

I know in this enlightened age of the new millenium, we're supposed to 'look forward' not back, but just occasionally a trip down memory lane can bring back a little reminder of life's realities. I was treated to one such 'pause for reflection' recently when a visit to Chris Maybury's office revealed that he's a bit of a magpie. Chris has kept more than a few back copies of previous issues of the RGBB Newsletter and this article is reproduced from an edition run over ten years ago.

-an article by Hilary Mantel on British expatriate life in the Gulf published in "The Spectator" of 18th August 1990 and recommended to us by the previous Commercial Counsellor, Peter Ford, as his "parting shot".

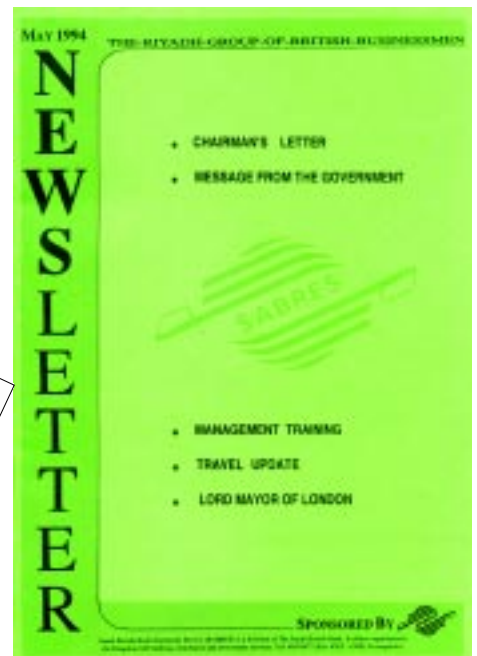
DREAMING OF POR- AND POR-

Gulfman will be sweating and hoping now. He will be tuning in to the World Service, for the foreign newspapers are censored and the local ones are "economical with the truth". If there is an emergency, if he has to throw his life in a suitcase and quit, it will be only what he has dreamed of doing thousands of times, when the mosquitoes bite and the bureaucrats need "persuading". And there has always been the treat of coup d'etat or sudden deportation. With part of his mind, he has always seen himself scrambling for a seat on the last plane out.

But then there is the other part of his mind, which sincerely wants to be rich. Wherever in the world they are British expatriates will always tell you "It's not what it used to be." There was always a golden age, when life was tougher but less complicated, and everyone knew his place and stayed in it playing his allotted role in the long drama of the Englishman abroad. In Arabia and the Gulf they look back to the age before shopping malls, when provisions were obtained in the souq and the roads were rough tracks and when restrictions were not so severe. Then in 1973 the oil price went up and the construction workers came. A concrete hell was born, with savage people in it.

Salaries, fortunately, continue to go up too. The first wave of "Brits", as they describe themselves, were employed by the construction companies. These men with tattoos worked on short contracts, leaving their families behind. Bewildered, sunburnt and lonely, they got into trouble by smoking on the streets during Ramadan or trying to chat up the women. Often, one contract down and pockets full of money, they would jump ship. There were always more where they came from.

The second wave of expats were the professional experts-teachers, scientists, accountants, engineers. Their companies made an effort to retain them-



housing them in what comfort was obtainable, paying them well and shielding them as far as possible from their host's strict religious and cultural characteristics. Families came out; a way of life was established, enduring but frail. It was dependent upon the successful functioning of air-conditioning units, and upon an ability to screen out many of the more restrictive features of Saudi life.

In a land where people are stoned to death for adultery, it is dangerous to have a roving eye; in a land where status quo is so precarious, it is dangerous to have a too enquiring mind. It is possible to make a photo fit for Gulfman. He is 30-35, lower middle-class and embarrassingly aspirant. His education is redbrick/polytechnic. He believes himself to be shrewd, likes to say that he is a cynic. He reads Wilbur Smith and the free magazine that comes with his new Gold Card. Jewellery is worn-sometimes a Credit Suisse token on a chain.

He despises the arts-he might go to the amateur Gilbert and Sullivan, if there is someone in it he knows. He likes to talk about cam-corders, compact discs, kit-cars, and tax shelters. His wife - very often his second wife-is deeply interested in nail polish. Her ambition is to open a nursery school.

Though it goes against the grain, Gulfman carries a sort of handbag for the many documents required to negotiate daily life in the Kingdom. Without these documents he is in peril; should he attract the attention of the police by, say, what he may feel to be some very minor misdemeanour, he may be thrown into Jail.

Gulfman curses his way early to the office, through traffic that knows no laws, or certainly seems not to. The move towards "Saudisation" has been under way for many years, so he will work alongside his hosts,