

REVIEW 2023

THE BRITISH OMANI SOCIETY





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COVER PHOTO:
Ambassador Al Mantheri presents his letter of Credence to the King

- 5 NEW AMBASSADORS AND PRESIDENT
- 6 WELCOME... NEW SOCIETY TRUSTEES AND STAFF
- 8 CHAIRMAN'S OVERVIEW
- 10 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
- 11 HH SAYYID THEYAZIN AT KING'S CORONATION
- 12 HIGH HONOUR FOR MARK EVANS

BUSINESS AND INVESTMENT

- 13 OBBC: PROMOTING THE ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIP
- 14 50 UK COMPANIES IN TRADE MISSION
- 16 UK GROUP FIRST TO INVEST OMAN LOUNGE
- 18 SPACE – AN EXCITING PROSPECT FOR MIDDLE EAST LEADERSHIP
- 22 HIGH LEVEL LONDON BUSINESS CONFERENCE
- 24 MINING AGREEMENT WITH KNIGHTS BAY
- 26 ROYAL GRAMMAR SCHOOL GUILDFORD MUSCAT
- 27 BRITISH EMBASSY CORONATION EVENT
- 28 BRITISH IFTAR IN MUSCAT

LONDON EVENTS

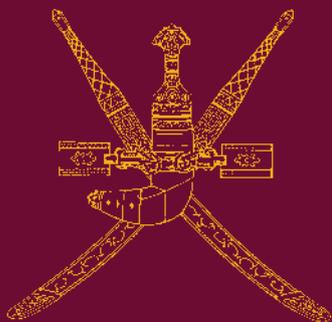
- 29 OMANI IFTAR IN LONDON
- 31 SOCIETY ANNUAL LUNCH
- 34 SOCIETY ALUMNI REUNION
- 37 MTC RECEPTION AND BRIEFING
- 38 OMAN NATIONAL HERITAGE LECTURE AT RGS
- 43 OMAN'S NEW ROSES AT CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW
- 44 CIVIL AID – THE KEY TO PEACE IN DHOFAR
- 49 ECONOMIC PROSPECTS UNDER SULTAN HAITHAM
- 51 ARABIC CLASSES IN LONDON
- 52 TOP NEUROLOGIST LECTURE AND INTERVIEW
- 54 CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY
- 56 HARAT AL-BILAD, MANAH, REVEALED
- 60 EARLY BRITISH WOMEN EXPLORERS OF ARABIA

- 62 THE HEART OF ARABIA EXPEDITION
- 64 UNLOCKING MYSTERIES OF THE OMANI ARABIAN SEA HUMPBACK WHALE POPULATION

GRANT-AIDED PROJECTS

- 67 BENEFITS AND IMPACT: SOCIETY GRANT SCHEME
- 68 THE GAPPIES ARE BACK AT THE SULTAN'S SCHOOL
- 71 GAP YEAR SCHEME: "HOME AWAY FROM HOME"
- 74 MAJOR CROP PESTS IDENTIFIED
- 77 ARABIC LANGUAGE SCHEME AT THE SULTAN QABOOS INSTITUTE IN MANAH
- 80 'BACK TO MANAH' GROUP
- 82 GLOBAL IMPORTANCE OF OMAN BOTANIC EXPEDITIONS IN WESTERN HAJAR MOUNTAINS
- 87 NATIONAL PARK EXCHANGE PROGRAMME
- 92 OUTWARD BOUND: OMAN'S BUSIEST YEAR
- 95 ANGLO-OMANI EXCAVATIONS AT FULAYJ FORT
- 99 GLOBALLY ENDANGERED LAPPET-FACED VULTURES
- 102 SEDIMENT DNA REVEALS OMAN'S ANCIENT ECOSYSTEMS
- 105 KNOWLEDGE SHARING FOR GLOBAL BIODIVERSITY

- 107 BOOK REVIEW: THE ART OF ARABIC COFFEE
- 108 BOOK LAUNCH: LANGUAGE AND ECOLOGY IN SOUTHERN AND EASTERN ARABIA
- 109 PEOPLE'S (NON) PARTICIPATION CONSERVATION: A CASE FROM OMAN
- 111 NAVIGATING OMAN IN LITERATURE
- 113 OUR GROWING SOCIETY LIBRARY
- 114 OBITUARY: COLONEL NIGEL KNOCKER OBE WO WKHM



REVIEW 2023

THE BRITISH OMANI SOCIETY (THE ANGLO-OMANI SOCIETY)



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FROM THE EDITOR

This is my eighth and last Review as Editor. It has been a privilege – though sometimes a frustrating one – to record the activities and achievements of the Society in challenging and changing times: a new Renaissance under a new Sultan, Covid and its effects both social and economic, a new King. I am handing over not only as Editor but as a Trustee and Vice-Chairman of the Society (to three chairmen: Robert Alston, Stuart Laing and Richard Stanford), and wish to record my thanks to my fellow members of the board and to the staff. They have been and are a great team, and I am sorry to leave them, but look forward to continuing as an active member and now a Vice-President of the Society and as a member of the SAF Association committee. One of the greatest pleasures has been to see the increase in younger membership and activities: the Society is helping to create an ever increasing youthful cohort of future leaders and influential citizens who will extend the unique friendship between our two nations... read about them in this year's Review!

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NEW AMBASSADORS AND PRESIDENT

OMANI AMBASSADOR AND SOCIETY PRESIDENT



His Excellency Bader Mohammed Al Mantheri, the Sultanate of Oman's Ambassador to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, was received in audience by His Majesty King Charles III of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Head of the Commonwealth on 16 February 2023, presenting his letters of Credence as Ambassador from the Sultanate of Oman to the Court of St James's.

Ambassador Al Mantheri's diplomatic career began in 1997. He was Ambassador to the Republic of Yemen 2013-2016 and then Ambassador to the Republic of Lebanon 2016-2022. He is married with six daughters and a granddaughter.

Ambassador Al Mantheri has expressed his honour to be representing the Sultanate in the United Kingdom. His main aim is to respect and maintain the strength of the longstanding partnership between the two countries, and his highly successful diplomatic career promises great success in his post.

As the new President of the British Omani Society, he plays a major role in influencing our growth and success, addressing the common interests in its constant developments to advance the education and wider knowledge of the longstanding friendship between the UK and Oman.



BRITISH AMBASSADOR TO MUSCAT

Dr Liane Saunders OBE has been appointed to be British Ambassador to the Sultanate of Oman in succession to Mr William Murray who has retired from the Diplomatic Service.

Dr Saunders has held senior strategy and coordination roles in foreign policy and national security in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and for five years in the Cabinet Office. Her recent assignments include Staff Counsellor, and Strategy Director and Strategic Programmes Coordinator at the FCDO. Dr Saunders coordinated the UK National Security Advisor's Lessons Learning process across Government following the publication of Sir John Chilcot's Iraq inquiry.

A history graduate of Somerville College, Oxford, she had early career postings to Kuwait and Egypt. After experience in South America, she served in Ankara and Northern Iraq mainly on the peace process and in reconstruction and humanitarian assistance. Her London roles include leading the FCO's counter-proliferation work and running its Crisis Centre, as well as work on the Middle East during the Arab Spring.

THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES



COLONEL GORDON ALLEN QGM WKHM(G)

Gordon Allen served as an artillery officer in the British Army for over 30 years. His senior appointments included operational and contingency planning in the Middle East in the Ministry of Defence and as a member of the directing staff at the Führungsakademie der Bundeswehr in Hamburg. Subsequently, he enjoyed ten years working in the financial services and public sectors, two years as COO of Liberata UK and acted as an advisor to Cardiff City Council and the Welsh Assembly Government.

He served in the Sultan's Armed Forces on loan service 1975-1976, and was awarded the WKHM(G) (The Sultan's Distinguished Service Medal) for gallantry in Dhofar. He also holds the Queen's Gallantry Medal for service in Northern Ireland.

He is Chairman of the Sultan's Armed Forces Association, committed to honouring the wish of Oman's leadership that the traditions and ethos of the Association should pass to later generations. There is much common ground in the aspirations and objectives of the Association and the Society, and he is glad to become a Society Trustee and have the opportunity to further the close links.

He is a passionate offshore sailor, married and lives in Shropshire.

EMBASSY SOCIETY BOARD MEMBER

First Secretary Faris bin Jamal Al Khodr is the new representative of the Omani Embassy on the British Omani Society Board. With everyday challenges, he believes in making sure to tackle them and find positive ways to get the best outcomes possible with the help of all the team at the Embassy as well as the Society. He plays an important role in enhancing the partnership and is excited to continue his role in ensuring a successful term.

Faris joined the Sultanate's Foreign Ministry in 2013 after completing his Masters degree in Management in 2012 from one of Malaysia's most prestigious universities, Taylor's University. He served in many departments in the Foreign Ministry throughout his career. He was appointed to the Embassy in London in August 2022 as head of the Political and Economical Section. Faris is recently married: he and his wife, who is a PhD scholar at Imperial College, live in London.



THE STAFF

The Society welcomed two new permanent staff members – Rosa Braune and Alexander Ward – and Intern Asma Ibrahim. We give our thanks and say a fond farewell to Dina Macki, the Society’s Communications Manager for four years, Sarika Breeze our temporary Business Opportunities Manager and Farah Al Zadjali, our previous Intern.



In the middle is Sandra Russell, building receptionist, a full and valued member of the team though strictly not a member of Society staff. Staff members left to right: Neil Coxon, Asma Ibrahim, Rosa Braune and Alex Ward... and yes, they are normally smiling!

ROSA BRAUNE

Our new Communications Manager, Rosa, joined the Society in May. Her previous experience includes leading communications for the A.M. Qattan Foundation’s UK arts project The Mosaic Rooms, Shubbak festival of contemporary Arab culture, and working in the Creative Economy team at the British Council. She has also worked in academia, with research scientists at the University of Cambridge, and with commercial art galleries and auction houses in the UK and New Zealand.

She has an undergraduate degree in Sociology from the University of Nottingham and an MA in Arts Management, specialising in marketing for cultural organisations, from Birkbeck, University of London.

ALEXANDER WARD

Alex joined the Society in March as Business Opportunities Manager/OBBC and is responsible for promoting commercial relationships, developing bilateral trade and investment along with other economic partnerships between Oman and the United Kingdom. He began working life in Corporate Finance within a Fortune 500 global firm.

He graduated from the University of Warwick with a degree in Accounting & Finance and learnt Arabic to intermediate level. He also studied at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul where he learnt Turkish and achieved a 4.0 GPA, Bentley University in Boston where he studied Corporate Finance and Business and at Institut d’études politiques de Paris (SciencesPo) where he studied Business, Economics and Diplomacy.

ASMA IBRAHIM

Asma joined the Society as Intern Management Assistant in January, working initially along-side our previous intern Farah.

Asma graduated from Cambridge with a BA in Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. As a student, she founded Cambridge University Yemen Society, acted as Foreign Affairs Officer at the Law Society and helped organise a charity auction for the Islamic Society. Asma spent her third year in Taipei, studying Mandarin, and focused her dissertation on Taiwan-Saudi relations. She joined the founding team of Al Yamaniah, a bilingual digital platform for female creatives of Yemeni heritage and has been co-director for three years. She worked in education before starting her internship.

AND OUR THANKS AND FAREWELL TO...

We say a huge thank you and **بالتوفيق** to Dina Macki, the Society’s former Communications Manager. Dina is pursuing her culinary projects, including her new Omani cookbook (more on this to come) and blog **dinewithdina.co.uk**, as well as consultancy work. We are very grateful for the huge contribution she has made to the Society over the past four years.

We also say thank you to Sarika Breeze, who finished her stint with us as Business Opportunities Manager in January. Sarika joined the Society as Business Opportunities Manager in 2022, as part of the Society’s renewed focus on the close commercial and economic relationship between Oman and the UK. She previously worked as our Intern Management Assistant from March 2020 to January 2021, and also worked at the Omani British Friendship Association in Muscat from September 2017 until May 2018.

We also say farewell and thanks to Farah Al Zadjali, our Intern who worked at the Society from May 2022 to this January, and is now working in the field of MENA geopolitics. We miss her cheery personality, but are glad she has another position suited to her interest in International Relations.

The British Omani Society in 2023

CHAIRMAN'S OVERVIEW

REPORT BY RICHARD STANFORD

I am pleased to report the progress your Society has made in the past 12 months. I would like to thank each and every trustee, member of staff and volunteer for their unwavering commitment and dedication to the Society and our work. It is the collective efforts of all which has enabled us to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the past year with such success.

We have adopted hybrid ways of working which have enabled better participation in events, from meetings to lectures. In this way we have enabled more people to attend our lectures and classes with people from the UK, Oman and far beyond. This flexibility has proven invaluable, enabling us to increase our reach and provide greater value to our members based out of London, and particularly those resident in Oman.

AMBASSADORS

We were delighted to welcome His Excellency Bader Mohammed Bader Al Mantheri as our new President and Omani Ambassador in London from February of this year. We are also pleased to congratulate Dr Liane Saunders on assuming the role as His Majesty's Ambassador in Muscat in June 2023.

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

It is with sadness that we bid farewell to Brigadier John McKeown as Vice Chairman and Trustee. He has served as a Trustee and Vice Chairman during an impressive nine and eight years respectively and he leaves to enjoy some more time with his family and

grandchildren. Throughout his tenure John has made invaluable contributions to the Society and most of our membership will certainly know him as the Editor of the Annual Review for the past eight years. He has also provided a very helpful link between the Society and the Sultan's Armed Forces Association as a trustee of both.



Presentation to your editor!

I am extremely grateful to him for his support in helping me to settle in as Chairman, providing much needed continuity and for his unstinting work on behalf of all members to so many aspects of our work. He has been exceptionally dedicated, hardworking and he has a long and deep understanding of Oman developed since the early days of the Dhofar war. On behalf of the whole Society, I would like to thank John for his unstinting support. I am pleased to announce that Chris Breeze has accepted the position of Vice Chairman to replace John.

I am also pleased to extend a warm welcome to our new Trustee, Colonel (Retd) Gordon Allen QGM WKhM(G). Gordon is the current Chairman of the Sultan's Armed Forces Association and brings with him a wealth of experience to our board. We are honoured to have Gordon as part of our board, and we look forward to further strengthening the ties between our organisations.

It was with great sadness that we lost one of our Vice Presidents, Colonel Nigel Knocker, in February this year. Nigel had a very long and distinguished association with

Chairman addressing the AGM, with Robin Traill, Company Secretary.



Oman dating back to 1971. He was a former Chairman of the of the Sultan's Armed Forces Association and stood in as Chairman of our Society from 2012-2015. Nigel was a great help to me when I was in Oman and also when I took over as Chairman. He was very involved right up to his death and he will be remembered by many of the Gap Year alumni since he was involved in their selection for many years. Nigel died at the age of 92 and was young at heart to the very end. His contribution to the Society, and our younger generation, is a wonderful example to us all. His obituary by Robert Alston is on page 114 of the Review.

LECTURES AND EVENTS

We have continued to offer a varied line-up of lectures and events to our members. We held our Annual Lunch last October, at the Cavalry & Guards Club, with over 120 members and guests. We were honoured to have HE Eng Saeed bin Hamoud al Ma'awali, the Minister of Transport, Communications, and Information Technology from Oman, as our distinguished guest of honour.

Another excellent event in the calendar was the annual Oman Natural Heritage Lecture held at the Royal Geographical Society in November, spearheaded by Nigel Winsler. We continue to support this lecture series, and are pleased to report it was a hugely successful event with the attendance of both British and Omani Royals, making it a memorable experience for a packed lecture theatre. A full account of the event can be found in the Review. There have been numerous other notable talks which are covered here also.

We have reintroduced alumni reunions, inviting participants from the Gap Year, Arabic language and Internship schemes. This was a resounding success with people gathering in Sackville Street from groups as far back as 11 years ago. It is testament to the excellent work of Elisabeth Kendall and Nigel Knocker in selecting such strong candidates for the Arabic Language and Gap Year Schemes respectively that we gathered a vibrant group of people who have gone on to hold a very interesting range of jobs. An unintended consequence has been that the Schemes have led to two marriages!

THE OMAN BRITISH BUSINESS COUNCIL

The Oman British Business Council (OBBC) has remained committed to promoting information about investment and trade opportunities in Oman to British investors and businesses. Following the success of the New Energy Conference last July, we supported a British trade mission to Muscat last October and joined the Omani embassy in arranging an investor event at the University of West London on 19th January. We supported an event this summer being arranged by Bloomberg sponsored by the Oman Investment Authority, Oman Air and others.

In the past year, we have welcomed 14 new corporate members to the OBBC, strengthening our network. We have also hosted exclusive briefings. e.g. we joined forces with the Omani Economic Association to hold a talk on 'Oman's Economic Prospects Under Sultan Haitham' in the Spring.

We bade farewell to Sarika Breeze in January and in her place as the Business Opportunities Manager we have been fortunate to welcome Alexander Ward to the position in March. With his finance background and expertise in promoting commercial relationships, we are confident in his ability to further the economic partnerships between the Sultanate of Oman and the United Kingdom.

PROGRAMMES AND GRANTS

Our commitment to educational programmes remains unwavering. The Gap Year Scheme has continued to generate exemplary feedback from Sultan's School and those on the Scheme, highlighting the outstanding qualities of our participants and the opportunities it provides. Similarly, the Manah Arabic Language Scheme, guided by Elisabeth Kendall, continues to provide excellent opportunities for people to improve their Arabic skills and we received highly positive feedback from both the students and the school.

Our online Arabic classes, taught by the dedicated Mohammed Abu Amara, have continued to flourish, with the summer term concluding in late July and

preparations underway for the upcoming term in September. Furthermore, we have piloted Omani Dialect classes, catering to both beginners and intermediate/advanced students. These initiatives further strengthen our educational connection with Oman and prove particularly useful for members living or working in Oman.

We have supported a number of other endeavours, studies and research through our grant schemes which all contribute to meeting our charitable objects. More details of the grants awarded can be found in Jamie Bowden's article in the Review. Our grants budget this year was £100,000 and the Grants Committee awarded £94,157 of this total. We awarded grants for new projects, renewed our support for previous projects and have also been actively forging closer relations with Omani students in the UK by supporting their events.

The Committee is also actively trying to identify further projects we might be able to support, particularly where there is an overlap between our objectives and Oman's Vision 2040.

IFTAR

Maintaining our connection with the Cultural Attaché and the Omani Student Council, we hosted an Iftar this Ramadan, bringing together Omani students from across the UK, including people travelling from as far as Dublin and Edinburgh. It was our great pleasure to host such an important gathering in Sackville Street.

34 SACKVILLE STREET

Members will recall the challenge we have had with our building following significant electrical faults in the street. I am very pleased to report that following herculean efforts by Neil Coxon and Martyn Bishop work has finally started on repairing the heating and cooling system in the building. We are told these should be complete by September which should lead to a more comfortable winter with some heating. Neil and Martyn have been tenacious in securing a resolution with the insurers, building managers and contractors. Plans are also underway to refurbish the third floor before marketing it in search of a suitable tenant.

FINANCES

Members will note from the financial report the significant drop in rental revenue, our primary source of income. We are looking at ways of improving the rental situation but that will take resource for refurbishment. As a result of the financial position, the Trustees have taken the decision to suggest to members that the annual membership donation should rise to £25 and we will suggest eligible members complete a gift aid form to generate further revenue from HMRC for the Charity.

STAFF

I would like to thank all our staff members who have done so much to further the aims of the Society and ensure we keep a varied, interesting and rewarding programme going. We said goodbye to Dina Macki in April who was our Communications Manager for almost 4 years. I would like to

thank her for her immense contributions during over this period including doing so much during lockdowns to take the Society online, provide webinars and podcasts and generally keeping interest in the Society going through challenging times.

We also said goodbye to our intern, Farah Al Zadjali, in February. We are very pleased to welcome Asma Ibrahim as the Society's intern who started in January and Rosa Braune as our new Communications Manager who started in May. Our Director Neil Coxon had a very successful visit to Oman in March during which he discussed a number of emerging opportunities for the Society to provide greater support and to strengthen our connections in Oman.

NAME OF THE SOCIETY

The trustees have recommended to members that our name is changed to the British Omani Society to capture better those we represent. This aligns with the

description of the Society in the Royal Decree in Oman which followed the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement in 2019 between Oman and the UK. Members will have the opportunity to vote on this name change at the AGM.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it has been a strong year for the Anglo-Omani Society. Through the collective dedication and determination of our members, staff, and board, we have continued to meet our charitable objects and will continue to do so in the future.

As we look toward the future, I am confident that the Society will continue to thrive, strengthening the ties between the United Kingdom and the Sultanate of Oman, fostering educational and cultural exchanges, and advancing economic partnerships. I extend my deepest appreciation to each and every one of you for your unwavering support and commitment. ■

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING



Gathering before the start of the meeting.

This year's AGM saw the adoption of some important changes, notably the name change to British Omani Society. This not only describes better our membership, which is of course from all countries of the UK and not just England, but is also an accurate version of what the Society has been called in Arabic anyway – **البريطانية**

العمانية. The change had been approved unanimously by the trustees and was endorsed overwhelmingly by the members who attended or sent proxy votes to the AGM – a grand total of more than 50 members.

A further resolution approved at the AGM was to increase the annual

membership subscription from £10 to £25, the first change in ten years. This is one of the measures the trustees are taking to mitigate the serious drop in Society income caused by Covid and its continuing effects. The introduction of a Gift Aid Scheme is a further way of increasing income, but in this case with no additional cost to members.

Those able to be at Sackville Street enjoyed a sociable gathering over a buffet lunch, the meeting itself and a film show afterwards – Bettany Hughes' *"Treasures of the World – Oman"*.

The new title of the British Omani Society is used throughout our annual Review, except where it was appropriate to leave the old title in context. We have perhaps anticipated the completion of the formal legal process under which approval of the name change is needed from both Companies House and The Charity Commission, which could take some weeks to complete. Your editor takes this step because we consider the change not to be contentious. ■

HH SAYYID THEYAZIN AT KING'S CORONATION

His Highness Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham Al Said attended the Coronation of King Charles III and conveyed the greetings of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. He was accompanied at both the King's Pre-Coronation Reception for overseas dignitaries at Buckingham Palace and at the Coronation itself at Westminster Abbey by Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr Al Busaidi.





HIGH HONOUR FOR MARK EVANS

HM Sultan Haitham bin Tarik
has conferred the Honorarium

Medal on Mark Evans, Executive Director of Outward Bound
Oman, in recognition of his efforts in upgrading the status of
Outward Bound Oman, earning it its international reputation.

The medal was presented by Sayyid Khalid Hilal Al Busaidi, Minister of the Diwan of the Royal Court, when he received Evans at his office. The Order is unusual in that it has the title in both Arabic and English. We are proud to say that Mark Evans is a long-standing member of our Society, and several articles by him are elsewhere in the Review. ■

ROYAL LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Her Highness Sayyida Basma Al Said was on the front cover of London-based *Global Women* magazine in July. The cover was entitled 'A Royal Leading By Example' referring to HH Sayyida Basma's role as a mental health expert and advocate. She was invited as a guest speaker to the Global Women Summit 2023 held over 15 and 16 July in London.

Her speech was on mental health and wellbeing, her area of expertise. The focus was on the art of acceptance and the importance of control. She explored questions such as when it is and isn't appropriate for one to accept certain situations and whether we actually need to be in control in certain situations.

HH Sayyida Basma's trip also coincided with a meeting for the Diana Award which has the mission is to empower young people to lead change for the better in the world through initiatives which unlock their potential, inspire action and create opportunities. She is a judge on the Diana Award panel.



OBBC: PROMOTING THE ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIP

ARTICLE BY SIR SHERARD COWPER-COLES KCMG LVO, OBBC CHAIR

The Omani-British Business Council (OBBC) is a sub-committee of the AOS, led by trustees Oliver Blake, Chris Breeze, Richard Stanford and me.

Since the last edition of the Review, the OBBC has continued its work delivering a programme of activity promoting the close economic and commercial relationship between the Sultanate of Oman and United Kingdom; and developing trade, investment and other economic partnerships between the two countries.

In September, we were delighted to welcome Arwa Al Balushi to her new role as Commercial and Investment Attaché at the Omani Embassy in London. Arwa was previously at the Oman Investment Authority managing international cooperation and taking care of foreign direct investors. We are pleased to be working together to support the trade and investment relationship between our two countries.

Building on the New Energy event that OBBC hosted at the Mansion House in July 2022, a trade mission to Oman took place in Muscat in October. OBBC worked with members of the UK Department for International Trade team in Muscat to identify potential attendees. Roughly twelve companies flew from the UK and about 50 UK companies attended, mostly via GCC-based representatives. Speakers included HMA, HE Qais Al Yousef, and Sir

Alan Duncan (representing AOS), and senior staff from PDO, OQ, Petrofac, Sohar International Bank and others attended.

In January, the University of West London hosted the first Oman-Britain Conference. Dr Malak Hamdan organised the event which provided an opportunity for UK businesses to meet key investors from Oman and potentially widen their market prospects, form investment partnerships and trade relations, giving direct access to key decision makers and investors from Oman.

The new Omani Ambassador was in attendance, and delegates heard from representatives of the Omani government about major new investment opportunities and incentive schemes for British businesses. Baroness Symons (in her capacity as Chair of the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce) and Saleh Zakwani, the Chair of OBFA, made the introductory remarks and I chaired a panel with representatives of the Commerce Ministry, Credit Oman and Sohar International Bank as OBBC Chair.

On 6 July, Bloomberg hosted an event on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in GCC at their offices in London and online. Discussions during the day looked at what makes the GCC region so attractive for investment, as well as analysing various factors fuelling the region's rise, including the state-of-the-art supply chain infrastructure in countries like Oman.

The event gave opportunities for those attending to identify specific opportunities for collaboration and investment, and I was delighted to take part in a panel discussion on shaping the future through FDI. Later



that day, OBBC hosted a drinks reception at Sackville Street with high-level Omani guests and further networking opportunities.

And finally, at the end of last year, Sarika Breeze finished in her role as interim Business Opportunities Manager and in March we welcomed Alex Ward to the role. Alex and the team have been developing some exciting new additions to the OBBC membership offer and we will be updating OBBC members on these soon. ■

On 6 July, Bloomberg hosted an event on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in GCC at their offices in London and online.

50 UK COMPANIES IN TRADE MISSION

ARTICLE BY ALEX WARD

After last Summer's Society/OBBC Mansion House Conference on New Energy in Oman, the OBBC worked with members of the Department for International Trade team in Muscat to identify companies from the event guest list to form a follow-up trade mission to the Sultanate in the Autumn. The result was that about 50 UK companies attended. Most used their GCC-based representatives, but delegations from a dozen companies flew direct from the UK.



Michael Eyley, Director of Trade & Investment at the British Embassy Muscat.

Oman is striving to diversify its revenue streams from oil and gas to other areas stipulated in Vision 2040. These other areas are focal points for inward investment and have been carefully selected through considering the domains that Oman could have a competitive advantage amongst other countries in the region. Adding to the competitive advantage, Oman has a habit of getting actions accomplished at a fast rate adding further incentive to potential investors.

In addition, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is a critical element required for growing new sectors, with the UK being the principal foreign direct investor into Oman leading the way for successful partnerships for many years to come. Oman is keen on having open markets as opposed to closed markets due to the damaging effect they have on growth which was illustrated in the 1980s in some of the countries of Latin America.

That was the rationale, with the support of the OBBC and DIT, for identifying potential investors who attended the New

Energy summer conference (See the Review 2022, pp20-23) to join the follow up trade mission organised in Muscat in October.

Oman is keen on enticing FDI and is constantly considering the needs and desires of potential and current investors. Therefore, the Sultanate announced the opening of the Invest Oman Lounge – described further elsewhere in this Review – designed as a one-stop-shop for investment where everything the investor needs is in very close proximity. The idea behind this is to further develop investment and to provide an increased level of support for investors.

In addition to the Invest Oman Lounge, Oman announced changes in legislation to benefit overseas entities when investing, aimed to boost FDI. Furthermore, other projects within the GCC region such as the announcement of plans to connect Sohar on Oman's northern coast and Abu Dhabi via a train network in order to increase logistics within the Gulf region increase interest and reaction. Negotiations on the

UK-GCC Free Trade Agreement are reported to be gaining momentum which, if approved, could increase trade by up to 16% according to recently released government studies.

The UK has been a long supporter of Oman, especially large multinational firms based in the UK. These firms provide large amounts of FDI into the Sultanate and in recent studies, make up over 50% of all FDI into the country, larger than any other nation. Not only does this benefit Oman through having the capital to build infrastructure and to stay ahead of the competitors but it also shows confidence which can be transferred to entities that are considering investing in Oman.

Other countries show interest in investing in Oman through organising conferences, however the UK is leading the way when it comes to putting words and plans into action. Furthermore, the job climate in Oman could be greatly improved using the support of the UK in order to cultivate the employment market, making it appropriate for the likes of Omani graduates, skilled workers and vocational employees in Oman.

Moreover, the UK is a global leader in the technological domain and the UK government is only too keen on keeping and progressing this accolade. Given this, there is a major opportunity for both nations to benefit from technological expertise and investment through the advancement of technological areas that Oman is seeking to develop. These include electrolysers, which are used in the



Sir Alan Duncan

Delegates had an opportunity to present their services which went well, and we heard that productive meetings between attendees and local companies were held.

production of hydrogen which uses electrolysis to split the hydrogen and oxygen atoms found in water molecules. Moreover, battery technology and wind turbine blades are all areas that the UK can support Oman in the near future in order to show support for vision 2040 and also a green and eco friendly future for the globe.

The event in question was very popular both with those in Oman and the GCC and with those going direct from the UK. The British Omani Society/ Omani British

Business Council are always striving to go above and beyond what has already been achieved by further enhancing FDI into Oman and this event, combined with the New Energy in Oman conference in particular, gave many new UK firms a unique insight into investing in Oman and potential opportunities available.

Due to its significance, it was no surprise that the event welcomed a number of senior ministers and business leaders. His Majesty's Ambassador spoke on matters concerning the trade mission along with His Excellency Qais Al Yousef and Sir Alan Duncan (representing the British Omani Society) who all gave a detailed and valued insight to those who attended. Senior staff from PDO, OQ, Petrofac, Sohar International Bank and others attended and spoke.

Feedback was very good, and the content was focussed. Delegates had an opportunity to present their services which went well, and we heard that productive meetings between attendees and local companies were held. DIT Muscat and the Commercial and Investment Attaché at the Omani Embassy in London, together with the OBBC, are leading on support for events going forward. ■



HE Qais bin Mohammed Al Yousef

UK GROUP FIRST TO INVEST OMAN LOUNGE

NEW UNIFIED WINDOW FOR INVESTORS AND INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES

ARTICLE BY ALEX WARD



A select group of business professionals from the United Kingdom was invited to the launch of the new Invest Oman lounge, organised by the Omani Embassy in London in cooperation with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP).

The group of business representatives travelled to Muscat where the government showcased the new facility. The zone makes up part of Invest Oman and its mission is to increase Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into Oman and bring prosperity to the investors. Those who were invited represented various industries including mining, technology, agriculture, services and logistics, all of which are directly relevant to current investment opportunities in Oman.

The Government of Oman is keen to attract foreign investors, particularly from the UK, and have prepared all of the necessary information required by potential investors. The lounge is designed to promote investment

opportunities in the country through a one-stop-shop system. The system is designed to accompany any potential investor from the original investment proposal to the investment itself and answer any questions there might be.

Moreover, the Government has made changes to policies to attract further investment from overseas. For example, it announced that commercial registration fees for new companies being set up in Oman would be reduced, making the proposition more attractive to potential businesses. In addition, measures have been introduced to reduce the complexity of starting a business alongside tax incentives, all of which augment the attractiveness of Oman as an investment destination.

Oman is a special case for overseas investors, situated on the south-eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula and on the crossroads of Asia, Africa and Europe. Its location makes it easier for businesses located there to access more markets worldwide. Delegates from other countries have also been invited since the UK delegation visit, aiming to boost FDI into Oman, a vital aspect of Oman’s Vision 2040.

Ahmed Salim al Rasbi, Director General of the Investment Services Centre at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, noted that Oman is a leading destination for British investors and that British companies’ investment in Oman touched \$23.5 billion in 2022, up by 9.3 per cent compared to the figures for 2021. He pointed out that this partnership had expanded in the past few years and covered several sectors, notably oil and gas, technology and infrastructure. The volume of trade exchange between Oman and the UK grew up to US\$362.3mn by October 2022 – 20.3 per cent higher than the figures of the corresponding period in 2021.

The British delegation met a number of Omani entrepreneurs to discuss partnership opportunities.

OPENING OF INVEST OMAN LOUNGE

The British visit followed a few days after the formal inauguration of the Invest Oman Lounge under the auspices of Sultan bin Salem al Habsi, Minister of Finance, in the presence of Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, and a number of Royal Family members, ambassadors of various countries, and other business dignitaries.

Conceived as a unified window for integrated services to provide all the required assistance to investors and offer investment opportunities that exceed RO 1 million, the Lounge makes available information about pathways to project localisation, the investment environment, facilities and services provided by various agencies, target sectors for investment, expected timetables for processing of proposals, and service level agreements reached with the various permitting agencies whose approvals are required as part of the overall process.

Twenty Government and private entities are represented on the premises, including the relevant ministries, a commercial bank,

telecom company, legal advice and accreditation office. A portal has been established to serve as an electronic platform for the benefit of investors (<https://investoman.om>), which provides key information covering investment in logistics, manufacturing, education, technology, information technology, health, circular economy, mining, fisheries, renewable energy, agricultural wealth and tourism.

A call centre in the Hall handles investor inquiries and, in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its representatives in the hall, will enable links with the embassies of Oman across the world.

Oman Observer reported that Shaikh Hilal bin Abdullah al Hinai, Project Head, said it was a matter for pride for everyone who contributed to this project across various stages, of planning, implementation and operation. Abbas bin Irshad al Lawati, CEO of Invest Oman, said the platform enabled an integration with all investment procedures, private and Government, the Oman Investment Authority, National programme for Investment and Export Development (Nazdaher), investment promotion at MoCIIP and other entities. ■



Ahmed Salim al Rasbi addresses the British delegation. Arwa Abdul Rahim Abdulla Al Balushi, Omani Commercial Attaché in London, is to his right.

Julie Holt-Jones, Co-Founder and Executive Director of www.Space4Sight.com, has 30 years of unusually wide Space domain experience having worked for ESA, NASA and space industries in the UK, Germany, Spain, India, Singapore and Taiwan. She was Flight Director for a complex international satellite programme before deploying her experience as a consultant. She has deep expertise in all aspects of Spacecraft operations, Space Applications and technologies. She was educated at Kent University, the School of Oriental and African Studies and the UK Institute of Directors; she has a degree in Physics and is a Fellow of the Royal Aeronautical Society. She has visited Oman many times.

SPACE – AN EXCITING PROSPECT FOR MIDDLE EAST LEADERSHIP

A PAPER FROM SPACE4SIGHT
SPACE CONSULTANCY AND PARTNER FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

Two most exciting careers children aspire to are fireman or astronaut. Whilst the former has perceived danger, urgency and sense of purpose and pride, the latter never fails to inspire, energise, and excite. The opportunity 'to boldly go' to Space and the thrill of launch, orbit and recovery catalyse successive generations. The make-believe world of Star Wars is fast becoming a reality as the domain is ever more accessible, the opportunities more diverse

and the designs on going more expansive.

Perhaps because of its very accessibility, the ultimate high ground – space – is now more contested than ever. Governments across the World are getting involved in Space – understanding it better, capitalising on its opportunities, recognising where national interests lie, protecting what they can and growing indigenous and regional capability to prosper at home, in orbit and beyond.

The Government of Oman has taken a bold step in committing to a Space programme across all aspects. Early ventures have gone well, but it was unfortunate that the launch in January was not as successful as the build and test of the first Omani satellite. It indicated how challenging 'Space' is and, as with all testing fields – sport, diplomacy, industry, agriculture – if it was easy, it would be boring.

'The Sultanate's satellite programme will provide investment, research and employment for the Omani people' – Muscat Daily.



HM Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has seen beyond this and designated Space as a national priority. This is prescient, inspired, and bold. Oman has long been a great Nation, at the forefront of grand ideas in various sectors and endeavours; Space is the next big challenge, which will lead the country to future historic and honourable goals.

Leadership in an emerging field is tough, but there are many ways Oman could plant its flag and help make Space a safer place. For instance, expanding the Nation’s understanding of Space through an education programme, driving through the United Nations better legislation to help protect Space, developing an indigenous satellite manufacturing industry, building on the possibilities of becoming a launch nation from the ‘Spaceport’ at Duqm, or growing the ground segment support skills and functions that ‘glue’ all this together. Oman’s rich legacy of peace-brokering, arbitration, and consensus-funding is a great platform upon which to build.

HM is ahead of many who are unaware of how we have become dependent upon Space for everyday life. Satellites giving

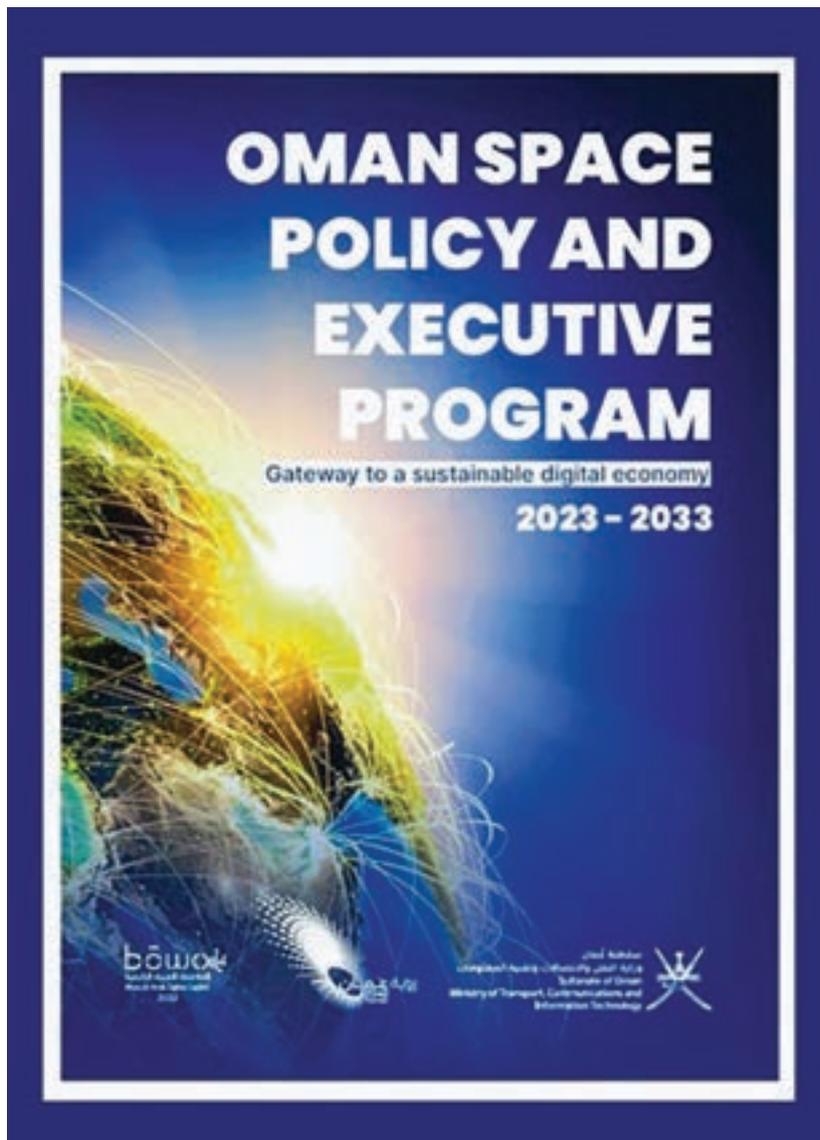


'Dr Saud bin Humaid al Shuaili, Head of NSP, initiating the project to establish a national space industry' – Muscat Daily.

Achieving a launch capability at Duqm is a signal to the region and World that Oman is in the Space business. Duqm represents so many things and has been at the heart of recent Anglo-Omani interests for the last decade or more.

'Port of Duqm... 2012 and Duqm Airport... 2014, next stop the Oman Space Centre' – Courtesy of Port of Duqm and Oman Observer.





'The long-term National Space Policy has identified projects and investment opportunities to develop a domestic space industry' - Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology.

position, navigation, timing, communications, and observation facilities are critical to everyday life, enabling transport systems, cash machines, trade between businesses and consumers, petrol stations, hospital functions, traffic lights and many other routine functions. Those in the A'Sharqiyah Sands may have less need for Space, but the bustling masses in Muscat have become dependent upon it.

Space services are not as secure as they have been, or as most think. Near misses between critical satellites, gigantic debris fields from satellite destruction, satellite obscuration and blocking of key orbits to deny others access are rising. Although protected by the 1967 UN Outer Space

Treaty, to which Oman is a Party, military activities in space are not expressly banned, so something more muscular may be needed. Oman could take a lead in this area. Perhaps Space might be the *cri de Coeur* for her to follow? This might include reaffirmation that Space must not be 'conquered, capitalised or colonised'. Wider recognition is needed that Space has become a cornerstone of all nations' interests – safety of people, protection of way of life, preservation of economic systems and ensuring fundamental freedoms (of speech and worship, and from want and fear).

A good way to bring this all about would be for the Sultanate to accelerate success against the National Space Policy and

Executive Program. It is a good document, widely situated, capturing the right elements and HMs interest and setting out how the Government is pulling this together. It sets the importance of Space to the Nation, identifies critical national assets that need protection, signals and steers the opportunities for investment and captures how Space risks will be mitigated. What is now required is a series of plans, sat beneath the Policy, that will make these lofty and sharply-focussed goals come to fruition. Key things to capture would be how the plans will be resourced with delegated authorities, sufficient people, time to get everything in place and financial investments to ensure short, medium and long-term delivery.

The first Omani satellite was the result of cooperation between Omani company ETCO, operating in the advanced technology sector, and Polish companies Tuatara and SatRevolution. It was a shame the launch did not reach orbit, but this should be an inspiration to re-double effort to achieve success. Roughly one in six launches go wrong in the early stages, so hopefully that risk is now behind the endeavour! Achieving that first successful in-orbit satellite will require all of Government to ensure it occurs smoothly and appropriately. This will mark the first major step in the Sultanate's Space journey and a major signal about Oman ambition under HM's vision.

Perhaps now is the time to catalyse a wider Omani Space enterprise and industrial base? The development of a civil service agency, working inside or closely to the Ministries of Commerce, Industry & Investment, Higher Education, Research & Innovation and Defence, could help bring all this together. Small, empowered and technically informed, a Sultanate Space Agency could drive projects, co-ordinate activity and help shape, frame and deliver the Sultan's ambitions in space. Delivery of an Omani satellite is an opportunity to expand the industrial base and capture part of the market.

Achieving a launch capability at Duqm will be a powerful signal to the region and World that Oman is in the Space business. Duqm represents so many things and has been at the heart of recent Anglo-Omani interests for the last decade or more.

NASCOM and ETLAQ will build a Spaceport there and its development beyond a port and training area is extremely exciting. There will be much to do around design, certification and licensing. Alongside this, integration and test, final assembly, clean rooms and mission control and management facilities will be needed. The proximity of the Indian Ocean offers a safe launch facility that can access a range of orbits and Oman's geography would allow the full range of launch capabilities – vertical, horizontal and sub-orbital. Adopting the US FAA licencing standards is a fast path to getting into orbit and could be the preferred plan. Oman offers much to the Global launch community, especially at this time with demand rising and launch capacity reducing.

Oman's geography would allow horizontal launch. This would let the GCC hold a responsive launch capability that is weather-agnostic with high launch rates/tempo for smaller payloads (<1000kg). Gulf neighbours do not have access to large safe launch spaces, but RAFO has several bases which could host horizontal launch capabilities. Adopting the US FAA licencing standards is a fast path to getting into orbit and could be the preferred plan for Oman. An Omani sovereign launch capability would certainly put Oman on the Space map.

Alongside launch, Oman has committed to a *Space Settlement Centre* in the Duqm district. The Global Space and Technology Company will help with mission simulation and science experiments to replicate the space environment, study the behaviour of astronauts before a space flight and serve scientists, researchers and those interested in doing experiments in the space sector.

These aspirations will prompt growth in industrial capacity – a greater demand signal into Sultan Qaboos University and others, which in turn will expand the sector and deepen Omani expertise. Capital investment is important too, but activity will trigger interest, which the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Commerce, Industry & Investment could collectively lead. Government grants, Venture Capital and Private Equity will also enable business.

Some of this is costly in time, people or cash, but Oman has been a regional convenor for the last 52 years and could be the centre of gravity for something around Space. Oman could propose a GCC Space



Julie with the Omani Ambassador, HE Bader Mohammed Al Mantheri, and Hussein Mohammed Alawi Muqaibil, Deputy Head of Mission.

capability, which might range from simple regional co-operation, industrial co-ordination or the development of a regional space command and management centre? Co-ordination would allow for 'ride-sharing' of payloads on Omani launches and the development of ideas, concepts and projects collectively across the region. Industrial co-ordination and component manufacture co-operation would lead to the avoidance of duplication and replication and lead to getting the most out of every bit of investment.

Oman and/or a collection of regional nations could form a Space Command/Management facility to bring all this together. It has been done in other areas, so Space is a natural next step. A facility would be a great place to bring in space-observation activity (tracking satellites, monitoring debris, co-ordinating launch, tracking space weather and the security

implications of all of these). A Coalition of Space Operating Nations such as exists elsewhere, could reside in the Sultanate. There is much to be done through working better together. It needs an idea, leadership, and most of all the energy to deliver it!

The bond between Oman and the United Kingdom has been strong for as long as anyone can remember. Our nations have stood strong together and offered each other wise advice publicly and quietly. There is an opportunity to extend that friendship into Space. It is crucial to our ways of life, an increasing opportunity for Oman, a major avenue of potential growth, and a way in which the Gulf States could be brought closer together. But more is needed and by a broader community to bring this to life for the Omani people so that they may 'live long and prosper'. ■

HIGH LEVEL LONDON BUSINESS CONFERENCE

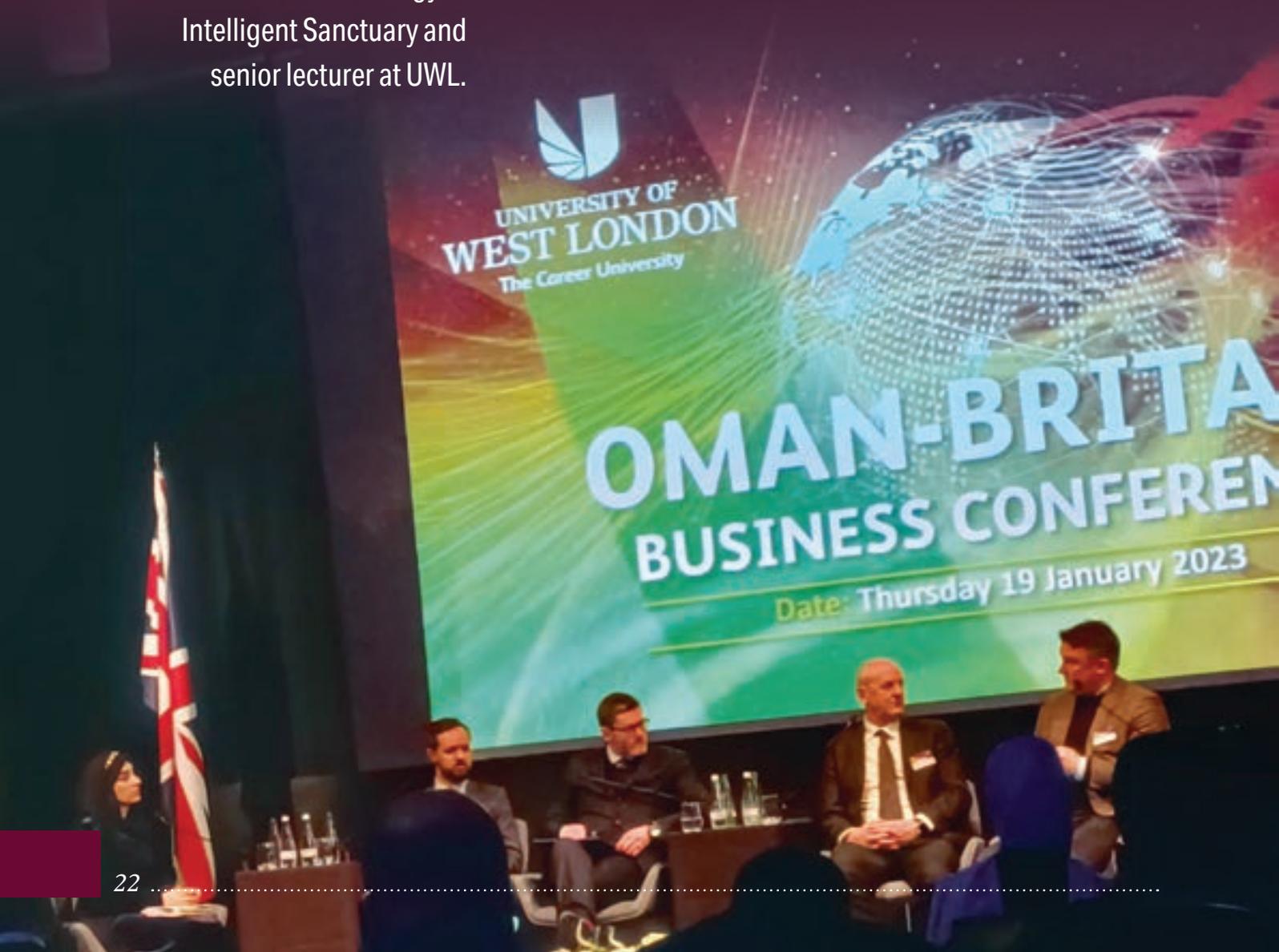
The Omani Britain Business Conference at the University of West London (UWL) was spearheaded by Arwa Al Balushi, Commercial and Investment Attaché at the Oman Embassy in London, and Dr Malak Hamdan, Director of Strategy at Intelligent Sanctuary and senior lecturer at UWL.

The goal was to showcase the variety of investment opportunities in Oman to potential British investors and bring together both sides for in-person interaction.

The conference was opened by Jennifer Bernard, chair of the board of governors at UWL, who emphasised the importance of sustainability, a priority in Oman, and the opportunities the conference presented for those attending. Baroness Symons, former Minister of State for the Middle East and current chair of the British Arab Chamber of Commerce, delivered a speech focused on the advantages Oman offers potential investors and its future potential. HE Saleh

Al Zakwani, chairman of the Oman British Friendship Association, was also present and briefly highlighted the British-Omani relationship and its importance.

Then came a series of presentations that spotlighted different sectors in Oman. Omran Group kicked off the series with a focus on opportunities in tourism and hospitality. They touched on sustainable cities like Yiti which are constructed in alignment with the local natural landscapes and produce their own energy, as well as potential investment in agritourism and adventure tourism, both of which are growing areas in Oman.



They were followed by Asyad Group who presented on the logistics sector. Asyad relayed their excellent track record as service providers in the MENA region, and highlighted the benefits of foreign direct investment since recent reforms which allow for total foreign ownership. Minerals Development Oman then outlined the possibilities for British investors in the mining sector, noting that less than three percent of the minerals in Oman have been commercially exploited.

After a networking break, Nadhim Zahawi, MP, Minister and Chairman of the Conservative Party, addressed the room with a short and striking speech emphasising the sovereign investment partnership signed by the UK and Oman last year as a commitment made by both sides to deepen economic ties between the two countries. The next two presentations were made by Fisheries Development Oman, a state-owned initiative, and INTAG, a private company responsible for various

The final part of the conference featured two panels. The first was a panel chaired by Dr Malak Hamdan and the second panel was chaired by Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, Chairman of HSBC Oman and the Oman-British Business Council.

staple food products in the MENA region and beyond.

The final part of the conference featured two panels. The first was a business panel chaired by Dr Malak Hamdan that discussed the incentives and advantages for British investors in Oman and the breadth of possibilities available.

The second panel was chaired by Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, Chairman of HSBC Oman and the Omani British Business Council. It featured representatives from the Ministry of Commerce, Credit Oman and Sohar International Bank. One of the major highlights was the announcement of

the 'Invest Oman' services that could be accessed directly from the London embassy including the opening of a commercial registry and the straightforward process of opening of an Omani bank account.

Professor Peter John CBE, Vice-Chancellor at UWL, closed the conference with a short but entertaining speech. It was a very successful day for networking as well as gaining information and guidance.

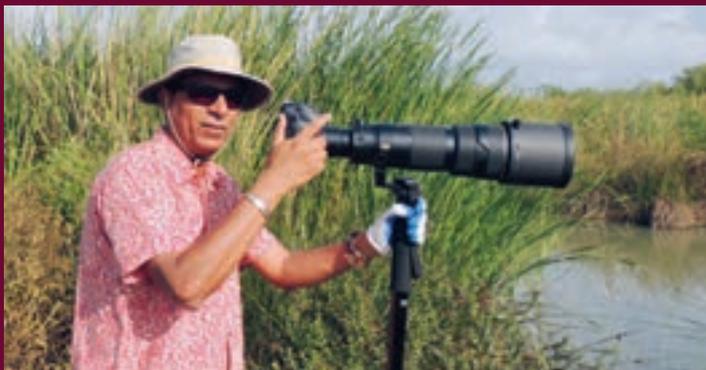
Dr Malak Hamdan was recently the regional director of the UK's Government Science and Innovation Network for all six countries in the Gulf. ■

2023 OMAN NATURAL HERITAGE LECTURE

The 7th Oman Natural Heritage Lecture will take place at the Royal Geographical Society on Wednesday 6 December 2023. The evening will focus on The Mangroves and Coastal Wetlands of the Sultanate of Oman.

The keynote speaker is Ms. Aziza Saud Al Adhoobi, a distinguished field scientist who heads the Wetland Management section at the Environment Authority. Ms. Aziza will be a guest of the British Omani Society and will be available for meeting UK mangrove specialists during the visit of this year's Oman delegation.

We look forward to welcoming her and her team to London. She is a social person, with qualifications in science, administration and art. More details of the evening, including news of the other speakers, will appear on the Society's website.



The second speaker is Badar Yousuf Al Balushi, Assistant Director of Marine Environment, Conservation Environment Authority. He studied conservation of mangrove forests and modern technique in transplanting mangrove seed in Okinawa Island, Japan, in 2002, and has enjoyed a career mostly in this field ever since.

Nigel Winsor, Roderic Dutton, Sean Nelson and Robert Baldwin of the Oman UK Group.
nigel@winserdialogue.com
www.britishomani.org/events

MINING AGREEMENT WITH KNIGHTS BAY

ARTICLE BY ALEX WARD

HE Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals, and Brian Spratley, Chairman of Knights Bay, at the signing ceremony.



In Oman's first mineral exploration deal with an overseas investor, the Sultanate has signed an agreement with Knights Bay Ltd for the extraction of nickel and its derivatives. Knights Bay is a new British company comprised of a team of mining, metallurgical and environmental professionals working in ethical jurisdictions.

Brian Spratley, the Chairman, is a mining engineer with long experience in the mining and extractive metallurgical industry, having led many large strategic project developments around the world, and in the last nine years developing the first new minor metal smelter outside China for 40 years in Oman. His son, Sean, an environmental scientist, also has worldwide experience in the mining sector. He led the development process for the new antimony smelter in Oman. He has developed IT and IT systems related to mining including aerial UAV systems and underground photogrammetry.

The new deal is a nickel exploration agreement whereby Knights Bay were given concession rights for mining area Number 21, located in the Wilayat of Ibra in the North Ash Sharqiyah Region, around 100 kilometres south of Muscat. The operation by the British firm will target high grade nickel and its derivatives that are essential for the production of electric vehicles in which nickel is used in the batteries.

The project will have an investment of around \$25 million to \$30 million in the first three years which will encompass the exploration phase. During this period,

geological surveys will be undertaken and a number of exploratory and appraisal holes will be drilled followed by chemical analysis to understand the quantities of nickel and its derivatives available.

The extraction of nickel from the mine will be carried out without any carbon emissions which is important in the quest for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. Nickel mining produced around 0.27% of all greenhouse gases emitted, according to a report by the Nickel Institute, though companies in the sector conscious of these statistics have recently reported a nine per cent fall in emissions.

A publication by the investment banking firm, Goldman Sachs, estimated that half of all cars sold worldwide will be electric by 2035. Studies have claimed that the worldwide demand for nickel for use in electric vehicle batteries, amounting to 60,000 metric tons in 2018, is anticipated to increase to over 660,000 tons by 2025. This makes the mining of an important element such as nickel vital for the electric vehicle industry – whilst safeguarding the economic future of Oman.

This first deal of its kind whereby a foreign company has been granted the rights to mine in the Sultanate shows a clear vision of the future concerning trading relations globally. Furthermore, that the company chosen to take on the role of mining is British further promotes and increases ties between the two nations. This follows the opening of the new Invest Oman lounge in which delegates from the UK were invited first.

It also follows the UK and Oman signing the Sovereign Investment Partnership last year which is designed to increase high value bilateral trade between the two countries. This deal along with access to the new investment area are all positive steps in the mission to boost trade. In support, Oman’s Minister of Commerce, Qais Mohammed Al Yousef, said that Oman was keen to support British investors looking to inject capital in sectors such as clean energy, mining, manufacturing, logistics, tourism and fisheries.

Due to current global events, countries across the Gulf have seen an increase in revenues from oil and gas related exports.



Oman’s net oil revenue for much of 2022 increased by approximately 40% to \$16 billion, accompanying gas revenues which surged by around 80% to \$8 billion.

As oil and gas reserves in the region gradually reduce, Oman is seeking to diversify its revenue streams in the industries mentioned above by Oman’s Minister of Commerce which echoes that of other Gulf nations. ■

DRIVING INTO THE FUTURE!

The British Omani Society New Generation Group organises the annual delegation that takes place alternately in the UK and Oman. This year, it is the UK’s time to host. The subject will be *“Driving into the Future: Artificial Intelligence Applications in Oman’s Transportation Sector”*.

The three-day conference will utilise the Society’s lecture room in the heart of Mayfair, with accommodation and dining booked at the prestigious Victory Services Club near Marble Arch. Planning is at the final stages to select 20 delegates from our two countries. Expert speakers are also being approached. The end goal is to present the conclusions of the conference to HE Said bin Hamoud al Ma’awali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology

We will report back in the next annual Review of what promises to be an inspiring conference.

34 SACKVILLE STREET

Our building and society are still suffering the effects of the electricity surge of May 2021, which caused such problems in the whole street. Huge efforts by Martyn Bishop and the staff have generated progress through the tortuous problems involving insurers, assessors, repairers, consultants et al, but we are still not quite back to normal (as well as losing considerable income from rents). One major item outstanding for two years was the air conditioning-system (heating and cooling) which led at times to our staff working in Arctic conditions. However... a spectacular crane operation over a weekend in June finally removed the existing eight outside air conditioning condenser units from the roof and the three from the basement courtyard and lifted the new eight for the roof and three to the basement courtyard, giving rise to this fine picture. and, we hope, tolerable conditions inside the building.



ROYAL GRAMMAR SCHOOL GUILDFORD MUSCAT



Another British schools link with Oman is being forged with the opening of RGS Guildford Muscat, which is due to open its doors this September for children in kindergarten to Grade 5, with plans to expand to Grade 12 over the next five years. This follows the opening of Cheltenham College's sister school in Oman two years ago.



RGS Guildford Muscat combines over 500 years of British education and heritage – the school gained a Royal charter in 1552 – with more than 20 years of developing schools in the Arabian Gulf (in Dubai and Qatar) with its partner Sama Educational Company.

Christopher T J Charleson is the Interim Head and Project Director, and he has collaborated with schools around the world to develop creative and innovative blends of curriculum, learning, teaching, facilities and leadership. He has developed schools across the Middle East, Europe, Asia and South America, and chaired international education

organisations, with the aim of preparing their students for a future in a volatile, complex, rapidly changing and often ambiguous digital and global society.

He stated: “We look forward to bringing the exceptional blend of expertise and experience to Oman, delivering an inspiring British international curriculum and world-class education to the families of Muscat.”

Dr. Jon Cox, Headmaster of the parent school, RGS Guildford, said: “Bringing RGS Guildford to Muscat is an honour and we will stay true to our values of inclusivity, scholarship, integrity, respect, courage and collaboration as we expand into Oman. We

look forward to our collaboration with the Ministry of Education in Oman and our partners, Sama Educational Company in offering an exceptional education for the young people in Muscat.”

Mr Badar Al Sayer, Chairman, Sama Educational Company said: “We are delighted to be partnering with the Royal Grammar School, Guildford to bring this unique education offering to Muscat. We are committed to the development of excellent learning and teaching in line with our mission, beliefs and educational principles that nurture character, deliver academic rigour, and produce future-ready global citizens.” ■



RGSG Muscat were honoured to support the British Embassy's celebration of the Coronation of King Charles III and Queen Camilla as Gold Sponsors.



James Goldman, Chargé D'Affaires at the British Embassy, welcomes the guests to the Coronation event.

BRITISH EMBASSY CORONATION EVENT

The event, which took place in the Al Bustan Palace Hotel, included a live screening of the Coronation from Westminster Abbey and a celebration of British food. The event was attended by senior government officials, ambassadors, dignitaries, and Omani and British business people.

Mr Charleson said: "This was a once in a lifetime celebration of British heritage and tradition. It was an event that genuinely brought together many elements of the Omani and British communities in a joyful celebration, rich in pageantry and British values." ■

BRITISH IFTAR IN MUSCAT

The increasing number of British Omani business contacts – group and individual, formal and informal – takes many forms, including Iftars, the significant and traditional meal taken after sunset on days during Ramadan.

One such this year involved the British Business Forum (BBF), the British Embassy Muscat and the Oman British Lawyers Association, who were welcomed to the new Invest Oman Lounge by CEO Abbas Al-Lawati and Ministry of Commerce Director Faisal Al-Nabhani. Michael Eyley from the British Embassy also spoke at the event.

Whilst the investment centre targets major investors, there is a growing number of expatriate Britons who invest in property or companies, and the Iftar provided an opportunity to inform them of ways and means of doing so.

The BBF, a members' organisation which works closely with the British Embassy Muscat's Trade and Investment Team, has a 20 year history of promoting British investment and trade in the Sultanate, and runs events throughout the year to connect its members to Omani decision makers, UK visitors and each other. It operates in full support of Oman's Vision 2040.

A very nice touch was that the catering for the special Iftar meal was provided by the National Hospitality Institute located in Wadi Kabir who train young Omanis for entry into the hotel industry. ■

Maggie Jeans OBE (BBF) with Ministry of Commerce Director, Faisal Al-Nabhani at the Iftar.



OMANI IFTAR IN LONDON



The Cultural Attaché of the Sultanate in London held an Iftar on Friday, 14 April, at the British Omani Society premises, graciously hosted by HE Bader bin Mohammed Al Mantheri, the Omani Ambassador.

Those attending included Omani students from various cities across the UK, members of the Omani embassy, the Cultural Attaché, supervisors and employees of the cultural office, the Chairman of the Omani Student Advisory Council in the UK and the British Omani Society.

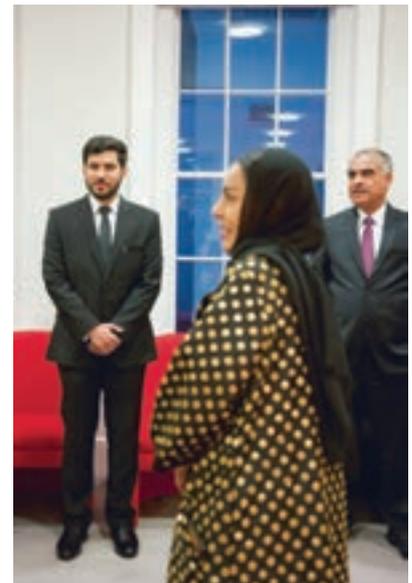




The cultural attaché's initiative to organise this Iftar stems from a keen interest in meeting students and their representatives. It was an opportunity for them to open a dialogue with the supervisors and staff of the embassy and the cultural attaché. The gathering also aimed to ensure the well-being of the students and that they are receiving necessary services and support during their period of study in the UK.

The atmosphere was welcoming, filled with warm greetings and friendly conversations, and everyone enjoyed their Iftar meal in the company of His Excellency the Ambassador. The aura was imbued with the spirituality of the blessed month of Ramadan.

The Iftar concluded with an open discussion where the Cultural Attaché, Abeer Ali Awadh, and the Chairman of the Omani Student Advisory Council, Mr Haitham bin Hilal Al- Alawi, both presented words of thanks to His Excellency and all those attending. ■



ALL ABOUT FRIENDSHIP IN A CHANGING WORLD

The move to the Cavalry and Guards Club for the annual Society luncheon enabled an attendance of 140 members and guests – a record turn-out and a most enjoyable occasion.

The Society Chairman, Richard Stanford, welcomed the members and VIP guests and spoke about the busy year at the Society and generally, referring to the death of HM The Queen, visits to the United Kingdom by HM the Sultan and his family including the passing-out from the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst of HH Theyazin bin Haitham and HH Sayyid Azzan bin Qais Al Said.

He thanked the retiring Chairman, Stuart Laing, and other members of the Board and staff, for their efforts in a very successful year, and stressed the emphasis which had been placed on Oman's Vision 2040. This ranges from heritage and culture, health, and education through to

the environment, economic diversification and investment. This has prompted the inclusion of the Oman British Business Council more fully into the Society's organisation, with a dedicated staff post for OBBC and related matters.

In introducing HE Saeed bin Hamoud al Ma'awali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, our guest speaker, the chairman stressed that our programme and activities are "all about friendship".

This theme was taken up by His Excellency, who emphasised that our two countries are friends in all aspects: business, culture and human to human relationships. He spoke of the importance





Richard Stanford, Saeed bin Hamoud al Ma'awali and Richard Muir.

Richard welcomed Omani Minister and the new Chairman of the Oman British Friendship Association.



of continuing this in a changing world, and issued the rallying call to “explore what we can do together.”

Society Vice-President, Richard Muir, replied on behalf of the Society and also highlighted the challenges in a changing world - the death of Her Majesty, war in Ukraine, financial crises, and unstable commodity prices - but noted that some things remain constant, especially the British-Omani relationship. He illustrated the width of the relationship and the important part played by the Society in so many aspects which we are able to host, fund, organise and develop.





Richard welcomed Saleh bin Mohammad Al Zakwani, the new Chairman of the Oman British Friendship Association – the Muscat equivalent and partner of the OBBC – and sent greetings to the former Chairman, Maqbool bin Ali Sultan, who was unable to attend the luncheon this year. He also stressed the strong trading and investment relationship between the Sultanate and the UK, and reminded everyone of the forthcoming British delegation to Oman following the Mansion House conference held earlier in the year.

The speeches were very well received, with great satisfaction at the celebration of the unique friendship between our nations... and the buzz of conversation and laughter between so many people from Britain and Oman at the reception and at the lunch tables was a strong illustration of the friendship. ■



SOCIETY ALUMNI REUNION

ARTICLE BY ROSA BRAUNE

We are now in the twelfth year of the Society's two fully funded flagship schemes for British students and recent graduates: our Arabic Language Scheme and Gap Year Scheme in Oman. We have also had interns working at 34 Sackville Street with the Society staff over the same period, and they were awarded study periods in the Sultanate.

Each year, we have sent some of the best and brightest British students fully packed and somewhat prepared to Oman to learn Arabic, explore the country and meet the people. More than 200 young people have been selected to date.

The Society's first alumni reunion in 2017 gave us all the opportunity to come together and discover how the scheme has helped kick-start careers, create a foundation for further study, and in many cases kindle a life-long interest and continuing connection with the country of Oman. Now that the covid period is over, we have been able to resume what we hope to become annual reunions.

OPEN DOORS

On the evening of Wednesday 3 May, we opened the doors of our building on Sackville Street to welcome former participants of our Arabic Language and Gap Year schemes for a reunion. In the lead-up to the alumni event we'd been delighted to receive RSVPs from many former participants of both schemes. We were excited to see who would arrive and to hear where life had taken our students since we last crossed-paths.

The event proved popular and we were lucky enough to welcome scheme participants from a range of years – some dating all the way back to 2011 – which we felt was a great demonstration of the on-going connection these participants felt to Oman and the Society.



As our staff and Trustees mixed with the alumni, we were impressed to hear the breadth of career paths they had taken – from legal to government and corporate to political, commerce to industry.



Then: “Oman will forever stick in our minds as one of most captivating, beautiful and friendly destinations we have ever visited. Watch out Muscat – we will be back!”
(Quote from article in 2018 Annual Review)

As our staff and Trustees mixed with the alumni, we were impressed to hear the breadth of career paths they had taken – from legal to government and corporate to political, commerce to industry – we spoke with alumni some in established careers and some still pursuing further studies. As a new member of the Society team, I was particularly interested to hear how, looking back, these former participants felt about their experiences on the schemes. What

had been their most enduring take-aways – career and personal? So, I asked some of them. In their own words...

THEN AND NOW...

Georgia Onslow, now working at a leading global corporate law firm, and Oisin Flynn, now a Master’s student studying Middle Eastern History. Both participants in the 2018 Gap Year Scheme.

Now: Georgia Onslow: “I met a lot of good friends, there are three of us here tonight (from the Scheme)... I also developed a huge love for the Middle East as a whole. I’m hoping as part of my work in the near future to get an international secondment in the Middle East. I found the Arabic lessons really really helpful. We did evening classes. And then I went on to do Latin and Ancient Greek at University. So, I think generally using linguistics and challenging myself to learn a new language was really helpful for that.”

SOCIETY ALUMNI REUNION



Now: Oisín Flynn: “Oman is a really amazing country to visit. The Arabic skills have helped me, I’ve gone on to study Middle Eastern History.”

Rosa Hirtzel, now working for a leading global intelligence, due diligence and risk advisory firm, and a 2016 Gap Year Scheme participant:

Then: *“The scheme was a really fantastic opportunity... firstly, to get to know Oman and get to know a beautiful country. Explore the wadis, swim in the sea, get to know the people and the culture. I met some fantastic teachers, and we developed our academic experience looking after some really talented students.”*

Now: “I’ve stayed in touch with the other people from my cohort very closely. My job is MENA region focused. We were very lucky that part of the scheme was doing Arabic lessons. Both by osmosis, from the students who expected us to be able to speak fluently which was quite funny at moments, but also through the Polyglot Institute language institution down the road... The regional awareness you gained through having conversations with teachers and Omanis as well means you come away with a greater understanding of how the country fits with the region more broadly.”

AND... OUR FIRST ALUMNI COUPLE!

Arabic Language Scheme participants Ra’eesa Mehta and Alexander Hayton came away from their trip having developed more than just a love for the country of Oman. They met on the 2011 scheme, which was then held at Dhofar University, Salalah... and are now a happily married couple. So, the society gave them rather more than improved Arabic! Alexander now works in the FCDO, and Ra’eesa is an Associate at a leading international law firm.



Because the event was such a success, we are happy to announce that we are making the alumni reunion an annual fixture.

SAVE THE DATE

Because the event was such a success, and because we love to keep in touch, we are happy to announce that we are making the alumni reunion an annual fixture in our events programme. Next year we will also be joined by members of the Omani Students’ Society, London. Alumni members, please do make sure your membership is up-to-date and keep an eye on your emails and our social media for the next date!

NOW OPEN FOR APPLICATIONS

Want to learn or improve your Arabic while taking the opportunity to learn about and explore Oman? Our funded schemes are for recent college leavers planning to take a ‘Gap Year’ before university, and for those having recently completed undergraduate or postgraduate degrees. ■

Our next schemes are now open for applications. Please visit our website to learn more and apply online:

ARABIC LANGUAGE SCHEME • Visit: www.britishomani.org/online-arabic-language-scheme

GAP YEAR SCHEME • Visit: www.britishomani.org/gap-year-scheme

MTC RECEPTION AND BRIEFING

A senior delegation from the Military Technological College (MTC) on an official visit to the UK seized the opportunity to make a presentation at the Society and jointly host a reception for representatives of various British institutions with which the college has links.

Ameed Al Siyabi and Engineer Al Harthy with Society Vice-Chairman John McKeown.



The group was led by MTC Dean, Ameed (Air Commodore) Dr. Mohamed bin Aziz Al Siyabi, the Vice-Dean for Academic Affairs, Bader Al Ghanimi, and included Engineer Tariq Al Harthy, along with other military personnel and academics from both countries.

The event began with a networking reception hosted by members of the Society, the MTC and the Royal Aeronautical Society with invited guests from various bodies such as the Institutions of Engineering and Technology (IET), Marine Engineering, Science and Technology (IMarEST), Mechanical Engineers (IMechE) and Civil Engineers (ICE), plus military officers including members of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) Association.

Engineer Al Harthy gave a presentation on the academic and military activities of MTC as well as briefly touching on their International Conference on Aeronautical Sciences, Engineering, and Technology at the MTC, which is due to take place 3-5 October 2023.

The MTC aims at integrating technological education with military training in order to be a significant tributary to the Ministry of Defence and the arms of SAF and other military and security apparatuses in Oman. It provides specialised and accredited vocational programmes for civil society as well as government units.

Initially formed to deliver trade and specialist courses such as apprentice training, it has developed degree level engineering programmes in a well-equipped and high quality learning and training environment. This year, it celebrates the tenth anniversary year of its foundation.

The MTC visit to the UK was principally to the University of Portsmouth, with which it has a long-standing relationship. Portsmouth has validated the MTC courses at degree level and generally helped to establish the higher education levels. Both the Dean and Engineer Al Harthy are graduates of Portsmouth University. ■



Prince Michael of Kent, Sayyida Susan Al Said, Dr. Iman Al Busaidi (Diwan of Royal Court), Mr. Hussein Mohammed Muqaibil (Acting Ambassador from the Oman Embassy), Professor Joe Smith (Director of the Royal Geographical Society), Kate Humble and Maj Gen Richard Stanford (Chairman of the British Omani Society) with guests from the Oman Embassy in London, the Natural History Museum, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and the Society. (Martin Hartley)

OMAN NATURAL HERITAGE LECTURE AT RGS THE BIRDS AND NATURAL HISTORY OF THE SULTANATE

ARTICLE BY MR. NASSER AL KINDI, MRS. AZZAH AHMED AL JABRI AND MR. NIGEL WINSER

With its curved bill and long tail, this Purple Sunbird (*Cinnyris asiaticus*), a resident small passerine, is predominantly found in northern Oman. During the mating season, the male assumes an overall black plumage with vibrant hues of purple and green. (Nasser Al Kindi)



The 6th Oman Natural Heritage Lecture at the Royal Geographical Society, which was given to a live audience of more than 400 and also broadcast online, focused on the birds and natural history of Oman as witnessed by ornithologists and naturalists associated with the Oman Natural History Museum.

The lecturers were Mr. Nasser Al Kindi, writer, filmmaker and author of 'Birds in Oman', and Mrs. Azzah Ahmed Al Jabri, Director of the Oman Natural History Museum, Ministry of Heritage and Culture. The sponsors were the Embassy of Oman (London), the British Omani Society, the UK Geographical Magazine, the London Speaker Bureau, the Natural History Museum of London and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

Professor Joe Smith, Director of the RGS, welcomed HRH Prince Michael of Kent, Patron of the Oman Natural Heritage Lectures, and many distinguished guests from Oman and UK, including Sayyida Susan Al Said and Dr. Iman Al Busaidi, Mr. Hussein Mohammed Muqaibil, Kate Humble and Maj-Gen Richard Stanford to the RGS headquarters.

"It gives me great pleasure to meet up with His Royal Highness, Prince Michael of Kent, whose field science association with the Sultanate goes back to the mid-eighties when you were an active member of the geographical team surveying the natural history of the Sands when your field surveys were 'on foot, in land rovers, by helicopter (which you piloted) and by a camel given to you by the Society's Bedu Guide, Said Jabber Hilays al Wahibi!"

"On that expedition, Michael Gallagher, founding Director of the Oman Natural History Museum and his ornithologists identified some 97 species of birds, including first sightings of the Little Green Heron and Lappet-faced Vultures. Today the bird-list for Oman exceeds 500 birds and these are a growing attraction to national and international naturalists and ornithologists."

TV presenter Kate Humble, Chair for the evening, introduced Mr. Nasser Al Kindi, a self-professed 'birder' whose field trips to all corners of the Sultanate has given him a rare glimpse of Oman's diverse birds and wildlife, and Mrs. Azzah Al Jabri, passionate naturalist and an inspiring team player who leads the team at the Natural History Museum in Muscat.

Nasser began by sharing his first encounter with a Barn Owl in the Sharqiya Sands and the impact this beautiful bird made on him as a naturalist inspired by his father, Sheikh Said Al Kindi: 'It was an incredibly beautiful bird with a pattern around its head resembling a heart. I was smitten.' He learnt there were many more species of owl in Oman, and this was the start of a journey photographing the birds of Oman leading to his own book 'Birds in Oman'.

Oman is good for birdwatching for several reasons. Firstly, the region is at 'cross-roads' for the flyways of migratory birds flying over from Africa, Siberia, Europe, India and the rest of Asia. Of the 536 bird species sighted by Omanis, expatriates and visitors to date, fewer than 100 species are resident. Secondly there are several 'hotspots' offering incredible sightings for the naturalist, from the Socotra Cormorants in Musandam, the Crab Plovers found in the Barr Al Hickmann tidal mudflats and the Dideric Cuckoo and Grey-headed Kingfishers in the Dhofar woodlands' laden with mist' during the monsoon 'Khareef'.

The urban areas along the coast with their gardens and parks are good places for



Prince Michael and Sayyida Susan Al Said with Mrs. Azzah Al Jabri (left), Dr. Mohammed Al Kindi and Mr. Nasser Al Kindi (right). Dr. Mohammed gave the 5th Oman Natural Heritage lecture (online) on the Geology and Caves of Oman in 2020 during the Covid lockdown. (Martin Hartley)

Sayyida Susan Al Said in her opening address drew attention to long 'natural history' collaboration between Britain and Oman.

"Having attended the Oman Natural Heritage Lectures at the Royal Geographical Society in the past, it gives me immense pleasure to offer all attending here today – and those watching online from around the world, a very warm Omani welcome. It is always a pleasure being at the Society's headquarters, knowing much about the long history of collaborations over the years, including our joint geographical surveys of the Musandam peninsula in the '70s and our unique Sharqiya Sand Sea in the '80s.



The 6th Oman Natural Heritage Lecture took place in the large 750 seat Ondaatje Theatre of the RGS, with a live broadcast worldwide online. Those attending included Omani students from UK Universities, fellows and members of the RGS (with IBG), members of the British Omani Society, the London Speaker Bureau, readers of the Geographical Magazine, guests from the Natural History Museums of London and Oxford, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and many other UK scientific institutions and conservation organisations. (Martin Hartley)

OMAN NATURAL HERITAGE LECTURE AT RGS



Nasser Al Kindi sharing his passion and knowledge of Oman's 536+ bird species and 33 important bird and biodiversity areas. Here is his photo of the Crab Plover with its striking black and white plumage flying across the RGS stage. It is known for its distinctive beak designed for breaking open crustaceans. A resident and passage migrant, the numbers of Crab Plovers in Oman are thought to make up more than 17% of the total population of Crab Plovers. (Martin Hartley)

birding, especially early in the morning. Sur, Filim, Masirah and Duqm all offer exciting bird locations for the adventurous tourist. And if you are heading to the 'sabkha of the Barr Al Hickmann, 'do take a guide and a second vehicle'!

Nasser acknowledged the legacy of naturalists over the years who worked hard to observe and document Oman's birds and the valuable work to compile the database of the Oman Bird List, notably Michael Gallagher, Hanne and Jens Eriksen and Reginald Victor. Today the electronic Birds of the Middle East App, along with others, assist discerning and curious birders. Nasser remarked that in the pursuit of new sightings, serendipity often leads to unexpected events, such as his sighting of a Desert Wheatear that joined his picnic in the Empty Quarter sands one day.

As in many parts of the world, the battle to conserve existing bird populations is far from over. Loss of habitat, encroaching developments, hunting, and invasive species such as the Mynah bird and the House Crow are some of the reasons that birds like the Indian Roller are in decline. However, much good work is being done in Oman. To date there are 33 IBAs – 'important bird and biodiversity areas' designated by Birdlife International and 18 wetland 'RAMSAR' wetland sites, which bodes well for the many birdwatching tourists who visit Oman each year. Nasser

praised the hard work of the Environment Authority and the Environment Society of Oman in promoting and encouraging the next generation of birders... to find their 'Barn Owl' and become smitten.

Mrs. Azzah Al Jabri, Director of the Oman Natural History Museum, spoke proudly of her dedicated team at the Museum in Muscat with its public galleries and national collections, which is open daily and a popular destination for students, scientists and tourists alike. Oman's rich natural history inspires naturalists and scientists. Since 1985, the Museum has been the meeting place for education,

research and training, providing an essential national record of the rich biodiversity and geo-diversity of Oman. Four public galleries showcase different aspects of Oman's natural heritage: Oman – Land of Contrast (from Musandam to Dhofar), Oman through Time (with fossils as old as 570 million years) the Diversity of Oman's Wildlife, and the Whale Hall, with the skeleton of a Sperm Whale.

With its green plumage, elongated tail, and slender beak, the Green Bee-eater can be spotted perched on tree branches or displaying its acrobatic aerial agility. A breeding resident, the Green Bee-eater is found in abundance in most parts of Oman. (Nasser Al Kindi)



The Grey-headed Kingfisher is one of many types of bird that visit Dhofar between April and November. As a breeding visitor, young Kingfishers are seen in abundance taking advantage of food provided by the monsoon. (Nasser Al Kindi)



The Museum, with the Caracal Lynx as the chosen logo, has six scientific National Collections for preservation, archiving and scientific study of some 40,000 specimens. These include the National Herbarium with vouchers since 1943, with some 43 holotypes and over 14,000 specimens representing 1,500 plant species. The National Seashell Collection is unique with 7,186 specimens representing 500 species. The National Insect Collection has over 13,000 specimens and includes records from many previous field surveys, including the fieldwork in the Sharqiya Sands by the RGS supervised by Michael Gallagher. The National Animal and Skeletons Collection includes some 160 species of birds and over 500 specimens. The final two are the National Arthropods Collection and the National Fossils Collection, all providing an essential record of Oman's rich natural heritage and biodiversity of Oman.



Mrs. Azzah Al Jabri, Director of the Oman Natural History Museum, gave an insight into the unique and valuable scientific collections for preservation, archiving and future scientific study. (Martin Hartley)

Mrs. Azzah Al Jabri described the importance of the diverse collections and detailed specimen's database at the Museum, with records back to the 1940s. Such records provide the government with baseline studies to assist in the conservation and sustainability of the natural heritage of the Sultanate. (Martin Hartley)

Future visitors wishing to learn more about Oman's Natural History should arrange a visit to this special Museum in Muscat and use the library, with several key recent guides on the whales and dolphins, macroalgal biodiversity, Coleoptera (beetles) and the snakes of Oman. These publications were on display at the RGS and UK residents can view these in the library of the British Oman Society. Field scientists and students wishing to undertake future surveys are encouraged to contact the Director and her dedicated staff.

The Museum has been digitising the database since 2013. Azzah described the importance of previous surveys, with particular reference to the 1975/77 Northern Oman and Dhofar Surveys and the 1985/87 Wahiba Sands Survey, both published in the Journal of Oman Studies as special volumes. Azzah also mentioned the important terrestrial reptile 2011/18 survey and Dr Mohammed Al Kindi's Oman Paleontology Expedition 2016/2018. These collections provide a source of inspiration and sustainability for the Natural Heritage of Oman.



OMAN NATURAL HERITAGE LECTURE AT RGS

As in many parts of the world, the battle to conserve existing bird populations is far from over.



A scavenger, the Egyptian Vulture can be found near landfills, particularly in Masirah and further north, feeding on carrion. Despite facing threats to its population, conservation efforts in Oman have helped protect it. The adult is distinct with overall white plumage and yellow face.

All those attending the lecture so enjoyed the overview by the Director, sharing her passion and commitment to safeguard Oman's priceless natural heritage for all generations to come.

Kate Humble chaired a Q&A session with questions both from the live audience and from online participants. The speakers answered a range of questions about future initiatives, mentioning the workshops for young students being undertaken at the

Museum to inspire young naturalists and the Science Festival as well as the active work of the Environmental Authority and the Environment Society of Oman. Mention was made of the Arabian Oryx programme, the nationwide work of the Oman Botanic Gardens and the growing number of terrestrial and marine conservation scientists increasingly active in Oman.

Kate Humble then invited Dr. Mohammed Kindi onto the stage to thank

him and Mr. Nabil Al Saqri for their earlier lecture on the Geology and Caves of Oman given in 2020. It was broadcast from their kitchen in Nizwa, due to Covid lockdown. Kate drew attention to the new book by Mohammed and his caving colleagues on the *Caves of Oman* and presented Mohammed with *STRATA – William Smith's Geological Maps* by Oxford University Museum of Natural History and Robert Macfarlane.

Dr. Tim Littlewood, Deputy Director of the Natural History Museum, gave a vote of thanks to Mrs. Azzah Al Jabri and Mr. Nasser Al Kindi, on behalf of Mr. Richard Deverell, Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Dr. Douglas Gurr, the Director of the Natural History Museum, the team at the British Omani Society and the wider natural history community. Tim spoke of the importance of the dedicated work by Nasser and Azzah and the inspiration their work is giving to a new generation of students and scientists, committed to 'recording, understanding and protecting' biodiversity – a global issue that has to be tackled locally. ■

THE YOU-TUBE BROADCAST OF THE THE 6TH OMAN NATURAL HERITAGE LECTURE 2022 'THE BIRDS AND NATURAL HISTORY OF OMAN' BY MR. NASSER AL KINDI AND MRS. AZZAH AL JABRI CAN BE VIEWED ON THIS LINK: [HTTPS://YOUTU.BE/M47HG8XR49A](https://youtu.be/m47hg8xr49a)

The Birds and Natural History of the Sultanate of Oman

Mr. Nasser Al Kindi

Filmmaker and Author of 'Birds in Oman'

Mrs. Azzah Al Jabri

Director of the Oman Natural History Museum

Chaired by Kate Humble and Nigel Winser

At the Royal Geographical Society
Wednesday 26th October 2022

Anglo-Omani Society, Geographical and London Speaker Bureau

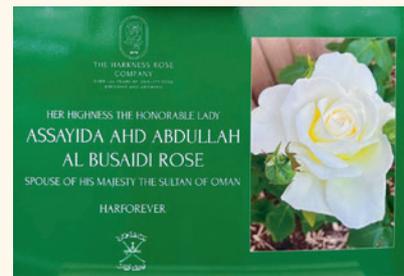
Oman
Natural
Heritage
Lecture



OMAN'S NEW ROSES AT CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW

ARTICLE BY ROSA BRAUNE
PICTURES FROM OMAN NEWS AGENCY

Two new rose species inspired by the Sultan of Oman and his wife went on display this year at London's internationally renowned Chelsea Flower Show.



The colours of the roses represent the Omani flag. Harcarmine is red, Harforever is white, and the leaves represent the green part of the flag. The roses were developed in Salalah, in Oman's Dhofar province, by crossbreeding existing varieties.

The new roses were launched at a ceremony in Chelsea, attended by Bader Mohammed Al Mantheri, Oman's Ambassador to the UK, among other Omani officials.

Roses are important in both British and Omani history and traditions. The national flower of England is the rose, having been adopted by Henry VII as England's emblem of peace at the end of the War of the Roses. A favourite of the English country gardener, an emblem used by England's national rugby union team, a stylised image on the royal coat of arms – the rose pops up everywhere.

Whereas the Damask rose, a species indigenous in Oman, also has a rich history. It was first cultivated in Syria during Roman times. Roses are also a source of

industry in Oman. They are used in herbal remedies, food flavourings and perfumes across the Middle East. The rose has even had its own postal stamp issued (in May 1990 showing the Sultan Qaboos Rose).

Today, roses are also a popular draw for tourists travelling to Oman. Each year, during March and April, Oman's Jebel Akhdar mountains bloom into life with thousands of roses. During this time, tourists from all over the world come to watch the rose harvesters and see the traditional process used to make smoked rosewater. ■



CIVIL AID – THE KEY TO PEACE IN DHOFAR

The joint Sultan's
Armed Forces
Association/Society
event in June went very
well indeed, with the
highest attendance
since before the COVID
years – more than 70
present in Sackville
Street, plus more than
50 watching on Zoom,
including members in
Oman, Australia and
the United States.

Martin Robb was commissioned into the Brigade of Gurkhas and saw service in the Far East before joining SAF in 1970, in the Muscat Regiment. In 1974 he was appointed to head the civil aid and development programme personally by HM Sultan Qaboos, and became a member of the original Dhofar Development Department. He remained

in Dhofar until 1984, and has retained strong links.

He and his wife Jenny now live in Perthshire, Scotland, where they run a traditional hill farm. As a good citizen, Martin has spent time in the political world, has been chairman of a variety of charities and continues his lay ministry within the Episcopal Church of Scotland.

Martin Robb with John McKeown and Gordon Allen



The audience settling down for Colonel Robb's talk.

THE KEY TO PEACE CIVIL AID IN DHOFAR

ARTICLE BY MARTIN ROBB

My talk “The Key to Peace” was centred around the Civil Aid Department achievements 1974-80. In 1974 Brigadier John Akehurst took over as Commander of Dhofar Brigade and set the military aim:

“To Secure Dhofar for Civil Development”.

As both General Tim Creasey (CSAF) and Brigadier Akehurst had clearly identified, there was great urgency to push forward a civil government development programme on the jebel and throughout the Province to integrate with the increasingly successful military campaign.

I was second in command of Muscat Regiment when General Creasey asked me if I would be interested in being appointed to spear-head a major civil government initiative on the jebel.

Having expressed interest, one week later His Majesty confirmed my appointment, instructing me that I was to set up a civil government organisation within the Office of the Minister of State and Wali Dhofar to set about the task of establishing Government authority on the jebel and throughout the rural areas of Dhofar.

Challenge! At this point in time outside of Salalah town there were no roads, no facilities, no schools, no health clinics, no water wells, no government representation!

The aim of the Civil Aid Department (CAD) was to provide immediate civil assistance to the indigenous peoples of the Province within the context of the military campaign as a policy of “hearts and minds”.

The basis of the civil aid programme was the establishment of Government centres providing seven key facilities:

- **Water** by the introduction of a well drilling programme providing water for human and cattle consumption.
- **Education** by the establishment of schools for children and adults.
- **Health** by the establishment of medical clinics and a comprehensive “Flying Doctor” service.
- **Religious Affairs** by the construction/renovation of mosques to encourage and maintain the religious life of the community.
- **Marketing Services** by the establishment of shops with assistance of administrative overheads aimed at



encouraging trade and economy between Salalah and the rest of the Province.

- **Relief Supplies** in the form of rations, tents, blankets, clothing and essential commodities provided to recently liberated areas and those returning from PDRY.
- **Communications** by the co-ordination and introduction of road, air and sea routes.

For a programme of this magnitude, co-ordination of civil and military agenda was essential to its success. This was achieved through the Dhofar Development Committee (DDC).

“The orchestration of the military, civilian and intelligence effort was vested in the Dhofar Development Committee which met every week under the Chairmanship of HE Sheikh Braik, Minister of State and Wali Dhofar.”

BRIGADIER JOHN AKEHURST



HM Sultan Qaboos, Martin Robb and Brig John Akehurst share a smile at Ayn Arzat.

THE MEMBERSHIP OF THE DDC WAS AS FOLLOWS:

HE Sheikh Braik	
Commander Dhofar Brigade	Brigadier John Akehurst
Dhofar Development Department	Mr Robin Young OBE
Head of Intelligence	Lt Col Bob Brown
Commander Firqat Forces	Lt Col Colin McLean
Director Civil Aid Department	Lt Col Martin Robb

At the weekly forum, military strategy, intelligence information, Firqat movements, tribal significances and civil aid response were carefully reviewed.

WATER

Well drilling 1975-77. The siting of wells was dependent upon the security situation, the population and the cattle distribution. Expertise in drilling of wells was provided by Sir William Halcrow and Partners. The boreholes averaged 3/400 metres in depth, the deepest being 840 metres. Royal Engineer teams were invaluable in the construction of access tracks to allow drilling rigs on site and to providing

ESTABLISHMENT OF INITIAL GOVERNMENT CENTRES 1975-77

Speed in the establishment of government centres was of the utmost importance. The first essential in establishing a Government Centre was the appointment of a civil government administrator “mandoob” elected by the local firqat and civilians of the area and formally appointed by HE Sheikh Braik. From the moment of his appointment the “mandoob” was responsible for representing the needs of the local community to the CAD.

Staffing of these centres was also done by locally elected people, thus ensuring the creation of a community spirit and a concern by Government that the local community played an *ownership* role in the formation of these centres and their future. Firqat played a key role in this process.

Tented, prefabricated and permanent structures at Juffa.



The siting of wells was dependent upon the security situation, the population and the cattle distribution.

An Initial Govt Centre with the Sultanate flag.



Well Drilling and cattle troughs.

military drilling rigs to some of the early more difficult sites.

Natural Water Sources. Renovation of natural seasonal springs, many of which had been damaged by enemy activity, was an important addition to the water programme.

Much of this work was carried out by locals on a self help basis. Civil Aid provided materials whilst the community provided the muscle power to make it happen.

Emphasis was on “self help”, “ownership” and creating a renewed “sense of pride”.

EDUCATION

Where early schools were few and far between and road conditions made travel difficult, school lunches were provided. So successful were these early schools that not only children attended but also evening classes were held for adults.

School teachers were recruited from Egypt and Jordan. In many cases the school master also provided the religious education.

Centres were provided with prefabricated mosques delivered either by road or air.

MARKETING SERVICES

During the initial phase, aid was provided in the form of tents, tarpaulins and food supplies – flour, rice, ghee, tomato paste, tinned tuna, tea, sugar and ‘carnation’ tinned milk. Under the direction of the “mandoob” a shopkeeper was appointed to distribute these supplies.



A tented school at Medinat al Haq.



A helicopter delivering rations.

HEALTH

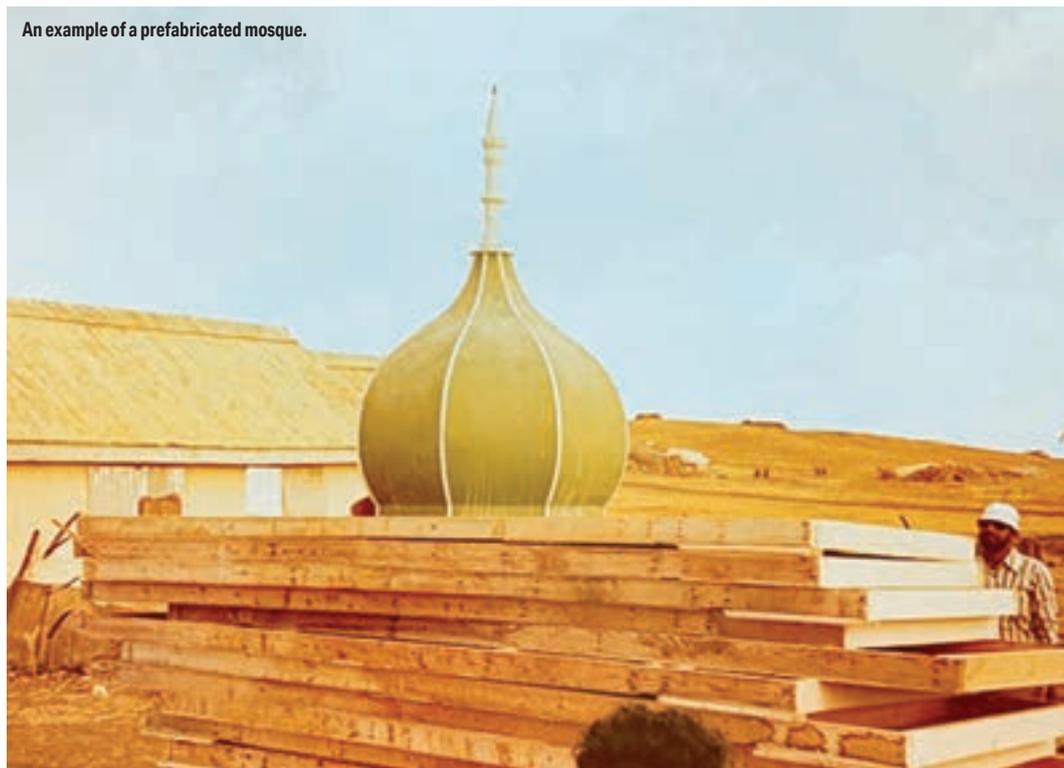
Tented and prefabricated clinics were established at Government centres to be visited by the “Flying Doctor” Service on a regular basis. Initially military doctors were seconded to the Civil Aid Department.

By the end of 1975 the first female doctor was recruited together with two female nurses resulting in a large increase of female patients. Local newly trained health assistants from Salah hospital were appointed to government clinics and supervised on a regular basis by the “Flying Doctor” Service.

RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS

An increasing demand for religious facilities to be re-established was met with close support. Civil aid provided materials and local enthusiasm carried out the repairs. Newly created

An example of a prefabricated mosque.



WESTERN AREA

Within 48 hours of SAF retaking Rakhyut and Dhalqut the first load of Civil Aid supplies were delivered by landing craft.



Delivery of goods by SON landing craft.



CAD carried out a rebuilding programme of existing houses:
 63 in Rakhyut
 52 in Dhalqut

With the increasing numbers of Dhofaris returning from South Yemen, Khadrafi (below Sarfait) was established as a “welcome home” centre. Tents, tarpaulins, blankets, clothing and rations were provided. A clinic was established and regularly visited by the “Flying Doctor” service. Names of all those returning were forwarded to Government in order to provide financial assistance to those returning “home”.

AGRICULTURE & FISHERIES

Considerable emphasis was paid to the traditional cattle rearing economy of the jebel area. The political aspect of re-establishing and encouraging new commercial links between the Jebel and

Salalah plain were considered an important part of the “hearts and minds” programme. This resulted in the organised purchasing of Jebali bull calves for fattening on the government Garzaiz farm established by Michael Butler on Salalah plain. The farm was well prepared to provide controlled conditions for production of fresh meat for local consumption.

Purchase of bull calves: 1975 430 cattle
 1976 520 cattle

BY THE END OF THE WAR

Government Centres

Jebel 21 Tawi Atair to Khadfari
 Negd 14 Makinat Shihan to Shalim
 Coast 12 Dalqut to Shuwaimyah & Kuria Muria Islands

Wells Drilled

NEGD 32
 JEBEL 26

Access tracks constructed by Royal Engineers during 1975/76 – 160km

Schools

21 Jebel, 12 Coastal villages, 5 Negd

Health

Flying Doctor was visiting 35 clinics

CAD was in effect “the” Government of the Jebel up to 1977. Handover to Ministries began in 1977/78.

“THE KEY TO PEACE” WAS CIVIL DEVELOPMENT



Tawi Atair permanent centre.

“The Dhofar war was a model campaign. A war in which both sides concentrated upon winning the support of the civilians of the jebel and which was won in the end by civil development, with military action merely a means to that end.

“The Civil Aid department was the one new lesson the Dhofar Campaign provided in the study of counter revolutionary warfare. If the people were to come across to the Government and give information about the enemy that information was needed immediately and not six months later. The Government had to be able to demonstrate immediate bounty. The Civil Aid Department seldom had executive staff of more than three or four but its impact on the war was enormous and before the war was over the Civil Aid Department fingers reached into practically every wadi in the jebel.”

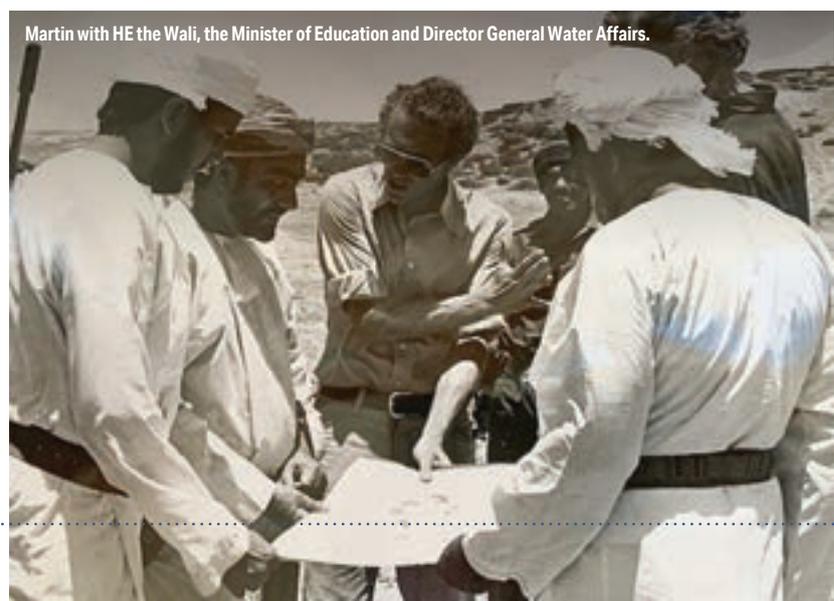
TONY JEAPES COMMANDER SAS 1974-76

Ministry of Education – rural schools

Ministry of Health – rural clinics and the “Flying Doctor” service

Directorate General of Water Supply – water wells

Ministry of Agriculture & Fisheries – agriculture and fisheries projects



Martin with HE the Wali, the Minister of Education and Director General Water Affairs.

ECONOMIC PROSPECTS UNDER SULTAN HAITHAM

ARTICLE BY ALEX WARD

Dr Khalid Al-Amri, Executive Chairman of the Omani Economic Association, gave a prestigious presentation at Sackville Street on Oman's Future Economic Prospects under HM Sultan Haitham bin Tarik.

The session included aspects ranging from new policies brought in by the government to data regarding economic indicators such as credit ratings. The Omani Economic Association is a non-government organisation tasked with enhancing awareness surrounding economics within the region and also partnering with other entities that include public and private sector organisations to achieve their mission statement.

Dr Al-Amri has worked in a variety of institutions within the financial sector ranging from insurance to banking and also within the higher education domain. In addition, he has worked in a variety of roles

for different governmental entities including the Ministry of Finance, Capital Market Authority, and the National Centre of Statistics and Information, and is a principal member of Oman Vision 2040.

He is also an advisor to the board of directors at Al Madina Takaful SAOG and board member of Muscat Gases Company SAOG, and has served on the board of Oman National Bank – Muzn. Dr Al-Amri holds a doctorate in finance and financial risk management from Fox School of Business at Temple University in the USA and holds a Master of Science in Finance from Boston University in the USA.



There are five pillars outlined by the government that vary from increasing efficiency within public finance management to revitalising and diversifying government revenue streams in order to achieve Vision 2040. One of the main pillars is the support of economic growth.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Oman is an oil reliant country which is in the process of diversifying its revenue streams as outlined in Oman's Vision 2040 plan. Over the past decade, the price of oil has been declining, sometimes with sudden price drops, and this, added to the environmental concerns about carbon reduction, is contributing to the decision to distance the country's reliance on oil.

Oman is profiting in the short term from the current spike in oil prices that we have witnessed recently, and is using the advantage to the full in order to shape the economic future in the long run. This will be done by investing in other sectors highlighted in Vision 2040.

Furthermore, Oman public-debt to GDP ratio increased from 4.9% in 2014 to 60% in 2019 due to the constant increase in public debt. The debt-to-GDP ratio can also be interpreted as the number of years it would take to pay back debt if GDP was used for repayment. In response, HM Sultan Haitham has introduced the Tawazun programme tasked with achieving fiscal balance in the medium term; in relation to public-debt to GDP, the plan will be to reduce this ratio.

Additionally, in more recent news, Moody's and other credit rating agencies have upgraded Oman to being on par with countries such as Brazil and Vietnam with a positive outlook. The reason for this upgrade is because of favourable trends in Oman's debt burden and debt affordability metrics during 2022, as a result of the increase in oil and gas proceeds, which thus increases Oman's resilience against potential future tremors.

To summarise, a credit rating is used by sovereign wealth funds, pension funds and other investors to measure the country's ability to pay its debts thus having a large impact on the country's borrowing costs.

FUTURE

There are five pillars outlined by the government that vary from increasing efficiency within public finance management to revitalising and diversifying government revenue streams in order to achieve Vision 2040. One of the main pillars is the support of economic

There is great emphasis on diversification of revenue streams for the country, which will be carried out using unified government strategic procurement.

growth which is vital for the future of any country through improving the business environment and also by stimulating domestic and foreign investment to the full extent. The next pillar focuses on enhancing government investment returns by strengthening tax administration and tax collection. In addition to this, the government will implement value added tax (VAT) which is a tax addition by traders on the value of the goods or services supplied to their customers. Moreover, the government will overhaul income tax by increasing the percentage of tax paid on earnings, largely affecting the higher earners in the Sultanate.

As mentioned earlier, there is great emphasis on diversification of revenue streams for the country, which will be carried out using unified government strategic procurement and by raising the efficiency of development spending whilst reviewing operating expenses. The remaining pillars relate to the efficiency of government spending and the management of public finances which will act as the supporting beams for the aforementioned pillars.

The UK is by far the largest provider of FDI into the Sultanate of Oman accounting for over 50 per cent and it is hoped that this figure will continue to grow. The UK and Oman are not only great trading partners but also have a long-standing friendship which spans many centuries.

Many people were present at this hybrid lecture, which was the principal Society event in April, both in person at 34 Sackville Street and via zoom, with representatives from the Oman Embassy London including the First Secretary, Shaima al Busaidi, and Commercial Attache, Arwa Al Balushi, in attendance. ■

ARABIC CLASSES IN LONDON

We are delighted to inform you that the Society not only continues to provide Arabic classes, but it has also introduced Omani Dialect classes to its array of seasonal language courses.

Our regular online Arabic classes continue to operate successfully. Our instructor, Mohammed Abu Amara, has been with us for several years now and continues teaching Arabic classes online, attracting students both in the UK and abroad.

Recently, the AOS established a partnership with Mawrid Al Marifa to offer Omani Dialect classes as a valuable addition to our regular schedule of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) classes. This course is tailored for students who possess an intermediate to advanced proficiency in Arabic, emphasising on conversational skills and the ability to communicate naturally in Oman (as well as the wider Gulf). The classes are conducted through Zoom and recorded for students' convenience, allowing them to review the material whenever necessary.

We anticipate that these classes will provide direct benefits to our members currently residing in Oman or those planning to relocate there in the near future. Our first cohort was instructed by Samah Al Ma'maria, a seasoned teacher who has fostered a positive rapport with the students. We intend to continue offering these classes in the future, and we highly encourage anyone interested to keep an eye on their emails or refer to the website. ■



Samah, our Omani instructor

FOREIGN PRESS ASSOCIATION EVENT IN LONDON



The Sultanate of Oman again took part in the annual Foreign Press Association (FPA) media awards ceremony in London. Dr. Abdullah bin Nasser Al Harrasi, Minister of Information, addressing the event via videoconferencing, said that Oman supports the FPA because of a deep belief in the role of media in spreading international and intercultural understanding.

Dr. Abdullah pointed out that Oman's economic diversification policy is prompted not just by economic necessity, but also by humanitarian factors and the need to address climate change. He touched on the impacts of climatic conditions in Oman last year and the drought that persisted in the United Kingdom at the same time. Both examples highlight the urgency of immediate action, he said, noting that Oman was among the first countries to take concrete measures to protect nature, and has pledged to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. Oman's economic policies underline that diversifying the economy should go hand in hand with protecting nature.

A documentary on Oman was screened, highlighting Oman's economic potentials and infrastructure that encourage investment and tourism, in addition to the country's distinctive weather and cultural diversity.

HE Bader Mohammed Al Mantheri, Omani Ambassador in London, was among 300 representatives from more than 100 media establishments in Britain and other parts of the world. Oman was again a sponsor of the event after being the Gold Sponsor last year (see AOS Review 2022, page 36).

TOP NEUROLOGIST LECTURE AND INTERVIEW

DR AL HASHMI Q AND A SESSION WITH ROSA BRAUNE



Distinguished Omani Neurologist Dr Amal Al Hashmi BSc, MD, FRCPC, gave the Society's May lecture on Stroke in the Young.

Her fascinating talk debunked the widely held belief that stroke is exclusively a disease of older populations. She spoke of how she encountered young patients with stroke in her daily practice in Oman. She highlighted the lack of traditional risk factors in these young patients, as well as the presence of other risk factors, including Sickle Cell Disease and Moyamoya Disease. She went on to discuss treatments for these particular cases.

Here, she tells us more about her career from the unique perspective of a woman working in a male dominated area of medicine in Oman, as well as her wider achievements in neurology and beyond:

Q What has been your biggest career highlight to-date and why?

A Being a senior consultant neurologist is one of the major achievements, neurology is the most complicated and rational field of medicine. No doubt, being

the founder of Oman's stroke programmes and the founder and president of Oman Stroke Society are both major achievements. But saving peoples' lives and changing others' lives is my biggest achievement in life.

Q In 2013 you led on the development of the first national stroke guidelines for Oman in association with the London-based Royal College of Physicians (RCP). Can you tell us a bit more about this collaboration?

A Yes indeed, it was a wonderful experience to collaborate with the Royal College of Physicians in London, we did that with the help of Professor Tony Rudd, Professor of Stroke Medicine at Kings College London and advisor at the Royal College of Physicians.

It was one whole year of hard work. The group visited us at the Royal Hospital in Oman and we had a stroke workshop. The group engaged in the preparation was really big and included representatives from different stroke multidisciplinary teams.

Q Your career includes achieving many firsts in your field. You have also achieved many firsts in your field as a female. You are the first female neurologist in Oman. You were also the first woman to hold the position of deputy at the Oman Medical Association (2013 to 2016). Could you tell us more about this? How has the landscape in Oman changed for women entering your profession today?

A Yes, I guess I'm privileged to be the first female neurologist for adults in Oman. I was also the first among men and

women to be board certified in neurology at the Ministry of Health. I also served as the first neurologist from Oman on the World Federation of Neurology Teaching Course Committee for two years (2018 and 2019).

I'm also the first woman to hold a deputy position at Oman Medical Association (OMA), luckily the first female to be a scientific committee member for a World Stroke Organization congress representing the Middle East and Africa (Toronto, October 2023). I'm also the chairperson of the Accreditation Initiative of Stroke Programs in the MENA + region (www.mena-sino.com) and the first female to hold such a position.

Of course, it is very challenging given the fact that the field of neurology is dominated by men worldwide, and being a woman from the Eastern community made it even harder. However, I personally believe that in order to be successful and achieve, competition is needed, otherwise things will be boring and won't be fruitful.

I helped to encourage some female medical students to get into the field of neurology, and currently there are a few of them in the pipeline. I'm also engaging with young women neurologists from our MENA region and we are planning to do some research where all the authors are women.

Q Your achievements are not only limited to your field. You have represented Oman at a number of international events as human rights commissioner – you were committee member of Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRC) 2016-2019. Can you tell us more about this?

A Indeed, I was honoured by the former Sultan of Oman through a royal decree to be a member of the OHRC. It was a fascinating experience. It was, without a doubt, one of the most beautiful experiences I have had. I learned a lot through regional and global congresses and meetings that I attended in the field of human rights, which was an eye-opener for reading more and more about this field. During this period, I delivered a few talks, and among the highlights were lectures introducing human rights at Sohar

University for the students' category and high human rights from multiple perspectives. I also participated in a symposium held at the College of Law at Sultan Qaboos University, in addition to heading the Omani delegation in some of these regional meetings.

Q We were lucky enough to host your lecture at the AOS in 2023 while you were in the UK as part of your work as a Visiting Research Fellow at Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. Can you tell us more about your project there?

A It is a great opportunity, my project is about the brain-computer interface (BCI), and I was lucky this scientific research coincides with the launching of a neuroscience research project at the Centre. The research focus involves the medical and non-medical applications of BCI technology, and the ethical issues raised around it.

Q Finally, what does 2024 hold for you in terms of talks, publications and research? Where and when can our readers learn more about your work and when might we invite you back!

A Currently, I'm the principal investigator for a few ongoing research studies at regional level (MENA+

region). One is a retrospective multicentre study looking at the aetiology and risk factors for stroke in the young in the MENA+ region. Additionally, I'm leading a prospective multicentre study of transient ischaemic attack (TIA), commonly known as mini stroke, in the MENA. The third one is a white paper about accreditation of stroke programmes in the MENA region between aspiration and reality.

I'm also working on a white paper about brain-computer interface and Muslim societies. Additionally, at the local level, I have one prospective study (2016-2022) under analysis. I am expecting publication for all these studies by 2024.

I'm also hosting (chairperson) Oman's 5th and 6th International Stroke Conference, taking place 15-16 December in 2023, and the same dates in 2024. For this, the AOS are helping me in nominating two UK neurologists to speak.

Additionally, I have many talks to deliver, for example the 8th MENA-SINO conference that will be held in Lahore, Pakistan, and the 9th MENA-SINO conference in Alexandria, Egypt, October 2024, among others.

Also, I am currently engaged with the World Stroke Organization in the accreditation of stroke programme initiatives in the MENA.

I was very delighted and honoured by this opportunity and would always love to come back and give another talk. ■

Dr Al Hashmi studied medicine at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). She continued her post grade study in the field of Neurology at McGill University (Montreal Neurology Institute, MNI), Montreal, Canada. She holds the Canadian Board in Neurology (certified by the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada). She currently works as a Senior Consultant Neurologist (Strokologist) and Head of the Central Stroke Unit in Ministry of Health of Oman (since 2013).





Dr. Amor Bin Nasser Al Matani (CEO) and Mohammed Juma Al Mukhaini (Senior Manager Communication & Community Affairs), Oman LNG Development Foundation with Society Director, Neil Coxon.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

OMAN LNG IS CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

Established by Royal Decree in 1994, Oman Liquefied Natural Gas LLC (Oman LNG) is a joint venture operating under the laws of the Sultanate. The company is renowned for producing and selling Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) and its by-products Natural Gas Liquids (NGL).

Its activities go beyond liquefying, selling and marketing Oman's natural gas. Since its inception, Oman LNG has placed significant emphasis on contributing to the growth and development of Oman and its people in various spheres through its vigorous Social Investment Programmes.

To further strengthen its robust Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts, Oman LNG Development Foundation was founded in 2015 as a centre of excellence to support the country's socio-economic fabric. It provides financial support to projects and initiatives, acts as Oman's largest CSR 'Centre of Excellence', and functions as a role model for sustainable social investment in Oman and beyond.

From healthcare and wellbeing to tourism and heritage, Oman LNG invests

in just about any field. Its Social Investment Programmes involves three distinct funds:

- Community Fund: this targets initiatives in areas surrounding the company's remarkable Plant Complex.
- National Fund: this covers a large swathe of the company's social development programmes.
- Reserve Fund: this ensures continuous sustainability of current and future CSR projects and programmes.

The "Gift to the Nation" initiative comes as an honourable endowment given every five years to enhance the lives of people across the Sultanate. Its milestones and projects address sectors from healthcare and medicine to tourism and environmental protection.

Even prior to operations, Oman LNG testified its commitment to support the nation through financing the establishment of Sur Hospital at a total cost of USD 4.7 million in the coastal city of Sur, where the world-class LNG Plant Complex is located.

Equipped with the latest technologies, Sur Hospital provides cutting-edge medical services in different specialities. Its role grew further with the outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020 when Oman LNG funded the establishment and inauguration of the Isolation Ward to combat the spread and transmission of the virus and other infectious diseases.

As healthcare is among the company's main priorities, Oman LNG collaborated with the Royal Oman Police in 2010 to provide 26 fully-equipped ambulances at a cost of USD 2.6 million. This helped to save the lives of patients and ensured critical cases reach hospitals on time.

Oman LNG has spared no effort to deliver modern medical tools and equipment to numerous health centres and hospitals across the nation. This explains the company's strive to finance the establishment of Kidney Dialysis Units in two hospitals to provide patients with better diagnostic and treatment services.

Oman LNG's commitment to pioneer social responsibility emphasises its role as a corporate citizen. In 2020, it earmarked six million Omani Rials to advocate the Ministry of Health's efforts in combatting the spread of the pandemic and supporting the Job Security Fund. The latter was set up by the Government to assist those who lost their jobs due to the pandemic and for job seekers. It will help to find alternative jobs for those laid off, while financial aids will be distributed to workers until they join new work.

When Shaheen Cyclone wrecked coastal governorates in 2021, the company approved a similar amount to support relief efforts in areas affected by the cyclone. Not only did this confirm Oman LNG's role in the society, but also translated its vision of standing with the nation at all times.

As health and wellbeing go hand in hand, the company collaborated with the Ministry of Social Development to establish Oman's first National Autism Centre. Catering for more than 120 cases a year, the Centre raises awareness on Autism Spectrum Disorder and enables social

inclusion through facilitating rehabilitation and treatment in autistic individuals.

The state-of-art facility also helps research into the root causes and diagnosis of autism, with tailor-made programmes and services to support and accommodate families with autistic children.

Blessed with a rich heritage deeply rooted in history and a unique flora and fauna; Oman LNG's milestones also involve financing the establishment of Fatah Al Khair Centre in Sur. The Centre reflects the ancient maritime history Sur holds and testifies its role in trade since ancient times. With more than 400 artefacts and items on display, the Centre is expected to boost tourism and preserve the local heritage for future generations.

Likewise, the company financed the rehabilitation project of the Ancient City of Qalhat, reflecting its efforts to promote Oman's rich heritage.

On a different note, the company spared USD 2.6 million to establish the Turtle Science Centre in Ras Al Jinz Reserve in Sur. The centre aims to provide the latest advanced means to preserve and showcase the lifecycle of sea turtles.

Oman LNG's commitment towards supporting environmental preservation is testified by its funding of Sur Public Park. Set to operate as a self-sustaining enterprise, the Park is expected to provide exceptional investment opportunities for local Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and local entrepreneurs, offer space for different activities and sports and also boost tourism.

The company has inked a pivotal agreement with the Ministry of Social Development to provide exceptional services to children with disability at an estimated cost of USD 10.6 million. The pact intends to upgrade the capabilities and skillsets of more than 250 therapists and professionals working with children with disability, launch electronic-based platforms and programmes specialising in rehabilitation and accommodating them in public education; and to enhance the facilities and services of related associations and centres.

Sustainability has long been a crucial component of Oman LNG's social responsibility strategy. As such, the need to come together and work towards collective change is growing. The keen interest in sustainability stems from the company's belief in diminishing any

possible harm businesses impose on people and the environment.

At Oman LNG, the idea of embedding sustainability is a priority. Therefore, the company has recently agreed to fund the rehabilitation of Mibam Sustainable Village, ultimately aiming to support capacity building in the society. Introduced by local youth, the project translates the company's sustainability efforts among the community, tourism and environment. ■

Dr Amor bin Nasser Al Matani, CEO Oman LNG Development Foundation, gave the Society's March hybrid lecture on the role of oil and gas companies in driving CSR in developing economies.

Dr Amor joined Oman LNG in 2002 as Deputy CEO. After graduating from Teesside University with a degree in Instrumentation and Control Engineering, he joined Petroleum Development Oman in upstream operations and commissioning. In the Ministry of Health he occupied a number of executive positions, including Deputy Director General for Administration and Finance at the Royal Hospital, Oman's largest hospital for specialised medical care. He completed his MBA (Newcastle) before being appointed as Director General for Sur Industrial Estate in the Public Establishment of Industrial Estates (PEIE).

He recently completed a PhD in Business Sustainability, is a member of several university and technical college boards, chairman of the Board of Trustees for OLANG's HAS school and chairman of OLANG's Tender Board.

As CEO of the Oman LNG Development Foundation, Dr Amor has incorporated sustainability issues more deeply into the Foundation's social investment portfolio. Dr Amor's leadership has supported the development of Oman LNG's sustainability strategies, including initiatives to reduce emissions and invest in renewable energy sources. The company has created several sustainability programmes to promote economic, social, and environmental development (ESG), enabling the introduction of a new social investment strategy that champions sustainability efforts and programmes.

Dr Amor's dedication to sustainability and strong leadership led to his appointment as a board member of the Oman Centre for Governance and Sustainability. This has enabled him to champion numerous sustainable programmes across the country.

HARAT AL-BILAD, MANAH, REVEALED

ARCHITECTURE AND SOCIAL HISTORY OF AN OMANI OASIS SETTLEMENT

Prof Soumyen Bandyopadhyay, Dr Giamila Quattrone and Claudia Briguglio, from the University of Liverpool's ArCHIAM Centre (Architecture and Cultural Heritage of India, Arabia and the Maghreb), gave the Society October lecture as part of their monthly programme of evening talks for members as well as the general public.

Prof Bandyopadhyay talked about the architecture and social history of Manah and its main quarter, Harat al-Bilad, at the heart of the oasis. Dr Quattrone and Miss Briguglio presented the *Harat al-Bilad, Manah, Virtual Exhibition*, a research-informed digital resource developed by the Liverpool School of Architecture's ArCHIAM Centre with the aim of raising awareness of the importance of Harat al-Bilad in Oman's history, urban, architectural and artistic development, as well as to inform both on-site and remote experience of the settlement.

The ancient settlement quarter (*harah*) is surrounded by a stone and mudbrick wall, pierced by four gateways located on the cardinal directions. The imposing watchtowers by the main gateways, visible from afar across the date palm plantation, would have defended it from incursions. The three main streets originate from the

gateways. All civic and communal facilities – mosques, meeting halls, shops and Qur'anic schools or madrasah, feature on them. A network of lanes, called *sikkah*, and dead-end passages or *drab*, give access to the dense maze of dwellings.

The settlement was uninhabited for decades after residents moved to the modern town and it was facing extreme dilapidation. From the early 1990s Prof Soumyen Bandyopadhyay researched historic oasis settlements in Oman beginning with Manah, which resulted in his 2011 book, *Manah: An Omani Oasis, an Arabian Legacy Architecture and Social History of an Omani Settlement*. In the early 2000s, the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, now Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, started conservation, focusing on restoring the north access gate, three mosques and some domestic and civic buildings.

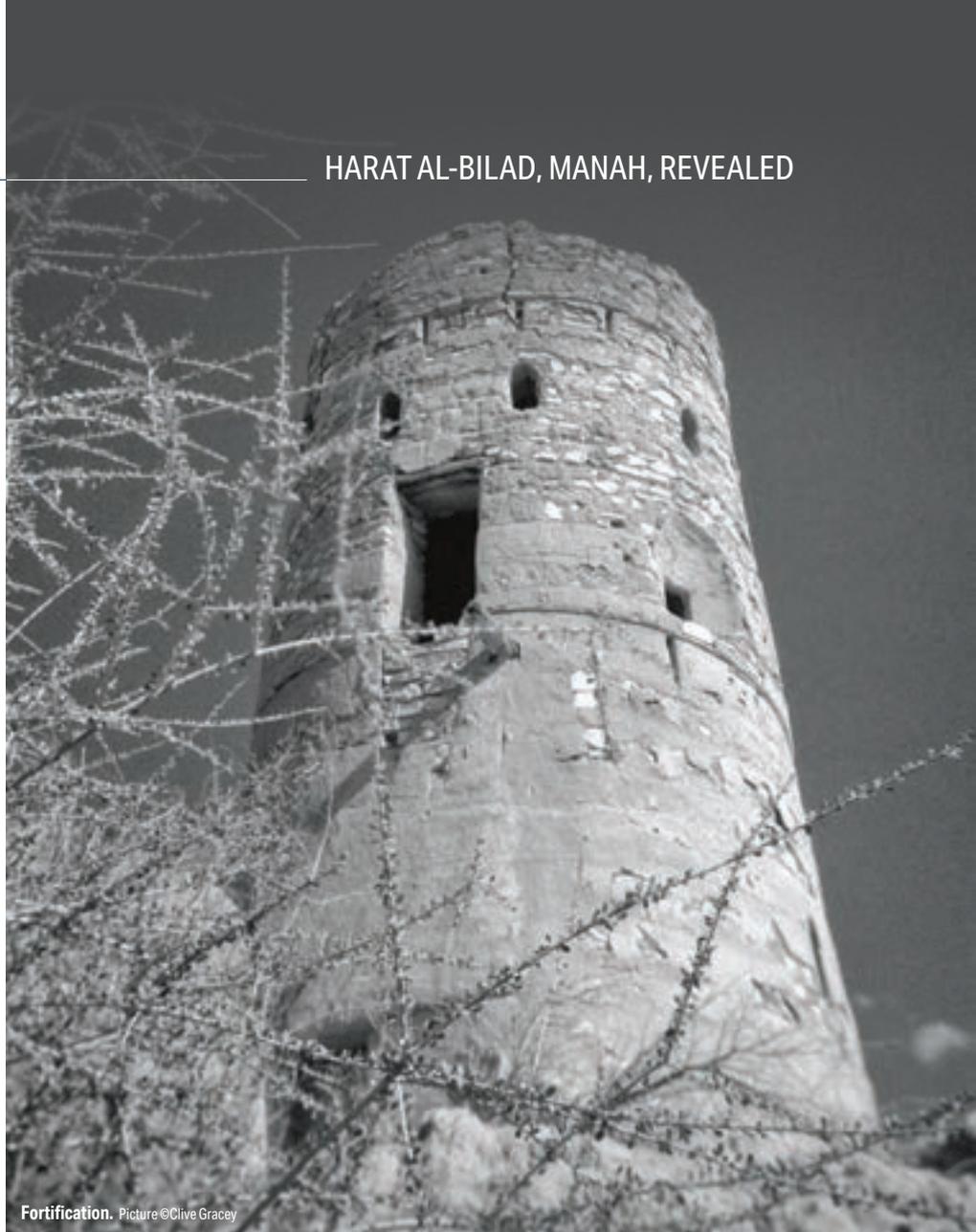


The project idea matured towards the end of 2020, during COVID-19, when the site was closed and there was no certainty it would reopen. Drawing on Prof Bandyopadhyay's longstanding and world-leading research, the team decided to convert a physical exhibition, developed in 2019, to showcase the urban and architectural heritage of Harat Al-Bilad on site, into a virtual museum.

Meanwhile, the 2021 report *Museums, museum professionals and Covid-19: third survey* by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism and culture sector's income and operations capacity that led to lost jobs and reduced cultural programmes, and on the society it compromised wellbeing.

Initial plans for the virtual museum broadened leading to the development of a research-informed, multimedia digital resource which people could access remotely via a dedicated website to virtually experience and learn about the site while this remained closed, and, later, to augment the on-site experience using QR codes.

The *Harat al-Bilad, Manah, Virtual Exhibition* website, developed by ARCHIAM with Martin Winchester, the



Fortification. Picture ©Clive Gracey



Liverpool School of Architecture's Experimental Officer in Design Computing, draws from the extensive collection of drawn material by Prof Soumyen Bandyopadhyay and photographic collection of Clive Gracey.

The website homepage provides an overview of the importance of Harat al-Bilad in Oman's history, as well as in the urban, architectural and artistic development of central Oman with a video produced by Monika Koeck. It features a settlement model with key sites highlighted and linked to dedicated pages with historical and architectural information, as well as relevant drawings and photographs.

A tab showcasing a photograph of the dwelling adjacent to the northern gate (Bab al-Burj), which has been 3D modelled to virtually host the exhibition, allows access to the model displaying the settlement's heritage in five thematic galleries: Townscape, Architecture, Fortifications,



Sablahs. Picture ©Soumyen Bandyopadhyay

Dwellings and Details. The website includes two additional tabs: a glossary and a bibliography with sources on Harat al-Bilad and Omani oasis settlements in general.

Currently, ArCHIAM is developing a digital repository of traditional material culture artefacts from Harat al-Bilad and the Ad Dakhiliyah region, which will be incorporated. The artefacts, encompassing household utensils, architectural features, work utensils, jewellery, furniture and furnishing, clothing and accessories, have been photogrammetrically

documented to generate 270 navigable digital models, and will be accompanied by metadata on provenance, culture, date, material, dimensions and use.

The impact of the virtual exhibition and other website sections is twofold. At societal level, it is expected to inform and raise awareness about the importance of Harat al-Bilad in the history of Oman's Interior amongst the public, government officials, culture sector staff and tour guides, and to enhance on-site visitor experience. Within academia, it will augment knowledge of Oman's heritage environments through multi-media research dissemination.

Through June, the virtual exhibition was on display at RIBA North, Liverpool, as part of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture 2022 and ArCHIAM 10-year Anniversary exhibitions *Inclusive, Sustainable, Innovative*. An online survey suggested most visitors aged between 18 and 44 were unfamiliar with the subject, but the website greatly enhanced their knowledge of the site, its importance and role in Oman's history and development of its Interior. They would read more about the subject, attend relevant public events such as lectures and conferences, and visit relevant museums/galleries or exhibitions to further their knowledge. ■



Dwellings. Picture ©Clive Gracey



The team (left to right): Claudia Briguglio, Soumyen Bandyopadhyay and Giamila Quattrone. Picture ©Rob Battersby

CLAUDIA BRIGUGLIO

Claudia Briguglio is Research Assistant at Liverpool, is part of ArCHIAM and supports the teaching of architectural technology, design, and heritage management and sustainable development. In ArCHIAM, Claudia leads practice-based projects for adaptive reuse of traditional buildings in Oman, co-leads the design and curation of research exhibitions, and contributes to field and digital documentation of traditional settlements in Oman, Morocco and India. Claudia is interested in architecture, cultural heritage and informal coastal urbanism around the Indian Ocean. She is doing a part-time PhD, 'Investigating Omani vernacular settings towards ecological urbanism'.

Claudia has contributed to: *Documentation and Heritage Management and Development Plan. Salalah Al-Wusta and Gharbiya, Dhofar Governorate*. Muscat: Ministry of Heritage and Culture, Oman (2016); *Documentation and Heritage Management and Development Plan. Mirbat, Dhofar Governorate*. Muscat: Ministry of Heritage and Culture, Oman (2016); *Documentation and Tourism Development Master Plan. Misfat Al-'Abriyeen, Al-Hamra, Dakhiliyah Governorate*. Muscat: Ministry of Tourism, Oman (2015).

SOUMYEN BANDYOPADHYAY

Soumyen Bandyopadhyay is the Sir James Stirling Chair in Architecture, the University Heritage Theme Lead and former Head of the Liverpool School of Architecture. Soumyen is director of ArCHIAM, an interdisciplinary forum with research and implementation projects in Oman, Qatar, Morocco and India. His teaching and research interests are focused on the historical, theoretical and contextual approaches to architectural design and the architecture and settlements of India and the Middle East.

Soumyen has extensive experience of architectural practice and has undertaken advisory and consultancy work in urban development, heritage management and reuse of Omani oasis settlements. In addition to published works in journals, he is the author of monographs and edited volumes including *Site and Composition* (Routledge, 2016) and *Manah: Omani Oasis, Arabian Legacy* (Liverpool University Press, 2011), *The Territories of Identity* (Routledge, 2013) and *The Humanities in Architectural Design* (Routledge 2007). He is currently working on a monograph on Muscat entitled *Cosmopolitan Muscat: Omani Architecture of a Globalising Port City*.

GIAMILA QUATTRONE

Giamila Quattrone is Lecturer in Architecture at Liverpool, where she teaches architectural technology, design, and heritage management and sustainable development. In her co-director role of ArCHIAM, she leads/co-leads cultural heritage projects ranging from research and documentation to sustainable development of heritage sites, from digitisation of archival collections to developing open-access pedagogic material, as well as community outreach, public engagement and capacity building initiatives. She is also the Digital Heritage Sub-Theme for the Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty, the School of the Arts Impact Lead, and newly appointed Expert Member of the International Scientific Committee on Vernacular Architecture.

Giamila's research interests revolve around three main areas: Arabian and North African vernacular architecture, focusing on traditional oasis settlements in Oman, Tunisia and Morocco and their changing settlement, dwelling and building patterns in the face of globalisation, sustainable heritage management and adaptive reuse, and creative re-cycling of waste lands, buildings and materials. She has co-authored 13 documentation and heritage management plans for traditional oasis settlements in Oman, and is currently working on a journal article on *The Traditional Liwan-Type House of the Sinaw Oasis, Oman*.



Dr Elisabeth Kendall and Reem Philby leading discussions at the launch event.

EARLY BRITISH WOMEN EXPLORERS OF ARABIA

ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY'S EXHIBITION

The Royal Geographical Society opened its 'Early British Women Explorers of Arabia' exhibition with a spectacular evening launch event on 8 February.

The month-long exhibition paid homage to five women who journeyed Arabia for different reasons, but shared an open mind, willingness to adventure and the desire to record their travels.

It featured photographs, letters, maps and other mementos from the trips of Gertrude Bell (1916), Dame Freya Stark (1920s and 1930s), Lady Evelyn (Zainab) Cobbold (1933), Lady Anne Blunt and Princess Alice (1938).

Dr Elisabeth Kendall, British Omani Society trustee, arabist and British female explorer of Arabia in her own right, kicked off the event with an introduction including the great quotation by Freya Stark – 'I have no reason to go, except that I have never been'. Wise words. Indeed, that sentiment may have been one of the many that propelled all five of these explorers to trek around Arabia.

Gertrude Bell, writer, diplomat and

archaeologist, was the only British woman at the Cairo conference in 1916 and instrumental in Arab politics as well as the preservation of Iraq's archaeological heritage of the time.

Lady Evelyn Cobbold grew up visiting North Africa on holiday. When she met the Pope, she abruptly informed him that she was Muslim, and indeed did convert later in her life. She eventually gained permission to visit Mecca and was the first British woman to complete this pilgrimage.

Lady Anne Blunt, keen equestrian and granddaughter of Lord Byron and daughter of Ada Lovelace, is credited with saving the Arabian horse.

Dame Freya Stark was a prolific writer and explorer of the Middle East. She arrived in Lebanon in the same way any one of us may hope to kick off our own trek to Arabia, 'with very little money, a revolver, and a fur coat'. Her contributions

Dr Elisabeth Kendall, British Omani Society trustee, arabist and British female explorer of Arabia in her own right, kicked off the event.

resulted in the Royal Geographical Society's Back Award for "applied or scientific geographical studies which make an outstanding contribution to the development of national or international public policy" and the Founders Award.

Princess Alice was the first European royal to visit Saudi Arabia and to meet its founding father King Abdulaziz. The visit was sparked by a chance meeting with the Crown Prince at Royal Ascot two years earlier. His invitation to Saudi, provided that she didn't mind sleeping in tents on occasion, was accepted and she toured the country with her husband, the Earl of Athlone, by car.

A great highlight of the launch event was the inaugural screening of *Journey of a Lifetime* documenting Princess Alice's journey. The King Abdulaziz Public Library, which acquired some of Princess Alice's

Lady Anne Blunt with her favourite Arabian mare, Kasida.



Gertude Bell



belongings via one of her grandchildren, produced the documentary film including never before developed photographs and footage from the trip. The film was presented to Queen Elizabeth II as a gift by the Saudi royal family.

After the screening, the audience were invited to join a discussion between Dr Kendall and Reem Philby, granddaughter of Harry St John (Abdullah) Philby. She completed the 'Heart of Arabia' expedition alongside Mark Evans (see pages 62-63 in the Review) entailing a 1300km crossing of Saudi Arabia in the footsteps of her grandfather. Following a light-hearted Q+A session, including a plea from the Saudi British Society for donations as they seek to establish a Philby Arabia Fund, the event came to a close with concluding remarks by the Saudi Ambassador to the UK, Prince Khalid bin Bandar bin Sultan. ■

THE HEART OF ARABIA EXPEDITION

ON THE TRAIL OF EXPLORER HARRY ST JOHN PHILBY

ARTICLE BY MARK EVANS

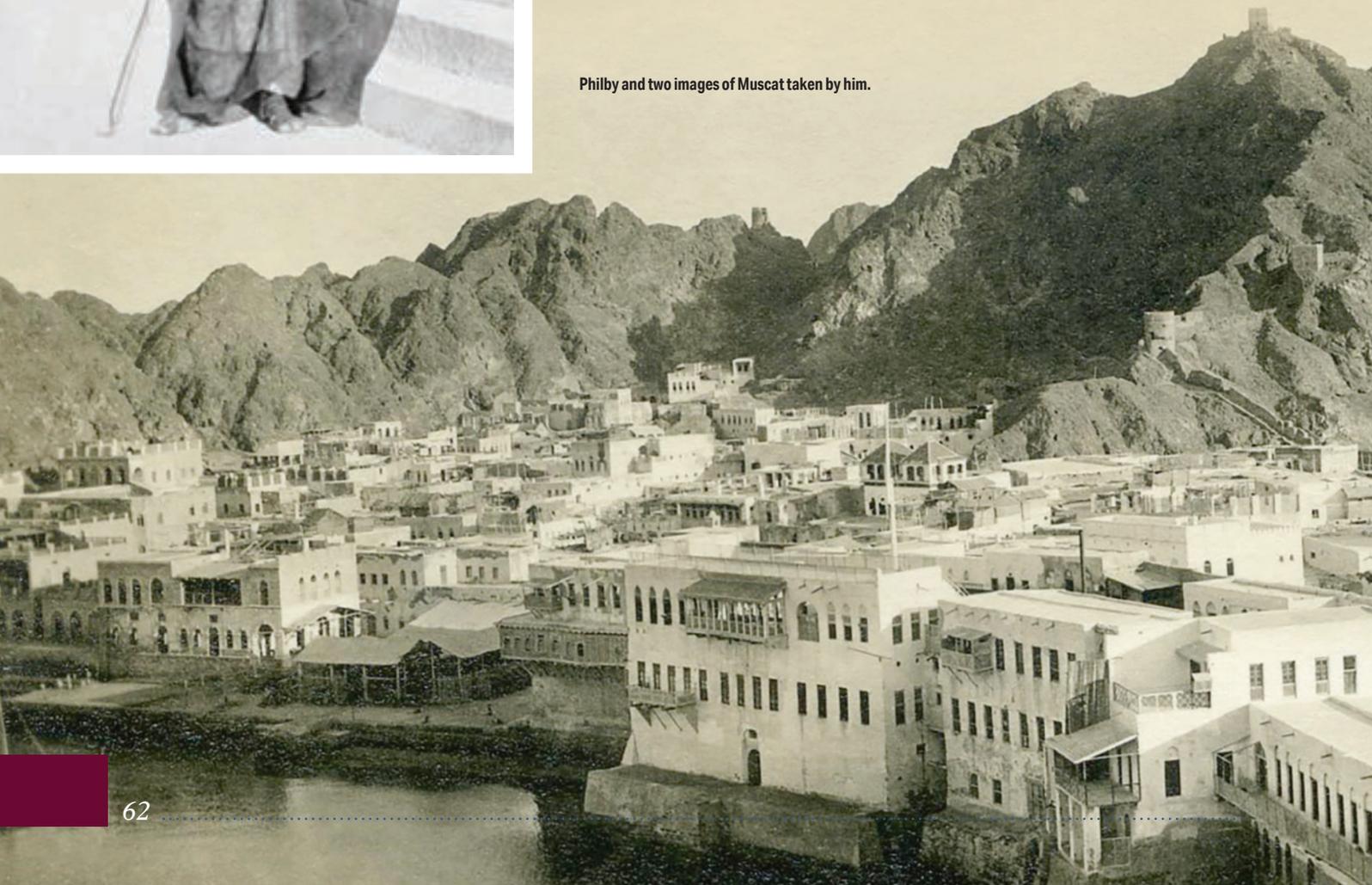


Ernest Shackleton and his men had just returned to the UK 106 years ago in 1917, after their long journey home following the incredible ordeal of *The Endurance*, and Elephant Island.

Within a few months another extraordinary individual set his compass on 180 degrees and headed south on an adventure that would shape the rest of his life, and that would also help shape a nation, and a region.

Sailing south from Basra under the orders of Gertrude Bell, political officer Harry St John Philby's instructions were to lead a small mission to travel into the interior of Arabia. There he was to forge an alliance with Ibn Saud in an effort to cut off Turkish supply lines across the central desert, and so support the work of Lieutenant T.E. Lawrence who was busily disrupting supply lines further west.

Philby and two images of Muscat taken by him.





*Philby went on to spend the rest of his life exploring Arabia, writing several books, including one called *The Heart of Arabia*.*



On 16 November 1917, having come ashore at the small port of Al Uqair near Bahrain, Philby and his small team started their journey west, reaching Riyadh on 30 November and striking up a lifelong friendship with Ibn Saud that would result in Philby converting to Islam, and spending the rest of his life in Arabia.

After several days of intense discussions, under the protection of Ibn Saud's men Philby pushed on west, eventually reaching Jeddah on the Red Sea and so crossing the Arabian Peninsula from East to West. So meticulous were his field notes that cartographers were able to add considerable detail to the existing maps of the interior of Arabia and in 1920, with the approval of King George, The Royal Geographical Society awarded Philby their prestigious Founders Medal.

Philby went on to spend the rest of his life exploring Arabia, writing several books, including one called *The Heart of Arabia* that described his famous journey of 1917. He visited Oman briefly en-route between Basra and Ceylon, and passed away in Beirut in 1960 whilst travelling overland from London to Riyadh. His son Kim scratched on his grave the next day 'the greatest of all Arabian explorers'.

On exactly the same date of 16 November but 105 years later, a small team left the now abandoned port of Al Uqair to retrace Philby's 1917 journey on foot, by camel and by 4-wheel drive. Continuing Philby's focus on gathering field data the team, consisting of expedition

photographer Ana Maria Pavalache, Riyadh based expedition logistics expert Alan Morrissey and Philby's granddaughter Reem Philby and myself set out to gather data to support three research projects ranging from recording bat calls and roost sites, photographing lithic artefacts on the desert floor and field testing a digital application designed to optimize human performance in extreme environments.

With a land mass approximately ten times the size of the UK, and a population less than half of the UK, much of Saudi Arabia remains under-surveyed and recorded, making such data collection of great value to field scientists who struggle to cover so much ground.

In her first public duty following the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, HRH The Princess Royal, expedition patron, launched The Heart of Arabia Expedition at The Royal Geographical Society in London on 22 September 2022 in the presence of Saudi Arabian Ambassador HRH Prince Khalid bin Bandar and the UK Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Neil Crompton, with good coverage appearing on BBC News and in The Times.

Audio diaries captured each day during the journey were used to build a series of expedition podcasts that have now had more than 8,000 downloads from 63 countries around the world.

Mark Evans will be speaking at the Society about the Heart of Arabia Expedition in April 2024. ■

Over 100 members, friends and guests of the Society gathered on a warm May Muscat evening to hear from two experts on the Arabian Sea Humpback Whale – a species unique to the Sultanate. During a hugely informative, eye opening and emotional 90 minutes of discussion, videos, charts and questions, Executive Director of the Environment Society of Oman (ESO), Suaad al Harthi, and Founding Director of Future Seas, Dr Andrew Wilson, opened our eyes to this threatened group of whales, now numbering less than 100. The Society would like to extend a warm thank you to the speakers and the ESO for this excellent collaboration and to OQ and Oman LNG for their sponsorship. We'd also like to thank Olivia Dalziel for inspiring and initiating this partnership and for all she has done in support of Oman's environment. What follows is a presentation summary compiled by the Environment Society of Oman.

OLIVER BLAKE

UNLOCKING MYSTERIES OF THE OMANI ARABIAN SEA HUMPBAC WHALE POPULATION

Suaad provided an introduction to the important role that humpback whales play globally and their consideration as a 'flagship species' due to their charismatic nature – in protecting them we work towards the conservation of other habitats and species

that occupy the same areas. Whales are also considered a 'keystone species' in that they play an essential role in maintaining the health of ecosystems. Of particular interest is the important role they play in regulating climate change through a system

known as the 'whale pump'. Whales transport carbon and other nutrients vertically through the water column and help create conditions for phytoplankton blooms that support the entire food chain and help to absorb CO₂ from the atmosphere.



An overview of research conducted on ASHW in Oman from 2000 onward was provided. This revealed the following key points about the population using the waters off Oman and likely the wider Arabian Sea:

- Every other population of humpback whales in the world undertakes long migrations between high latitude feeding grounds, where they take advantage of high productivity in summer months, and low latitude/tropical breeding grounds where they generally fast while they focus on mating, calving and nursing young.
- In the 1990s evidence emerged that humpback whales were in the Arabian Sea year-round, and whales that were illegally hunted by Soviet whaling fleets off the coasts of Oman, Pakistan and India between 1964 and 1966 had full stomachs and embryos that indicated whales were adhering to a Northern Hemisphere breeding cycle, despite having no feasible migration routes to northern feeding grounds.
- Upwelling of cold, nutrient rich waters during the Southwest Monsoon/Khareef allows humpback whales to find both abundant prey and the warm protected water that they need for reproduction within the tropical latitudes of the Arabian Sea.
- Photo-identification studies indicate that fewer than 100 individuals use the waters off the coast of Oman, while genetic studies show that these individuals have been isolated from other Indian Ocean populations for more than 70,000 years. Current population modelling which is still undergoing peer review indicates that the population is not stable.
- Satellite tagged whales generally stayed within Oman's EEZ, although one individual crossed the Arabian Sea to the Southern tip of India and back again.
- Habitat modelling from boat-based surveys and satellite tagging, as well as humpback whale song recorded by passive acoustic monitoring shows that the Gulf of Masirah and the Hallaniyats Bay are 'hotspots' for the Arabian Sea Humpback Whales in Oman.
- These areas, particularly the Gulf of Masirah, are also important for fisheries and shipping.



A recent visual health assessment of ASHW in Oman found that 66% of all animals examined showed evidence of past entanglement in fishing gear, while four animals had evidence of scarring attributable to ship strikes/propellor damage. Whales also had a high prevalence of skin lesions thought to be caused by a poxivirus – a possible sign of weakened immunity and overall fitness.

The second half of the presentation focused on the altered route that project partners are charting towards conservation of ASHWs given emerging evidence of their ecology and threats in the region. Whilst 20 years of research and tens of thousands of kilometers of searching for whales at sea has revealed fascinating insights to the population identity and ecology, the current evidence is demonstrating that conservation work is desperately lagging behind human induced pressures on ASHW breeding and feeding critical habitats.

Modelling of satellite tracking and shipping traffic movements has revealed that the preferred habitat of the whales over continental shelf areas co-occurs with some of the most dense shipping traffic routes around the Arabian Sea, including commercial cargo vessels transiting through Oman's waters. This presents a high risk of ships to strike whales with lethal force, a threat globally recognised as commercial shipping activities continue to

expand across migratory corridors of whales.

Meanwhile commercial, artisanal and illegal fisheries continue to escalate across the whale's range in the Arabian Sea against a backdrop of declining fish stocks of key species, including whale prey such as sardines. Additional climate change induced stresses are also becoming evident on ocean ecosystems as evidenced by the associated effects of weakening winter monsoons and increasing ocean temperatures. The presenter lamented the influences observed on the ASHW population as a 'silent spring', where detection of whale song during the breeding season declined from 60% of the time in 2012 to 2% in 2022 and sporadic sightings in their core home range in the Hallaniyat Bay and Gulf of Masirah in 2021 and 2022.

This changing seascape poses a challenge for conservationists struggling to map the status, distribution and behaviour of this population, activities which are necessary to apply appropriate management and mitigation measures. The project partners believe that forming a community of government and industry leaders around the community of whales is a solution that can be adopted to raise the profile of the population and secure stakeholder input to management activities.

The Renaissance group provided the first multi-year funding dedicated to

OMANI ARABIAN SEA HUMPBACK WHALE POPULATION



Ma'an Al Rawahi

the Environment Society of Oman and Environment Authority together with collaborators at the International Whaling Commission now appeal for industry leaders to back initiatives within a Conservation Management Plan funded by HSBC and launched in 2022. Critical to this will be providing a fund to support the continuous development and employment of Omani nationals within this alternative industry dedicated to securing social, economic and environmental value for Oman's natural capital.

photo-identification and acoustic evidence indicate that they are genetically distinct and isolated from neighbouring humpback whale populations in the Indian Ocean. The IWC, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) have all expressed the urgent need for cross-cutting conservation actions to be taken at the government level to address the critical threats Arabian Sea Humpback Whales are facing. These threats include ship strikes, noise pollution, disturbance from unregulated tourism and entanglement in fishing nets. In 2022, ESO and the Environment Authority jointly organised a Conservation Management Planning workshop to initiate discussions with multiple stakeholders on a national plan to mitigate threats to the Arabian Sea Humpback Whales. Going hand in hand with advocacy campaigns at the government level, the Environment Society of Oman has also led several community level initiatives including; targeted fishermen awareness campaigns, net clearing activities that have removed almost 800 tons of abandoned fishing gear, safety training of whale and dolphin tour operators, capacity building of Omanis in cetacean research and school awareness campaigns. ■

supporting fundamental research activities of ASHWs with the Port of Duqm early to get behind a whale management and mitigation plan in waters adjacent to the port. The World Shipping Council recently ordered a review of vessel routing options to avoid important ASHW habitats presented from Oman based studies.

The current partnership supported by

Parties interested in supporting research and conservation activities are encouraged to contact the Environment Society of Oman: *Arabian Sea humpback whales (ASHW) comprise a small and unique sub-population of humpback whales (possibly fewer than 100 individuals off the coast of Oman), resident in the Arabian Sea year-round. Genetic,*

Dr Amor Al Matani, CEO of Oman LNG Foundation and President of ESO, with the speakers.



BENEFITS AND IMPACT: SOCIETY GRANT SCHEME

ARTICLE BY JAMIE BOWDEN
CHAIRMAN OF THE GRANTS COMMITTEE

I must begin by thanking Stuart Laing for all that he achieved in his tenure as Chair of the Grants Committee. In particular, he put in place a systematic approach to decision making which ensures that applications for awards are objectively assessed, especially for the benefits they will create and the impact they will have. It was a great pity that for much of his time as our Chair the work of the Committee was blighted by the pandemic.



Restrictions on travel meant that there were fewer applications than usual and three grants that have normally been made annually, sending British students to work as teaching assistants in the Sultan's School, paying for Sultan's School students to attend IB courses in the UK and sending British students to do Arabic language training in Oman, were not needed.

This year the grants budget was £100,000, a drop from £120,000 in 21/22 reflecting again a drop in the Society's rental income. We awarded grants worth £94,157 although £30,000 that we had allocated from the budget to pay for the Sultan's School IB courses was unclaimed.

This year the Committee is going to be talking to a range of Omani organisations to identify areas of activity that we might be able to support. We hope that one consequence will be more grants awarded to Omanis. Grants must, of course, be consistent with the Society's Objectives but we are also considering them against the priorities of Oman's Vision 2040. Vision 2040 places significant emphasis on economic development and as a result the Society is giving greater weight to grant applications from Omanis for activity such as training, technical development, economic planning, entrepreneurship, leadership and internships.

Turning to what we supported during the year we contributed £8,622 to the 6th Oman Natural Heritage Lecture, on the Birds of Oman, at the Royal Geographic Society. This has become an annual allocation which the Committee believes represents a good use of our resources. The lectures have consistently been excellent and reach a wide audience far beyond those who already know Oman.

We supported a community archaeology programme in Seeb organised by the International Association for Arabian Studies. Anyone who knows how quickly

Seeb is being developed will appreciate the urgency of some of the archaeological work there and this project involved local people in discovering and preserving their heritage. We made new grants to projects that we have supported in the past: Professor Dawn Chatty's work on nomadic society and Ibtisam al Wahaibi's book on the importance of camels to Omani society.

As a new focus, we supported two events organised by Omani student associations in the UK. Trustees are keen for the Society to forge closer relations with Omani students. We made a further grant to Outward Bound Oman to send instructors for training in the UK, an important contribution to the fostering of leadership skills amongst young Omanis. We made the third and final payment of the £45,000 grant agreed in 2020 to Oxford Brookes University to conduct research into the DNA of Omani flora. A key element of this work is developing the skills of Omani researchers.

For the first time in recent years we were able to pay for British students to work at the Sultan's School and for British students to do Arabic courses in Oman. As usual, we supported the publication of the Sultan's Armed Forces Association Journal.

The Committee has rewritten the grants page on the Society's website to make it clearer for potential applicants and Scott Dickson kindly reviewed and suggested some changes to the contract that we ask grant recipients to sign. The key addition is a disclaimer to make clear that the Society does not have any liability in respect of recipients of grants.

If you believe you know a person or project that may be eligible for a grant please do refer them to the website (www.britishomani.org/grant-application) and if they believe that they meet our criteria suggest they submit an application. ■

THE GAPPIES ARE BACK AT THE SULTAN'S SCHOOL

THE FIRST OF THIS YEAR'S TWO COHORTS CONSISTED OF GRACE KENNEDY (ST ANDREWS UNIVERSITY), SAM LOVEGROVE (AMPLEFORTH COLLEGE), THEO MELLOR (OUNDLÉ SCHOOL) AND ALEXANDER BROWN (MAGDALEN COLLEGE SCHOOL). HERE IS THEIR REPORT, WRITTEN BY ALEX.

We are glad to report that the Gap Year Scheme – bringing together British students and pupils at the Sultan's School – has resumed after three Covid years. The carefully chosen participants (from many applicants) spend three months in Oman, where they are integrated into the life of the school and have the opportunity for wider visits and experiences.

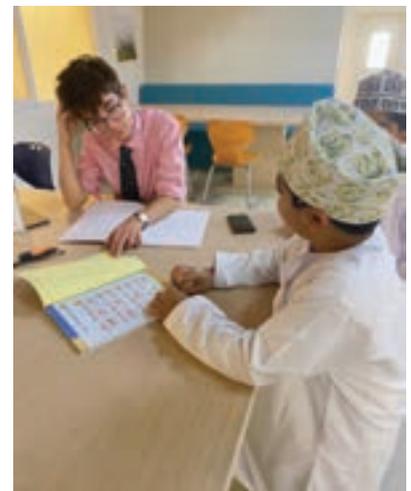
The long-term results are a growing body of Britons often moving on to prestigious posts in government, commerce and industry (well over 100 since the scheme started) with a knowledge and love of the Sultanate, plus whole generations of Sultan's School alumni who have come to know them well.

From the moment we touched down in Muscat, with Arabic signage and the palm trees in the airport, we knew we were in for an exciting time. Since the first blast of hot air coming off the aeroplane, we have not looked back. This review is a lovely opportunity to reminisce and remind ourselves of the truly phenomenal three months we spent in Oman.

Before we go any further, we want to thank both Sean and Laura Griffin for the huge amount of help and support they provided throughout our time in Oman; our trip would not have been as enriching nor enjoyable without them. Following a long flight via Istanbul, we arrived in Oman to be met by Sean who took four tired Gappies onward to the Sultan's School. Having been woken up early by the call to prayer next day, we enjoyed a very-much-appreciated meal made by Laura and started to work out our schedules and find out what our job at the school would entail.

Our weeks were mostly filled assisting with English in the primary department and helping the scholars (the boarding school students) with homework in the evenings – activities that made us

appreciate how difficult it is for Arabic speakers to learn English (as Year 3 spelling tests attested to). In turn, we committed ourselves to the study of Arabic, with Mr Mohammad ensuring that learning was an enjoyable, and at times humorous, experience – something we will continue upon our return to the UK! Additionally, Sam helped to tutor students in Maths and Chemistry – while our resident Musician Theo helped instil a love



Alex with Year 6 student Abdullah.



A happy group picture... including Lucifer the dog.

for music among the Sultan’s School pupils. It’s important to note that it wasn’t only academics in which we participated.

Trying to explain the concept of “passing the ball” in Year 1 PE was certainly a highlight, as was the Model United Nations conference in which Alex offered helpful advice to students and was excellent in his role as a ‘messenger’, passing notes around the hall. Grace organised a fortnight long competition involving copious amounts of Wordle, Sudoku and linguistic challenges, with prizes for the scholars at the end.

Even after 12 weeks of teaching, our favourite class continued to be the very first one we taught. Year 4 was a bundle of joy (if not at times uncontrollable) as they buzzed around the classroom. The constant babble of questions really made their personalities shine through.

Oman National Day was a particular highlight as we swapped our shirts and ties for traditional Omani attire, dishdashas, musars, khanjars and a sheila and abaya for Grace. We were in for a treat as we watched the parade, where students dressed up and waved flags, and then assembly in which students performed ceremonial dances. The atmosphere was palpable and we could feel the pride beaming from the students’ faces and cheers. We also had an opportunity to try Luqaimat and Khubz Ragag, which we have sought out ever since.

Out of all we experienced, nothing will stand out more than the immense generosity and hospitality of the people we met. At an Anglo-Omani Society lecture at the British School Muscat, we met a young Omani called Turki, and over dinner at his favourite falafel restaurant, he invited us to spend the weekend with him. Despite having already arranged to camp a couple of hours away from Muscat on Fins Beach, Turki emerged at 7am the next morning laden with breakfast and fresh hot Karak Chai. We spent the day exploring the caves and pools of Wadi Shab before heading to Sur to pick up a friend of his, Salim, who took us on a tour of the town, unable to go down a street without stopping to chat to a friend or relative.

From an ancient tower we watched the



Sam, Theo, Alex and Grace.

sunset as the call to prayer echoed throughout the port of Sur. Still uncertain as to where we would be spending the night, we set off into the darkness in a convoy behind Turki and Salim and arrived at Ra’s al Hadd where Salim showed us round his uncle’s villa in typical Omani fashion. Seemingly out of nowhere, a myriad of Mishkeek was produced, and we dined under the stars with our newfound friends who, out of their generosity and spontaneity, had provided us with one of the most memorable experiences of our time in Oman.

This was representative of the real passion and desire to demonstrate the beauty of Oman that we found in every Omani and similar experiences arose from countless offerings of accommodation and car adventures. It’s no wonder they are called the “Gentlemen of the Gulf.”

Armoured with the basic Arabic phrases such as

“إن شاء الله”, “الحمد لله”, “السلام عليكم”, “أنتخبز الخبز”, and “فكرا”

we travelled the country discovering Oman’s natural beauties from wadis to pristine white sand beaches to whale sharks. Such highlights included Nizwa Goat Market, which we visited with Sean, and our whirlwind night-time tour of the town on the back of a golf cart driven by local “tour guides”. We enjoyed the challenge of haggling! We had an unparalleled opportunity to experience the stunning natural beauty of Oman, and made the most of travelling from Cave Park in Al-Buraymi in the West to Ra’s al Hadd in the East.



Alex and Grace get the local knowledge.



Continuing in this vein of spontaneous trips, and seizing the football spirit of the World Cup, we watched the Oman v Germany match. It was an exciting experience which involved a lot of cheering, drums, flags and fun. It is fair to say that the Omani “Ultras” won the match, even if their team didn’t.

Our trip to the Wahiba Sands with the scholars was unmatched. Early Friday morning, we set out on Route 1, direction Bidiyah. Two hours, Salat-al-Zuhr and one Karak Chai stop later, the three vehicles came to a halt outside the magnificent sand dunes of Sharqiya. There, seven Bedouins packed us into their 4x4s and raced off to the resort where we would be staying the night. Once everyone had comfortably settled into their tents, we hopped back into the 4x4s and went dune bashing into the sunset. As we completed this high speed race, we arrived to find the ‘majlis of the desert’. Bedouins and other tyre-burning lovers raced each other up steep

banks of sand. Occasionally a 4x4, having failed to take sufficiently long run-up, would resort to a last minute U-turn back down the hill. We found the experience hysterical and got a genuine thrill from it.

Following the sunset prayer, Salat-al-Maghrib, we assembled under the starry sky, played cards and participated in an exhilarating game of Omani tug of war. The rope snapped twice, each time resulting in the most amusing human domino. We relished our wonderful barbeque dinner mainly consisting of camel meat, chicken and rice with hummus and bread. It was simply delicious.

Next morning, we were wakened by the roar of a digging machine carving a way below the zipline that ran across the resort. From our tent terraces, we observed the early-rising scholars mounting the quadbikes, taking it in turn to try and spin as much sand onto each other as possible.

Our final few weeks in Oman were as exciting as our first. To our delight, we

stumbled upon Camel Racing in Ibra by trailing behind a horse trailer. The area was filled with camels and horses adorned in Omani colours and jewellery. The event was enhanced by Arab music, a visit from the Saudi ambassador and paragliders from the sky waving large flags of HM Sultan Haitham. The race was even more exciting than we could have imagined as we ducked out of the way when camels veered towards us from the course!

These months have been a unique gap year experience; so different from the traditional options. The unspoilt scenery and the hospitality of the Omanis have touched our hearts. Thank you to the Society for sponsoring and organising the trip; and we are so grateful to the teachers and students. We look forward to welcoming the scholars who will be studying in the UK and hopefully will return to the school in a few years to see how the scholars in Year 6 and 7 have progressed. Oman, we miss you! ■

Our incredible experience is testament to the beauty of Oman, the hospitality of Omanis and Sean and Laura and of course, to the success of this Scheme! Once again, a massive thank you... We look forward to being part of the New Generation Group! (Grace)

"HOME AWAY FROM HOME"

SECOND GYS PARTY SPENT THE EARLY MONTHS OF 2023 AT THE SULTANS' SCHOOL

Sunset in Sur (captured from a lighthouse).

We were able to get involved at every level within the school community whilst working at the Sultan's School. Helping predominantly within the primary school, we assisted in a variety of lessons ranging from Science to English, Maths and PE. We were also able to help with school events, such as music gigs and performances, athletic and football meets, plus school trips to museums, planetariums and beaches. After school, we helped Year 6 and 7 scholars with their English skills and homework, before eating with them in the school cafeteria. We also had the opportunity to learn Arabic with a teacher from school two nights a week.

Outside school, we tried to explore the geography of the region – something that

collectively fascinated us. With trips to wadis, beaches and neighbouring towns/cities, we all had our personal favourite spots. Oman, commonly referred to as the gem of the Middle East, definitely lived up to its name. Within the city itself, we were thoroughly impressed with its rich culture, history and heritage, not to mention its people who were all friendly and hospitable. From camping in Sifah to snorkelling at Daymaniyat Island only 40 minutes away, we had so many adventures.

The Gap Year Scheme is a unique way to exchange knowledge and experience. The placement gave us a great chance to learn more about Omani culture and traditions through working with both primary and high school students. Because they came

from a variety of places in Oman, we had the opportunity to learn about their hometowns and local customs. Alia was interested in learning more about the geology of Oman so started attending geography classes. She quickly understood why Oman is referred to as a geologist's paradise, and it was an amazing opportunity to learn all about it whilst seeing the different components first-hand.

The Sultan's School provides students with the option to board from Year 6 to Year 13. A key task for all of us was to help them finish their homework and practise English through reading and writing for four hours a week. This was a very rewarding experience, more specifically witnessing their English progress over the



Whenever it was a Year 6 or 7 scholar's birthday (as this is the age group we supervised), we would make a small cake and throw a birthday party for them to celebrate amongst friends.



One of our favourite nights was spent camping on the beach at Sifah where we enjoyed a BBQ under the stars. It's a memory that will always stay with us...

three months. Whenever it was a Year 6 or 7 scholar's birthday (as this is the age group we supervised), we would make a small cake and throw a birthday party for them to celebrate amongst friends. Many of the students could cook but needed support and direction, so some cooking sessions after school were introduced with a Gappie to make some delicious Middle Eastern dishes!

Our time in Oman outside school was moulded by the people we met. The

teachers at the school were so generous with their time and inclusion in their social activities which helped us to experience life as normal in Muscat. Bertie was lucky enough to be able to play football and cricket in a social setting, which he greatly appreciated and experienced the amazing stadium at Al-Amirat with the dusk and sunset as a backdrop.

We were also able to experience local hospitality to an incredible extent. A brief shout out to Turki – a wonderful friend





1:2:1 reading with a Year 6 student.

interpersonal and communication skills. It required a lot of patience, getting to know the students individually and then tailoring individual sessions to their needs. Throughout the three months, we saw major progress in their understanding which is a testament to this.

Our communication skills were also developed by interacting with

colleagues both in and outside the classroom, from assisting in planning activities to behaviour management or building rapport with members of staff socially. Overall, our experience in Oman taught us to be independent and resilient in the face of change and was one of the best experiences of our lives. We are grateful to have been given this opportunity.

Lastly, we would like to express our thanks and gratitude towards the Anglo-Omani Society for this incredible experience, and to Laura and Sean, who acted as our parents whilst we were at our 'home away from home'. ■

taking us on weekend trips from camping by the beach and seeing the bioluminescent sea to exploring and swimming in mind-boggling wadis. The clear and warm water has always been a luxury for us used to a cold brown North Sea even on a summer's day. We were invited into homes for fabulous meals and, of course, dates and coffee.

The whole landscape of the country is astonishing with the impressive Mars-like mountains giving way to perfect sandy beaches and on the opposing side vast deserts. One of our favourite nights was spent camping on the beach at Sifah where we enjoyed a BBQ under the stars. It's a memory that will always stay with us... despite the food half-covered in sand.

The three months spent in Oman was an opportunity to gain new skills as well as to strengthen others. Living in a new environment far from our home, family, and friends, where a different culture was the norm, seemed incredibly daunting. But we learnt to adapt to our new surroundings, to be independent and stray outside our comfort zones. This allowed us to immerse ourselves in Omani culture, meet locals and have an enjoyable time overall. Whilst working in the school, reading with students in small groups, assessing their progress and planning activities, we learned the importance of organisational and time management skills.

Furthermore, one-to-one sessions with children with special educational needs or gaps in their knowledge, as well as helping Year 6 and 7 scholarship students with English, allowed us to develop our

OUR SECOND GYS COHORT OF THE YEAR WAS SOMEWHAT SENIOR TO THE FIRST...



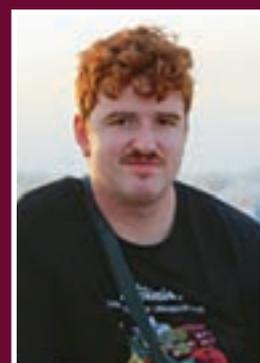
Alia Alqwaizi, reading International Relations at Cardiff University, is taking a year out before returning in September to complete her final year. She has a deep interest in UK-Oman relations and joined the Omani Student Society. She hopes to pursue a teaching career.



Ayan Habane is a global health graduate of Queen Mary's University of London, taking a gap year before starting a postgraduate degree in medicine. She is interested in working with NGOs in the Middle East and keen to learn Arabic.



Rachel Croft graduated from university in Liverpool with a Bachelor of Arts in Criminology and is in the midst of a gap year (or two) before commencing her master's studies. She lived in Oman whilst her parents were teachers at SS, so this was a great opportunity to return.



Bertie Carter-Semenczuk took a BA in Middle Eastern studies at Leeds. He has a great fascination with the region and was delighted to have the opportunity to visit Oman, work at The Sultan's School and explore the museums, galleries and natural wonders of the country.

MAJOR CROP PESTS IDENTIFIED

10 YEARS OF UK-OMANI SCIENTIFIC COLLABORATION

Andrew Polaszek and Joseph Monks (Natural History Museum); Ali A. Al-Jahdhami, Tarik Almandhari and Abdulhamid Al-Riyami (Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, Oman)

This year marks 10 years of scientific collaboration between the Natural History Museum, London (NHM), and several Omani institutes. We last reported on NHM-Oman collaboration in the Society Review in 2016 (Polaszek, 2016, AOS Review pp 93-95) and since then several major collaborative projects have been completed.

Two important projects aimed at alleviating agricultural problems in Oman were recently completed successfully in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and the University of Nottingham. Tarik Almandhari and Abdulhamid Al-Riyami, both PhD students, undertook extensive research on two of the most important agricultural pests in Oman, with the support of the NHM.

Tarik's research focussed on the major pest of dates in Oman and neighbouring countries, the lesser date moth (*Batrachedra amydraula*). This pest's range includes Egypt, Iran, Iraq, and Libya. Unripe fruits are attacked early in the growing season by larvae that bore into them. Fruits attacked remain attached to their stalks by larval silk at first, but eventually dry and drop, causing significant yield loss, which can reach 70-80%. In Oman, *B. amydraula* produces three generations between February and June, after which larvae remain inactive before pupating the following year, and emerging as adult moths.

During the course of the study, a species of wasp was discovered which lays its eggs on the body of the moth caterpillar. The wasp larvae eventually eat

Joseph Monks (3rd from left), Andrew Polaszek (3rd from right) and staff of the Oman Botanic Garden at the Salma Plateau, Hajar Mountains, in November 2018.



the contents of the caterpillar, and in this way significant numbers of potential moths are destroyed. Samples of adult wasps were brought to Andrew at the Natural History Museum for identification, which he discovered to be a completely unknown species.

To provide the Latin scientific name for the species, a description was published including not just the detailed appearance of the adult wasp (the morphology), but also DNA-sequencing. The latter included the widely-used DNA 'barcode' – the mitochondrial cytochrome oxidase 1 (CO1) sequence, and also a nuclear ribosomal gene fragment known as 28S-D2. The description of the wasp as *Goniozus omanensis* (family Bethyliidae) was



Left to right: Abdulhamid Al-Riyami, Andrew Polaszek, Ben Wright (then Manager, Anglo-Omani Society), Ian Hardy and Tarik Almandhari during a visit to the NHM in September 2018.



Goniozus omanensis Holotype female.



Above: Larvae of *Goniozus omanensis* hatching from eggs laid onto a rice moth host larva (*Corcyra cephalonica*). Below: Fully-developed larvae.



published in the high-impact, open-access scientific journal PLoSOne, and can be found here (Polaszek *et al.*, 2019) <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0223761>

The article includes links to video footage of the wasps in action. Further study revealed that about 10-12 eggs are laid on each caterpillar, and that one wasp can destroy up to 24 caterpillars during her lifetime. The species is also found in Iraq, and may be quite widespread.

Abdulhamid's PhD study was on another pest, the pomegranate butterfly *Deudorix livia*. The caterpillar of the pomegranate butterfly burrows within the fruit, causing spoilage of seeds, subsequent infection by bacteria, and growth of moulds, rotting of part or all of the fruit, and, in some cases, the fall of the fruit. In a similar scenario to Tarik's study with the lesser date moth and its parasitoid wasp, an important control agent was discovered

during Abdulhamid's investigation. A minute wasp belonging to the genus *Telenomus* (family Scelionidae) was found to lay its eggs inside those of the butterfly.

Once again, extensive study of both the appearance of the wasp and its DNA sequences showed conclusively that it was a previously unknown species. The wasp was first discovered near Nizwa, and Abdulhamid therefore chose the name *Telenomus nizwaensis* which translates as "*Telenomus* from Nizwa". Studies indicate that *T. nizwaensis* is the dominant parasitoid of pomegranate butterfly in the



Above: Pomegranate butterfly (*Deudorix livia*) female. Below: Male.





Telenomus nizwaensis Holotype male (after DNA extraction).

Al Jabal Al Akhdar region. Annual reports of the Integrated Pest Management (IPM) programme run by the Omani Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries show that the parasitism rate by *T. nizwaensis* over the past 15 years averaged 62%. The formal description of *Telenomus nizwaensis* can be found here (Polaszek *et al.*, 201) <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0250464>

The descriptions of both of these important new species are each based on a unique specimen termed the holotype. In both cases, the holotype has been deposited at the Oman Natural History Museum in Muscat.

Bees are represented globally by 20,000 known species, and undoubtedly many thousands of species as yet undiscovered. Most of us know honeybees and bumblebees, but would be astonished by the global diversity of this critically important group of animals. In 2016 Joe Monks and Andrew Polaszek collected five individuals belonging to the extremely rare



Left: *Borgatomelissa* – new species collected near the Sumail Gap. Right: *Borgatomelissa brevipennis* newly recorded for Oman.

bee genus *Borgatomelissa*. These turned out to belong to two species, *B. brevipennis*, originally described from Ethiopia by Francis Walker in 1871, and a new species. In 2020 Ali Al-Jahdhami collected a single individual of another new species of *Borgatomelissa* from Al Batinah. Formal descriptions of these new species have

been submitted for publication in *Journal of Natural History*.

The bee genus *Pseudapis* is well-represented in Africa and the Middle East. Between 2016 and 2018 Joseph Monks and Andrew Polaszek collected many specimens of the genus, including two previously unknown species. They were formally described as *Pseudapis kuhlmanni* and *Pseudapis lisetae* earlier this year (Pauly *et al.*, 2023) in the journal *Zootaxa*. All of these remarkable new discoveries demonstrate that far from being arid and lifeless, the wild areas of Oman contain a wealth of hidden biodiversity, much of it of direct benefit to humankind.

Andrew and Joseph, on behalf of the NHM, would like to acknowledge the financial support of the Society for much of the fieldwork which led to these discoveries. Andrew's work on *Goniozus omanensis* and *Telenomus nizwaensis* was supported in part by a grant from the University of Nottingham

obtained by Prof. Ian CW Hardy, currently at the University of Helsinki. Other support over the 10 years of NHM-Oman collaboration has come from the Oman Botanic Garden and the Oman Natural History Museum in Muscat. We sincerely thank Azzah Aljabri, Director of Oman Natural History Museum. ■

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ARABIC INSTRUCTION AT THE SULTAN QABOOS INSTITUTE IN MANAH

ARTICLE BY BRID BEELER

READ THIS...

... especially if you are thinking of applying for Society sponsorship to take part in the Arabic language scheme at the Sultan Qaboos Institute. Brid Beeler, one of our selected participants, had an atypical experience in that she was unable to attend as part of our chosen group but instead went as an individual to another course. She has produced this detailed and compelling article about the whole experience which really does give the full story, and it is well worth reading.

Dr Elisabeth Kendall is the trustee responsible for the Society's Arabic Language Scheme, leading the process of choosing ten eager students to travel to the Sultanate each year to immerse themselves in intensive Arabic lessons and Omani culture.

The Arabic language has been part of my life since 1989 when I first went to live in Saudi Arabia. While I learned only a smattering of words over the course of 10 years in the Kingdom, it wasn't till I was back in California in the early 2000s that I immersed myself in a two-month intensive summer program learning Modern Standard Arabic, known as Al Fusha, at University of California Berkeley, taught by an Iraqi teacher named Abbas Kadhim.

Over the years language studies continued on and off, but living in the region had its benefits as one used it daily.

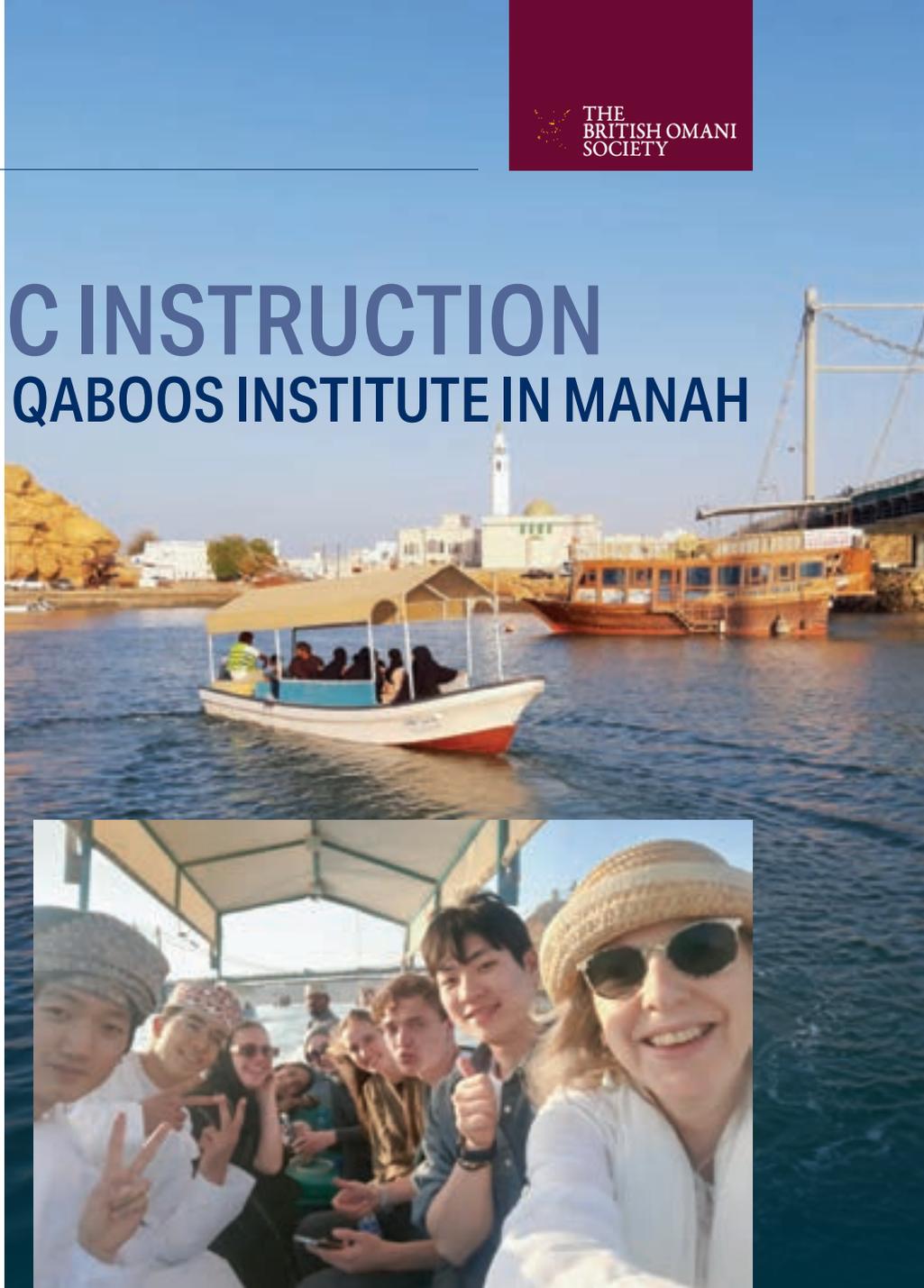
Fast forward almost 20 years later, and I have just returned from an eight-week intensive Arabic course in Manah, in Ad Dakhaliya Province in Oman at the Sultan Qaboos Institute for Teaching Arabic Language to Non-Native Speakers, formerly known as Sultan Qaboos College.

Thanks to the Anglo-Omani Society, the Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Diwan of the Royal Court, I was awarded a scholarship after first sitting an exam and being interviewed. Tuition, visa, airline ticket, health, and travel insurance along with transportation to and from the Sultan Qaboos Institute in Manah was provided, along with all cultural programs, accommodation, and food.

Needless to say, I was exhilarated at the opportunity to return to a country I know intimately and have loved since first

visiting in 1990. Over the course of the 10 years when I lived in Saudi Arabia, I had been able to travel to Oman for two to three weeks annually and, on those trips, I had explored the country from Musdandam's tip in the north to the Yemeni border in the south. I was also fortunate to live and work in Muscat in the tourism industry from 2007 to 2009, in addition to bringing tour groups to Oman and leading the Smithsonian Institution's Sackler Gallery's visit in country. It is a place that gets under your skin; a country that is hard to leave.

Meeting my fellow students was like being at a session of the United Nations. There were 25 of us, coming from Brunei, South Korea, Iran, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Poland, Lithuania, Austria, France, South Africa, and myself. The Institution is



sought after worldwide for its Arabic program, and we were fortunate to be there as not everyone is afforded this opportunity. I was the oldest of the group as the other students ranged in age from 21 to 32. Except for myself and another colleague, all had three to five years of academic Arabic instruction at university level. Some were finishing their Bachelors in Arabic and Middle Eastern studies; others were in the midst of a master's degree, and a few were doing their doctorate. The competition was steep, and it became very apparent very quickly that I had to figure out how to keep up.

While I have excellent computer skills, I'm not much of a whiz with a mobile phone. I only use my phone for making calls, sending WhatsApp or text messages. Nothing further. WhatsApp groups were formed, and everything was in Arabic. While I have always written in Arabic, I never learned how to type in Arabic. Trying to download an Arabic app onto my phone presented a challenge, as was my slowness in finding the letters on an Arabic keyboard. In the end, I had to admit defeat and seek help, which thankfully, was readily available.

Prior to arrival, we had been divided into

three different levels of Arabic studies. Classes began at 8:00am and ran until 12:30pm daily, except on Friday and Saturday, which are Oman's weekend.

Each of the three levels had two teachers, one focusing on grammar and the other focusing on vocabulary. The pace of study moved along at the speed of sound, with reading and listening exercises, presentations, and homework. Lots of homework. This is not for the faint hearted. It is something akin to bootcamp; you must be totally committed and avoid distraction.

The Institute itself is situated on its own grounds with a large team of Omani employees handling every aspect of business devoted to our learning requirements. These kind and gentle souls fussed over us as if we were their very own family. They were always there to help and would respond to a call or text message even on their weekends or late into the evenings. While we were grappling with our lessons and minor difficulties, they were grappling with making sure the program provided the best instruction and overall cultural introduction to the Sultanate of Oman. It is a credit to the Omani government that they

offer such opportunities to non-native speakers of Arabic.

Despite the monumental amount of instruction we faced daily, our devoted teachers (mine were Hozaim and Saeed) made it fun and kept us engaged so class was over before we knew it. For the first time in my life, I faced doing a crossword puzzle in Arabic! I couldn't believe it and was absolutely hopeless at it. I had not even done one in English, never mind trying to do one in Arabic.

Additionally, we had language partners, who were university graduates from the area, who spent four hours a week with us speaking Arabic in the evenings for the duration of the course. My language partner was Ruquaya from Nizwa and she was absolutely wonderful, and I look forward to seeing her when I return to Oman again.

Our home for the two months was *Beit Al Dheafa*, the guest house, a modern but traditional style building specifically built to accommodate students. We all had our own bedrooms, and many had their own private bathrooms. The place was kept spic and span, thanks to the Indian and Bangladeshi team who ensured that our rooms, bathrooms, and common areas were fit for a Sultan. As is typical of homes and buildings in the Arab world, it is surrounded by high walls, with an outdoor garden area where one can sit and relax in the shade during daytime or in the pleasant evenings at night.

Beit Al Dheafa's wooden double doors take you direct into a beautiful *majalis*, a seated area with television and lots of space for students to lounge, sit, study or chat with each other. *Beit Al Dheafa's* receptionist team of four Omanis, two men and two women, rotated every 24 hours, each one sleeping nightly on the premises. One of the women had a baby and I thought it wonderful to see her bring her nine-month-old girl to work so she could feed her in comfort and in private just behind the receptionist area. The other lady also had a boy who, on occasion, joined her for a couple of hours at the Institute's reception. How enlightened the Omani women are, as in western societies we would not be so adept to allowing mothers bring their babies and toddlers to work. Few companies provide that privilege.

The dining room was overseen by the Cave Restaurant in Muscat, an upscale restaurant providing famous traditional Arabic cuisine. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner was provided daily, including vegetarian options. At both lunch and dinner, there was always a selection of meze style cuisine that would include either hummus, muttabel, or muhammaria; fatoush salad, feta salad or tabbouleh; and an assortment of pickles along with Lebanese style flat bread.

There would be at least two main courses of meat, chicken or fish served daily for both lunch and dinner. Different rice dishes would be served at lunchtime and in the evening, there would usually be an Asian noodle or pasta dish instead of rice being served. Potatoes, baked, mashed, boiled or French fries were also served and there was no shortage of fruit. Various desserts like Omani basbousa and



other Middle Eastern fare appeared at least once a day along with dates. A variety of juice was served at all meals and tea and coffee was available 24/7.

There were separate quarters for men and women. Designated laundry rooms for both sexes in each quarter were also available along with ample laundry machines, drying racks and ironing facilities. Because of the warm temperature, clothing dried at a rapid pace without the need to use the dryers. Or you could walk around the corner to the local laundromat where for a miniscule amount you could have your laundry washed, dried, and ironed.

WIFI was available throughout, although occasionally it was slow... a phenomenon we must deal with in most of the world. Many of us used our international numbers for WhatsApp and many bought local Omani numbers for the duration of our stay. There is an array of providers available in Oman and accessible in the shopping malls in Nizwa. I could not recommend one over the next as everyone was happy with their chosen provider.

There were separate gyms for men and women in their respective quarters, but walking around Beit al Dheafa was a joyful evening experience as you rarely met another soul and, when you did, you were greeted and often warmly invited by the locals to visit their homes, meet the family, and have some coffee, and dessert.

Wadouwa, a coffee house in Manah about 1 mile from Beit Al Dheafa, served up the best cappuccino and cakes in town, along with freshly squeezed orange juice.

Coffee houses are everywhere in Nizwa, and it is a dynamic place to sit, and people watch. Besides the twice weekly scheduled Institute bus to Nizwa, if one wanted to get to Nizwa by taxi, it cost approximately two or three Omani rials one way, depending on whether you were going to the Souq or shopping mall, which took approximately 20 mins. If a few people traveled together, then the shared cost was miniscule.

Throughout the program, we had many extracurricular trips designed to introduce us to the richness of Omani culture. One evening, we had a presentation on the Omani seafaring traditions given by fisherman from Sohar, home of legendary Sinbad the Sailor. This was followed by a weekend trip to Sur, center of shipbuilding



literally) at making pottery. I particularly enjoyed a fashion show at a nearby farm, where we became the models donned in Omani fashion representing

for the old iconic dhows, to see the maritime festival. We also visited the Science & Technology Laboratory Project funded by Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) in Nizwa, which provided a fascinating glimpse into a world of nano technology. At the other end of the technology scale, we all got up very early one morning to visit the renowned Friday Al Habta goat market in Nizwa, after which we enjoyed a chance encounter with a group of men performing the Bara'ah, chanting poetry to the sound of drums and swinging their swords in the air.

On another morning, my female student colleagues and I were taken to Wiliyat Izki, where we were met by the women of the village, who had made many preparations and food to welcome us. Along with all the women and children who met us, there were artists working in mediums such as oil and watercolor. On another occasion in Bahla, we were all able to try our hand (quite

different Omani regions, and on another occasion a visit by a calligraphy artist, who gave us an introduction to that exquisite art form.

Excitement was high on the day the camel races were held at Adam, in Al Sharquiyah, attended by people from Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain and, of course, Oman. We arrived in time to watch the camels being lined up behind a gate, not unlike at a horse race, but not penned into individual starting stalls, but just crammed together side by side. After we watched the winner cross the finish line, we were invited to visit Sultan's home, one of our staff in Beit al Dheafa. The area around Adam is home to Bedouin tribes who live with their camels in the traditional way. We were welcomed by women who painted traditional designs on the faces of some of my fellow students and gifted us with the traditional Burqa worn by the Bedouin women in the desert region.

We had a marvellous evening of Omani cuisine introducing us to various local dishes cooked by teachers, our language partners and staff. The opportunity to sample home cooked cuisine was very special. Turning the tables, we also had a cultural night where each of the students gave a presentation on their home country, modelling dress, cooking national dishes, and highlighting other interesting aspects of their culture, including music, dance, and poetry. People from as far away as Muscat and the surrounding Ad Dakhaliya province attended, and a good time was had by all.

Trips to Muscat, to the Book fare, to Jebel Akhdar and a rose farm, along with visits to Birkat Al Mawz's falaj and date palm oasis were all part of our introduction to the country. In addition, we lived for two months within spitting distance of Harat al Balad, old Manah, one of the oldest archaeological sites in Oman and the most intact old town I have ever encountered anywhere in the Middle East. It is a hidden gem, and our visit here was very special. It was only walking distance from Beit Al Dheafa and to stroll through here before sunset as the bird song is in full chorus and prayer call begins, is truly a mesmerising experience and not to be missed.

At graduation, Dr. Abdullah Al Hashmi from the Sultan Qaboos University presented our individual certificates and many other dignitaries attended the ceremony. We returned to the farm that evening for our graduation party, which completed our time in Manah. Tears flowed as we said masalama to friends and our Omani families with whom we had grown close.

In conclusion, I urge anyone having the opportunity to study Arabic at the Sultan Qaboos Institute to grab it with both hands. While it will require hard work and strict attention to study, the rewards are huge and the cultural experience truly unforgettable. My sincere thanks to the Omani government and the Society for facilitating this opportunity. Most of all, a heartfelt thanks to all teachers and staff in Manah who nurtured and cared for us throughout the two-month experience. I miss them very much and I wish Sinbad the Sailor would use his magic to transport me back to Manah to relive the experience once again!

THE 'BACK TO MANAH' GROUP!

Suhail Karim (Westminster University), Adam Omar, Syed Hussain, Craig Greathead and James White (SOAS), Laila Moussaid (Kings College, London) and Lucy Armstrong (Durham University)

For many of us the opportunity to study in Oman, thanks to the Society scholarship, was two years in the waiting in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, as we arrived at the airport the sense of gratitude and enthusiasm was palpable. Over the course of the seven weeks, we have had the privilege to have taken part in a range of curricular and extracurricular activities as part of the Sultan Qaboos College. Although it is always tricky to write in a way that does the experience justice, we have put our heads together to pick out some of our highlights.

THE ARABIC PROGRAMME

From the beginning, the College in Manah did a great job of ascertaining everyone's level of Arabic, placing

students into the appropriate levels from intermediate through to advanced. With classes taking place from Sunday to Thursday, morning until noon, there is ample opportunity for rest, independent study and arranged activities to take place throughout the afternoon and evening.

The classes themselves touch on a broad range of skills, including time dedicated to speaking, listening, writing and reading. These are punctuated with presentations, tests and regular pieces of homework to ensure new material is taken in. The library in the College has also been a beneficial resource and welcome sanctuary with a plethora of books on Arabic language as well as Omani history and culture available.



Laila Moussaid (left) and Lucy Armstrong



Craig Greathead (left) and James White

ARABIC LANGUAGE SCHEME

classroom setting. After the hard work throughout the week, we all look forward to our weekend trip and exploring a new part of this beautiful country. Our two-day trip around Sur was a notable highlight. Combining cultural excursions to the local maritime museum with the excitement of seeing the Sharqiya sands and wild sea turtles, the extended trip exceeded all expectations.

CONCLUSION & EXPECTATIONS

The opportunity to study at Sultan Qaboos college offers more than just intensive Arabic study, it also provides students with the chance to truly get to know Oman and its welcoming people.

We came into this with a range of personal expectations – whether it was to refine our Arabic, experience Omani culture, or simply see the sights. But without a doubt this programme went above and beyond what we even imagined. A comprehensive and interactive curriculum, wide-ranging cultural experiences, action-packed trips, memories for life, and much more.

We've all grown in our appreciation of what this country has to offer - the best of which not being its natural beauty, but the beauty of its culture, its people, and everything else in Oman which welcomed us with open arms. We sincerely thank the Society, the Sultan Qaboos College, and everyone else who contributed to this once in a lifetime experience. We cannot thank you enough. ■

CULTURAL ACTIVITIES & LANGUAGE PARTNERS

One of the unexpected things about the school was the wide range of cultural activities they organised for us outside the classroom. In the first week, we met our Omani language partners with whom we would soon become good friends. They played a significant role in improving our conversational Arabic and answering questions we had about Omani culture. Some of us were even invited into their homes for dinner and were lucky enough to experience Omani hospitality first-hand. On one evening, the school laid out an impressive buffet for us of traditional Omani delicacies including Qurus, a delicious savoury pancake which was freshly prepared in front of us.

We also had the opportunity to try our hand at Arabic calligraphy with the help of an esteemed artist. It turns out calligraphy is a lot harder than it looks! A cultural highlight would have to be the sports and games night which was kindly arranged by our language partners. We played a series

of traditional Omani games as well as games from the countries of fellow students. Surprisingly, we found that many cultures share similar games! Overall, it was heart-warming to witness the love the people of Oman have for their culture and traditions.

LIFE IN OMAN – TRIPS

With Sultan Qaboos College we have had the opportunity to explore the area around Manah and venture further afield to Muscat as well as the Sharqiya region. From the natural beauty of Wadi Bani Khalid to the cultural heritage sites such as the Bahla fort, we have discovered all that Oman has to offer to visitors. The college has been great in combining these trips with the opportunity to learn more about Omani history and culture, while also offering real life opportunities to use and develop the language skills we have learned in class.

The variety of trips has meant that there have been excursions for everyone and we've enjoyed getting to know our classmates and teachers outside the



GLOBAL IMPORTANCE OF OMAN BOTANIC EXPEDITIONS IN WESTERN HAJAR MOUNTAINS

In collaboration with the Oman Botanic Garden (OBG), and building on the success of the 2017-2019 projects supported by the Anglo-Omani Society, we conducted a fourth collaborative botanical expedition in October 2022.

This 15-day expedition, by Omani personnel and an international team, aimed to provide skills and training on scientific survey methods which, together with Omani excellence in botany, led the team across the stunning landscapes of the Western Hajar Mountains, surveying endangered and endemic plant species.

The data collected forms part of the evidence base for proposing one or more Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) for the important plant biodiversity in the Western Hajar Mountains. This is an internationally recognised designation of globally important sites bringing benefits from implementation in policy to monitoring and safeguarding. This programme cultivated international co-operation, cross-cultural and scientific exchange, and skilled leadership in the conservation of Oman's natural environment.

KEY BIODIVERSITY AREAS & THE WESTERN HAJAR MOUNTAINS

KBAs are sites of global importance for the persistence of biodiversity. KBAs can accelerate efforts to reverse the loss of nature, by ensuring conservation efforts are focussed in the places that matter most, and by enabling entities that may have negative impacts on nature to avoid or reduce those impacts in the places they would be most damaging.

The Western Hajar mountain region in Northern Oman is an endangered ecoregion. It contains many habitats, with a clear altitude zonation, including wadis, limestone habitats, steep slopes and juniper woodlands. It is also an important refuge to many endemic and relict species, primarily of Indo-Iranian origin, such as the iconic



Rebecca and Saif measuring plant microclimate.

Arabian Tahr. These mountains also contain around 60% of Oman’s vascular plants. The recent discovery of rare and threatened plant species in the region by OBG, including in several putative Important Plant Areas (IPAs), made it a good candidate for consideration for one or more Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs).

This would represent a significant step in Oman’s conservation efforts towards recognition and protection of globally important sites for biodiversity within Oman, following a global standard (The Global Standard for the Identification of KBAs). This will help elevate international recognition of Oman’s unique and spectacular biodiversity as well as, we hope, national recognition in policy and safeguarding measures.

This project assessed the potential for adding qualifying plant species to the Jabal Al Akhdar KBA, originally established for birds, as well as scoping a new KBA for plants, based on existing data and knowledge from the OBG. Several sites

were identified within the region by OBG and the Centre for Middle Eastern Plants (CMEP) as candidate Important Plant Areas (IPAs), which use different but related criteria. We used these candidate IPAs, supplemented with OBG data and expertise, as a starting point to identify the most likely sites to trigger KBA status for plants in the Western Hajar.

THREATENED PLANT SPECIES & CLIMATE CHANGE

The Al Hajar Mountains are also an ideal location to begin addressing a research gap on fine-scale climate (‘microclimate’), because topographically complex regions like mountains are known to provide a wide array of microclimates, to which different species have specialised in different ways.

Alongside fieldwork to survey the distribution and abundance of threatened and restricted range plant species, we conducted a complementary, stand-alone

assessment of microclimate for a subset of the focal species. It is important to characterise microclimate preferences so that we can better understand why species exist where they do. Then, it is possible to identify other sites where a species might occur, thus directing future sampling surveys, as well as enabling us to better predict where species will occur in the future, under climate change.

The objectives of this expedition were to:

1. Conduct botanical field surveys of five endemic plant species in the Western Hajar region for a KBA assessment.
2. Quantify the difference between ambient temperature and the fine-scale ‘microclimate’ where species actually exist.
3. Conduct knowledge transfer and capacity building by way of a series of workshops facilitated by both Omani and UK participants.

*At the IPA in Wadi Bani Awf, we found **Centaurea chasmophytica**, **Dionysia mira**, **Lavandula nourruddinii** and **Stipa mandavillei** on the roadside cliffs around “Sharafat Al Alamaein, from Balad street village to Al Hamra”.*

EXPEDITION OUTCOMES

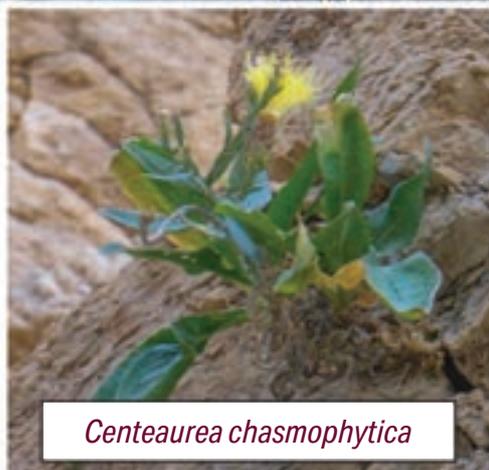
The team comprised 12 postgraduate students, recent graduates and conservationists from the United Kingdom, and 10 Omani botanists and conservationists from the OBG. Before the expedition, Thomas Starnes from The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), conducted a workshop on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™

and KBAs. The OBG team then provided an orientation of the Botanical Gardens to inform the UK team about the state of Oman’s environment and conservation efforts. Fieldwork involved setting up base camps in the Western Hajar from which the Omani and UK participants travelled in smaller groups to predetermined locations to conduct field surveys and collect microclimate data.

The team visited four IPAs in the Western Hajar Special Botanical Interest Zone. Each of these areas are identified in the Important Plant Areas of Oman, containing species that meet IPA criterion A(i), which is equivalent to KBA Criterion A1. In order for the sites to qualify as Key Biodiversity Areas, they need to also contain at least five or ten reproductive units of the species, and so the central aim of this fieldwork component was to ascertain whether the sites contained the minimum number of reproductive units to qualify as a KBA.

BOTANICAL FIELD SURVEYS

We found all five endemic plant species during our surveys! The IPA in Sayq Plateau harboured an important population



The five target endemic plant species.



Looking for plants in crevices (from left to right) Thom, Saif, Benedetta and Salim.

The team comprised 12 postgraduate students, recent graduates and conservationists from the United Kingdom, and 10 Omani botanists and conservationists from the OBG.

of *Campanula akhdarensis* and *Dionysia mira*. About 50% of the largest known population *Dionysia mira* was eradicated in November 2016 due to road construction (pers. observation A. Patzelt), but this site contained many individuals. This IPA therefore likely qualifies as a KBA for *Dionysia mira* and *Campanula akhdarensis*.

At the IPA in Wadi Bani Awf, we found *Centaurea chasmophytica*, *Dionysia mira*, *Lavandula nourruddinii* and *Stipa mandavillei* on the roadside cliffs around “Sharafat Al Alamaein, from Balad street village to Al Hamra”. This was the most interesting location in terms of globally important populations of KBA species.

MEET THE TEAM

Laila Al Harthi – Oman Botanic Garden (OBG)
 Abdulrahman Rashid Al Hinai – (OBG)
 Saif Amir Al Hatmi – (OBG)
 Zawan Juma Al Qasabi – (OBG)
 Laila Nasser Al Jahwari – (OBG)
 Fathi Nasser Al Hisani – (OBG)
 Nasser Mohammed Al Rashdi – (OBG)
 Mohammed Hamad Al Baloushi – (OBG)
 Salim Khalfan Al Rahbi – (OBG)
 Omar Abdullah Al Amri – (OBG)
 Raid Musalam Al Mamari – (OBG)
 Cindy Cosset – University of Florida & University of Sheffield
 Rebecca Senior – Durham University
 Thomas Starnes – International Union for Conservation of Nature
 James Borrell – Royal Botanic Gardens
 Elliot Fisher – University of Edinburgh
 Ciara Whittaker – Zero Foodprint Deutschland
 Jerome Viard – Newnham College, Cambridge
 Benedetta Gori – University of Cagliari, Italy & Royal Botanic Gardens
 Cat Cameron – Aberystwyth University
 Mark Clover – Freelance outdoor activity instructor, UK
 Zoe Allin – Natural England & Zoe Allin Climbing, UK
 Marian Siedentopf – ö:konzept environmental assessment agency, Germany

The last two IPA locations in Jabal Shams and Hayl Al Juwari contained significant populations of *Stipa mandavillei*. Future visits by the OBG may be required to confirm the presence of *Campanula akhdarensis* and *Dionysia mira* in these two areas. The OBG is currently working with Thomas Starnes to complete the administration protocols to assign KBA status to these four IPAs.

MICROCLIMATE STUDY

In total we collected 167 microclimate observations across nine species. Most observations made were not for the five KBA species because these were too rarely encountered. Instead, we focused the microclimate study on *Helichrysum glumaceum*, as it was reasonably abundant but clearly chasmophytic in growth habit (i.e. plants adapted to growing in rocky or creviced habitats, such as cliffs, boulders, and rock faces), and thus a good example of a species that likely experiences a microclimate that is distinct from the wider macroclimate.

The initial findings for this species indicate that the microclimate temperature around it closely follows the temperature of the surrounding area earlier in the day when it's cooler. However, as the day progresses and the surrounding area gets warmer, the microclimate temperature around the species varies more and tends to be hotter than the surrounding area. This was due to the rocks absorbing and radiating heat differently than the surrounding area, resulting in higher temperatures near the rocks. Wind played a role in making the overall temperature more consistent across the area.

When we look at the temperature around the plant more closely, we see that the temperature on the surface of the plant is similar to the temperature of the air around it. However, the temperature of the soil beneath it is different. Even though the soil gets very hot, the plant doesn't get as hot because of its reflective properties and the fact that it's not in direct contact with the soil. This is probably because rocks and soil hold onto heat differently than plants, and the plants have some natural cooling properties.

This work on microclimates has formed the basis of a long-term research

This research would enable us to better protect species by predicting where they will occur under climate change in the future.

programme as further work is necessary to unpick the patterns observed here. This research would enable us to better protect species by predicting where they will occur under climate change in the future. News and updates about the expedition will be uploaded to our blog, that can be read online by a worldwide audience:

<https://oman2022expedition.wordpress.com/>

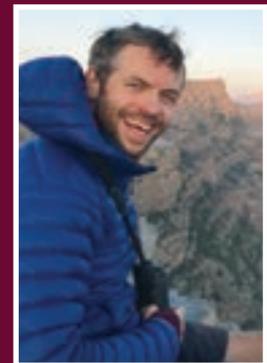
Check out our past expeditions here:

<https://conservationfieldstudies.com/>

AUTHORS



Cindy Cosset (University of Florida, USA & University of Sheffield) – a tropical ecology and conservation biologist with a keen interest in putting science into practice. Her work has taken her to Borneo, Colombia and Oman, working on conservation related issues, from assessing land-use impacts to restoring forests and protecting biodiversity. Currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at Florida, her research aims to guide reforestation initiatives in tropical forests.



Thomas Starnes – a passionate and dedicated conservationist who has worked in various spatial analyst positions, including at the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. He now leads IUCN's (International Union for Conservation of Nature) work on Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs), developing, managing and implementing projects in several countries, including the establishment of KBA National Coordination Groups in Africa and the Middle East.



Rebecca Senior (Durham University) – a conservation scientist with a passion for using big data and new technologies to understand the drivers of biodiversity loss, and to identify potential solutions to mitigate that loss. She is interested in improving understanding of the likely impacts of climate change, and how this interacts with the ways that people manage land. Currently an Assistant Professor at Durham.



James Borrell (Royal Botanic Gardens) – a research leader at Kew, focusing on ecological modelling, food security and conservation, he is particularly interested in understanding what drives the fine and broad scale distributions of plants.

NATIONAL PARKS EXCHANGE PROGRAMME

OMANI MINISTRY AND SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY



Exchange team at Jabal Al Akhdar, an area worthy of National Park status. L to R: Richard Ferguson, Aisha Al Wahaibi, Dr Hanan Al Jabri, Robert Whitcombe, Kholoud Al Abri, Hamda Al Hajri and Safa Al Mughazwi.

Oman and the UK have treasured landscapes. Whilst physically very different, they have much in common – local people making a living, and visitors who come for recreation and to appreciate natural beauty and distinctive histories.

The Society was glad to sponsor an exchange between Oman’s Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MoHUP) and the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) to explore the relevance of the UK’s National Park planning system to the Sultanate.

There are 15 UK National Parks (NPs), the most recent being the South Downs, established in 2010. As set out in legislation, they have two purposes and one duty which act as a powerful guide to the development and activities that are permitted.



The duty and two purposes of the UK’s National Parks are underpinned by legislation.

This is a different model from some NPs in the US and Africa, from which residents including local people may be excluded. NPs in the UK are classified as Category V “Protected Landscapes/ Seascapes”, according to a globally recognised system of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

IUCN Category V: “An area of land, with coast or sea as appropriate, where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant aesthetic, ecological and/or cultural value, and often with high biological diversity. Safeguarding the integrity of this traditional interaction is vital to the protection, maintenance and evolution of such an area.”

Under Sultan Qaboos, Oman designated several ‘Protected Areas’, such as the Jabal Samhaan Reserve, for important wildlife including the Arabian Leopard, and the Jabal Al Akhdar Natural Landscape Reserve. However, none has been delineated, planned and operated in a way comparable to the UK NPs. ‘Nature’ was the focus in Oman, settlements are for the most part excluded and facilities for visitors

limited – with the notable exception of the Turtle Reserve at Ra’s Al Jinz.

In English NPs, there are over 320,000 residents, 140,000 employed with business turnover of £13bn and 94m visitors (domestic and international) spending £5bn, supporting 75,000 jobs in tourism. Oman is promoting tourism as part of Vision 2040 as an essential plank in its economy. What lessons might the Sultanate learn regarding the control of development across Oman’s dramatic mountains, deserts and coast? How best to support economic activity, housing and infrastructure that are sustainable and in the ‘right place’, whilst safeguarding the livelihoods of local people and protecting natural and cultural heritage?

To help answer these questions, SDNPA’s Tim Slaney (Director of Planning) and Richard Ferguson (Development Management Lead and with planning experience in Dubai), accompanied by Dr Robert Whitcombe (an Environmental Planner who has worked in Oman for many years, most recently on Oman’s National Spatial Strategy), visited the Sultanate in February 2022. They were welcomed by staff of MoHUP, who

organised visits to the Jabal Al Akhdar, Jabal Shams and Sharqiyah Sands. They held meetings and workshops with government and local stakeholders.

A reciprocal visit was arranged in June 2022 for four members of MoHUP, Dr Hanan Al Jabri (Director-General of Urban Planning), Fahd Al Farsi (Urban Planner and Head of Development & Technical Support, Office of the Undersecretary for Urban Planning), Ahmed Al Shu’aibi (Head of Urban Planning in South Sharqiyah) and Safa Al Mughaiawi (Environmental Planner, ONSS Implementation Office). They spent two weeks at the SDNPA and a third at the North York Moors and Peak District NPs, as well as exploring London where they were given a guided tour by a Town Planner from Atkins. They visited sites for residential, tourism, mining and other developments (existing and proposed) as well as learning about Country Parks and Nature Reserves. They attended meetings of Planning Committees and observed the processes involved in NP decision-making.

The purpose was to **share knowledge** and experience, especially from the South Downs, an area of competing priorities for conservation, enhancement and growth,



Technical Exchange Partners and the stunning landscape of Jabal Al Akhdar – a candidate Special Planning Zone / National Park?



Omani welcome to village of Addah, Sharqiyah South Governorate, in the proposed Eastern Hajar Mountains SPZ. Fahad Al Farsi (3rd from left), Robert Whitcombe (5th from left) then Tim Slaney and Richard Ferguson. R to L: Aisha Al Wahaibi, Safa Al Mughaizwi, Hamda Al Hajri, Dr Hanan Al Jabri and Ahmed Al Shu'aibi.

and as close to London as the Western Hajar mountains are to Muscat. The Park is the most populated in Britain with an internal population of 117,000 and 2.2 million people living within 10km of its borders. Whilst there was some opposition to the Park's establishment, importantly most of the land remains within private ownership.

The balanced approach to development, environment, and respect for local communities, provided by a Local Planning framework, under the jurisdiction of the South Downs National Park Authority, is proving successful. The SDNPA task was to explain and advocate the multiple benefits of planning in sensitive environmental areas and of balancing landscape, economic, cultural heritage and environmental factors in decision making.

This **knowledge sharing** had a foundation on which to build, the Oman National Spatial Strategy (ONSS). This was the culmination of an intensive four-year programme of the Supreme Council for Planning that introduced innovative policies to guide the Sultanate's future development – promoting integrated communities; the spatial spread of economic development; enhancing the natural and cultural environment; and developing new green forms of infrastructure provision. The ONSS was approved by Cabinet in March 2021 and endorsed by Sultan Haitham, as the main enabler to implement Oman's Vision 2040, with the objective of achieving integrated and balanced development among the Governorates. Royal Decree (93/2020) set out the remit of MoHUP and included the

implementation of the ONSS.

The ONSS introduced the concept of Special Planning Zones (SPZs), for populated areas with significant landscape value and rich natural and cultural heritage. SPZs present opportunities for local and international tourism and for communities seeking economic activities to reduce rural to urban migration. This had been developed with reference to the planning system operating in the UK's NPs. MoHUP is in the early stages of proceeding with implementation.

The ONSS's Strategic Spatial Development Policy SD11 states: *“Special Planning Zones (SPZs) will be established as a new planning designation which will provide greater protection of areas of distinct character with a combination of significant ecological, geological, cultural and scenic values. These SPZs will be planned and managed together with their coastal equivalents... The SPZs will provide a more stringent framework to guide development to*

ensure the unique assets contained within their boundaries are well managed – now and for future generations.”

MoHUP staff were keen to learn of the first-hand planning experience of Tim Slaney, Richard Ferguson and colleagues at SDNPA, including Mike Hughes who had previously worked in Abu Dhabi's Urban Planning Council and been a regular visitor to Oman's mountains. Knowledge of the challenges experienced over many years by the Park Authority teams in the Peak District and North York Moors was also welcome – and that of residents and stakeholders in all three NPs. The Omani team was keen to see how the NP/SPZ concept could break down impressions in Oman that 'environmental designations' are protectionist and at odds with a growth agenda. How planning in a more sensitive way can prevent 'trashing' environmental and cultural assets, which create a sense of place and draws visitors for unique experiences.



Stakeholder Workshop on Tourism and Planning at a Modern Camp in the Sharqiyah Sands.

A workshop with local and tourist interests in the Sharqiyah Sands made an impression on Tim and Richard. The sense of the discussions were familiar in terms of developers' wishes and local concerns. The politeness of the dialogue (*Shura*) and the need to ensure no-one lost face publicly was clear. This contrasted with a typical address by an individual or developer to a UK Planning Committee, which can be a harrowing three-minute experience to make a point before elected representatives make a decision. Conversely, Dr Hanan appreciated the consultative and transparent framework that the UK system provided, with evidence and views being presented by applicants and the public; there is visibility on how decisions are made. This experience gave Tim and Richard a new perspective on the UK's planning system's strengths and weaknesses.

Throughout the exchange, Tim stressed that Planning is primarily about people. Planners need to communicate and 'bring people with them' when preparing Local Plans or determining proposals. Evidence is essential and Tim recognised that a wealth of useful evidence had been accumulated by the ONSS and accompanying Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs) for Oman's Governorates. Traditions, values and 'local geography' are important, and planning can help to protect and enhance them.

Tim was also keen to get across that, although planning may be expressed through drawings of buildings, spaces and landscaping, **planning** is really about helping to make places and communities work better. **Town & Country Planning** is a combination of science and art, making balanced judgements (on economic, social, cultural, environmental grounds) on what local communities, the government and the private sector wish to achieve. Planners have to show Leadership. When decisions have to be made in NPs, the balance should lie in favour of communities and the natural and cultural heritage of the area – in accordance with their Two Purposes and Duty. This approach should be considered by Oman for its SPZs.

The exchange participants recognised surprising similarities between the mountains of Oman and the hills and



valleys of the South Downs, the North York Moors and the Peak District. The importance of water resources and the cultural and natural heritage; threats from climate change; the need to support a vibrant local economy (including well managed tourism and mineral extraction); the risk of large numbers of tourists coming to special areas (and associated development) damaging the very attractions that the tourists have come to see; the desire for Dark Night Skies; a passion for each region's unique attributes and a sense of cultural identity. Oman see their country as distinct from others in the region and development should reflect this. Oman also is keen to manage its affairs as best it can, using consultancy where appropriate. The Government-to-Government exchange that the society sponsored allowed for open discussions and built rapport and trust.

Challenges facing Oman include having jobs and homes in separate locations; the rapid pace of growth; compact traditional villages but sprawling new settlements; major schemes with little infrastructure but some large infrastructure (e.g. roads) with limited immediate demand; limited first-hand knowledge of an area being planned; struggle to find suitable terms in Arabic for certain concepts (Landscape, Spatial Planning, Protected Areas, NPs).

These similarities and challenges presented opportunities for 'lessons-learned', from the UK NP planning system, to be applied to Oman's SPZs. Tim and Richard and other NP staff led Capacity Building workshops with the MoHUP staff, to provide guidance on the establishment

and management of NPs / SPZs in Oman.

In the UK there was a wide range of topics for presentations and workshops: Dark Skies; Community Involvement in Aquifer Management; Affordable Housing in the South Downs NP; Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment; Design Award Schemes run by the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI); "Ryevitalise" a four-year

Landscape Partnership Scheme with 15 partners to restore and enhance a river system and to reconnect people; overview of the North York Moors NP and how it deals with 'Exceptional Major Development' where national needs for development override the protection of landscape; overview of the Peak District NP and how it works in partnership with the business sector, for example through a scheme called BESST (Business and Environment linked through Small Scale Tourism).

Tim Slaney, Ahmed Al Shu'aibi and Robert Whitcombe reviewing development proposals for the Jabal Al Akhdar.





Ladybower Reservoir, Peak District National Park. L to R: Fahad Al Farsi, Brian Taylor (Head of Planning), Robert Whitcombe, Dr Hanan Al Jabri, Safa Al Mughazwi, John Scott (retired Director of Conservation & Planning) and Ahmed Al Shu'aibi.

Oman has yet to make the commitment to designate its first NP or SPZ. Nevertheless, the participants believe that this exchange has raised awareness of the beneficial aspects of a planning system that provides important checks and balances to proposed development, to enable greater benefits, over a long time period, than unplanned growth. The Minister of MoHUP, His Excellency Dr. Khalfan bin Saeed Al Shu'aibi, met the team on two occasions and was keen that such progress is made. There is a need to promote Town and Country Planning as a valued profession that supports decision-making, ensuring a sustainable future for Oman's most special landscapes – its dramatic mountains, coasts and deserts.

Key outcomes from the exchange were that the MoHUP team should focus their efforts on a Vision and Local Plan for part of the Western Hajar Mountains SPZ, using evidence to develop strong conservation and tourism policies. The policy framework should understand the desire for and address emerging projects and establish a system of sound governance. To enable good decision-making, policies and plans must show awareness of the 'big picture', with respect to development and conservation, as well as the detail.

Two SPZ locations where Local Plans are a priority for MoHUP are the Sharqiyah Sands and the Jabal Al Akhdar / Jabal Shams. Subsequent to the exchange visits, MoHUP staff have been developing local planning policies in consultation with local communities and regional and national representatives of other Ministries. Work remains to be done, but the support of the Society to the SDNPA / MoHUP collaboration has helped to initiate this task.

Success factors in the preparation of a 'Local Plan' for a National Park or Special Planning Zone.



Seven Sisters Country Park, within the South Downs NP. L to R: Safa Al Mughazwi, Fahad Al Farsi, Richard Ferguson, Ahmed Al Shu'aibi, Peter Cousin (Commercial Manager), Dr Hanan Al Jabri and Shahad Al Na'amani.



With tourism a focus for significant investment, the time has come for high value landscape areas to be protected by a National Park planning system that prevents the killing of the goose that lays the golden egg. Now there must be an Omani proverb for that! ■

There is no space to document and illustrate all the travels, site visits and meetings of the participants across England and northern Oman. Key points, principles and highlights are mentioned here; further information and presentations are available on request (to rwhitcombe@aol.com and abu.abyen@gmail.com – Ahmed Al Shu'aibi)

OUTWARD BOUND OMAN'S BUSIEST YEAR

ARTICLE BY MARK EVANS

2023 has seen continued growth and expansion at Outward Bound Oman (OBO), where in excess of 23,000 people have now been trained (estimated to exceed 25,000 by the end of 2023), and more than 1,000 training courses delivered since foundation.

Initially set up with seed funding by founding partners BG, Dentons, Shell and Sheikh Suhail Bahwan, a start up team of three people based in a small, donated office in Madinat Sultan Qaboos has now evolved into a team of 39 (85% are Omani), operating out of a state-of-the-art training centre and headquarters located close to Sultan Qaboos University in Al Khoud, on land generously donated by HE the Minister of Social Development.

In eight years since the then Prince Charles handed a letter to HM Sultan Qaboos from the Duke of Edinburgh, who at the time was the patron of Outward Bound, three international standard training centres have been constructed, the first some 11km into the Sharqiya Sands, and the second (that acts as the formal HQ, central equipment stores and urban training centre) being formally opened by HH Theyazin bin Haitham in October 2020, in the presence of various Ministers, under-secretaries, the then British Ambassador Hamish Cowell and the Oman media.

March 2022 saw the completion and formal opening of OBO's third and flagship

training centre, funded by the Ministry of Energy and Minerals social investment committee and located at 7,400ft altitude on Jebel Akhdar. Built on land adjoining the highest altitude government school in Oman, the centre is ideally positioned to deliver powerful courses all year round, the location enabling groups to walk out on overnight expeditions amongst the juniper and wild olives trees that grow in abundance there.

Designed by architects 23 Degrees North, the centre uses local stone gabions to blend into the surroundings, and consists of two training rooms, one AV lecture theatre for 60 people, a large kitchen and canteen, plus equipment stores, accommodation, two stone firepits, four learning pavilions (each sits 20 people), showers, toilets and prayer rooms. An emphasis is placed on renewable energy through the provision of more than 100 solar panels, three micro wind turbines and ten solar streetlights. The energy generated is fed back into the grid, making the centre cost neutral (or potentially even positive) in terms of energy. Similarly, fitting solar panels to the roof of our Muscat HQ has

Climate Shaper students
round the Jebel Centre
fire pit.

seen our electricity bills reduced by more than 50% thanks to the panels that contribute 42kw into the national grid.

Since foundation by Kurt Hahn in 1941, Outward Bound schools have been established in 35 countries around the world, with Oman being the first in an Arabic speaking nation. All schools in the network were hit hard by Covid – especially OB Hong Kong that at the time of writing was locked down and unable to run courses. In Oman we opted to retain all of our staff during the short period of lockdown, and used the opportunity after many years of relentless growth to catch up, consolidate and plan strategically for take-off once Covid eased.

Thankfully our lockdown was short, and OBO was given approval by the Supreme Committee to deliver a series of indoor mental wellbeing courses for those most affected by lockdown and isolation, with reduced numbers for physical distancing, in partnership with the Ministry of Health. Our post-Covid



The new Jebel Centre, opened in March.

recovery has been rapid, and 2023 was, like many years before it, the busiest year since we started in 2009, resulting in more jobs being created for more talented young Omanis to join the team. A five-year strategic plan has a target of 5,000 people being trained annually by 2025, something we may achieve a year ahead of schedule, as we anticipate training some 5,300 people in 2023.

The range of courses delivered by the OBO team broadens by the year. In addition to our main 'Next Generation' course that has the aim of upskilling unemployed job seekers, courses now range from the leadership teams of some of Oman's leading private sector entities, to courses for the socially disadvantaged via a partnership with Dar Al Atta'a, for young people with autism, those undergoing drug rehabilitation and

young people re-entering society after a period in prison.

OBO is becoming more closely aligned with government initiatives, such as supporting the Ministry of Labour Etimad programme through short courses that trained more than 250 emerging talent from across the private sector, courses that were enhanced by drop-in mentors such as HE Dr Ali Qassim Jawad Al Lawati, President of The Royal Academy of Management, who added great value to each three-day course.

A major programme during the earlier part of 2022 was to ensure that key messages trickled down from the COP-26 event in Glasgow; supported by the British Embassy in Muscat, our Climate Shapers course saw 34 courses successfully delivered to more than 500 young Omanis, with all mentors and OBO Instructors



Dr Madiha Al Shaibani, Minister of Education, formally opened the new Jebel Centre.



Mentors from leading companies in Oman lend value to discussions on sustainability.

undertaking an online Royal Scottish Geographical Society Climate Accelerator programme as part of the package.

The results were impressive: 97% of the 500 were more aware of the importance of diversifying Oman’s economy, and the importance of making sustainable choices; 98% were more aware of climate change and global and local efforts to mitigate its impact; results that were shared at an event held in the presence of HH Bilarab bin Haitham Al Said, and the then British Ambassador Bill Murray. So successful was the programme that OBO has been invited to participate in COP28 in Dubai later this year.

The success of Oman’s investment in OBO has not gone unnoticed in the region. Confronted with the same issues of employment, and employability, OBO has acted as a catalyst for applications for OB operations to be established in Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain. A social return on investment (SROI) analysis of Outward Bound Canada, undertaken by global consultancy Bain and Co concluded that every 1\$ invested in OB Canada had a return of 13\$.

Significant benefits were evident for government through people being considered to be more economically productive, less dependent on government support, and having a better attitude to their own health, resulting in less dependency on government health care, and towards the health of the environment. SROI reviews undertaken by

PDO and Oman LNG show that OB Oman is achieving similar results, and a more detailed impact audit is currently being undertaken by KPMG.

With three international standard training centres in operation, OBO has the capacity to play an increasingly significant role in developing the human capital and national talent of the Sultanate as Oman strives to make Vision 2040 a reality. The Anglo-Omani Society continues to play a key role in the evolution of OBO through providing grant support that enables less experienced Omani instructors to travel to UK and spend time at Outward Bound Aberdovey (where the OB movement was started in 1941), and Outward Bound Scotland where they can shadow and observe best practice as part of their professional development. ■

OBO’s patron is HH Sayyid Faisal bin Turki Al Said and Mark is the Executive Director. The website is at <https://outwardboundoman.com>



Above: HH Theyazin Bin Haitham was guest of honour at the opening of the HQ.
Below: The Muscat HQ and Training Centre.



ANGLO-OMANI EXCAVATIONS AT FULAYJ FORT

ARTICLE BY DR SETH PRIESTMAN, PROF NASSER AL-JAHWARI, DR EVE MACDONALD & DR DEREK KENNET
WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY DOMIZIANA ROSSI, MARK ANDREWS, ROSALIND MACDONALD, DAVIT NASKIDASHVILI, DR VLADIMIR DABROWSKI,
IBRAHIM AL-MAQBALI, KAWTHER AL-ZEIDI, TATIA MAMALASHVILI, VLADIMIR KENKADZE

Exploring the Archaeology of Arab- Persian Interactions on the Batinah and the Advent of Islam in Oman

The *Fulayj Fort Project* focuses on the unique archaeological remains at the site of Fulayj: a small stone-built fort constructed between the early 5th to mid-6th century AD during the late pre-Islamic period and its subsequent reoccupation during the first decades following the Islamic conquest of Oman in the 7th century.

The fort is located on the Batinah coastal plain, 30km SE of the famous medieval port of Sohar, a key centre of Indian Ocean maritime trade during the Early Islamic period. It is a square, regularly planned and heavily defended stone-built

fortification with projecting corner towers. It bears all the hallmarks of a professional military construction. Its size, at 30 x 30m, is too limited to have housed a significant military detachment. It may therefore have formed part of a wider defensive system designed to control the economically important coastal Batinah and Sohar hinterland. This could have been achieved via a limited mobile force, such as a series of cavalry units, able to return, where needed, to a strongly protected series of defensive installations.

Oblique aerial view of Fulayj fort looking to the west; map showing the location of Fulayj on the Batinah plain of Oman.





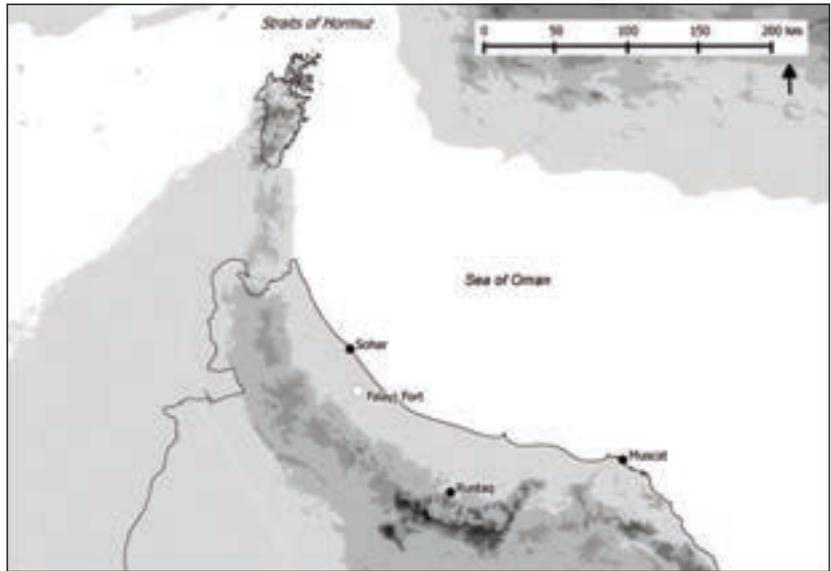
Oblique aerial views of Fulayj fort looking to the southwest.

Previous excavation at Fulayj by our team in 2015-16 demonstrated that the fort was built in the late pre-Islamic period. It is likely associated with the historically attested control of the Batinah region under the authority of the Persian Sasanian Empire. At this time, a Persian population was actively settled along the coast. The fort was later reoccupied and transformed into what appears to be a domestic space during the first century of Islamic governance when Oman came under the direct rule of a rapidly expanding Arab/Islamic empire. These events set in motion a process that overturned the Late Antique world order and established a framework, which endures in many respects to this day.

ANGLO-OMANI RESEARCH COLLABORATION

The *Fulayj Fort Project* was developed as an Anglo-Omani research collaboration between Durham University and Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) under the authorisation of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT). A key aim is to integrate the provision of skills training and knowledge sharing alongside high-quality archaeological research within an historic context.

Capacity development within Oman, especially in historic archaeology, a traditionally underrepresented field of research, has the potential to deliver significant benefit and impact. The main cultural heritage asset in Oman relates to activities associated with the most recent millennia, and the requirement for skills, knowledge, and expertise in Islamic archaeology extends across all areas from



public engagement, higher education, and wider heritage protection.

This aspect of training investment has been identified as a condition of the project funding awarded by the AOS. It was therefore a particularly gratifying aspect of the 2022 season to have positive uptake on the skills training offer with two placements

filled by recent archaeological graduates following different career trajectories, one in public education and another as a junior staff member of the MHT.

Below: Excavation in progress in 2022 with participants including early career trainees from the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and Sultan Qaboos University.



2022 EXCAVATION SEASON

The third season of the joint British-Omani excavations at Fulayj took place over a six-week period 14 February -27 March 2022. The project was co-directed by Dr Seth Priestman, Prof Nasser Al-Jahwari, Dr Eve MacDonald and Dr Derek Kennet. There were 12 other international participants including professional archaeologists and specialists from the UK, France, Italy, Canada and the Republic of Georgia and early career trainees from Oman.

Excavation focused on the northeast corner of the fort, where traces had previously been identified of an Early Islamic occupation horizon. Two trenches were opened and excavated, in most areas, to the base of the fort occupation sequence. Excavation procedures aimed to maximise the information available for a site that remains unique in its coverage of the Late Antique/Early Islamic transition in Oman.

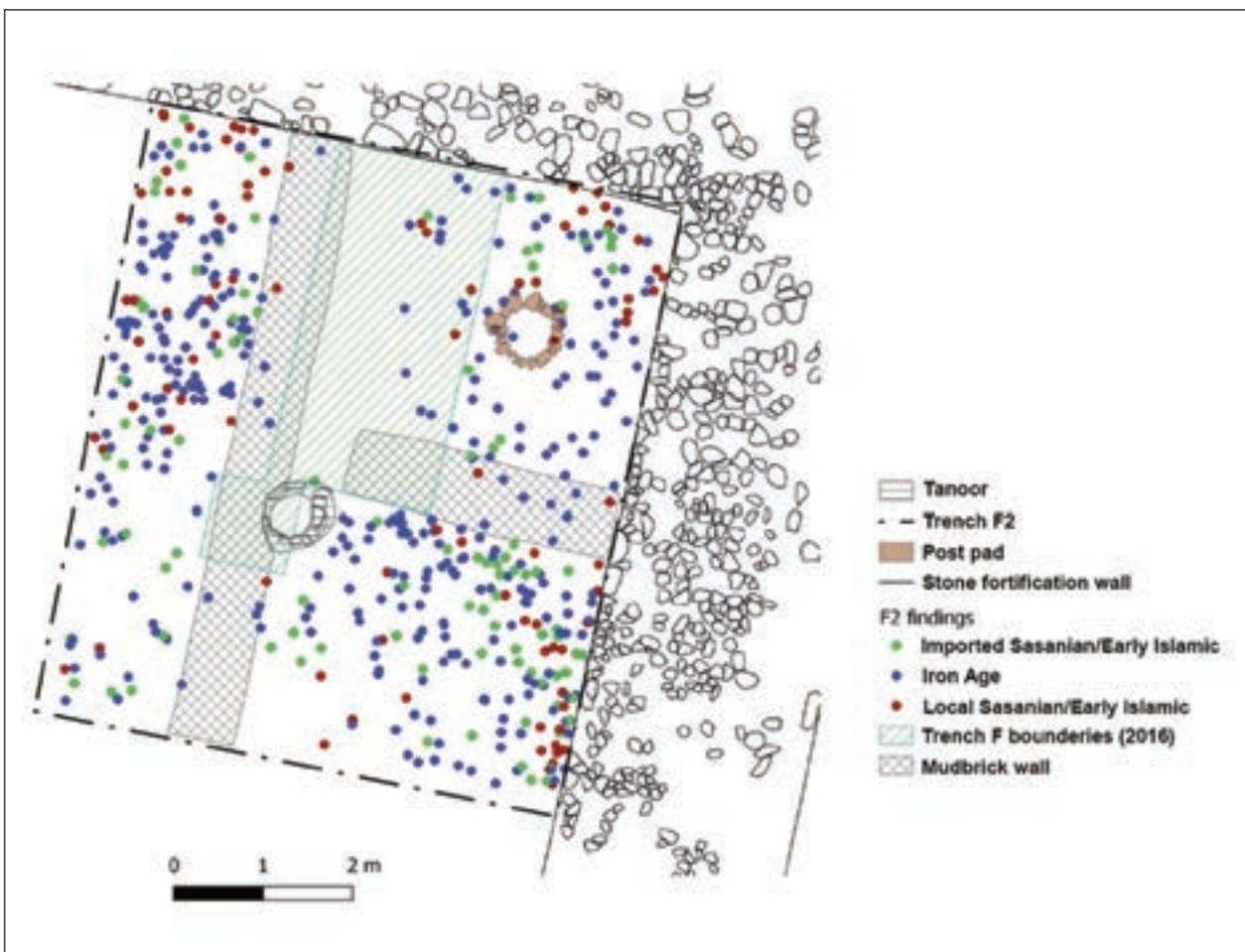
A specific focus of the project was the application of a full archaeobotanical sampling.

A specific focus of the project was the application of a full archaeobotanical sampling. This concerns carbonised plant remains preserved within the excavated soil deposits. The main objective of the archaeobotanical study was to determine how the inhabitants of the fort obtained, utilised, and managed various plant resources required in the provision of food and fuel as part of their subsistence needs.

Furthermore, it offers the potential of detecting significant evidence for long-distance exchange, either directly in the form of traded food commodities, or via the translocation of plant species across the Indian Ocean. Well preserved archaeobotanical remains were recovered throughout the sequence. Soil samples were processed via a bulk flotation method capable of processing sufficient material in

volume. The relatively low density of domestic activity within the fort necessitated the use of specialised equipment to extract small quantities of remains from sizeable volumes of deposits.

Preliminary analysis of archaeobotanical remains provides the earliest known evidence for the presence of sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor ssp. bicolor*) in Arabia, brought from India in the 7th century. This is an important drought resistant cereal crop with a high calorific value. Today, it is the fifth most prevalent cereal crop in the world after rice, wheat, maize, and barley. Full identification and analysis of the archaeobotanical assemblage will now be undertaken by Dr Vladimir Dabrowski at the *Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle* in Paris. The results will form a core component of the final publication and report.



Excavation of Trench F2 completed in the northeast corner of the fort in 2022 showing the newly revealed mudbrick architecture and distribution of ceramic finds.



The flotation machine built at Fulayj. Water is recycled and recirculated via a domestic pump (left). The sediment is poured into the main barrel and the carbonised macro botanical remains are gathered within a fine mesh (right) before being dried in the sun (bottom).

PROJECT RESULTS

The 2022 excavation season produced significant new information that enriches our understanding of Fulayj and advances our general aims concerning the investigation of the site. A number of broad outlines concerning the main history of the fort had been established in the first two seasons of excavation in 2015 and 2016, but key aspects of the evidence required validation and refinement. Secondary occupation detected in the form of the inner face of a perpendicular mudbrick wall abutting the fort wall were uncovered within a 1 x 4m sondage opened in 2016.

This area has now been exposed over a 7 x 9m area, within which we can observe the full thickness of the mudbrick wall, a complete room with a return wall in the northeast corner of the fort, and the continuation of a further internal room division to the south. Furthermore, and importantly, it has been possible to identify a relatively substantial and rich occupation containing typical late Sasanian period finds that pre-date the construction of the

fort. It is possible that a more ephemeral defensive structure was erected in an earlier phase.

IMPACT OF THE ANGLO-OMANI SOCIETY SUPPORT

Fulayj represents one of the most significant contexts currently known for a detailed archaeological analysis of Islamisation in Eastern Arabia. Support from the Anglo-Omani Society has been instrumental in broadening the scope of the investigation and maximising the potential for information recovery. During the next season of fieldwork, we intend to direct particular focus towards the occupation that immediately pre-dates the construction of the fort. The characterisation of this horizon is critical to the overall understanding of when and why the fort was established. We also intend to investigate the possibility of a wider regional defensive system, and the activities of farming and urban communities living along the neighbouring coast. ■

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GLOBALLY ENDANGERED LAPPET-FACED VULTURES IN OMAN

ARTICLE BY FAISAL AL LAMKI & MIKE McGRADY

Ringed nestling LFV at Wadi Sareen in 2021. ©ESO.



Oman is famous for its natural beauty and diversity, derived from the surrounding sea and its varied landscapes of high mountains, coastal plains, stony and sand deserts, and wadis of all sizes.

That beauty and diversity extends to the animals found in the country, including the Arabian Humpback Whale, Arabian Leopard, Arabian Tahr, and Sooty Falcon.

In addition to the more high-profile animal species that call Oman home or migrate to and through the Sultanate, there are species that go rather unnoticed. However, the global importance of Oman to these species is becoming more and more of an open secret.

Although the lappet-faced vulture is the largest wild bird species in Oman and is globally endangered, it is fairly unknown and under-appreciated. Despite its size, the lappet-faced vulture has flown under the radar of most people who travel to Oman in search of its natural beauty.

In 2021, the Anglo-Omani Society provided support to Faisal Al Lamki for a project entitled: *Lappet-faced vultures (Torgos tracheliotos) in Oman: Harnessing and improving local capacity to monitor and conserve a globally endangered vulture species*. The aims were to collect

information on the ecology of lappet-faced vultures in Oman that would be useful for its conservation, and build local capacity to conduct similar work in the future by harnessing the in-country human and institutional resources.

Needless to say, COVID caused major disruptions in 2021 and 2022 and this extended to the study of lappet-faced vultures in Oman. Nonetheless, better-than-expected progress was made on the project because of in-country partnering with the Environment Society of Oman (ESO), and the Environment Authority (EA). Funded by the Disney Conservation Fund, ESO provided field researchers, public educators, and financial support for the field effort. EA supported important field expertise in the form of rangers and biologists and permits for the research. Our work also attracted additional in-kind support from Hawkwatch International and the Peregrine Fund in the form of satellite tracking devices that allow us to follow the movements of some vultures. Thus, despite the chaos caused by COVID, the partnerships that coalesced around lappet-faced vulture research and conservation enabled the AOS-funded work to move forward, benefitting from synergies.

In 2021 and 2022, surveys for breeding lappet-faced vultures were conducted in seven Omani governorates. Surveyors came from EA, ESO, and included volunteers from Oman and other countries. We sought to understand the geographical distribution of breeding vultures by finding nests, and determining territory occupancy and productivity (i.e. whether eggs, chicks or fledglings were produced). This data is important because it highlights habitats important to breeding vultures in Oman, and provides vital demographic statistics to help us understand the status of the vulture population – i.e. to determine whether it is at a healthy and sustainable level.

During breeding surveys, chicks were

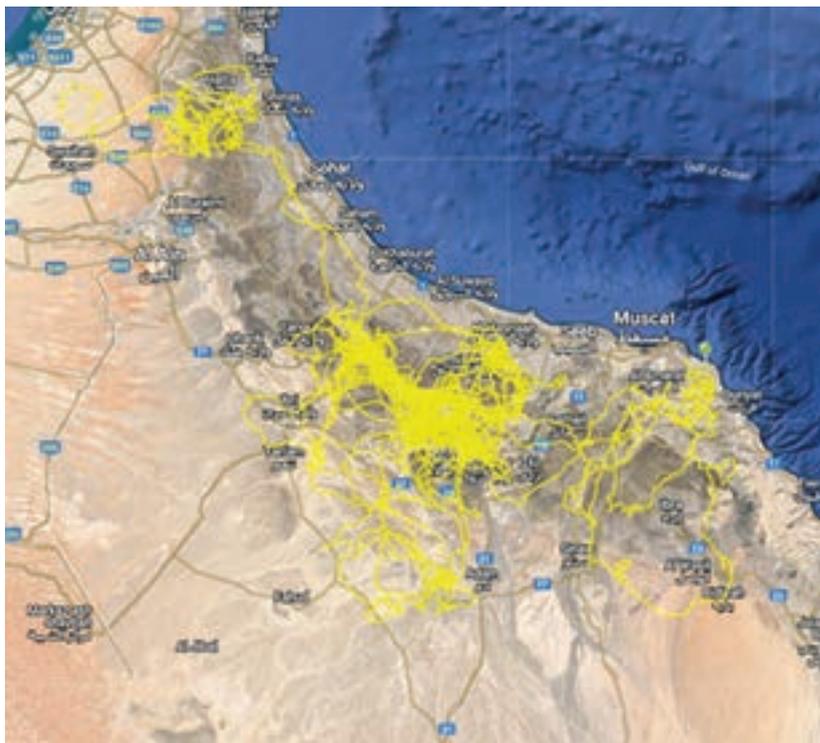
Our work identified about 120 nominal nesting territories of lappet-faced vultures, but time and logistical constraints undermined our ability to determine whether all of those nests were currently occupied by breeding vultures or if they were just the evidence of past breeding.

fitted with uniquely numbered colour rings, and DNA samples were taken. The rings make it possible for the birds to be identified by observers (with the help of binoculars, telescopes or cameras), and DNA samples enable the birds to be sexed (One cannot tell sex from outward appearances, though females tend to be larger than males).

Our work identified about 120 nominal nesting territories of lappet-faced vultures, but time and logistical constraints undermined our ability to determine whether all of those nests were currently occupied by breeding vultures or if they were just the evidence of past breeding. Lappet-faced vulture nests can be huge and persist over many years in the arid climate of Oman. Despite being unable to confirm

occupancy at the nests, and searching only a small proportion of the available habitats, our finding suggests that more lappet-faced vultures breed in Oman than previously suspected, and that Oman may be a global stronghold for this endangered species.

During surveys we also collected information on how many chicks were being produced. One way to understand the status of the population is by determining whether enough young birds are being produced to compensate for the number that die. Less than half of the nests we found produced nestlings that survived to fly. This seemingly high loss of eggs and nestlings is worrying, and we are working to understand the main causes. Is it a lack of food? Is it predation by eagles, ravens or crows? At the moment, the answer remains



Movements of a young lappet-faced vulture reared near Jebel Shams during May 2022 – January 2023.
© M. McGrady



ESO field researcher, Mr. Ali Al Rasbi, with a young lappet-faced vulture that has been fitted with a GPS tracking device. ©ESO

unclear and more work needs to be done to find out.

Apart from the colour ringing of nestlings, some vultures that had been illegally taken from the wild then confiscated by the authorities were fitted with solar-powered GPS tracking devices and released. The devices, fitted to the birds like a backpack, track movement and send locations via the mobile phone network (GSM). The devices can last many years, and we are currently tracking a number of birds. The general pattern of movement has been that they wander ever more widely, and that, over time, huge areas are covered. For example, a nestling from a nest near Ibra covered tens of thousands of kilometres, wandering across much of the Hajar Mountains of northern Oman and visiting Hatta and southern Sharjah, UAE.

Such wandering is not unexpected. Vultures are scavengers, and in natural conditions may have to wander over huge areas to find enough food. Vultures are adapted for their scavenging lifestyle, in that they can soar with little effort for hours on end, and their digestive system is highly efficient, meaning they get the most out of the food they eat.

In addition to the nesting surveys, our team of partners also surveyed medium-



Participants at an Environment Authority/Environment Society of Oman workshop aimed at developing a vulture action plan for Oman.

voltage powerlines in areas frequented by vultures. Recent work on vultures and other birds has shown that electrocution on medium-voltage powerlines is a major threat to some species, especially large ones. In Oman we have documented the electrocution of some birds, including some lappet-faced vultures. What we have observed represents only the tip of the iceberg in terms of bird deaths caused by electrocution. To address this threat and offer feasible ways of reducing the risk of electrocution, we are working with power

distribution companies in Oman to predict areas of high risk and take actions to mitigate them.

Another important facet of the project, perhaps the most important, was education across all levels of society, including children, the general public, commercial and government organisations, and on-the-ground rangers and biologists from the EA. This consciousness raising across such a wide segment of society is crucial to the conservation of vultures and other natural resources. ■

IN SUMMARY, OUR STUDY FOUND:

- Oman is apparently a stronghold for globally endangered lappet-faced vultures.
- Lappet-faced vultures are under threat in Oman.
- Threats require long-term conservation commitment and support.
- More research is needed.
- More Omanis need to be trained, especially within the Environment Authority.
- Public education is important.
- Government, waste managers and electricity providers need to be engaged.
- AOS funding and collaboration has been key to the project's success.

IN THE FUTURE, WE MUST:

- Continue engaging, partnering and coordinating with EA to support their eventual leading role in lappet-faced vulture and other bird conservation.
- Recognise the importance of birds in the environment, and Oman's position as a global stronghold for some species.
- Identify and support bird champions in EA.
- Partner with ESO, companies and funders like AOS to develop local capacity.
- Ensure that lappet-faced vulture conservation work, and similar projects remain on-going.

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The Society is glad to offer its facilities for hire year-round to its members. Our impressive fully refurbished period building at 34 Sackville Street, Mayfair, includes a boardroom and lecture/ events space. Both have AV equipment installed, and the capacity to hold online/hybrid meetings. We are pleased to offer this benefit to our members at a competitive price.



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SEDIMENT DNA REVEALS OMAN'S ANCIENT ECOSYSTEMS

ARTICLE BY PROFESSOR SIMON UNDERDOWN

Simon Underdown, a member of this Society, is Professor of Biological Anthropology and Director of the Centre of Environment and Society at Oxford Brookes University. His research focusses on using a range of techniques, including archaeology and ancient DNA analysis, to discover how people in the past adapted to changes in climate and the problems of disease.

From the frankincense producing trees in Dhofar to the junipers that dominate the mountains of the North, the plant life of Oman is an essential part of what makes the Sultanate so special. Anyone who has witnessed the transformation brought by the Khareef and the resultant swathes of green that engulf Salalah knows that plants have the power to awe.

The relationship between humans and plants is tightly intertwined: they provide food for us and our livestock, raw materials, shade, and beauty. Yet the climate and flora of Oman has changed dramatically in the past, and with the impact of climate change may do so again in the future. With my colleagues Dr Ash Parton (Oxford Brookes) and Dr Laila Said Al Harthy (Senior Botanist at the Oman Botanic Gardens), and supported by the Society,



Prof Simon Underdown demonstrating how to prepare a section for sampling.

Trainees alongside Prof Simon Underdown and Dr Laila Said Al Harthy.



we are using new archaeological techniques to reconstruct the floral history of Oman.

Oman occupies a critical location for understanding the effect of past climate changes to flora and fauna. Over the last 100,000 years, the landscape of Oman has been periodically transformed from a dry, desert region to one characterised by lakes, rivers and extensive grasslands. Such changes were instrumental for the development of our species, allowing groups of early humans to expand across Arabia and, eventually, the rest of the world. The arrival of wetter conditions also brought an explosion of life as floral and faunal communities expanded into regions previously closed off by unfavourable environmental conditions.

The archaeological and environmental records of Oman are testament to these changes and provide a vital archive of ancient demography and climate change. Unfortunately, the vast majority of these records are fragmentary, temporally limited, and fail to reveal the exact nature and timing of environmental change. As such, our present understanding of how the changing climate and ecology of Oman helped shape the fortune of its earliest people remains limited.

Our limited understanding of Oman's early climate and people has the potential to be revolutionised through the recovery and analysis of ancient DNA. DNA is all around us: since Watson and Crick published their structure of the double helix in 1953 our understanding of DNA has advanced at an amazing pace. Studying DNA provides us with a window into the building blocks of life and to identify remarkable details about the history of life on Earth. The study of ancient DNA has also transformed how we understand the past. As the name suggests, ancient DNA (aDNA) is recovered from ancient sources.

aDNA analysis is one of the most important developments within archaeology since the radiocarbon dating revolution of the 1950s. It allows the genetic code of organisms that lived many thousands of years ago to be analysed, revealing information about them well beyond what traditional archaeology alone can provide, such as population movements and the evolution of diseases. aDNA samples are most frequently taken from archaeological bones and teeth, but it can also be extracted from mummified tissues, ice cores and soil sediments.

The latter, known as sedimentary ancient DNA (sedaDNA), is the crucial source for this project: it provides a unique insight into the entire ancient ecosystem as ancient sediments contain aDNA derived from humans, animals, bacteria, viruses and plants.

However, there are many potential problems involved in the recovery, extraction and analysis of aDNA. Unlike modern genetic sampling (from saliva, hair, or blood for example), ancient genetic samples are typically of very low quality and much shorter than modern samples. It is therefore essential that ancient sediments are sampled with precision and care, to avoid any risk of cross-contamination with modern DNA. To demonstrate how this is achieved, I ran a workshop with Dr Laila Said Al Harthy, in May 2023.

The workshop was an excellent opportunity for collaboration and interdisciplinary work across subjects, borders and expertise. Attended by colleagues from across Oman and Saudi Arabia, the workshop began at the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, generously

Sampling sedaDNA.



hosted by His Excellency Eng. Ibrahim Said Al Kharusi, Undersecretary of Heritage and attended by Mr James Goldman, the British Chargé d'affaires to Oman. This included talks from Dr Laila Said Al Harthy, on the Botanic Garden project, and myself on our project and the collection and analysis of ancient sedaDNA, followed by a reception.

A second day saw the practical element of the workshop take place at the Botanic Gardens, surrounded by the amazing plant collection that has been assembled from across Oman and representing the floral diversity of the entire Sultanate. The striking buildings are rising from the ground and have an almost organic look to them as if, fittingly, they are growing naturally from the hillsides.

Collecting ancient DNA requires a remarkable amount of care and attention to detail to prevent contamination. For this reason, protective clothing is worn that looks like those sported by a forensic scientist at a crime scene: Tyvek suits, gloves, overshoes, goggles and masks.

The daytime temperature in Muscat that week had rarely dipped below 40, and at our 8am start the mercury had already crept up to 43. Working outside in such



SEDIMENT DNA REVEALS OMAN'S ANCIENT ECOSYSTEMS



SedaDNA sampling demonstration at Botanic Gardens.

heat poses challenges under normal circumstances: wearing multiple layers of plastic introduces an element of extreme sport to proceedings.

After discussing how I prepare a site for sedaDNA collection (laying out equipment, preparing sampling tubes), I then demonstrated how to cut into the face of a section to extract the sediment samples. Then, alas, it was time for the plastic suit. It's difficult not to be amused by the sight

of a middle-aged academic struggling to remember words while boiling himself to perfection inside a white plastic suit, and it caused a great deal of shared hilarity. After demonstrating how to sample, clean tools and store the sediments I was extremely relieved to remove the protective clothing. Then, very gamely, many attendees donned the equipment and, under my direction, practised the sampling technique. Once again, the shared

discomfort lent the event a great sense of camaraderie and many selfies were taken.

Training done, we moved indoors for refreshments and continued our discussion. The training workshop, a cornerstone of our project, offered the chance to share knowledge and network, building links between Omani and British research. It was also a lot of fun!

The next phase of our project will be joint fieldwork in January 2024 to collect

modern plants and ancient DNA from the same sites. This will allow us to build a detailed picture of how plants have changed across time in response to variations in climate. Building this unique picture of the changes to Oman's floral history using modern and ancient data will allow us to show how Oman's environment is not static but has changed dramatically many times in the last 100,000 years.

This environmental long view, stretching from the present into our deep past, has the potential to help us understand the challenges posed by climate change in the future. ■



Lecture at Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING FOR GLOBAL BIODIVERSITY

GROWING NETWORK OF BRITISH AND OMANI NATURAL SCIENTISTS

ARTICLE BY NIGEL WINSER

CO-CONVENOR OF THE OMAN NATURAL HERITAGE LECTURES

Professor Paul Wilkin, Head of Natural Capital and Plant Health, Royal Botanic Gardens (RBG), Kew, spoke about the importance of knowledge sharing for global biodiversity and the high standard of research and conservation work being undertaken by Botanic Gardens worldwide at the Oman Natural heritage Lecture in 2019.

In thanking the botanists and horticulturalists, Paul ended by applauding the achievement of the new Oman Botanic Garden (OBG) in such a short time as a centre of excellence in the Middle East for those committed to understanding and protecting the precious diversity of the world's plants and habitats.

He was giving the vote of thanks to Dr. Annette Patzelt, Dr Laila Al Harthy and Dr Khalid Al Farsi for their lecture about the Flora of Oman and the pioneering work of the OBG.

This Oman delegation, funded by the British Omani Society, was invited to RBG Kew to be introduced to the Director, Dr. Richard Deverell, and key scientists working in the Sultanate of Oman, for a behind the scenes tour of both the Herbarium and the Plant Houses.

Our particular thanks go to Dr. Shahina Ghazanfar and Dr. James Borrell.

This past year, Dr Tim Littlewood, Executive Director of Science at the Natural History Museum, in thanking the speakers, Mr. Nasser Al Kindi, writer and filmmaker and author and Mrs. Azzah Al Jabri, Director of the Oman Natural History Museum, spoke about the enormity of the task ahead to 'record, understand and protect' the biodiversity of the world.

This includes the continuing task to complete the taxonomic inventory of the planet before the trends of habitat loss are reversed. These are global issues that can only be tackled by local scientists and conservation practitioners, such as the great work underway in the Oman Natural Heritage Museum.



Dr. Aida Al Jabri (Marine scientist), Dr Suaad Al Harthy (Environment Society of Oman) and Dr Saif Al Shaqsi (Director of the National Field Research Centre for Environmental Conservation) being given a tour of the Princess of Wales Conservatory of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, in 2017 with Nigel Winsor.

The British Omani Society, which gives funds to facilitate additional joint projects each year, are contributing to a growing network of natural scientists in Oman and in the UK.

As in the past, Mr. John Jackson, Head of Science Policy and Communication, organised a bespoke visit for the Oman Delegation to meet the Director, Dr Doug Gurr and arranged a behind the scenes visit to both the Museum in South Kensington and a special visit to Natural History Museum at Tring to see the famous bird collection. These visits conveniently coincide with the annual



Mr. Nasser Al Kindi being given a special tour of the Natural History Museum at Tring, home of the Museum's Bird collection, by Mr. John Jackson, Head of Science Policy and Communication at the Natural History Museum in South Kensington. (Photo Nigel Winsler)



Dr. Saif Al Shaqsi, Director of the Oman National Field Research Centre for Environmental Conservation after the 4th Oman Natural Heritage Lecture in 2019, meeting Professor Joe Smith, Director of the Royal Geographical Society (top right), Sarah Staunton-Lamb, Dr. Steve Andrews (CEO) and Professor Lucian Hudson, Chairman of Earthwatch Europe (top left) to discuss future collaborations in Oman and UK. (Photo Nico Wills)

'Wildlife Photographer of the Year Exhibition' which is always popular.

Dr Roderic Dutton and organisers of the Oman Natural Heritage Lectures are truly indebted to many academic and science institutions that open their doors to the Oman Delegation each year. Last year Professor Paul Smith arranged a special visit to the Oxford University Natural History Museum and our colleagues at Kew made similar plans for the team to meet staff and learn of contemporary new projects.

Staff and guests of these and other institutions, such as Earthwatch, RBG Edinburgh, the Zoological Society of London, IUCN and Fauna and Flora, attend these annual lectures at the Royal Geographical Society thanks to the additional support from the London Speaker Bureau, the Geographical Magazine, the UK Oman volunteer group and the Oman Embassy in London.

The British Omani Society, which gives funds to facilitate additional joint projects each year, are contributing to a growing network of natural scientists in Oman and in the UK who continue to share knowledge, project ideas and funding, all enhancing the UN global goal of sustainability for our shared biodiversity for a safer planet tomorrow. Long may this continue. ■

BOOKS

THE ART OF ARABIC COFFEE

By Medina Ilyas, 2022, Medina Publishing, £16.

Arabic coffee is not just a drink. It is a cultural institution, and the cornerstone of Middle Eastern hospitality. In this new edition of *The Art of Arabic Coffee*, coffee expert Medina Ilyas recounts a fascinating journey of culture, ritual and togetherness.

The Society was glad to host an interactive Arabic coffee masterclass by Medina at Sackville Street in October pre-publication. She gave a one-hour class on history, preparation and a serving ceremony together with tasting and discussing the

importance of preserving this intangible cultural heritage. The workshop was designed to cover:

- The history of Arabic coffee
- The ingredients & tools you need
- Graining and roasting
- The recipe and the process
- The traditional serving ceremony

Medina noted: “I visited Oman for the first time 15 years ago, and was introduced to Arabic coffee. It was love at first sip! I was mesmerised not only by its taste, but also by the culture surrounding the Arabic coffee ritual.”

FROM 'THE ART OF ARABIC COFFEE' BOOK

“The cultivation, roasting, and preparation of coffee were originally pioneered and perfected on the Arabian Peninsula. In fact, Arabic coffee is not merely a drink – it is a cultural institution in itself, as well as the cornerstone of the famous Middle Eastern hospitality. With hundreds of years’ worth of history in the Middle East, the wealth of oral traditions and intangible cultural legacy surrounding the rituals of brewing and serving coffee has been passed down over many generations. Indeed, the Arabian coffee ceremony is much more than simply serving coffee.

“It is a ritual that involves connecting with friends, family, and the surrounding community, as well as honouring one another by taking the time to simply get together to share a delicious drink, a warm experience, and a shared story recalled or to be written. Moreover, drinking Arabic coffee is more than a means to pass time or refuel – it’s an enriching cultural experience.”

Featuring a wealth of unique and flavourful recipes, from a delectable Arabic Latte to the experimental Affogato Qahwa and Yemeni Moka Pot, Ilyas documents the tips, tricks and secrets that are essential to beginning and enjoying a lifelong relationship with Arabic Coffee.

Medina sold copies of her new book on the day, with all her profit going to UNHCR. ■



BOOK LAUNCH

LANGUAGE AND ECOLOGY IN SOUTHERN AND EASTERN ARABIA

Appraising the entangled relationship between languages and ecosystems

Janet C.E. Watson, Jon C Lovett and Roberta Morano (Editors), 2022. Bloomsbury, £85.50.

Article by Jon Lovett and Roberta Morano

Jon Lovett is Chair of Global Challenges in the School of Geography, University of Leeds

Roberta Morano is an early career researcher at the University of Leeds

The Society hosted the launch of *Language and Ecology in Southern and Eastern Arabia* at the February event in the presence of the editors and authors Shahina Ghanzafar and Dawn Chatty. The discussion illustrated the key points of the book and emphasised the relationship between language and ecosystems in Southern and Eastern Arabia.

Indigenous languages around the world – in contrast to official or mainstream languages – tend to reflect the close relationship between people and their natural environment, embodying the complex connection humans enjoy with the landscape and seasons. These bonds can be broken when indigenous languages are severed from the ecosystems in which they arose, a situation that can arise through replacement of indigenous languages by lingua franca, degradation of the ecosystem, depopulation, or forced or voluntary removal of the indigenous language community from the local ecosystem. The book seeks to examine the relationship between language and ecology from the perspective of the communities living in the southern and eastern parts of the Arabian Peninsula.

Southern Arabia is remarkably diverse in both ecology and language. This diversity is a natural result of its varied topography, geographical position, diversity of climates and extremes of weather. It is a land of mountains and deserts. Rising from the coast of the Gulf of Oman, the Hajar mountains extend for 700 kilometres through northern Oman and the United Arab Emirates, attaining an elevation of over 3000 metres at Jabel Shams.

In southern Oman and eastern Yemen, the Dhofar and Hadhramaut mountains catch the south-eastern monsoon rains of the Khareef from June to September, and have a lush green vegetation in marked contrast to the inland desert sands and stony plains.

It is also a land of cultural connections. To the South and East lies the continent of Africa. To the Northeast are the ancient cultures of Persia, and further east the Indian subcontinent is part of the prosperous monsoonal trade routes.

Over millennia the monsoon was central to exchange of goods, knowledge and language. It flows to the South during the winter and to the North in the summer. Dhows travelled south to Zanzibar and Kilwa; and returned north to the Red Sea, Oman, the Gulf and eastwards to India. This traditional economic and cultural flow has changed hugely in recent years with changes to transport infrastructure. As a result there has been massive loss of traditional knowledge and connection with nature. The monsoon is celebrated in poetry, such as the couplet from the chapter by Sam Liebhaber, Kamela Al Barami and Ahmed al-Mashikhi:

*I could never love anything but the monsoon that brings the rain clouds.
And the breeze which pushes them up
and over the high mountains.*

Not only is there the steady climatic rhythm of the monsoon, but also weather extremes of droughts and floods. Destructive cyclones can cause chaos with high winds and torrential rain. Rainstorms from the cyclones can traverse the mountains into the desert bringing a pulse of water into the sands. The poems, songs and stories of the region celebrate travel and trade, but also the unpredictability of the weather.

These stories are a cultural memory specific to the varied environment and livelihoods of the people and their language carries these memories from generation to generation so that everyone knows what to expect and how to behave, even if they have not experienced the extremes themselves.

Janet Watson discussed the complex language around wind among the Mahrah, the importance of names over numbers, and how temporal relations among the communities in Dhofar are often based on natural events rather than numerals: people born before the 1970s, for example, relate the time of their birth to well-known natural events.

The aim of this collection of articles is to approach the critical relationship between language and ecology by exploring the themes of water, flora, fauna, conservation, weather and climate, and natural resource management. In doing so, the book is divided into three main parts: 'Arabia: the significance of names', 'Arabia: narratives and ecology' and 'Arabia: conservation and revitalisation'.

We would like to thank the British Omani Society for hosting the book launch; Arran Stibbe, Founder and Convenor of the Ecolinguistics Association; and Mariana Rocca, series co-editor of the Bloomsbury Advances in Ecolinguistics. ■

PEOPLES' (NON) PARTICIPATION IN CONSERVATION: A CASE FROM OMAN

BY DAWN CHATTY WHO WAS ONE OF
 THE SPEAKERS AT THE LAUNCH

The earliest expression of interest in conservation in Arabia came about a decade or so after World War II as the alarming rate at which gazelle, oryx and other 'sporting' animals were being caught or killed by regional elites using motor vehicles and modern semi-automatic rifles became clear.

The Sultan of Oman, Said bin Taymur, issued a decree in 1964 banning the use of vehicles for hunting gazelles and oryx. He commanded the setting up of a 'gazelle patrol' of local tribesmen to stop, search, and report transgressions. Despite the ban, the oryx continued to be hunted in the Jiddat il-Harasīs and in 1972 it was declared extinct from Oman and the rest of Arabia. The loss was lamented by the only human population to inhabit this region, the Harasīs camel and goat herding tribe of the Jiddat il- Harasīs.

In 1974 Sultan Qaboos bin Said gave the green light to explore the potential for restoring the oryx to Oman as part of its natural heritage. In 1977 and 1978, a consultant attached to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) toured extensively throughout the interior, and concluded that the ideal habitat for the oryx reintroduction project should be in the Jiddat il-Harasīs and concentrated in the north east in an area known as Yalooni.

It also recommended that the whole of the Jiddat il-Harasīs should be proclaimed a wildlife reserve or sanctuary. No thought was given to the reality that this was not

'terra nullius', a land empty of people, but rather occupied by the Harasīs tribe. In 1980, the first oryx from the World Herd were flown into the country and released into the main oryx enclosure that had been built at Yalooni. Ten Harasīs tribesmen were hired as oryx rangers, tracking the animals, watching their social behaviour, and generally keeping accurate daily records of their movements.

The Harasīs tribe who numbered about 5,000 people in the 1980s were spread out over the Jiddat il-Harasīs, a vast waterless plain of about 42,000 square kilometres. Their traditional subsistence economy was based on the raising of camels and goats by natural graze to produce milk rather than meat. At the core of their way of life was migration determined by seasonal and ecological variables in the location of pasture and water for their herds. Free movement across this vast landscape they had occupied for over 200 years was important for survival.

In 1980 an international conservation effort in the Jiddat, the Arabian Oryx Re-introduction Project, came into effect and between 1980 and 1996, 450 Arabian oryx were returned to 'the wild' in the Jiddat il-Harasīs or were born there. In 1994, Oman succeeded in getting this conservation project recognized formally as the UNESCO World Heritage Arabian Oryx Sanctuary. But on-going and constant friction between the Western managers of the conservation project

and the local Harasīs tribesmen regarding their 'rights' to graze their domestic herds in large parts of their territory – now officially a UNESCO nature reserve – eventually resulted in physical and emotional distancing from the project by the Harasīs and severe diminution of any sense of ownership or use rights to this newly established government animal sanctuary. The only engagement of the local tribe was through the employment of a dozen or so Harasīs men to track and observe the behaviour of the oryx.

This (non-) participation of the tribe contributed to the undoing of the project to recreate a wild herd. The Harasīs were not consulted on the use of the Jiddat, nor on the establishment of a core area that they would be banned from entering, nor on the restricted water and road development in the area of the Oryx sanctuary. The



PEOPLE'S (NON) PARTICIPATION IN CONSERVATION



Harasīs' own intimate knowledge of the flora and fauna of the Jiddat and their stewardship of the land was not recognized.

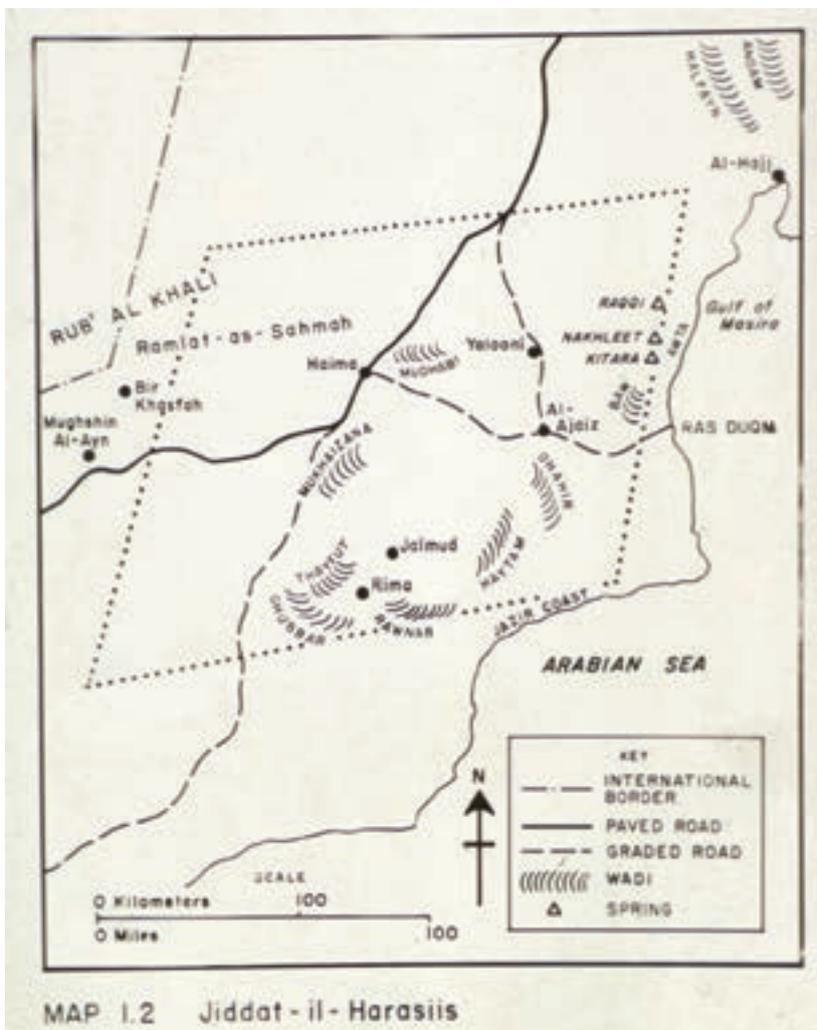
Although the older generation remained deeply attached to the oryx in their territory throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the younger generation began to show their lack of commitment to the scheme by silence that bordered on complicity. Poaching and live capture of gazelle (first reported in 1986) and later of oryx by rival tribesmen was rarely reported by young Harasīs. Unlike their elders who had manned the 'Gazelle patrols' in the 1960s

and 1970s, the younger generation just sat by and watched. Between 1996 and 1998 herd numbers dropped from an estimated 400 to 120 and those caught poaching were all members of rival tribes. The temptation to make money by illegal capture become difficult to resist, especially as they had no sense of ownership or participation in the animal sanctuary.

For long-term sustainability of conservation development it is in the interest of the state and conservation authorities to bring the local populations into a truly participatory relationship with the project. Otherwise, the project has no

long-term future. With ever-increasing numbers of Harasīs youths attending the high school at Haima (the first class graduated in 1993) there is still the possibility that the local population could be drawn gradually into the conservation project – through concerted education, curriculum development, and skilled employment – in a more significant capacity than the (non-) participation' of the past. Sustainable conservation requires, above all else, the good will of local populations. In the case of the Harasīs, that goodwill was squandered and the oryx project severely crippled.

After 1998, the oryx were rounded up and placed in secure enclosures at Yalooi protected by army patrols. However, Harasīs interest in the oryx has not been destroyed and could be encouraged with careful planning. When the local human communities envisage benefit from a combined conservation /development scheme, then cooperation and long-term sustainability is possible. ■



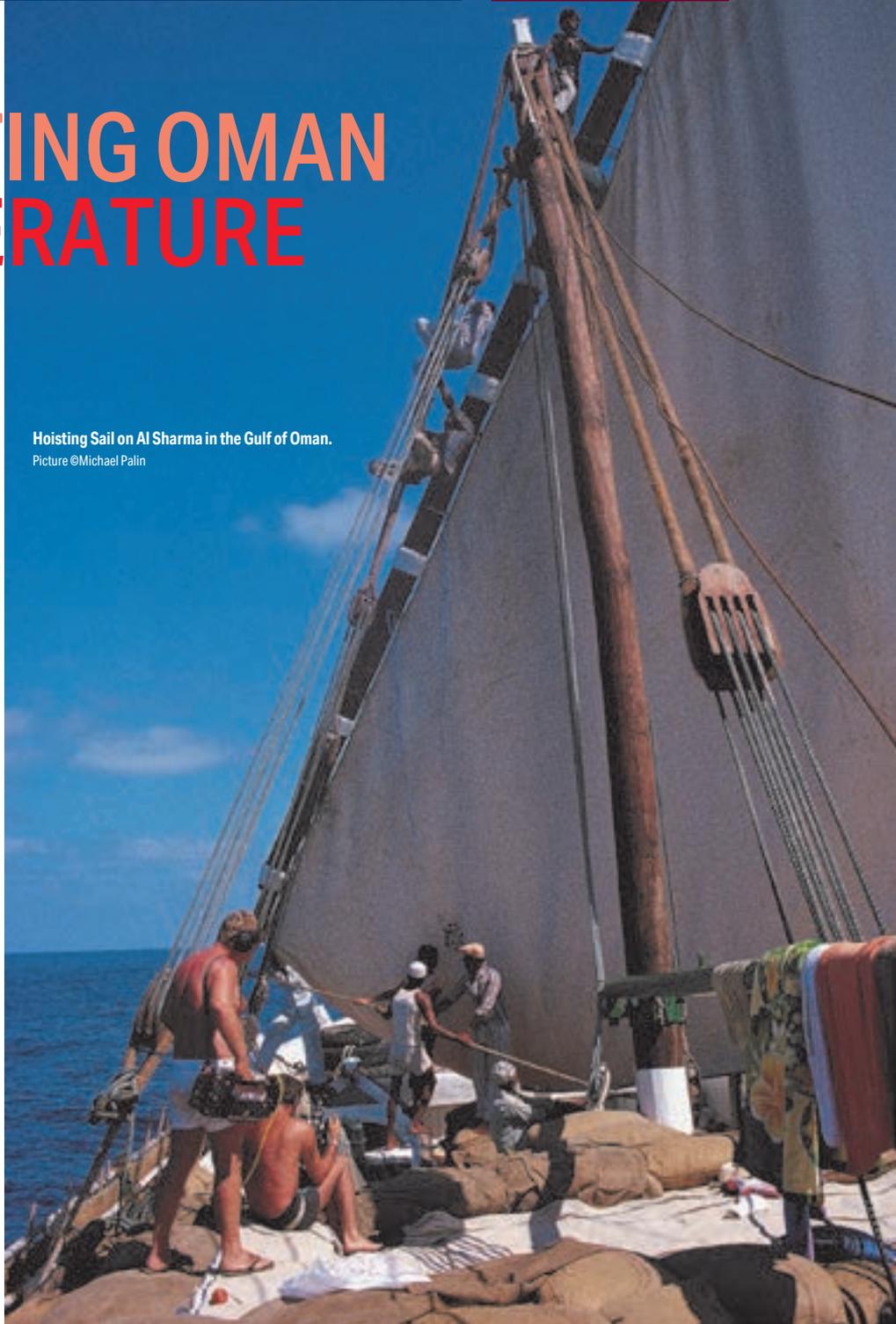
Dawn Chatty is Emeritus Professor in Anthropology and Forced Migration and former Director of the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, United Kingdom. She was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 2015. Her research interests include refugee youth in protracted refugee crises, conservation and development, pastoral society and forced settlement. She is the author of *Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East* – Cambridge University Press, 2010, *From Camel to Truck* – White Horse Press, 2013 and *Syria: The Making and Unmaking of a Refugee State* – Hurst Publishers, 2018.

NAVIGATING OMAN IN LITERATURE

ARTICLE BY LESTER HILLMAN

Fictional global traveller Phileas Fogg, in *Around The World In 80 Days*, was cruising off Oman 150 years ago. The book was published in 1873, after magazine serialisation when some readers imagined it to be a factual account taking place in real time. Its French author, Jules Verne, is now amongst the world's most translated authors.

Hoisting Sail on Al Sharma in the Gulf of Oman.
Picture ©Michael Palin



The Reform Club where the whole adventure began and ended is a short walk from the home of the Society, as Fogg's residence at No.7 Savile Row was just north of Sackville Street. His stroll to and from his beloved Pall Mall club was perhaps a favoured route passing number 34, a grander building than Fogg's bachelor pad. Sackville St was largely rebuilt in the 1730s with a residential, tailoring and professional services community, and may well have been on Fogg's route on 2 October 1872 when the wager was agreed and he hurried home to start his epic journey.

Barely ten days later, aboard the steamer *Mongolia*, Fogg was putting in to Aden for coal bunkering. P&O with 50 plus ships

around the world spent £800,000 a year on fuel, with coal at £4 a ton. Sailing along the Oman coast there was a steady North West wind and the *Mongolia* could make use of sail.

Life aboard the 2400 ton vessel steaming at 9.5 knots included four hearty meals a day. Fogg was not one for admiring the view, being '*the sort of Englishman who on his travels, gets his servant to do his sightseeing for him*'. He preferred playing whist for much of the 168 hours of the

scheduled sailing to Bombay, reached on 20 October 1872, which Fogg calculated was two days ahead of schedule.

Fogg's global journey incorporated other epic sailings, to Japan, across the Pacific and then the Atlantic Ocean. He had strong sailing and maritime interests, and had in 1868 bought a yacht which he moored on the river Somme near his home. In the Franco-Prussian War he was commander of the Coast Guard patrol vessel *St Michel* on the Somme.



Michael Palin on Al Sharma. Picture ©Julian Charrington

In 1988 writer, broadcaster and comedian Michael Palin recreated Fogg’s journey and unforeseen complications almost delivered him an overland route to Muscat.

Communication was being transformed. Thomas Cook was offering the first public commercial round the world trips.

Aboard the *Mongolia* the new Bombay – Aden telegraphic cable underneath the vessel might have given conversation a buzz over whist. In February 1870 *The Great Eastern* had laid the link for *The British Indian Submarine Telegraph Co.*, joining cable sections each three miles long in the 1650 mile telegraphic chain stretching to Britain.

Verne’s book was during a period of technical, commercial and political change. In 1874 Benjamin Disraeli became Prime Minister. During his administration the Suez Canal was purchased and in 1877 Queen Victoria became Empress of India.

In October 1903, three decades on from Verne’s imaginings, P&O launched a steamship *Mongolia*. At 9,505 tons it was nearly four times the size of the fictional vessel with a crew of 170 and 500 passengers. It came to an end in its own tragic drama, sunk in June 1917 by a German mine 50 miles outside Bombay.

volume of images, captured the intricate texture of Omani sand dunes at Ubar on the border with Saudi Arabia on 7 May 2016. An earlier image, on Leap Year Day 2016, showed Fogg’s route sweeping down to the *Bab el Mandeb* (Gate of Tears) and Aden.

TEMPTED TO FOGG IT?

Jules Verne Tours offer 99 day 2023 world cruises from Southampton. At £14,000 a person they are under the £19,000 Fogg expended (for two and later three persons), and Muscat does feature in tour options. Jean Passepartout, the faithful and resourceful valet to Phileas Fogg, has a podcast named after him. Need some tips? Neil Coxon, the Director of the Society, brings a wealth of Oman sailing expertise... so maybe a good place to start would be 34 Sackville Street! ■

In 1988 writer, broadcaster and comedian Michael Palin recreated Fogg’s journey and unforeseen complications almost delivered him an overland route to Muscat. Alternative plans meant that for a few days he was able to sail down the Gulf of Oman on a dhow, the *Al Sharma* (translated as Candlelight). Two decades later Palin revisited both his journey and the people involved including *Al Sharma*’s captain Hassan Suleyman. Verne’s story was recently reimagined in a TV serialisation broadcast in 2022.

Verne’s story was also reimagined in a 1956 Oscar winning film, which attracted cameo appearances from more than 30 stars including Frank Sinatra, Ronald Coleman and Buster Keaton.

Verne’s story came out when the anniversaries of historic global circumnavigations were to the fore. It was 350 years after Magellan’s voyage 1519-1522, when the hunger for lucrative spice cargoes influenced routes. It was a century on from James Cook’s second voyage exploring the southern oceans.

AROUND THE WORLD IN 40 MINUTES?

Where else might a glance towards Oman be found? Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* has Puck (Robin Goodfellow) put a girdle round the earth in just 40 minutes. Taking off from a wood in Athens with a circumnavigation in a higher latitude than Oman shrank the journey but is unlikely to have offered a glimpse of today’s Oman.

In the last 150 years all manner of circumnavigation initiatives have been made, but even modern space travel has still not bettered the challenge set by Shakespeare. Yuri Gagarin in Vostok 1 in 1961 approached re-entry near Oman, coming from the South West over the Red Sea heading towards the Soviet Union.

Today the International Space Station (ISS) in various orbits circles the Earth 14 times a day, about every 80 minutes. British ISS astronaut Tim Peake, in his



34 Sackville Street

Lester Hillman served in Oman in 1986 and has previously written for the Society Review (2014, p 88) celebrating the exhibition of the History of Friendship between the RAF and RAFO held at the RAF Museum London (Hendon) and a presentation at Sackville Street in November 2016.

OUR GROWING SOCIETY LIBRARY

ARTICLE BY NEIL COXON, DIRECTOR

We are immensely proud of our Library. Subjects covered in the 700 publications include politics, foreign affairs, defence, history, culture, botany, arts and the economy.

Members of the Society are welcome to visit 34 Sackville Street and utilise the books for their research. The Library has grown due to generous donations by our members. A recent donation by one of our members of 23 books has been gratefully received. There have been others over this past period, some of which are personal accounts, and are unique due to a very small print run.

There is no doubt that the current humble bookcases in our back office can't accommodate all the books. The Trustees are carefully considering where larger and

more accessible bookshelves can be put.

If you would like to donate to our collection, please do contact us, as we are always looking for new undiscovered gems in Oman. Including donations, we also occasionally come into a surplus of books, sometimes sent from the embassy or publishers, and offer them to members for a minor fee to cover delivery costs. So please check our library page on the website where you can see books we have available to purchase and the catalogue of books available in our library. ■



COLONEL NIGEL KNOCKER OBE WO WKHM

31 AUGUST 1930 - 21 FEBRUARY 2023

Nigel Knocker was born in Southampton General Hospital. His father, John, was an RAF officer rising to the rank of Wing Commander. His mother, Lilian, was a teacher. His childhood was peripatetic around RAF bases in southern England including Gerrards Cross, Biggin Hill and Lympne, from which his father led wartime Mosquito reconnaissance flights over France and Germany.

After Sandhurst and a dalliance with the Life Guards, whose mess bills he found challenging, Nigel joined the Royal Sussex Regiment in the Suez Canal Zone in 1951. He had a mix of regimental and staff appointments between then and 1971.

I first met Nigel in 1957 when he was Adjutant of the 1st Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment under the command of John Glennie, who had commanded the same Battalion at Monte Cassino 13 years earlier. I was a just commissioned National Service subaltern, who joined the Regiment in Gibraltar as they returned from service as the last British Battalion to serve in Korea after the war there a few years earlier. National Service officers always knew where they stood with Nigel but we also learned much from him in terms of focus, determination and efficiency.

He was posted to Aden in the mid-1960s, his first encounter with a southern Arabia in sometimes violent transition. When the way forward in the British Army became less appealing in 1971, he decided to apply for secondment to command of the Desert Regiment in Oman, at the height of Oman's determined resistance under Sultan Qaboos, who acceded in 1970, to the revolt in Dhofar supported by the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, which had ousted Britain from Aden in 1967, Egypt, China, and Russia.

Nigel made an immediate impact in Oman as promoter and then executor of the plan named Operation Simba to secure a position at Sarfait, high up in the hills overlooking the border between Oman and Yemen. There are many anecdotes of the



dry humour and practicality with which he addressed the issues of commanding a position only accessible by air, living in sangars scraped from the rocky soil, and under frequent enemy shelling. For this he was awarded the OBE and was also decorated by Sultan Qaboos.

In 1973 Nigel was again involved in creating and implementing a significant strategic development in the war – the creation of 'Diana' positions on the boundary between the jebel and the Salalah Plain to protect Salalah from further rebel attacks.

In 1977 he returned to Oman as Defence Attaché in Britain's Muscat Embassy. His son remembers this as an interesting and happy time, not least his involvement in the Queen's first State Visit to Oman on HMS Britannia in 1979. Soon after that appointment ended, General Sir Tim Creasey, whose respect Nigel had earned during his spell with Desert Regiment, and who had become Commander of the Sultan's Armed Forces, crafted for him an appointment on his personal Staff, which he held till retiring from the Army in 1985.

In 38 years of retirement Nigel played a central part in both the main organisations committed to continuing close relations between Britain and Oman. He edited the Journal of the SAF Association from 1990 to 2019, and was Chairman of the

Association from 1994 to 2017. For him an all-important aspect of this role was in acknowledging and channelling the ongoing appreciation of Omanis for British personnel who had served alongside them at a critical time for their country. Nigel was awarded the Order of Oman in 2018 for his work for the Association.

He became a Trustee of the Anglo-Omani Society in 1996, served as Acting Chairman between 2012 and 2015 following the unexpected resignation of the previous Chairman, and became a Vice President on his resignation from the Board in 2018. With a small group of others he built the foundations for a solid programme of activities using the Sackville Street premises whose purchase had been made possible by the generosity of Sultan Qaboos in 2010.

He was always a supporter of ideas for making the Society more relevant and approachable to a New Generation of young people in Britain with an interest in Oman. With Pat Alston and Richard Owens he created in the early years of the new century the regular 'gap year' secondments of young people to the Sultan's School in Muscat. He continued to have a hands-on role in the administration of the scheme until shortly before his death. He will be missed in both countries for his engaging personality and for the twinkle in his eye, for his ideas and commitment, for his leadership skills, and for his love and understanding of Oman.

Nigel's first wife Catriona, whom he married in 1958, died during his appointment as Defence Attaché in Muscat. He then married Angela during his appointment at SAF HQ. He died at his Wiltshire home in February 2023 after a long fight with cancer. He is survived by Angela, and by his and Catriona's two children Jonathan and Fiona. ■

ROBERT ALSTON

British Ambassador to Oman 1986-90 and
Chairman Anglo-Omani Society 2015-18.

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