

# Remembering Geoff Hann



MAY 2022

## Abrar Foundation hosts commemoration

The commemoration for Geoff Hann was addressed by Karen Dabrowska, his friend and colleague who co-authored three travel guides to Iraq with him, his partner Tina Townsend-Graves, his daughter Louise and the found of Bradt Travel Guides, Hilary Bradt.

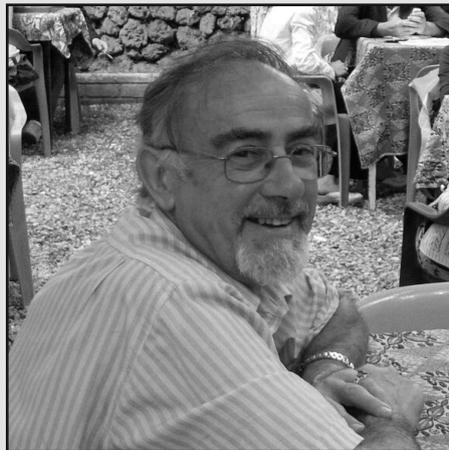
**KAREN DABROWSKA:** Good evening, salam aleikum thank you all for coming.

The Holy Quran tells us: "We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another."

And that is exactly what Geoff did. He brought people together from different countries and different cultures so they could get to know each other. He built bridges of friendship and understanding between East and West.

In this verse the Quran talks about people and it was the Iraqi people who helped Geoff in his hour of need in the days before his tragic death in Yarmouk Hospital in Baghdad. After he suffered a stroke at the end of an archaeological tour of Iraq he was without friends as the people on the tour had left the country. A medical evacuation flight organised by Tina his partner was not allowed to take off as two people on the tour were arrested for allegedly trying to smuggle antiquities out of Iraq and the judge said Geoff had to stay in Baghdad so he could answer questions about this. I heard about Geoff's plight through the crowd funding appeal organised by Tina and spoke to Tom Westcott a journalist. What Tom doesn't know about getting things done in Baghdad is not worth knowing. She contacted a friend and in less than 24 hours Geoff had pyjamas, juice and excellent food. And he was looked after every day until he passed on on April 21st.

Imam Ali talks about brothers in Islam and sons in humanity and we saw the humanity, generosity, friendship and good will of the Iraqi people in the way they helped Geoff. When Saeed Shehabi who runs the Abrar Islamic Foundation heard I wanted to organise a commemoration



*Geoff Hann (1937 – 2022) was a traveller all his life. He took travellers with him all over the lesser explored places in the world for 50 years: Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Kashmir, the list goes on. He was blown up by the Taliban, shot at by the Syrians and caught up in the Iranian Revolution. But he always brought everyone home safely. He led his last trip before retirement to Iraq, the mainstay of his business, in April this year. At the end of a wonderful tour he suffered a stroke and passed on Yarmouk Hospital in Baghdad on 21st April. His life was celebrated on May 31st, 40 days after his death, at a commemoration at the Abrar Islamic Foundation. Geoff's friends and admirers drew inspiration from his endless reservoir of energy, enthusiasm and love of Iraq which he introduced to thousands of travellers.*

for Geoff he said May 31st is 40 days after he passed - let's have it then. Once again sons in humanity, Saeed and Abrar have given us the use of the venue and provided a meal. And I want to say a special thank you to Saeed, Hassan and everyone in Abrar.

Most of you here today knew Geoff very well but for those of you - sons and daughters in humanity - who never met him but have come nevertheless I would like to say a few words about his amazing life.

Geoff was the world's oldest tour leader still taking people to Iraq aged 85. He treated war, sanctions, terrorism and a global pandemic as minor hurdles in a mission to share his passion for the ancient history of modern Iraq.

He was not a man - he was a superman - doing things nobody else managed to do:

He was the first person to take tourists to Iraq during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, the first one to take tourists to survey the destruction wreaked by ISIS in Mosul, the first to take tourists after western governments imposed sanctions on the regime of Saddam Hussein and when the Covid-19 travel bans were finally lifted.

So how did he become a tour guide who took travellers with him all over the lesser explored places in the world for 50 years: Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Pakistan, Kashmir... the list goes on. He has been blown up by the Taliban, shot at by the Syrians and was caught up in the Iranian Revolution. But he always brought everyone home safely. The overland trips started when Geoff drove from London to India to where his wife had gone to live in ashram with a guru. (His daughter

Louise will talk about those early days). He lost a wife and world gained an adventurer who, through his company Hann Overland, organised hundreds of trips from London to Kathmandu.

He still kept going despite wars and sanctions: if the FCO advised against travel to a country you could be sure Geoff would be taking tourists there. (Tina, Geoff's partner, will talk about those days in a few minutes)

I first met Geoff when trying to write a travel guide to Iraq for Bradt Travel publishers. Dr Salah Shaikhly a prominent figure in the opposition to Saddam's regime suggested I write it and I said yes. Everything is easier to get into than out of. Our first meeting was bit strained. "What do you know about Iraq?" Geoff asked as he glared at me from across a massive dining table in his home in Streatham. "Not a lot," I said. End of conversation. I went home with my tail between my legs.

But when I got home there were at least ten emails from Geoff, pictures, answers to questions, information about tourist sites in Iraq only he had. That was Geoff, a meticulous researcher who provided those on his tours with excellent background information. His contacts on the ground were second to none, he could make informed decisions about when it was necessary to change route or abandon a visit to a certain site for security reasons. He was the ideal person to write a travel guide to Iraq (Hilary Bradt will tell us about his writing). It was an honour and a privilege to write three travel guides with him.

Retiring, growing old – Geoff gave that up years ago. I remember saying to him "I am 60 now," and he looked at me with the mischievous grin I am sure you all remember and said "I am 80 – what's your problem?" He was a bit of a devil, he loved a drink and a good time and he was fun to be with, always helpful and entertaining.

We are all very sad Geoff is no longer with us on this earthly plane. But rather than mourn his death let us celebrate his life, his inspiration and his can do attitude. He accomplished many missions impossible.

Let us hope that trips to Iraq – the serious scholarly trips which take us to the cradle of civilisation - continue and another inspiring travel agent follows in Geoff's footsteps and continues to foster friendships across frontiers between the Iraqis and the peoples of the world.

I will end with a quote from the famous Iraqi poet Badr Al-Sayyab which I am sure echoes Geoff's sentiments:

*Farewell my friends, my beloved ones  
If you wish to remember me,  
Remember me on a moonlight night  
When the moon shines over the Tigris  
Otherwise I will just be a name  
Disappeared among other names  
Just as the moon lights up the Tigris  
You lit up my life  
I am forever in your hearts  
Just look up at the moon  
On a moonlight night*

**LOUISE WOFFENDEN:** My father raised Vanessa and I on his own from when we were four and six respectively. He had a hankering for travel and history, so in 1970 we went on our first trip to Turkey. We didn't just fly over as a normal family would do.

He placed an ad for a chaperone in the paper for Vanessa and I, and packed us all into the family Ford escort, then drove overland to Turkey taking about a week to get there: we visited most of the sites, then drove home as if it's all was quite normal.

Our second trip was not too long after in 1971, but this time it was to India in a VW campervan. There was a war on at the time between Pakistan and India, so we simply left the van at the border, flew over, then continued by steam train

from Amritsar to Bombay to visit my mother, who was living out there at the time.

The third trip was in 1972 again to India, but this time he upgraded to a Land Rover and had his first couple of paying passengers join us. Thereafter, he would go on his tours without us and build his business from there.

I have many fond memories of my childhood with dad. Way too many to tell you today, but please indulge me in letting me tell just a few. One of them is the time he took me to Stanford's the London map shop for his first few trips, where they pulled out drawers and drawers of maps to select from. He was very particular how each map should be folded, so as not to ruin them. To this day, I hear his voice when folding a map, and still ignore him and ruin them.

The second memory is when dad would let Vanessa and I sit on his lap to help steer the van in Afghanistan on one of the very long straight roads if nothing was ahead. In those days you could go hours without seeing another vehicle.

The last one I will tell from our child hood is when we were again in Afghanistan. He had parked the van, but when I turned around and saw a man placing nails under the tyres. I told dad, who immediately went over to the van opened the door, pulled out the rifle he had purchased in Bonn for our protection and said 'get away from my fucking van'.

In later years he would phone me from many of his destinations to say hi, but one occasion sticks in my mind from around 20 years ago. I had a call from dad on his sat phone to say that he was ok, and that he loved me. At that point I heard a loud bang and dad's usual expletives. He came back on the line to say he had been blown over due to the helicopter landing to air lift him out of the area and had to go now. Love you.

His legacy of travel will stay with me for life, as I hope it will for each of you. Thank you all so much for making my dads trips so enjoyable.

**TINA TOWNSEND-GREAVES:** I haven't written out anything: Like Geoff he never really planned anything really well. He just went along and settled things as they went along. The first time I travelled with him was in 2006 and we went to Afghanistan. I had never been anywhere or done anything adventurous. I was totally innocent and I thought that if there was a trip to Afghanistan it must be perfectly safe.

The vehicle didn't start when we wanted to leave the car park and I could see that it was going to be an unusual kind of tour. We made our way to Peshawar. The first morning we were there Geoff collected our visas so we could go through the Khyber Pass. It was really exciting. And we had breakfast and the driver came down and asked have you got your passports? Then we discovered that the lady who I was sharing a room with had managed to lock us out of it. We had to get some handyman to chisel the lock out of the door because there were no spare keys. And we went to Geoff's room and he was sitting there looking really terrible. And he said: "I've lost your passport." I said "that's okay I will just get another one." And Geoff was thinking what am I going to do. I am taking her to Afghanistan. She hasn't got her passport and she hasn't got her visa. He was nearly crying. I said: "Don't worry." Then I got into my room and the manager of the hotel came and asked what's wrong. And the manager of the hotel



**Louise Woffenden**



**Karen Dabrowska**



**Tina Townsend Greaves**

took Geoff's little phrase book and the passport was inside it. It was just a little bit smaller than the phrase book and had slipped into it. Geoff had a brandy in the room at eight o'clock in the morning. But I think he probably deserved it. And that was my introduction to the world of travel.

I had never been on anything like that before. We travelled all through the Khyber Pass and the Kabul gorge and we got to Jalalabad and we were sitting down for dinner in Jalalabad. He wore an Afghan waist coat and it looked as if it had something in it. And I asked: "What's that." And he said "nothing". You can't say that to a woman. He got a gun. I asked him if he took a gun on all his trips. And he said: "No – just this one." He said this trip might be a more risky than normal. "Do you know how to shoot?" I asked. He was in the RAF but spent a lot of time in the athletics team. He said that he was going to save the honor of the ladies. "Thank you. How many bullets have you got?" "I have nine." But there were ten of us.

Geoff was very inclusive. He said that Kandahar can be a bit tricky. "We could drive through Kandahar and not stop. Or we could drive through Kandahar and stop. Or we could fly past Kandahar or we could go through the north which I have never really done before. What do you all think?" Needless to say and sadly we did not go to Kandahar. We went through the north which was fabulous. In the end the mini bus came and it was fine and we went through in a convoy.

That was Geoff's trips. You never knew what to expect. We were all safe. It may have seemed like he did things on the spur of the moment. But as Karen has already said he had bloody good contacts and he knew his stuff. He was very upset about the Italian SAS when he got back to Herat. And they did not offer him a bottle of Italian wine. And he really fell out with them.

There was the time he got arrested in Afghanistan. Luckily it was only house arrest. The three remaining people on the tour had to carry on and do the rest of the trip on their own. Geoff was giving instructions on what to do next and it all went very well.

He was attacked by Taliban. Geoff was a great believer in starting early – four in the morning. And the police insisted that they couldn't leave till nine or ten in the morning. And that is why they were attacked.

He made the trips enormous fun, and everyone always felt safe and Geoff always brought everybody home safely. And I am just sorry we couldn't bring him home safely. Having said that Geoff died doing what he loved. He was a traveler. He had a good last trip. He enjoyed it. His health wasn't so good. According to an Iranian newspaper he was the leader of an antiquities smuggling gang that was stealing things to order for the British Museum believe it or not. That would have made him laugh.

He could never have come home and deteriorated and be hospitalized. That wasn't Geoff. And I am really sorry I didn't get to say goodbye to him. He was an adventurer through and through and we will all remember him that way.

**HILARY BRADT:** I've known Geoff since the 1980s. For nearly 40 years he and I exchanged stories about the trials and tribulations of being a tour leader. However it's through his deep knowledge of, and love for Iraq that we remember him and how he first began his long collaboration with Bradt Guides.

After the First Gulf War we were contacted by a journalist who urged us to do a guide to Iraq because the world needed to know what was happening there. Potential authors came and went but finally Karen Dabrowska, who has written or co-written all but the most recent of our Iraq guides, agreed to write a book about the people and places,

even though normal tourism was not possible. Publication was scheduled for early in 2002. The annual Frankfurt Book Fair was held in the first week on October so we produced posters and information on this forthcoming title. Then came September 11, New York's Twin Towers were attacked, and a guide to Iraq was clearly impossible. We cancelled publication but having produced the poster I decided to bring it to Frankfurt anyway as a way of attracting attention to our stand.

The result was remarkable. One after another of our foreign distributors, including America, stopped at our stand and said "I could sell that!". We were astonished but went ahead and published the guide in 2002. Sales were brisk from the start but at the onset of the Iraq War in 2003 we received an order for 3000 copies from our American distributor. We learned by hearsay that they went to the Pentagon and were instrumental in the planning of the US effort. An unwanted result for publisher (me) who joined the demonstration in Hyde Park against the invasion – having learned so much about the country from Karen's book.

Geoff's involvement dates from 2008 when tourism was starting to open up – sort of – and we asked him to join Karen in describing the practical aspects of visiting Iraq (only the Kurdish north at that point) and to contrast pre-war Iraq with the country it was becoming. *Iraq Then and Now* was published that year and an evolving version of it has continued in print to the present day. The third edition, published in 2021, was co-authored by his partner Tina.

Geoff's love of history and taste for exploring little-known routes made him an obvious candidate to get immersed in Iraq, and during the Iraq-Iran conflict his groups were often the only travellers there. In 2003 he paid a fleeting personal visit as war ended, and then led a rather famous post-war Iraq tour. In *Iraq Then and Now*, Geoff told of the bemusement of the military personnel - how could a group of tourists be travelling past their checkpoints as they were hunkered over their machine guns? It is an appealing image, isn't it? Sadly, this open window soon closed. In 2007 he operated two tours of Iraqi Kurdistan and waited for southern Iraq to open again.

Patience was rewarded and for five years he was able to travel throughout all of Iraq. Further restrictions curtailed these tours and the second edition of the travel guide was punctuated with security warnings about areas that were still inaccessible. However Geoff was the eternal optimist and predicted access would change again in the near future and indeed by the time the third edition of the Bradt guide came out last year, Geoff was leading tours once more. The warnings softened from tales of outright closures to warnings never to remove objects of archaeological importance.

Claire Strange, Bradt's commissioning editor, recalls speaking to Geoff on the phone in 2015 just after the ISIS devastation of the ancient Mesopotamian town of Palmyra in modern-day Syria. "I was lamenting the destruction of the statues and temples so was surprised that Geoff was so sanguine about the situation. He explained that while some of the buildings had gone, the vast site had been barely touched by archaeologists and so much more was waiting to be discovered.

This was typical Geoff, marvellously optimistic, supremely confident and always expecting the best. While that occasionally made meeting editorial deadlines somewhat tricky, Bradt's Iraq guide remains a testament to his love of the country and its people.



*Hilary Bradt*

## TRIBUTES AND MEMORIES SHARED BY GEOFF'S FRIENDS

**PETER MONTEATH:** When I was in a position to go on a tour I booked one which was Nepal to West China and there was a group visa to China. The Friendship Bridge was the actual border between Nepal and Tibet. We had a co driver and a Chinese interpreter. She turned around and said you are all in this country illegally and we are not stopping overnight. If you object I will report you to the authorities. We thought this was a game of bluff and stood our ground and we had a night's accommodation. I can't say I was really scared. I was the new kid on the block in the world of travel. But I thought surely Geoff had planned this all out properly and it is not going to be a problem. Nothing happened and we carried on.

**LINDSAY FULCHER:** My impression of Geoff. I only travelled with him once. It was six months before Tony Blair's illegal war against Iraq. Geoff to me was a very mercurial character. He never missed a thing. He was much smarter than many people gave him credit for. When he was in a corner he could get out of it. He was the only man who said: "I can take you to see the Garden of Eden" – and he did. And when we got there to the confluence of the two rivers there was a tree there and it was dead. So he sent someone to the market to bring some apples and there we all stood in the Garden of Eden with these apples. To me that is the quintessential Geoff. He had a real sense of humor and a sense of compassion. His heart was probably in Baghdad and I am very sorry I didn't travel with him further. What a man.

**SOPHIE MACKSMITH:** Hello. My name is Sophie. I actually took one of those tours as a tour leader. I went on a tour of China because I spoke Chinese and when I got home from that there was a crisis in Madagascar because the previous tour leader rather than booking the accommodation ran off with the tour funds. I went out there. I didn't know what I was doing and my French was coming out in Chinese. I had never been to Madagascar and Geoff said two pieces of advice: the worse experience they have now they are all going to dine out on it when they get home. The local people bought mattresses – by that time they knew me. Nobody complained. And one of the people on the tour wrote to me and said I am dining out on this story every single week. Geoff was amazing.

**DAVE ANSELL:** Although I had met Geoff before it was on the 2006 trip to Afghanistan that I really got to know him. When I moved to Yorkshire and I almost became neighbors with Tina and Geoff. I saw them a few times.

When we were travelling around Afghanistan after a few days I started to ask myself if I should have been there. I wanted to go and see what the country was like and what the situation was like. I did wonder if I was actually in the right place, if I was doing any good or whatever.

We were in Mazar-i- Sherif in a complex in a shrine and I was walking around taking photographs like all good tourists do and a young guy in his 20s came up to me and started speaking in very beautiful English. This was certainly very odd because Afghans don't speak English. And he told me that he studied English at university.

We sat down on some steps and were talking for about twenty minutes or so and then he said look at all these people. And I was only looking at him throughout the conversation. I just turned and standing there in a semi circle must have been at least 100 Afghans looking at us and smiling. He told me that they did not have the faintest idea what we were all talking about but they were all very happy and very impressed because a foreigner is talking to an Afghan and that doesn't happen. The foreigners who come here are in the military or they work for NGO's and they live in compounds and when they leave the compound they have lots of security and they don't talk to ordinary Afghans. They come for or two months and then they go back home. And these people are really happy because you are talking to me and they had the feeling that they are not being forgotten. I realized then that is why I was there and it was serving a purpose.

And of course that is something that Geoff knew. And he got us to meet local people and to talk to them. We saw the historical sites but to talk to the ordinary people was great. I was a geography teacher for 30 odd years and I tried to encourage my students to travel. And several of them many years later would contact me or would see me and say thank you for giving me the travel bug. And I want to say for goodness sake when you go somewhere talk to the ordinary people and try to understand them and get them to understand you. And that is something Geoff did so much. I owe a great debt to him for doing his.

I live in Huddersfield which is three miles away from Brigg House where Tina and Geoff lived and outside Huddersfield station we have a wonderful statue to the Labor Prime Minister Harold Wilson who comes from Huddersfield. I was thinking recently there is no statue at Brigg House station so maybe there should be one at Brigg House station to Geoff.

Geoff would not want that and Tina would not want that because she would have to clean it every month but it would be nice if people knew about him and what he did and I can't think of anybody who is there to replace him. Maybe somebody will come forward, somebody we will hear about but it needs people with his enthusiasm to take other people to these parts of the world.

**VANESSA HANN:** We had one of the first answer phones in the country. We used to sit together in the living room when the brochures came out and staple the brochures together. I also worked for him a couple of different times and he was always very kind. I used to courier for him and I used to go up town with an old bag that didn't look like very much and it held £3000 in cash and peoples passports. I had to go to various embassies for visas. I went to Thomas Cook to change money into different currencies and all that sort of thing. So behind the scenes there was quite a lot going on.

**The commemoration was attended by Mr Jawhar Hasan, a Consul at the Iraqi Embassy in London, and Vice Consul Mr Wisam Faeq Hatem.**



Peter Monteath



Lindsay Fulcher



Sophie Macksmith

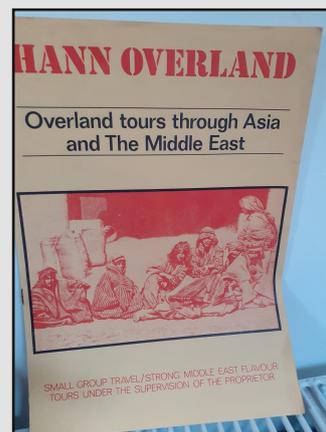
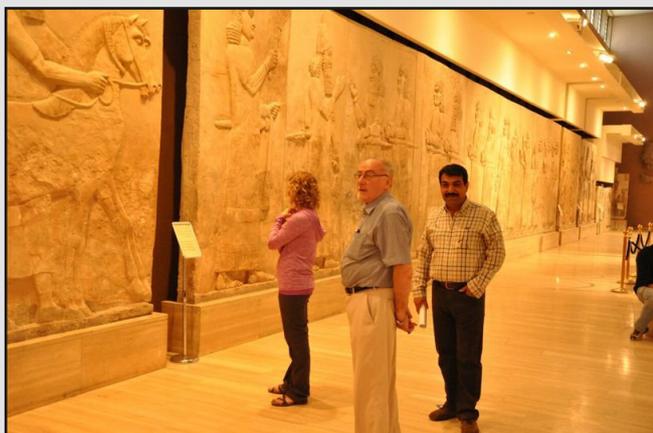
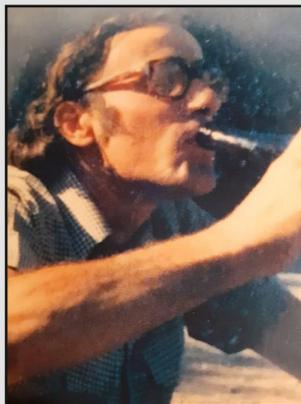


Vanessa Hann

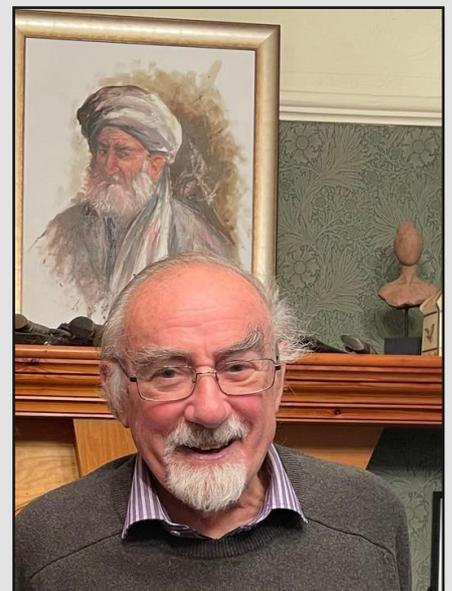
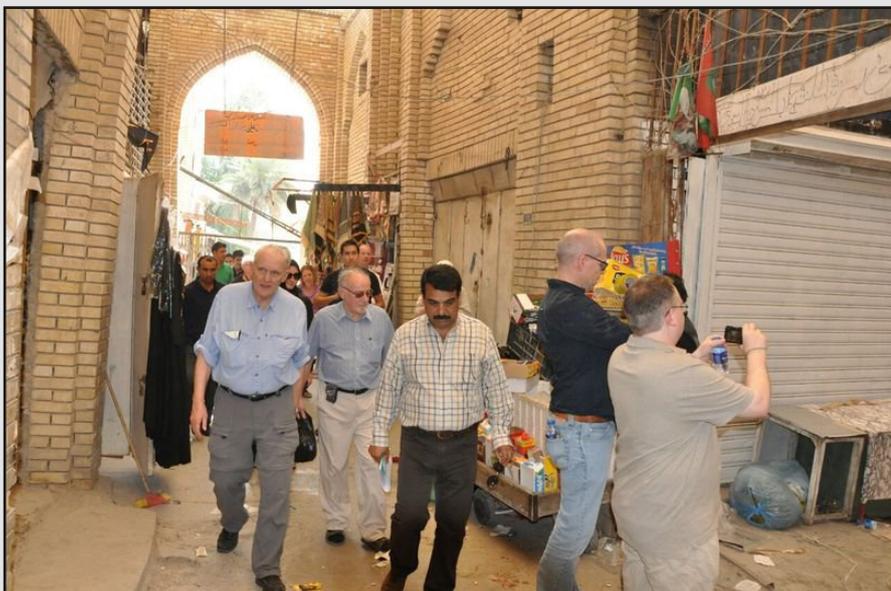


Dave Ansell in Afghanistan

# GEOFF'S LIFE IN PICTURES



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