

## **BDOHP Interview Index and Biographical Details**

Henry George Hogger, CMG, 2004

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## **BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME**

### **RECOLLECTIONS OF HENRY HOGGER CMG, RECORDED BY SYD MADDICOTT AND TRANSCRIBED BY SUZANNE RICKETTS**

DSM: This is Syd Maddicott, recording Henry Hogger. It's 29 June 2016. Henry, perhaps I could ask you first to start off with a little bit about your background - where you went to school, where you went to college and how you ended up joining the FCO?

HH: Well, where I went to school can be answered in two different ways. One is that I was a bit peripatetic in my early years because my Dad was in the Navy. I think by the time that I went to a rather small and now defunct prep school at the age of eight, that was my eighth school!

DSM: I suspect there are very few Arabists in the FCO, then or now, who actually studied Arabic at college.

#### **Foreign Office, 1969-71**

HH: I did. I had two contemporaries who joined more or less at the same time as me, who did the same thing, one actually in the same year, the other a year ahead. So, as I say, it wasn't very satisfactory in terms of what I think I really wanted to do which was, in the first instance, to try and join the Foreign Service, although then, as now, it wasn't at all something you could simply assume you could get into. But I certainly wanted to do something which would involve travelling in that part of the world and therefore using the language as a tool for communication. As it happened, I applied through what was then called the Method 2 process to join the FCO and, slightly to my surprise and that of a few other people, got in! So, having been accepted, I started in August 1969 and the first thing we did was two weeks of so-called induction/training. It wasn't described as training but we spent an awful lot of time learning how to draft in the Foreign Office approved way. We spent a lot of time learning exactly where to punch a hole in the top left-hand corner of a minute and a lot of other stuff like that, some of which I suppose I remembered. It didn't strike me at the time we were learning anything very much about how to be a diplomat. Maybe the answer is that there isn't an easy way of doing that. But, in essence, it was much more about correct

procedure than really about policy or current foreign policy issues or anything like that. I think we talked about those things more in my final interview than I ever did on the training course. But we all did that together, of course, that year's intake.

I was then assigned to the East Africa Department, as it then was, to be the desk officer for Ethiopia, Somalia and the French Territory of the Afars and the Issas, which had one file in the Registry. It's now called Djibouti. We didn't spend a lot of time on that. In those days there was never any suggestion that a desk officer, least of all a junior one who just started, would have the chance to visit the countries that he was responsible for. So you have this rather peculiar situation where you were dealing with the political issues in the two countries in a kind of vacuum, because you didn't know what the place looked like. If anybody came to you who was going out there and wanted to know what the weather was like in Addis Ababa at that particular time of year, I really didn't have any idea. When I grumbled about that, people would say, "That's why you have embassies out there – they're the experts on what the place looks like and who people are and talking to them. You're just receiving their reports and processing them into policy towards those countries." This process was still fairly mysterious to me. I remember feeling strongly enough about it once, at least, to offer to go and visit either or both countries during my annual leave, though I hoped they would be able to pay my fare there. Nothing happened.

It was an interesting time because there was quite a lot going on in both countries. Ethiopia was limbering towards the demise of the old Emperor, Haile Selassie, and in Somalia they'd just had a coup which brought into power a President, Siad Barre, who lasted, if I remember rightly, for about twenty-five or thirty years. Although they were both rather peripheral countries for British interests, there were some interesting issues to look at. The Ethiopian Royal Family had a number of UK connections. I think the Crown Prince had been to Dartmouth and was an Admiral and had quite a fond relationship with the UK. So the gradual precariousness of that regime was something that the Foreign Office were quite concerned about. Somalia was a bit more peripheral, being taken over by somebody who was then clearly under the influence – and probably in the pay – of the Soviet Union. This wasn't regarded as a particularly helpful development. So it was certainly good and interesting start on what you might call mainstream political work, I suppose. I was a very small cog in a bigger wheel, but the fact that you had two countries that you were pretty much responsible for, albeit under the general oversight of a First Secretary in what was still called the Third Room then, meant you were getting a degree of responsibility for at least the routine passing

of reports up the chain to those who were interested in knowing. There was a little bit of contact with the ministerial level, but all very indirect because in those days – unlike more recently – desk officers weren't encouraged to submit their thoughts directly to Ministers: it all went through a great chain of three or four people, through Under Secretaries and so on. It was unfamiliar territory to me. I didn't use my Arabic but it probably wouldn't have been a lot of use anyway except to spell a few Somali names.

### **Arabic course, MECAS, Lebanon, 1971-72**

I did that job for about eighteen months and then it was decided, with my support, that I need to do something about modernising/updating my Arabic language abilities. In those days, we still had the rather formally named Middle East Centre for Arabic Studies, otherwise known in Beirut taxi ranks as the spy school, which was in a purpose-built building in a little village up in the mountains above Beirut. Lovely climate, very pleasant location. It had been regarded as a bit of a nice place for young gentlemen to go to and have quite a good time visiting the high spots of Beirut etc. But one of the previous Directors - I'm struggling now to remember his name – had decided that we really ought to take it seriously and were therefore given some rather harder work to do. There was a little bit of learning by rote: you were given cards with Arabic words on and you were supposed to learn thirty of those a day, or something like that. But I think the key point was that you were in the region. You therefore had people about you who, although in the case of the village residents were rather well versed in the formal dialogues we had to learn, you had it around you all the time.

DSM: Were you learning Lebanese Arabic?

HH: That's an interesting point which I've discussed a lot with Arab friends since. What they tried to do was to teach you a kind of universal spoken Arabic. The trouble is, there isn't a universal spoken Arabic. And of course we were in Lebanon, so what you actually talked, even when you went to Syria and Jordan, where the dialect is fairly similar, was one particular version of spoken Arabic. There was a joke about the MECAS version of spoken Arabic which was that it enables you to speak and communicate with any other graduate of MECAS anywhere around the Arab world! That's slightly understating it. It was certainly a great improvement on what I had had at university. It was using the language as a real tool and trying to get you to understand a bit more about how they thought.

DSM: You were there for two years?

HH: For about eighteen months altogether. I and a contemporary who had also done Arabic at university were parachuted in halfway through the long course, the nine-month course, on the basis that we knew quite a lot of Arabic. This was true for grammar and vocabulary, not in terms of speaking where we were quite a long way behind. We then stayed on over the summer for a couple of months, for the break, and then resumed what they called the advanced course which was another four or five months. Autumn and beginning of spring, if you are talking school terms. I used that summer period to travel about quite a lot. I went to Jordan, Egypt and various other places and tried to concentrate on the speaking and getting a bit more adept in the language.

DSM: Were you living in the school itself?

HH: Yes, the single people lived in the school which was described as the Mess, the origins of MECAS having been a sort of army establishment in Jerusalem originally after the Second World War. It was run on slightly military lines. It was called the Mess and we were fed and looked after. Quite nice rooms. The married people were housed with villagers in their houses and therefore had a bit more contact in a way. When you came towards the end, you did an exam.

### **British Embassy, Aden, 1972**

The standing joke was that if you didn't get your Arabic grammar right, you'd be sent to Aden. The next thing I knew, I was being told by the very nice Director that I was off to Aden! We all had our marching orders for posting around the Arab world. I didn't know very much about it, except that it had changed relatively recently from being the British Protectorate to the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, which was pretty much the way that it sounds - a Soviet satellite.

DSM: The appearance of the word 'Democratic' gives the game away.

HH: Yes, that was the first giveaway. The second was that there had been a rather posh Governor's Residence, but the British Embassy by then was in a rather uninspiring modern building in what had been Northumberland Avenue, now renamed Ho Chi Minh Street. That was another clue as to what it was like. It was quite a difficult place to be, because – as you can imagine – the British were not flavour of the month. Everything in the speeches of the leadership was blamed on 130 years of colonial misrule. We had to go to endless openings of dams and processions of tractors across the horizon – Soviet tractors of course – and listen to

all this stuff about colonial misrule. So, even for a junior guy on his first posting, it wasn't wildly exciting. There was quite a fun, small expat community - people from BP working at the refinery, international NGO and UN people and so on. So you could have quite an enjoyable social life, but it didn't have much to do with mixing with the people or getting to understand them because they weren't officially allowed to talk to us. We had some unpleasant incidents. One or two of our local staff were taken in to the clutches of the security people and, in one case at least, never reappeared. There was a plus side from my personal point of view, because I met my now wife there. She was working in the Embassy as the Ambassador's PA. The only thing I was slightly regretful about was that we had very severe travel restrictions, à la Soviet system, about getting round the country. But as the Ambassador's PA, she was allowed to accompany him on the occasional diplomatic trip which allowed her to get to places like the Hadhramhaut, a fantastic area further up the Yemen with these old mud skyscrapers and so on. I never managed to get there.

But I got the last laugh, in a sense, when Inspectors from the Foreign Office came out, not long after I started there. They had decided that my job should be abolished after a year of my being there, basically on the grounds that there wasn't enough to do on the political reporting front because of the rather thin nature of our relationship. By then we had got engaged and my fiancée was due to leave post in about the September of that year, having done eighteen months or so which was a regular tour. We'd fixed to have our wedding in the October. It all sounds very quick, but that was the way it worked. What then happened was there was a rather unpleasant incident involving a newly-posted Third Secretary of theirs in London who was discovered bringing unacceptable things through the diplomatic bag. He was expelled and the next thing I knew was that I was being lined up, rather consciously for various reasons probably to do with the fact that I was going to be leaving anyway, to be the victim of the tit-for-tat reaction that we were pretty sure was going to happen. It did. So I have the rather surreal experience of having to interpret, because the then Ambassador wasn't an Arabist, for most of the interview with the Foreign Ministry's Permanent Secretary to explain that I had a week to leave the country because I was a threat to the security of the state. I thought this was pretty good on my first posting - I was quite proud of that! I was sent out of the room for the crucial bit about a week, which the Permanent Secretary obviously managed to do in English. So it was only when the Ambassador came out that I knew what was happening, although I had been rather expecting it. The other thing, and I don't know whether I feel guilty about it even now, is that I had been the person who had

interviewed this Third Secretary who was being sent to London for his visa, because he didn't actually speak any English. I wasn't sure how much use he was going to be to them.

So that was the end of my first Arab posting. Unexpected. It made my fiancée quite cross, because instead of her going back ahead of me to start getting ready for the wedding, there was me going first. But that's the way these things sometimes happen. I don't remember whether I got a formal stamp in my passport saying I was never to set foot in that country ever again, but I never did. I never felt tempted, to be honest.

So what happened after that was that I ended up rather unexpectedly on a bench outside the Personnel Department in the Foreign Office. When I went in and had my turn, the first question was, "What are you doing here?" This bewildered me as I thought they would have heard what had happened. The next question was, "Where would you like to go next?" I said, "You've spent all this money on teaching me Arabic. I've only done about five months in Aden. I imagine you want me to go back somewhere in the Arab world." At which they threw their arms up in horror, saying that all those other people sitting on the bench outside were also redundant Arabists who had been expelled from Iraq and Libya and various other places. There weren't any vacancies in that part of the world for the foreseeable future. What would I think of a choice between Latin America and South-East Asia? Well, I contemplated for a bit. I did have some rather basic Spanish. On the other hand, people are being rocketed in Saigon and so on, at the moment, so I thought Latin America might be the best choice. The result of that was being posted, very soon after our wedding – I think we had 4 ½ days at home - to Caracas in Venezuela.

### **British Embassy, Caracas, 1972-5**

This was therefore the opening chapter in our married life in the Foreign Service. I wouldn't have said it started entirely auspiciously. People said to us, "Aren't you lucky you're going to have a three-year honeymoon in Latin America? Wonderful!" For a number of reasons, the reality was a bit different. We were put into a hotel which was extremely expensive, apart from anything else. Venezuela was known then colloquially as Saudi Venezuela and it was at very much the height of the oil boom. Diplomats and many other foreigners were poor relations, compared with the wealth of the élite in the country. As far as accommodation was concerned, I had of course had to start straight away in the office, so my wife was given a Spanish dictionary and list of local estate agents and invited to go out and find a flat, with a

rent ceiling which was not terribly realistic. Which she did, to her credit. Eventually, but it took a bit of time.

The next problem was that my Spanish was based on holidays in Spain and therefore was the Castilian variety. It didn't really cope with the realities of Venezuelan Spanish which they speak with their mouths closed, very quickly without any discernible consonants. Our Embassy was half a floor in the Shell building which was a sort of tower block and I potted down to the basement where Shell had a language school and asked them if I could have an arrangement where I went down there three afternoons a week and just sat and talked to somebody for two hours. What I really needed was to deal with a situation where somebody from the Foreign Ministry rang up speaking no English. I needed something more convincing than asking them to ring me back in two months' time when I had had a chance to learn their beautiful language. That worked very well, because being made to talk was as good a way as any of getting up to speed and being able to talk to people. It was a fun posting in many ways, despite its very sad situation now. Even then, there were some negative things about city life: a lot of crime, theft and that kind of thing. A very beautiful country to explore and as Third Secretary, a very junior type of person, it was much more fun travelling round the provinces because you could get to call on the local Governor.

We did have quite an interesting development which gave me, in a sense, my first taste of multilateral diplomacy, in the form of the UN Conference on the Law of the Sea. For reasons that I never really understood, a session took place in Caracas. It was an enormous jamboree with every country in the world being represented and quite a few of them, in the case of Commonwealth countries, didn't have local representation, so we found ourselves having to look after Australians and New Zealanders and various others in terms of helping them with logistics, accommodation and all sorts of things like that. And beginning to understand a little bit about UN diplomacy, although of course the issues themselves were fairly arcane. Once you start talking about the nodules at the bottom of the sea, people like me get rather lost. But it was quite fun looking after the various different delegations that came. And it gave me the first chance to look at the wider world of UN type diplomacy.

What I think was the most interesting issue work-wise was, not long after I arrived there, the then Venezuelan President, Carlos Andrés Pérez, announced that he wanted a very large scholarship programme for young Venezuelans to go to university in other countries and we were approached with the news that they wanted a large number to go to the UK. Quite a



complicated exercise, because it involved basically sending young kids to do their A-levels in the UK so as to be able to qualify for undergraduate scholarships at British universities. This was a pretty major operation and, as the only Third Secretary in the Chancery at the time, it was going to be a rather formidable thing to process. But we could not afford to reject this important sign of interest in at least one aspect of relations with the UK. I was lucky enough to have a very able Head of Registry, as they used to call them, who was spending his whole day dealing with files. Not quite up to his capabilities and getting a bit bored with it. So he and I basically took this on the sense of trundling around meeting different Ministries, including the Central Planning Ministry which was quite a powerful organisation, and starting the process of looking at applications, writing to the British Council in London who took it on, despite the fact that they had only withdrawn their resident Council Director a few weeks before. Pretty bad timing. Luckily, they were able to do this from London, so we were very much the agents, dealing with the government at slightly different levels and strata than you normally do as a diplomat. That was fun. We never got the ten thousand students a year they had been talking about, but we did manage to get a surprising number. How they got on was difficult to know because the first intake only went towards the end of my time. But we certainly had some receptions for some rather bewildered young students who didn't speak much English and were a bit apprehensive about leaving the country for the first time.

DSM: I wanted to ask you who the Ambassador was. What view did you form of the personalities in the mission?

HH: We had a new Ambassador arrive very shortly after I did. For a time, once the Embassy decided the hotel we were in was too expensive, they put us in the Embassy Residence which was in the middle of the rather posh area of the country club, because they were in between Ambassadors. This was rather a difficult game because the Residence staff had expected to have quite a long holiday, instead of which they found themselves having to look after us which they clearly resented. We didn't really have any administrative authority over them. So it was rather uncomfortable but at least it spurred us on to finding our flat. I mentioned that because the incoming Ambassador was Sir Lees Mayall. The only thing we knew about him in advance was that he had spent the previous seven years as Head of Protocol in the Foreign Office. So people were rather nervous that we were all going to have to go round in hats and white gloves and that kind of thing. As it turned out, you couldn't have had a more relaxed person as your boss. He was on his last posting. He'd been in Brazil, so he spoke some Portuguese. But he hadn't really been in the Spanish-speaking

world before. Being on the verge of retirement, he was at least as interested in travelling around and getting to know and enjoying the country as the job. Which was fair enough because, in those days, the British Ambassador to Venezuela didn't have a huge workload. We spent some very enjoyable times travelling about the country with him.

We had two Heads of Chancery, the first of whom was a very cheerful gentleman who seemed very able to do the job in about ten or fifteen minutes a day but had the annoying habit, when you thought he wasn't really doing anything at all, of getting things like the election results absolutely spot on. Whereas those of us who were scouring the country meeting members of different political parties thought we knew what was going to happen but got it wrong. It wasn't a very big Embassy. We had an Economic Counsellor who was really doing the most important job because it was liaising with their oil company and the Energy Ministry and so on, and dealing with Venezuelan investment in the UK.

I think, as far as Caracas is concerned, those were probably the main issues. It was, in a sense, my first full-length posting. My first married posting, therefore probably more fun for me than for my wife as local labour law unfortunately didn't allow her to work. It was the first time she'd not been able to work and that, together with the initial strangeness of the place, made it a bit difficult. But we ended up enjoying it overall.

### **British Embassy, Kuwait, 1975-8**

DSM: After Caracas, what then?

HH: Well, it then turned out that there was a vacancy back in the Arab world. It was in Kuwait. Not that, strictly speaking, you needed a lot of Arabic because everybody in Kuwait seemed to speak English. Kuwaitis themselves are less than half the population of the country. Most of the work was – and I'm sure still is – done by expatriates, either Arab nationals like Palestinians or Egyptians doing the administrative work, or labourers from the subcontinent and the Philippines out in the very considerable heat slaving away on construction programs and so on. My job was a traditional Chancery reporting one, but I also had a role as an acting honorary unpaid Defence Attaché, because the Kuwaitis didn't allow Defence Attachés at that time. I think the rule has changed since. They didn't approve of people in foreign military uniform on their territory. I got given the job, despite the lack of any real military experience until that time. It was quite interesting. As a rich Gulf country, they were very much in the market for our military equipment and we were in the process of

trying to sell them Chieftain tanks which were then the latest UK armoured vehicle. And patrol boats to the Navy. Cutting a long story short, we won on the tanks but were pipped by the French on the patrol boats. It also meant being the liaison for British military training teams. There was a team of thirty or forty doing various aspects of military training for the Kuwaitis: the Kuwait Liaison Team it was officially called. I've still got my tie with the logo in Arabic. It was another OPEC country, oil very much a big theme but not something I had directly a lot to do with. Another wealthy country where foreigners and foreign diplomats were probably at the bottom of the food chain, because foreign expatriates working in the oil industry or in banking and so on were themselves pretty well off and did pretty well. They were able to have quite a good life.

It was rather a claustrophobic place which you had to get out of fairly regularly. It's basically a city state. A chunk of sand with, even then, very modern and striking buildings on it. There are a lot more now. My main asset for the Defence Attaché job was that I had driven most of the way to Kuwait in one of the least suitable cars you could think of, namely an MGB. It was painted a delicate shade of military khaki which meant that, whereas other Embassy representatives had a lot of difficulty getting to the General Headquarters to go and visit officers and others at the base there, I was just waved in! It was also a help that Fiona, my wife, was able to work there. There were restrictions, but she worked in the Consulate which was a separate building downtown from where the Embassy was. So although we were working for same outfit, we were in different places.

I should also mention that the Residence in Kuwait had been the political Residency in the Protectorate times, before the Second World War. The widow of the last Political Representative, Dame Violet Dixon, had stayed on in an old Kuwaiti house, of which there weren't very many left. One of the fun things in my time was accompanying the Ambassador, now Sir Archie Lamb, to inform the Emir who was getting on a bit, that Violet Dixon whom he knew well was about to be made a Dame in that year's Honours List. As you can imagine, trying to explain the concept to an Arab in a rather patriarchal society of what being made a Dame actually constituted was quite a challenge. Eventually he got it. He looked up and said, "Ah, Sir Dixon!" So she was known as Sir Dixon from then on until she died, well into her 90s.

So Kuwait was enjoyable if you took it in the right way. The defence side was something new. I enjoyed the liaison with the military training team more than sales side where there is

a lot of scope for things to go wrong. But when we drove home - because we'd driven out as well – I can't say I shed too many tears as we drove along the Corniche for the last time.

DSM: What was your route home?

HH: It was slightly different from the way out. The way out involved driving down to the southern part of Italy and putting the car on a boat to Beirut. Because we couldn't get visas for Syria or Iraq which was the normal way through, we had to hand the car over to the mercies of a local driver from the British Embassy in Beirut who drove it down to Kuwait for us and we flew. This was 1975 and it was rather fascinating coming into the port at Beirut because I looked around – I'd been there before for my Arabic studies – and I didn't remember it being like that. It was a very international port normally. There were twenty or so ships in the port, every one of which had a red star and sickle on the funnel. It was only a few days later that the Lebanese Civil War broke out. I don't have any evidence for what was being supplied by those Russian ships, but a lot of Kalashnikovs were being used a few days later on the streets of Beirut.

That was the way we went. But going home, we decided to do something different and we drove up what was called the Tap Line, the pipeline that came out just south of Kuwait, through Jordan. So we went through Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria and then across Turkey and back that way.

### **Foreign Office, 1978-80**

DSM: So this is 1978. You're back home. What next?

HH: It had been made clear that I was due for a home posting by then, which didn't really surprise me. Once again, continuity wasn't immediately obvious because I was assigned to the Southern European Department to be desk officer for Cyprus. I had visited it a couple of times on holiday, but I couldn't really claim to be a great expert on the Cyprus problem. I got versed in it quite quickly because about the second day I was there what we used to call a blue minute from the Secretary of State's office landed on my desk. This was David Owen, Secretary of State at the time, telling me that he would like a draft solution to the Cyprus problem, ideally by Tuesday morning. That was quite a busy weekend, mugging up on all that! As you know from the subsequent course of history, the solution we came up with didn't work, although it was then only four years after the Turkish invasion that really began the crisis. However many years later, we still don't seem to be much nearer. Most of the

issues – UN representatives, peacekeeping forces etc. – are still very much in place and, of course, British sovereign bases which were really what gave the UK a very lively interest in efforts to try and resolve that problem. Then, as now, we are parties to the Cyprus problem in the sense that we are one of the guarantor powers with Greece and Turkey. The trouble is, you can never seem to get all three pointing the same way at the same time. The actual outline of a solution, as I discovered, is – I wouldn't say easy – there. There are plans before and since. I think Kofi Annan had a go at doing one when he was UN Secretary General and others have too. But it still rumbles on. And it continues to be an obstacle to all sorts of things, whether you're talking about Turkey in the EU or other issues.

But I should also flag up that period as being a time when I resolved the problem, having by then established ourselves in darkest Dorset, of where to live and operate from during the week when working in London, by becoming a Resident Clerk in the FCO. At that time, it was a job that you did part-time around your normal day job. You did the occasional weekend on duty plus overnight during the week. It gave you a flat above the Office which had its pluses and its minuses. In those days it was a pretty rudimentary setup as far as the tools you had to deal with crises around the world: you had basically aged messengers occasionally stomping up the stairs from the communications centre in the basement with boxes full of paper telegrams; you had a rather ancient telephone system that relied heavily on having an intelligent operator in the building which you very often did, to be fair, but not always; and a list of useful phone numbers bequeathed by successive Resident Clerks that obviously got bigger and bigger over time. I think because our first child was born during that period, I'm fairly sure I was the first Resident Clerk to have not a resident but a visiting baby. I remember a Minister's office ring me one time and saying, "Is that a baby I hear crying in the background?" And I had to say, "No, it must be something on the telly!" It wasn't illegal but it was just a new sort of experience, I think.

We had our share of excitements as all Resident Clerks do. In those days you had a junior guy who came in during the day as your Assistant Resident Clerk and it helped to take a bit of the pressure off. I, not uniquely, was in the habit – by about midday on Sunday when you'd been cooped up there since the Friday evening – of going to walk round the park for half an hour. It was all quiet so I told young Alan I was just going to nip out to get a bit of fresh air. I came back half an hour later. "All quiet, Alan?" "Not completely," he replied, "it seems that a student mob in Teheran – this was 1979 – are breaking into one end of our Embassy compound and the staff have been evacuated to another compound slightly out of

town. The main problem is that the Ambassador went out this morning to visit his American counterpart and we can't get in touch with him. We've no idea where he is." So we had visions of the Ambassador stranded somewhere in the town with this raging mob. Anyway, when he gave me that news, from then until about 3 o'clock the next morning, I think we were on the phone continuously. The issue of the Ambassador was resolved eventually by looking through the useful numbers and finding one for the White House. So I rang the White House and explained the problem. They rang me back to say that our Ambassador was still drinking tea at the American Residence.

DSM: Who was the Ambassador in those days?

HH: Tony Parsons.

There were quite a few other excitements of that kind. But with that one, you felt you were at the beginning of an historic moment.

So there we are. I didn't solve the Cyprus problem. It was half a home posting in the sense that I did it for about two years and then was transferred across to what was then called European Community Department (Internal).

DSM: But you did make a familiarisation visit to Cyprus?

HH: I should have said. I did. It contained ingredients which somebody doing the same thing now would still find. We flew in a UN helicopter down the Green Line between the two sides, the ceasefire line across the country; we went with a UN patrol down the street that literally forms the Green Line in Nicosia where there were the remains of people's meals in houses which they had to abandon as they rushed off. We visited the so-called dead city of Varosha which was quite a key holiday resort just outside Famagusta on what had been the Greek side but now occupied by Turkey. Varosha was supposed to be an issue which might have prised open some kind of solution because it was a desirable holiday area occupied purely by the military. But it never happened. Of course it's a beautiful island. Lots of people have been there as tourists to both sides although the time getting to what had become the Turkish side was pretty difficult involving transferring in Istanbul to a 'domestic' Turkish flight to get to an airport that was not officially recognised by the international community. It is sad. What at that time one heard a lot of – you won't hear any more – is that, rather like the Israeli-Palestinian situation, the two communities had lived side by side, there had been many contacts and friends across the two communities, and indeed there is Greek property

occupied on the Turkish side and vice versa. At the time it was said that if you were a Greek Cypriot and wanted to do a swap with the property you had on the Turkish side with a Turkish Cypriot who had property in Paphos or Larnaca or somewhere like that, the place to do it was Camden or Haringey in North London where the Cypriot diaspora live. I'm pretty sure there were quite a lot of deals of that kind that went on. In that generation they were friends, they did fraternise across the communities. Sadly, as time has gone on, there is less and less awareness of what the other side is like and more demonisation.

### **Foreign Office, 1980-82**

HH: Back to the European Community. It was rather an elaborate title, but I think the principle has gone on in the way the Office is organised in that you have a department that deals with the UK interest in what happens in the EC – and now the EU – policy in different sectors and then an external department that looks at our interests in the EU's relations with the outside world. This at the time was mainly enlargement. On the internal side, most of the people I had the feeling were old veterans of the European Community, which I certainly wasn't, having had very little to do with it and little idea of what it actually involved. I was given a rather strange portfolio, partly involving the Common Fisheries Policy which was not something I knew anything about, and partly involving propaganda, by which I mean drafting speeches for Ministers and other senior officials which had to have two, arguably slightly conflicting, objectives. If you were addressing a UK audience, it had to be about how robustly we were standing up for British interests. *Plus ça change* when we look at recent events. If you were writing a speech for a Minister to give in Brussels or another European capital, it had to be all about how sincere and committed we were to making a success of the European Community, and ready to contribute – not dilute – our national interest to making it work. What was quite interesting about that side of the job, I suppose, with hindsight – quite why I got it I don't know, because I was probably the least qualified in terms of knowledge – was that it was a commissioning job. You'd be commissioned to draft a speech. You'd then get contributions from the people who did agriculture and people who did the budget and so on. Then you'd have to twist it round according to which audience you were doing it for. Bearing in mind it wasn't that long after the last referendum in 1975, the polls suggested that if you asked a question about the European Community as a political entity, in other words its usefulness in terms of things like bringing peace to Europe, you had about a two to one majority in favour. If you asked about the economic manifestations of it like the Budget, which of course had been the subject of a great row with Margaret Thatcher, and the

Common Agricultural Policy, it was about two to one the other way. I suppose it just illustrates that a lot depends on how you ask the question. But I have a feeling at that time, perhaps because you had an older generation who actually remembered the war and why the thing had been created in the first place, were more impressed therefore with the political character of unity in Europe than they were with its economic manifestations.

Anyway, in order to learn a bit more about the fishing industry, I managed to wangle what might have been the first ever FCO familiarisation visit to a domestic destination, namely Hull, Grimsby and Scarborough which I organised through the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries who were the Department who actually did the negotiations in Brussels. I said I would really like to do this because I already had the impression that opinion in the fishing industry in the UK was pretty hostile. They said that I was absolutely right but advised against it as I would get a very hostile reception. But I did spend a few days in December. It was an eye-opener. I did get some very strong views but I also met people in the market, in the pub who seemed quite pleased that somebody from the Foreign Office had actually bothered to come and listen at first hand to what they had to say.

So that part of it was interesting, if a bit dispiriting. I think then, as now, the CFP certainly doesn't work to UK advantage. It may, arguably, just not work. It therefore made rather a contrast to drafting speeches extolling the virtues of European unity in one form or another.

### **British Embassy, Abu Dhabi, 1982-86**

DSM: So by then, you'd done two jobs at home. So you were due another job abroad.

HH: Yes. I think the Office probably counted it as a home tour, as it was four years in all. It gave me a strong enough case to argue for a posting. To be fair, in those days, you didn't have to fight quite so hard as people have done recently to get an overseas posting. It was to the United Arab Emirates, a slightly curious set up constitutionally as it originally had been the Trucial Coast, or the Trucial States under a British Protectorate. It became an independent federation of seven Emirates with Abu Dhabi as the political capital. Dubai, a hundred miles up the road, is very much the business and commercial capital, the place where most of the expat community tended to live. For all that it was a rather loose federation, in some ways, from a slightly selfish personal point of view, it was an improvement on Kuwait because it was a proper country that you could travel around and see different bits of. I think the situation, as far as our diplomatic representation was concerned, was unique, certainly at



that time because the office in both places was called the British Embassy. So we had a British Embassy in Abu Dhabi and a British Embassy in Dubai in order to satisfy particularly the Dubaians who acknowledged that Abu Dhabi was the capital officially, but regarded their place as the centre of the world. We were lucky enough to have a very good friend who was in fact my Head of Chancery in Kuwait as Consul General in Dubai when I was in Abu Dhabi as the Head of Chancery. We managed pretty well, I think, to separate who did what. It wasn't a particular issue for me. I was focused pretty much on what was happening in Abu Dhabi itself. But for the Ambassador you'd sometimes get the feeling of slight tension turf-wise: the boss in Dubai was very much the expert on their commercial setup ... separate personalities and so on. But, on the whole, it worked pretty well. We were lucky enough to have in both cases people who got on with each other and acknowledged where each other's sphere of influence really lay. It was very interesting. My postings up till then – apart from Aden which was a special case – were all OPEC members ... the theme of oil wealth running through it. The Abu Dhabians had – and still have – a very effective and impressive Investment Office that is channelling large swathes of the oil revenues into a pretty impressive portfolio of investments in Western companies. The Qataris are doing the same thing now. The Kuwaitis reckoned, even at the time I was there, that the proceeds of their investments in Volkswagen, Mercedes and all sorts of big companies were actually slightly larger than their oil revenues, even then. I guess it may well be even more so these days. This is a pretty big hedge against something going wrong on the oil side.

But, as I said, in a personal sense, Abu Dhabi had travel opportunities as well as Dubai. I really preferred Abu Dhabi. People used to say that social life was much livelier in Dubai which was a much more expat-dominated place. It was all rather larger than life, if you know what I mean. I haven't been to Dubai for a few years. The last time I went was from Iraq, funnily enough. But I do remember going to one party where we all sat round a very lavish pool. The villa was round three sides of it and the other side was the beach, with people wearing Gulf rig - a sort of open neck shirt, then dinner jackets and trousers with somebody in a leopard skin cummerbund. I thought to myself that that symbolised what I didn't like about Dubai. I preferred the quieter and more relaxed atmosphere of Abu Dhabi. There were things to do like sailing. There was a rather rudimentary golf course. And because it was the capital city, the job was more interesting. People mostly did commercial work in Dubai. We lived on a compound which had its pluses and minuses. Possibly something slightly different for a dyed-in-the-wool political animal was that I was both Head of Chancery and Consul.

But for a number of reasons, including living on a compound, in a way I got more involved than you might normally expect. The Abu Dhabi police had the habit, from time to time, of arresting expats who overdid the drinking and driving side of things. Given that it is basically an Islamic society, they were remarkably tolerant. But from time to time they would just take people in to cool off overnight in the local nick which was just across the road from the compound, so I was very often the first person that people telephoned. The police very often telephoned me. If I knew who they were or if I'd got a fairly clear idea of the nature of the case, I would say that I would be over at 8 o'clock the next morning and it would do them no harm to be cooled off. Sometimes there was more of an element of injustice. Legal procedures were a little shaky sometimes and then I'd try and go and bail them out or find some sort of solution to the problem. I also had a marriage licence so I would perform the odd marriage in the rather nice Embassy garden!

One last point. The Ambassador had a little bolt hole in Al Ayn, the oasis that's about equidistant from Abu Dhabi and Dubai, well inland in the desert. In their wisdom, the then Ministry of Works a few years earlier had built this Scandinavian wooden type of log cabin, I suppose, with no resemblance to or suitability for the local desert climate. It was nonetheless a nice place to go and if the Ambassador wasn't using it himself, other people could book it.

Overall I have positive memories of that posting. I enjoyed the opportunities to travel around the country in connection with work.

### **Foreign Office, 1986-89**

DSM: So, after Abu Dhabi, you came back home?

HH: Yes. By then we had begun to move towards the situation where you alternate between one home posting and one overseas posting. I was brought back to be Assistant/Deputy Head of Maritime, Aviation and Environment Department. Like most people who were assigned there, the first question was what do we actually do? A lot of it is about liaison with other departments in government at home, because the subject matters you deal with fall to those departments. Dealing with air services, for example, our interlocutors were the Department of Transport. The aviation industry - like Airbus and other aviation companies - was the Department of Trade and Industry. Environment, which initially was a fairly poor relation, was the Department of Environment. The remit for the Foreign Office department dealing with those things was to try and keep under control, to try and preserve the political

relationships we had with other countries through the rows we tended to have with some of them over these specific areas. Air services is a prime example. The issues that we had with the United States then, we still have to some extent now. Negotiating air service agreements is so bitter because of the commercial interests of the airlines on both sides: there is a real risk of a lot of fall out onto the wider bilateral relationship. In the case of the US, it's never going to destroy it, but it can cause damage. Our slightly thankless task, I suppose, was to intercede with the experts in the Department of Transport who were doing the negotiation, making sure they would let us know when things were getting bad. We had to do whatever we could to limit the damage.

There were some quite delicate issues to deal with in all that. Where there was real disagreement between a home department pursuing the commercial interests and the Foreign Office trying to keep the bilateral relationship steady, a lot of the issues went to Cabinet Office Committees. I attended these quite often. This gave a different insight into the way government works: what are the mechanisms for resolving disputes between different bits of government that have a different agenda or see things in a different way. There are some very smooth and impressive operators in the Cabinet Office, seconded from the FCO and other departments who do that very difficult balancing of interests.

The other thing that was interesting: my three or so years coincided with Margaret Thatcher's conversion to the importance of protecting the environment which was based on scientific advice she had from various people. It therefore moved up the agenda pretty rapidly. (Not long after I left, there was a specialised, dedicated Environment Department in the FCO.) That involved again getting to grips with some unfamiliar issues like climate change and other things that are only too familiar these days. One thing I had quite a lot to do with was negotiating a new international agreement about maritime terrorism. You probably know the Montreal Agreement that resulted from a number of hijackings that went on in the 70s. This was a tripartite initiative by Egypt, Austria and Italy, based on an attack on an Italian cruise ship, the Achille Lauro, where a lot of the passengers were Austrian, the ship was Italian and it happened in or near Egyptian waters. So those three decided there should be something similar to the Montreal Treaty. To cut a long story short, I ended up spending two weeks in Rome at the diplomatic conference to finalise the text and found myself playing quite a key role which sort of reverberated back on my Arab world experience, in the sense that the chief negotiator for the Arab group was the Legal Adviser to the Jordanian Foreign Ministry. He was representing the traditional Arab point of view that one man's terrorist is another man's

freedom fighter. The definition of terrorism was basically the key issue we had to argue about. The third party in that little inner group, as it were, was the deputy Soviet Ambassador at the United Nations, a rather engaging guy called Sergei Ordzhonikidze. He was a Georgian, but he stayed on after the end of the Soviet Union and when I last heard of him he was Deputy Foreign Minister. But he was then quite a young diplomat and, unlike quite a few Soviet diplomats of that time, was quite open-minded because he had been in the UN in New York for a long time. The three of us managed to get on quite well and piloted some of those more difficult bits of the text which we eventually got adopted by consensus and then passed up the chain to the political masters. So that was my first real hands-on engagement with multilateral diplomacy. Quite satisfying to see that going through. As far as I know, it's not been invoked since.

There was also an issue on the aviation side. There was a US embargo on Libya for various things that Colonel Gaddafi was seen to have done which affected an order the Libyans were trying to make ... they were trying to get hold of new engines for their fleet of Airbus aircraft for Libyan Arab Airlines. There were obviously all sorts of third parties involved in trying to get hold of these parts and we were involved a bit in trying to stop it. There was some detective work involved in trying to track down and stop sources of contraband supply. I remember an outfit (whose name it's perhaps best I can't remember) which was supposed to be a supplier of legitimate aircraft parts at a very posh sounding address in Piccadilly. I went past there one lunchtime – it was purely a brass plate on a door with the caretaker saying there was nobody around. That was a live thing because you felt you were involved in some hands-on stuff.

We were involved with the Rome Treaty with some issues concerning terrorism. We had a specialist department then called Security Cooperation Department which dealt with terrorism as such. But because so much terrorism had happened on ships and aeroplanes and other forms of transport, we would get fairly involved. I went out to Cyprus to take part in a counterterrorism exercise in which a plane was fictionally hijacked to Akrotiri. I was supposed to be an Arabic interpreter helping negotiate between the terrorists and the authorities but because the people playing the terrorists decided at a rather early stage that they would speak in English, not Arabic, I didn't have a lot to do!

The keynote really was that there was a very varied set of issues that you had to deal with. You got a feeling throughout that you were dealing with real things that mattered to real

people, unlike some aspects of diplomacy where you begin to wonder. I enjoyed it and I found it quite rewarding.

### **British Embassy, Amman, 1989-92**

DSM: So after your job in Maritime, Aviation and Environment Department, you got a promotion. Were you appointed to be the Deputy Head of Mission in Amman, or did you apply for it?

HH: A good question. I applied for it, although if I remember rightly, there were one or two other postings in the Arab world they were trying to push me towards. That was the one I was keen to have and I applied for. They never tell you how much competition there was, but I was very glad to get it.

DSM: You had an interesting journey to get there, I think?

HH: Because I was buying a new car – I had suffered before from the interminable delays if you have your car shipped out to post – I decided I wanted to drive it out. This was a bit of a challenge with family consisting of a wife and four children ranging from about ten to about five. Luckily, it was one of those long Peugeot estates with three rows of seats to fit everybody in. We also had a time constraint between the starting point of a concert in the lighthouse in Poole in which my wife was singing and the absolute last day on which the boss – the Ambassador, Tony Reeve - had told me I had to be there. So that was a challenge as ten days isn't a lot from Dorset to Jordan. We entertained the kids with a complete range of methods of transport: hovercraft across the Channel, car on the train to Italy and then across Italy to catch a boat to Greece and from Greece we went on a rather rambling route via Cyprus to Haifa in Israel, arriving in Haifa on Easter Sunday morning with kids grumbling about how there didn't seem to be any Easter eggs! Because of politics, although we could have got to Amman by lunchtime that day, it took us another 2 ½ days to get there because we had to drive right down to the south of Israel, over into Egypt and then get a ferry back up to Aqaba in Jordan. The Allenby Bridge didn't open up until a bit later on.

Anyway, we made it. And as usual, when you're told this is the absolute latest date you can possibly arrive, you get there and people say, "Oh, are you here already?"

The Jordanians are nice people and, historically, we have a very good relationship with them, from the Royal Family downwards. This is a great help and makes life easy, as does the fact

that, after two postings in the Gulf where your social interaction with local people is quite restricted, the Jordanians live the same kind of lifestyle and you are surrounded, wherever you live, by very nice Jordanians/Palestinians who entertain at home and you entertain them. We had a nice house, a historic house which I now believe has been given up, sadly. Tony Reeve, the Ambassador, was a thoroughly nice man. Very efficient and very well liked locally.

So it was all going very well. What changed to make the circumstances a bit darker was the first Gulf War, the invasion of Kuwait and its aftermath. There was quite a period between Saddam's invasion of Kuwait and January when the Allies moved in to push him out during which we had to evacuate families and so-called non-essential staff. Families is bad enough, going back to England in January when they had no school places or whatever. But also for staff because how do you decide who is non-essential? If they were really non-essential they shouldn't be there. So that's all quite tough, as indeed was doing without them for what turned out to be quite a long period. My family didn't come back until, I think, May.

It was difficult. Like any conflict, I suppose, you don't know what's going to happen. The Jordanians, despite their friendliness, at official level disagreed strongly with what the West was doing. King Hussein had no love for Saddam, but he had tried and believed it should be possible to have an Arab solution where everybody sat down in a tent and agreed an outcome. A peaceful outcome.

I think at the official level there was probably a bit of posturing, but there were all sorts of undercurrents. Arguably, with hindsight, the Jordanian establishment were a bit nervous of seeming to be too cosy with the West by siding with us against Saddam. There was also quite a strong influence at the more popular level, because of Jordan having almost certainly a majority Palestinian population i.e. West Bankers. I was quite struck at the popular level as well as with one's official interlocutors by this feeling of disapproval, disagreement with what the West was doing, or US/UK more specifically I suppose, although there was quite a wide coalition that time, including ironically the Syrians and other Gulf countries.

What was positive in the silver linings department was, because I had been there for eighteen months or so and Tony Reeve had been there for a bit longer, we'd been able to build very good personal relations with a lot of senior Jordanians, official or otherwise. That made it possible to limit the damage that was done, because you could disagree, even quite strongly, about the respective policies of our governments, without necessarily spilling over into

personal hostility or dislike. I remember very well, for example, my neighbour was a very nice Greek Orthodox Palestinian who was rather distinguished. He had done a degree in his 50s in early Jordanian history at Oxford. By virtue of being the local agent for Amstel, the Dutch brewery, he was the honorary Dutch consul. As a Palestinian – and his wife was Palestinian too – he had very strong views about our policy on Kuwait. After the evacuation of families leading up to the war, we were keeping our heads down, doors locked and all the rest of it, there was a knock on the door. I looked through the spy hole to see this shrouded figure in a greatcoat. I opened the door and this figure flung his greatcoat open to reveal it was completely lined with bottles of Amstel. He said he thought I might be having rather a quiet time and had brought me a peace offering!

DSM: What proportion of the population was Palestinian?

HH: Nobody really knew because it's quite a sensitive subject, for a whole lot of reasons. For East Bank Jordanians i.e. the sort of bedrock of support for the Royal Family etc. they were not particularly keen to acknowledge that the Palestinians were in the majority.

DSM: Do you think they were in a majority?

HH: Oh yes. Even at that time the consensus, talking to people, was that they were. Anecdotally, you came across people with very obviously Palestinian West Bank names among your friends and acquaintances. There was a lot of cross fertilisation. Some of the families, like the Nuseibeh family, were distinguished in Palestine and Jordan. In fact the Nuseibeh we knew best, Hussein, though his actual day job was running a shipping and packing agency we used for sending our personal effects and things like that, also had on his mantelpiece the key to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. In Crusader times, then as now, there were so many different Christian sects that vie for prominence in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the decision was to give the key to a Muslim family. And the most respected Muslim family was the Nuseibehs.

So when we talk about Palestinians, they were a mixture. Some of them didn't have Jordanian passports. The Jordanians issued them with a document that said they were a Palestinian and could reside in Jordan. Others had Jordanian passports. There is another category – actual Palestinian refugees living in refugee camps in Jordan. When you think that the Beqaa which is the largest, just outside Amman ... at that time had about 180,000

residents in it. If you're talking about the balance between Jordanians and Palestinians, that makes a considerable difference.

It was a difficult time. The underlying relief, I'm sure, without explicitly saying so, at seeing Saddam eventually evicted from Kuwait and the situation getting back to what passes for normal in that part of the world, on the Jordanian side was pretty strong. It gave them an incentive to patch up the relationship pretty quickly, although by that time I wasn't far off leaving. We had quite an impressive flow of visitors. Douglas Hurd came four times while I was there.

### **High Commissioner, Windhoek 1992-6**

DSM: So we'll move on to talk about your next posting, which followed straight on, I think? You were High Commissioner to Namibia.

HH: Yes. How that happened is a typical Foreign Office personnel story. I didn't know what's going to happen next and having got into a pattern of alternating home and overseas posting, I rather expected they would drag me home. I got a phone call from the Office, asking me what I thought about Namibia. The reason it suddenly came up was that my predecessor, a guy called Francis Richards who had gone as effectively the first High Commissioner to Namibia which had only become independent in 1991, had been pulled out ahead of time because he was a Russian specialist and the deputy post in Moscow had become vacant. That accident was my good fortune. I didn't really know anything about Namibia. I had heard of the great Namib Desert and the Skeleton Coast. Given that it was an alternative to a home posting, I jumped at it.

DSM: So you were in a newly independent state.

HH: I didn't really know what to expect, to be honest. The whole country had about one and a half million people and Windhoek had about the same population as Bournemouth. To give you an idea of scale, I had a map in my office of Namibia with a map of Europe superimposed on the top of it. In the top left-hand corner was Edinburgh and in the bottom right-hand corner Rome!

Anthony Goodenough came out on a visit as Assistant Under-Secretary. We did the usual rounds of people. When I was driving him back to the airport, he said, "I've been thinking about this all the time I've been here. There's something unusual about this place. There are



no people!” So there we were, driving 40 km to the airport through bush. There was the odd game lodge or tiny village or farm, but otherwise between the capital and the airport it was empty.

To me, that was a very attractive aspect. But my wife, who wasn't working, found it almost agoraphobic although, as time went on, we made friends and it got better.

DSM: I assume that, in a newly independent country, there wasn't a massive amount of diplomatic representation there?

HH: I'm glad you asked that because it brings me back the nature of the job. There was actually a surprisingly large diplomatic corps. The independence of Namibia was a big event. It had taken twelve years trying to prise it out of the South Africans with the liberation war going on with people based in the south of Angola coming across the border. It was regarded pretty much as a triumph of the international diplomatic system. The UN Resolution was passed in 1978 but independence wasn't gained until 1991: it took a long time. What enabled it to happen was essentially the collapse of the Soviet Union who were the principal supporters of the liberation movement.

Apparently there was quite a scramble for property with all these Embassies being set up in Windhoek. Before, we'd only had a sort of liaison office like some of the other bigger countries did, at least the ones who were involved in the negotiations – the so-called Contact Group – of which we were one, including the Americans and the Germans.

DSM: Is there still a German population there?

HH: It's fascinating because the Germans in fact weren't there for all that long. They arrived in the mid-1890s. Bismarck was initially very much against colonies: the dynamic new Germany didn't need them. But then somebody hinted that there was one of these new bits of Africa left i.e. South-West Africa where they had made the first discoveries of diamonds. So then it all looked a bit different. That was one of the last bits left together with what became Tanzania or Tanganyika, German East Africa and German South West Africa. That was in the 1890s but they were pushed out by South African troops in 1915 on behalf of the Allies. The influence of that period is still extremely strong. At least until independence – and, to some extent, now – the country is dominated area-wise by these great big farms run by white farmers who are roughly half Afrikaans and half German. We used to go shopping in a big

supermarket called Wecke und Voigts in downtown Windhoek where my wife was very frightened of a fierce German lady who doled out the sausages on the deli counter. Wurst.

The Namibian government when it came in wouldn't officially recognise dual nationality ... we're talking about something like 5% of the population. They had a bit of a dilemma because not many of the Germans wanted to give up their German passports, but there was soon an arrangement where they surrendered their German passports as a symbolic gesture to the Namibian passport authority. The Namibians, as they were bound to, gave the passports back to the German Embassy. So you could go there and collect your German passport. So although you couldn't travel on it into and out of Namibia, you could travel anywhere else.

DSM: Was it SWAPO, the liberation movement?

HH: Yes, the South West Africa People's Organisation, a sort of Namibian equivalent of the ANC.

That brings me to say that, although as a family and in personal terms one of the absolute highlights was travelling around the country to all sorts of wonderful places, on the professional level it was much more rewarding than I had expected it to be. With a High Commission of four, later three, staff we were overseeing a pretty massive UK aid effort, partly because of the role we played in the Contact Group in actually bringing the country to independence and partly because the President, Sam Nujoma, had specifically said to my predecessor – possibly even to Margaret Thatcher who went out for the independence celebrations – that he wanted to move away from the South African administrative systems that they had inherited to what he called the Commonwealth model. What he really meant was British. The result of that was that we had a team of military advisers, originally about fifty strong, people helping revamp the education system, a retired senior civil servant from the Cabinet Office doing reorganisation ... all these people really came under us, with a big input from the ODA.

DSM: Were there ODA people resident?

HH: No. There was a Development Division in Pretoria and they sent people from there. One fascinating thing was having my own special projects scheme which meant I was able to go out and about to spot worthy causes to fund. One of the more successful things we did was micro-finance, microcredit schemes. For example women in the very overcrowded and economically poor Northern part were given a financial incentive to make crafts that could be

sold in the market in Windhoek to tourists. All they needed was a little bit of capital which the South African commercial banks weren't really interested in. A British organisation called Cooperation for Development organised a credit scheme to buy the equipment. By the time I left, the repayment rates were up at 90% to the point where the commercial banks were moving in.

We did something similar in Windhoek itself, because what happened in the townships, where a lot of the poorer people still lived, was that women wanted to go to work but had the universal problem of what to do with the kids. So a crèche system was set up by the women themselves. The fun part of that was that we got involved with probably the only two famous Namibians: Frankie Fredericks, the great Olympic sprinter and Michelle Mclean, a former Miss Universe.

DSM: How many local staff did you have?

HH: Half a dozen. A couple of drivers, a receptionist and a couple of people supporting the aid operation.

DSM: How did you rate the President?

HH: He had a very high standing locally, a mini Mandela, if you like, but he was nothing like as charismatic as Mandela. He shared the approach, post-independence, of reconciliation. He didn't want any kind of retaliation against the whites who had oppressed his people or anything like that. Probably my best contact among Ministers, who subsequently became President, was a man called Pohamba. He was then Minister of Home Affairs and therefore oversaw the police, with which we had another big project with advisers (from the West Yorkshire Constabulary, who were very good). I remember him telling me a story about visiting a prison in Windhoek. One of the jailers was a big Afrikaner who'd been his jailer. He said to this chap, who obviously looked rather uncomfortable, "I think I know you, don't I? Yes, you looked after me while I was in this prison". He could see this man quaking. "But now we're independent, we're friends again and all reconciled. I will shake your hand". That was the approach. The linkages between Namibia and South Africa were very close. Quite a lot of people from the white community in South Africa, mainly business people, came up to see how Namibia was doing in anticipation of something similar going to happen in their country. And indeed there were great waves of judges, prospective civil

servants who were going to be given these administrative jobs for which they had no experience ... they all came up to talk to the Namibians to see to how it was working.

I'm not absolutely sure when London looked at South Africa, which clearly they saw as extremely important – a million British citizens there for a start, people with British passports anyway – whether they wholly realised that aspect of it that made Namibia a bit more than just tending the garden a bit.

In addition to travelling inside Namibia where there was so much to see, the job also gave me the chance to visit the region as well. I went up to Luanda for example, given the very close relationship between SWAPO and the Angolan regime. We went to South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe. The end of my tour was mid-January and we did a big circuit in 2 to 3 weeks through Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho and Zimbabwe. Then we took the car to the shippers in Windhoek and came home!

### **Foreign Office, 1996-2000**

DSM: So you came back to the Office as Head of Latin America and Caribbean Department?

HH: You might ask what the qualifications are of an Arabist with a bit of African experience. I had been in Venezuela at the beginning of my career. I did speak Spanish. But I didn't know any of the other countries, to be honest.

There's always been an issue about where certain countries in that area sit. It had been WIAD – West Indian and Atlantic Department. Then it became MCAD which was Mexico and Central America Department. So the revamp was to bring a bit of logic to it, except that you then got the English-speaking Caribbean countries absorbed into the Latin American world. This created a few issues in the sense both the local people and our representatives in these small Caribbean countries felt a bit overshadowed. They thought that if we were worrying about Argentina and Brazil, we wouldn't have much time left. They were sort of right. I tried very hard to be aware of that and visited most of them. High Commissioners coming to the end of their careers in these smaller islands and Spanish-speaking Ambassadors in the bigger countries were different characters. There was possibly a tendency to a bit of rivalry as well.

It was a wonderful opportunity because I did get to every Central and South American country, even including Guyana. Anybody who knows those countries will know how varied they are and, on the whole, easy-going, friendly, welcoming. I was lucky because there's a sort of cycle with Latin America in terms of UK foreign policy where, every 20 or 30 years, the government of the day or somebody in the Foreign Office says "It's time we should be doing more." John Major got quite excited about that. There's always quite a healthy volume of trade: we had very large investments in the bigger countries and even in some of the smaller ones in Central America. It's a healthier trade relationship than you would think. Commercially, it's important and there was a very encouraging movement ... tendency at the time for all these countries to become more and more democratic and to get away from Generalissimos and all those sorts of things. And that was something it was felt we should be encouraging. During my time we had a big conference in London at the Banqueting House, presided over by John Major and attended by three Presidents from Brazil, Peru and Panama. It coincided with the time when I think the government in more or less every Latin American country had been elected democratically, even Venezuela as it was just before Chavez came on the scene.

So it was good to be working on this at a positive time when we were interested in thickening up relationships. As always, there was pressure to close Embassies. We had a resident Embassy in every single one of the seven Central American countries at the time. Some were Embassies with two people, a Head of Mission and a Grade 9 junior officer deputy – amazingly efficient. One of the arguments we were able to use was that with seven countries, you got seven votes in the UN. One of the things that turns people off a lot is if you remove your resident diplomatic mission which makes them inevitably think you don't care about them. Pretty simple, but surprising how difficult people find it to recognise that. What does it cost to have two people?

DSM: Were there any big political issues?

HH: I suppose bilaterally the biggest one was towards the end of my time which was the detention of General Pinochet in London and all the aggro about that. It was rather fascinating in a way. There was quite a lot of pressure. What we were having to do in the FCO was to defend a policy which was really being run by the Home Office. They were the ones who wanted to keep him or at least not let him go back to Chile. There was an extradition request from this rather charismatic Spanish judge and the Home Office had a Brit

they wanted to get out of Spain. I can't remember if he was a train robber or something else. There was a bit of reciprocal interest in actually getting Pinochet to Spain, but the Chileans were very unkeen. Difficult for the Chilean regime, who by then were very much centre-left, post-Pinochet, with no sympathy for him. So in our Department and in the FCO generally, there was quite a lot of what I call tea and biscuit diplomacy. We'd have these delegations of Chilean MPs coming to appeal to us to do the right thing, whatever they thought that was. You'd sit down with them over tea and biscuits and try and mollify them a bit.

DSM: Who was the Foreign Secretary at the time?

HH: Robin Cook had just come in and Jack Straw was Home Secretary. So he was having to play an unusual role of being at the not very liberal end of the spectrum. The trouble is, people in places like the Home Office and the Daily Express automatically think the FCO is there just to be nice to foreigners and therefore whatever we tried to say about the merits of keeping the Chileans happy, it didn't really count.

It was a rewarding job. I came away mainly with a yen to go back and see some of these places as a tourist properly but I don't know if I ever shall. It's a long way to go and very expensive, unfortunately.

What I also took away is that, without sounding like a homily, we do ignore some of these countries at our peril and take relationships for granted. Apart from the Falklands, they tend to be friendly to us, but they don't like to be ignored.

### **HM Ambassador to Syria 2000-3**

DSM: After Latin America and Caribbean Department, you got a promotion. Tell us about that.

HH: By this time we'd got onto the system where you bid for postings. Syria came up towards the end of my time in Latin America and Caribbean Department. My interest was very vividly pricked because it's the country I already knew a little bit and certainly very much wanted to have a posting there. In many ways it was my best posting professionally because of my background as an Arabist and all the rest of it.

DSM: What sort of size was the Embassy?

HH: There were a dozen or so UK-based staff, quite a large local team because we had a fairly big visa section, for example, a fairly well staffed commercial section. So there were probably fifty locally engaged staff, maybe more when you include the drivers and other ancillary staff. So quite a big mission, but not anywhere near our biggest in the Middle East.

DSM: What were your principal objectives as Ambassador?

HH: Well, that was rather affected by the nature of my arrival because instead of the usual ambassadorial type arrival where you slip in on a British Airways flight and have a courtesy meeting with the protocol people and generally have some time to mug up on things and start making contacts, the former President of Syria, Hafez al-Assad, died two days before I was due to arrive there. This was a shock to everybody. And what it meant for me was instead of a quiet and anonymous arrival, I travelled out on an aircraft of the Queen's Flight, accompanying the Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, and various other dignitaries, who were going to pay their condolences to the newly appointed President, Bashar al-Assad. This did have the extra benefit that I ended up meeting almost all members of the Assad family on my first day in post. Several of my predecessors would have been rather envious of that.

DSM: Was Hafez al-Assad very old?

HH: No, 69 I think. But he'd had heart trouble for some time and certainly he was known to be unwell and his health had been declining. What had happened was that the original heir apparent was Bashar's elder brother, Bassel, who was a very different sort of character, much more in his father's mould I think. But he managed to write himself off in his car on the airport road in 1994 if I remember rightly, by which time Hafez was already pretty sickly. So there was a bit of a panic in the regime about what was going to happen if he did disappear from the scene unexpectedly. Bashar, who was then studying as an ophthalmologist in London at St Mary's Paddington, was hastily summoned back to take the crash course in being President of Syria. I think this is quite significant because, looking ahead a little bit to what we might say about Bashar, yes he had 18 months or so in London getting used to Western ways (and incidentally meeting the British lady who was eventually to become his wife), but after that he had six years at his father's knee or, more specifically, surrounded by his father's dyed-in-the-wool old guard advisers, who will certainly have influenced him quite strongly in a more conservative direction.

So to come back to my objectives for the posting, this unexpected development meant that my first objective – and this was made pretty clear from London – was to get alongside this new young President who everyone thought was a promising young chap, who might be able to open the country up to outside influences: it was very, very closed under Hafez. Given that Bashar was receiving Head of State after Head of State, he gave Robin Cook and our delegation quite a generous amount of time for a bilateral chat. The omens looked very good. Instead of finding myself, a bit like my predecessor, treading water and doing what we could with this closed, somewhat hostile, anti-Western regime, we found ourselves actually having some rather more positive opportunities ... potential opportunities anyway to pursue.

Bilaterally, the relationship wasn't very strong. The political climate wasn't good under Hafez: there'd been various fallings-out over specific incidents e.g. the Hindawi affair, the hijacking of an Israeli plane that was considered to have been instigated by the Syrians, which had led to quite a long rupture in diplomatic relations up to the early 90s. We didn't have a lot of trade relations or anything like that. But there had been, over the year or so before Hafez's death, some quite positive moves in the Middle East peace process leading up to a meeting between Hafez el-Assad and President Clinton. In the end, it didn't quite work, but came pretty close. The reckoning was that if you were going to open up some sort of progress towards the wider Arab - Israel issue, to make a start with an agreement on the Golan, by then the only occupied bit of sovereign Arab territory occupied by Israel, if you could prise open that issue, then perhaps you might be able to make a wider start. So I would say that the impetus to cultivate Bashar and exploit opportunities for a more open and positive dialogue were mainly political, in the sense of geopolitical rather than specifically bilateral.

DSM: The Golan was the festering issue really, wasn't it?

HH: Yes. It was the remaining bit of what you might call sovereign Arab territory as opposed to the West Bank and Gaza that was still occupied. Yes, it was a festering sore. It led people, including President Clinton, to say that Syria really held the key to progress on the Arab – Israel dispute. The saying was, "There's no war without Egypt and no peace without Syria".

DSM: We know what developments have happened since but can you tell us what things were like when you first arrived there?



HH: When people talk about sectarian differences, I would dispute that because what I found more generally in that part of the world and in Syria particularly – certainly at that time – was that historically what I call the default mode actually was tolerance between different religious and ethnic groups. The illustration I always use about that is when you go into the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, which is certainly one of the oldest and possibly one of the most distinguished mosques in the Islamic world, you go into the prayer hall and right in the middle of it is a little enclosure which is a shrine supposed to contain the head of John the Baptist. Christian pilgrims used to flock in to pay their respects, through the middle of the Muslims praying in the prayer hall of the Umayyad Mosque and nobody batted an eyelid. In another corner of the courtyard of the mosque was a shrine to the Imam Husayn, the so-called martyr venerated by the Shia Muslims. You get all these phalanxes of black-clad Iranian ladies pouring into to pay their respects there, one of the mainstream Sunni Muslim mosques.

DSM: What is the breakdown approximately between Shias, Sunnis and Alawites?

HH: The vast majority of the Muslims are Sunni, a source of some grievance. Those Sunni Muslims had, since the ascent to power of Hafez al-Assad in the early 1970s, been dominated by the sect that the Assads come from, the Alawites. They are regarded as a branch of Shia Islam, although they were only really recognised as proper Muslims about a hundred years ago. As far as what I call mainstream Shia of the type that that you find in Iran or Iraq, there were very few. The Alawites themselves are thought to be about 10% of the overall population and therefore about the same as Christians. At that time. There are far fewer Christians now, since the trouble started. So they're both minorities and I would say that, historically, the tradition is of all these different groups tolerating each other. Among Christians – they're 10% or so of the population – there are three Christian Patriarchs resident in Damascus, or there were, of three different sects: Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox and on you go. My take is that those countries, because they're merchant communities that thrive on business and trade, business and trade of course thrive on stability and peace. And to achieve stability and peace in a multi-ethnic, multi-sectarian group, tolerance is a key thing. So you don't have to love the colour of the eyes of the other guy in the other tribe or the other religious group, but you have to recognise that the best way is in everybody's interests. It's a very admirable trend, like John the Baptist in the mosque. It's been going on for 1,400 years.

DSM: But gone into reverse in recent years. And of course a lot of the big cities in the Middle East had Jewish populations.

HH: Most of them have disappeared, but there was still a shop opposite the entrance to the Azm Palace, which is a rather splendid Ottoman building in the old city. It was a souvenir shop run by a Jewish family. There was some sort of scandal about taking money out of the country and I believe they've now gone. In the present climate, I would find it very surprising if there were any Jewish people left. But, as you say, in earlier times, it was perfectly normal. The role of the Jewish community in banking and trade of various kinds was recognised and, on the whole, respected.

DSM: Did you find the Embassy in good heart when you arrived? Did you think your team were working well? What sort of changes did you want to make?

HH: There wasn't a great deal of pressure to make changes. It was a good embassy, functioning well. Given the circumstances I was describing up until then in terms of our relationship, we had quite an active Commercial Section which was doing its best to promote trade. There were some quite positive ingredients. Although Syria historically is regarded as having been in the French sphere of influence, by that time there was a very strong interest – like many other places around the world – in learning English as a tool for getting a better job or being a better trader or merchant. That meant that the British Council operation was really working well and making quite a lot of money from promoting English classes. That in turn had a bit of a spin-off for our commercial interests. Consular Section was pretty busy, although the restrictions on Syrians getting visas for the UK were fairly strong. But there was also quite a lot of demand, for example from students wanting to go and study in Britain. So it was quite a busy Embassy in rather unsatisfactory premises which we'd had for about thirty years. They were always regarded as temporary, but nothing was ever done about it. We were on four floors of the big concrete Soviet style apartment building with civilian families living interspersed in layers in between. From the point of view of things like security, it was a bit of a nightmare.

It didn't seem to me there was any great need to change not least because we were really focusing on improving the political relationship and the political environment. We had good Arabic speaking people in the Chancery. My feeling was we had the resources, the tools to do what we were being asked to do from London.

Slightly fast forwarding, but during those three years we had the first ever visit to Syria by a British Prime Minister and the first ever visit to Britain by a Syrian President. Hafez al-Assad practically never travelled and before that was a series of usually rather short lived heads of state.

DSM: Syria had traditionally been a client state of Moscow, hadn't it?

HH: Effectively, yes. Which way round it was is probably still debatable. When Hafez came to power ... initially his coup was 1970 and then he was formalised as President two or three years later ... I think the Russians, or the Soviets as they then were, probably saw that as the same kind of opportunity that we saw with the advent of Bashar, in the sense that they hadn't been much interested before that because there had just been a series of coups and the occasional elected civilian government then overturned by another military coup and so on. With Hafez clearly, with his very strong grip on the country, and the tendency at that time of Arab nationalists which was nominally the ideology of the Assads - the Alawites - that was something that the Soviets had already been exploiting in Egypt and in Iraq and various other places. So they used that opportunity and started supplying weaponry, training and all sorts of other things. Certainly in my time, you found a lot of the generals had been trained in Russia. Many of them spoke Russian. There was a historical link even before the Soviet times, particularly with Aleppo in the north of Syria, where you'd see shop signs in Arabic, Armenian and Russian. It was on a sort of trade route between Russia and the Middle East.

So in the Soviet period it was mainly about taking the opportunity to increase their influence. And in the case of Syria, probably looking for what they've now got as a result of the recent conflict, which is their warm water port on the Mediterranean which they've been looking to since the time of the Czars.

DSM: The fact that you were trying to achieve objectives on a grander political scale suggests that most of that work will have had to be done by you. Is that right?

HH: I think that's broadly true. I was talking to somebody the other day about what's the point of Ambassadors in these times of instant communications where Prime Ministers and Presidents can just pick up the phone or go on Skype to each other. My view remains that it is actually the sort of time when having a person on the ground who is trying his or her best to understand how the country ticks, making contacts and forming relationships that allow you to have an effective dialogue about things is really important. Tony Blair could have

picked up the phone to Bashar and said, “Look, I’m coming to Saudi Arabia next week. Would you like me to drop in and meet you?” That was one way it could have been done. But it wasn’t. I was sent in at really quite short notice because somebody in London had this idea fairly late in the day to talk to the Foreign Minister. It took me long enough to get a meeting with the Foreign Minister. Certainly none of my colleagues in the Embassy would have been able to do it - would have had great difficulty to put this proposition to them. Happily, it was accepted with considerable enthusiasm which I thought was a good mark of how they themselves saw the possibilities of getting a better relationship with Britain and the West more generally. I don’t think we were necessarily regarded as a goal in our own right. So that’s what happened. I think it’s not being too immodest to say that having somebody on the ground, able to do this kind of legwork, preparatory work, actually proved its value on that occasion. I think these days it’s still the case in a lot of countries.

DSM: It was observable in the run-up to the Iraq war that the Embassy in Washington wasn’t playing a very large role. All the communications were between the staff at Number 10 or the Prime Minister and the staff at the White House and the President. So I think in some cases direct communication does seem to have taken over.

HH: Also, that relationship is so important that there’s always going to be a tendency for that to happen. Prime Ministers and Presidents inevitably get to know each other – it’s part of the so-called special relationship. Yes, Iraq was a strong example of that. The diplomatic machinery was almost completely put on one side. I’m sure our people in Washington were doing stuff in the background, but it might not have been so crucial. But of course in Syria, we didn’t have a special relationship. We were trying to build one.

DSM: Of course language is one reason why the President and the Prime Minister can speak to each other easily. But presumably Bashar’s English was quite good?

HH: Yes, it was better that he tended to admit because it was a protocol thing. When Tony Blair came, for example, in the set piece meetings with all the delegates, Bashar would speak in Arabic and his very good aide/translator would translate and Blair would reply in English and she wouldn’t translate back. At one point they went off on one side – I wasn’t actually present – and that conversation would have been done in English. The first sustained bit of English I heard from Bashar was when he came to London and gave a speech at the Lord Mayor’s Banquet. You can’t be an eye doctor in London unless your English is pretty good!

DSM: How long had he lived in London?

HH: It was only about eighteen months that he was doing his course. It was a two-year course but cut short by the events that brought him back to Syria. I'm fairly sure that was when he met Asma who became his wife after he became President. She was from a Syrian family but had been born and brought up in Acton. Her dad is a cardiologist in Harley Street.

DSM: So approximately how long after you arrived did the Blair visit take place?

HH: It must have been early summer 2001, in my first year.

DSM: Did everything go smoothly?

HH: Yes, it wasn't too bad because it was short, really an overnight. A stopover on the way to Saudi. The Syrians put him up in the Sheraton hotel and therefore I didn't have a great big party descending on me at the Residence. There was the set piece meeting with the President, then in a departure from what we understood to be Syrian protocol, he took Blair in his own car – driving himself – down to the Al-Hamidiyah Souq. This is the great central thoroughfare of this very old souq which is normally completely pedestrianised. Some of the traders were slightly startled by being pushed into their shops by the security people so that they could drive down this cobbled street. They ended up in the mosque where there were a couple of rather impressive photographs of them standing in the courtyard. Evocative. At the time, it was all very positive.

DSM: Did you get any impression of Tony Blair from meeting him personally?

HH: It was fairly fleeting. I went to the hotel to collect him in the morning and go up to the presidential Palace, so we had a bit of a chat. He seemed keen to ask me what we'd like to get out of this visit. I don't think I said anything very revolutionary, except to build a closer better relationship. There was a little bit of a sour note which hit the UK press inevitably, the joint press conference. There was a bit of a falling out over Afghanistan, going back to the old idea of one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. As far as the Syrian regime were concerned, basically what the West was doing as they saw it, penalising Afghanistan for perceived association with terrorism, wasn't the right way to set about it. That said, Bashar had started off talking to the press very strongly identifying with the West over 9/11, saying that Syria had been one of the first targets of Islamist terrorism, referring back to the early 1980s when there was an uprising by the Muslim Brothers, mainly in the city of Hama, which

had been very seriously repressed by the regime. Perhaps a bit ominous with hindsight. The Syrian take on that was that was Islamists, possibly stirred up by Syria's enemies/rivals, meaning mainly Saddam Hussein. As an early victim of that kind of thing, they could identify with us. But, at the same time, they didn't think going out and bashing Afghanistan was the right response. The UK media picked up on that quite strongly: all that stuff about better relations with Syria wasn't worth the paper it was written on, Syria hadn't changed its spots, etc. etc. In practice, having been at the press conference, it wasn't a very strong disagreement.

DSM: Presumably the good thing about this is that the British press's interest in Syria lasted about as long as Blair was there?

HH: Oh yes, they all moved on. Saudi probably wasn't very interesting because it was mostly about trade. Nothing much more happened in terms of media interest in Syria. By then, you see, we'd had the Damascus Spring after Bashar's arrival. I was there, with the rest of the diplomatic corps, Syrian Parliament, listening to him taking his oath of office a couple of days after he became President. There was nearly a hiccup over his assumption of the Presidency, because the constitution at the time said that you had to be a minimum age of 40 and he was something like 36. But changing the constitution in the Syrian system doesn't take very long. I think they did it in about twenty-four hours. Anyway he took his oath of office and made a very positive speech. He used the word *legitimacy* several times which was quite a strong implication that he wanted something slightly more solid to confirm his right to be President than the traditional 99.99% vote which periodic elections had produced for his father. Indeed, there was an election not very long after that in which he was the only candidate, admittedly, but you did have the right – in theory – to say yes or no. They very carefully managed to make it come out at 97% to indicate it was slightly more democratic.

After the Blair visit, we tried to keep the momentum up. I think the Syrians wanted to. We were looking at various initiatives to thicken up the relationship in various different fields, ranging from what I call the broadly uncontentious politically, like trying to get the British Museum to come out and sort out the Damascus National Museum which had a wonderful collection displayed in complete chaos. The French and Italians had tried over the years to sort it out, but all that means is there are name tags all over the place in French and Italian, not much use to the majority of tourists. Perhaps a bit more seriously because it involved the presidential family ... one of the initiatives the new regime had taken in the economic field

was to open up commercial banking. This was a Soviet style, centrally planned economy, so there was no such thing as commercial banks or indeed a private sector. They said they wanted to allow commercial banks to come in and there was Ghassan El-Rifai, an open minded Economy Minister I had quite a lot of dealings with - he'd worked in IMF or the World Bank, I can't remember which. This was partly his initiative, but also by then we'd got Asma there as the First Lady who, among other attributes, had spent some time as a high-powered merchant banker in London, working for Deutsche Bank and JP Morgan. So she was very much involved in this. So they came to us to say that they had realised that if you were going to have a commercial banking sector, you needed a regulatory mechanism for it, otherwise you would get a Lebanese style situation with the banks completely out of control and unregulated. They wanted the Bank of England to send some experts on bank regulation out to talk. So they did and I had the agreeable task of escorting them up to see the First Lady and we had a very friendly discussion. I hadn't met her before. A very impressive person, younger than the President. Very switched on and interested in this. The Economy Minister was there and went away with instructions to pursue this. It never actually got anywhere, for all sorts of reasons ... the way our relationship changed in the run-up to Iraq and the war itself. But it was a very positive time and there were various things, fairly low-key because we didn't want to push at the boundaries too much. It led ultimately to the visit of Bashar to London.

DSM: Tell us about that. What kind of visit was it?

HH: There were some indications that the Syrians, having got that we were interested in developing the relationship for more Syria prestige kind of reasons than bilateral interest reasons, were quite keen to have a state visit and we had to make it clear fairly early on that that wasn't going to happen, because the queue for those is seven or eight years. So it was an official visit. A lot of the negotiations were about trying to get in as many of the features that would apply to a state visit as you can. We did get tea with the Queen. We did get a meeting with Prince Charles and the main interaction was going to be with the Prime Minister. I think it was three to four days. It was rather an enjoyable occasion. Both my wife and I went back. We didn't fly in the official presidential plane. We went separately on Syrian Arab Airways which had a regular 747 flight – a rather elderly 747 - between Damascus and London. We were two of the four passengers, handsomely outnumbered by the cabin crew. My wife accompanied Asma on her separate programme, involving going back to her old college. My wife found her very agreeable. They had almost gone to the same school in Ealing; it turned

out there were two different ones close together, so they knew what they were talking about. She found her very relaxed, very informal saying, “I wish I could just put on my jeans and go out to meet old friends.”

DSM: So that happened approximately how long after the Blair visit?

HH: It was towards the end of 2002, so about 18 months I suppose. In a way, looking back on it, the two feel closer together because we spent so much time planning. Tony Blair issued the invitation to come to London, but it was the usual thing of finding dates that actually fitted.

The thing that overshadowed it by then of course was that we were on not exactly a collision course but a diverging one regarding Iraq. We had kind of thought that the gradual warming of our relationship might make it easier to persuade the Syrians that actually they had an interest in doing something about Iraq. They’d always been rivals in a way, rivals for the crown of orthodox heirs of Ba’ath Arab nationalism. Saddam of course was a good deal more ruthless – at least openly – than Hafez had been, though he was pretty ruthless in a quiet way, in a domestic sense. You wouldn’t have caught Hafez invading Kuwait. He wouldn’t have been quite as stupid as that. So basically, yes, as rivals, as the Iraqi regime were charged at least by the Syrians as having sponsored various acts of terrorism over the years. So we thought perhaps there was scope for a bit of common cause here. We might even be able to get them to intervene a bit to help us deal with Saddam. But once we were talking about the possibility of military action against Iraq, that was where we really parted company.

Syrian policy was fairly well articulated by Bashar at the Number 10 press conference. Funnily enough I don’t remember it being quite as acrimonious as the one in Damascus, although our differences by then were quite a lot greater than and more immediate. Basically the Syrian take goes back to the first Gulf War with the Jordanians: there’s always a way of sorting these things out peacefully. What we should be doing is sitting down with Arab brothers in a metaphorical tent and sorting this dispute out, coming to an agreement. I don’t think there was ever any realistic prospect of that happening in either of the Gulf Wars, but that was the way the Syrians saw it. They definitely didn’t like the idea of the Crusaders – as George W Bush unfortunately put it – riding into impose their version of democracy on an Arab country, not least because it had very strong implications for them as a similarly constituted political entity.



DSM: So that was in late 2002. And the Iraq war started in early 2003. How did that affect the Embassy and you personally?

HH: Quite considerably. Just finishing on the London visit, I think that despite that disagreement and the press conference pointing it up a bit and being the focus of media reporting, it was positive. We finished feeling that there were things we could do. The eventual move to war really put the mockers on all that – the Bank of England initiative and other things really went out of the window. In personal terms, one of the consequences was that, like the rest of our Embassy staff, my wife had to go home. I say *had to*: the official position was they had a right not to go. In our case, as we wanted to thin out, and we were sending home the unfortunately named non-essential staff as well, for example-setting purposes she agreed to leave.

What we knew at the official level was that there was a strong coalition of anti-UK/US feeling about what we were doing, despite all I said earlier about their antipathy to the Iraqi regime. For the ordinary Syrian in the street it wasn't so much about the regime. So many conversations started, "Of course I've got no time for Saddam, but ...". And then the 'but' was it's our Iraqi brothers being killed as a result of this, not Saddam Hussein himself. So it was quite difficult in personal terms. We kept a low profile. There were periodic rent-a-crowd demonstrations outside the American Embassy. My American colleague hunkered down quite a bit. Most of his families and staff went home. We would meet from time to time. I remember calling him one day and asking if we could have a chat about what was going on. He replied that his dance card was not very full at that moment! It wasn't so much that you didn't get invited to parties because they didn't like you, but because they weren't any parties. What was more positive about that ... I would wander across the road to my local supermarket and buy stuff. I didn't have a security detail, unlike our Ambassador in Jordan who had a delegation of military police sent out from the UK to lie across his bedroom door. What I did have was a contingent of Syrian riot police, eventually, which they sent. These guys turned up. I'm not sure how effective they would have been in the event of a real attack. When I used to take our beloved Labrador out for a walk, these guys would scatter – they never liked dogs much in this part of the world.

It was a dark time in a way, what was positive was that there was very little acrimony with the numerous friends I had made in the Syrian community. People in that part of the world

are able to separate the official attitude where they have to be hostile and the personal relationships in a way which is a positive thing.

DSM: In the first couple of years before the war broke out, did you have a chance to get around the country and see much?

HH: Oh yes. It was an open air museum of a whole range of historical periods, from prehistoric times, through Sumerians, Babylonians and so on, right through to Ottomans. There are Greek temples, Roman temples, every possible historical period. It was an absolutely fascinating place to be a tourist in, even more so to be paid to live there and travel around! It's fantastic. One of the strands to our relationship below the political level were about half a dozen British archaeological missions working in different parts of Syria on their digs which was fun. On top of that the people were absolutely delightful. In my early period, when I was on my own, I used to drive out into the countryside round Damascus and deliberately get myself lost as a quick way of familiarising myself. In doing that, I often stopped at a farm or a field to ask people the way. Every time you stopped, you got whatever was growing that week from people you'd never met before: apricots, strawberries. You'd come back laden. To me this was symbolic of the very strong Syrian tradition of hospitality and friendliness. This is why it's such a tragedy to see what's going on now.

DSM: Tell me, looking back now. You were dealing with the Al-Assads, treating them as the civilised people they appeared to be. Now we see them in a very different light. How do you feel?

HH: That's a good question to which I wish I had a convincing answer. I don't know. I was interviewed recently by a film company who were making a film on the Al-Assads. They asked the same question. I said that as far as I could see, it had to do with the period that Bashar spent being briefed by the old guard. What they would have instilled in him is that he was representing a regime (hence the emphasis on the concept of legitimacy) which had rather weak underpinnings in terms of its rights to be there. It represented a minority group, 10% of the population. It came to power through a military coup originally. The so-called elections, held periodically under the constitution, are pretty dodgy as a means of establishing proper democracy. For all these reasons, he needed to work very hard to stay in power. That message, I guess, will have resonated with him in the end, when the real crisis came in 2011 with the Arab Spring and initially peaceful uprisings by people talking about more democracy and all those things. Nothing to do at that time with jihadis or Islamists or

anything like that. When that happened, that message will have carried more weight with him than the one that said that he ought to be putting the country on the track to greater openness, being more liberal, having a more democratic system, a more open economy etc. In addition, many of the people who instilled that message were still around, although beginning to die out. There will still be real dinosaurs like the Defence Minister, Mustafa Tlass. I remember him telling a visiting delegation from the Royal College of Defence Studies about his theory of the Twin Towers, 9/11 which was that it was all organised by Mossad to put the Arab world in disrepute. I've heard that before from other people but this was the Defence Minister briefing an official delegation. Not many of the RCDS members who are, of course, quite senior military officers and civil servants from different countries, were very impressed by that. Anyway, there were still quite a lot of people like that about, advising him on how to handle this crisis. I think the open question is: to what extent did he decide he was going to react in this way? It is frankly almost impossible to imagine Asma, for example – as far as we know she is still in Syria – just sitting there watching this stuff happening, without some kind of emotional feeling. He, after all at the end of the day, is the President of Syria, born and mostly brought up in Syria. She was born and brought up in London and goodness knows how she coped. For him, I think the question now is how much is he really in control of the situation. For example, would he have personally authorised the latest chemical attack that brought this – as it turned out this not very strong – retribution? We just don't know the answer to that. We may never know, because – I hesitate to make any kind of prediction – if there's a crumb of comfort in what's happening now, it's that if he authorised the chemical attack or people in his name did it, and the Russians were not privy to that or consulted about it ... I think if they had been, they would have counselled against it. So they may be starting to think, although they don't want to lose their position in Syria ... there was a small piece in the paper the other day by a Russian general in office saying or less what I've just said: if the long-term solution to the Syrian issue meant the future of Syria was without Bashar, then that would have to be the case. I don't think this was somebody enunciating official Russian policy but the apparatchiks of the Russian regime don't talk off the cuff.

I do recall vividly towards the end of my time going to call on the Foreign Minister. Sitting in his outer office with his Private Secretary, we were watching that statue of Saddam being pulled down in Firdos Square. When eventually I was ushered in, he had switched his TV off but I could tell he had been watching the same scenes. I had got to know him quite well and he had always been on the dour side but, even for him, he was looking very bleak indeed. He

said, "Believe me, nobody is going to get any good out of what's just happened there." And in a way he was right.

DSM: Sometimes, you just need a strong man to hold things together. Take the strong man away and there's chaos.

HH: We were coming at it from slightly different angles. For him, a Ba'athist regime, supposedly invincible, overthrown so obviously to the delight of its own people was a very specific message. For us in the West, it was a more positive thing: these things aren't there for ever. But what I really think was important was, even though I guess the vast majority of people in the Arab world would disapprove of the way it had been done by outside agency, I don't doubt that the message that none of these regimes, however oppressive and apparently entrenched, are necessarily there for ever, eventually had a feed into what happened under the so-called Arab Spring, even though it was seven or eight years later.

DSM: So you left Syria in August 2003. Was that the normal timing of your posting or did you leave earlier?

HH: I think the real answer is that it was normal timing except that, given that by then you were allowed to apply to extend your posting, I had done so but had been told that my application hadn't been successful. I'd done my three years. I had put in for a fourth year but as the Foreign Office kindly put it, I failed to beat the competition. In a way – and I don't know if it played a part in their thinking – it might have been right that the Office identified what had ended up being a rather bad experience for them i.e. the Iraq war, despite the good things that had happened earlier which I take some credit for. I don't know how much credit I got in London – you never hear about these things. But at the risk of seeming immodest, the Foreign Minister – dour though he could sometimes be – did, on my farewell call (unprompted, I think) described me as one of the best Ambassadors we had. I didn't report that to London. Perhaps I should have done, but I'm not a great one for blowing my own trumpet. I'm not sure how impressed they'd have been, because I sometimes wondered during my time there whether there wasn't a slight feeling in London that I was being too nice to the foreigners, in the way that people sometimes worry. The way I saw it was that it was part of my job. If you were trying to improve relationships, you had to be nice to people and try and understand what motivated them. You do so, not to butter up the foreigners as an objective in itself, but in the hope that by doing so you can advance UK interests.

## **Governorate Coordinator for the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq,**

**2003-04**

DSM: You came back. What happened next?

HH: Before I left, I was asked if I would volunteer to go and be something called a Governorate Coordinator for the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq.

DSM: Is that a quasi-Governor?

HH: Effectively, yes. It was a brand new idea. Unlike most of Paul Bremer's ideas, it was quite a positive one. He was the sort of Viceroy in Iraq and had only recently taken over. He had decided that it would be a good thing to have a representative of the 18 Iraqi provinces, reporting to him to keep an eye on what was going on locally in each place. The difficulty about that is that you needed 18 reasonably qualified people to do the job. So they had to scurry round quite fast trying to find people. Initially, I wasn't told where I would be going.

It wasn't the sort of posting I'd expect to get after Syria which, although overall was a very rewarding and fun posting, was also quite stressful, especially the last bit without family and so on, I think I hoped for something a little bit quieter in Europe or wherever, without much hope because I had probably been branded as the sort of person who goes to difficult places by then.

This was still before I left Damascus in about the July. Initially, it might have been Mosul which I was rather keen on – the old name is Nineveh and I envisioned this rather Babylonian place, although I don't think the reality would have been quite like that! In the end it was Basra. The Basrawis say it's the second city of Iraq. The inhabitants of Mosul say the same about their city. Nobody really knows. Anyway, Basra was really quite important and was in the UK area of operations, militarily and so on. I managed to fix a recce visit in July, which was interesting. I'd last been there in the 1970s when it was a dump, so I wasn't that surprised to find that it still was a dump only with more battle damage, including the headquarters of the Queen's Lancashire Regiment who were more or less my hosts in taking me round for the two or three days I was there. They had set themselves up in a more or less flattened building that had been the Ba'ath party headquarters. They took me out and showed me what things were like initially. They were an armed escort but they wore soft hats. I had a flak jacket but that was it. We wandered around the souq. I must say the flak jacket in July

in downtown Basra where the temperature was probably well over 50° was slightly uncomfortable. But those were the conditions in which they lived entirely, no air-conditioning or anything. So that was my introduction. I went home in the middle of August with a fairly short turnaround time as they wanted me in Basra by late September. But then there wasn't a lot of briefing to be done in London because nobody really knew much about this place.

DSM: What was the chain of command? Did you report directly to Paul Bremer?

HH: It was curious. When I agreed to go, I made several conditions: one was about leave plans, particularly getting home at Christmas; and one was that I should have a proper job description so that I knew what I was supposed to be doing. By the time I got out there in September, I didn't have a job description, so I ended up writing it myself which was probably much more satisfactory in a way. But that relates to your question about the chain of command, because even that wasn't really clear. My letter of appointment was signed by Bremer, so officially I was seconded from the Foreign Office to the Coalition Provisional Authority and he was my boss. However, within that, my office as Coordinator for Basra province was co-located with something called the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) South which at the time was run by a Regional Coordinator in the form of Hilary Synnott whom you may have heard of. He wasn't an Arabist. He had been High Commissioner in Pakistan and he'd been Deputy Head of Mission in Jordan where I had succeeded him. He was there as the Regional Coordinator for the four southern provinces that were part of the British so-called area of responsibility under the military set up around Basra. He had quite a lot of technical experts who were mainly involved in physical reconstruction of one sort or another – water, electricity and all those kinds of things. He didn't really have, in a sense therefore, a political role, although obviously in real life and with his very strong political background, he was quite heavily involved in dealing with the Iraqi Governor in Basra and so on. So he wasn't really my boss, but I would stand in for him when he was away on leave, for example. We kind of boxed and coxed a little bit in that respect. But my main focus was liaising with the provincial authority, which consisted of an Iraqi Governor who'd been elected by a provincial council, which the CPA with the British military had more or less brought into existence. Initially, of course, the military were running things almost completely. There weren't civilian counterparts.

So that was the background. At the same time, the FCO were obviously involved, in the sense of my and indeed Hillary's home department. There was an Iraq Unit that had an interest in what was going on. The way I dealt with that was to minimise the kind of two masters thing. I wrote a monthly report for Bremer about what was going on in Basra and I would send a copy of that to the Foreign Office. They seemed to find that perfectly adequate. It wasn't highly classified because, initially at least, the systems in CPA South were so primitive that we all were using our private emails. The Foreign Office took about six months to provide an extension of the system called Firecrest. We had got six or seven FCO secondees doing the admin for the complex we lived in, doing comms and registry type work. There was me, a political adviser in CPA South called Robert Wilson, a very distinguished Arabist. Although I pointed it out tirelessly, it took the Office quite a long time to realise that, as an FCO unit, we were probably bigger than the majority of other diplomatic posts those days. Therefore, it would be quite nice, for example, to get the FCO Bulletin and all that sort of stuff. It took them quite a long time to agree.

Anyway, initially we didn't have any of that. It was all quite primitive. The accommodation was very primitive. The chain of command was not completely clear because nobody else seemed to have a specific idea about what I was supposed to do. So I sat down and wrote something myself and sent it back to London. They said it seemed to be all right. It was nothing terribly startling, but it was mostly things you might write as your objectives in a normal diplomatic post, although it was anything but a normal diplomatic post. Bearing in mind that we were there, in terms of the political relationship, after a gap of twelve years: we hadn't had any representation in Iraq at all. So there were quite a lot of threads to pick up, both in the Basra local context and nationally in Baghdad where we also had a number of FCO people, from Jeremy Greenstock downwards.

Incidentally, there's a very good book by Hilary Synnott, who has sadly since passed on, called *Bad Days in Basra: My Turbulent Time as Britain's Man in Southern Iraq*. He published it not long after he left. It's well worth a look.

DSM: So what did you spend most of your time doing?

HH: Great variety. One of the things was dealing with quite a steady rate of high level of visits by people to see how we were getting on: Prince Charles, Tony Blair, Jack Straw and quite a lot of military dignitaries.

We started off living in what had been the electricity company offices, in very basic conditions, mostly bunks in what had been offices. I was lucky enough to get one by myself. That was upstairs and downstairs were our offices, again pretty basic and crawling with wires which had been put in to produce electricity. Despite being the electricity company, they hadn't been any electricity. It had to be put in by military engineers. We then moved out to the old Saddam palace at the Shatt al-Arab. This was a much more congenial situation on the waterside. He'd never actually lived in it, but he had to have a palace in each city in Iraq. He wouldn't have ever dared to stay overnight in Basra which was very ill disposed to his regime.

DSM: Were they mostly Shiites in Basra?

HH: Yes. They'd been very seriously oppressed over the previous thirty years. We didn't live in the palace. The military were headquartered in the palace from the outset. They built us a whole little town of portakabins which were of Turkish manufacture, strangely, I suppose because it's nearby. These were much more salubrious from a personal point of view and there was even something called an ambassadorial portakabin which was two knocked together, you had your own en-suite and sitting room. Compared with what had gone before it was quite luxurious! But, more importantly, it meant we were co-located with our military counterparts. This was useful because we worked so closely with them. It had been the military, when they were there more or less on their own, who had set up this provincial council which had elected a governor etc. etc. They'd hit on what turned out to be the wrong guy as Governor initially who was a kind of traditional tribal sheikh. He had many positive qualities but being a tribal sheikh, he also had many enemies. He'd had to go and was replaced by a distinguished Iraqi judge who had spent time in exile from the regime. He was my counterpart in a way. My other counterpart was the Brigadier in charge of the brigade accommodated in Basra which looked after Basra Province. Above that, bureaucratically, you had the multinational Division South East, commanded by a Major General who was Hilary Synnott's opposite number. They looked at issues more to do with the region, the four provinces as a whole, whereas I was just Basra, but doing something a little different. There was someone like me in the other three provinces reporting on the political issues.

So by then it had thickened up as a political presence. That was one end of what I used to do. And then I did a lot of what I suppose I would call PR. One of the more optimistic things I



did was to join the Governor in opening the refurbished Basra Tourist Office, bearing in mind that in Basra Province is the alleged site of the Garden of Eden, up at Al-Qurnah where the two rivers join. There is very attractive scenery around. A lot of history to that part of the world. If you go a bit wider than Basra there's Ur of the Chaldees, the ziggurat ... Just up the road is the place where the first recorded literature was produced, the Epic of Gilgamesh. It has a certain contemporary relevance as it is about the hubris of a king who thought that he was as good as the gods: he gets his comeuppance in the end!

There was some more serious stuff to do with institution building, Iraq having been another Soviet style centrally planned, centrally controlled polity. They'd never had any such thing as local government. So the military, when they first came, made a start on creating it. What happened by the time I got there was that you had these trappings of a provincial council and a Governor, looking after the political situation and then a series of people who were technical experts in water, sewage, electricity etc. but who were nominally local representatives of central government ministries. So it was the Ministry of Electricity's man in Basra. Because they were central government people in this new set up, there wasn't any mechanism for the two to communicate and coordinate. One of the things I and my colleagues in the team felt was really important was to join that up. It became particularly important when, for example, a rather splendid American Admiral was put in charge of a huge appropriation of funds authorised by the American Congress – eighteen billion dollars – for reconstruction in Iraq as a whole. We decided we'd pitch for the biggest possible share for Basra, in competition with my colleagues from other provinces. Basra seemed to have a good case, having the main port. But we had to look joined up and effective, particularly as regards our Iraqi counterparts. So we put together something called the Technical Committee, which was simply the technical people and the local politicians. This wasn't rocket science, it was just getting people to talk to each other. That meant that the electricity expert was not only the representative from the central ministry but also the provincial council's electricity man. So when he put forward suggestions for things that might receive funds in his area, there was a local stamp of approval on it. We felt it was quite important that should be an Iraqi stamp. We worked very hard to get an Iraqi identity. I had a little office block where my exiguous team sat and we had the Iraqi flag flying. The same with the regional CPA. So the hope was that when we did leave, we might be able to bequeath it as a going concern to the Iraqis. But it didn't quite work out like that.

I would say in a way that type of activity – the physical infrastructure, that aspect of reconstruction – was handled more at the regional level, though we got involved in it. I had some rather surreal trips out. Once I operated a digging machine for a short time but wasn't very good at it. It was a kind of back loader which was scooping out one of the canals in Basra. The canals were quite a feature in the 1950s and 1960s: Basra had been the Venice of the Gulf and you could still buy postcards of the pleasure boats floating around on these canals. By the time we got there, it was all blocked up, full of sewage and really rather disgusting. But it was felt to be quite a good idea, because of the visible aspects of reconstruction that people could see were positive. It was all done, sadly, because of various constraints, at too slow a pace to forestall some of the rioting and disturbances and major security issues that arose down there. But we tried.

DSM: Did you ever feel your personal safety was threatened?

HH: Oh yes. I travelled everywhere with a team of usually four bodyguards recruited from a security company, a lot of them ex-special forces, in armoured four-wheel-drive vehicles. I was protected as could reasonably be. My view of this was that if you were going to put yourself about a bit, opening tourist offices or whatever it might be, you have to get out of the vehicle. So there were times when it was a bit uneasy. I used to say to the bodyguards that the safest possible thing would be just to sit in my office in the very heavily protected CPA headquarters. But there wasn't much point in my being there if I did that.

We actually managed one time to drive up to Baghdad in a convoy. On the way back, I asked to divert slightly to see a place called Ctesiphon. I think it's probably originally a Persian name. It was a huge fortification, basically built by the Persians to stop Alexander the Great crossing the Tigris. It has the biggest brick built arch in the world. It's a splendid site. Nobody had been there for a long time. My bodyguards were very nice about it, but the slight problem was you had to go through a place called Salman Pak, where Saddam's alleged biological or chemical warfare plants were. Everybody seemed perfectly friendly and waved, although they were a bit startled because they hadn't seen a foreigner for quite a few years. We found Ctesiphon. Wonderful. This great big arch and the Persian type façade. Very helpfully, there was a football game going on at the foot of these walls which gave a sense of scale for the photographs of just how big this thing was. As we came back past the football game, I wanted to do something to break the ice, so I raised my arm in the air and shouted, "Manchester United!". I got a huge cheer and the whole thing dissolved into great

friendliness. As we walked back to the car, one of the security team said to me, “You took a risk there, boss.” I asked him why and he replied, “What if they’d been Arsenal supporters?”

So there was quite a lot of travelling about. We did as much as we could. The point was to be seen about. The Coalition had to be seen to be doing something useful and positive. The VIP visits of course helped quite a lot, although they didn’t come out always as exactly as planned.

DSM: Presumably, the amount of planning that can go into a VIP visit to an area that is not wholly secure without secure communications is minimal?

HH: That’s true. Of course our great asset there was having the military because they get communications, they can do all this at the drop of a hat. Prince Charles, for example, was really the guest of the military because he came in his military uniform as Colonel in Chief of whichever regiment it is, although he did come across to the CPA building to talk to us as well and met the Governor and so on. For the Tony Blair visit, I got a slightly panicky phone call from one of his entourage. They were in a helicopter at the time, flying over Jerusalem and the call was patched through to me on my mobile phone. The Prime Minister was coming the following day and would be meeting the Iraqi Governor. They were conscious of domestic opinion at home and thought it would be really good if the Governor could say something very positive about the Coalition completely spontaneously. Being a loyal civil servant, I called the Governor’s very nice aide – who sadly was later murdered after our departure – and passed this on. So when we got to it, this rather nice press opportunity with the Governor and the Prime Minister on the terrace of the old palace overlooking the rather picturesque Shatt al-Arab with its palm trees and things, the Governor duly did his stuff. And as he spoke, there was what they call top cover, a British military helicopter overhead, making so much noise so directly overhead that none of the press could pick up anything of what the Governor said. The best laid plans ...

DSM: How long were you there?

HH: Therein lies a bit of a tale. The deal was supposed to be six months, September 03 to March 04, with the expectation for most of that time that the CPA itself would go on for another eighteen months or so afterwards. Towards the end of that time, though, they started talking to me about an extension, which I wasn’t very keen on. What then happened, as you may remember, is that Bremer – well, the US administration but mainly at Bremer’s initiative

– brought the date of handing over from the CPA to an Iraqi government forward by a year. This made the windup date the end of June 2004. So the Office then asked me to stay on for that extra three months, which seemed to me reasonable. So I said yes and was there for nine months, in a situation which – in some ways – got progressively worse in terms of the security environment, for example. There had been a rather bad summer before I got there with rioting in the streets and a nasty attack on military police in the next-door province, Al Amarah, where we lost six military police to the so called Mahdi army, run by a rogue cleric called Muqtada al-Sadr who is still very much part of the political system there. He was the scion of a very highly respected Shia Muslim clerical family, but himself a thug. He had one of the other imams murdered. He decided he was going to have a go at the Coalition, despite the fact that locally the Coalition's activity was seen as having liberated the Shia. He didn't see it that way and his Iranian masters probably encouraged him not to see it that way. Democracy in the next-door country was not something they really wanted.

So I had a definite end date. The next thing was discussion about what was going to happen to me next. I wasn't approaching official retirement age by any means. I had thought there was an unspoken agreement that I could bid for whatever posting I liked. I had these visions of a nice, touristically attractive place in Europe or whatever, but again I had very little hope that it would actually happen. The person who had given me these rather vaguely worded undertakings had by then posted himself somewhere else. That has happened to me so many times in my career, so I couldn't really be surprised.

The then Director of Personnel came out. He said that there was a bulge at my level, with too many chiefs and not enough wigwams to put them in. They were getting rid of people and downgrading posts and all sorts of other things. Because of these objectives, there was a fairly generous early retirement scheme and I was welcome to bid for it. Which I did, at the age of 55. I retired officially at the end of 2004, when I was 56. It wasn't a bad deal, because they grossed you up, in pension terms, as if you had retired at 60. There was nothing either in what might have been regarded professionally as my field of eligibility i.e. the Arab world, because you then move on from places like Damascus and Iraq to the high-powered places like Saudi and Egypt, or a nice place in Europe for which there would be many bidders qualified in language and other terms much better than I.

So it was a sensible thing to do, on both sides. It was perfectly amicable. I haven't regretted it for a minute because I find myself doing a whole range of quite interesting, if not

financially terribly rewarding, things that I have enjoyed doing. No regrets. It wasn't exactly the way I had envisaged my career coming to an end with my official Residence as a Turkish portakabin. But people have had a lot worse.

DSM: Fascinating. Are there any observations you want to make about the FCO before we finish?

HH: Not really. Periodically people come to me for advice when their son or daughter is thinking of applying to the Foreign Office. Or a young student from my old college rings up. I find it quite difficult, because from everything I hear from ex-colleagues and those who are still in it, the Office has changed a lot over the years since I left. In particular, it's changed so much since I applied for it, that it's quite difficult to advise people. What I would say is that, personally anyway, for all the things I found broadly negative about it in terms of disruption to family life and schooling and not seeing enough of your kids and occasionally being in a little bit of danger (probably a more relevant hazard these days), if I was asked whether I do it all again, I would say probably yes, because of the things I feel I got out of it, the things that I like doing like travelling and speaking languages and getting to know people. On the other hand, it's not quite the same as saying you should definitely apply. And it's always been very competitive. I don't think that's changed all that much. But the actual systems for application have changed so much, there's not much point my trying to advise on that side of it.

So it's a positive experience. There are not many other things I feel confident I might have been able to do. My manner of departure, though arguably unorthodox, was amicable and perfectly positive.