021

THE ANGLO-OMANI SOCIETY





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Nadirah Al Harthy, who conquered the World's Highest Mountain

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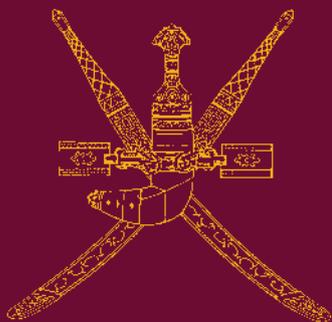


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# REVIEW 2021

## THE ANGLO-OMANI SOCIETY



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## FROM THE EDITOR

Once again, Society activities have been badly affected by Pandemic restrictions. We regret the loss of our programme at 34 Sackville Street, the ability of interested parties being able to bid for or spend grants for worthwhile projects, and perhaps most of all the ability to help young people from both nations to immerse themselves in the other's culture: so there are no reports of young British students on gap year attachments or Arabic language studies, and no reports of Omani students in Britain. Again our staff, working from home (and in Dina's case, mostly from Oman) have done a sterling job in delivering a rich website: we have included plenty of examples in this Review but it is still only a fraction of what is available – please do log on to read and listen! In the meantime, there is still plenty of interest to read in this year's Review...

### PROTECTIVE NOTICE

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Views expressed in contributions from outside writers are their own, and do not necessarily reflect the Society's opinion or thought.

# CHANGE OF HER MAJESTY'S AMBASSADOR TO OMAN: BILL MURRAY

Mr Bill Murray has been appointed Her Majesty's Ambassador to the Sultanate of Oman in succession to Mr Hamish Cowell CMG who will be transferring to another Diplomatic Service appointment.



Mr Murray is due to take up his appointment during September 2021.

Mr Murray spent ten years as a Royal Marines officer before joining the Diplomatic Service. He has served in diplomatic appointments in Baghdad,

Irbil, Nairobi, Amman, Sana'a, Jerusalem, Tunis and - most recently - the UAE from 2019. His home tours were as head of the Syria Team then head of the Libya Team. He is married to Joanna. ■



# WELCOME...

## ...TO A NEW TRUSTEE, COMPANY SECRETARY, GENERAL MANAGER AND INTERNS!



**JAMIE BOWDEN**  
CMG OBE MVO

Jamie, new Society Trustee, was Ambassador to Oman between 2011-2014. Before joining the Diplomatic Service he spent seven years in the Army with the Royal Green Jackets. As a soldier he did a tour with the peacekeeping force in the Sinai and lived for two months with the bedu in southern Jordan.

As a diplomat he served in eight Arab countries and in Washington, where he was responsible within the Embassy for Middle East affairs. He was also Ambassador to Bahrain and to Chile. He was Deputy Private Secretary to HRH The Prince of Wales between 2014-2017.

Jamie has the distinction of being nominated to the Board by our President, the Omani Ambassador in London, H.E. Abdulaziz Al Hinai.

### ROBIN TRAILL

Since joining the Society in 2009, Robin has been a regular attender of Society events. He has been understudying Alan Milne as Company Secretary for some months, and took over the demanding trustee role at this year's AGM.

He is a retired Chartered Accountant who qualified in 1976. During his time in the profession, he spent a total of some 18 months working in Dhofar, first arriving in late 1972. The firm for which he worked was auditing, on behalf of the Omani Ministry of Defence, the cost applications from various construction companies. In 1978 he left the profession and worked in industry for several international engineering companies. Robin continued with his travelling; initially and up until 1982 he made regular trips along the Southern Gulf: the UAE, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Subsequent overseas assignments were to the USA, Canada, Hong Kong and Thailand.



### AAISHAH SHARIF

Aaishah graduated from the School of Oriental and African Studies with a BA in Arabic and History. During her time at SOAS, she lived in the West Bank, Palestine for a year where she studied the Arabic language.

After graduating, Aaishah embarked on an internship in Beijing at the China-Britain Business Council as a

Researcher and Editor. This enabled her to develop a global mindset as well as gaining invaluable experience working abroad. She has recently been on a charity deployment trip to Lebanon to distribute food and aid to Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese refugees. Her passion for the Middle East region and international relations led her to apply for her internship at the Society where she is broadening her knowledge of Oman and its neighbouring countries. Aaishah is hoping to find work in the international aid or development work field.



## JAMES MARRIOTT

James grew up and lived overseas in Australia, Hong Kong and Oman, the latter being where he spent his final six years of schooling at the American International School of Muscat. He studied Politics and International Relations (BA) at the University of Kent in Canterbury before coming to London to complete an MSc in Middle East Politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).



His background, being half-British and half-Omani, and his focus on Oman in his Master's dissertation led him to apply for the internship at the Anglo-Omani Society where he has further expanded his interest in Oman. For the future, James is hoping to find work in journalism or think tank research focused on the Gulf and wider Middle East, and is always open to pursuing a PhD in the future. We look forward to his continued membership in the Society!

## DAVID NEWTON

David Newton is now at the helm of the Executive Office in Sackville Street having joined as General Manager in May this year. David has enjoyed a full career in the Royal Navy as both a Warfare Officer and as a pilot in the Fleet Air Arm, and brings a wealth of experience from his active service days and subsequently running an SME based in Muscat. He maintains that most stories of his earlier life are best left untold but, with persuasion, would be happy to recount tales from the Dartmouth experience, postings in Hong Kong and around the world plus numerous active sea-going deployments.

With his partner, Helen, he has thoroughly enjoyed the last eleven years in the Sultanate where he served as Naval and Air Attaché in the embassy under both Noel Guckian and Jamie Bowden. On completion of his RN career he helped to create and run a defence-



based SME in Muscat before returning to the UK in August 2020.

David has a daughter, Laura, who is a knitwear designer in London. He originally hails from York, but he and Helen have now made a base in Windsor.



# ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Once again, we had to hold our AGM in virtual fashion. Alan Milne and his wife, Susan, were the official meeting pair at their home at Benenden, Kent. Stuart Laing, John McKeown and David Newton were at the Society premises in Sackville Street – all in separate rooms, in some cases dim and eery as the electricity supplies for lighting and audio-visual equipment were still not fixed.

We were very glad to see that we were quorate because, in addition to the Board members, more than 20 members logged on to join the meeting, hear Stuart's account of our year, Martyn Bishop's stewardship of the accounts, and vote on trustees – one third have to resign each year and face re-election.

This is the second year that we have lost our physical AGM...we look forward to welcoming a bumper turnout next July. The AGM is usually a convivial event including refreshments and a film about some spectacular aspect of the Sultanate. Put it in your diary! Thursday, 21 July, 2022.

The Anglo-Omani Society in 2021

# CHAIRMAN'S OVERVIEW

REPORT GIVEN BY SOCIETY CHAIRMAN, STUART LAING, AT THE AGM



Stuart Laing

And so it goes on!  
I prepared this report just  
after the Prime Minister's  
announcement of the  
extension of Covid-19  
restrictions, to a British  
public that had been  
hoping for some relaxation  
in the early summer. But it  
was not to be.

The effects of the spread of the virus have naturally been felt by the Society, although nothing like the outcomes ranging from serious to disastrous for numbers of businesses, in addition to the tragic loss of life and damage wrought by 'long-term Covid' experienced by so many. Our sympathy goes to all those who have suffered during the past year.

For the Society, obviously, the main adjustment has been the cessation of almost all activity in 34 Sackville Street. I say "almost", because the staff have been going in from time to time to make sure that all is well in the building (which it hasn't been! – more on that below). As I commented in last year's report, Trustees and staff have made remarkable efforts to maintain the life of the Society through a range of on-line activities, provoking positive responses of gratitude from many of our members.

Some of our customary programmes have sadly had to be cancelled outright for 2020-21. These include the language programme at al-Manah for students of Arabic, and the Gap Year Scheme at the Sultan's School. We hope to resume both of these in 2022, hoping that by then travel restrictions will be lifted.

With imagination, ingenuity and clever use of technology, the Society has been able to transfer existing programmes on to internet platforms, or develop entirely new ones. As reported later in the Review, Jane Kinninmont has continued our lecture programme, with lecturers delivering from their study desks or sitting-rooms or kitchens, in a pattern now become all too familiar. I know from my own experience that this is not as easy as it sounds; the technology does not always run smoothly, making it tricky to match PowerPoint slides to your presentation, and you miss the reactions from your audience. So our thanks go to Jane, and to all our lecturers,

for some stimulating talks much enjoyed by our membership.

Our new on-line 'products', started initially during the first few months of Covid last year, have included the podcast interviews, several conducted by Dina Macki, with some really interesting interlocutors. More recently, members will have appreciated the *Tales of Ajdaduna*, now retitled *Tales of Kibruna (Tales of our Grandparents / Elders)*, with some unexpected glimpses into lives of the previous generation of Omanis. Other continuing outputs have been the Spotlight On series, about various industries and businesses in Oman, the Insight articles on and by some of the remarkable young people in the Sultanate, and the *Weekly Roundup* and *Press Review*.

A highlight of our year, also reported separately in the Review, has been the Jubilee Photography Exhibition, celebrating 50 years since the 'Renaissance' at the accession of His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos. Planned for November 2020, this was transferred on-line, and we were most grateful to receive recorded messages of greeting from HRH The Prince of Wales and HH Theyazin bin Haythem Al Said. Large numbers 'visited' the Exhibition, demonstrating what we and others have found in the on-line experience – that a good presentation on-line can reach larger numbers, with a wider geographical spread, than a real-life show. Not exactly a silver lining to the grey cloud, but at least a consolation! We thank and congratulate Richard Muir, one of our Vice-Presidents, for his tireless work in achieving this success, and to James Marriott, one of our interns, for his podcast interviews based on pictures in the Exhibition.

Richard Muir has also been instrumental in keeping alive the dialogue between the Omani State Council and the House of

*One innovation that we have introduced this year is the Technical Committee. The purpose of this is to bring together British and Omani experts and entrepreneurs in fields of advanced technology. The Technical Committee has met so far only virtually.*

Lords in Westminster. Meetings have, of course, had to be held remotely over this year, but real-life exchanges will be resumed when travel again becomes feasible.

A continuing success is the programme of Arabic language classes, which in their early days were live in 34 Sackville Street, but have adapted happily to an on-line existence. There are now eleven classes, at different levels, and I do encourage members to take advantage of this excellent facility offered by the Society.

Our grants programme remains a central element in the Society's activities. Sadly it has contracted in the year under review, simply because nearly all projects involve travel between Britain and Oman, and applications have dropped as a result. Details are reported separately. We are budgeting rather less for 2021-22, partly because of this reduced number of applications, but also because we are experiencing a drop in income, explained below.

One innovation that we have introduced this year, at the initiative of Ollie Blake, one of our Trustees, is the Technical Committee. The purpose of this is to bring together British and Omani experts and entrepreneurs in fields of advanced technology. The Technical Committee has met so far only virtually, under Ollie's chairmanship, and is beginning to identify some useful areas of collaboration.

Both through the Technical Committee, and through the Oman-Britain Business

Council, the Society is seeking to respond to messages we are receiving from our Omani friends, looking to the UK for growth in collaboration aimed at diversifying the Omani economy and providing opportunities for young Omanis in private sector employment. The links with the Business Council have been strengthened during the year, but of course activities have suffered as a result of the Covid restrictions.

I'd like to thank Lissie Simpson, our Trustee who supervises the New Generation Group, for keeping the Group alive and well during the year under review. The annual delegation visit is being replaced by a virtual conference on-line, with plans for a visit later in the year if travel allows. The New Generation Group is an essential part of the Society's contribution to furthering the bilateral relationship, stressing the importance we attach to a continuation and growth in British-Omani friendship long into the future.

I need to mention an unhelpful effect of Covid-19, in relation to the income the Society receives from letting those parts of the building at 34 Sackville Street which we do not use for our offices and facilities. I'm sure you'll all be aware that a combination of factors – including recession in some sectors and the increase in working from home – has led to a drop in rental values in London and elsewhere. As landlords, we have had to agree to requests for rent reductions. One tenant in fact left, but this has had an interesting and I might say a happy outcome, since the Cultural Section of the Omani Embassy have decided to occupy that floor, and a new tenancy agreement with the Embassy was signed in mid-June '21. We shall be glad to have the Cultural Section as our 'neighbours' upstairs.

Let me say a few words about our people. No Trustees have left during the year under review, but I'd like to add, to what I said last year, some words of thanks to Ian Kendrick. Ian completed his history of the first 45 years of the Society, which was printed and sent out to members with last year's Review. It is a comprehensive and beautifully illustrated work, and we congratulate him on it. Ian was also particularly interested in the Library.

Hopes for digitising our collection, to make it more easily available to members, are so far unrealised, but the catalogue is on our website, and we plan soon to introduce a system for members to borrow books.

We are delighted to welcome one new Trustee to our Board. This is Jamie Bowden, formerly British Ambassador in Bahrain, Muscat and Santiago, and someone well known to many of our members. Jamie is a good friend as well as a former colleague, and we warmly welcome the skills and competences which he will bring to our Board.

Among the staff we had to bid farewell during the year to Nick Smith, who had been our Manager for less than two years, all too short a time. Members will know how well Nick managed the changes necessary when Covid-19 restrictions came into effect. He has moved to a job in the private sector, in order to advance his career. We miss him, but wish him the very best. His place has been taken by David Newton, appointed in May as General Manager. David had his first career in the Royal Navy, and has lived for 11 years in Oman, first as Naval and Air Attaché in the British Embassy, and then working in the private sector. We are very glad to have David with us, and wish him every success in this post.

David has not had an easy beginning. As some of you may know, in May Sackville Street suffered an electrical surge of a very rare kind, which has caused failure in a wide range of our electrical equipment. Effecting the necessary repairs and replacements has been, and continues to be, a complex task. Partly this is for administrative reasons, since insurers of the electricity company and ourselves are involved; and partly it is for technical reasons, since the burnt-out equipment is in many cases high specification, superseded, or with spare parts difficult to access. David is showing admirable calmness in resolving the problems, but at the time of writing we are not yet back to normal.

We have continued to employ interns in the office. Bidding farewell at the start of 2020 to Sarika Breeze, we welcomed Aaishah Sharif and James Marriott as our new interns. They have contributed nobly, despite the difficulties of moving to home-working so soon after joining us.

## CHAIRMAN'S REVIEW



And I save the most significant change to the last. After 29 years of selfless service to the Society, our Secretary Alan Milne is stepping back and handing over to someone else. I have known Alan only for the last three years, since I became Chairman, but I know that his calmness, extensive knowledge of the regulations governing the charitable and the business sectors, and his efficiency, in addition to his kindly friendliness, have been invaluable assets to me and to Chairmen before me, and indeed to the whole Board of Trustees. And all this

*It is hard to express our thanks adequately. As a small token, we are presenting him with an inscribed plate and a copy of Jeremy Jones's book on the history of Oman.*

for a long time! It is hard to express our thanks adequately. As a small token, we are presenting him with an inscribed china plate (below) and a copy of Jeremy Jones's book on the history of Oman, signed by the author and by members of the Board of Trustees.

Alan's place as Secretary has been taken by Robin Traill, whom we warmly welcome.

Looking forward, the Society's activities will continue to be affected by what is permissible and prudent under Covid-19 rules. The experience of the last year and a half has shown us that there is demand among the membership for on-line content

as well as real-life activities in 34 Sackville Street. We shall conduct some enquiries to find out what you, our members, would like to see in the future development of the Society. I suspect that we may find that hybrid events are the answer – that is, lectures and seminars held live in Sackville Street, but with beaming on-line to members via Zoom, Teams or YouTube. As a Board, we shall do our best to respond to what you the members are keen on.

Meanwhile, I thank you for reading this far, and wish you all a happy and healthy year. ■

Society Chairman and Vice-Chairman with Alan Milne's presentation items.



# ARABIC LANGUAGE COURSES LONDON & ONLINE

The Society runs Arabic Language Courses for Society members in our Sackville Street offices and online (due to the current situation, all classes are online). Classes are offered for a variety of abilities from total beginner to confident conversationalist.

All online courses are £125 for members. If you are interested in joining classes, please email at [rsvp@ao-soc.org](mailto:rsvp@ao-soc.org)

The courses cover both written and spoken Arabic and focus on Modern Standard Arabic, although the teachers have good knowledge of various dialects so (depending on students' interests) will explain different dialectic translations. Courses run for 10 weeks and consist of two-hour classes. Any material (courses roughly follow the Gateway to Arabic books) required for the

course will be provided via email PDF. However, students are recommended to buy the Gateway to Arabic books if they can. There is no formal requirement for work between lessons, but it is highly recommended that time is put aside each week to revise vocabulary, spelling and grammar. The more work put into studies, the more will be got from the course. ■

## DAYTIME AND EVENING COURSES ARE RUN ONLINE FOR THE FOLLOWING LEVELS:

**BEGINNER 1:** Students have little or no existing knowledge of Arabic.

**BEGINNER 2:** Students are somewhat familiar with the alphabet, know some basic words and key phrases and can introduce themselves.

**BEGINNER 3:** Students are more comfortable with the alphabet, have some vocabulary beyond basic vocabulary used to introduce oneself, have some knowledge of present tense verbs conjugation (I, you, he/she, we) and possessive endings.

**PRE-INTERMEDIATE 1:** Students are comfortable with conjugating present tense verbs (1st, 2nd, 3rd person singular) and have a basic vocabulary. Students may have some knowledge of the past tense. This directly succeeds Beginners 3.

**PRE-INTERMEDIATE 2:** Students have some introductory knowledge of the past tense, and are fairly comfortable asking and answering questions.

**PRE-INTERMEDIATE 3:** Students are able to conjugate verbs in present and past tenses using first, second and third person pronouns, read Arabic words with short vowels, long vowels and Shadda (stress symbol), and introduce themselves briefly in Arabic.

**PRE-INTERMEDIATE 4:** Students are confident with verb conjugations. Some students can hold basic conversations in Arabic.

**ADVANCED:** Students can confidently hold conversations about a variety of topics in Arabic. Some students have degrees in Arabic, but the level is quite mixed.

# MEMBERSHIP OF THE SOCIETY

ARTICLE BY SCOTT DICKSON  
TRUSTEE FOR MEMBERSHIP LIAISON

The Society is grateful  
for the support of its  
members.

During normal times we look forward to coming together for our lectures in Sackville Street, the annual lunch and this Annual Review. All of these allow the Society to promote an ever closer relationship between the United Kingdom and the Sultanate of Oman and enhance the mutual understanding of our countries.

We introduced a new website to make information on the Society more accessible to members and to make it easier for members to engage with the Society and fellow members online. We have also responded to the many challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic by enhancing our webinars and podcasts.

We currently have 892 individual members (of whom 757 are UK-based and 135 in Oman) plus 16 corporate members. We would encourage members to encourage others who have an interest in the UK-Oman relationship to apply for



membership of the Society. We would also like to invite members to give us feedback on how the Society engages with members.

In particular, we welcome views on the content of the Society's website and the regular news digest email to members – and we are always interested to hear from members with suggestions for our lectures, seminars, webinars and podcasts. ■

Please send feedback to  
[manager@ao-soc.org](mailto:manager@ao-soc.org)





# NGG STAY CONNECTED

It's been a difficult year for NGG activities, with ongoing Covid uncertainty and restrictions disrupting existing projects and new.

Members of the team have changed and fallen ill with Covid, but despite this we have managed to stay connected and move forward with some important objectives.

Masterpiece Oman, the 50th National Day Art Competition, has been a welcome relief and shown us that creative output continues both in the UK and Oman. We were lucky to receive a wide range of fantastic entries from established and upcoming artists, some of which we were able to showcase through our social media.

ARTICLE BY LISSIE SIMPSON

One of my personal favourites was from 10-year-old Lia, who was born in Oman and painted her imaginary childhood friend. Whilst international travel has been impossible for many of us, it is inspiring to see artists exploring their memories and imagination to create work that the rest of us can live through vicariously.



Another new project has been to pilot a programme to support Omani students in finding summer placements at private companies and organisations in the UK. In partnership with the Omani Embassy, students were invited to apply for a number of placements at different firms. International work experience is much sought after by Omani students as an opportunity to gain the skills to perform in a different cultural and work environment but also as a way to set themselves apart when returning to Oman as graduates. From those placed in Summer 2021, we will be seeking feedback to improve and grow this scheme and hope to build this into an annual programme.

Looking forward, we intend to revisit some of our flagship activities – London/ Muscat events and the annual delegation. With official visits between the UK and Oman being tentatively planned, let's hope this isn't too far off! ■

# SOCIETY LIBRARY

The Society is accumulating an increasingly useful collection of books on the Sultanate and the British connections in particular. Many are gifts from members and authors, and we also prepared to buy as appropriate.



We hold a 600 book reference library on a range of subjects relating to Oman, and the list can be found on our website. Whether your interests lie in politics, foreign affairs, history, culture, botany, arts or the economy, please feel free to make an appointment to visit the library by emailing the Manager at [manager@angloomanisociety.com](mailto:manager@angloomanisociety.com)

The books are kept within the staff offices at present and we are considering how to make members' access to them easier, for example by introducing a lending scheme or ultimately looking at options and costs to reposition the library and how it would then operate. Ideally we would like to have a reading room, but stress that this is an aspiration not likely to be fulfilled any time soon.

We have considered the possibility that the Society could have a digital library. The benefits of that are clear: increasing numbers of young people are undertaking projects that might benefit from the improved availability of research material on Oman, and members who would like to read our books would value access at home rather than travelling to 34SS to spend the day reading there.

However, we have had to suspend research into a possible digital library because the copyright departments in various publishing businesses were not responding well, having been adversely affected by pandemic disruption. The business world is now expected to recover but it might take some time for the small copyright departments to start fully functioning again. Publishers are also naturally reluctant to give permission for digital release of texts onto the Society's website. ■

# LECTURES AND WEBINARS

ARTICLE BY JANE KINNINMONT  
TRUSTEE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE  
LECTURES AND EVENTS PROGRAMME

Over the past year the Society has sadly had to suspend our regular programme of in-person lectures at Sackville Street, but our energetic and creative staff have responded by creating a fascinating programme of online talks and webinars. I should like to thank Nick, Dina and David, and the interns, for all their great work on these events.



The move to digital events has enabled us to engage more speakers and participants based in Oman, and we will continue to run some of these online events even after the in-person lectures resume, to take advantage of these opportunities to connect digitally with Omani friends and colleagues.

In January, for instance, we had the pleasure of hosting three Omani speakers on the country's foreign policy, including Dr Abdullah Baabood, an Omani academic with strong connections to the UK, where he previously ran the Gulf Research Centre branch at Cambridge University, which hosts the world's largest conference on Gulf studies each year; Fatima Al Arimi, an independent journalist; and Dr Yousef Al Balushi, who studied at King's College, London.

In February, we were delighted to host a webinar which brought together curators from the National Museum of Oman and the British Museum to discuss "Adornment, Identity and Empowerment: Female Silversmiths in Southern Oman", based on an ongoing project that the two museums have been collaborating on. Moza Al Wardi, Senior Curator at the National Museum of Oman, emphasised the importance of understanding the history of silversmithing in Oman as part of preserving the nation's heritage, and in particular the less well-known role of female silversmiths. The Oman Observer ran an article [<https://www.omanoobserver.com/article/4524/Editor's%20choice/spotlight-no-silver-lining>] highlighting the webinar to an Omani audience.

Digital presentations have also

highlighted beautiful photographs from all over Oman, from the underwater world of "Oman's Secret Seas" to "The Plants of Oman" and "Aerial Archaeology".

## 21/22 PROGRAMME

As Covid restrictions continue to be lifted, a key discussion point among Trustees is when we might plan to resume physical events at Sackville Street. It is important that the community feeling of our association of members be retained through actual meetings at 34 Sackville Street. The regular monthly Thursday has long been an important fixture for the Society and we believe that our growing numbers of members will be glad to have the opportunity to meet again in person over wine and snacks.

Assuming the roadmap out of lockdown continues as planned, we therefore plan to resume lectures after the traditional summer break. If costs permit, we will also plan to record them and make them available on the website for members outside London. Overall, we feel that a hybrid system would be preferable, for example with overseas speakers appearing online. In order to judge members' preferences, we will initiate a questionnaire to put to all members (including those not online).

Putting together a new programme at present is a difficult process. Potential speakers are reluctant to commit to a future date when they know neither whether the pandemic restrictions will cause cancellation nor whether their other commitments – for most of our speakers are very busy people – will mean they are unable to fulfil a commitment to us.

Members will notice that the usual lecture card, providing advance notice of a full year of lectures, is not included with

your Annual Review this year, as current circumstances are not conducive to such long forward-planning. However, upcoming lecturers will include Reverend Dr Andrew Thomson, author of a book on Christianity in Oman, and Glada Lahn, Senior Research Fellow at Chatham House, whose research covers the impact of climate change on the environment and economy of Oman and other Gulf states. We'll keep members updated by email (and on our website) as our in-person series resumes. ■

## SAF ASSOCIATION TALK BY COLONEL DAVID BENNETT

# EAST OF SUEZ

## THE UK'S DEFENCE HUB AT DUQM

The Society is pleased to offer its facilities to the Sultan's Armed Forces Association for a presentation on the UK Defence Hub at Duqm on Thursday 23 September.

This is the first in what is intended to be a series of talks arranged by the Association and held at the Society premises in Sackville Street.

The talk is, of course, open to members of the Society, provided that there are places available, and booking-in should be done in the usual way. Members are invited to gather at Sackville Street from 1700 with the talk commencing at 1800 and expected to end after questions sometime after 1900.

Colonel (Retired) David Bennett was commissioned into the 9th/12th Royal Lancers (Prince of Wales's) in 1984, serving in Germany, Cyprus, the Falkland Islands, Bosnia, Northern Ireland and Canada. In 2003 he conducted the 'In Theatre Training' for 1st Armoured Division in Kuwait and entered Iraq with the GOC's Tactical HQ. After command of the Armoured Fighting Vehicle Gunnery School in Lulworth he deployed to Afghanistan as Chief Operations in HQ ISAF. On promotion to Colonel in 2009 he deployed again to HQ ISAF as Executive Officer to DCOS Operations, a US 2\* General.

The last nine years of his military career were spent in Defence Engagement roles in the Middle East, firstly as Director of Studies at the Staff College in Kuwait and then Chief Directing Staff responsible for establishing a new Staff College in Qatar. In 2016 he was selected as the Defence

Hub Duqm Liaison Officer, charged with creating a permanent UK presence in Oman centred on the Port of Duqm from which to conduct training, operations and logistic support. He left the Army in 2019 and is now the Director of the Stansted Park Foundation, a charitable Estate in West Sussex.

His presentation entitled "East of Suez – the UK's Defence Hub at Duqm" will examine the strategic drivers behind the creation of the Defence Hub as an integrated joint enabling facility. He will describe being launched by the UK MOD to Oman to liaison with Government Ministries, SAF and civilian entities and commercial companies. As the UK's latest manifestation of its strategic commitment to Oman and the Gulf region, he will outline how Exercise SAIF SAREEA 3 was used as a proof of concept to confirm that Duqm could be the plinth on which strategic presence could be based. He will highlight his quest to identify a new and challenging desert Training Area at Ras Madrakah and how it was used for the first time in conjunction with SAF. He will look forward to future opportunities for combined and joint training as well as examining what Duqm signifies for the UK's bilateral relationship with Oman and our regional influence. ■

# THE SOCIETY'S GRANT SCHEME

BY STUART LAING, CHAIRMAN OF THE GRANTS COMMITTEE

Before reporting on the Grant Scheme's operations in 2020-21, I should like to pay tribute to my predecessor as Chairman of the Grants Committee, Richard Owens. For many years Richard managed the proceedings of the Grants Scheme, and to him is due much of the success of this, the flagship of the Society's spending programmes.

Overall, for well-known reasons, we were under-spent on our Grants Budget for this year. Several projects were cancelled or postponed and we are carrying them over into 2021-22. The Budget for grants for the year 2020-21 was £180,000, and we spent £118,000. Compare that with the £163,000 which we awarded in grants in 2019-20. Two of our favourite regular projects, the Gap Year Students programme, and the al-Manah language programme for British students of Arabic, had to be cancelled in 2019-20 and sadly look doubtful even for 2021-22.

Looking ahead, 2021-22, we are budgeting for grants allocations of £120,000. Partly this is because the Society is expecting a lower income from property rental this year, but it is also because we are receiving fewer applications for grant-supported projects. The reason for this is not hard to find: most of our projects



involve travel between Oman and the UK, which has become difficult (and at times impossible) during the pandemic.

Nevertheless, several of our grants applicants have shown ingenuity in developing plans that work through on-line networking. A notable example of this was the Oman National Heritage Lecture, normally held at the Royal Geographical Society (RGS), but in 2020 held simultaneously in London and Muscat, with the lecturers physically in Oman. For an event such as this, there is a silver lining in the cloud: on-line lecturing provides the opportunity for a world-wide audience, going far beyond the RGS auditorium.

As I write, our forecast for 2021-22 is mainly composed of projects carried over from 2020-21. We have had few applications for new projects, and we should welcome more. In particular, Trustees would like to see a change in emphasis towards development, technology, and the economy, to align ourselves more closely with current policy priorities in Oman.

Before closing, let me give you a flavour

of the variety of the grant-funded projects that were in fact completed in 2020-21. Expeditions often feature in our Grants Scheme, and in the year past we have supported a crossing of Oman from North to South, in conjunction with Outward Bound; and we have offered funding to another expedition being organised by Walking With The Wounded, although at present we do not know if/when this can actually go ahead. As you can imagine, the logistical hurdles are considerable.

We have given grants to research projects, one on Oman's floral past, and another on the pomegranate butterfly. One successful grant applicant is introducing young Omanis to Shakespeare, through live streaming of a play Shakespeare's Got Cursed. Another has been granted finance for pre-publication costs of a book on Omani camels.

I thank the two Trustees who sit with me on the Grants Committee, Martyn Bishop and Lissie Simpson, and we invite members of the Society to send worthy potential grant applicants in our direction. ■

# RARING TO GO... BACK TO MANAH!

ARTICLE BY ELISABETH KENDALL, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD  
TRUSTEE OF THE SOCIETY AND SUPERVISOR OF THE ARABIC LANGUAGE SCHEME

Having just celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Society's Arabic Language Scheme at "Sultan Qaboos College for Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers" in 2019, we came to an abrupt halt in 2020 as the pandemic brought international travel to a standstill.

However, we still have ten excellent British students raring to go, just as soon as pandemic-related restrictions are lifted and the College can resume activity. The current pause in operations simply serves to increase everyone's enthusiasm for learning Arabic in an authentic environment again, whilst experiencing the warm and welcoming culture of Oman.

In the meantime, we wish all the dedicated staff at Sultan Qaboos College

well, and extend our thanks, as ever, to the Diwan of the Royal Court of Oman and the Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Their ongoing support ensures that this worthwhile scheme will continue to thrive. We can't wait to get back out to beautiful Oman!

As Dr Kendall reported last year, there have been 100 Society alumni of the course at Manah, near Nizwa. A new cohort of 10 students has been selected. ■



# GAP YEAR SCHEME

## THE SULTAN'S SCHOOL MUSCAT

ARTICLE BY NIGEL KNOCKER



The Society, in conjunction with the Sultan's School in Muscat, runs a GapYear Scheme for British students, both male and female, to spend three months at the school, usually September to December and February to April each year.

We aim to select four students for each period, and about 100 students have taken part since the scheme started in 2002, though there have been none since early 2020.

The future of the scheme may be uncertain and may not start again until perhaps September 2022 because of the Covid 19 situation. It may in any case be difficult to restart the scheme because of a lack of continuity. We do, however, hope and plan for resumption as soon as we can. It has enhanced Anglo-Omani relations in its own particular way, as well as giving students a valuable and enjoyable immersion in Omani culture. Reports from them are





invariably upbeat, and several can be seen in previous copies of the Society Review.

How do applicants hear about the scheme? There are a variety of ways such as the Society website, word of mouth from previous students – often the best – talks to schools and interest shown by others in conversation. Details of how to apply are on the website, and are very straightforward.

Applicants are interviewed by me and

another trustee, Debbie Martin, as well as our programme manager, Dina Macki. In the past we have successfully made use of Zoom to interview applicants.

Clearly the school also receives the students' CVs and has the final word on our selections.

What are we looking for? Well, a spirit of adventure and determination to participate fully are clearly necessary. We look for an

interest in the Middle East, particularly the Sultanate of Oman, the Arabic language and culture, and possibly considering a career linked to the region and the United Kingdom's strong bonds there.

Once selected, we keep a close eye on the students by email with them, and the school staff obviously do so too. On arrival at the school, each student has a separate programme depending on their interests and abilities and the requirements of the school. They take part in classes, particularly sport, expeditions and other outside activities.

The Society provides return air fares, insurance cover, pocket money, car hire and contributes to the cost of outside Arabic lessons.

The scheme has been a great success, and both students and the school have benefitted. Some of the many advantages to the students, apart from the experience of their lives, have been the follow up: for example at least one has been accepted by the FCO because he learned Arabic at the school and knew of that part of the world, and others have found related careers because of their knowledge of the area. ■



# SOCIETY SILVERWARE AT ANTIQUES ROADSHOW!

ARTICLE BY DAVID NEWTON

The Society was fortunate enough in the Summer to receive an invitation to attend The Antiques Roadshow for an edition filmed in the new format at Ham House, Richmond, and our two interns and I were lucky enough to be the Society representatives.

Recent Trustee meetings had discussed how best to show the magnificent Sheilagh Bailey bequest of Omani Silverware to the Society. As a result, Debbie Martin, a current Trustee, arranged for an expert assessment and filming. What an experience and, if it survives the cutting room floor, then the short clip should be included in a future show in the coming months. Members will be advised as soon as we have notification.



With due regard to the social distancing rules (measured by a two metre piece of drainpipe!) our intrepid interns, James Marriott and Aaishah Sharif, explored the merits of some selected pieces with expert Duncan Campbell. I was relegated to the watching audience.

Public attendance was understandably reduced to comply with pandemic restrictions so we could hardly claim to draw a crowd nor extract the usual “oohs and aahs” on valuation. But, what a thrill to be amongst the iconic AR red sunshades and experience the filming process.

Duncan, as an acknowledged expert on Foreign and Colonial silverware was suitably excited by a few of the pieces and offered some fascinating insights. He confirmed that we were lucky to have the collection that was deemed significant if only for its extent and as evidence of an avid collector as Sheilagh Bailey was in the 1970s.

A fun day. We got our glimpse of Fiona Bruce, witnessed some interesting items being displayed, had our few moments of fame, and, best of all, returned the bag of loot back to safe storage. We look forward to displaying the whole collection in the future but members can view by appointment through the Executive Staff.



## THE ANGLO-OMANI SOCIETY SHEILAGH BAILEY SILVER COLLECTION

Sheilagh held an important role in the Palace Office in Muscat, for which she was awarded the Order of Oman. An intrepid traveller after retirement, she was an active member of the Anglo-Omani Society London until frailty meant that she could no longer take part. She presented our Society with a valuable collection of Omani silver, and several books about the Sultanate. She has also deposited biographical and other material including photographs in the Middle East Centre at St Antony's College, Oxford. She died two years ago, and her obituary was in the Anglo-Omani Review in 2019. ■



Nigel Winsor, in an empty RGS theatre, welcomed thousands online on behalf of the Oman UK Group, Dr Roderic Dutton, Sean Nelson, Robert Baldwin and himself, and the UK Volunteers. He introduced the speakers, and moderated a question session.



## OMAN'S NATURAL HERITAGE LECTURE 2020

# THE 800 MILLION YEAR STORY OF OMAN'S UNIQUE GEOLOGY AND CAVES

ARTICLE BY DR MOHAMMED AL KINDI, MR NABIL AL SAQRI AND MR NIGEL WINSER

Because of COVID restrictions, the 5th Oman Natural Heritage Lecture was broadcast live simultaneously from the Royal Geographical Society London (RGS) and from the Sultanate of Oman.

Mohammed Al Kindi and Nabil Al Saqri broadcast from their homes in Nizwa, with support from Mr Abdulmunim Al Zakwani and the Geological Society of Oman (GSO) in Muscat. Nigel Winsor was live at the RGS, supported by a small broadcast team from Encounter Edu and the Society. Prince Michael of Kent gave the opening address from Kensington Palace, and Dr Saif Al Shaqsi gave the vote of thanks from the Diwan Office in Muscat

The lecture was sponsored by the Anglo-Omani Society and in association with the National Field Research Centre for the Conservation of the Environment, Diwan of Royal Court, Sultanate of Oman, the

London Embassy of Oman, the UK Geographical Magazine and the Royal Geographical Society, London. The Guests of Honour (online) were Prince Michael, His Excellency Abdulaziz Abdullah Al Hinai, London Ambassador of the Sultanate, and Mr Stuart Laing, Chairman of the Anglo-Omani Society.

The programme was watched live by 1,751 guests, and more than 3,000 have now watched the programme on the GSO's YouTube. Before the live lecture, a film about the natural history and diverse geology of Oman made by Mr Nabil Al Saqri was broadcast with a time clock to help those signing up from all round the world.



exposes hundreds of metres of carbonate rocks from the Mesozoic Era (about 250 to 66 million years ago). This mountain chain reveals an integrated system of valleys. The carbonate units of the massif include corals, fish bones and teeth that date back to the Mesozoic. Deeply eroded mountains in Al Hajar expose ancient rocks dating back more than 540 million years (informally known as the Precambrian). The rocks span an age between 1,000 and 540 million years ago and record extreme climatic changes and tectonic events that shaped Arabia and the whole globe.

Prince Michael spoke about the important update by colleagues from the Geological Society of Oman, about the diversity and beauty of the geology and caves of the Sultanate of Oman and its unique geological heritage.

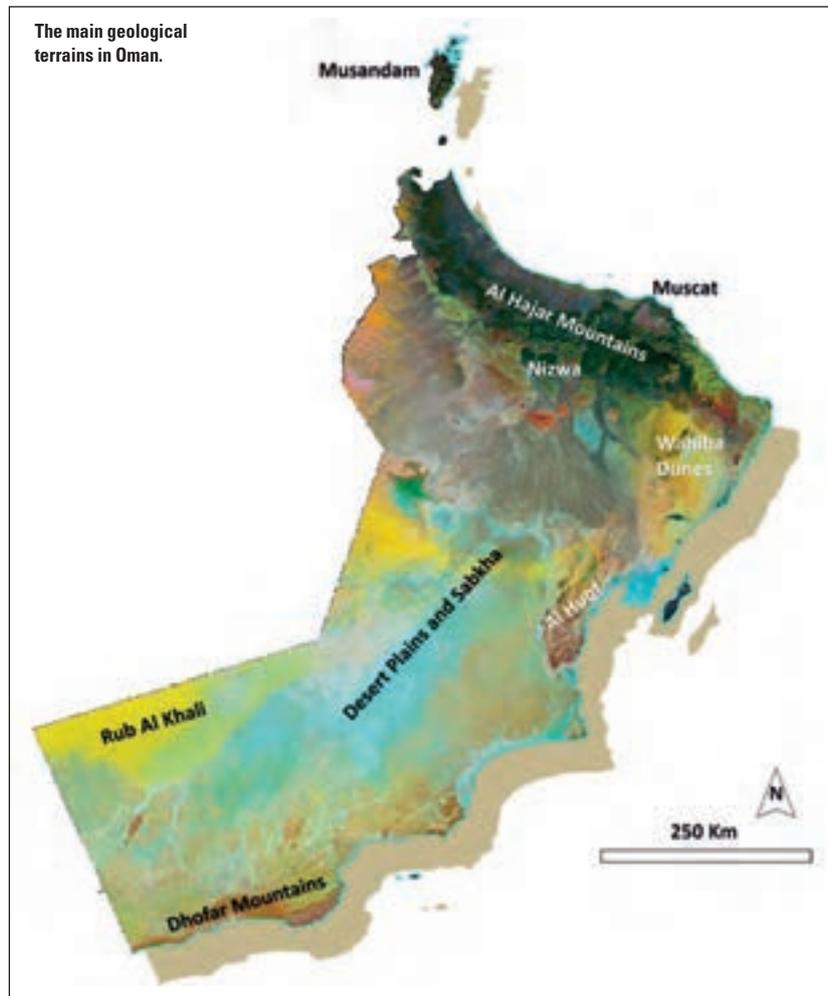
“I have fond memories of travelling through the distinctive mountains surrounding the Sharqiya Sands as a member of the Royal Geographical Society survey team in the eighties and so I am sad not to have a chance to be with you tonight.

“Oman’s geology and caves are known throughout the world and tonight you will be getting an update on recent discoveries by scientists in Oman - and their pioneering fieldwork to safeguard Oman’s geology for future generations.”

## THE STORY: THE WONDERS OF THE GEOLOGY OF OMAN

Mohammed Al Kindi then presented his lecture about the geology of the Sultanate of Oman. Oman is globally known as a land of enchanting geology and amazing caves, with a wonderful character of being able to record important events of the history of earth and its inhabitants. The fossils are unique, with unmatched variety of caves to explore and study, beautiful wadis and canyons, different types of coasts, some mountainous, sandy, and lagoonal zones.

Oman is divided into various geological terrains, each with its marvels and attractions. The main ones are al Jebel al Akhdar and Jebel Shams, Musandam and al Jebel al Abyadh in the North and the



Dhofar Mountains in the South. Between them lies a desert plain, where wind and water has sculptured rocks and land into amazing shapes.

One of the most famous parts of the Al Hajar Mountains is Jebel Akhdar, and the summit of Jebel Shams, standing more than 3000m above Sea Level. The massif

The Ophiolite is Oman’s world unique wonder. It forms the best exposed oceanic plate in the world. It was pushed by tectonic forces on top of the land some 90 million years ago, carrying with it details of the ocean floor with its volcanic and colourful deposits. These details include pillow lavas, sheeted dykes, and massive



Marine fossils of corals, and fish bones and teeth found more than 2,000 m above sea level in Jebel Akhdar. They date back to around 260 million years and 150 million years ago respectively (Al Kindi, 2018).

The desert plain also includes a wide variety of wonders, such as the rock garden in east central Oman where weathering and erosion shaped rocks into extraordinary shapes. There are beautiful pink lakes formed when the salinity of water increased many times more than sea water, promoting bacteria, algae, and fungi to flourish, causing the production of pink pigment. Sand dunes cover large areas of central Oman. Those rich in carbonate grain tend to be white in colour. Deposits of ancient lakes are found within sand dunes. Around them humans lived for thousands of years. Their tools scattered around the lakes and springs tell us about their lifestyles. The sand dunes and desert

hydrothermal vents. The ophiolite provided Oman since the end of the Neolithic and the Bronze age with copper ores. The mining was done in harsh conditions and the copper was exported to Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq) among other places. They named Oman as Majan, the Land of Copper. Ancient tombs and castles across Oman stand witness of that amazing civilization. The process of ophiolite emplacement and its movement led to amazing structures.



One of the oases and pink lakes in the central desert plains of Oman.



Pillow lava (left) that gushed on the sea floor close to mid-oceanic ridges before being emplaced on top of Oman. On the right, deformed oceanic sediments (radiolarian cherts) that were folded and fractured during the emplacement of the ophiolite and oceanic sediments on top of Oman, some 90 million years ago.

plains hide also marine fossil sites, as well as fossils of petrified wood and grooves induced by glacial event some 300 million years ago, and old rock deposits and structures.

## THE DIVERSITY OF THE CAVES OF OMAN

Nabil Al Saqri spoke about exploring and documenting caves, with increasing passion for this dangerous but fascinating adventure. The Oman Cave Exploration Team has documented hundreds of caves in Oman over five years, and will publish at least 100 of them in a book soon.

“We will not stop at this point. There are many others waiting for us out here. When we go caving, we must be well equipped. All gear should be checked and prepared. Sometimes we walk long distances, carrying heavy bags. But the reward can be worth it. For new undocumented caves, the

Oman reveals evidence of the emergence of life on our planet. Its rocks record multiple changing environments, and its fossils represent the oldest evidence of multi-cell organisms found. Here lived the first primitive fish to swim in the sea and the earliest plants to grow on Earth.

Dinosaurs, some of which are found to be new species, and elephants once roamed the plains. Early man passed through and settled. Civilizations flourished in this land once called Majan and Mazoon. Welcoming and vibrant, amongst all this splendour, Omanis live today.



One of the caves where stone houses were built inside, in Jebel Akhdar.

overlooking the sea. It is composed of light-coloured carbonate rock, prone to dissolution and weathering forming large cave systems. The most famous cave is Majlis al Jinn, one of the largest cave chambers in the world. It is about 150m deep and more than 300m long. The caves in al Jebel al Abyadh include beautiful speleothems that formed during wet climatic periods over thousands of years.

Caves and sinkholes are also documented in the central desert plain, including caves that were used as salt mines. The Dhofar mountains in South Oman are cut by massive cliffs on the southern side. From Winter to Summer, these mountains undergo a massive

entrance can be mysterious. We plan and ensure the safety measures are in place. We start by removing any potential falling rocks and drill for anchors and bolts if required. We then check the system and install the ropes. We documented about 40 major caves in al Jebel Al Akhdar. The most famous are Hayl al Diyar, Amer Cave al Saqf. Some caves were used as houses. We make maps and sections of caves, and in many cases 3D maps as well.”

Al Jebel Al Abyadh, the white mountain, in the northeast corner of Oman, stands about 2000m high



Deposits in one of the caves in Jebel Abyadh.



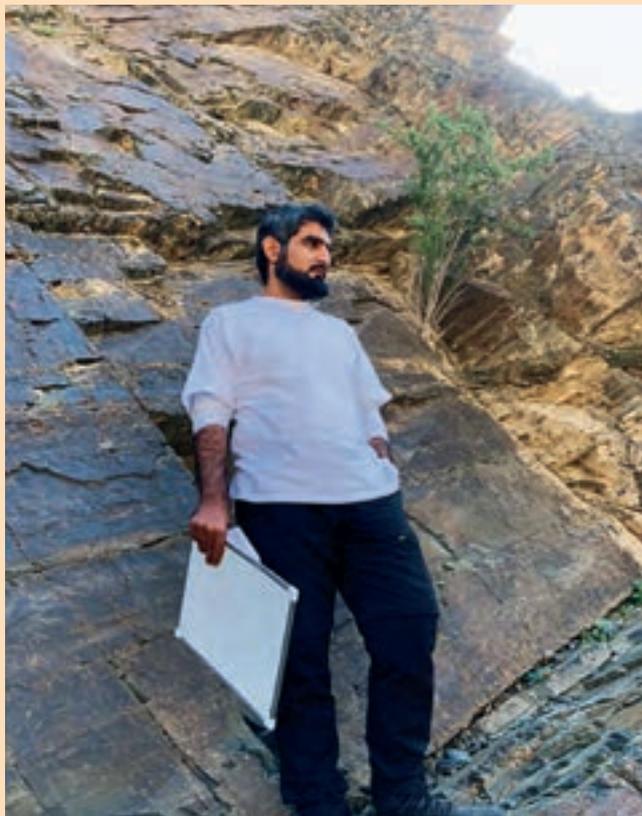
One of the magnificent walls of Hayl Al Diya's main chambers, decorated by types of speleothems (formations precipitated in carbonate solutional caves). Photo by Oman Cave Exploration Team.



A cave in central Oman which was used to mine salt.

transformation of climate because of the summer monsoon from the Indian Ocean. Much rain falls and the area is covered by a green lush. The carbonate units dissolve and form massive sinkholes and caves. Many small caves and shelters contain ancient script and drawings. ■

*Caves and sinkholes are also documented in the central desert plain, including caves that were used as salt mines. The Dhofar mountains in South Oman are cut by massive cliffs on the southern side.*



## THE SPEAKERS MOHAMMED AL KINDI

Mohammed al Kindi is a keen and active Omani geologist. He obtained his bachelor's degree in physics and geology from the University of Aberdeen in 2003 and he completed a PhD with the University of Leeds in 2006, studying the structural styles at the southern limit of the Oman Mountains. In 2008, he became Executive Manager of the GSO and in 2013 President. Between 2006 and 2014, Mohammed worked as a petroleum development geologist in Petroleum Development Oman (PDO).

Mohammed al Kindi is a geological surveyor, enthusiastic fossil-hunter, cave explorer and keen photographer. His main specialism is structural archaeological expeditions. He visited many geological wonders and fossil-rich areas while working in PDO and during his contributions to GSO's projects. He has led several geological expeditions and research groups.

Mohammed is founder and CEO of the Earth Sciences Consultancy Centre as well as a visiting lecturer in several universities and institutes, including the German University of Technology in Oman, where he supervises students studying different branches of geology. He has published two books about the evolution of land and life in Oman and about the caves of Oman.



### NABIL AL SAQRI, THE OMAN CAVE EXPLORATION GROUP

Nabil is a schoolteacher of information technology from Nizwa. Having lived in one of the most diverse natural attractions in Oman, he became passionate about the documentation and protection of wildlife and natural wonders. He specialises in the macrophotography of fauna and flora, particularly of insects. He is an active member of the Oman Cave Exploration Team (the Speleological Team of Oman) contributing to the current exploration of Oman's caves. As part of the team's activities, he has travelled across Oman taking striking photographs of caves and their fauna. He was one of the key members in rigging caves and surveying their trajectories. He worked with the team producing a book about their work, which includes information about the locations, size, geological setting, and main attractions of about 100 caves.

### VOTE OF THANKS BY DR SAIF AL SHAQSI

DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL FIELD RESEARCH CENTRE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

On behalf of the Oman Group in the UK, I express my appreciation to all involved:

Dr Mohammed Al Kindi and Mr Nabil Al Saqri for their most impressive and enjoyable lecture and films about Oman's unique geology and caves. We have been able to witness the sheer beauty and diversity of Oman's geological heritage, which will be of interest to earth scientists and tourists for generations to come. We know how hard you work in the field and we thank you for sharing the results with us. Mr Abdulmunim Al Zakwani and his colleagues at the Geological Society of Oman in Muscat, for making the arrangements in lockdown and for the broadcast from Dr Mohammed's home. We applaud all that is being achieved in Oman to safeguard Oman's unique geological heritage. The Anglo-Omani Society in London for their continued support for our annual Oman Natural Heritage and for field research in general.



## 2021 BIRDS OF OMAN LECTURE POSTPONED FOR A YEAR

Sadly, after discussions with the Oman Embassy (Rashid Al Junaibi in the Ambassadors Office) and with our two distinguished Omani speakers, Mr. Nasser Al Kindi and Mrs. Azzah Al Jabri in Muscat, Roderic Dutton and I have decided to postpone the 6th Oman Natural Heritage lecture for a year because of the uncertainties of quarantining and the rules regarding indoor gatherings. It was scheduled for Wednesday 27 October 2021.

We were truly sorry to do this. But Roderic and I feel this is the right decision in the circumstances. Also, we are very keen

that both Nasser Al Kindi and Azzah Al Jabri benefit from meetings with the senior staff of the Natural History Museum, Flora and Fauna International and Birdlife International during their time in the UK, and this was at risk should we have had to broadcast the lecture from Oman like last year.

We have informed the Royal Geographical Society and the Geographical Magazine, requesting the revised date of Wednesday 26 October 2022 for us to hold the Birds of Oman Lecture by Nasser and Azzah. This they have confirmed.

BY NIGEL WINSER

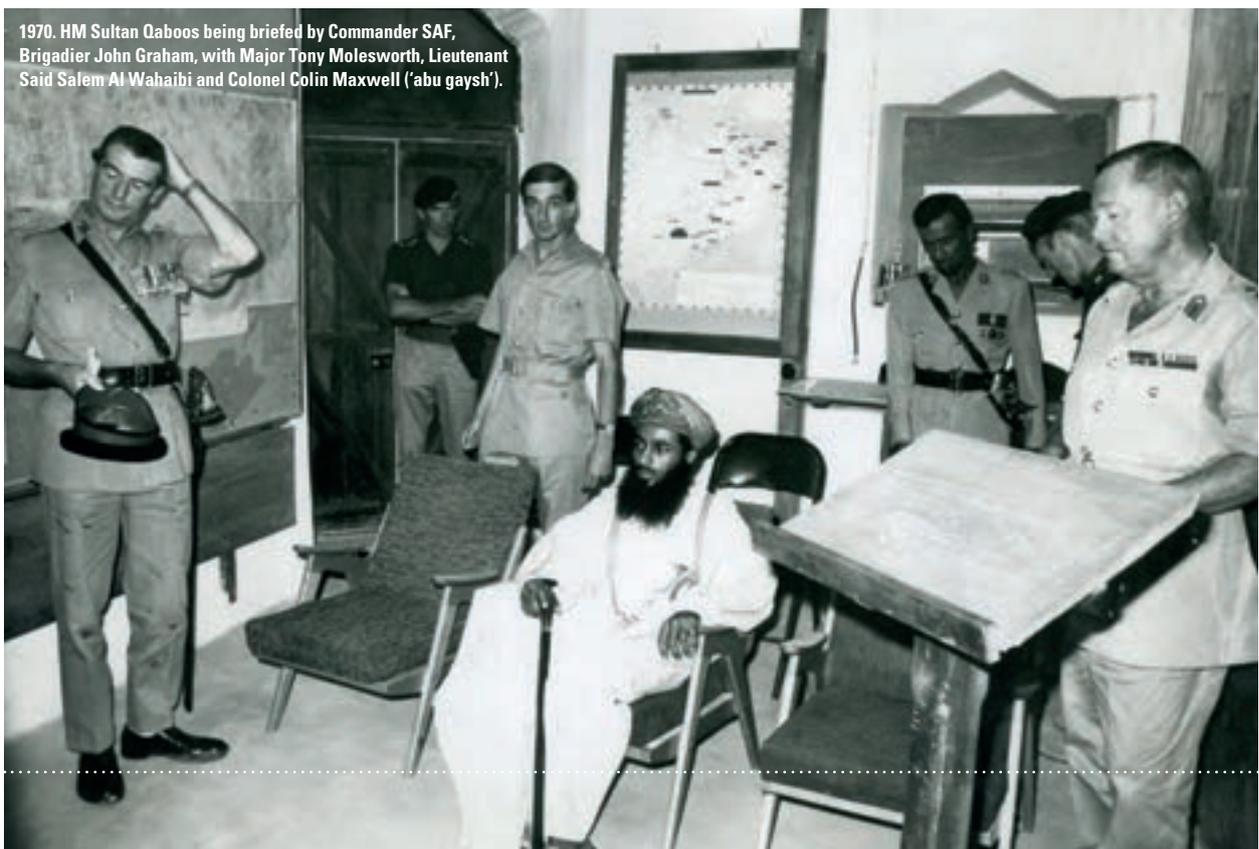


HRH Prince Charles and HH Sayyid Theyazin welcoming the opening of the Society's on-line Renaissance Exhibition.

## 50th ANNIVERSARY PHOTO EXHIBITION

By Vice-President Richard Muir, who masterminded the amazing collection of pictures to illustrate the Renaissance period. Our selection in the Review emphasises the enduring relationship between our two countries... with touches of nostalgia for those of us from Britain who served in the Sultanate over the years.

1970. HM Sultan Qaboos being briefed by Commander SAF, Brigadier John Graham, with Major Tony Molesworth, Lieutenant Said Salem Al Wahaibi and Colonel Colin Maxwell ('abu gaysh').





The BBME at Buraimi.

collections: John Graham's annotated albums, the Charles Butt, Edward Ashley and Jill Brown photographs.

For later years the memories of successive former Ambassadors and Society members proved more or less reliable, backed up by past editions of the SAF Journal and for more recent years the Society's own Review.

In parallel we approached a firm of exhibition designers, Bees and Honey, who had done excellent work for the Royal Geographical Society and came highly



The Shell filling station at Muttrah.



The Royal Yacht Britannia at Muscat, 1979.

The minutes of a meeting of the Society's Trustees held in the Court Room of St Andrew's Church, Holborn on 13 December 2018, record agreement that the Society should organise an event to celebrate HM Sultan Qaboos's 50th Anniversary of Accession in 2020. The Society's President HE Abdul Aziz Al Hinai soon approved the idea of an exhibition of photographs spanning the 50 years. Having suggested it, I found myself tasked with getting it done.

By January 2019 we had a plan of action for an exhibition of captioned images illustrating Anglo-Omani cooperation over the period 1970-2020. It would be in the lecture room at 34 Sackville Street, open to members and the public for a couple of weeks in November 2020. There would be a VIP opening ceremony to mark the event and generate publicity in Britain and Oman.

We had in mind a series of panels divided into five sections each representing a ten year period between 1970 and 2020, showing the breadth and depth of Britain's close and collaborative relationship with Oman over the 50 years. We would appeal to Society members and trawl UK collections and archives for the material we needed; we would also approach potential Omani sources.

We first had to establish a timeline and

identify key events. For the period up to 1989 the National Archive at Kew proved invaluable. Our intern at the time, Callum Printsmith, spent several days combing through the Annual Reviews and other papers produced by the Muscat Embassy and now publicly available. Callum and Dina Macki then travelled to Oxford and with the help of the Archivist, Debbie Usher, searched the St Anthony's College Middle East Archive, the repository of several vital

recommended. They proposed an arrangement of panels to fit neatly into the lecture room at Sackville Street and provide a backdrop for an opening ceremony about which feelers had gone out to the office of HRH The Prince of Wales.

Welcome offers of material came in from members who were to prove the source of many of the most original images. Nigel Walker produced pictures of the first National Day; Dina Macki obtained a unique





HM The Queen with HM Sultan Qaboos in London 1982, with the Chiefs of Staff of the British Armed Forces.

photograph of HM Sultan Qaboos in Muscat in 1970 taken by the poet and journalist Dhiab bin Sakher Al Ameri; John Wright sent us pictures of ‘Oman with Britain’ the major festival organised by Robert Alston – with a lot of input from Pat – during his time as Ambassador; Richard Owens produced a commemorative album of the festival events which we were able to plunder.

Both Ruth Hawley and Terry Clark were generous with their time and their private collections of photographs. So were Stuart Bailey, Ollie Blake, Mark Evans, Ian Kendrick, John McKeown, Stuart Laing, Nigel Winsor and several others. Invaluable leads came from our intern Sarika Breeze, from Nigel Knocker and Hugh Willing. Francis Owtram from the British Library tracked down a unique contemporary copy of the 1800 Agreement between Sayyid Sultan bin Ahmed and Captain John Malcolm. We had encouragement and support throughout from our President and from

‘Issa Al Shibani at the Oman Embassy.

We realised that we would need to do research in Oman. Dina Macki and Ghaith Al Harthi prepared the way for my visit in November 2019. With the assistance of the Oman Embassy in London we met the Minister of Information, the Editor in Chief

of the ‘Oman Observer’ and the veteran photographer Hamid bin Hamed Al Qasbi. HM Ambassador Hamish Cowell and Julie Hannan at the British Embassy Muscat were extremely helpful in digging into their back rooms for old photographs. Kai Vacher sent us material from the British School archive. An impromptu visit to the National Museum led to an invaluable screen shot from video footage of the 1994 National Day celebrations at Nizwa.

Collecting the material brought home the enormous change in photography over the 50 years. The early pictures are relatively few, the days when most people had to send their films off for expensive developing and just 36 pictures on a roll. For official occasions there was heavy reliance on professional photographers protective of their product. The explosion came in the early 2000s with digital photography; from then on rather than scraping around for images it was a matter of selecting from hundreds.

On 10 January 2020 came the sad news of the death of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos



Wilfred Thesiger and Salim bin Kabina meeting in Salalah in 1992 for the first time since the crossing of the Empty Quarter in 1946.



Omani and British young people making music together.

followed by the succession of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. It soon became clear that with continuity the watchword, the 50th Anniversary would still be celebrated in November and our plans could remain on track. The emphasis, however, shifted to HM Sultan Qaboos’s legacy and a look forward to the Renaissance renewed under HM Sultan Haitham.

Covid and the lockdown in March 2020 ruled out a follow up visit to Oman to unearth further material. But while we found that with a few work arounds we had a just about viable collection of images we could no longer securely plan on an event

## 50th ANNIVERSARY PHOTO EXHIBITION



Comrades in arms in the field...



...and on Parade



The Duke of Edinburgh and Sir Terence Clark (then HMA) on a desert fuddle.

The messages from the two heirs apparent which could have been written by a single hand complement each other in emphasising the length and closeness of the bilateral relationship and the role in that of the Anglo-Omani Society. We could not have hoped for a better opening to the display.

After inevitable last-minute cliff hangers we succeeded in launching the site on the morning of 18 November 2020. It received wide coverage in the Omani press and television and proved a hit on Omani social media. As Her Majesty's Ambassador, Muscat, was kind enough to put it, the display was 'a very important contribution to a very significant day'. The website display pages recorded over 5,000 views over their three-month run. ■

at Sackville Street. We were rescued by the recent completion, after long endeavours, of the Society's new website. We shifted the effort to a digital display with the enthusiastic support of Nick Smith and the now remotely working Sackville Street team.

The web designers created new pages and we set about selecting images to produce a coherent narrative divided into five sections each covering a decade. We gave each picture a detailed caption and inserted linking text between each gallery of images to give continuity and essential background.

With the support of the Chairman, we approached Clarence House for a video message from HRH The Prince of Wales in place of a speech at the now defunct opening ceremony. After a favourable response our President suggested a matching message from a senior Omani figure – we had in mind HH Sayyid Shehab's appearance with HRH The Prince of Wales at the Society's anniversary events at Lancaster House. All this bore fruit in the two short videos that appear on the first page of the website exhibition. We were delighted that HM The Sultan nominated HH Sayyid Theyazin for the task.



HRH Prince Charles being shown museum pieces by the then HH Haitham.



HM Sultan Haitham with HRH Prince William.

# OMAN IN THE PIVOTAL YEARS OF THE 1990S

SIR TERENCE CLARK INTERVIEWED BY JAMES MARRIOTT

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.

Sir Terence Clark, KBE, CMG, CVO was Ambassador to Oman 1990-1994 after serving as Ambassador to Iraq 1985-1989. Sir Terence entered HM Diplomatic Service in 1955. He studied Arabic at SOAS and the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies (MECAS) before embarking on a career largely in or dealing with the Arab

world, interspersed with service in Europe and the Foreign Office.

To learn more about this period of maturation for the Anglo-Omani relationship, our intern James Marriott spoke to Sir Terence about his years as Ambassador.

This article touches upon the many developments 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.

Al-Alam Palace located in Old Muscat.



## SIR TERENCE CLARK INTERVIEW

My first Gulf posting after studying Arabic at MECAS 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 revitalised 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 five years, including the last three 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 necessary personal effects to start business. 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



Presentation of Credentials 1990.

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 20 years before, so that I could telephone 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 Ministers and visits to all parts of Oman from Musandam to Dhofar, so that I could submit within three months a formal despatch giving my first impressions of Oman in general and the excellent state of Anglo-Omani relations in particular.

### 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 in Salalah for the summer. 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.

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

Well, Kuwaiti-Omani relations traditionally were very close. The heads of state and ministers all knew each other well, so it was a terrible shock 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 a Royal Visit from the Duke of Edinburgh, what do you remember of that?

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, and landed his own plane at Seeb Airport. He stayed at the Sultan's Palace at Bait al-Baraka, but 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 officially opened the new Embassy Commercial Section established in Ruwi to



Prince Philip presents a replica of a Mesopotamian cylinder tablet.

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.

### **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.

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 his former

companions on the journey for a traditional Omani lunch and Thesiger and his companions were absolutely delighted.

The exhibition then moved 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. HRH 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 three days, during which time 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 Prince Charles 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.

### **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



Prince Charles' visit to the British Council in February 1992, speaking to Fathiya al-Hinai, of Oman TV.

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.

With the help of the British Council, we were 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 XI for matches with their Omani counterparts.

### What do you remember about the end of your Ambassadorship, and what important changes occurred during your 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 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 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.

Leaving Oman was a very emotional moment for me. I had spent altogether about six and a half 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". ■

Farewell audience with HM Sultan Qaboos and Sayyid Haitham bin Tarik in June 1994.



# HM SULTAN HAITHAM BIN TARIK'S NEW BASIC LAW

ARTICLE BY RICHARD MUIR

HM Sultan Haitham bin Tarik completed his first year in power in January with a new constitutional document (Basic Law) and a new set of rules for Oman's parliament, the Oman Council.

These laws are consistent with his pledge on succession to continue his predecessor's approach to governing but contain significant new features. What are these and what do they tell us about HM Sultan Haitham's intentions as Oman faces its most severe set of challenges since the Dhofar war?



## SULTAN QABOOS'S BASIC LAW

HM Sultan Qaboos issued the country's first Basic Law in October 1996. He amended it in November 2011 following popular demonstrations, to spell out in greater detail how the Oman Council was to function. In both cases he acted by royal decree with neither public nor parliamentary debate, although there is evidence of extensive private consultation with Omani and foreign constitutional experts. He demonstrated that the Sultan could promulgate and amend the Basic Law at will, that in Oman it is the ruler who shapes the constitution rather than vice versa.

Qaboos's 1996 Basic Law codified the practice and principles evolved over his first 25 years of rule. It confirmed him as head of state and supreme commander of the armed forces whose 'command is obeyed'. He alone was to appoint and preside over the executive as well as appointing the senior judiciary. Citizens had freedoms and rights, but circumscribed by further laws. There were two new elements: an arrangement for the succession (important because Qaboos had no direct heir) and the creation of an upper house of parliament, the State Council, which he would appoint to balance the elected Shura Council which had been a work in progress since the 1970s.

HM Qaboos saw the role of this Oman Council as one of discussion and consultation, based on the Ibadi and wider



Islamic tradition of shura rooted in the Quran. Parliament could thus debate some of the executive's draft laws and propose its own, but the Sultan, having received parliament's advice, would have the last word and sole power to ratify and promulgate laws. It is possible that Qaboos deliberately left space between the lines for a robust parliament to push the boundaries towards a more developed democracy and there is some evidence that it did this after 2011.

### HM SULTAN HAITHAM'S BASIC LAW

In his January 2021 Basic Law HM Sultan Haitham has retained most of his predecessor's language. His two major changes are in the provisions for succession and in the transfer of detail on the Oman Council to a new law with some new provisions. There are also significant tweaks.

On the succession, Qaboos's 1996 formula (essentially a letter to be opened should the ruling family council fail quickly to agree on a successor) was always problematic. Although in the event it produced a fast and orderly transition on Sultan Qaboos's death, that was not a given. Sultan Haitham's new version brings greater certainty and stability but remains susceptible to amendment by some future royal decree. The detailed provisions in the new Basic Law for appointment of a Crown Prince could be seen as formalising practice generally followed in the Al Said

dynasty (in contrast to the Imamate where there had been a tradition of limited election). In identifying an heir apparent it removes an element that troubled Oman's friends and international creditors, as well as its people, and brings the Sultanate more into line with the GCC mainstream and many other monarchies including the UK.

HM Sultan Haitham's other significant changes in the new Basic Law show greater emphasis on effective government performance and on the welfare of Omani citizens. There is provision for more devolution to local government and for new committees reporting direct to the Sultan to monitor ministers and chase up the performance of government departments and public bodies. The social contract is made more explicit with firmer commitments to social solidarity, welfare, and support for Omani citizens, including the 'right to work', themes elaborated during Sultan Haitham's first year with emphasis on social inclusion, fairness, justice, and equality of opportunity.

The commitment to the 'free market' which appeared in the 1996 Basic Law is softened for language of the mixed economy. Universities are given autonomy and academic freedom guaranteed. HM Sultan Haitham has, however, retained verbatim Sultan Qaboos's chapters on freedoms of expression and assembly, on the press and the right to form societies; these are again all set firmly 'within the limits of the law' with only a hint that the relevant laws may be made less restrictive.

### HM SULTAN HAITHAM'S OMAN COUNCIL LAW

The new law governing parliament replicates much of the text Sultan Qaboos added to his Basic Law in 2011 setting out powers and procedures for the bicameral Oman Council. It gives the force of royal decree to procedures in the elected lower house. These allow members to make individual statements on 'urgent matters of public interest' and to 'raise such matters with the government' as well as putting written and oral questions to ministers. The Council as a body can similarly raise 'matters of public interest' with the government and invite ministers to participate in debates on topics it selects. Retained from the 1996 Basic Law is the right of both houses jointly to propose draft laws and to vote on the cabinet's draft laws before they go to the Sultan. All these procedures are to be in public unless parliament and government agree otherwise.

Two other important provisions come from the 2011 Basic Law: scrutiny of the draft state budget and of the draft five-year development plan; and interrogation of service ministers accused of 'exceeding their powers in violation of the law'. But the new law requires that these sensitive and potentially highly controversial processes take place in camera. It also repeats the insistence of the 2011 law that the Oman Council's 'competence' should extend only to government departments and state

entities delivering public services; other areas such as defence and security appear to remain off limits.

Overall, the new law gives the Oman Council, and particularly the elected Shura Council, more clearly defined powers. If the Council uses them it could in future be harder for ministers in charge of services to the public to elude serious parliamentary questioning or for the cabinet to avoid sending draft laws to parliament for public debate. That should include new legislation introducing income taxes, cuts in subsidies and other major elements of economic policy. The right to scrutinise the budget and sequential development plans remains an important power.

In the accompanying important article Waheb Al Saadi, a legal researcher at the Shura Council, explains how he believes the Council can look to developing its legislative and oversight functions as an equal partner with the Executive.

### DIRECTION OF TRAVEL

The new Basic Law confirms that Oman remains an autocracy with power concentrated in the hands of the ruler. Sultan Haitham has put himself firmly in the lead. He has retained Sultan Qaboos's provision for a prime minister but, like Qaboos, appears set on doing the job himself (although he has dropped the other portfolios held by his predecessor).

It is clear from the pace and range of action since his first day in power that Sultan Haitham has recognised what Sultan Qaboos was always reluctant to accept, that the economy has to change fast and that the process, complicated by a still oil dependant rentier economy fraught with vested interests, high youth unemployment, an unsustainable deficit and now covid will be extremely painful. In a raft of measures in his crowded first year Sultan Haitham sought to make the executive more efficient and more accountable with a younger and better qualified team. Plans for change are based on the wide discussion and consultation directly with the public that he led during Sultan Qaboos's final years and on the various programmes - Vision 2040, Tawazun etc - home grown by Omani technocrats and so with a better chance of taking hold than those parachuted in by international consultants (cf Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030).

Sultan Haitham has buttressed his measures with repeated assurances, amplified by senior ministers, that those citizens most in need of support will always receive it, and that those most able to contribute should always do so, including through taxation and increased charges for public services. In an important gesture many senior officials and military have been retired and those remaining have lost significant perks.

Sultan Haitham's government has also been rather more open. He has spoken himself in some detail about his aims.

Some ministers and senior officials have been able to say more in media interviews. The covid crisis has been handled through credible weekly ministerial press conferences and daily updates. Private sector news agencies are permitted to operate. The press is still by no means free and is precluded from political comment and from covering in any depth areas such as foreign affairs and security, the budget and ministerial transgressions; but taken with a lively (albeit similarly restricted) social media, the public now have a fuller, if not yet sufficient, account of the government's actions and intentions.

In the national Oman Council and in the local regional councils citizens can also see some means beyond the traditional channels of influencing government decisions on jobs, taxation, and the services they will be increasingly paying for. As Waheb Al Saadi shows in his article, the way could now be open for the Oman Council to use the teeth in the new Law to act as a conduit for public opinion and to offer an alternative to the resort to the streets – the 'youthquake' that happened with serious consequences in 2011.

The road ahead will be tough. It inevitably carries risk for the Sultan and his Crown Prince should plans falter and public opinion sour; the Basic Law leaves them politically exposed. Sultan Haitham has done much in a short time but will need the consistent support of his friends in the UK and elsewhere if he and his government are to retain the confidence of Oman's elites, religious establishment, and ordinary citizens in a secure and stable future. ■

# THE OMAN COUNCIL AND THE NEW ROYAL DECREES: WINDOW TO A NEW HORIZON

ARTICLE BY WAHEB AL SAADI



As explained in my article in the 2020 Review ‘The Oman Council: How a visionary leader institutionalised the Shura tradition’, the process of modernisation under His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said (1970-2020) reflected a political will to strengthen the principles of democracy and participation in governance.

This was done in a way that maintained a close relationship between Islamic traditions and the development of civil society, and it was appropriate to the Omani context.

In his speech on the 50th National Day anniversary in November 2020, HM Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, who had succeeded HM Sultan Qaboos the previous January, announced that work was in hand to review the process of legislation and oversight as well as to develop instruments of accountability; and that these areas, primarily the concern of the Oman Council and its two chambers (State and Shura), were to form a basic pillar for the future of Oman. We can read the new Sultan’s words

as a call to reinforce the ground on which the Oman Council and its two chambers were founded, and then substantially to develop significant parts of the Council’s responsibilities.

The new Sultan’s announcement came at a crucial time. In November 2020 aspects of governance were under review, including the framework regulating public policy, the legislative process, and the division and separation of powers between the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. An overarching framework was to be set out a few months later in the new Basic Law, issued in January 2021 as Royal Decree 6/2021. A parallel Royal Decree 7/2021, the Oman Council Law, which is the main subject of this article, was to promulgate specific regulations for the legislature.

Moving forward, the task before the two chambers of the Oman Council is now not only to reflect the will of the political leadership but also the legacy of parliamentary practice shaped over the 40 years since the establishment of the Consultative Council in 1981. In doing this the Oman Council will need to take account of the current and future interests of the nation as well as being guided by the

stipulations of the new Oman Council Law.

This process starts from a basic point: the introduction of the two-chamber model (elected and appointed) was an important step forward in the Sultanate's political development. It needs to be taken forward now with a clear analysis and understanding not only of the two new Royal Decrees but also of the legacy of parliamentary practice developed in both chambers of the Oman Council over more than two decades.

The preamble to the Royal Decree promulgating the new Basic Law highlights the importance of the tradition of shura, its practices, and its role as an anchor for the foundations on which the Basic Law stands. It is worth noting here that shura was a major focus of the amendments introduced in the revised 2011 Basic Law; these reinforced the fundamental importance of shura to the Sultanate's political system and its significance as a key political principle.

In contrast to the 1996 Basic Law and to the 2011 amendment (which in Chapter 5 has 46 articles devoted to the Oman Council), the 2021 Basic Law contains no detail on the nature and function of the Council nor on its makeup and powers. There are instead just eight basic articles setting out broad principles. The detail is now contained in the separate 2021 Law specific to the Council. This is a significant departure.

While the Basic Law is a 'rigid' constitutional instrument, deriving from the will of the Sultan and difficult to amend or change, the new Oman Council Law removes the arrangements for the Council from those tight confines and creates a potentially more flexible framework open more readily to amendment. At the same time, it is significant that the 2021 Council Law retains the provision allowing the Council to propose draft laws which the Council should be able to use to introduce legislation on its own authority both to

expand (or reduce) its role and to develop the parliamentary tools at its disposal.

Finally, it is important that the Oman Council should not only carry out its legislative and oversight functions as codified by law but that it should also act as an institution which gives citizens the feeling that political and social change are possible and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change (what is sometimes termed political efficacy).

The Oman Council, and particularly the Shura Council as the elected chamber, should be aware of the authority and opportunities that derive from these expectations and should design and direct its oversight tools and legislative role with that in mind. As it does so the Oman Council should have parity with the executive since the exercise of the parliamentary function is based on the legitimacy the Council derives from the public. ■



Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from coronavirus Press conference.

# THE WINDS OF CHANGE CHALLENGING YEARS AHEAD

The first major Society event of 2021 in mid-January was a thoroughly satisfactory Zoom webinar on the outlook for the Sultanate in both domestic and foreign policy.

The three distinguished experts on the panel were informative, interesting and enjoyable to hear, and the event was well modulated by Vice-President Richard Muir. Society members were participating at lunchtime in the UK and in the early evening in Oman.

Yousuf Al Balushi began by referring to the Winds of Change which need to be harnessed for the future. There is a successful and exciting story of progress over the past 50 years in international, social, economic and infrastructure terms: growing from scratch the basic elements of



## DR YOUSUF AL BALUSHI

Before leaving Oman's public sector to launch Smart Investment Gateway <https://www.omainvestgateway.com/>, he was Chief Economist for the Vision Oman 2040 task-force under the leadership of HM Sultan Haitham. His teams examined sector-wide business opportunities at Governorate-level to develop a macroeconomic framework and private development plan. An economist, he spent over 20 years at the Central Bank of Oman and at the Supreme Council for Planning. He was appointed as an advisor on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) statistics in the framework of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). His PhD in Economics was from King's College, London.



**FATMA AL ARIMI**

An Omani journalist with 12 years' experience in local and international media, she was Reuters' correspondent in Oman until 2018. She is one of the most followed journalists on social media, and in 2017 was recognised as a top influencer by Oman's National Youth Committee. She set up The Media Centre (TMC) in 2018 as an Oman-based information and news hub, with a focus on analysis of current economic and social matters. She edits the news service wafoman.com, the bilingual independent business news website in Oman. Her November podcast for the AOS in which she talks about her career is on our website.

a modern state, such as education and hospitals, between 1970 and 1994; then wise progress and planning, including Vision 2040, written in-house by Omanis.

The situation now is challenging, and the modes of development need to change fundamentally. In energy, single source reliance on oil is not sustainable. It has been as high as 85 per cent, but as a finite resource it is a declining asset; there are physical limits to exploitation; and market demand is lessening, bringing lower prices.

The private sector has to become stronger, with more emphasis on diversification, manufacturing, technology, capital investment and markets. This will change the State/people dynamic, from too much reliance on Government jobs and support and imports. Much has been done, but more change is necessary to move from what might be termed a welfare state into an enterprise state creating more

businesses and jobs. This depends on the four pillars: the people, the economy, the environment and government.

Change management requires administrative restructuring. This is happening, with older people who have borne the burden being released for well-earned retirement leisure, to be replaced by fewer people from younger generations with fresh energy and ideas. Capital investment is required, and a culture of cost sharing between state and people is essential; the proposed VAT tax has a lot of exemptions and so will have only limited impact; there is a need for a stronger message.

He summed up by stating that Oman had a wealth of natural resources, people and history. Good progress had been made, for example in fisheries and agriculture. The new challenges were not unique to Oman, but also to GCC and other oil economies. It is a matter of time to

harness the fruit of what has been done and to achieve a smooth transition.

Fatma Al Arimi concentrated on social aspects of how people feel, for which they need the necessary knowledge and information, which in turn means open communication and media to transmit it.

Accountability is seen by HM Sultan Haitham as a key element of change. With publicity, people can see it in operation. The Shura Council now has the right enshrined in a new Royal Decree to interrogate ministers. For this to be a step forward the Shura Council will need to make use of this right and to do so in open session.

The mid term fiscal plan's proposed restructuring of subsidies is being debated by the people. At present 40% of the people need subsidies. If subsidies are to be cut the government has to find ways of increasing average incomes. In the meantime cutting the benefits received by high officials is welcomed by the public as sharing the burden.

Fatma Al Arimi sees the freedom to express dissatisfaction as a good thing and her expectation for the future is positive, citing also the new permission for private news agencies to operate plus de-centralisation within government and to governorates and municipalities.

With new powers come responsibilities, and with the implementation of new laws there is a need to put tools in place to gain trust from the people.

Abdullah Baabood outlined the existing principles and policies in international relations which HM Sultan Haitham announced soon after his accession that he would continue to follow: based on international law, friendship and cooperation with neighbours and more widely, resolution of problems by diplomacy and negotiation, and avoiding armed conflict. So there is continuity, but change is inevitable because of economic and other factors. The core ideas are the same, but clearly there is a new style of leadership, government and senior officials, laws and economic challenges.

Regionally, Oman supported moderation (together with Kuwait) in the Qatar/GCC 'spat', and so the end to it is welcome. The GCC is important on cooperation and integration for itself and the wider region,

and both travel and trade were adversely affected. The neighbouring country of Yemen has many cultural and other linkages with the Sultanate, and the conflict and suffering there need resolution: Oman is providing the venue and facility for the factions to meet safely for talks. Recent international interventions, such as branding the Houthis as terrorists, were unhelpful.

In wider world links, the differences between the United States and Iran are disturbing, though the change of President in the USA could lead back to resolving differences, in which again Oman could be a facilitator. Oman also is trying to balance relationships with China and traditional partners such as the UK and India.

Reacting to the serious economic situation, Omani Ambassadors have been told to focus on this aspect of their work. This is important, but also difficult without a period of training for diplomatic staff (persuading traditional diplomatists more towards commerce and trade is not necessarily easy).

Internally, young people want jobs and progress, so there are internal and external challenges. HM Sultan Haitham has inherited an established country internationally, and though there is hard work ahead, there are positive signs such as regional moves, resolution of one Gulf crisis and the election of President Biden.

Questions from Society members brought out further insights from the panel. On the economy, Yousuf Al Balushi spoke on flexible dynamism and the ability to adjust in achieving the 2040 vision. He stressed the importance of education, and the reliance of government changes, taxation, representation and the need for a pro-active Majlis.

Fatma Al Arimi said existing tools for action had not been fully utilised, for example ministers had not so far been brought under real pressure from the Shura. Under the power of the new law, the tools need to be used, bringing more engagement in policy making.

Abdullah Baabood agreed with a questioner that the economy does affect foreign policy. The debt crisis is serious. It is not in Oman's history to join a regional faction to attract loans or grants, but the country does need to use its position to



### DR ABDULLAH BAABOOD

An Omani academic and researcher, he is former director of the Centre for Gulf Studies at Qatar University. He holds a PhD in political economy with a thesis entitled "EU-GCC Relations: A Study in Inter-Regional Cooperation" and master's degrees in business administration and international relations, all from Cambridge University. His research interests are international relations and political economy; Gulf affairs; economic, social and political development in GCC countries and their foreign relations. He has taught and conducted research at several universities and institutions in Europe, and published many books, articles and conference papers. He is a regular participant in the Society's discussion panels.

attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and help diversify its economy. Continuity and stability would encourage investment.

In response to a direct question on China, Yousuf Al Balushi said partnerships bringing FDI, diversification, jobs, productivity and technology were welcome. Abdullah Baabood agreed that Oman should be open to investment from sources additional to the traditional ones (the UK is the largest source of FDI) but care should be taken not to prejudice existing relationships, and other factors such as USA/China/USA relations need to be considered.

Asked for a summary of what to look for in the coming months and years:

Yousuf Al Balushi spoke of energising the people, especially the young, and the need for investment including FDI;

Fatma Al Arimi spoke about the need to boost the private sector especially small and medium enterprises (one of HM Sultan Haitham's initiatives) and create opportunities;

Abdullah Baabood spoke about effective, productive and less costly government stimulating the private sector; work ethic in public and private sectors; empowerment and employment of women; an important change in personal psychology from relying on the government to becoming individually more productive; and the important role which religious institutions can play in all of this. ■

*This report by your editor is inevitably a synopsis. The full seminar, with supporting material, is available on the Society's website.*

# CHALLENGE TO TRIUMPH SOCIETY WEBSITE DURING COVID-19



The Society staff did an outstanding job of switching from Sackville Street to the web over the past year, leading to a truly amazing amount of first-class material on the website. They had to source, commission, prepare and publish. Here is what they did, and how to access it, by our then General Manager, Nick Smith.

As I write this in lockdown day 372, I am reminded of my initial enthusiasm as I bounded out the office on 22 March 2020 unapologetically excited about a couple of weeks unshackled by the mercurial nature of the South Western Trains schedule. Two weeks of no commutes, morning runs and slow brewed coffee. A two week circuit breaker. I have to admit, I wasn't all too displeased.

A year later, it all feels very different as I've become intimately acquainted with the four walls of my London flat and the complaints team of my negligent broadband provider. As the days have slipped into weeks and the weeks into months, it can seem a bit like life exists in a professional purgatory of postponed plans and missed opportunities.

Muscat and London, while once brought closer by the novelty of Zoom calls, seem now to be drifting further apart once again with the prospect of red lists and quarantines in bleak airport hotels. The steady drum of activity in Sackville Street is all but a distant memory.

*Muscat and London, while once brought closer by the novelty of Zoom calls, seem now to be drifting further apart once again with the prospect of red lists and quarantines in bleak airport hotels.*

It's why in times like these that it's important to remember that it wasn't always like this and it won't be forever. That's been our driving force over the last year; to bring the best of Oman to the UK and to look back so that we can once again look forward.

As an office team, we've been busy – Insights, Podcasts, Round-ups, Press digests, History series, Governorate series, quarterly bulletins, webinars, Tales of Ajdaduna, social media campaigns. Working and communicating from our own homes, we had to decide on the subjects, find the people to write and take the pictures, persuade them to take up the challenge or be interviewed over the air, urge them on, receive their submissions and try to give them our best presentation.

While it'll be a little while still until you find yourself meandering through the streets and souqs of Nizwa, sunning yourself in the morning sun on the Muttrah Corniche, swimming in the warm Gulf waters or failing to find your hiking legs in the Hajar mountains, I hope that we've managed to remind you of that special place you remember so fondly. You can also be forgiven that little bit of envy... my colleague Dina is currently hiking through a Wadi in Dhofar, while I'm planning a short mid-afternoon excursion to my local Tesco Express...

I'd like to take this opportunity to share some of my favourite reads of 2021. Unfortunately, our podcasts, webinars and audio-visual series don't lend themselves quite as well to the Review format but you can find them all on our website. Make sure you look not only under News and Events but also down the Menu list. We believe there are riches to be enjoyed, and knowledge to be gained: one of our main objectives as a Society.

The indefatigable Richard Muir delving into Oman's domestic and foreign policy and Dr Harriet Nash's encapsulating lecture on the traditional timing of Falaj water shares are real standouts in the Webinars. In our Podcast series, catch up on James's conversation with Dr Abdullah Al Bahraini discussing the past, present and future of the economic landscape in Oman (S3, Ep1), Aaishah and Arabella Dorman exploring the realities of conflict today through the medium of art (S3, Ep7)

*There is material for everybody: people and places, government, policy, the past, the future, war and peace, nature and artifice, the land and the sea.*

and Dina reflecting on the notions of citizenship, absence and belonging of young Omani Swahili speakers and the Zanzibari diaspora with Franziska Fay (S3, Ep4). The podcasts are available on Apple, Spotify and Google, so accessible to all.

There is material for everybody: people

and places, government, policy, the past, the future, war and peace, nature and artifice, the land and the sea. From the *Tales of Ajdaduna*, the series that captures the stories of Oman through the eyes of two very different generations, I'd highly recommend putting aside an afternoon and feasting on them all. You won't regret it.



Nick Smith has done an excellent job since he joined us as general manager in early 2019 on leaving the Army. He has now moved on with our grateful thanks and very best wishes for the future. Martyn Bishop presented him with a fine khunjar, sourced in Muscat by Sheikh Ma'an Al Rawahi.



# CONQUERING THE WORLD'S HIGHEST MOUNTAIN

ARTICLE BY NADIRAH AL HARTHY

I was fortunate enough to meet the late Khalid Al Siyabi, the first Omani to climb Everest, while working on a project set by the Ministry of Education.

I remember going back home that day and there was nothing else on my mind except climbing Everest, and that was how it all began, a whimsical idea that turned into a two-year dream.

Although I didn't really think I would climb the tallest mountain in the world, even before this project I had always been thinking about progressing in my life and doing something that truly represented who I was. I've always had a natural curiosity, constantly asking people

around me what steps they took to get to where they were in life. What were their journeys? The answer was always the same: if you don't chase your passions, if you don't try something, you will never find out what you can be and what you're truly capable of.

In 2017 I decided to climb Everest. I started training immediately, but I didn't have any real experience in mountain climbing. It was difficult to stay focused on my goal, and negotiate the cultural

challenges, even things as simple as what I should wear during my training – particularly as to what would be acceptable for a Muslim Hijabi woman training outdoors.

Alongside my training programme, I made sure that I read everything I could on climbing mountains, to understand the theory of mountaineering, how to tackle different routes in different mountains in different climates and, ultimately, to gain more confidence in my abilities. All my training was conducted in Oman, which of course, has a very different environment to Everest. I coached myself, although Khalid Al Siyabi also supervised me throughout my training. It was not an easy journey but I committed and I trained hard, balancing my training with a full-time job and a family. I was utterly determined to achieve my goal.

The most challenging obstacle was how to make my dream come true. I mean yes, climbing the tallest mountain in the world is a huge challenge but getting to that point is something else in itself. There are a lot of things to share here, internally what happened to me, my inner world – the doubts, emotions, the lack of confidence, the fear of failure and the potential disappointment. These thoughts were at times overwhelming, let alone the physical pain. I survived because I was READY for it. It was like this sudden surge of power hit me when I reached the base of Everest and I realised I had the power to do this at whatever cost it might take.

I was lucky that I had the support of an amazing team that felt like family, who kept my spirits high and gave me the strength to keep believing in myself.

Since climbing Everest in 2018, I always think about ‘what’s next’. I want to spend more time in the mountains and with nature in general. It had such a beautiful effect on me and I don’t want to ever lose that. I have plans to start climbing Oman’s mountains and really explore in-depth what we have here. We are fortunate to have so many beautiful mountain landscapes and it’s so important that we make the most of them. I want to build a mountain climbing community in Oman, conquer more summits – not only in Oman but outside the Sultanate as well, to keep achieving incredible things for my country.



The advice that I would give anyone wanting to achieve crazy, wild and seemingly insurmountable dreams, is to work hard, to improve every day and to find happiness in the journey itself. Even if you don’t complete your goal, it is an experience that will only change you for the better. Get reading, researching and discovering. Believe in your own potential.

Oman has limitless potential for adventure. The possibilities are endless and are simply waiting for the world to discover them. Oman has so much to offer. I hope one day there will be more investment in Oman’s unique landscapes and an authority responsible for developing mountain climbing and creating world-leading Omani climbers.

*The advice that I would give anyone wanting to achieve crazy, wild and seemingly insurmountable dreams, is to work hard, to improve every day and to find happiness in the journey itself.*



# UNTRAVELLED PATHS AND YALLA GO

ARTICLE BY ANISA AL RAISI

I am a runner, rock climber, pluviophile, water sports enthusiast, motivational speaker, adrenaline junkie, world traveller, foodie, self-professed ‘Scrabble Legend’ ... and a former real estate agent.

In April 2018, at the age of 34, I made history by becoming the first Omani to ski the Geographic North Pole. Setting off for a challenging expedition with the unique 10-member all-female Euro Arabic team, we crossed unforgiving, harsh, beautiful and life-changing treacherous terrain at the top of the world, finally reaching the North Pole in eight days. Nothing was going to stop me; not wandering polar bears, sub-zero snow storms, hunger or loneliness.

Travelling in a place that is so unforgiving, and yet free of human influence, allows you to remember the scale of our planet and your place in it. The daily routine of a manual expedition is one of constant workload, vigilance, routine, concern about hazards such as the weather and crevasses, and maintaining a philosophical attitude towards all the inevitable problems that arise.

All this is underpinned by the worry that one night, as you sleep, your resolve to keep going might simply desert you. Tent life is cold, damp and cramped, and it's easy to have serious doubts about the merits of such self-imposed suffering. All of this is fortunately countered by moments of blinding clarity where elation takes hold as you realise the enormity of the challenge you are steadily accomplishing and how life changing it is. The Arctic is extremely cold and unforgiving, but the rawness and beauty of it all is out of this world and motivates you to keep going.



## BUT MY STORY NEITHER STARTS NOR ENDS HERE...

Waiting for something that you know may never come to pass is extremely difficult. However, it is even harder to give up on something that you really want. From an early age all I wanted was to venture down the paths less travelled; and this is where my journey of self-discovery begins.

I joined Outward Bound Oman as an instructor in 2014. As a fitness fanatic, someone who likes high adrenaline sports and the great outdoors, I was keen to see if I could turn my life passions into work. My body has been my only engine, driven by the strength and determination of my mind. If there's something that I've learned it's that the power to move the world is in the subconscious mind, and a focused mind is one of the strongest forces on earth.

*'The great ambitions of nations and peoples are not achieved accidentally or by depending on others. They are only achieved by self-reliance, hard work, creative efforts, wholehearted and responsible participation. This is what we call upon you today to achieve, for our country now and in the future.'*

*His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said,  
Sultan of Oman 18.11.1990*

Life is a journey, and we set out not knowing exactly where we will end up. We take each step with our focus ahead. These experiences often force us out of our comfort zones and provide opportunities for personal growth.

Those who know me well, know that I thrive in my 'stretch zone'. Our comfort zone is our preferred way of doing things or responding to situations; our daily habits and routines. While our comfort zone is effective in getting things done and maintaining the status quo, it is not an effective way to improve, grow and develop. The stretch zone is the region outside the comfort zone where there is unease, where new and unfamiliar experiences occur, and where the panic zone is sometimes encountered. It is in the stretch zone where we learn new skills, adapt to unfamiliar circumstances, think outside the box and innovate, and are challenged to do things we never thought possible before. The more we engage in activities that 'stretch' us, the wider that zone becomes, which allows us to be more flexible and resilient when there are challenges.

## A PATH LESS TRAVELLED – THE YALLA GO EXPEDITION

Yalla Go will see Natalie Taylor (British) and myself cross Oman from the Northern tip to the South coast in a straight line, kayaking seas, traversing mountains, crossing deserts and experiencing the



beauty and rich history of Oman along the way. The journey will have us cover more than 1,500kms over 50 days. The expedition will be the first of its kind as we will not be deviating from our selected route by more than 5km, making this extremely challenging and dangerous given the diverse terrain Oman offers.

When we face challenges in life we are pushed to acknowledge our shortcomings and need to develop and grow as leaders, parents, people. It is then that we transform, moments that break us and make us dig so deep within ourselves to find that reserve we never thought existed.

To me success is not what you accomplish in your lifetime, it is what you inspire others to do in theirs. We have plans and strategies, but they do not always work out. There are times when we get knocked down and doors close. Our hopes can often be replaced by fears. We can lose our direction and so we will change, and become passengers in the life that is spinning too fast.

The great outdoors represents a place where you are made brutally aware of your insignificance. Taking the path less travelled, unsullied by humans, enables you to have a very intense, personal relationship with your surroundings.

'Maktoob': derived from the old Arabic verb 'write', meaning 'already written'. It refers to the idea that everything is pre-determined by a higher power. You can't tell that process "you ought not to happen!"

Life is not about waiting for the storm to pass. Accept that "it ought to happen!" Accept that "it must happen!" And you WILL catch onto the trick of it. Life is a journey, and we set out not knowing exactly where we'll end up. But take the path less travelled and I promise you this, wherever you go, it will not be boring.





# SPARTAN RACES, VOLCANOES AND WEIGHTLIFTING

ARTICLE BY MARWA AL WADHAHI

During the day, I have a full-time desk job in the energy sector. In the evenings and weekends, I'm a passionate sport and adventure enthusiast, dedicated athlete, weightlifter and part-time coach. I really enjoy trying new things and taking on challenges. The crazier a challenge sounds, the more it draws me in...

My passion started early. As a kid, I was hyper – I loved playing, exploring and doing sports in school. PE and Maths were my favourite subjects and I enjoyed participating in school competitions. Although I wasn't really involved in sports during my studies at university, I never missed any of the annual sport days. After graduating in 2013, I began work and in parallel I started exploring gyms, sports and classes.

I took a wide variety of classes, from HIIT to Core, Zumba, Yoga, Bootcamp, Kickboxing and even Taekwando. In 2016, I started doing Crossfit and Pole Fitness. In the same year, I climbed my first big mountain abroad: Mount Damavand in Iran, a potentially active volcano 5600m high, highest natural point in the Middle East and the highest volcano in Asia. My preparations involved a lot of stair climbing, continuing fitness classes and increasing the frequency of my training from three days to six or seven days a week, doing multiple classes a day to test my endurance. This caused such an addiction to physical activity that I didn't want to reduce the frequency of training after the mountain, I was just hungry for more challenges!

That year, I also did my first Obstacle Course Race (OCR) – Spartan Race. It was new to Oman, a sprint distance of about 6.5km with 24 obstacles in Jebel Sifah. I saw the advertisement and was immediately excited to give this new challenge a try. It was hot, tough, new and I didn't have the skills or knowledge to tackle all obstacles but that didn't stop me from pushing myself to the finish line.

In 2017, I continued taking part in competitions, starting the year with the Muscat Marathon where I did my first 10km running race. On the adventurous side, I summited another mountain abroad: Mount Kilimanjaro, a dormant volcano in Tanzania, the highest mountain in Africa and the highest single free-standing mountain in the world at 5,895 metres above sea level.

Most notably, I was honoured to be one of three individuals representing Oman during the Spartan World Team Championship at Lake Tahoe, California, USA, for the first time. This was another crazy challenge for me, as I was almost a total beginner, competing in a totally new



environment, very cold weather unlike the Middle East, two long races, with new obstacles, distances I had never done before, against the world's top elite athletes in the sport from around the globe. Although I was scared and uncertain, I pursued the opportunity fiercely and was proud to be a finisher surviving the crazy race weekend, and left with fond memories of the truly enriching experience.

From there, I have continued doing OCRs and am thrilled to have led and empowered numerous women's teams over the past three years. I love sharing what I have learnt and supporting others who dare to have such immense dreams.



As a Crossfit athlete, I always loved developing and mastering skills. Weightlifting is part of this sport and I felt my snatch lift technique needed improvement. This led me to approach, and subsequently join, the Omani Weightlifting National Team. My original intention was to improve a skill (the Snatch Lift) but, to my surprise, I was the first Omani female ever to join the Weightlifting National Team. Initially I was the only woman training among 20+ guys, but it didn't matter – I was improving and learning and the men were nice and respectful.

I started to find more women to join the National Team and within three months, four Omani women, including me, made history representing Oman as female weightlifters in the Gulf and West Asia Championship. We were thrilled with how well we did, collectively achieving 24 silver and bronze medals, an amazing feat considering the limited time and training before doing our first competition. I loved

the sport and felt honoured to represent my country and open the door for women to weightlifting in the national team.

But my story didn't stop there. I kept seeking more challenges, a few recent ones worth mentioning include:

- The gruesome OmanByUTMB 50km Trail Run across the beautiful but tough Omani Hajar mountains. I was the second Omani Female Finisher.
- The Epic Ironman70.3 Muscat (2km Open Water Swim + 90km Cycling + 21km Run) where I was one of two brave Omani women doing the race for the first time.
- And various Crossfit, OCRs, mixed challenges in the region...

On a different note, 2019 was a year in which I undertook multiple courses, developed my knowledge and started my coaching journey. I completed a weightlifting judge course to become the first Omani female weightlifting judge. I then completed a Crossfit Level 1 Trainer Course, followed by a Level 2 Gym Instructor Course and finally completed an Intermediate Pole Instructor Certification Course.

I'd like to end with some advice. Be fearless pursuing what you love, no matter what criticism you're met with, as long as you believe what you are doing is right and it makes you happy. Believe in yourself, you can achieve far more than you know. Uncertainty, fear and doubt are normal and are part of the journey; they are obstacles you are bound to encounter and overcome, so don't let them stop you. Whenever I sign up for a new challenge, I am terrified, but I still make it. Be brave enough to seek support when you need it. Finally, don't be afraid to be different, doing things others don't typically do, starting something new and uncertain!





# MY FITNESS JOURNEY

BY LINA AL RASHDI

I wanted to get fit and healthy, but was put off by the idea of mundane exercise – I didn't want it to be a boring chore, as my worst nightmare is routine.

When I was a senior in College FIT, I came across karate classes and signed up, eager to find out what it was like to fight as an exercise and an art. It was so much fun that I ended up participating in competitions, winning three medals and two trophies. In one competition, there were no other women with a green belt in Kumite (a type of karate), so my *sensi* told me I didn't have to participate, but I could fight the men if I wanted to. It didn't take a second thought: I

fought the men! I broke a nail that day, but I got third place in Kumite.

When I came back to Oman it was difficult to find a Karate club that accepted ladies. The one I found was 30 minutes away and the timings didn't suit my schedule, but I went for it. While I was training Karate, my cousin asked me to try his friend's CrossFit box, offering a one-month free trial. As much as I was intimidated by the intensity of CrossFit, I was willing to give it a shot, and liked it. I gained strength and progress in a short period of time which made me want to do more and lift heavier weights. I was determined to keep my mind open to different sports and never to fear trying.

At that time I started social media, posting some of my workout and travel photos and videos. I connected with friends online who had common interests, and in January 2019, Marwa Al-Wadhahi reached out to ask if I would like to try weightlifting for the National team. I was never drawn to the idea of just lifting weights as a daily workout. However, I stuck by my promise of keeping an open mind and, after considerable convincing from Marwa, gave it a shot and have never looked back. Those around me made their judgements clear and I heard the good and bad. I was so sick of the social stigma associated with ladies practising tough sports, particularly involving weights. I was determined to prove them wrong.

My first time competing in a professional sport was an overwhelming experience. I had bad expectations of the competitors, perhaps prompted by movies, but it was my judgement that was proven wrong – they were sweet and supportive. We had never met before but at the warmup we cheered each other on, regardless of who was on whose team, and it created an encouraging atmosphere.

I kept in mind that I was unlikely to win, as we hadn't had long to prepare. I reminded myself to focus on enjoying the experience rather than winning. But then there I was, standing on the podium with three silver medals. I felt so much pride but I hadn't only made myself proud, I had made my country proud. The amount of support was beyond expectation. Even those who hadn't supported my decision to practise weightlifting said they were proud of me. I remembered a quote 'Be you and the world will adjust'. I realised women fall



under social pressure and expect to follow a path based on society's preferences. My focus in my Instagram account is to break that constant social pressure and encourage women to practise what they want, regardless of the stigma.

### THE SOLO BACKPACK TRIP

I never watch TV, but I used to binge watch YouTube videos. One day, a video came up on a solo backpacking trip. One video turned to three then four and eventually it turned to a daily habit of watching solo backpacking videos. It was December 2018,

the season of reflecting on the past year and planning New Year's resolutions. Although I felt it impossible, I wrote 'travelling solo with a backpack' in my planner. I didn't set a date, I didn't know where to travel, I didn't know how much I should save for it; all I knew is I wanted to travel solo with a backpack.

Summer 2019 came by, the season when the workload is lowest. I decided to plan for my trip. The planning was harder than the travelling! I chose to travel to Europe as it was recommended for female beginner solo travellers. I kept changing the countries, the route and the activities. It took three months and, after changing the

plan 100 times, finally decided to travel to Switzerland, Czech Republic and Italy.

My family totally rejected the idea of me travelling solo. They were scared I would be abused or attacked because of my hijab and asked my brother join me. This might sound mean, but I felt lucky when I found out that he had college registration the same week as I'd planned the trip. I had taken leave from work so played the 'I can't cancel my leave and I won't be able to take leave later in the year' card... I was determined for the trip to go ahead.

As I boarded on my first flight, I was in shock! How did I make this happen – travelling by myself as I wanted? It felt like I was dreaming, too good to be true!

It was by far the best experience of my life. I met strangers who became friends, from all over the world. I saw kindness in all shapes and forms. I was invited to stay at friends' houses free when I visit their countries. The experience toughened me up in ways that years of living in my country didn't teach me. As I met people, I broke the stereotype that Arab and Muslim women are oppressed; several people told me they'd never met or heard about an Arab Hijab female travelling alone before. Every time I rode a train or aboard a plane for the next destination, I had to pinch myself to prove it was real.

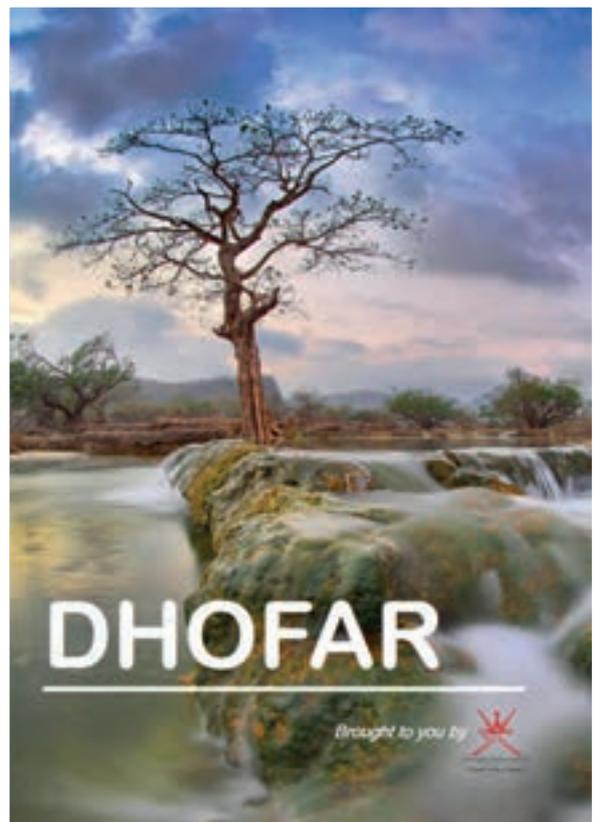
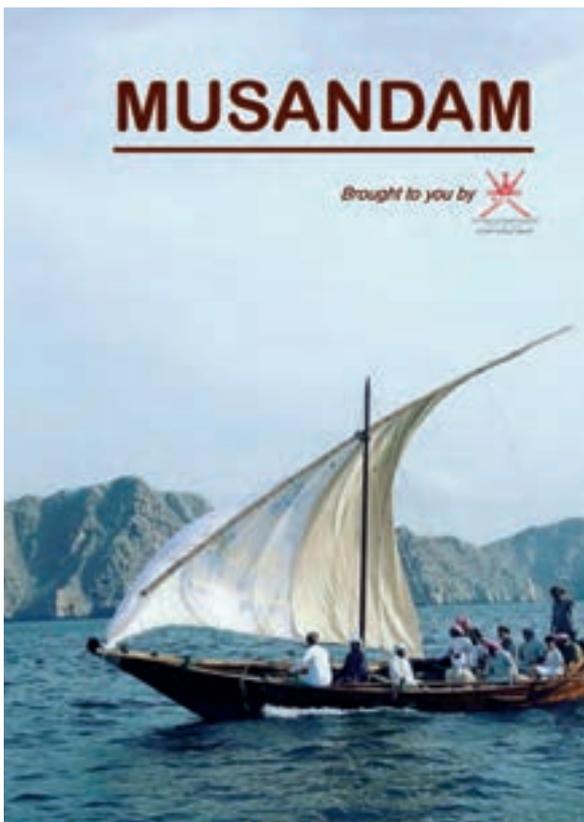
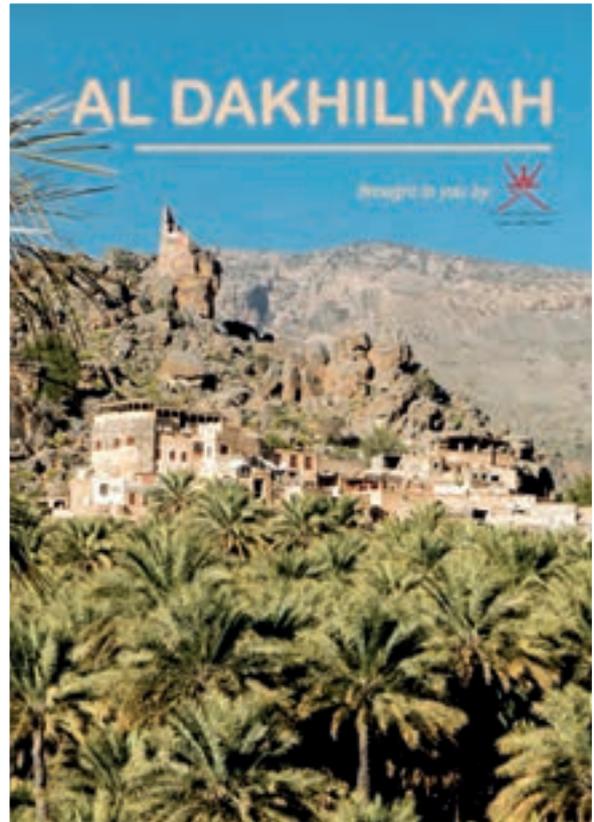
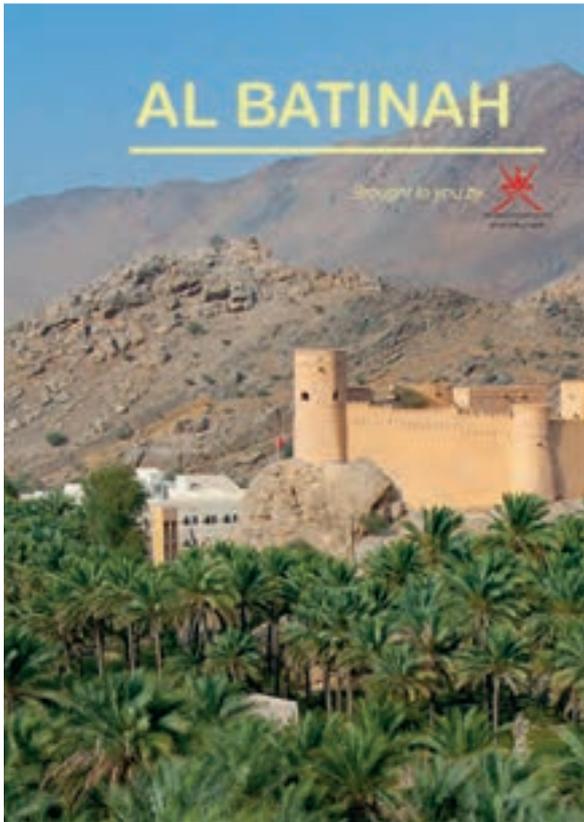


# GOVERNORATES SERIES

Oman is composed of 11 Governorates, each of them blessed with a distinct identity steeped in its own unique culture, history and character.

From the jebali tribes of Dhofar to the fjords of Musandam, from the thriving cosmopolitan streets of Muscat to the historical ports of the Al Batinah, Oman is a country of stories waiting to be told. We have identified subject matter experts on various interesting aspects of each governorate and featured them: fascinating and informative! These are the ones already on the website in time to be publicised in this year's Review.





# GOLF: FROM SAND TO WORLD-CLASS GRASS COURSES

BY MUNDHIR AL BARWANI, CHAIRMAN OF OMAN GOLF ASSOCIATION

The game of golf in Oman began in 1970 with two modest sand courses. Half a century later, Oman is earning a reputation as a unique and spectacular golf tourism destination.

I first experienced golf 17 years ago on a trip to Kuala Lumpur when I went to a golf club and met an Algerian coach who encouraged me to try it. I was immediately hooked. I returned to Oman and started playing on the sand courses. They are very different and the game was very challenging. You need to pull your trolley through the soft sand, use the small Astroturf mat and then try to control the ball on an oily sand brown (sand golf's version of a green).

Even with all of the challenges it was still enjoyable and we built our initial skills on these courses. I am pleased to say that today we still have one sand course where the members can enjoy the unique challenges of sand golf.

The Oman Golf Committee was established by the Ministry of Sports Affairs in 2009 to manage the development of the game and to encourage its growth within the Sultanate, I became the third Chairman of the Committee in 2014.

Al Mouj golf course.



In 2020, the success of the Committee was acknowledged with the announcement and formation of the Oman Golf Association.

The main objectives of the Association are two-fold: to see the golf industry grow domestically and also to use the game of golf to create increased global awareness of the Sultanate of Oman.

Domestically over the last 15-20 years with the support of HH Sayyid Qais, HH Sayyid Taimoor, HE Dr Rumhy and the Ministry of Sports Affairs, the game of golf in Oman has grown significantly. The first grass course was opened in Muscat Hills in 2009 – a dream come true for golfers in Oman who before this would have to travel to Dubai to play on a green course. Currently there are five grass courses all located around Muscat. They are as diverse as the country itself and all offer world renowned Omani hospitality to their members and guests. Pictures of all five of them are on the website.

## AL MOUJ GOLF

The host venue for the European Tour's Oman Open, the Greg Norman-designed Al Mouj Golf layout is regarded by many as one of the Middle East's top courses. Forming part of the Al Mouj Muscat luxury waterfront development, Al Mouj Golf was recently voted the second-best course in the region by the National Club Golfer and it won the Sustainability Award for Community Value at the 2019 IAGTO awards. Complementing its 18-hole championship layout are the Al Mouj Golf teaching academy, floodlit par-3 nine-hole course, pro shop, floodlit driving range and restaurant.

Ras Al Hamra Golf Club is Oman's first completely floodlit course and although only 9 holes, it has multiple tees and greens creating an 18-hole layout. Designed by the leading course architect Graham Marsh, the parkland-style layout makes its way through a series of wadis and around several high rocky outcrops. Despite its



Muscat Hills golf course.

length, the course tests your shot-making ability with every club in the bag, including your driver. There are driving range and practice green facilities here, as well as PGA Professional lessons and coaching available.

## MUSCAT HILLS

Muscat Hills was the vision of the late HH Qais Bin Tarik Al Said and was the first 18-hole grassed golf course to be built in the Sultanate. The par-72 layout boasts spectacular sea and mountain views as it makes its way through natural wadi terrain. In addition to the championship course and club house, there is a floodlit driving range and putting green; and the Muscat Hills Academy offers state-of-the-art equipment in their pro shop, and a team of PGA professionals who offer lessons and tuition.

Ghala Golf Club has come a long way since it was established in 1971. This 18-hole championship layout now plays host to the MENA Golf Tour and Oman Amateur Championships every year. Recently, the course was ranked as one of this year's "Top 30 Most Unique" courses by Golfscape. The course is set snugly into a valley and surrounded by mountains, and its narrow fairways will certainly challenge you. After your round you can relax on its open-air porch overlooking the course.

Located around a 45-minute drive south-east of Muscat, Jebel Sifah golf course forms part of the luxurious Jebel Sifah lifestyle development and marina. Managed and operated by golf luxury experts Troon, it's a gorgeous nine-hole, par-36 course that can also be played as an



Oman National team.

18-hole layout with second pin flags. With the Sea of Oman out front and Al Hajar mountains behind you, the setting is breathtaking. There's also a pro shop here stocking golf equipment, leisure apparel, and rental clubs if needed.

The domestic market is an important area of growth which will create sustainability for the industry, through initiatives such as the GOjuniors and GOLadies programmes the game of golf can now be experienced by many, and in time, through continued coaching, those citizens who show promise will have the opportunity to go forward and represent their country at national level. We are proud of the fact that our current National Teams have seen recent success, in particular at under 15 level. This is important in creating awareness and aspiration amongst citizens to take up the game.

Oman Golf Association became the promoter in 2018 for the prestigious Oman Open European Tour event, which takes place in February every year. This carries a prize fund of \$1.75 million and is broadcast through 30 hours of live television coverage to over 300 million households

worldwide. The event which is played each year at the stunning Al Mouj Golf shows the world not only that we have fantastic golf facilities in Oman but also allows for the beauty and diversity of the country to be seen by all. The event is a valuable asset in promoting tourism and overseas investment; the measured global media value for the 2020 Oman Open exceeded \$134 million and the event was televised globally with over 2000 hours of coverage.

Golf can be played by all, socially or competitively. It can be played alone or with family and is a wholesome and healthy pastime. It promotes environmental responsibility and sustainability and supports a diverse range of wildlife and plant life. It is a highly effective vehicle for investment and tourism and a vital component of the ITC's in Oman including Al Mouj, Muscat Hills and Jebel Sifah, all of which use golf to drive freehold residential sales. All of these elements contribute to the Oman Golf Association's strategies which have been aligned to Vision 2040 to ensure that the game continues to grow and positively contributes to the Sultanate both domestically and internationally. ■

# OMAN TO HOST 2022 WORLD RACE WALKING CHAMPIONSHIPS MIDDLE EAST FIRST

## OMAN NEWS AGENCY REPORT

World Athletics announced at its annual congress in Tokyo that the Sultanate is the new host of the 2022 World Race Walking Team Championships. The event will be held for the first time in the Middle East and is expected to attract 1700 athletes.

The bid for the event came as an initiative by Oman Sail based on its expertise in hosting international events with world-class standards as well as its network with international federations of various sporting disciplines. The event will take place 1-6 March 2022 at Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre (OCEC) and will be organised in partnership between Oman Sail, the Oman Athletics Association and OCEC.

Dr. Khamis Al Jabri, CEO of Oman Sail, said: "We are delighted to be able to lend our expertise in managing large international events in order to make sure the World Athletics Race Walking Team Championships are a huge success. As hosts, this is a prime opportunity to develop the Sultanate of Oman as an attractive venue for international athletics and inspire our own people to pursue their sporting ambitions. The country prides itself on its authenticity and will offer a warm welcome to athletes from around the world in 2022."

On his turn, Mohammed Al Asmi, board member at the Oman Athletics Association, said: "This is a great opportunity to enhance athletics in Oman. We have seen in the past how enthusiastic the Omani people have been for home grown and international events and to be able to bring a major championship to the country has the potential to position athletics as one of the leading sports in Oman. We are excited to provide the stage for the world's best race walkers to perform and anticipate an amazing debut for Oman as hosts of the event."

Each national athletics federation will select a squad to represent their country in Oman. The Championships will feature a male and female 20km race, U20 male and female 10km races, and Masters

categories, scheduled for Friday 4 March 2022. The following day there will also be a 35km combined race. The week of racing in Muscat will be a celebration of athletics with a 1km and 2km Kids' Run and Park Run Festival event either side of the main competition with a health and fitness exhibition on site to inspire budding local athletes to become more active.

Eng. Said Al Shanfari, CEO of OCEC, said: "We are immensely proud to have been chosen to host the championships. The Sultanate has enjoyed a period of rapid sporting growth and earned a strong reputation as excellent hosts as a result. We look forward to delivering another inspiring competition which will have a profound effect on the nation's youth and further raise the country's profile internationally."

Muscat will provide a spectacular backdrop to the event, offering world class accommodation and hospitality for athletes and race officials while also lending a rugged and rich cultural experience to the championships. Racing will centre around the OCEC in the heart of Muscat. The route will take competitors through pristine landscaped gardens and features a variety of elevations to challenge the racers and provide a perfect viewing platform for a live audience within the Spectators Village.

Training Camps will be set up at Barceló Mussanah Resort, DusitD2 Naseem Resort and Golden Tulip in Nizwa to allow the competitors to acclimatise before embarking on the race.

The championships were originally due to be held in Minsk, Belarus, but the ongoing travel restrictions caused by COVID-19 forced the event to be rescheduled. Oman now has the opportunity to make history and usher in a new era for athletics in the Sultanate. ■

# FOSTERING BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS

ARTICLE BY OLLIE BLAKE  
SOCIETY TRUSTEE AND VICE-CHAIRMAN OBBC

As the Trustee responsible for our collaboration with the Omani British Business Council, I'm proud to say that it has been an extremely busy year in spite of the pandemic.



As a brief reminder, the OBBC was formed to promote the close economic and commercial relationship between the Sultanate of Oman and United Kingdom and to develop bilateral trade, investment and other economic partnerships between the two countries. It is the principal conduit within the Society to facilitate and foster the commercial relationships which complement our unique friendship.

Prior to the pandemic, we were preparing to launch a series of breakfast briefings in London that would educate and inform existing and potential corporate members on the myriad of commercial reforms currently underway in Oman. Further to that, we were hoping to host senior Omani Ministers and CEOs at Sackville Street for members events and smaller round table sessions. Lastly, the annual OBBC conference is the flagship event of the year but as with many of our other plans, this was also unfortunately cancelled in 2020.

In spite of the ongoing uncertainty and major restrictions around travel and in-person meetings, our AOS Manager at the time, Nick Smith and Programmes Manager, Dina Macki did a superb job of pivoting our AOS / OBBC work online.

Nick engaged with a huge range of senior stakeholders across Oman's entrepreneurial, energy, agricultural and fisheries sectors in order to produce over thirty interesting, informative and hugely relevant articles that explored the development of the Sultanate's diversifying economy. These were supported by more in-depth quarterly newsletters covering the same sectors. Several of these excellent articles are included in the pages that follow and the others can all be accessed online under the OBBC section of the AOS website.

As Britain opens up again, we will embrace the chance to host events back at Sackville Street but we will also maintain many of the excellent procedures and outreach programmes that have enabled us to connect with such a wide international audience over the last eighteen months.

As I write, travel is still restricted between Oman and the UK so we have taken the decision to shift this year's OBBC conference format into a series of virtual panels that will explore Oman's commitment to three key technological areas – Cyber Security, Digital Skills and Data Governance. We are hosting these online sessions with the help and support of Plexal, Imperial College London and Cylon – all companies working with the FCDO to deliver digital skills programmes in Oman. More information will be released through our website in the coming weeks and please do watch the panels in September and let us have your thoughts and feedback.

Lastly, I'd like to thank those members of our AOS Technology Committee who provided excellent advice, guidance and access to their tech networks as we on the AOS Board have sought to improve our knowledge of new spaces that we should be operating in. To that end, we are now developing channels for successful UK entrepreneurs to mentor Omani start-up companies as well as enabling a whole host of summer internships for Omani undergraduates studying in the UK, with the fantastic help of the Omani Embassy.

It was recently reported that 40% of Oman's population is now under 18 – a timely reminder that we at the AOS have to enable an entirely new generation of relevant cooperation, collaboration and outreach.

# RENEWABLE ENERGY DEVELOPMENT



ARTICLE BY BRIAN WOOD, SENIOR ADVISOR,  
OMAN POWER AND WATER PROCUREMENT (OPWP)

The story behind renewable energy development in the Sultanate of Oman is an interesting one, demonstrating a readiness to commit wholeheartedly to opportunity subject to prudence in timing, given an overriding responsibility to nurture economic growth and the well-being of citizens.

It is no secret that sunshine is formidable year-round throughout the country, nor that the wind is stiff and constant in the southern region for much of the year. Yet harnessing these resources has come quite recently as the cost to develop them has dropped to a point that is competitive with hydrocarbon-based fuels. Some context is needed to understand why.

The electricity sector in Oman was wholly owned and operated by the Government until a restructuring initiative launched a regulatory regime in 2005. Before that, the focus was on nation-building, to develop an infrastructure rapidly that would support an improved standard of living and economic growth.

In 2005, OPWP was established to be responsible for procurement of electricity generation and related water desalination, along with a separate transmission company, four distribution companies, the regulatory agency, and a vertically integrated entity responsible for electricity

supply in rural, off-grid areas. Under their operating licences, these companies were focused squarely on the assurance of stable and reliable supply at economic prices.

Most electricity generation has been fuelled by indigenous natural gas, apart from rural areas that lack access to electricity grids or gas pipelines, requiring diesel-fired generators. The nation's domestic gas supply has thankfully been available to support OPWP's obligation to develop generation resources in response to demand growth. From 2005 to 2015, electricity demand grew at an astonishing annual rate of 10%. OPWP procured generation capacity from a base of formerly government assets of 2,600 MW in 2005, to 11,000 MW in 2020, all under the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model in which assets are developed, owned and operated privately with no government stake, under Power Purchase Agreements with OPWP.

During this period, from 2005 to 2015,

government entities supported studies of the potential for solar and wind energy development. OPWP operated solar monitoring stations at two sites for five years, to collect ground-sourced data that would support bankable solar energy projects. Yet at this time, even as the cost of solar photovoltaic (PV) projects was falling fast, they were still not competitive with the full economic cost of gas-fired generation. Despite a strong interest in renewable energy development, OPWP was constrained by its licence obligation of economic purchase.

That condition turned a corner in 2016, as large scale solar PV projects within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region set new records for low-cost solar PV. Furthermore, in 2017 the Government launched a Fuel Diversification Policy, in which one of the principal elements was a renewable energy target of 10% production share of electricity supply by 2025. This helped to accelerate OPWP's regulatory and government approval processes, and to open interest to other promising renewable energy technologies such as wind (requiring transmission access), waste-to-energy and others.

*Do we anticipate challenges? Certainly. Access to land for large projects is a first concern. Even in the most seemingly remote desert areas, land access may already be committed to government entities.*

The tendering process for the first large-scale solar PV project by Oman was launched in 2017 and awarded the following year. That project set a global record for the lowest cost in levelised terms at the time of award. At 500 MW, the Ibri II Solar IPP is currently under construction and expected to begin operation in the second half of 2021. Two further 500 MW projects are in the tendering stage. By 2025, OPWP expects to have 2,000 MW of solar PV capacity in operation.

As with development of thermal generation resources, the Government has no capital or loan guarantees at risk in the project companies developing these renewable energy projects. The tariff for generation from the Ibri II Solar IPP is less than OPWP's average generation cost, such that consumers benefit from every unit of electricity produced. Solar PV costs have continued to fall since 2017, and OPWP expects the upcoming projects similarly to yield lower costs and greater consumer benefits.

OPWP's renewable energy development journey has not stopped with solar PV. There is an abundant wind resource in the eastern and southern governorates. The first utility-scale plant, at 50 MW, started commercial operation in 2018. It supplies electricity to the Dhofar region, an islanded grid having average demand of about 360 MW. OPWP aims to develop another plant with capacity of 100 to 150 MW on an adjacent site by 2025.

Further wind development needs completion of a transmission line to connect to the main demand centres to the north, which is expected in 2024. OPWP plans to procure a further 300 MW of wind



*Oman has ambitious plans to develop its abundant resources in the emerging Renewable Energy economy.*



power by 2025. The development schedules for these projects are constrained by the transmission connection schedule and collection of bankable wind data from the project sites, which OPWP is managing.

Waste-to-energy is another promising technology for renewable energy development in Oman. Both waste-to-energy and bio-gas projects have been promoted by the Sultanate's main waste management company, be'ah. When it was determined to explore tendering via the PPP model, the first project came to OPWP to develop a feasibility study and tendering approach. It is intended for a site near the Barka landfill, with electricity generation capacity of 100 to 140 MW. However, waste-to-energy is primarily a waste management technology, where commercial electricity sales will support only a portion of project costs. Under the current adverse economic conditions, the project has been put on temporary hold.

By 2025, OPWP plans to have installed renewable energy capacity of more than 2,400 MW in operation, compared to 50 MW today. That would contribute about 13% of generation requirements in the grid-connected areas supplied by OPWP. We expect that the renewable energy share of

generation may reach 30% by 2030, purely on economic terms without government subsidies. That may require as much as 3,000 MW of additional renewable energy capacity by 2030. This is a period when we do not expect significant net additions of new thermal capacity.

And OPWP's activity is only part of the story. The Rural Areas Electricity Company has an ongoing tender for eleven wind and solar projects to displace diesel generation. Oman's oil and gas sector has developed a 100 MW solar PV project, along with a 4.5 MW rooftop solar carpark, and has near-term plans for a wind farm. Industries are looking at private solar farms, of which the first is under construction at 25 MW. The Government also has a programme underway for the development of rooftop solar projects in homes.

Do we anticipate challenges? Certainly. Access to land for large projects is a first concern. Even in the most seemingly remote desert areas, land access may already be committed to government entities, or if uncommitted, it may be disputed for access by livestock herders or others. In the sparsely vegetated desert environment, livestock require a large range. In more accessible areas, it is more

challenging to find a contiguous plot of land available for a utility-scale project. Yet the Government has pledged to support access to land to meet the ambitious renewable energy development targets.

For power system planners, an important concern is how we can assure that the grid can be managed securely and reliably with the advancing penetration of renewable energy technologies. By 2025, we may expect occasional relatively rapid changes in power output at wind and solar plants due to weather developments, which must be compensated by other generators. OPWP and Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) are working together to anticipate technical issues in time to offer effective solutions. Before 2025, we do not expect the need for energy storage solutions to support renewable energy integration into the grid. Studies are currently underway to assess when the need would arise under anticipated development plans.

Oman has ambitious plans to develop its abundant resources in the emerging renewable energy economy. A study is underway to assess the developing market for green hydrogen: a future fuel and industrial feedstock that may be supplied entirely by renewable energy. ■

# CREATING A BIOFUELS ECOSYSTEM IN OMAN

ARTICLE BY TALA HASAN, CHAIRMAN, WAKUD

*Since 2011 McDonald's in Oman has been sending all used cooking oil to biodiesel plants in Europe.*



It was a typical English rainy day in 2009, and a friend had offered to show me round a biodiesel company for which he worked in central London.

As we toured the small facility, I had to ask the same question again: “So, you take used cooking oil from restaurants and you convert it into a sustainable diesel which can be used in a vehicle’s engine and it burns cleaner than petro-diesel?”. “Yes, that’s correct!” was the answer (again). I was dumbfounded at the simplicity of the concept and a little surprised that this was the first I had heard of biofuels.

The following year, I moved back to Oman and immediately looked at what restaurants were doing with their used cooking oil and noticed that it was being collected and dumped, or worse, put back into the food chain (which is a carcinogenic). I then set up a logistics company with two friends which focused on the collection of used cooking oil for conversion to biodiesel and we started with our first customer in Oman, McDonald’s.

Since 2011 we’ve been sending all of our used cooking oil to biodiesel plants in Europe, as there is no facility in Oman. We are proud to say that today, all used cooking oils collected from restaurants and commercial establishments in Oman are being recycled into biofuels, albeit outside the country.

In 2018, Oman announced that its subsidy on fuel was to be removed and a formula-based pricing system would be adopted. This was a pivotal moment for us as finally it made commercial sense to build a refining plant and use





potential beyond road fuel with sustainable aviation and marine fuel as future areas for growth. Green Fuels have developed a strategy accordingly, starting with the founding of its sister company,

Green Fuels Research (GFR).

Among several proprietary advanced biofuels processes that GFR has developed is SABR (sustainable aviation through biofuels refining), which converts biodiesel into biokerosene (jet fuel) and sustainable marine fuel, both drop-in blend fuels which require no modification to aero or marine engines. These waste-derived fuels, apart from being verifiably sustainable, are the shortest, least costly route to decarbonisation of air and marine transport, which together account for 5% of global carbon emissions.

Moving goods by sea is efficient on a purely commercial, tonne-per-kilometre basis, but the volume of marine traffic means that this sector accounts for around 3% of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Efficiencies in vessel design are possible but ships are expensive, long-lived assets therefore it will take a long time to upgrade the world's fleet. Electrification is presently not a viable option for large ships on long routes and other alternative propulsion systems are prohibitively costly. Most ships today use marine diesel or heavy fuel oil and substituting these with sustainable, liquid alternatives will make an important contribution to decarbonisation.

As for aviation, the sector generates around 2% of global carbon emissions and consumed 360 million tons of fuel in 2019, with only a miniscule amount of sustainable fuel used. There is, therefore, a pressing need to transition and decarbonise this sector. Aviation is a key application for sustainable fuels because the energy needed to move a large airliner long distances can only be supplied by liquid fuel. As with ships, no battery or alternative propulsion system comes close to delivering the required energy density, and will require billions in R&D investment and take years, possibly decades, to become commercially viable, which itself is not guaranteed in two understandably risk-averse sectors. Thus, proven, drop-in, liquid sustainable fuels are demonstrably the shortest route to decarbonisation.



Our plant in Oman is the first step towards building an integrated biodiesel and sustainable aviation/ marine fuel value chain in Oman, and eventually throughout the Gulf, and will establish the Sultanate as the standard bearer in sustainable development, advanced biofuels production and technological innovation in the region. We want to create a biofuel ecosystem in Oman and will achieve this via knowledge transfer (we will host internships at our plant and at Green Fuels), and by collaborating with Omani SMEs to explore other avenues of feedstock for biofuels such as fish oils, fruits oils, algae and more.

The last decade has seen unprecedented disruption in the energy sector and a profound energy transformation as the global trend shifts from fossil fuels to renewable energy. The recent oil price crash has accelerated the need for increased diversification in the energy sector, in alignment with key themes of Oman's Vision 2040. Biofuels will play a role in Oman's energy transition and Wakud aims to lead the way on biofuels and to catalyse the sector in Oman. ■

biodiesel in Oman to create a textbook circular economy. This is when we reached out to the team at Green Fuels in the UK, a pioneer in sustainable fuels since 2003.

Earlier this year, we incorporated Wakud with a mission of creating a biofuels ecosystem in Oman. Wakud is a joint venture between Omani entrepreneur Maher Al Habsi, Green Fuels, and my business 44.01, a company focused on decarbonising Oman and the world. Maher is the CEO of Wakud and brings over 14 years of used oil recycling experience with him.

Wakud will play a leading role in the energy transition in Oman and the Arabian Gulf. We shortly will ship a state-of-the-art FuelMatic GSX20 biorefinery from the UK for installation and commissioning at its site in Khazaen Economic City, about 70 kilometres west of Muscat. The plant has the capacity to process 20 tonnes a day of used cooking oil (UCO), collected from restaurants and food processing establishments, into European EN14214 standard biodiesel for local consumption as road fuel.

Selecting Green Fuels as our refining technology partner was an easy decision given our similar belief that biodiesel has





# OMAN: A SEA OF OPPORTUNITIES

ARTICLE BY DR WILL LE QUESNE

A PRINCIPAL MARINE ECOLOGIST AT CEFAS, THE UK GOVERNMENT'S MARINE SCIENCE ADVISORY AGENCY, WHO IS LEADING CEFAS' COLLABORATION WITH THE MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND WATER RESOURCES AND THE ENVIRONMENT AUTHORITY. IN PARTNERSHIP WITH HSBC, CEFAS HAVE CONDUCTED A CLIMATE CHANGE RISK ASSESSMENT OF OMAN'S FISHERIES AND AQUACULTURE SECTOR

As a maritime nation, Oman has a long history of association with the sea.

During the time that Ahmad ibn Majid, the Lion of the Sea, was establishing the primacy of Omani navigation in the Indian Ocean in the 15th Century, the sea was important to Oman as a source of food, a source of employment and commerce, and as a gateway to the world.

As Oman turns its eye to economic development and achieving Vision 2040, the sea is as important to Oman now as it was in the days of ibn Majid.

The Tanfeedh Programme identified five sectors of the economy to drive economic diversification: logistics, fisheries (including aquaculture), tourism, manufacturing and mining. Each of these pillars is intimately connected with the sea. The connection of fisheries to the seas is obvious, and many tourists are drawn to Oman for its beautiful coastlines and rich marine biodiversity. The logistics sector relies on the sea as a gateway to the world, and while the manufacturing and mining sectors do not directly rely on the sea, they are dependent on port facilities and shipping routes to connect to global markets.

With a marine Exclusive Economic Zone covering over half a million km sq of sea and a coastline stretching over 1,700km, the focus of the Tanfeedh provides Oman with a sea of opportunities. This is demonstrated by the major investments in port facilities

in Sohar, Duqm and Salalah showing how Oman is capitalising on its geostrategic location on the shipping routes between Asia, Africa and Europe. There is similar investment and growth in the fisheries sector with aquaculture and industrial fishery production growing by over 2000% in the three years from 2017-2019.

As well as a location for economy and enterprise, Oman's sea and coasts are home to highly productive marine ecosystems and globally important biodiversity. Situated at the northern end of the Indian Ocean, the coasts of Dhofar, Al Wusta and Sharqiyah are some of the world's most important upwelling areas – where nutrient rich waters from deep in the ocean come to the surface and fuel vastly productive marine ecosystems. It is this feature, which turbo-charges Oman's marine environment, that means Oman is blessed with a rich and diverse marine environment. This supports productive fisheries and globally important marine biodiversity including turtle and whale populations.

In addition to nutrient rich waters offshore, Oman's coastline provides a home for a wide range of species and habitats, including the regionally critical shorebird feeding areas of Barr al Hikman in al Wusta.

If you ask someone to picture Oman's coastline the typical image they have is of long sparsely populated shores and sandy beaches. Throughout history and still, just today this is an accurate image of Oman's coast. However, with population growth and economic development this picture is changing. Oman's coasts and sea are rapidly becoming busy, causing increasing environmental impacts and leading to conflict over allocation of space between sectors, and these pressures will only increase over time.

Fisheries are not limitless; tourist resorts cannot be co-located with industrial harbour facilities, and coastal development of any nature can damage coastal habitats such as turtle nesting beaches. Human activities and development along the coasts and in the sea both impact the marine

environment and can depend on the condition of the marine environment. Fisheries critically rely on productive fish populations but also impact these species and wider marine biodiversity. Aquaculture relies on clean waters and coastal tourism depends on clean waters, litter-free beaches and abundant marine wildlife for nature watching.

It is obvious how coastal industry can impact the environment, but it can also be affected by the environment; climate change and fishing are leading to an increase in jellyfish and algae blooms which can block and disrupt the seawater intakes of desalination plants and cooling water intakes of coastal industry. This has affected coastal facilities from Sohar to Sur and can cause millions of Riyals in costs due to clogged filters and interrupted operations.

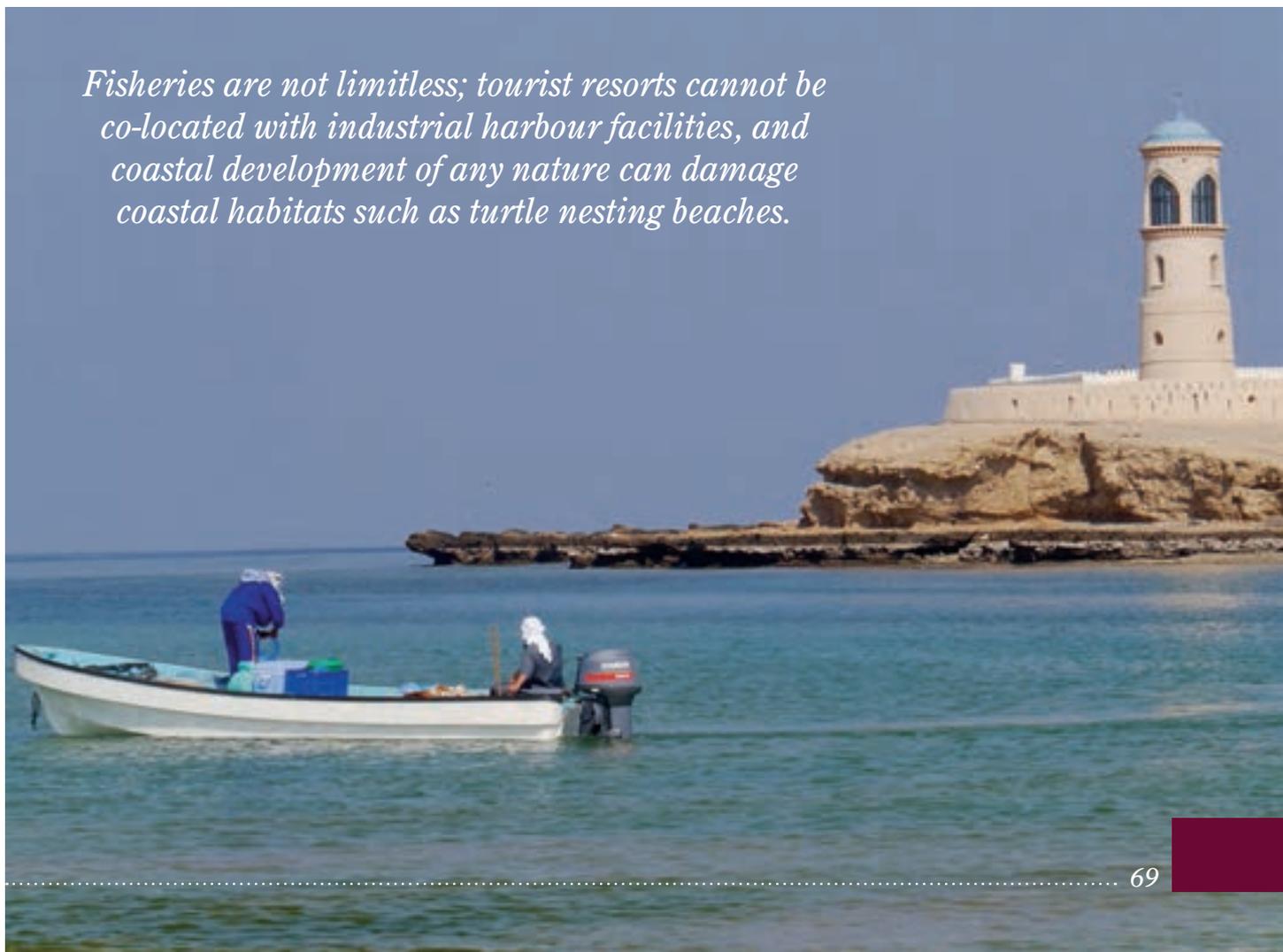
The development of Oman's coastline is occurring during a period of rapid climate change. Climate change is causing a number of physical, chemical and ecological changes that are directly and

indirectly impacting biodiversity and society. The most obvious impacts are increased cyclones (due to increased seawater temperature) and long-term sea level rise.

Cyclone Gonu in 2007 caused more than 50 deaths and economic damage estimated at over 3% of GDP. Since then there has been an increasing series of cyclones affecting the Omani coasts including Cyclones Phet, Mekunu, Hikaa and Kyarr. Climate predictions suggest that the intensity of cyclones will increase, and they may travel further north towards the more populated coasts of Muscat Governorate.

The physical impacts of climate change are not the only drivers of marine climate change with adverse societal impacts. As waters warm and sea conditions change this affects fish and wildlife that are adapted to living within certain conditions, which in turn affects fisheries production and biodiversity. As noted above increasing jellyfish and algae blooms can also affect coastal industry and desalination plants.

*Fisheries are not limitless; tourist resorts cannot be co-located with industrial harbour facilities, and coastal development of any nature can damage coastal habitats such as turtle nesting beaches.*





At this time of major investment in the marine and coastal sectors, much of which is committing to establishing long-term fixed infrastructure, this is an important moment to consider long-term sustainability and resilience if Oman wants to follow a pathway of maintaining a biodiverse and productive marine environment that benefits current and future generations.

Planning for long term economic prosperity and sustainable development requires strategic assessment of the multiple societal benefits generated by

*Planning for long term economic prosperity and sustainable development requires strategic assessment of the multiple societal benefits generated by the sea and the trade-offs between different sectoral developments and conservation.*

the sea and the trade-offs between different sectoral developments and conservation. This strategic planning needs to be coupled with a dedicated focus and investment in fostering adaptation and building resilience to climate change to maintain the abundant benefits that Oman's sea provides.

Oman's sea and coasts do indeed provide a sea of opportunities, but they are no longer open to unconstrained growth and without strategic planning and management there will be stormy seas ahead. ■



# FISHERIES IN OMAN

ARTICLE BY DAVID ELLIOTT, MACALISTER ELLIOTT & PARTNERS

Oman has a coastline of 1,700kms stretching from the Yemeni border in the South to Musandam on the Straits of Hormuz in the North. Fishing is a well established activity providing food as well as a livelihood for a significant percentage of the population.

Traditionally small wooden skiffs and dhows would fish the Al Batinah and Arabian Sea coasts but in the second half of the twentieth century the introduction of glass fibre open skiffs with outboard motors and mechanised dhows has fuelled a huge expansion in fishing activities. The heritage aspects of the fishing villages and ports do of course have immense spin off benefits to the tourism industry and add local colour to the coastal areas.

Omani fish also have an excellent reputation in the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia and have been exported to European countries. Principle species are pelagics (usually feeding in the surface layers of the sea) such as sardine and mackerel, large tunas and demersal fish (that lie on or near the seabed) including groupers, emperor, ribbon fish and croaker. In addition, high value shrimp, rock lobster and abalone are harvested.

In the late 1970s and 1980s an industrial fishery of foreign-flagged trawlers harvested large quantities of fish whilst damaging the marine environment, and most of this catch was exported with little benefit to Oman. In the late 1990s, under

the stewardship of Hamed Al Oufi, then the Director of Fisheries, bottom trawling was banned. This farsighted initiative benefitted the stocks and should safeguard the fisheries for future generations.

Whilst much of the artisanal catch is still landed on beaches, considerable investment by the Government of Oman in ports and fish markets and private sector investment in vessels and current initiatives in the Duqm fishing port and fisheries industrial park will be functioning in the near future. Any visitor to Muscat should take in the new fish market where an eclectic mix of species can be seen and purchased.

Whilst the Omani Government has identified fisheries as a growth area for investment, resource management, data collection and surveillance of fishing activities as well as landings are vital to ensure long term sustainability.

## CURRENT STATUS OF FISHERIES

Today, the fisheries in Oman continue to be dominated by the artisanal sector,

*Traditionally small wooden skiffs and dhows would fish the Al Batinah and Arabian Sea coasts.*





operating through thousands of fibreglass beach landing vessels, which are collectively responsible for 96% of the country's catch (reported at 580,240 Tonnes in 2019). It is also true to say that this production has grown significantly in recent years (it was 217,000 Tonnes in 2016). The accuracy of the landing data is questionable, and the sustainability of some species may be in doubt if catches continue to increase without enhanced fisheries management and surveillance.

The most significant change in the current fisheries sector though has been the growth of the industrial small pelagic fishery, led by Al Wusta Fisheries (AWF), owned by the Omani Sovereign Wealth

fund. AWF commenced fishing in 2018 for scad and mackerel (both small pelagic species like sardines but found further offshore) with industrial sized (95 metre) mid-water trawlers. Results have been impressive, with large previously unexploited stocks identified off the Al Wusta coast, and other operators are considering joining this fishery.

Currently, most of this fish is exported to Africa and it is estimated that a total sustainable catch of 250,000 Tonnes may be available to these (and other vessels) in the future within the Omani Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). It is therefore this area of the current fisheries which is most likely to see future growth in Oman.

## AQUACULTURE

Aquaculture is still in its infancy in Oman but is clearly a growth area for the Sultanate and will without doubt show large production increases over the next decade. Certainly, to date, the uptake in new facilities has been limited by the financial concerns of investors and a variety of red tape associated with the licensing process. Potential species include sea bream, shrimp, abalone and sea cucumber as well as the potential of tuna ranching.

## VISION FOR THE FUTURE

The Oman 2040 Vision and 10th Five Year Development Plan both clearly identify the Fisheries and Aquaculture Sectors as key pillars for growth in the Sultanate and for helping the country's diversification away from the oil and gas sector. The sectors currently contribute around 0.8% of GDP but it is believed that this could be increased substantially to over 5% in the next decade.

The development of a new small pelagic industrial fishery in Oman represents the biggest material change to the fishery since the 1970s and does present an opportunity for future growth when also coupled with potential increases in aquaculture production. The Government is also currently considering how better to position Oman within the wider Indian Ocean tuna fishery (which is globally of great importance). To date, Omani involvement in this fishery has been limited to coastal activity within the Omani EEZ and has been dominated by the European Union distant water fleets. Oman and other coastal states see this situation as unfair and so discussion on how to rectify this imbalance are ongoing in the region.

However, some significant challenges also exist for the sector, mainly around maintaining catches (particularly in relation to sardines) at sustainable levels into the future so that this resource can continue to benefit Oman for decades to come. ■

MacAlister Elliott & Partners is a UK based fisheries and aquaculture consultancy which has been active in Oman since the 1980s. Recent work has included feasibility studies in both the fisheries and aquaculture sectors



# OMAN'S FIRST COMMERCIAL FARM

ARTICLE BY SHAUWN BASSON, CEO NEHAD AGRONOMY SERVICES LLC



Farming, or settled agriculture, is an industry dating back to the beginning of the Third Millennium BC in Oman, and has together with fishing and trade contributed to shaping the country we see today. The country is broadly divided into desert, mountains and sea and each tied to unique lifestyle patterns and activities.

The climate is characterised by fierce heat and rainfalls are extremely limited, averaging less than 102mm each year and mostly concentrated in the mountains. The few times it does rain, it is more often than not in the form of a short, heavy downpour, rather than a steady shower, and is quick to dissipate. It is the scarcity of water which has, without question, been the single-most defining influence on the development of agriculture in Oman.

A key factor for success under such harsh conditions was the management and storage of water. Across much of Oman, water was traditionally obtained and distributed through an elaborate network of irrigation channels (known as falaj/afraj) either from natural springs or underground water sources. Even today, the irrigation system continues to be a

lifeline for towns and villages and allows for cultivation of land that would otherwise be desolate.

It has often been said that the landscape in Oman is 'confronting and challenging rather than embracing' and offers a fine line between survival and prosperity.

### So why choose to set up our farm under such unforgiving conditions?

Well, on a clear day one can see the Hajar Mountains from the Nehad farm. The mountain range stretches for more than 500kms along the Batinah coast and reaches a height of almost 3000m. These mountains are a vital catchment area for rainwater and deposits of silt washed down onto the plains have resulted in some extremely fertile soil. In addition to this, the area has plentiful supplies of

groundwater, making for excellent wells.

It is therefore not surprising that Sayyid Al Mutasim Bin Hamoud al Busaidi established Oman's first commercial farming enterprises in 1979, in exactly this place. With a humble 20 acres, the farm started with only a handful of traditional crops, with traditional Omani dates being one of them. The conditions along the coastal plain are ideal for the cultivation of the date palm, which according to Omani folklore has to 'have its head in fire and its feet in water'.

The date palm is, without a shadow of a doubt, the most important of Oman's crops and is often referred to as 'the tree of life'. As a food source, the date is unbeatable and the annual yield from a single tree may be as much as 270 kg. To this day, the Nehad farm still grows the most popular



varieties of Omani dates like Khalas, Khunaizi and Fardh.

The farm not only produces and exports dried dates, but has developed an assortment of date syrups, date vinegar, date biscuits and chocolate covered dates added to the product list.

## EXPANSION

The key to expanding successfully is often a company's ability to be innovative, having a finger on the pulse and understanding the consumer's preferences and current trends. Long gone are the days of Nehad Agronomy Services producing only a handful of crops for the local market. Today it is a multi-million riyal enterprise spread over multiple locations in Oman, with a total cultivated area of over 2200 acres, employing 300 permanent staff in addition to seasonal workers, and exports its produce not only to the neighbouring Gulf countries, but also the Japanese and European markets.

Our company has expanded dramatically in all areas of cultivation and now has a product mix of traditional crops like tomatoes, melons, carrots and sweetcorn alongside more unusual produce for the Gulf, such as broccoli, kale, Swiss Chard, leeks and even strawberries. The company is forever experimenting with new crops and varieties and pushing the limits for what is considered possible to grow in a



desert country, which virtually is astride the Tropic of Cancer.

Nehad Agronomy Services has proven that with determination, greenhouses and the right technology, it is possible to successfully grow and even export exotic flowers like lilies, roses, Calas lilies, chrysanthemums and even gladiolus. Of course such achievements and the secrets of the trade are kept close, but it is no secret that in an industry which still, to a large extent, relies heavily on hands-on manual labour, Nehad's production has moved into a new generation of farming practices, combining agriculture and technology.

## NEW TECHNOLOGY

In order to optimise productivity and output, the farms are using tailor-made management software to track business resources and capacity. Through a digitalised task calendar, the farm managers get daily analytics and details on the water amount, fertilisers and practices to be followed. This has improved the overall efficiency of the farms by 25%, and worked towards identifying the right product mix for the market in every season.

Although the farms have their own wells, typically at a depth of 30m or more, water and water management is always a huge factor. With the farm ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) technology the company was able to save 5% on water consumption cost.

Special emphasis is on the post harvesting technology which includes packaging and transportation. The company has the only fully automatic tomato grading line in the entire Gulf region, grading tomatoes on colour and weight. With our own cold stores on site and a fleet of GPS monitored refrigerated trucks, the vegetables and flowers are guaranteed to stay fresh from farm to shelves.

## THE FUTURE

As global consumers become more health conscious and seek alternatives to conventional farmed produce, our company has been sensitive to this shift and crops are produced using proven environmentally safe fertilisers and chemicals. We have set up our own composting unit for in-house production of organic manure, and so reducing dependency on chemical fertilisers.

The future looks bright for farming in the region. Research is being undertaken to address the main issues of water scarcity, and alternatives to conventional farming methods are being tested. Hydroponic and aquaponics farming are predicted to receive huge growth opportunities as the Gulf countries acknowledge an increasing need for food security. Experts believe that with correctly applied farm management technologies and/or a potential for hydroponics adaption in the region, the Middle East can eventually rank amongst the top food produce exporters in the world.

The future is bright – the future is green. ■

Nehad Agronomy Services LLC, the first commercial farming enterprise in Oman, is located in the Batinah Region. At the time of its humble beginning in 1979, a handful of traditional crops was grown, dominated by dates, watermelon, sweet melon and tomato. Over the decades, the company has grown dramatically in all areas of cultivation, product range, post harvest technology, and cold chain management. It now boasts a cultivated area of 2200 acres, spread over six locations, and produces world-class fruits and vegetables. NAS is producing and exporting Sweet Melons, Watermelons, Beans, Green Peppers, Colour Sweet Bell Peppers, Cherry Tomatoes, Tomatoes, Cauliflower, Cabbage, Squash, Eggplants, Lettuce, Mango, Dates, Carrots and Lily Cut Flowers.

# FIRST OQ SHIPMENT OF LPG FROM SALALAH

Oman News Agency reported that OQ (the Government-owned national petroleum investment company) completed its first shipment of Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) products on the tanker *Searambler* to international markets in June.

The freight ship which has been commercially commissioned will carry propane 5000MT and butane 5000MT.

Eng. Ihsan Al Jandal, Vice-President Salalah Operations, OQ Downstream said: “We are proud to announce this strategic achievement as one of the main growth projects in OQ which will reiterate the position of Oman as an energy exporter. This will enable the Sultanate to further optimise its gas value chain by recovering propane, butane and condensate for international markets. This comes in addition to other operational successes in line with best global practices in the petrochemicals industry.”

This product is the first of its kind to extract LPG and condensate from OQ’s gas

network. OQ’s LPG plant currently produces propane and butane as well as condensate – a commercially valuable and economically competitive fuel with growing demand in domestic and international markets. Built with a total investment of over 300m Riyals, the facility consists of an extraction plant, a fractionation facility, storage tanks, shipping facilities, and an interconnection pipeline system.

Mark Hardiman, Port of Salalah CEO, stated: “We are happy to see the strong collaboration between the Port of Salalah team and the OQ team. I am confident that together we can deliver a world class service and retain our position as one of the top players in the global marketplace.” ■

*“We are proud to announce this strategic achievement as one of the main growth projects in OQ which will reiterate the position of Oman as an energy exporter,” says Eng. Ihsan Al Jandal, Vice-President Salalah Operations, OQ Downstream.*





The Middle East Centre Archive at St Antony's College, Oxford holds an outstanding collection of papers and photographs relating to the Sultanate of Oman in the Oman Archive.



Reading room

## THE OMAN ARCHIVE ST ANTONY'S COLLEGE, OXFORD

ARTICLE BY DEBBIE USHER

The Middle East Centre Archive was founded in 1961 and over the past 60 years has become an internationally renowned research resource. The Archive now holds the papers of over 700 individuals or organisations with particularly strong holdings for the Palestine mandate and for the Sultanate of Oman.

The Oman Archive was established in the 1990s and now holds the most extensive collection in the United Kingdom of personal papers and photographs relating to Oman, especially for military history in the 1970s.

The proposal to establish the Oman Archive was made in February 1992, by Mr

Ian Skeet, a former Management Liaison Representative for the Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) oil company. The primary motivation for the project was the realisation that much potential research material for the study of twentieth century Omani history, was in the hands of individuals who had lived and worked in

Photo credit: Charles Butt Collection



Butt-Oman-1307 Sib, Camels racing, 20 November 1975.

Oman. Collecting these papers and photographs in the Oman Archive, would see to their preservation and enable research.

With the help of the Anglo-Omani Society and many veterans, the project to collect papers and photographs was successfully started in the 1990s. The Archive expanded rapidly as individuals

who had served in Oman donated their papers and photographs and encouraged their friends, who had also worked in Oman, to do likewise. The Oman Archive now holds the papers and photographs of more than 40 individuals or organisations, with extensive material from veterans who served in the Sultan's Armed Forces in the 1960s-1970s.

To help start the Oman Archive, Shell International Petroleum Co. Ltd provided a grant of £5,000 to support the initial work of cataloguing the Oman material received in the 1990s. The first 12 Oman Collections were catalogued from June to September 2000.

The Anglo-Omani Society has generously given two grants to the Oman

Butt-Oman-5974 Dhofar, Sarfait-Muscat, Airhead SOAF AB-214 landing (from above), 22 August 1976.

Photo credit: Charles Butt Collection





Butt-Oman-1515 Batinah, Hilfri, Inside arches in fort, 9 December 1973.

Photo credit: Charles Butt Collection

Archive. The first was in 2008 to digitise the Charles Butt photographic collection of over 7,000 colour slides and the second was in 2014 for the Visual Heritage of Oman project to digitise the photographs in the John Graham, William Kerr and Jill Brown photograph collections.

Notable collections in the Oman Archive include the papers and photographs of Major-General John Graham (Commander of the Sultan's Armed Forces 1970-1972) and Colonel David Smiley (Commander of the Sultan's Armed Forces 1958-1961), as well as papers from the Anglo-Omani Society and the Sultan's Armed Forces Association.

In addition to the papers and

photographs of many veterans who served in the Sultan's Armed Forces, the Oman Archive also has rich variety of other collections. For example, papers from individuals who served in Petroleum Development Oman, as well as a journalist (Pauline Searle), the papers of John Hazelden who served in the Royal Oman Police and papers relating to the first demographic surveys of Dhofar in 1977 and Musandam in 1983 in the Peter Sichel Collection. We also hold the papers and photographs of Valerie Robinson (née Nelson) who served as a personal assistant in the British Embassy in Muscat 1977-1982.

The rich variety of our holdings in the

Oman Archive provides a wonderful opportunity for research. For more information on our holdings, please see our Oman Archive webpage at <https://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/research-centres/middle-east-centre/mec-archive/meca-oman-archive>

The Oman Archive at the Middle East Centre Archive is housed in the beautiful Investcorp building, designed by Zaha Hadid. This provides state of the art facilities, with a purpose-built reading room and storage rooms. The Archive continues to grow and every year attracts many researchers studying the history of Oman. ■

*If you have lived or served in Oman, please consider adding your papers and photographs to the Oman Archive at the Middle East Centre Archive, St Antony's College, Oxford OX2 6JF. Email [debbie.usher@sant.ox.ac.uk](mailto:debbie.usher@sant.ox.ac.uk) Telephone: 01865 284706.*

Debbie Usher is the Middle East Centre Archivist at St Antony's College, Oxford University. She received a first-class BA in History and Politics and a Masters in History from Warwick University and a Masters with distinction in Archives and Records Management from University College London. She has worked at the University of York, the Royal Society and, since 2002, as the archivist at the Middle East Centre Archive.



Photo credit: Keith Barnes Photography



# CHELTENHAM MUSCAT

## MOD PENSION FUND INVESTS IN SISTER SCHOOL

ARTICLE BY CRISPIN DAWSON, FOUNDING PRINCIPAL

Cheltenham College is delighted to have the opportunity to be the first premium British private school to set up a sister school in Muscat. Cheltenham Muscat will offer a first-class education to boys and girls from 3-18 from September 2021.

Over the 180 years that Cheltenham College has been providing education in the UK there are many aspects which have remained consistent, but any outstanding institution needs to adapt and move forward and it is that drive which has led to the opening of Cheltenham Muscat.

Many UK Independent schools have ‘franchised’ and given their name to international schools, but Cheltenham College was always clear about striving for a better model which would create real educational opportunities for pupils and teachers at both schools. The relationship between Cheltenham College and Cheltenham Muscat will be considerably closer than many of those organisations who have just lent their name to international partners. The pupils and teachers in both schools will gain enormously from working alongside one another to learn more about the international nature of the world into

which the children from both schools will graduate.

Having spent the last eight years as Deputy Head at Cheltenham College I have the great privilege to be the Founding Principal of Cheltenham Muscat and our vision is simple: to lead education in Oman. Cheltenham Muscat has a fantastic opportunity to bring the educational standards and the all-round education that has served many generations of Cheltonians so well to Muscat. We want to make a real difference to the community of Muscat and Oman by continually striving for excellence in the education we offer to the young people in the city and the country.

We will work alongside the Ministry of Education and other schools to help ensure that the young people of Muscat get an education which will enable them to maintain the pride in their heritage but also an education that will enable them to



*Cheltenham Muscat will embody all the values that gives Cheltenham College the worldwide reputation for educational excellence that it has.*

contribute to the success of Oman on a global scale. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than seeing future alumni of Cheltenham Muscat helping to ensure the continued success of Oman and maintaining the special relationship which exists between Britain and Oman.

We have been honoured to work alongside the Omani Ministry of Defence

Pension Fund (MoDPF) who have built the school and have provided facilities which will enable us to fulfil our ambition of providing a first-class education. Despite the challenges of a global pandemic the MoDPF have continually insisted that we focus on providing the best education. It has been uplifting to work with a partner who shares our long-term vision for excellence.

That focus has enabled us to ensure all lessons from Grade 4 and above will be taught by subject specialists which we know enables the brightest children to be challenged, as well as expert support offered to those who need it at the earliest possible stage. We know this makes a difference to their educational performance as they progress through school, and we



are delighted to be able to offer that to the young people of Muscat. The specialist teaching rooms, amazing sports facilities and communal areas will be the envy of many schools across the Gulf region. We are also incredibly fortunate to have a wide range of spaces where we can gather the school together and help create a real sense of community which is one of the hallmarks of a Cheltenham education.

Cheltenham Muscat will embody all the values that gives Cheltenham College the worldwide reputation for educational excellence that it has. We will provide an education where children are encouraged to be curious and to be creative. We want children to have their own character, but also to show character in the sense of having a moral backbone. The Head at Cheltenham College, Nicola Huggett, was very clear with me that when she comes to Muscat for our annual inspection, she



Cheltenham Muscat will be the first British co-educational independent school to open in the Sultanate, purpose-built on a 45,000sqm site, locally owned by an independent company led by the Ministry of Defence Pension Fund. Crispin Dawson is the Founding Principal at Cheltenham College's first overseas school. He has been Deputy Head at Cheltenham College for eight years including two terms as Acting Head.



wants the school to feel like a Cheltenham school. The special sense of community, alongside a desire to provide the best education for young people is what we will be striving for from the outset.

The success of any school is dependent on the staff it employs, and we have been delighted that we have been able to recruit an outstanding group of founding teachers, from a range of UK and overseas schools, all with UK experience and a desire to do what is needed to make the school the best.

Muscat has proved to be an inspired choice to create the first Cheltenham international school. Oman's 2040 Vision has education as the primary focus and Cheltenham Muscat wants to be at the forefront of providing the best for the Muscat community in that area. So many of the prospective parents that I have met have experienced a UK education and want that standard of education for their children, whether they are Omani or international.

Both Muscat and Cheltenham provide a wonderful location for young people to grow up where there is an abundance of opportunities to experience the great outdoors which will be certainly something that the school will exploit. Both locations offer stunning scenery, albeit of a different type. Whilst I do miss the rolling hills of the Cotswolds in the UK, the stunning Hajar mountains and the Arabian Gulf do make up for it. I am still getting used to the hot summers but there is so much to explore and enjoy in Oman and the Omani people have been every bit as welcoming and hospitable as I was assured they would be.

The strength of the relationship between Britain and Oman is exemplified through the military links both countries enjoy. Cheltenham is ideally placed to build on that relationship with the military links that the school has. A great number of families in the school today have military links and historically 702 Cheltonians lost their lives in World War 1. Indeed we have been very fortunate to have a number of Cheltonian families on British Loan Service in Oman who have helped us immeasurably during our pre-operations phase and we very much hope that this will continue to be a strong relationship into the future.

As I write we have a few weeks until opening day in September and I am hugely excited about welcoming our founding pupils and families from across Muscat into the school, growing the Cheltenham family and supporting the education of young people in Muscat. Should any members of the Anglo-Omani Society wish to visit Cheltenham Muscat as prospective parents or just interested parties I would be delighted to show you the school.

Please contact us through [admissions@cheltenhammuscat.com](mailto:admissions@cheltenhammuscat.com)



# MASTERPIECE OMAN

## 50TH NATIONAL DAY ART COMPETITION

In celebration of Oman's 50th National Day, the Society launched its first Omani National Day art competition, open to artists of all ages resident in Oman and the UK. It turned out to be a remarkably successful competition with stunning pictures from well-known and talented artists.



Anglo-Omani Society New Generation Group's Lissie Simpson and Ma'an Al Rawahi were two of the judges.

The competition offered artists an opportunity to showcase their work, participate in a virtual exhibition and join a physical exhibition at the Society's headquarters in London. Winners also received cash prizes to support them in progressing their practice at this challenging time. First place was awarded £1000, with runner-up prizes of £500 and £250.

Entries were judged anonymously by a panel consisting of the heads of the Anglo-Omani Society New Generation Group in the UK and Oman – Lissie Simpson and Ma'an Al Rawahi – alongside guest artists judges.

Our first-place winner, Arabella Dorman, is one of Britain's leading portrait painters and an award-winning war artist. Arabella is also a prominent public speaker and fundraiser.



First-place winner, Arabella Dorman.

Suffused in golden light, Arabella's works capture the timeless beauty of Oman and its people, within an ever-changing world. In a dialogue between past and present, Arabella's paintings are a testament to the Sultanate's age-old traditions, historical architecture, and dramatic landscapes.

We spoke to Arabella to find out more about her prize-winning piece entitled 'Animal Souk, Nizwa' and her inspiring journey as an artist.

Since the age of eight I wanted to be an artist. It is my first language in a way. I started primarily as a landscape painter: now I am mainly a portrait painter. I am also a war artist, which has taken me to some of the most fascinating and pitiful parts of the world. It led me to a whole other journey of searching for the light in the darker corners of existence. My time in Oman opened the gates of the Middle East for me, leading to an enduring fascination and love for the region. I adore the Middle East, and Oman is a jewel in an otherwise quite troubled area. Every day I was there was one of discovery and revelation.

I have always been fascinated in the ability of the still image being able to tell a story. I think art is, or should be, a mirror of our times. I do not think artists can escape being a mirror of our times because we live within our times. I felt compelled to document what is going on in the world today. Where else is best to see what it is like to be human than in the theatre of war. Why is it called a theatre? Perhaps it is a very heightened experience of life, the very worst but also the very best. I have seen such extraordinary examples of hope and courage and tenacity. I see it as my responsibility as an artist to portray something of that. Likewise, in Oman I felt it my joyful obligation to portray the beauty of the country.

I spent all my teenage years travelling with my paints in my backpack. Oman was one of many trips that I made during that time. My uncle, Stuart Laing, was the Ambassador in Oman. He very kindly invited me out there to have a look, he thought I would love to paint there. That is how it all started. The minute I arrived I could not believe the light, the warmth of the people and the history of the region, it was intoxicating! I spent months there and returned the next year to work with

Madame Susan Al Said at the Bait Muzna Gallery and had an exhibition at the end of it which pretty much sold out!

My painting 'Animal Souk, Nizwa' summed up everything I love about Oman. One of my first impressions of Oman was its timelessness. You are very much in a beautiful timeless world of human activity, the smells, the heat, the dust, the colours and the warmth. Much of which has not changed even now.

I did a lot of field trips out into the desert, to Nizwa and up into the mountains. Wherever I went I would take my sketch

book and do really quick sketches, figure studies to try and capture someone sitting under the trees or an old man moving a sheep, the elegant way the Omanis dress, so beautiful for an artist to convey.

I start off using water colour then I take it all back to the studio and start working it up into oil figure studies. The final painting is an oil on canvas. Most of my finished pieces are oil on canvas or charcoal drawings. Currently I am quite into pen and ink drawings too. Being an artist the opportunities and the ways to express oneself are just endless!

*My painting 'Animal Souk, Nizwa' summed up everything I love about Oman. A beautiful timeless world of human activity, the smells, the heat, the dust, the colours and the warmth.*



'Animal Souk, Nizwa'

Second-place winner,  
Elizabeth Davis,



*Much of Elizabeth's artwork is greatly inspired by the scenic beauty of Oman.*

Our second-place winner, Elizabeth Davis, is a prominent artist in the Oman art community. Much of Elizabeth's artwork is greatly inspired by the scenic beauty of Oman and its deep-rooted culture.

"The Omani village folk are excellent craftsmen, with skills handed down through the generations. The thorny stunted Acacia trees are typical of the region and provide a cool shade. You often see children nearby,

happily playing with each other. Nimble-footed mountain goats are also an integral part of the Omani villages. The evening skies have a hazy pink hue, probably due to the dust in the air. My four panels have been done in such a way that it can be placed in various combinations, or individually, or as a diptych or triptych."

We spoke to Elizabeth to find out more about her stunning piece entitled 'Omani

Artisans' and about her artistic and personal connection to Oman.

I am from a small place in India called Kerala. It is the most southern part of India. I have spent almost equal time in both India and Oman. Having been in Oman for almost 30 years now, Muscat is like a home away from home for me. I have been dabbling in art since I can remember. It has always been a big passion of mine. For the last four/five years it has all been art. Now, art is my life. I have my own little studio and I paint whenever the mood strikes me.

I have been involved in a fair few art competitions. I am a member of the Omani Society of Fine Arts; they have conducted many competitions. Being an Indian national, I am also part of the Indian Social Club Art Wing, the Indian Embassy have also had a few competitions which I have entered.

This piece reflects my total connectivity with Oman. Initially when I started painting, I would use books and magazines, but in the last five years I began to focus on Omani themes, and I am finding it so delightful. From my paintings, you can see what a huge impact Oman has had on my artwork. For this particular piece I worked on it a few years back but was not satisfied with it, so I kept adding to it along the way. I added the children and the animals to give it a more ethnic feel, I changed the entire background making it a pale pink, to match the evenings skies in Oman. The whole painting is an impressionist style; it is a polyptych piece.



'Omani Artisans'

Our third and final winner, Anjali Babu, is a versatile artist and painter residing in Oman. Anjali takes much of her artistic inspiration from the natural culture and heritage of Oman. Her work includes portraits, landscape paintings, figurative themes and abstracts that radiate positive energy in any setting.

The general impression created by her 'Omani Traditions' painting is one of warmth and affection, enriched by culture and tradition. The warmth comes from the complementary colour scheme, the soothing tones, and the harmony created by the two Omani boys embracing. The use of oil paints allows for a seamless transition from one colour to another. The brush strokes are very soft and subtle, emphasising the delicate nature of the subject matter. Essentially, this painting depicts, love, hope and an appreciation of Omani culture.

We interviewed Anjali to discuss her breathtaking piece.

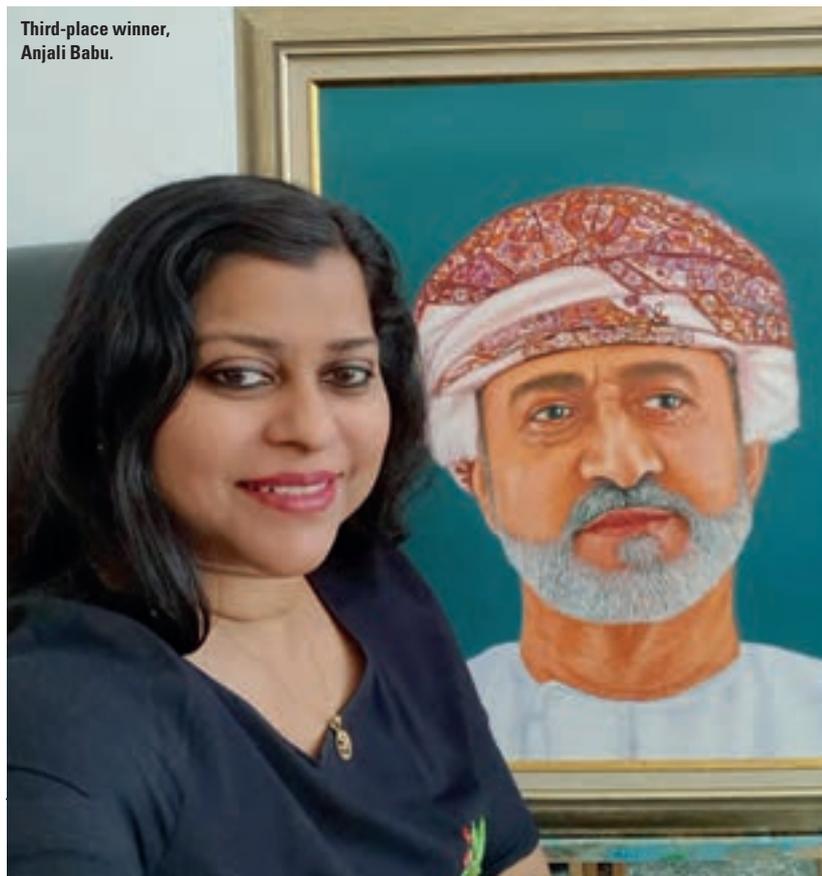
I am an Indian artist residing in Oman for the past 24 years. I was taught by several artists and attended many workshops. I first exhibited my work in the Oman Fine Arts Society and I have been involved with multiple exhibitions since.

I have been here in Oman for a huge part of my life. I just love the Omani culture, they are such humble, kind people. I often visit villages where I'm grateful to receive



'Omani Traditions'

Third-place winner,  
Anjali Babu.



*Friends and family members have a culture of rubbing their noses together to show love and affection for each other.*

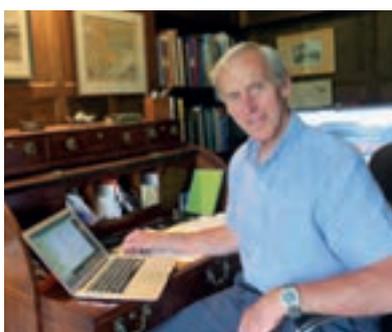
the affection and hospitality of the Omani people. I am so impressed with their hospitality! I feel very connected to the people and the culture. You could say, I am perhaps more connected to Oman than I am to India, as I have spent half my lifetime here and only visit India on vacations.

My picture is showing the Omani traditional greeting. When friends and family members meet, they have a culture of rubbing their noses together to show the love and affection they have for each other. I wanted to capture this tradition. In India we do not have this particular traditional greeting, we hug but do not rub noses! ■

# SOCIETY ESSAY COMPETITION

ARTICLE BY STUART LAING

In 2020 and in 2021, the Society has held an essay competition for sixth-form students.



The purpose was to raise awareness of Oman and of the Society amongst this age group, and to encourage interest in Omani affairs. We also thought that writing an essay would be an activity popular with both teachers and students during the periods of Covid restraints. Our suggested topics covered history, and economic and social affairs. I am reporting on both competitions in this article, since last year the competition was judged in August (too late for last year's *Review*), and this year in June.

We conducted a fairly strong campaign to advertise the competition, using social media and also writing directly to schools and academy groups with which we had contact. We also involved the *Arab Digest*, an on-line newsletter about the Arab world, who advertised the competition and also provided one of the judges. We are grateful to *Arab Digest* for their collaboration, which also included offering a free subscription to the first prize-winners.

In strictly numerical terms, we were slightly disappointed in the response; we

received six entries in 2020 and seven in 2021. In 2020 we thought that the meagre tally may have been due to the short notice – we only advertised from early June; but our numbers in 2021 were hardly any higher. Perhaps it was because it takes time for essay competitions to become known; or because Oman is a somewhat niche subject area; or there may be other reasons.

Entries came from a reasonable cross-section of schools in Oman and the UK, although the preponderance of British entries were from independent (private) schools. In both years, the quality of entries was high, all of them being well presented and with a high standard of English.

I chaired the judging panel. Other members were John McKeown, Lissie Simpson and Bill Law from *Arab Digest*. Nick Smith in 2020 and Aaishah Sharif in 2021, kindly edited the entries so that we, the jury, received only the essay texts, without either names or schools shown. We found no difficulty in selecting the

winner in 2020 – Grace Dunn, from St George's School, Ascot; and in 2021 we awarded joint first prize to Mary Brown, from Repton School and Sam Lovegrove from Ampleforth College.

Winners received a cash prize, plus a year's subscription to the *Arab Digest*, and an invitation to come to an event at our headquarters in Sackville Street, when we resume in-person lectures. This year we have also offered a talk at the winners' schools by a member of the Society's Board.

The small number of entries suggests that the essay competition has not succeeded in reaching a wide cross-section of the sixth-form age group, and it is doubtful that we shall organise a competition next year. But we hope that you will enjoy reading the winning essays, and some readers will no doubt meet our young winners when they come to a Society lecture in due course.

## ESSAY COMPETITION, 2020

### 1ST PRIZE

**Grace Dunn**

St George's School, Ascot

### 2ND PRIZE

**Abdillah Masoud**

Caludon Castle School

### 3RD PRIZE

**Sara Al Lawati**

Al Shomoukh International School

The three essays reproduced here show an informed selection by the young authors of subjects of particular importance. They also show mature and well-researched understanding of their topics, and are well written. They are important in furthering a Society objective of preserving and enhancing the longstanding friendship between Britain and Oman by the promotion of learning and a wider knowledge about Oman among British people – especially the young. All three essays were very well referenced with appropriate and authoritative sources, and all three included a bibliography showing wide reading: for reasons of space in an annual *Review* without academic pretensions, the editor has reluctantly removed the references and bibliographies.

## ESSAY COMPETITION, 2021

### 1ST EQUAL

**Mary Brown**, Repton School and  
**Sam Lovegrove**, Ampleforth  
College

### RUNNER-UP

**Daniel Keith Chan**

Oxford International College

# IS THE DOMINANCE OF IBADISM IN OMAN THE MAIN FACTOR THAT HAS ALLOWED FOR A SUSTAINED TOLERANCE WITHIN THE COUNTRY?

BY GRACE DUNN



GRACE DUNN HAS BEEN STUDYING A LEVELS IN HISTORY OF ART, ENGLISH, PHILOSOPHY AND CLASSICS AS A STUDENT AT ST GEORGE'S SCHOOL, ASCOT. SHE HAS DECIDED TO TAKE A GAP YEAR, AND PLANS ON GOING TO UNIVERSITY IN 2022.

Oman is a country balanced in the cross-section between traditional religious beliefs and advances in modernity. It has progressed over the late 20th century into a Sultanate that is internationally respected for its internal peaceful relations between a diverse plethora of religious and ethnic minorities.

Being the only nation which has an Ibadi majority, and thus large Sunni and Shi'a minorities, it is exempt from the well known conflicts that other Arab administrations and non-state performers are partial to, as well as maintaining a steady understanding of other religions. The dominance of Ibadism has contributed to the high level of tolerance seen within Oman, whereby anyone who is not an Ibadi Muslim is allowed openly to practise their culture and religion within limits, although this permittance of peaceful co-existence is not to be confused with open celebration of additional religions and Islamic sects.

Under the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said, the education system and opportunities it has provided have been radically reformed. The Sultanate itself runs on a system which has allowed for modernisation whilst also conserving its cultural and religious traditions. Domestic and international development have progressed greatly since 1970. However, it has ultimately been down to the people to accept the reformations presented; Omani culture and behavioural customs, intertwined with Ibadism, have created the foundation for social and political development, and with that an established tolerance.

Ibadi ideology centralises on the belief that the Qur'an was the word of God specifically designed for the Prophet and his immediate followers to understand at the time, and thus they believe that its message should not be held with the same weight in the modern day, and that it should be interpreted within circumstantial context. This founding of thought has therefore allowed Ibadi Muslims a much more open response to changing times and circumstances as well as a greater tolerance towards not only other Islamic sects, but religions. Furthermore, Ibadism shares beliefs with both Shi'a and Sunni sects which gives them the ability to connect with both as well as acting as a middle ground between the two.

Thus, Oman, as the world's only Ibadi majority nation, does not have the same stakes in the Sunni-Shi'a conflicts which have proven to be a prime justification for armed conflict in recent years, as many of the other Arab administrations, and non-state performers do. Ibadi neutrality within religious conflicts has allowed for a practical approach to global politics as seen in its continuous provisions of humanitarian aid to Yemen, in addition to mediating peace talks between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. In addition, the more liberal interpretation of the Qur'an naturally leans away from fundamentalism and towards modern development and a slow evolution of political, social and economic landscapes both within the country as well as globally.

Oman's international stance of "active

neutralisation” has also been applied to domestic affairs; from 1965-1975 there were large amounts of insurgents, poverty, harsh restrictions, and a lack of modern structure which called for domestic reformation in order for it to be taken seriously internationally as a neutral party. Sultan Qaboos’ reformations starting in 1970 slowly dissipated these issues and by extension of improving internal policies, Oman’s external appearance and role of neutrality between the Euro-Atlantic Zone, the Gulf Cooperation Committee (GCC) and Iran, was consolidated. Thus, global and domestic neutrality go hand in hand, and without a sustained and stability of internal affairs, Oman’s active neutrality would not be applicable internationally.

Its Ibadi majority, in practicality, has kept it out of Sunni-Shi’a conflicts and thus has allowed it to mediate between the GCC and Iran as well as sustaining a coexistence of all three Islamic sects domestically. The freedom of religious expression and additional culture has developed a diverse community which has allowed for a sustainable sentiment of tolerance by all who live there. The neutrality of Ibadism in Sunni-Shi’a conflicts has enabled Oman to mediate both domestically and regionally whilst simultaneously aiding or developing areas in need.

In the successful coup against his father with the aid of Britain, Sultan Qaboos bin Said began slow reformations of Oman with the purpose of modernisation in an ‘evolutionary’ process. One of the most substantial changes was the academic curriculum; Oman went from almost no schools to over a thousand, including a university, within 25 years. The newly founded Ministry of Education in 1971, took on the task of establishing a new academic curriculum that combined religious and historical framework with modern studies and proscribed a similar level of compulsory schooling as other Arab nations had at the time.

Islamic studies were made compulsory from the first grade through to the twelfth, and were designed to promote unity and avoid secularism,

thus the curriculum focused on the common beliefs of all Muslims and not on any particular beliefs held in either Sunni, Shi’a or Ibadi schools of thought. In comparison to the Bahraini academic curriculum, where religious beliefs and the educational system have clashed, causing discomfort for the Shi’a minority community, Ibadi dominance in Oman has allowed for the creation of a religious and secular curriculum without friction or discomfort within minority sects.

This unity of education in both modernity and religion has neutralised sect differences within Islamic studies, and has actively encouraged the participation of both genders up to, and including university education. Academia, with Ibadism at the forefront of its designing, has overtly been responsible for sustaining sentiments of tolerance in Oman. Furthermore, the exposure that children have received through the education system to both their traditions as well as modern subjects has encouraged open attitudes not just to other religions and nationalities, but also progressive modernisation.

Due to the Omani people’s ‘ideology of politeness’, expressions of tolerance towards others are deemed essential to a person’s honour. The Basic Law, established in 1999, allows for other religions and Islamic sects to practise and build places of worship openly, although there are still limitations; religious buildings must be built on land allocated by the Sultan, and religious festivals must be practised within those buildings (with the permission of the Sultan) and not publicly in order to avoid civil upset and unrest. Thus, Arab, Iranian and Indian cultures and nationalities can confront each other as complete alternative schemes of existence within Oman, and therefore have the ability to co-exist alongside each other.

Local Omani people claim themselves to be ‘non-conscientious’; their culture contains formalities and a customary code of honour regarding public behaviour which inhibits the articulation of a person’s worth, or criticism about

another. It is due to their customs of courtesy, as well as the passing of the Basic Law that has allowed for expressions of nationality and religion within reason. The limitations and strict customs of behavioural conduct within Omani culture, has allowed for a sustained sentiment of tolerance towards additional sect beliefs and sacred practices.

Ultimately, Ibadism, nestled within traditional culture, is the foundation of tolerance within Oman; its thought is a large aspect of customs and tradition seen in the local culture. Whilst it is a direct influence on the willingness of the people to embrace modernisation, Ibadi ideology alone is not enough to justify the sustained position of tolerance that the country enjoys. This comes from the concept of Ibadism being a sect of Islam that exists and survives outside of the Sunni-Shi’a rivalry; it is thus a catalyst for promoting peace, as its differences allow neutral mediation, but its Islamic identity along with certain religious beliefs and practices allow for commonalities.

It is this understanding of the function of the Ibadi majority within Oman that has enabled Sultan Qaboos’ reformations within the educational sector to be well received and thus promoting a peaceful coexistence within the Islamic and national majority and minorities. The understanding of modern theories and other religions and sects provided by a religiously inclusive, modern academic curriculum for all children, has decreased Oman’s tolerance for intolerance. The educational system, along with cultural behaviour, and additionally tolerance enforced by the Basic Law have all been the result of the neutrality of Ibadism in religious feuds and their ideology.

Therefore, overall, Oman is responsible for the sustained attitudes of tolerance which reflect the country’s international policy of ‘active neutralisation’. Its peaceful internal and external relations provide one of the greatest examples of how a country can, and has, successfully flourished in modernity and tradition simultaneously. ■

# HOW CAN THE ECONOMIES OF GULF COUNTRIES, PARTICULARLY OMAN, ADAPT TO THE NEW REALITIES OF A GLOBAL 'GREEN ECONOMY'?

BY MARY BROWN



MARY BROWN IS STUDYING HISTORY, LATIN, CHEMISTRY AND MATHS AT REPTON, AND WOULD LIKE TO STUDY ARABIC AND HEBREW AT UNIVERSITY. SHE HOPES TO LIVE IN THE MIDDLE EAST WHEN SHE IS OLDER, AND HAS ALWAYS BEEN FASCINATED BY THE HISTORY, POLITICS AND CULTURE OF THE REGION.

Oil. It is what many in the West would immediately associate with the Middle East and it is the resource that drives economies there. However, with the advent of eco-activism, the development of cleaner energy sources and general concerns about the dubious ethical nature of Middle Eastern oil and regimes, its days seem numbered. The Middle East's economic dependence on it makes this development a significant threat to most countries in the region.

However, this trend need not be a death knell for the Middle East – in fact, it could turn out to be the making of it. By diversifying both energy and economy, the Arabia of 2100 could be stable, prosperous and technologically advanced and serve as an example to the rest of the world on how to adapt and transform an economy when it is under threat.

The diversification of energy in the region is incredibly important in both securing energy supplies and improving the image of Gulf countries. The most viable alternative energy source is solar due to the hot and arid climate of the region, yet renewables currently only make up 3% of Middle Eastern power. In recent years, however, several countries have

begun to capitalise on this untapped resource: Oman, for one, is in the process of building a 500-megawatt solar power plant. Projects such as this represent a shift in the Middle Eastern approach to energy: that investing in renewable sources is the way to go.

There is further hope to be found in the Pan-Arab Strategy for the Development of Renewable Energy of 2013 when Arab leaders committed to more than sextupling renewable energy generation capacity by 2030. Not only will this shift in energy production help the planet and ensure energy security for posterity but, in the short-term, it could make the Middle East a hub for technological innovation and research. A location with such a wealth of sunlight is likely to attract scientists and corporations in the same way that oil once did as experts look to research and refine their techniques. This would mean that the Middle East retains its status as a lynchpin of the global energy industry, albeit for a greener reason, improving its image on the global stage.

There are, of course, questions to be asked of the feasibility of the transportation of solar power in order to make it profitable – it is clearly far

*The diversification of energy in the region is incredibly important in both securing energy supplies and improving the image of Gulf countries.*

more transient than coal or oil, so the infrastructure that accompanies it must be considered. Fortunately, there is pioneering technology that could allow Oman to profit from exporting solar power. Scientists have developed techniques that allow them to separate the hydrogen and oxygen atoms of water by exposing them to sunlight. By further reactions, liquid hydrocarbon fuels, simple hydrogen gas and methanol can all be produced and transported easily.

These 'solar fuels' allow the benefits of solar power to be truly global, allowing everyone to benefit from the technology and making it a more reliable energy source. Due to the physical properties of liquid hydrogen and hydrocarbon fuels, existing infrastructure can be adapted to accommodate it (particularly gas pipelines). While it is important to note that this is not yet able to be completed on a commercial scale, it has been shown to be possible and early research by scientists is promising.

It is also pertinent that Oman is already profiting from wind power in the Dhofar region. In 2019, the first utility-scale wind farm in the Gulf began generating power there. With further funding and investment, there is every possibility that Gulf states, especially Oman, will be able to profit from this shift in the global energy supply.

Yet diversification of the economy is what ultimately will allow Gulf countries not only to survive but also to prosper. Saudi Arabia is one Gulf state that, in recent years, has recognised the important role that tourism might play in moves away from oil dependence. The Saudi Tourism Development Fund (worth \$530 million) was established at the end of April to finance public and private sector cooperation in Saudi tourism. This example, and others similar, illustrate the power of tourism in the Middle East.

However, there are two significant issues with the development of tourism there, particularly from the West. The first is safety. Egypt, for instance, is a country with a wealth of treasures to

visit and also a desirable climate. However, its tourism industry has suffered greatly due to terrorist and national security incidents. Before the 2011 uprising, almost 15 million tourists a year visited Egypt, yet, by 2016, this number had plummeted to 5.3 million. Recently, visitor numbers have begun to recover (albeit not to 2010 levels) but Egypt's situation is still indicative of how important security is in the tourism industry.

The second issue is perceptions and the image of the country. For example, Saudi Arabia is notorious in the West for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and the Kingdom's general treatment of women and dissidents. Therefore, prospective tourists may hesitate to visit a country whose values seem antithetical to their own. Saudi Arabia appears to recognise the consequences such perceptions of the Kingdom might have on tourism with moves such as the repealing of the ban on female drivers.

Oman is fortunate not to suffer from either of these issues. Oman is known for being one of the most peaceful countries in the Middle East, ranking fourth in the region for peace in 2019. Due to its size and its relatively low-profile on the world stage, the country also doesn't suffer the bad publicity that plagues the regimes of Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Oman is also blessed with numerous sites of interest to tourists: beaches, rolling sand dunes and the Muttrah Corniche, to name a few.

Similar to the UAE, visitors are expected to respect local customs (hence loutish behaviour and promiscuity, for instance, are frowned upon). However, this has not stopped the UAE from capitalising on tourism. In fact, the state has nearly doubled its visitor numbers in a decade to 16.7 million in 2019.

While Oman only welcomed 3.5 million visitors in the same year, it is crucial to note that this was still a significant increase of 8.4%. Paired with the news that 66 new hotels are to be built in the country, it is clear that the government is turning its sights to

*And so, there is hope for the future of Gulf countries, despite talk about the destabilising of their economies. There is a significant opportunity for the Middle East to pioneer new solar technology and become a trailblazer in the sector.*

tourism (they are intending it to be worth 10% of GDP by 2040 and employ 500,000 workers). While it is unlikely to replace oil as a main source of income, the Omani government's intention and commitment to diversifying their economy indicates that there is a serious attempt to create a greener economy. And so, it is clear that Oman has the capacity and will to be a haven for tourists, one that could make it richer and less reliant on oil.

And so, there is hope for the future of Gulf countries, despite talk about the destabilising of their economies. There is a significant opportunity for the Middle East to pioneer new solar technology and become a trailblazer in the sector. As we become more and more aware of the impact of climate change, technology and innovation will allow us to harness the power of natural resources without harming the planet.

The money that tourism can contribute to economies in the region is also a significant positive (and it is an opportunity from which smaller and more peaceful Gulf states, such as Oman, are most likely to benefit). Ultimately, I do not fear for the Gulf. Throughout its history, it has faced existential threats, both natural and man-made, and I don't doubt that it has the talent, tenacity and ability to emerge flourishing from this latest threat. ■

# GOVERNMENT SYSTEM CHALLENGES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

BY SAM LOVEGROVE



**SAM LOVEGROVE HAS SPENT HIS FORMATIVE YEARS IN A MULTINATIONAL ENVIRONMENT AND SPEAKS FLUENT FRENCH, SWEDISH AND ENGLISH. HE HAS COMPLETED HIS FIRST YEAR OF 'A' LEVELS AT AMPLEFORTH, STUDYING MATHS, CHEMISTRY, GERMAN AND SPANISH. HE RECENTLY JOINED AN AOS BEGINNERS ARABIC LANGUAGE COURSE WHICH HE HAS MUCH ENJOYED. HE HOPES TO READ ARABIC AND GERMAN AT UNIVERSITY.**

Oman and other Arabian Peninsula countries have monarchical systems of government, combined with structures for shura (consultation). How do you see these systems developing as their societies face the challenges of the 21st century?

International press headlines, and associated critical articles, often question which type of governmental system is best suited to cope with the challenges which countries, and their areas of influence, face in the 21st century.

I believe the current governance system in Oman – with a parliament with limited legislative authority – is unsustainable in the long-term. With the increasing accessibility of social media, foreign travel and Western cultural and political influences, Omanis have had the opportunity to see the benefits of the plurality of perspectives in public discourse which democratically established countries enjoy. Without the assertion of multiple conflicting opinions which citizens of democratic countries are allowed to express and implement through the democratic process, Oman may struggle to address the pressing challenges of the 21st century such as gender inequality, geopolitical instability and the need for economic diversification.

In 1991, as a way of giving the Omani citizen a voice in the affairs of government, His Majesty the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said established a Consultative Assembly, the Majlis al-Shura. This is the lower house of the Council of Oman, the bicameral Omani parliament (of which the Upper House is the State Council). The Majlis al-Shura is a democratically elected legislative chamber consisting of 86 non-partisan members (almost exclusively male), one or more of whom are elected to

represent each province (wilayat) of Oman. Although some constitutional rights have been granted to this Assembly, the Sultan still holds all the real power and can ignore proposals put forward by the Shura council.

The president of the Shura, as originally inaugurated, was nominated by the Sultan to ensure that the recommendations made by this assembly were in keeping with his own ideologies. Following demonstrations in 2011, over corruption and the population's demands for social improvement, the Sultan responded by empowering the lower house to propose and amend legislation, to summon ministers for questioning and to elect its own chairman.

Although the Shura represents a degree of political liberalisation, it is far from being an open, democratic system; the Sultan retains the power to reject bills and proposals determined by the Shura without explanation. Furthermore, the traditional tribal system plays a significant role in who is elected and without political parties to organise candidates by their ideologies, voters are unable to elect a candidate who best reflects their views.

However, the very establishment of the Shura by Sultan Qaboos was an important recognition on his part of the necessity to involve Omanis in their own government, thereby giving Omanis a sense of having a voice within their society. Oman's monarchical actions in this regard have, by comparison, set a radical example to the neighbouring monarchies of other Gulf Cooperation Council states on the Arabian Peninsula, including Saudi Arabia.

Throughout my research, I have reflected upon why it is only in the last 30 years that Oman's Islamic

monarchical system of government has come to recognise the need for 'consultation with the people' by way of a directly elected legislative body. Perhaps, owing to increased literacy rate, access to social media and extended travel, and through diplomatic relations, Oman, and many other Arabian peninsular countries, have begun to liberalise along Western democratic lines. However, this apparent softening towards democracy through Shura 'consultation with the people' remains constrained to an extent by traditional Islamic beliefs.

As we have seen in the last century in Western nations, traditional religious beliefs and cultural traits usually become less important as modernisation takes hold. Where there is a shift in some of the powers from states and organisations to the individual, this shift tends to be irreversible and therefore autocratic leaders are often reluctant to democratise unless necessitated by societal pressure. In the context of Islam, many absolute monarchies, including Oman's, are reluctant to democratise as they suspect that a resultant increase in individual freedom might affect the behaviour of their subjects at the potential cost of reducing the power of religion.

Given the historical lack of education of the general population of certain Arab peninsula states, many in power argued that giving all citizens the vote was futile without literacy being commonplace. In an interview featuring Shaykh Salaah al-Din al-Tijaanii al-Hasanii, he argued it is unjust that the majority who "can't write and read much", and therefore lack understanding of sensitive and complex political notions, should have the power to influence the decision making of the executive branch. According to a 2017 article published by the Canadian Center of Science and Education, around a quarter of males and half of females in the Arab world are illiterate. However, Oman, does not fall under this bracket, with a 95.65% literacy rate, and thus this line of argument does not readily apply to this country.

The Shaykh further argues that shura (in the sense of 'consultation' in contrast with democracy) is better suited for Islamic

countries, as it prevents consideration of ideas which might contradict Shariah Law. However, several Muslim majority countries, such as Pakistan, Indonesia and Iran, have become Islamic democracies, whilst still upholding Islamic values and not the Western liberal cultural standards that so many anti-democratic fundamentalists fear.

The cultural scientists and religious historians Walter Ong and Professor Hartley at Curtin University argue in their book "Orality and Literacy" that the increase in understanding brought about by widespread literacy in a society makes majority literate nations more driven towards democratic ideals than majority illiterate ones. Written language expands the ability to think in abstract terms, including topics such as freedom or equality which underpin democracy.

In contrast, oral societies (which are less likely to have mass engagement with journalism and literature) are more likely to maintain deference to authorities, and thus lack the ability to question the status quo. Therefore, the substantially increased literacy rate of the Omani population in the last 20 years, coupled with burgeoning internet access and more common overseas tourism, means that it is more likely that citizens are politically engaged and have firmer views about how their country should be run, leading to further demands for democracy.

In an article exploring the youth perspectives on the future in Bahrain, a diverse group of young people, mostly Bahrainis, from different political backgrounds were interviewed about how they perceived the development of the Bahraini government – a government very similar to Oman's, with both having introduced a democratic assembly into their government system and around the same time. These interviews suggested that the most contentious issues discussed were the need for democracy and the role of religion in politics and society. One participant argued it was the "fear of the unknown" which caused so many to worry about political change, especially democracy, among a section of Bahraini society.

Despite the flaws of Oman's current

systems of governance and even without full democracy, Sultan Qaboos made fundamental modernising changes, since the overthrow of his father's rule in 1970. And in turn the current ruler of Oman, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik Al-Said, has declared his intention to maintain and develop Sultan Qaboos's measured approach to governance.

Oman is now ranked top among Gulf states in terms of safety, security and friendliness towards expatriates. The Sultanate of Oman is also widely renowned for its ever more important role as a 'facilitator of diplomacy', organising backchannels for communication and diplomatic openings in a number of regional conflicts. Whether between Iran and US, Israelis and Palestinians, or between agitated factions in Yemen or Syria, Oman has facilitated improved relations between countries whilst staying out of regional conflicts.

Meanwhile, the Sultan and his Council of State will not wish to cede any power or control through democratisation, given that a more Western style of governance could be perceived as a risk to compliance with the Shariah law. With a better educated, literate society, which has access to social media and foreign travel, the variety of ideas from across the globe, both political and cultural, to which Omanis are exposed, will increase over time.

How quickly Oman's controlled process of liberalisation will develop is difficult to estimate. However, what is apparent is that the liberalisation of Oman will be a gradual process 'by evolution rather than by revolution' leading to a Western style democracy but with Islamic values at its core. The prospect of universal franchise amongst Oman's citizens, and transformation into a constitutional monarchy, remains a long way off.

The first step toward democratic evolution would be to grant genuine legislative power to the Shura, the Lower House of the Council of Oman, and to permit an increased diversity of political opinion to be represented by candidates for election. His Majesty the Sultan has much to ponder if he is to promote a moderate evolution toward democracy at a pace sufficient to satisfy his subjects' aspirations. ■

# INDISPENSABLE LESSONS FROM OMAN: RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

ARTICLE BY ZAHRA BEG



Zahra was an intern at the Society from September 2019 to March 2020. She was given the usual opportunity to visit the Sultanate and conduct her own study: this is her report. The pictures are of the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, Muscat. Zahra is currently working for The Advocacy Team where she supports client work across the UK and EU with research, advocacy and campaign strategies.

Oman is idiosyncratic, shaped by its distinctive history, geographic location and vibrant culture. Although it shares the most widely followed religion with the Arab world, a significant characteristic is the difference regarding the private role of religion in public life. A core aspect of Omani national identity is the anti-sectarian nature of the country as evidenced by the coexistence of groups such as Sunni, Shia and Ibadi Islam as well as with other religious minorities including Christians, Hindus and Buddhists.

This report will examine how Oman is unique in nurturing interfaith tolerance, what drives motivations for passionate Omani identity, the significance of monopolising religious education and how this has prevented extremism. The report will conclude with lessons for the Western world concerning religious space in both private and public life.

## RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

### HISTORY AND TRADITION TOPOGRAPHY

When answering a question on how coexistence is prevalent in Oman, Sheikh Al Muatasim Al Maawali drew my attention to John Wilkinson's description of Oman. "The topography of Oman is perhaps one reason why its people are independent in their religion. Oman, on the eastern side of the Arabian Peninsula, is like an island. On one side the sea, on the other Arabia's Empty Quarter."

This important feature has allowed Oman to flourish as an oasis of peace in a sometimes-volatile neighbourhood. As a seafaring nation, Oman has enjoyed contact with the outside world for countless generations. The country having proximity to East Africa and South Asia has allowed Oman to welcome the sizeable presence of those with ethnic origins from those regions as well as other religions such as Hinduism. Despite the vast control of the Omani empire, stretching from Iran in the north to Mozambique to the south, they did not impose Ibadi tradition.

### IBADI HISTORY

Ibadism, neither Sunni nor Shi'i, emerged from the secession of the al-Muhakkimah (arbitrators) in 657 CE. Ibadis never acknowledged their association with the violent Kharijites who emerged from the moderate Muhakkimah in 64 AH, unlike the widely circulated notion. While extreme Kharijites deemed Muslims with differing views as infidels, Ibadis have distanced themselves from the group. However, misconceptions, even in the Gulf, are still prevalent today in the Muslim world, with some conflating Ibadism with the Kharijite movement. Ibadis, as they believe, have always been present in Oman since their conversion to Islam during the time of the Prophet.

Besides being known for tolerance a characteristic of Ibadi tradition is how they choose their leader. Ibadis believe that their Imams should be chosen, not by dynastic succession but based on their spiritual and political skills through selection by consultation. This demonstrates the shura method and how Oman has been practising democratic



methods before a more legal form was taken under the rule of HM Sultan Qaboos. Many compliment Ibadism as the cause for Oman's success in overcoming sectarian tensions.

Another strength of Ibadi tradition is that there has not been fragmentation in reform compared to regional neighbours such as the Sunni/Shia split in Yemen from Al Shawkani against Shi'i Zaydism and the huge break in Sunnism in Saudi Arabia such as the Asharis and Wahhabi offshoot deeply entrenched in Muslim countries today.

### SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS

With Oman's long dynasty and tradition, this has shaped policy that we see today present in the country. Once HM Sultan Qaboos assumed his leadership in 1970 he began to travel around Oman for face-to-face dialogues in order to meet people and ask them personally about their concerns. The late Sultan made sure that steps to modernity were taken slowly in order for the country to seamlessly transition under his father's rule to his own. By cultivating friendships with all, other countries trust Oman as HM has characterised the country to be synonymous as a respected and reliable intermediary.

### RELIGIOUS EDUCATION 1980S CONTEXT

A notable aspect of Oman's religious education is the emphasis on Islamic values generally without accentuating difference among sects. In the 1980s, the Gulf was vulnerable to radical ideologies. The Dhofar War just ended, Iran was in the throes of its Islamic revolution and Saudi Arabia was recovering from the siege of Mecca of 1979. The latter resulted in the Saudi rulers exerting a tighter hold on their religious ideology to assert themselves as the protectors of the two Holy Mosques.

### RELIGION FOR THE PUBLIC

Once the office of the Grand Mufti of Oman was founded in 1974 all religious scholars, who were historically independent, were now under the Mufti's guidance. The Ministry of Education was also brought under government supervision, being responsible for the religious studies aspect in public schools. The Omani government decided to change the educational curriculum of Islamic studies and in turn, make it more cultural than religious and focus on basic principles of Islam rather than preferring one tradition.

With the establishment of the Ministry of Endowments & Religious Affairs in 1997, it became solely responsible for the regulation of khutbahs (sermons), appointment of imams and religious instruction at schools as well as the supervision of non-Muslim religions. Mosques are supervised in Oman as imams are trained by the Ministry of Endowments & Religious Affairs and for Friday prayers the same khutbah is shared by all mosques in Oman. To avoid radicalism and extremism, political issues are not mentioned in the khutbah.

The khutbahs in Oman are popular enough in that they are livestreamed as well as the transcript being available online (mara.gov.om) for people to download and used in other Arab countries such as Iraq and Jordan for their own Friday prayers. One observation is that Sunnis/Shi'is and Ibadis pray in the same mosques despite having differences in their prayer stances. Essentially it is a taboo in Oman to ask directly which sect an individual follows.

**EXPORTING IBADISM WORLDWIDE**

A global project on religion in Oman, 'Tolerance, Understanding, Coexistence: Oman's Message of Islam', directed by H.E. Sheikh Mohammed Al Mamari, Undersecretary of Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, began in 2010. It has been translated into many languages as the exhibition is taken to non-Muslim countries to explain more about religion in Oman as well as Muslim countries who are not familiar with Ibadism due to its small following.

The exhibition has toured over 37 countries and more than 130 cities worldwide. The exhibition includes a brief history of Oman and the current practice of Islamic philosophy, specifically Ibadism, bringing tolerance and peaceful coexistence to Oman. Interestingly Al Mamari noted that their exhibition is one of the few Islamic ones from a Muslim country who focus on tolerance among all faiths rather than only among the three Abrahamic faiths. Since 2003 the Ministry has been printing an Islamic intellectual publication called Al-Tafahom (mutual understanding) which is published quarterly covering



*Oman's isolated landscape, strong social traditions rooted in history and centralised approach to religious education has successfully prevented extremism.*

issues such as Quranic studies and Islamic civilisation and aims to promote discussion between different religions.

**CASES OF EXTREMISM**

Due to cases of violent extremism in the past, Oman has worked hard to prevent any radical thoughts and actions in the country. For example, there were two cases in the 1990s where two groups (one Shi'i and one Sunni) were arrested and charged with receiving aid from outside. Since then a charitable foundation has been established where only registered charities can participate in charitable work. In 2005, there was a fundamental group (Ibadi) who had opposing ideologies, but they conflicted with the government rather than a network of terrorists. The Omani government's approach to counterterrorism is notably demonstrated by their pledge to major public counterterrorism bodies such as National Counter-Terrorism Committee and the National Committee to Combat Money-Laundering and the Financing of Terrorism.

**LESSONS FOR THE WEST  
ROLE OF THE STATE VS. ROLE OF RELIGION**

Western observers should not perceive religion in a traditional sense in the public of only involving missionaries but rather as an established foundation for guiding principles. The West must learn that religion in Oman is a private affair. There is a clear separation between religion and politics, which helps protect religion from politics, and vice-versa allowing minorities to practise freely. Intertwining the two can lead to heightened tensions as demonstrated by BJP's ethnic-nationalistic nature which is sowing further religious division in India. Further examples include how Western Muslim communities want to build mosques with minarets which can gather criticism from locals as it would change the neighbourhood architecture. In Ibadism, the minaret feature can be overlooked as the most important characteristics in the mosque are the mihrab which indicates the direction of prayer.

**CONCLUSION**

Oman's isolated landscape, strong social traditions rooted in history and centralised approach to religious education has successfully prevented extremism. With global ambitions, Ibadi ideology is being explained not only through exhibitions, which are widely available in a number of translations, but through the interactions of the Omani diaspora abroad and also increasing visitors to the Sultanate. Efforts of HM Sultan Qaboos in broad religious education, instead of a singular Islamic school of thought, has created an encouraging atmosphere of open-mindedness, respect and tolerance in the country. Oman is hence a leading example for Muslims and the world in coexistence and significance of praying together despite sectarian differences and to unite in their shared values instead. ■

I would like to thank the following people who gave me their time to provide valuable information regarding this topic:  
 Sheikh Mohammed Al Mamari  
 Sheikh Aftah Al Rawahy  
 Sheikh Al Muatasim Al-Maawali  
 Sheikh Abdulrahman Al-Salimi  
 Jeremy Jones

# GUINNESS WORLD RECORDS FOR *ESMERALDA* SHIPWRECK PROJECT!

ARTICLE BY DAVID MEARNS

The project to archaeologically excavate the *Esmeralda* shipwreck, a Portuguese Nau in the second exploratory fleet of Vasco da Gama that sank off the coast of Al Hallaniyah Island in 1503, has been awarded Guinness World Records (GWR) in recognition of the early age of two of the most important artefacts recovered from the wreck site.

The first artefact, a small bronze bell, was certified by GWR to be the oldest ship's bell ever discovered. After cleaning and conservation the bell was found to be marked with numerals indicating it was made in 1498, probably the same year as *Esmeralda's* construction. Remarkably this bell was found lodged underneath a large boulder in less than five metres of water. The date of the bell was a key piece of evidence used by archaeologists to confirm the identity and age of the shipwreck.



The second artefact was a copper-alloy disc marked with the Portuguese royal coat of arms and an armillary sphere, known to be the personal emblem used by the King of Portugal during his reign (1495 to 1521). Initially the identity and function of the disc was unknown. However, after a team of specialists from WMG Warwick University travelled to Muscat to scan the bell using a sophisticated 3-D laser measuring system, the disc was found to have a series of gradations confirming it to be a mariner's astrolabe. Owing to the age of *Esmeralda* this disc was confirmed by GWR to be the earliest known mariner's astrolabe in history.

The Sodré astrolabe, named after the

Captain of *Esmeralda*, is absolutely unique amongst the hundred or so mariner's astrolabes recovered to date as it appears to be a transitional instrument between the classic planispheric astrolabe and the heavy open-wheel types that came into use later in the 16th century.

These awards are further recognition of the *Esmeralda* shipwreck project: a landmark project conducted by Oman's Ministry of Heritage and Culture in collaboration with David Mearns of Blue Water Recoveries and his team from Bournemouth University. ■



More detail was reported in the *Society Review* in 2016, 2017 and 2019, and for further reading about the Sodré astrolabe refer to: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1095-9270.12353>

# YOUNG OMANI LAWYERS ON INTERNATIONAL LAW COURSES

ARTICLE BY WADHA AL BADI AND SALIM AL RAWAHI

The Academy of International Law at the Peace Palace in the Netherlands is one of the most prominent international bodies conducting teaching and research in the field of International Law.

Since opening its doors in 1923, thousands of students and practitioners who have a prior grounding in public or private international law from over 100 different nationalities have been able to attend the Academy's courses.

Annual summer and winter courses constitute the Academy's primary activity. The summer courses are organised in two sessions of three weeks each, one focusing on Public International Law and one on Private International Law.

Four young Omani legal practitioners have been able to participate at these prestigious course this Summer. They are from different legal backgrounds, and willing to increase their knowledge and experience through the opportunity to meet great names in the field of international law. This will enhance their ability to work on national and local contributions to benefit the legal communities in Oman, and engage with related strategic directives of the future vision of Oman 2040, concerning enhancing Omanis human capabilities in the fields of legislation and the judicial sector.

We, Wadha and Salim, were participants in the Public International Law course in



Wadha Al Badi



Salim Al Rawahi



the first three weeks of July, followed to mid-August by Reem Al Hamadani and Abulkarim Al Balushi as participants in Private International Law.



Reem Al Hamadani



Abulkarim Al Balushi

We are truly grateful for the generous support made by The Anglo-Omani Society for our participation on this year's Summer Courses at the The Hague Academy of International Law.

Three intensive weeks listening to the courses from the some of the most prominent experts of public International law was an enriching experience for the whole three weeks for both of us. We were particularly impressed by the quality of the courses given and the enthusiasm of the teachers in teaching their subjects; learning of new branches of international law from the International Law on cyber-security to the Law on International Watercourses.



The summer course of public international law included a general subject and six special subjects, as follows:

**LIABILITY AGGRAVATED IN CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL LAW:**

This course discusses responsibility in contemporary international law, and it should be noted here that we are talking about the obligations of states, not persons.

**THE EXTRA-TERRITORIAL USE OF FORCE AGAINST NON-STATE ACTORS:**

Professor Taldi talked in this course about the use of force against any country that is not a member of the United Nations, and just as the title of the course is interesting, its content is undoubtedly exciting. The bottom line is that it is not permissible to use force even on countries that have not joined the United Nations as members except in special cases such as a request from a threatened state for assistance.

**INTERNATIONAL INVESTMENT LAW WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF PUBLIC INTERNATIONAL LAW:**

There is no doubt that trade constitutes an important element of global communication and international convergence, hence the importance of this course to address the most important points about international investment law.

**INTERNATIONAL CYBER SECURITY LAW:**

This topic is no less important than the previous topics. Rather, it may be the most prominent topic in our present time, as technology surrounds us from every direction. This topic is of importance at national and international level.

**THE PRINCIPLE OF IURA NOVIT CURIA IN INTERNATIONAL JUDICIAL AND ARBITRAL PROCEEDINGS:**

The course addressed the core of the adjudicative deliberation process by international courts and tribunals through analysis of the principle of *iura novit curia* (the court knows the law – so the parties to a dispute do not need to plead or prove the law that applies to their case).

The principle was initially presented as one of the cornerstones of domestic judicial proceedings worldwide. However, its relevance and configuration vary in individual domestic jurisdictions, primarily between Civil law and Common law jurisdictions.

**THE EVOLUTION OF THE LAW OF INTERNATIONAL WATERCOURSES:**

This course which was lectured by Stephen C McCaffrey is about human uses of fresh water, and the evolution of the Law of International Watercourses in specific areas, Navigation on Nature's Highways in a Forested Land, and Non-Navigational Uses for water, citing various cases.

**AND LASTLY, THE GENERAL COURSE: INTERNATIONAL LAW AS A BODY FROM PRIVATE LAW & PUBLIC LAW:**

This enriched our knowledge about the system of international law, sources of international law, the relation between domestic law and international law, subjects of international law, international responsibility, dispute settlement, the use of force, law of armed conflicts, and effectiveness of international law.

In conclusion, we truly enjoyed the access to so much knowledge of public international law. We hope the second group had the same enriching experience. We look forward to using the knowledge gained in our future career paths, and we will plan to share this knowledge with law students and junior practitioners.

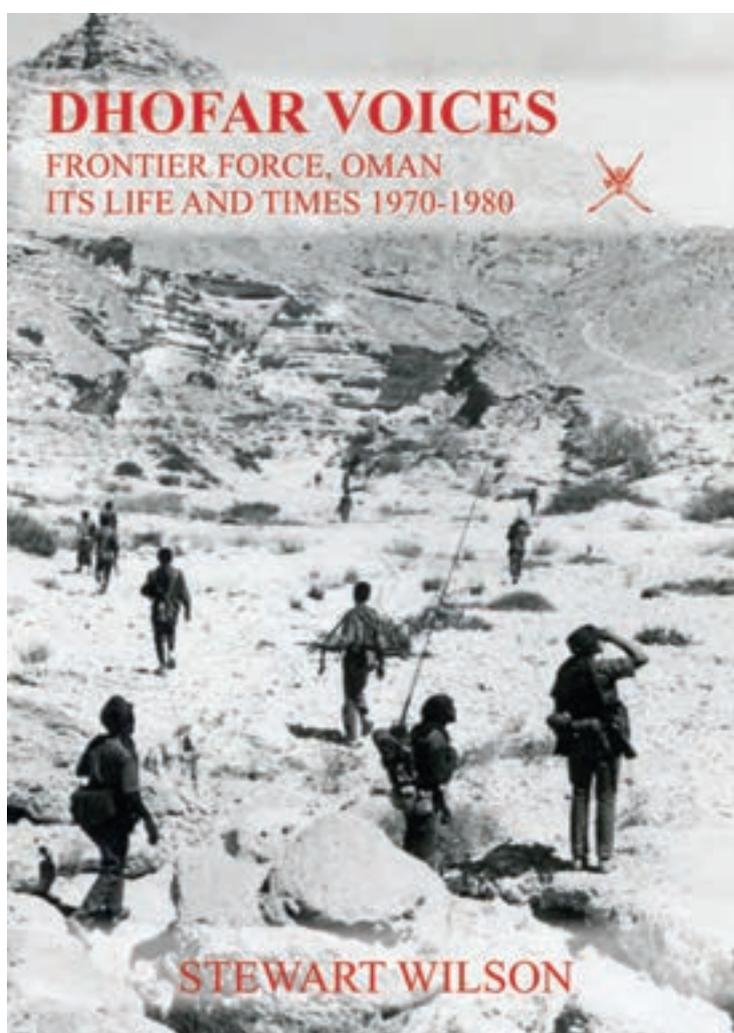
Finally, as Oman's future vision focusses on enhancing the legislation and laws ecosystem, we think such programmes will help participants to gain a better understanding of the laws, so that they can assist the Omani authorities creating efficient legal solutions. ■

# BOOK REVIEWS

## DHOFAR VOICES

*By Stewart Wilson, 2021, Baskerville Press, £35 on application to [dhofarvoices@gmail.com](mailto:dhofarvoices@gmail.com)*

A review by John McKeown



Wilson's book is about one Baluch regiment, the Frontier Force (FF), and its activities in the decade following the accession of HM Sultan Qaboos in 1970. It also describes the place of Baluchis in the Sultanate following historic Omani sovereignty over the Mekran area now in Pakistan and other possessions around the Indian Ocean and the Gulf.

The genesis of FF was a few dozen Baluch from the old Sultan's guard force. Its rapid build-up by the first CO, Vyvyan Robinson, began by selecting Baluch immigrants in the Emirates and

dropping them at the border to be picked up by truck or taken by dhow round the coast. Subsequent recruiting trips to Baluchistan raised the rest.

The first deployment of FF was along the Hornbeam Line, the continuous wire barrier reinforced with anti-personnel mines, 50km long from the sea over the jebel to the desert. "It was constructed over the most difficult terrain and within shooting distance of a much-aggrrieved enemy; it effectively sealed off the transit of men and materiel from the PDRY to Central and Eastern Dhofar."

Wilson describes the early FF as inadequately trained with few British officers (therefore without proper means of controlling artillery and air), poor administration and discipline problems. Deploying recruits without proper training led to problems and casualties: effective capability had to await a new commanding officer.

The new CO, Jonathan Salusbury-Trelawny, Coldstream Guards, took firm grip, with a proper complement of British officers, and raised both the efficiency and operational ability of the regiment. He demonstrated in a small scale operation that a carefully planned all-arms coordinated attack could be mounted and succeed. This was the prelude to a major operation west of Hornbeam, with seven companies and integrated air and fire control. It routed an enemy HQ, inflicted casualties and captured significant enemy weaponry. The Hornbeam Line was no longer under enemy pressure and fire.

FF had earned its spurs, and went on to play a prominent role in the major operations which ended the war in late 1975, with hard fighting against determined enemy. Occasional contacts continued for months after the war, with casualties on both sides, but basically FF, together with two other Baluch regiments and SAF generally, settled down to peace, civil development, and Omanisation with British officers gradually replaced by Omani nationals.

The operations are well described using direct quotations from those who took part – the Dhofar voices – illustrated with maps and personal photographs. ■

# TERRORIST MOVEMENTS AND THE RECRUITMENT OF ARAB FOREIGN FIGHTERS

A History from 1980s Afghanistan to ISIS

By Roger Warren, 2019. London: Bloomsbury, £85.

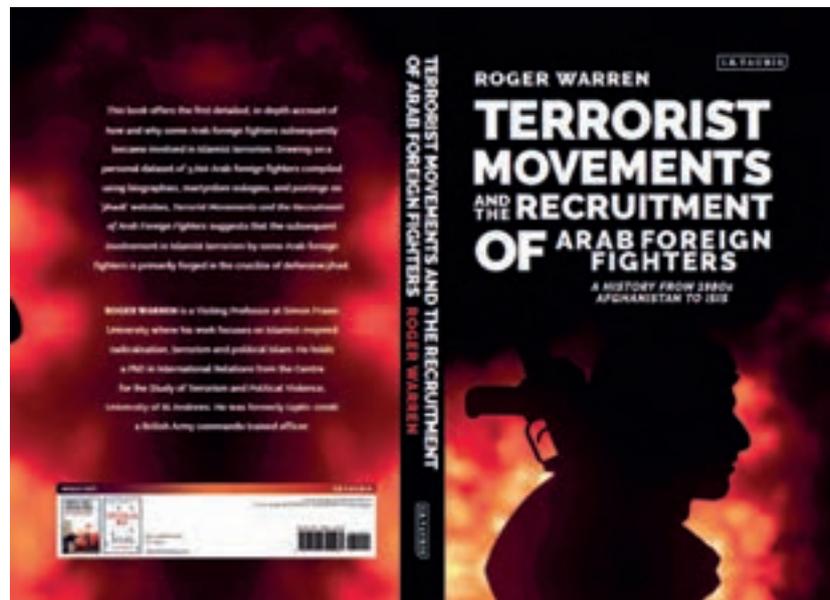
A review by Matt Minshall

This book is the result of seven years research by Roger Warren, a leading scholar of Islamist mobilisations, and now an Assistant Professor for Terrorism, Risk and Security Studies in Vancouver. It is based on primary source material, mostly in Arabic, that explains the personal and group motivations behind Arab foreign fighters who travelled to 1980s Afghanistan and/or Iraq (post-2003) and/or Syria (post-2011).

The author is well positioned to write a book on this subject. In 1989, he mingled with Arab foreign fighters in 'the markets of Peshawar... on the Afghan-Pakistani border, just after the Soviets had withdrawn from Afghanistan' (p. vii), and in 2003 witnessed Arab foreign fighters in Iraq (labelled then as 'technicals'). He served in the Arab world, including Oman, for over ten years and has much experience of Arabic. He holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of St Andrews.

Out of 17 Arab countries Dr Warren establishes the near non-involvement of Omani foreign fighters in Iraq (post-2003) and Syria (post-2011), suggesting the influence of national stability and the mature leadership of the Sultan's government.

Having explored the initial impulses of fighters to travel to conflict locations, the book examines the dynamics that influenced them: some committed to defensive jihad whilst others became involved in Islamist terrorism attacking civilians and non-combatants. The author offers an empathetic account and encourages readers to understand the philosophy of 'it is what they believe, not what we necessarily believe'. The book is provocative and much of it counter-intuitive, and relevant for academics, students, practitioners and those with an interest in foreign fighters.



The major findings were: that Arab foreign fighters in defensive jihad should not necessarily be associated with Islamist terrorists; that self-sacrificial ('martyrdom/suicide') attacks targeting civilians and non-combatants should not necessarily be considered synonymous with attacks that target military forces; and that Arab foreign fighters who subsequently became involved in Islamist terrorist-related activities were largely influenced by situational variables identified by Professor Zimbardo's Lucifer Effect 'when good or ordinary people do bad or evil things (and) maybe traced to factors outside the actor... unique to a given setting.'

The book subtly offers two phases in the lives of Arab foreign fighters. The first is in their home country, and the young volunteers appeared to be largely unremarkable ordinary young men. In the second, in the conflict zone, many were influenced by variables of the Lucifer Effect: experience of close combat

(brutalisation); ideological indoctrination; charismatic leadership; and the demand for obedience. Many Arab and Western foreign fighters from the Syrian insurgency have returned home, and so greater understanding of their initial motivations and their subsequent behaviour in theatre is vital in assessing whether they may pose a threat to their country of residence.

Dr Warren effectively uses a personal dataset of 3,367 Arab foreign fighters – a treasure trove of empirical evidence – to analyse and explain involvement in foreign fighting in clear language. Drawing on social psychology and war studies, he offers a persuasive account of Arab involvement in violent Islamist activities. The book provides rigorous evidence-based research, challenging some basic academic assumptions. ■

*The author and reviewer served in the Oman Artillery on secondment to the Sultan's Armed Forces from the British Army.*

# 'SECRET SEAS' A LABOUR OF LOVE

Paul Flandinette wrote to us about his new book

"I'm really excited to bring you news of 'Secret Seas' – the very first book on Oman's unique underwater world. After seven years of photography and a lot of knocking on doors for sponsorship it is finally a reality. It's been a long journey and a real labour of love. OMRAN Group's sponsorship is making the publication of 'Secret Seas' possible and I'm delighted that HH Sayyida Tania Al Said, President of Environment Society of Oman has written the Foreword.

"I've been collaborating with my good friend, Michel Claerebout, a marine scientist and photographer, also based in Oman, and together we believe we've created a book that will enthral you with some beautiful images and an informative narrative that explains why Oman's seas are so special. 'Secret Seas', published in early August, promises to be one of the most beautiful and revealing books published on Oman's natural world."

The launch offer is shown here, as it was on our website, and although the date for reduced price copies has passed, Paul has confirmed that he is happy to hold the special launch price for AOS members of GBP36.85/OMR20.00 plus shipping where applicable.



Foreword by HH Sayyida Tania Al Said, President, Environment Society of Oman

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Every summer in Oman the southwest monsoon or Khareef, one of the world's most powerful weather systems, transforms the barren landscapes of southern Oman, also known as Dhofar, into a lush and verdant land of plenty for wildlife and plants. More rain falls here in the summer than in the whole of Arabia combined in a year.

The Khareef has a massive effect Dhofar's underwater world. In the Arabian Sea powerful winds and currents combine to draw vast volumes of cold water up from the depths bringing with them enormous quantities of nutrients that support an abundance of marine life. These, in turn, create a unique ecosystem in which tropical and temperate species live side by side - this happens nowhere else on the planet. Meanwhile, in the Sea of Oman, a layer of cold water lying just a few metres below the surface protects corals from the searing summer heat.

The diversity of Oman's marine life is spectacular. Oman is one of the world's most important sea turtle rookeries; four out of the seven species find nesting sanctuaries here. Coral communities teeming with life are home to over 1,600 species of fish and nearly 200 species of corals. Whale sharks, the world's largest fish, make regular seasonal appearances while colourful reef fish glide over vibrant corals and rocky outcrops that hide shy species such as the dramatically beautiful dragon moray eel. The 'macro' world of crustaceans and nudibranchs, meanwhile, is no less fascinating.

In an underwater world, where mysteries still run deep, Secret Seas is brimming with stunning images featuring 150 different species while an insightful narrative explains why Oman's seas are so special.

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## SOME STUNNING REVIEWS HAVE BEEN RECEIVED:

*"Secret Seas' is a wonderful book that showcases the vibrant underwater diversity of Oman. The clash of kelp and coral creates a unique marine biome that this book captures beautifully with striking, colourful imagery. From sea slugs, to turtles, to the largest fish in the sea (the whale shark), this book showcases and lifts the lid on a stunning stretch of coastline that should be celebrated."*

James Lea, CEO, Save Our Seas Foundation

*"The underwater world of Oman is both unique and beautiful, described insightfully thanks to Michel's unrivalled knowledge of the location and so crisply revealed by Paul's stunning imagery. But it is also one of the least known spots in the whole Indo-Pacific – until now. Oman is easier to reach for many than most warm water destinations, but we've been waiting for a book such as 'Secret Seas' to show us what is there. And the answer in these pages is exciting: the richness of these waters, combined with the special mix of species makes this a must see destination. 'Secret Seas' – the perfect introduction."*

Dr. Alex Mustard, one of the world's elite of underwater photographers & published author

*"I have never considered diving in Oman. It has just never come up in conversation before. And yet the opening pages of this book have moved it right up my wish list of diving destinations. The chapters within cover a range of marine life from macro critters to sharks and are packed with excellent underwater images. You can really get a feel for what it is like to dive there. Whether you love looking for tiny crustaceans or you prefer looking out into the blue for pelagics to cruise past, it seems that Oman has something for everyone."*

Caroline Robertson-Brown, Deputy Editor, Scubaverse & Asia Dive Adventure Magazines

# MAJOR GENERAL JEREMY PHIPPS CB WOA1



General Phipps as SBSLO entertaining senior British officers who served in Oman (left to right) Commodore John Gunning, Air Vice-Marshall Sir Erik Bennett, Major General Ken Perkins, Liwa Alec McKenzie, Major General The O'Morchoe, Rear Admiral Hugh Balfour.

Jeremy Phipps, who died on 16 March 2021, was the Senior British Loan Service Officer in Oman 1993-1996, having served with the SAS during the Dhofar War. He was awarded the Sultanate Order of Achievement 1st Class, a new order for the 25th Anniversary year.

General Phipps had a distinguished career as a soldier. He was commissioned into the Queen's Own Hussars, and served with them in Germany, Aden and Northern Ireland. He commanded 11 Armoured Brigade, and was Chief of Staff of the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. He is probably best known as a special forces officer: according to *The Times* he was the first cavalry officer since the Second World War to pass selection and command an SAS troop.

As a young officer, he served with the SAS in Belize and other locations as well as in Dhofar. In 1980, as operations officer of 22 SAS, he was involved in planning the operations – watched on television by millions – which successfully ended the siege at the Iranian Embassy in London with the release of the hostages and the death of the terrorists who had seized the building. He was Director of Special Forces 1989-1993 after commanding 11 Brigade and immediately before his posting to the Sultanate as SBLSO.

Special forces were in General Phipps's blood. His grandfather (14th Lord Lovat) was the founder of the Lovat Scouts in South Africa, his uncle (15th Lord Lovat) was heavily involved in the early SAS (together

with his cousin David Stirling) and led 1st Commando Brigade on D Day. His father, Lieutenant Alan Phipps RN, was killed in action in 1943 ashore at the battle of Leros, and his mother Veronica (daughter of 14th Lord Lovat) later married Brigadier Sir Fitzroy Maclean, another prominent SAS figure in the Middle East and Yugoslavia. Jeremy was educated at Ampleforth and Sandhurst.

After retirement from the Army, General Phipps worked in several security positions, including for a time as Director of Security for the Jockey Club. He was a keen outdoor sportsman, including offshore sailing. *The Times* reported that during the disastrous Fastnet race of 1979 he saved a French crew by cutting a fouled line while being held by the heels over the side of a yacht in a Force 10 storm.

General Phipps's widow is the artist Susan Crawford, who painted portraits of HM Sultan Qaboos during their time in Muscat. He is also survived by their son Jake, the furniture designer, and daughter Jemma, the portrait artist, who is still the youngest artist to have painted HM The Queen, having exhibited her portrait at the Royal Society of Portrait Painters in 2006 when she was in her twenties. ■

# TIM SEVERIN AND THE SINDBAD VOYAGE

One of the modern world's great adventurers, Tim Severin, who built the dhow Sohar, a replica of the ancient Arab sailing ships which navigated the world's oceans more than a thousand years ago, and then sailed her on the perilous 6,000 mile voyage from Oman to Canton in China, died on 18 December 2020.



'Sohar' was built in Sur using only traditional materials and skills and with no modern tools or advantages, from trees personally selected by Severin from the forests of the Malabar coast in India, tied together with more than 600 kilometres of coconut rope: not one single nail was used. The crew of 20, including eight Omani sailors, navigated the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean, Malacca Straits and China Seas using early Arab navigation methods over the seven month voyage.

Tim Severin was born in Assam, India, where his father was a tea planter, and educated at Tonbridge School and Oxford, where he was a geography fellow. His first adventure, as an undergraduate, was an attempt to follow, by motorcycle, Marco



Polo's route across Asia with fellow students including Stanley Johnson, father of the Prime Minister: they made it to the Chinese border, where visa problems ended the trek.

His first major project was the Brendan voyage, which demonstrated that Irish monks in small hand-made oxbite boats could have sailed to the American continent hundreds of years before the Vikings and a thousand years before Christopher Columbus. Meticulous research, starting with the legendary story of St Brendan, led to the careful recreation of an ancient craft using only what would have been available at the time, and courageous sailing across the stormiest waters of the North Atlantic, became the hallmarks of his future life. It was towards the end of this voyage, off the coast of Newfoundland, that Severin pondered what his next adventure was to be... and his thoughts turned to legend of Sindbad the Sailor, 'the most famous sailor of all time, known to every child who has read *The Thousand and One Nights*.'

And so began the preparation of the Sindbad Voyage. After undertaking considerable research in Britain and with the help of the Omani ambassador in London, Severin travelled to the Sultanate in 1979. He consulted widely, and tramped the beaches on the Batinah coast and at Sur, looking at traditional Omani vessels, and their construction.

He was asked by the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture to give a lecture on the Brendan voyage, and within two weeks of his return to home in Ireland was

informed by telegram from the Minister, Sayyid Faisal, that the Sultan had approved a project which would be sponsored by the Ministry to produce an Omani ship sailing under an Omani flag...in time for the tenth National day which was only 15 months ahead. By the Sultan's command, the ship was to be named 'Sohar'.

The full story of how the ship was built in 165 days and sailed to China, including a month becalmed in the Doldrums and the battering of violent seas elsewhere, is told in Severin's book *The Sindbad Voyage*. The Ministry of Heritage and Culture has released *Harvest of Symposium on the Sohar Ship*, which brought together working papers from a symposium organised by the Ministry in December 2016, coinciding with the 35th anniversary of the ship's voyage to China. Libby Purves was the only British reporter at the ship's first trials in 1980, and wrote in *The Times* earlier this year after his death of the 'quiet, determined, scholarly adventurer' who navigated by the stars from Oman to China.

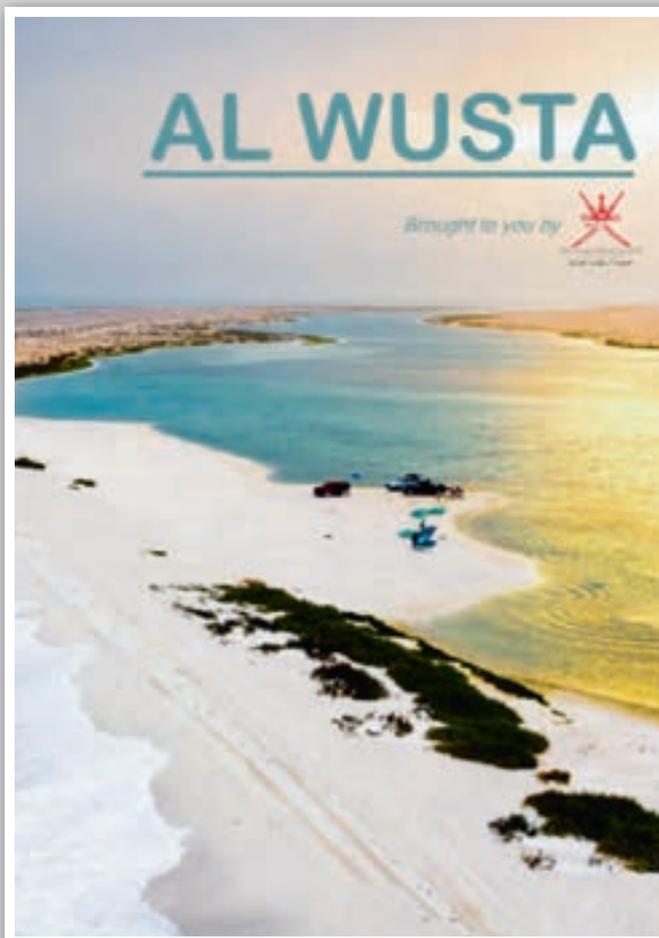
Severin subsequently undertook other projects recreating the exploits of legendary ancient people, their ships, travels and other exploits, and was widely honoured for his achievements. He is survived by a daughter and two grandsons.

The 'Sohar' is now mounted as a museum-piece on the roundabout between the Al Bustan Hotel and Parliament building in Muscat, sadly without a sail. A picture of her there was in the Review in 2016, at which time she was still rigged with sail. ■

## ‘THE GOVERNORATES’ FIFTH EDITION

The fifth edition in ‘The Governorates’ series on our website (see Page 56) was published just in time for the 2021 AOS Review. In this Al Wusta bulletin, we explore Bar Al Hikman, a hub in the global flyway network and a pristine jewel in the Sultanate of Oman. Then we discover Duqm Rock Garden, one of Oman’s lesser known natural wonders, home to hundreds of beautiful, naturally formed rock sculptures. And finally, we dive into a closer understanding of development in Al Wusta’s coastal region of Duqm. The articles are beautifully illustrated – log on and read!

The next Governorate brochure, and the first in the Society’s new year, will focus on Sharqiyah South.



## FOR THE RECORD... SULTAN QABOOS BIN SAID AL SAID

... our obituary in last year’s Review did not list HM Sultan Qaboos’ British post-nominals correctly. The penultimate paragraph should have read as follows:

“His personal relations with the British Royal Family were strong. HM The Queen made a state visit to Oman in 1979, which he returned in 1982. HM The Queen made another state visit to Oman in 2010. He retained property in Britain and made many private visits. HRH Prince Charles and other members of the Royal Family often visited Oman. He was the recipient of the British honorary awards of the GCB, GCMG and GCVO, as well as numerous other national and international high awards.”

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