

50th Anniversary Photography Exhibition



Oman with Britain Celebrations:
Friendship and Cooperation

February 1989



THE ANGLO-OMANI SOCIETY

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Oman with Britain was a festival held throughout Oman during February 1989 to celebrate and further encourage the historical relationship.

It involved educational, economic, cultural and sporting activities, and had as its centrepiece one of the largest all-British Trade Exhibitions of recent years. With over 400 participants from Britain, the festival demonstrated both the breadth and quality of the relationship between the two nations.



To learn more about the festival and its importance to the bilateral relationship between Oman and Britain the Anglo-Omani Society sat down with Patricia and Robert Alston, UK's ambassador to Oman 1986-1990, and Richard Owens, a long-time employee of Inchcape's Middle East Subsidiary Gray Mackenzie & Co Ltd working all across the Gulf. We explore the particulars of the festival along with the wider implications it had in Oman's history of development and its longstanding relationship with the United Kingdom.

Oman with Britian Interview

What were your backgrounds before to arriving in Oman?

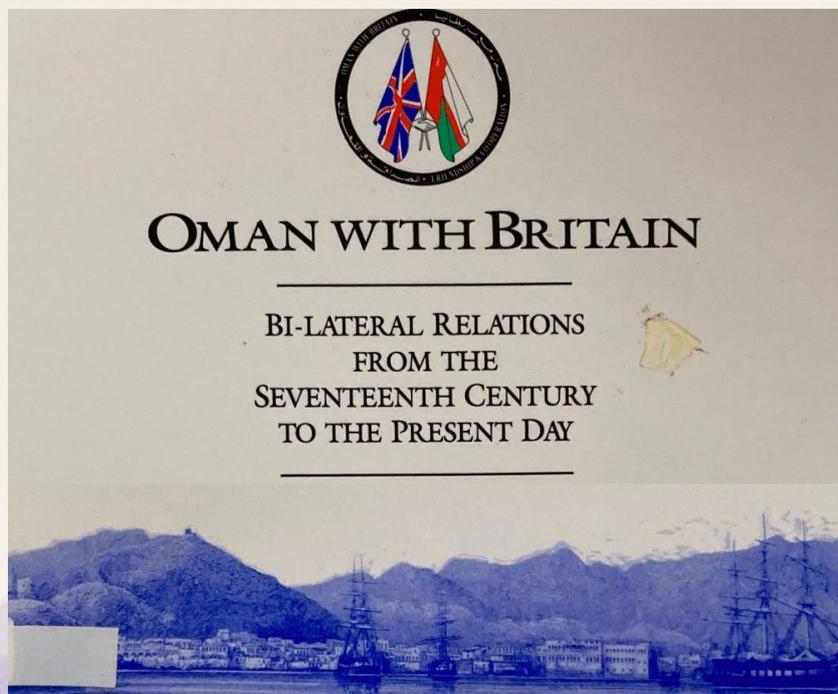
Richard: I first went to Oman in 1973 and I went back briefly in 1978, and then at the end of 1985 I went and spent ten years there. So I spent all my working life in the Gulf, and Oman was definitely the place to be. Essentially I managed to keep my head down and people forgot I was there. I worked for a company that was a trading organisation called Inchcape and we had local companies in the Gulf and the Far East, worldwide. I joined the Middle East bit called Gray Mackenzie and it was mainly involved in shipping and trading, but also involved travel, consumer good, oil fields supply. Each area in the Gulf was slightly different but I spent my whole working life in the Gulf.

Robert: Unlike most British ambassadors I was not, and am not, an Arabist. I was in fact a Farsi speaker and I served in Afghanistan and Iran, so it was a very pleasant surprise to be appointed in 1986 as ambassador to Oman. It was unexpected and has been a huge influence in our lives ever since.

What was the background for Oman with Britain?

Robert: We arrived in 1986, nearly two decades from the beginning of the development of modern Oman. I think it seemed an appropriate moment to refocus the British relationships, which, still had a military dimension but had obviously expanded with the growth of a whole range of other activities. One of the things that we did was to promote a publication, *Oman with Britain: Bilateral Relations from the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day*, which was the first systematic look at the history of Britain relations with Oman from the seventeenth century onwards. This has been something I have been involved in since; I am not sure if you have seen the book Stuart Laing and I did called *Unshook till the End of Time*, which is a much-amplified version of the first booklet.

So it seemed a good time to refocus the relationship: (A) to look backwards and show its history and how Oman developed outwards with the growth of the modern state, and (B) to look forward. A lot of what we did focused on young people hoping to engage them in future relations as I think it did. And having got the Foreign Office to agree in principle that it was an interesting idea, I then talked to HM Sultan Qaboos about it and he embraced it with enthusiasm; he a lot of thoughts of his own including the choice of name 'Oman with Britain', that was his choice.



Patricia: Yes, we had 'Britain with Oman' and he turned it around.

Robert: Yes, he was insistent that Oman should come first but also rather importantly I think the 'with' rather than 'and' was very much his choice of emphasis. And so with that blessing, we got underway with organising it.

What was it like organising the festival?

Richard: Every three or four weeks we used to have a meeting primarily held at the embassy with the organising committee. Jobs were doled out depending on one's abilities and area of expertise. That started in the middle of the previous year, 1988, there was quite a long gestation period. There had to be quite a lot of liaison with the UK end and things often took quite a long time with us changing, modifying, and improving things as we worked. Everything eventually culminated in February 1989.

Robert: It is worth saying that the committee was mainly people on the ground, based locally, but the sponsors were a wide range from both countries. HH Sayyid Assad sponsored the publication that I mentioned, and Qais Al Zawawi and Dr Omar Al Zawawi are sponsors as well. But overall seventy-five sponsors, both Omani and British, were secured.

Patricia: The other thing to note is that it was much longer than a week. It was nearly three weeks to my memory. Because not only were there events held across Muscat, it went outside Muscat across different parts of Oman. It went to Nizwa, Sohar, and Salalah. But of course, the main concentration was in Muscat.

Robert: Yes, and there were a lot of people in both countries that were involved. The central event, because it had a commercial function, was the event at the Exhibition Centre which was an all-British trade exhibition that had the support of Margaret Thatcher, then Prime Minister, who had visited Muscat the previous summer. The exhibition itself was both a trade fair with a wide range of participants including quite a prominent participation from the department store Harrods that had more or less built an entire shop in the exhibition centre. But also a range of joint craft events and things of that nature.

Richard: The exhibition itself ran for about a week to ten days. It was officially opened with a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Monday 20 February with Sayyid Faisal bin Ali alongside the Duke of Kent and the first day was set aside for commercial people. After this first day, it was then opened to the public thereafter. I think from there the core element lasted for about a week. It is worth noting also that the exhibition centre was quite new, and while 'Oman with Britain' was not the first event held there it was a very early one.

Robert: I think the exhibition centre, and all the events, were events on two levels: there was serious business import and then it was meant to be an opportunity for a much wider spread of Omani society to attend the activities and see what was going on. As I recall it was all very jolly.

Patricia: Yes, and I think in the usual way they grew as more people got to hear about it.

Richard: The newspaper reckons that about 60,000 people attended the exhibition centre.

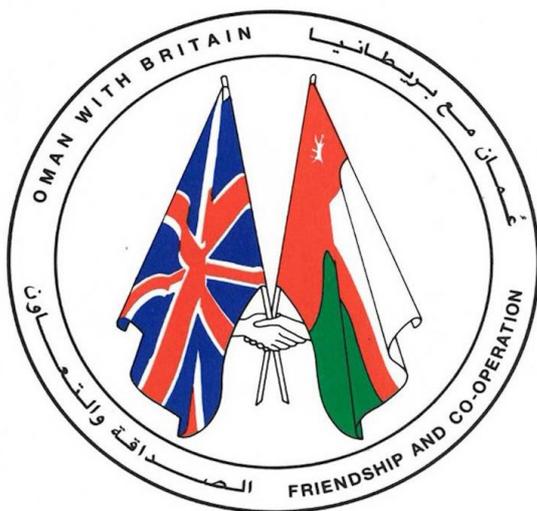


What other activities were part of the festival?

Patricia: Some of the other activities were football, boxing and wrestling; the wrestling I think was held at the Al Falaj hotel and we had the fashion show at the Al Bustan hotel. That was a big event, all very much helped by Dr Omar Al Zawawi who was tremendously supportive and his secretary was always there to help us. One could ring him and he would ring back from anywhere in the world and sort things out, it was incredible.

Robert: Yes, and the football match was held between an under-16 football team from England, so they were mainly junior players with major clubs. They played an Omani youth team as part of a friendly match.

Robert: One of the biggest events during the festival which was not recorded in the Anglo-Omani Society photography exhibition was the fashion show at the Al Bustan. It included quite a number of quite well known London fashion names and was much attended by Omanis. We remained quite friendly for many years after with one of the designers, Lindka Cierach, who later designed the wedding dress of the Duchess of York. That was an interesting window into the London fashion world that was part of the wider exhibition.



The opening ceremony of the exhibition was one of the two formal events involving members of the royal family: Sayyid Faisal Bin Ali Al Said was the minister of culture for Oman at the time, and the then Omani Minister of Commerce, Salim Al Ghazali, played a very prominent role in all of the commercial side of things. The events were also the focal point of the Duke of Kent's visit to Oman. He had previously visited Oman, but his visit in 1989 was very much a formal royal visit for the Oman with Britain exhibition.

As part of the planning of the event, we had devised a logo which was the two flags and the handshake meeting in the middle which was used for various products and publicity. We had the logo on mugs, keyrings, placemats, and various other things all produced around the theme.

Robert: Turning to the buses outside the exhibition centre featured in one of the photographs I remember that they were surplus buses. The idea had been that they would actually take visitors to the exhibition at Seeb from Muscat but the police pointed out that that would put the entrance platforms on the wrong side of the road! So they weren't used for that purpose, but they were around the exhibition centre and they were used to take people on excursions around the capital area. Until fairly recently, one of them was still around parked somewhere in a hotel garden or something, but it seemed to us at the time it was a well-known London symbol. It seemed quite a good way of publicising that Britain was around, as it were.

Patricia: Yes, and I think it was Shell who covered the cost of it and sponsored it, and it ran mostly around Muscat with maybe one or two trips up to Nizwa.

Richard: And interestingly one of the press cuttings from the time wrote that about three thousand children were taken on trips around on the buses. And the buses came complete with drivers, they had two rather jolly drivers as I remember.



A booming market for British manufacturers

Britain has consistently enjoyed a strong trade surplus with Oman. In 1987 it sold exports valued at £249.9 million, and bought Omani goods worth £49.4 million.

In the first 10 months of 1988, the latest period for which figures are available, British exports were up to £201.6 million - valued somewhat by an order for the Sultan's yacht - while British imports from Oman had risen to £19.3 million.

Britain's peak trading year with Oman was 1985, when exports totalled £689.5 million and imports from Oman £69 million.

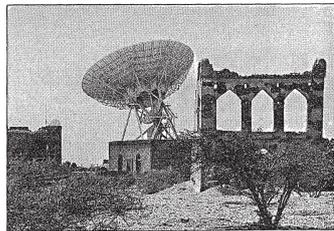
Reflecting the nature of the economic development of Oman, and the on-going need to replace and maintain previously supplied equipment, British exports are dominated by machinery and transport equipment, which in the January-October period of 1988 totalled £172 million.

The next British category of any significance was miscellaneous manufactured articles (£56.5 million), followed by chemicals and related products (£15.4 million) and beverages and tobacco (£9.6 million).

Oman is Britain's eighth largest market in the Middle East, and Britain is Oman's largest supplier among the members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

In the Gulf as a whole, Japan remains the largest single exporter, with a 17.3 per cent share of the cake in 1987, followed by Britain's 15.6 per cent.

According to economists at the Bahrain-based Gulf Inter-



Reaching for the sky: imported technology at the Omani earth satellite station at Al Hajar

national Bank, Japanese products account for 70 per cent of the Gulf area's electronics market, 80 per cent of the vehicles market, and more than 50 per cent of the machinery and metal product markets.

In Oman, on the other hand, Britain holds first place with an estimated 25.6 per cent share of the cake, followed by Japan (14.9 per cent). The United States and West Germany come next with an equal share of around 11 per cent.

Tenders take the long-term view that Oman's economic base will in due course be successfully shifted away from oil. Demand remains strong for advanced medical and testing equip-

ment and technology, and in the field of educational aids. The Omani government is placing on agriculture, water conservation, drainage and sewerage, and on the faster development of fisheries potential, presents other trading opportunities.

Calculations of gross per capita income vary widely depending on source. They range from a recent \$5,780 estimate by British economists in an International Monetary Fund figure of \$7,770. But there is no doubt that, with a steady growth rate, an increasing number of Omanis have money to spend on houses and leisure activities.

Japanese and other foreign cars now travel along paths where camels once trod. Sport and recreation activities have

long played a part in the average Omani's life. Marine and aquatic products should remain growth markets. And women are playing a more evident role in Oman's public life than in most other Arab countries.

Robert Atkin, the British Ambassador to Oman, says that while no immediate trade expansion between Britain and Oman is expected, and while the Omani will not be measured by immediate faster order books, the trade will steadily increase. He says that the already strong links that exist between the two countries, and expect that they stay connected for the decades ahead.

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Following the trade routes



The Department of Trade and Industry, in association with the Bahrain Chamber of Commerce, is staging until February 24 the Omani with Britain trade and cultural exhibition, the biggest British trade fair in the Middle East for some time. It will cost £1 million to put on, and has received Omani backing. The Duke of Kent will attend the official opening on

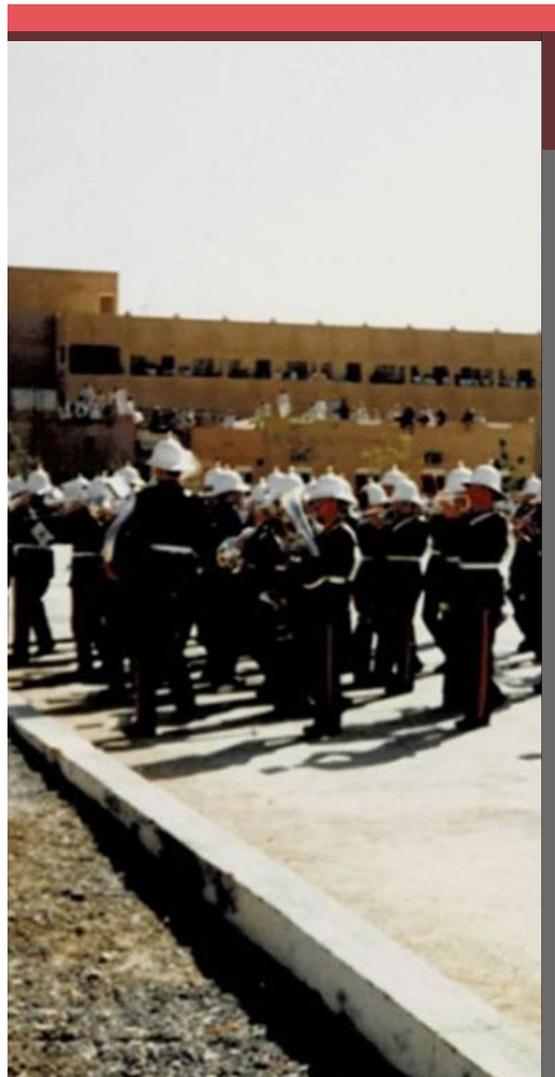
February 20 at the Soob exhibition Centre, Muscat. Robert Atkin, the British Ambassador in Oman, says that because the bulk of Oman's infrastructure development is now in place the next steps in British-Omani co-operation depend on developing new markets, new products, and new ideas. He warns against being complacent simply because

British feet have trod in the trading sands of Arabia for centuries. In his view, Oman is a market which should not be ignored. The 60-plus British firms taking part in the Omani week include Shell and BP, British Telecom, De La Rue, Patis, Hawker Siddeley, P & O, Henry, Jaguar and Rolls-Royce, BHS, Thross EMI, and Harrods.

Patricia: I remember our children had flown out to Muscat during that time and at one point the buses picked up all the models for the fashion show and were driving them to the Al Bustan hotel. Somehow our children and I managed to get onto the route the bus was taking before it had arrived and as it was coming down the road we put out our hand as if we were at a bus stop and we managed to get on with all these glamorous girls. When the bus tipped over the last hill on its way and revealed that beautiful scene from the top of the hill of the Al Bustan at the bottom. It was a really magical moment.

Robert: Yes, we mentioned that in addition to the capital area there were events in Sohar, Salalah, and Nizwa. While we couldn't be everywhere at the same time to attend everything we did watch a football match and the Marines in Nizwa.

The marines also did another marching parade at the formal closing of the events held at the Al Bustan. That one was done together with Omani military units and that was attended on behalf of HM Sultan Qaboos by Sayyid Thuwaini bin Shihab Al Said as the Sultan's Special Representative. This made up one of the three main highlights held at the Al Bustan: the fashion show, a musical concert, and this final event of the Royal Marines.



What part did music play in the festival?

Robert: Around the time Richard and we arrived, I think about 1985, HM Sultan Qaboos decided he would like to create a western-style symphony orchestra. There was already quite a tradition of military music; military bands and pipe bands. But, there was very little western music so some musicians from Britain were recruited and they literally went out into the countryside trying to identify in elementary ways young people who had a sense of sound.

Patricia: Yes, they looked to see if they had the embouchure for a trumpet and if they could tap out a rhythm on their knees from listening. If they had that, they were in!

Robert: And most of these Omani musicians were teenagers who were brought into Muscat in 1985 and a group of music teachers were brought in to teach them from scratch. First of all, teaching them to play the individual instruments and then gradually developing a repertoire of symphonic music. By the end of our time in Oman, they were quite sophisticated and skilled.



One of the occasions they were invited to play was at HM Sultan Qaboos's New Year's Eve reception which would have been difficult for musicians of any calibre because it took place outdoors, quite often on a quite moist night. I remember they had just finished playing *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* and the program said that the next item was going to be Schubert's unfinished symphony and His Majesty looked at his watch and said "I think we might leave the symphony unfinished for next year". These poor musicians who were trying to keep their instruments in tune were given an opportunity for rest. But they were already quite a sophisticated group, so we brought in a group of young musicians from one of the London music schools to do a concert with them and that is what was photographed.

What legacy do you think Oman with Britain had?

Richard: I think we should remember the economic aspect of the event which started off as a roundtable and then ended up as the Oman British Friendship Association. This I think was one of the lasting legacies of Oman with Britain which still exists, albeit in a slightly different format. That was really the kicking off point.

Robert: The Oman British Friendship Association was always meant to be a body with a presence at both ends with senior business figures. The name itself again was approved by the Sultan, subsequently, the British end has renamed itself the Oman British Business Council which is one of the key bilateral groups today. And indeed, as Richard said, the Friendship association had formally organised itself by the time we left Muscat which was almost exactly a year after Oman with Britain. So from the initial roundtable, we went directly into forming a formal institution and structure for bilateral business relations.

Patricia: When I think about the whole festival, to me it was a celebration of exactly what the name suggested: Oman with Britain.

Richard: I think that just as a final point, that exhibition and the surrounding events set the benchmark for international bilateral exhibitions in Oman. Anyone who came in after would have had to have done better than the British, we set the standard.



Photo Credits:

- "Oman with Britain- Friendship and Cooperation (logo)". <https://www.ao-soc.org/50th-anniversary/1980s>
- "HH Sayyid Feisal bin Ali and HRH The Duke of Kent open the major exhibition celebrating Oman with Britain" <https://www.ao-soc.org/50th-anniversary/1980s>
- "A New Bus Route for Muscat" <https://www.ao-soc.org/50th-anniversary/1980s>
- "OIB Exhibition Stand" <https://www.ao-soc.org/50th-anniversary/1980s>
- "Royal Marine Band Display at Nizwa" <https://www.ao-soc.org/50th-anniversary/1980s>
- "Young Omani and British Musicians Play During the Festival" <https://www.ao-soc.org/50th-anniversary/1980s>

- "HRH the Princess of Wales surrounded by students during her visit to Sultan Qaboos University" In: Oman with Britain: Bilateral Relations from the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day.
- "Britain and Oman during the Dhofar War" In: Oman with Britain: Bilateral Relations from the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day.
- "Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra" In: Oman with Britain: Bilateral Relations from the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day.
- "The Wahiba Sands Project" In: Oman with Britain: Bilateral Relations from the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day.