

Special Feature

The British Embassy in Tehran: Before

The ransacking of the two compounds comprising the British Embassy in Tehran on 29th November has brought back many memories of the 16 months I spent there in



1979/80. The Embassy's modern offices, various staff accommodation and the historic Ambassador's residence are all in the 15 acre downtown compound, lying on the Firdowsi Avenue, the main route for demonstrators coming from the principal mosque on a Friday. Further staff houses lie in the much larger compound about six miles up the hill at Gulhak. This also contains a school, the office and library of the British Institute for Persian Studies and the Commonwealth War Graves cemetery, with 573 identified graves of which 467 are British and the rest from 11 other nations, including 11 Russians.

Built on a Grand Scale...

The residence was built in 1876 to the design of J.W Wild of the South Kensington Museum and under the supervision of a young Royal Engineer officer, at a cost of £8,000, about £530,000 in today's money, a figure which drew criticism in Parliament on the grounds of extravagance. Situated on a site which at that time lay outside the town, it replaced an older crumbling building in the bazaar area. In addition to the main house and houses for staff

including the Legation doctor, there was stabling for 51 horses. The principal rooms are on a grand scale with high ceilings and tall windows. They are furnished to match, with Persian carpets,

large portraits of Queen Victoria and her four successors on the walls of the dining room and a famous and splendid portrait of Fath Ali Shah (1772-1834) the second Qajar Shah of Iran, in the drawing room and a fine library, as well as some other more modern paintings. On the staircase leading up to the bedrooms in the modern wing there is a fresco by Osbert Lancaster of a fictional official in tropical diplomatic uniform, possibly after Lord Curzon.

...Only to be Ransacked

I use the present tense: sadly it seems from reports of the ransacking of both compounds, including the houses of the staff, that some if not all these paintings and certainly those of the Kings and Queens may have been seriously damaged. These are no doubt replaceable but the portrait of Fath Ali is not. I have not heard what other damage there has been, but the Times reported that a visiting party of other Western diplomats was appalled by what they saw.

The Embassy has been host in its 135 year history to two particularly significant events. In 1906 a vast crowd of Persian

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notables numbering between 12,000 and 15,000 was allowed, in accordance with ancient Persian custom, to take refuge in the grounds as part of a civil uprising against the ruling Shah. After three weeks, the Shah gave in and was forced into granting a constitution providing for elections to a parliament.

Witness to World Events

The second occasion was the Tehran Conference in 1943 attended by Roosevelt, Stalin and Churchill, at which they discussed plans for the conduct of the Second World War. The Conference coincided with Winston Churchill's birthday and the leaders of the US and Soviet delegations were entertained to dinner in the Residence. It is said that on entering the dining room, Stalin, seeing the portraits of the bearded George V and Edward VII, immediately took umbrage, having mistaken one of them for the Czar. In more recent times our downtown Embassy was attacked on 5th November 1978 (nothing, I think, to do with Guy Fawkes) and again on the same day in 1979, the day after the American Embassy had been occupied. In the first

of these, the wing of the modern office block housing the commercial section was set on fire and much damage was caused. On the second after searching the buildings, perhaps for Americans who might have taken refuge with us (there were in fact three, but in the upper compound), the invading mob left: they caused no damage and took nothing, bar a pair of boots. In both cases the staff although intimidated were not physically molested.

What Now?

Sadly, according to reports, this was not the case in the latest invasion. In theory the Iranian Government should pay compensation for the damage done, as the UK did for the repair of the Iranian Embassy in London after the release by the SAS of hostages held there in April 1980, but I should guess that there is little chance of that. I have read a report that some in Iran are talking of turning the principal compound into a museum. The worry must be that they will sequester, illegally, our two properties, without compensation.

Sir John Graham

Fantastic Fundraising Total Congratulations to All in the Wychwoods!

You will be pleased to know that between Bonfire Night and Christmas day 2011, Shipton, Milton, Lyneham and Ascott raised an amazing **£17,929** for charity!

From Fireworks to Lawrence Home Nursing Team coffee mornings and from 'Carols around the Tree' to the Shipton Charity Ball, this is an extraordinary achievement.

Many other people have quietly been making their own contributions during the

year, for example it seems incredible that Joanna and David van de Poll accumulated pounds and pennies from their Bruern Road table, amounting to £792!

Whilst the press continues to talk about the Big Society, the Wychwoods are quietly making it happen.

A huge thanks to all the amazing volunteers, fundraisers, helpers and supporters, who make our community so special. See page 63 for more details.