

THE PERSIAN GULF

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THE stamps of India used in the Persian Gulf ports have long been collected by the select band of "India Used Abroad" specialists, and yet, how many collectors could answer if asked why Indian stamps should have been used in these parts? What were we doing there anyway? How did we come to be there at all? Or, why did certain of the territories bordering the Gulf come under British protection?

These articles are designed to answer these questions, because the more information that is available to a collector about the countries he collects, the more interesting does the collection become. Unless one does know the whys and wherefores of the various issues, one is apt to miss a lot of pleasure in searching for the various cancellations used.

The Persian Gulf, or, as it is better known to master mariners, "The Gulf", must be the earliest stretch of water to have been navigated. Bordering, as it does on the North, the ancient lands of the Old Testament, it is reasonable to suppose that man's first venture on the unknown water was in a sheltered arm of the Gulf. Certain it is that its written history goes back to the earliest historic times. Geographically, the Gulf runs from the mouth of the Shatt-el-Arab, in the North, to the Strait of Ormuz in the South, a distance of some 500 miles away, where it joins the Gulf of Oman. Its breadth varies from 180 miles at its widest point to 29 miles in the Strait. It is comparatively shallow, being for the most part between 40 and 50 fathoms deep; the greatest depth lying much nearer to the Persian side, which probably explains why there are more ports on that side than on the Arabian coast.

Among the earliest recorded voyages up the Gulf was that of Alexander's general, Nearchus, who in 326-325 B.C. successfully sailed from the Indus to the Euphrates. This voyage was important, as it opened up a communication between Europe and India, hitherto virtually unknown, which was to bear fruit in the years ahead.

Roman traders, faced with hostile Powers in Mesopotamia, developed the alternative routes to the East which ran through the Red Sea from Egypt, and the Gulf route lay little used until the early centuries of the Christian Era, when Arab and Persian mariners and explorers extended the trade routes of the Gulf, and as commerce grew between the Eastern countries and the European nations it became a more important trade artery between East and West. It was not, however, until the discovery in 1498, by Vasco da Gama, of the route to India via the Cape, that a European nation arrived on the actual scene.

The Portuguese obtained a firm footing in the Gulf in the early years of the sixteenth century, when Albuquerque attacked and occupied Hormuz, in the Strait of Ormuz, together with a number of towns on the coast of Oman. During the rest of the century the Portuguese strengthened their hold on the trade of the Gulf, and until their explosion in 1622 were the principal trading nation in these parts.

In 1587 a Portuguese vessel, the *St. Philip*, was captured by Drake, and amongst the ship's papers was one which gave a glowing account of the Indian trade; this, on being transmitted to England, may possibly have had something to do with the formation of the East India Company, for Elizabeth's policy was to get all possible openings for trade diverted into English hands. At any rate the East India Company came into being in 1600, and it is presumed that the London merchants immediately made plans to get their share of the riches of India.

Between the years 1600 and 1612 no less than twelve vessels were despatched by the Company, and in the latter year a certain Thomas Best obtained a trading agreement from the rulers of Surat, near Bombay, and established a factory there.

In 1614 it was decided to extend the Company's trade, if possible, to Persia, and emissaries were despatched to examine the towns on the Persian side of the Gulf, and report on their suitability as ports. After examining Jask, Gombrun, Barin (Bahrain), and Reshire, it was decided that Jask, about 90 miles east of Hormuz, would answer the purpose.

The first English ship, the *James*, was sent out from Surat in 1616, and arrived at Jask in December of that year: this is significant, for it marks the start of British influence in the Gulf. By 1619 a factory (trading depot) had been opened in Jask, and in the years that followed encounters between the British and the Portuguese, who resented this infringement of their monopoly, were frequent. Owing to the predatory habits of the Portuguese, who frequently raided and looted along the coast, the Persians attacked and subsequently expelled them from Gombrun, and also from Hormuz, thus leaving them only the port of Muscat on the Oman coast.

Here they remained until 1650, when they were besieged by the Omani Arabs, and finally compelled to surrender the town. From this date the Portuguese can be said to have lost their once premier position, and become a negligible factor in the Gulf trade.

The British, on the other hand, were going from strength to strength, and when Shah Abbas of Persia built a seaport round the fishing village of Gombrun and renamed it Bandar Abbasi, or the "Port of Abbas", the British were given permission to trade from there, and for a century and a half Bandar Abbas was the principal Company trading port for the Gulf.

The Dutch were on the scene in 1623, and establishing a factory at Bandar Abbas, soon became serious rivals of the British, although most of their trade was in the spices of the Far Indies, as against the cloth and cottons of the British. In 1641 they were even selling their goods below cost price in an endeavour to undercut the British trade.

In an attempt to increase the British trade, which was adversely affected by the Dutch policy, a British ship was sent up the Gulf in 1639-40 to sound the possibilities of running the traffic through a port elsewhere than Persia, and this expedition obtained licence from the Turks to trade at Basra, at the head of the Gulf.

A factory was opened there in 1643, and from that date began the British interest in what was Mesopotamia, and is now Iraq.

By the close of the seventeenth century the Dutch power in the Gulf began to wane, mainly owing to the arrogant methods they adopted, and in 1699 the then Shah of Persia showed his marked preference for the British by paying a Royal visit to their factory at Isfahan.

During the Seven Years War a French fleet appeared off Bandar Abbas and shelled the British factory; this confirmed the British suspicions that Bandar Abbas had served its turn, and in 1763 they moved their headquarters to Basra, and opened a secondary trading post at Bushire, near the head of the Gulf.

In 1764 Basra was recognised as a Consulate under the Capitulations by the Turks, and a Royal grant from the Shah of Persia gave the British peculiar privileges and great standing at Bushire—including the right to hoist their own colours in the port, and maintain "21 Guns for Saluting"—so that, by the end of the eighteenth century the British had attained a strong position in the Gulf.

The first half of the nineteenth century is chiefly remarkable for the efforts of the Indian Marine to combat the recrudescing outbreaks of piracy along the coasts of the Gulf.

Piracy appears to have been at once the business and the hobby of most of the Sheikhs of the Arabian coast, notable amongst

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whom were the Jawasmi; in fact, the whole coast from Ras Masandam at the Strait of Hormuz to the Qater Peninsular was known as the "Pirate Coast". Various encounters with the warships of the Indian Navy during the early 1800's coupled with the blockade of the pirates' towns finally convinced them that there was little future in it, and in 1820 a general treaty was signed between the Arab Sheikhs and the British Government. By this treaty the Sheikhs agreed that "There shall be a cessation of plunder and piracy by land and sea on the part of the Arabs, who are parties to this contract, for ever". This was followed, in 1835, by an agreement whereby the Arabs pledged themselves not to conduct their inter-tribal wars by sea, providing the British refrained from interfering with their private wars on land! This lasted until 1853, when a Treaty of Peace in Perpetuity was concluded whereby the Sheikhs agreed that the peace of the Gulf "Shall be watched over by the British Government" and that any infringements should be referred to the British Authorities. This agreement at once placed the British in a position of trust and responsibility in the Gulf, not only for their own rights, but also on behalf of all nations whose ships used the Gulf for trading.

Further agreements and treaties were made during the latter half of the nineteenth century prohibiting the Slave trade, Gun running, and the like. The various Protectorate treaties will be described under their territorial sections.

This necessarily brief summary has shown the reasons why the British came to the Gulf. They came primarily as traders; they remained as Protectors and Guarantors of the Peace of the Gulf; they built harbours and surveyed the coastss; they charted the Gulf and made it safe for shipping; they constructed cable stations for ease of communications; they brought peace and justice to the warring Arabian tribes. In the words of Lord Curzon, in a speech to the Trucial Chiefs in 1903:—

"Why should Great Britain continue to exercise these powers? . . . The history of your States and of your families, and the present condition of the Gulf, are the answer. . . . We found strife and we created order. It was our commerce as well as your security that . . . called for protection. . . . We saved you from extinction at the hands of your neighbours. We opened these seas to the ships of all nations, and enabled their flags to fly in peace. We have not seized or held your territory. We have not destroyed your independence, but have preserved it. . . . The peace of these waters must still be maintained; and the influence of the British Government must remain supreme."

Quite apart from that, we discovered oil, not only in Persia but also in Bahrain—but that is another story, and will be dealt with under the first port on our list—Bahrain. (*To be contd.*)