

Transcript: Friends of the Basra Museum A Conversation with Sir Terence Clark

Mehiyar 0:00 Welcome to the Nahrein Network podcast series. Today we're with Sir Terence Clark, former ambassador to Iraq and former head of the Board of Trustees of the Friends of Basra Museum. Hello,

Terence Clark 0:11 Hello, and thank you for inviting me to contribute to this series of podcasts.

Mehiyar 0:17 You were a diplomat in the late 80s. In Iraq,

Terence Clark 0:20 yes, from 85 to the end of 89.

Mehiyar 0:23 And and since then, I mean, you've been interested in Iraq been able to work with the Friends of Basra Museum?

Terence Clark 0:29 Yes. Well, before that I helped to set up with the former Iraqi ambassador to the UK, Dr. Salah Shiekhly, a British Iraqi Friendship Society, in the UK. We both saw this as something missing in the relationship between the two countries. And we set up this organization with a view to encouraging contacts across a wide range. But sadly, it lasted for only about three or four years, I think, largely because we had great ambitions, but support, particularly from the Iraqi British community was sadly lacking. It was very difficult to raise sufficient funds to carry out the range of activities that we envisaged

Mehiyar 1:31 And this was obviously with a view to strengthening partnerships and strengthening relations between the two countries in many different fields.

Terence Clark 1:38 Well, we wanted to do something that was, if you like unofficial, outside, formal government governmental contacts. And as I say, initially, for the first two or three years, it was extremely successful. We organized some really good events, but without the steady cash flow that you need for such societies, it was doomed to failure in the end. Well, I found another way to come to maintain my interest in Iraq, through the Friends of the Basra museum. And this was a project which certainly when I first became engaged in it, and in 2010, I never realized it would take so long to come to complete fruition. The project was already initiated in 2008, when the British army was still in occupation in the south of Iraq, but based mainly in Basra. When the idea came about, that we the British, should leave some legacy of the occupation. And we thought that this, the best field for such a legacy was in the field of archaeology and history. Because, first of all,

Britain has a centuries long, special connection with Basra going back to the 17th century and the East India Company.

Mehiyar 3:29 This is a trade and a cultural relationship to Basra.

Terence Clark 3:33 Trade, cultural and political because the first diplomatic representatives to Turkish Arabia as the area of the three wilayats of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra, were called during the Ottoman occupation, the first diplomatic representation was in Basra, not Baghdad. So we had really for like four centuries, a very special connection with Basra. So when this idea began to take shape, that we should look at some means of developing a special connection in the field of archaeology and history a small group of specialists went out in 2008 to have a look at the possibilities and came up with the idea of establishing a new museum in Basra. They thought this was the best option and the British army had already established themselves in one of Saddam Hussein's former palaces, the so called Lakeside Palace by the Shatt-Al-Arab where the army had had some accommodation, canteen facilities for a while. So the army knew of the possibilities of the building. When they suggested that this might be a suitable building for a museum.

Mehiyar 5:35 There was an initial decision not to totally change the building and use it also to have it as a heritage site. Given the fact that it had inscriptions from the time of Saddam.

Terence Clark 5:47 There were his initials in Arabic calligraphy. Sa Ha had appeared carved in wood work in a number of places throughout the building. But no, it was not certainly in the back of our minds at the time, that we should try to preserve that aspect of Iraq's heritage. No, we were looking rather to the longer term, far reaching in the back into the history of Iraq, to establish a state of the art museum presenting the narrative of southern Iraq's history.

Mehiyar 6:33 This was a new building, but obviously, Basra had previously a museum.

Terence Clark 6:37 Certainly it had had, indeed, the Basra museum had been established in the former Greek consulate in Basra, in an old type of building with a Shanashel, you know, but it was in a part of the town which was no longer very secure for precious objects, and the building itself had suffered from depredation. So it was decided that the new museum should be in a new building in a different place. This idea, as I say, it was developed in Basra by the British army. Some experts went out, confirmed this as a suitable site, and a suitable project. This project was then put to the British Museum as a possible backer and discuss further with the new British general who was going out to command of forces in southern Iraq. There was lots of enthusiasm. So we then put this project to the Basra authorities were, again, certainly from on the part of the then director of the Basra museum, Qahtan al Abeed, it was welcomed as something to be supported from the Iraqi side. This was to be a museum covering the history of ancient Iraq, but also

including Basra heritage, with objects to be supplied by the National Museum in Baghdad. And some of those objects had been looted and recovered.

Mehiyar 8:35 And those objects were from Basra itself?

Terence Clark 8:37 Some were from Basra, some from other museums, it took a process of something like what almost 10 years to then go from the scoping visit, which I and John Curtis from the then British Museum, we made to Basra. John Curtis with his expert eye, saw it immediately, sort of museum the shape and design layout of the museum lent itself to being a museum. We then had to look at how to raise the money because although the building had come pretty well through all the tumultuous events, 2003 and period afterwards, it still needed to be secured against the elements and would need various installations to make it suitable for a museum. So we decided to form here, a committee of people interested in Iraq. And in this particular project. We then looked at how to raise the money, we decided to set up a charity. We got donations from a number of British companies active in Iraq, notably BP. And we were promised funds from the Iraqi side by the Basra Regional Council. So we thought we could go ahead. We needed to appoint civil engineers to, to scope the work, oversee it, and see it through. And we found a British company working in Basra capable of doing that. We looked at local contractors to carry out the work and found an excellent Basrawi company to do the work. And then we came to a couple of major hitches, first of all, although the Basra and Baghdad authorities had agreed that the building should be allocated to the project, I think it was in about 2007, we discovered that the Basra Investment Authority had moved into the building.

Mehiyar 11:22 This is the provincial Investment Committee. And on what authority did they move?

Terence Clark 11:28 Well, they must have had that authority from from Basra town. But anyway, although the building had already been allocated, the Basra Investment Authority moved in and occupied it. So the project had to mark time for I think, just over a year.

Mehiyar 11:51 And that took you by surprise when they moved in.

Terence Clark 11:53 Yes it did, completely, yes. So we had to wait until they found alternative offices. And eventually they did and moved out. The second major hitch was there was a kind of hiatus in government in Baghdad, there'd been fresh elections. But it'd been proved difficult to form the government. There was no budget. And the money that had been promised to us simply was not forthcoming. At the same time, the oil price collapsed again. And the oil revenue wasn't there to back up the budget. So we were then faced with a dreadful dilemma. We had raised in this country about 350,000 pounds, which was insufficient for the project as a whole. Should we drop the idea? Or should we go ahead, piecemeal? We put it to the authorities in Baghdad, in Baghdad and Basra. And we

agreed with them that we should secure the building against the elements and refurbish one gallery to be called the Basra gallery to start with, then, if further funds were forthcoming, we could proceed with the other three galleries and office accommodation. So on that basis, we began, as I said, we had civil engineers and the local contractor doing the work. We ordered display cases from, actually from Germany. Slowly slowly. It took time, but everything takes time in Iraq, you know that, we slowly got to 2016. And we could see that it would be possible to open the first gallery with an exhibition. It was an exhibition to cover the history of of Basra. And in September 2016, that gallery was opened. We had something like 600 people present. I mean, it was a big event for Basra. And when you think against the background of Iraqi history of the period, it was a huge success. I mean, to have achieved that and against all the difficulties, political, economic of the time. Around that time in 2016, the British government decided to establish The Cultural Protection Fund with a fund of some 30 million pounds and encouraged people in areas where conflicts had affected the cultural history of the countries involved to bid for funds in that field of archaeology, history, culture, so we put in a bid. And we were one of I think of only seven successful applicants, which gave us enough funds to do the other three galleries. Now, there are four galleries, there are now four galleries, okay. And there was a generous, anonymous donor that contributed enough money for us to adapt one room as an education centre. And this is very important, I can't stress it too much, aspect of the new museum, the outreach to involve people as much as possible from the locality and wider field, of course, in the narrative of Iraq's history. I mean, we from the British side, also wanted to ensure that there was some tangible benefit from our presence in southern Iraq. And that we were interested, we wanted to show our interest in the redevelopment of Iraq in the post-Saddam era. I think, on the Iraqi side, there was also a political imperative. Because, sadly, I think, for the last couple of decades, outside influences have been encouraging the notion that the history of the area started with Islam, as we have seen, through the terrible damage, which Islamic State, so called, wreaked on many aspects of Iraq's ancient heritage, on the grounds that it was pre-Islamic, ungodly, and should be obliterated. I think it was a political imperative to show to particularly young Iraqis who had grown up in this period that Iraq had a long and ancient history of which to be proud. After we obtained this tranche of money from the Cultural Protection Fund, we were encouraged to put in another bid, which we did, and we were successful. And with that money, we have established a library, it's not quite finished, but will be finished shortly. It will be equipped with many books from the former British School of Archaeology in Iraq, which was established by Gertrude Bell in the early 1920s. And this library will, with the education centre perform the role of a kind of hub for people to come and sit and study. The second part of this outreach is of course, to train the people to to carry through this narrative we have with the Friends of the Museum, have, are about to, rather, put in a bid for further funds to the Cultural Protection Fund. And we hoped if we're successful, that we shall be able to make this library education centre work by training, local Basrawis to operate the center. So we've already started some training courses for museum staff in managing the museum and curating the Museum in the preservation side of archaeology. And we hope as I say, we'll get some more funds to push that training further forward.

Mehiyar 20:08 And then they might I heard that there might be a cafe in the museum that could help sustain the work of the museum itself.

Terence Clark 20:16 Yes. This is an idea which the Basra museum are keen on. I'm not quite sure the location, they were talking about putting the cafe on the roof. I'm not sure that's such a good idea. But somewhere in the grounds, because, as you may know, the Basra authorities are keen on making this whole area around the museum into a kind of cultural park with other museums.

Mehiyar 20:51 I wish you luck with your future work and engagement with the country Iraq, Sir Terence Clark. This has been a pleasure speaking with you,

Terence Clark 20:58 Thank you for the invitation. And I shall certainly continue as a trustee of the Friends of the Basra Museum.