

SAUDI-BRITISH SOCIETY

THE RAWABI HOLDING AWARDS 2015

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY ANDREW MEAD

Sheikh Abdulaziz, I really should begin with a few words of thanks to you for your generosity and support of the Saudi British Society. To find myself worthy of consideration is actually astonishing and to join the very short list of Rawabi prize winners is truly an honour.

So thank you Sir.

After Sherard had contacted me to advise me of this award, Ionis suggested that I'd be expected to make a short speech. Remember she said it's meant to be an evening for entertainment and not education! I am also acutely aware that whilst outside of this room I might be regarded as something of a Saudi specialist, here tonight, amongst such fine company I know that there is very little point in giving you a lecture about Saudi Arabia.

So instead I'm going to tell you a little bit about me. Like so many others I first went to Saudi Arabia hoping to make my fortune.

Arriving in Jeddah about 35 years ago I was met off the plane, taken through a side door at the Airport and driven to an expat housing compound where they were having a party. My passport and luggage followed a couple of hours later.

My first brush with Wasta.

To begin with, I was sent to Taif to negotiate supplies to a Saudi/French contractor who had been given the job of building houses for the National Guard. I'd been taught a few words of Arabic and with my schoolboy French I set about trying to talk to a bunch of people who were then digging holes in the ground.

A daily round of "qui est l'acheteur senior" or "Min Fadlak, aya tarik ella moudir al am" got me nowhere, but after about six weeks of persevering with my Afwans & Shukrans, one thobed gentleman said to me in perfect English:

“Actually old boy, we’ve thoroughly enjoyed your attempts to communicate but if we’re ever going to do any business it better be in English.” Turned out he’d been educated in the UK. When I wasn’t working I learnt how to Scuba Dive... I learnt how to drive the sand dunes... At weekends we would camp on Showaiba beach or at the extinct volcanoes north of Madinah. I visited places like the Wahba crater. I drove to places like Abha, Baha, Najran, places I’d never seen on a map let alone thought I’d come to know and love.

Anyone who has not seen the night sky from a camp bed whilst lying inside the mouth of an extinct volcano or seen the green valleys of the Asir in the rain really should add visits to their bucket list.

The Ambassador at the time was a certain Sir James Craig. In his recollections, Sir James Craig recalls that his enterprising Secretary spoke to the agent of one of the big shipping firms about the possibility of departure by Sea. The Agent, a chap called Dick Denning, sadly passed on now, set about fixing that trip with P&O. Dick was on the committee of something called the British Businessman’s Luncheon Group, as was I, and a group of us arranged for a couple of coaches to take revellers into the port, and have a bit of a party on board to give Sir James a proper send off. As always the logistics gave us quite a problem. But it was done. And what had been for Sir James no more than a brief moment in his fascinating life turned out to be rather more significant for me.

One of the fellow committee members was David Gore-Booth and again a decade or so later that friendship proved to be more significant for me than I realised at the time.

In March 1995 I found myself assisting the British Embassy at the Partners in Progress exhibition in Jeddah. I was by then modestly computer literate and had been asked to install a mixed bag of software that would help Commercial staff match appropriate UK suppliers to the daily requests they were handling from Saudi companies. This included commercial electronic versions of Kellys, Kompass & Rodan’s Directories and after fifteen years of dealing with the Kingdom a substantial database of my own.

The then President of the Board of Trade, Michael Heseltine, raised a laugh at the show by telling everyone that I should go and find a proper job since ‘his’ Business Links operation would very shortly have all the information any Commercial Officer might require and ‘people’ like me would not be needed.

Luckily for me David Gore-Booth felt differently.

The Embassy had, for many years maintained a list of British Companies with resident representatives in Saudi Arabia. As the list of British Companies dealing with Saudi grew larger it became more and more difficult for Commercial staff to maintain that list. David asked that I combine my information with the Embassy's and publish the result on the Embassy's behalf and so the Saudi British Trade Directory was born.

I'd had no previous publishing experience but had help from Dr Abubakr at the Jeddah Chamber. 20 years ago, desk top publishing was still relatively speaking in its infancy but I was assured by the Doctor that his staff had spellcheckers on their word processors and my notes would be transferred correctly. Good job that we still did some proof reading though. One of the boys had spelt warehouse with an extra H. The spellchecker had autocorrected so that countless distributors were selling their products through whorehouses across the Kingdom.

However, Working on behalf of the Embassy until 2012, I've managed to update and publish that Directory every year. In the 1995 edition of the Directory, Mohammed Bakhressa was listed as the Editor of UK Ltd, the British Embassy magazine. When Mohammed retired the Embassy sought to upgrade the publication and in view of our successful cooperation with the Directory I was asked to assist with a publication then called Enterprise UK. This was primarily a commercial publication promoting UK sources of goods & services. During that time, it was Sir Andrew Green's wife, Jane, who put me in touch with Max Scott who persuaded me to write the Business Travellers Handbook. I also took over the publishing of the RGGB News magazine and the BBG Jeddah Handbook.

In 2002 with Derek Plumbly as Ambassador and Philip Parham as Director of Trade the Embassy magazine was again refocused to carry more of a hearts & minds message and became Kingdom to Kingdom.

During Sherard's time, William Patey's era and that of Tom Philips, the Kingdom to Kingdom publication grew both in size and popularity. As the magazine grew it became more expensive to produce and as well as creating the layouts, and arranging for print, my role became that of fund raiser by selling advertisements to pay for the production. Staff at the Embassy used to joke that I was doing the Embassy's 'dirty work' since they "couldn't possibly be seen to be asking for money" to pay for publications.

As compiler I'd been given exceptional access to the Embassy and many of the outside functions Ambassadors were expected to attend. I would often arrive at meetings and dinner parties armed with my camera in order to get a picture or two for the next publication. In 2007, Sir William arranged for me to travel as part of the official press pack when King Abdullah made his state visit to the UK. I recall that when my attendance at one function was being questioned, Sir William actually responded that I was there as his personal archivist. I wasn't asked for any more identification on that trip.

As a result of what I'd been allowed to do with the Embassy in Saudi, I travelled to Jordan, to Egypt and Iran. I had several years producing the AlForsa magazine for the British Embassy in Oman and over seven years producing the British Embassy magazine in Syria. In 2005 I began what remains a successful cooperation with the Bahrain British Business Forum. Having produced over 100 different publications promoting or celebrating the Saudi British relationship I'm proud that these have been 'Good News' publications. I've been trusted with a level of access that has given me a tremendous insight.

Whilst I have continued with the Directory, I will be publishing the 2015 version shortly, the Embassy magazine has ceased to exist ... but ours (well at least mine) is not to reason why.

So why else am I here.

Having worked alongside the Embassy for many years I had often been asked to assist in some small way with the functions held by the Ambassadors' wives. I'd helped to raise money after the Turkish earthquake in 1999 when Andrew Green was Ambassador. I'd been involved in a small way with Nadia Plumbly and the Art in Arabia exhibition in 2002 and a number of RGGB & community functions all raising funds haphazardly for one thing and another. I'd always felt that if these community events could be better coordinated we might actually achieve better results.

When Sherard & Bridget arrived I was allowed to raise money under the ICING banner. ICING stands for International Children in Need Group. NOT a charity in itself but merely a means to coordinate and direct the efforts of the British community in Riyadh. Our first event, a Cricket Match followed by a buffet supper, raised about SR50,000. By the time Sherard left his posting we'd raised over SR500,000.

During William & Vanessa's time in the residence we were regularly raising half a million in one night. By now we were coordinating efforts by the RGGB, the English Society and the

Welsh Society and others outside the British community became involved. There was one evening when the Swedish Ambassador turned up to an event and not realising that we were raising money for charity he didn't have any cash to buy a raffle ticket. He promptly donated the waistcoat he was wearing which we immediately auctioned and raised SR5,000.

And I hope you noticed I said 'WE' were doing this and not 'I'.

ICING was not a one man show and I was only the coordinator. True, as the only self-employed member of the team I was able and prepared to devote a good deal of my time, but many others have assisted with these Charity efforts and not least in helping to decide how the money we raised was allocated.

What we did was actually quite simple. In seeking out sponsors for our various activities we were able to cover all of the costs in arranging an event however big or small. This meant that we could genuinely state that every riyal donated to attend one of our functions or spent at one of our auctions would go to charity without any deduction for 'administrative' expenses. All of the work done to organize and manage these events was done by volunteers who took no reward. In addition to the funds we were able to donate inside Saudi Arabia to Autism, Handicapped Children and Downs Syndrome, for example, we thought carefully about how we could donate to UK based charities. Our research showed us that donations to worldwide organisations could easily be swallowed up by administration costs and we selected two charities in particular where we felt the money we could donate would make a significant difference. In both cases, we have representatives here this evening and I commend them to you. In the Kids for Kids organisation which assists in Darfur and in the Friends of the Hadramaut, we found that we got a tremendous amount done for the little we raised. Both organisations channel their funds very carefully and very specifically and I'll leave it to Patricia & Shad to tell you more.

ICING's purpose was not only to raise money for those charities we chose to support but also to raise the profile of charity in Saudi Arabia. I'm delighted to tell you for example that one 'Royal' benefactor gave us SR350,000 on one occasion on condition that we DID NOT give it to a specific charity ... since he would be now giving them a similar donation directly on an annual basis.

So here I am today. After 35 years association with the Saudi Arabia I still haven't made my fortune but what a wealth of experiences I've had. I've met people from all walks of life, I've

done things I never expected to do, I've seen parts of the world I did not know existed and what changes I've seen.

I have to tell you that I've enjoyed my time with Saudi Arabia and that I'm quietly proud of the work I've done for the Embassy and with ICING. There's one other thing I'm proud of and that's my four children who are all with me tonight. All of them have been to Saudi Arabia and in my humble opinion, all have benefited from the experience.

Ladies and gentlemen, I feel like I've already taken up too much of your time. I hope I've managed to give something back to the country that has treated me well over 35 years and I hope you can tell that I've enjoyed it. I could talk for hours about the experiences I've had in the Magic Kingdom BUT

There's an Arabic proverb that goes something like

“A man who knows a little, talks a lot ... but a man who knows a lot, says little.”

Sheikh Abdulaziz, members of the Saudi British Society. I'm honoured to have received this award and to be with you this evening.

Thank you.