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'Memorandum'

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About this record

A memorandum with a cover note, in which the Political Resident and Consul General at Baghdad, Trevor John Chichele Plowden, writes to the Political Secretary, India Office, Sir Owen Tudor Burne, suggesting that clarification be sought from the Turkish Porte regarding their permission for the British to replace the *Comet* at Baghdad with a new steamer; consideration should also be given to the new ship's armament and to the composition of the crew. The author also mentions the expediency of giving the Resident in Turkish Arabia an assistant.

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From Trevor C. Plowden, Esq., C. S., Political Resident and Consul
General at Baghdad, to Sir O. T. Burne, K.C.S.I., Political
Secretary, India Office.

Sir,

I have the honour to enclose a Memorandum, which I think
may have some public interest, and which, I venture to suggest,
might be printed.

I have the honour to be,

Your most obedient Servant,

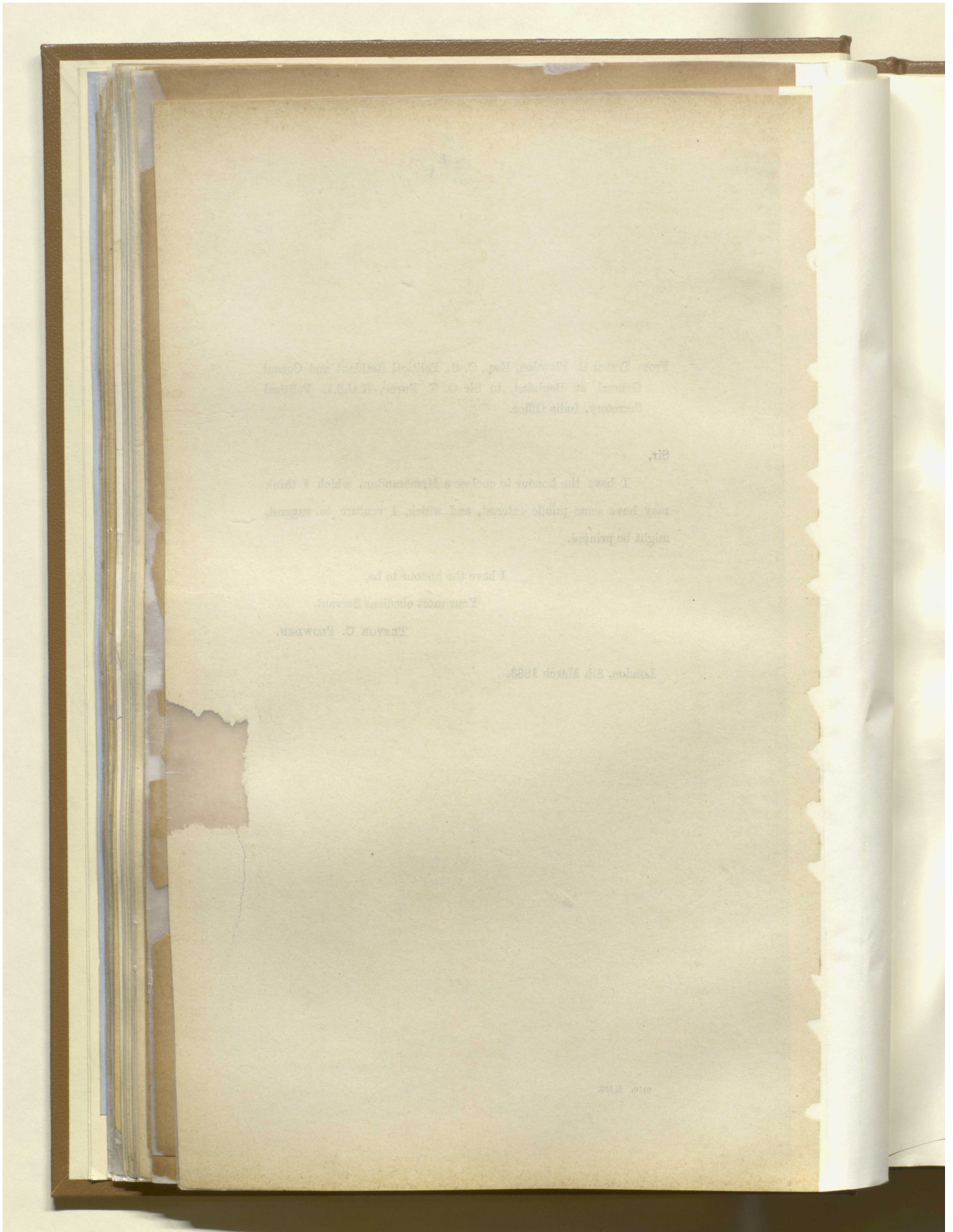
TREVOR C. PLOWDEN.

London, 8th March 1883.

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MEMORANDUM.

I should like to submit for consideration the following observations on the subject of the steamer now being built to replace the the "Comet" at Baghdad.

2. Much correspondence has passed on different occasions between the Porte and the British Government in respect to the "Comet," and the conditions on which that vessel is stationed at Baghdad. At page 3, vol. vii. of Aitchison's Treaties the result of these discussions is described as follows:— "In addition to these two vessels (*i.e.*, the two steamers sent out from England to navigate the Euphrates) an armed despatch boat, The 'Comet' was for many years attached to the Residency, for service in the waters of Turkish Arabia. In 1864, the Porte sanctioned provisionally the continued stay of the 'Comet,' and in 1869 consented to a new vessel of war being sent to replace her." The consent here referred to was given in a *note verbale*,* dated 13th July 1869, which describes the "Comet" as stationed on the rivers of Mesopotamia (*i.e.*, on both the Tigris and the Euphrates), and agrees to its being replaced by another vessel of the Royal Navy. This consent not having been immediately acted on, it was thought advisable, some years later, in order to prevent the question of lapse being raised, to get a renewal of the Porte's sanction. I know that this was obtained, but I do not know whether the later permission differs in any way from that of 1869, and what conditions are attached to it.

3. It is desirable to have a precise understanding on the subject, because objections may be raised by the Turks to the passage of the new steamer up the Tigris, and to its remaining at Baghdad after it has succeeded in getting there. It is true that the *note verbale* of 1869 intimates that the Vali of Baghdad has been instructed on the subject of the new steamer. But the question is what is the nature of the instructions which have been given him? It is generally believed at Baghdad that the replacement of the old steamer by a new one will be opposed, a supposition which derives support from the fact that the local authorities took prompt exception to my employment of the "City of London" as a temporary substitute for the "Comet."

4. Under these circumstances, it appears advisable that the Resident in Turkish Arabia should be instructed both as to the line to be taken in the event of Turkish opposition to the new steamer, and as to the conditions under which that vessel is allowed to navigate the "waters of Mesopotamia." The last point involves the question of the legal status of the "Comet." On what footing is that steamer stationed at Baghdad, and what immunities and privileges belong to it? I gather from the *note verbale* of 1869 that the Porte regards the "Comet" in the same light as the "Stationnaires" attached to the different embassies at Constantinople, and this is the light in which the vessel in question might most conveniently be regarded. In short, I think, the "Comet" ought, to be declared to be what the Porte in the above-cited "note" describes it, *viz.*, a vessel of the Royal Navy. And this suggestion would seem to meet another difficulty, that of providing for the discipline of the crew. I do not know whether the provisions of the Bill relating to the Indian Marine will cover a vessel employed in the inland waters of Turkey, where the Government of India has no jurisdiction, but if they do not cover it, and in any case until that Bill becomes law, offenders on board the "Comet" can only be punished under the provisions of the Ottoman Order in Council.

5. I have said that the passage of the "Comet" up the Tigris may be opposed. I think it would be a good thing if it were arranged that the new

* The full text of this note will be found at page 16, vol. vii., Aitchison.

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vessel should carry me to Baghdad, for difficulties are less likely to be raised if the Resident is on board. I expect to reach Bombay early in September, and it is said that the new "Comet" will be ready by August. If a telegram were sent to India on the subject, the completion of the vessel by the time named might be ensured.

I would also suggest that the manner of disposal of the old steamer be settled beforehand, so that it may be got rid of as soon as possible after the arrival of the new "Comet." It is desirable to avoid the appearance even of any design to get an extra vessel in the Tigris, a design of which the Turks will suspect us if there is much delay in removing the old steamer.

6. Other matters which, I think, deserve serious attention are, the armament of the new steamer, the qualifications of the officers, and the composition of the crew.

An armed despatch boat is maintained at Baghdad, not only in the interests of British trade and to uphold British influence, but also to safeguard the lives of the Christian population, European and Oriental, of that city. The value of such a vessel to British commerce is shown by the attack on the mail steamer "Khalifa," an outrage which would scarcely have been perpetrated had not the patrol of the Tigris by the "Comet" been allowed to fall into disuse. The situation of Baghdad makes it evident that in the event of a fanatical outbreak no extraneous assistance can arrive in time to be of any use. The European colony and the local Christians must depend upon their own resources, to which an armed British ship is, it is hardly necessary to say, a most important addition.

It is evident, therefore, that the duties which the "Comet" is called upon to perform are of a special character, and, consequently, the vessel requires a special organization. Its duties are, in fact, analogous to those entrusted to the Royal Navy, and are wholly different from those ordinarily imposed on the Indian Marine.

The armament of the "Comet" ought to be thoroughly effective, not only that the ship may be able to do good service in an emergency, but also because the more efficient the "Comet" is known and seen to be the less likely is it that any emergency will arise. On the details of what is requisite in this respect my opinion is not worth much. It has been decided, at my request, to furnish the magazine with an adequate supply of Henry-Martins and revolvers, but I have not heard what has been settled as to the guns. I should like to have one Gatling gun, and the others should, I think, be light breech-loaders, say 20-pounders, not having a very long range, but able to throw shells.

7. It is of no use, however, to provide effective guns and arms of precision unless the crew are able to use them, and the crew will not be able to use them unless they have officers who can teach them. This raises the question of the qualifications of the officers and the composition of the crew. In former days the "Comet" had a crew of 38 Europeans, besides Natives. Its officers belonged to the Indian Navy. They understood the management of a vessel of war, and were accustomed to political work. The Indian Marine has been constituted on different lines, and its members, except those who happen to be ex-naval officers, do not know how to work a ship's guns or how to drill a crew. Lately, I had the advantage of making a voyage in the Indian Government steamer "Amberwitch." The four junior officers were, I doubt not, excellent seamen, but they had all been trained in merchant vessels, and not one of them would have been of any use for my work. In saying this, I do not refer only to ability to manage an armed vessel; in patrolling the Tigris the officers of the "Comet" must necessarily come in frequent contact with Arab Sheikhs and Ottoman officials, and it is essential that the officers who have to deal with such persons should possess special tact and discretion. My opinion, therefore, is that the officers for the "Comet" should be drawn from the Royal Navy, and not from the Indian Marine. I would suggest an application to the Admiralty for the loan for a limited period, say for three or five years, of two qualified officers to serve as "Commander" and "Second in command." If the experiment answers, permanent arrangements might be made hereafter, while, if it fails, no great harm will have been done.

As to the crew, although I do not advise a return to the original scheme of a complete European establishment, I am strongly of opinion that the lascars should be specially selected, and that there should be two European quartermasters, in addition to the gunners. The replacement of the old "Comet" by a new ship affords an opportunity, which it would be a great pity to lose, of putting matters once for all on a sound and efficient basis, and of placing on the Tigris a ship thoroughly well found in every respect. In her day the old "Comet" was a model ship of her class, the effect produced was in accordance with her merits, and it lasted long after the vessel had ceased to be efficient.

8. As I am dealing with Baghdad affairs, I take the opportunity of mentioning another matter,—the expediency of giving the Resident in Turkish Arabia an Assistant. There is no officer in the Indian political service who has to deal single-handed with so large a charge as that entrusted to the Resident in Turkish Arabia and Consul General in Baghdad. The country under my political supervision measures about 140,000 square miles, and it is part of my duty to keep the Imperial and Indian Governments informed of all political events of importance which may happen throughout this extensive territory,—of the movements of the Kurds in the north and north-east, of the condition of affairs on the Turco-Persian frontier, and of the relations of the Arab tribes towards each other, and towards the Ottoman Government. I have to correspond with the local Ottoman officials, with the foreign Consuls, French, Russian, and Persian (with the two former the correspondence is in French, which I have to translate myself), with my two Assistants at Basreh and Mosul, with the Resident in the Persian Gulf, with the Governments of India and Bombay, with the English Foreign Office and the Ambassador at Constantinople, and occasionally also with the Minister at Teheran. I have also the charge of an Indian Post Office, which is largely used as a channel for the import of valuable merchandise, and of a Treasury. And whereas in India the duty of personally certifying the balances of cash in the Treasury on the last day of the month, and of submitting the Treasury and stamp accounts on certain fixed dates, is ordinarily assigned to a young assistant magistrate, at Baghdad the duty devolves upon me. It hampers me very much, for it obliges me to be present in Baghdad on certain specified days. Petty litigation and petty disputes among the British Indians take up a further large share of my time. Then I get a number of telegrams, necessarily in cipher,—for every open telegram is seen by the Turkish authorities,—and which have to be answered in cipher. The English and the Indian Governments do not use the same code, so that I have sometimes to communicate the same message in two different ciphers, and as I am obliged by stringent orders to do cipher work entirely by myself, all other business has in the interval to be put aside.

My staff consists of two Portuguese clerks, who in Bombay would be worth Rs. 40 per mensem, a Syrian native agent, an Armenian dragoman, an Armenian treasurer, and one or two native clerks. Naturally, I have frequent business with the Vali and other Ottoman officials. Very little can be done in Baghdad by despatch writing, and at the same time it is not always convenient or proper that I should go in person to the Vali or his subordinates. And yet I have no person on whom I can rely to send in my place. The native agent and the Armenian dragoman are local Christians who carry no weight and who are really afraid of the Vali. I am most reluctant to send them, for they can rarely get anything done, and yet practically I have no choice. Contrast my position with that of the Resident on the Persian Gulf. I have at least as much work to do, and yet while I am single-handed, the Resident at Bushire has an Assistant Resident (until lately he had two), and a Treasury officer of the status of an Extra Assistant Commissioner. There is no comparison between my work and that of the French Consul at Baghdad, the proportion is as ten to one, and yet the latter is allowed by his Government an European Assistant, carefully trained in the Oriental College at Paris.

Moreover, the value of Baghdad as a field for training a young political officer is worthy of some consideration. He would have an unrivalled opportunity of learning Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, of mixing with Orientals

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of many and various types, and of seeing what Muhammedanism is like in a country where Islam is the dominant faith. I cannot help thinking that, if Baghdad were nearer India, the necessity of giving the Resident an Assistant would have been recognized long before this, and I am strongly of opinion that the public interests suffer through the omission to appoint one.

TREVOR CHICHELEY FLOWDEN,
Political Resident in Turkish Arabia, and
Consul General, Baghdad.

London, 1st March 1883.