

TRADESMAN INSURANCE



Have you got the right protection for the job?

- Public liability, employer's liability and tools cover available to protect your business

Visit directlineforbusiness.co.uk or call us on **0845 301 5052**



direct line for business

REBUILDING: One of Mike Laird's aims is to restart the tradition of building mudhif huts, pictured right



CHARITY

Former Castaway travels to Iraq to help Marsh Arabs

By Jenna Pudelek

jenna.pudelek@archant.co.uk

HE was once castaway on a remote Scottish island with Ben Fogle in a pioneering BBC reality TV show – but now Mike Laird is attempting to reverse an environmental catastrophe in Iraq.

Inspired by the intrepid adventures of Sir Wilfred Thesiger, the Tunbridge Wells businessman travelled to the marshlands of southern Iraq and was touched by the plight of the Madan people who live there.

Mr Laird, who by day works as a risk manager for a life insurance company, devotes his spare time to charitable projects in some of the world's poorest and most remote places, the latest of which involves the Marsh Arabs.

Their centuries-old way of life was virtually destroyed under Saddam Hussein's regime, when in retaliation for the 1991 Shia uprising, he ordered the wetlands drained and turned to desert.

During the crackdown by Iraqi government forces, villages were bombed as those who took part in the failed uprising had sought shelter in the remote marshes.

Work has begun to restore the wetland region, where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers split into ribbons and lakes before flowing into the Persian Gulf, and which has sustained human communities for five millennia.

Mr Laird, 42, who featured in the BBC's Castaway programme in 2000, is CEO of the charity MarocAroundTheClock and went out to marshlands in January with his friend and 'fixer' an Iraqi-born British doctor called Sam Balal.

"The Marsh Arabs suffered badly at the hands of Saddam Hussein," he said. "They are descendants of Babylon and Mesopotamia, it is a unique culture. But the ecology has been scuppered.

"When the rivers were dammed, the land



dried out and salinated so nothing can grow. It is apocalyptic – farms have turned to desert. It is desperately sad."

Mr Laird said he has wanted to visit the southern wetlands since meeting with Sir Wildred, a famous adventurer and writer who travelled extensively around Africa and lived with the Marsh Arabs between 1950 and 1958, before his death in 2003.

A report by the United Nations Environmental Programme found that about 90 per cent of the 20,000 square kilometres of marshlands were lost because of drainage and upstream damming in "one of the world's greatest environmental disasters".

The task to restore the marshland and reverse what the UN has described as a "catastrophic" impact on wildlife and biodiversity is huge.

Mr Laird has had to choose three projects to focus the resources of his small charity.

Until 1991, the Madan lived traditionally, growing rice and dates, raising water buffalo, fishing and building boats and houses from reeds.

The charity's projects will be centred on the town of Chabayish and Basra children's hospi-

Kent Chorus A new choir for Tunbridge Wells and the South-East

REDISCOVER THE JOY OF SINGING!

MOZART'S REQUIEM

(Concert Salomons, 13th November 2011) and Mendelssohn's *Elijah*
Musical Director, Richard Jenkinson

- CHRISTMAS CAROLS
- SOCIAL EVENTS
- CONCERT TOURS

COME AND JOIN US NOW!

REHEARSALS

Mondays from 12th September 7.45pm
Tunbridge Wells Baptist Church (Warner Hall),
12 Upper Grosvenor Road, TN1 2EP

Presented by Meridian Voices

For further information
www.kentchorus.co.uk
E kentchorus@meridianvoices.org
07771 764207

follow us



Whitehead Monckton
unique to Kent



Are you considering disputing a will?

NO WIN – NO FEE Do you have a.....

- ...Will Dispute?
- ...Executor Dispute?
- ...Probate Dispute?
- ...Trust Dispute?
- ...Power of Attorney Dispute?

We can help you, call us on **01622 698000** now to find out how!

The Kentish Law Firm with national expertise



Please call Maidstone 01622 698000 or Tenterden 01580 765722 or visit our website www.whitehead-monckton.co.uk

Regulated by the Solicitors Regulation Authority Whitehead Monckton 59423. Authorised and Regulated by the Financial Services Authority.

SUMMER HOLIDAY FUN

23rd July - 4th September

- Crusoe World
- Enchanted Forest with its adventure board walk
- Formal Gardens
- Birds of Prey displays
- Canal boat ride

Providing your family with a great day out and an opportunity to explore the outdoors

Groombridge,
Nr. Tunbridge Wells,
Kent TN3 9QG
Tel: 01892 861444
www.groombridge.co.uk

bringing you the latest news ■ sport ■ video ■ jobs ■ cars and property  ...Just visit the Apple App Store



tal. Work will begin in October next year and the fundraising target is around £25,000.

“About 10 years ago it was quite a small place,” he said. “Then people who had been depopulated from other places identified it as a nice place, not pretty just sympathetic and safe.

“Taunted with death or prison, ethnic groups, particularly the Kurds, were targeted. They felt able to settle in Chabayish and the population exploded. But the infrastructure did not grow at the pace necessary to support all these people. Toilets, water, medical facilities and surfaced roads are needed.”

As the displaced Madan return to the area when the marshes are re-flooded, there is also a drive to preserve their culture, bringing back traditional buildings, farming techniques, poetry, music and dance.

One of the charity’s projects is to build a traditional mudhif – a building made from a reed called qassab.

“Mudhifs have great cultural significance,” Mr Laird said. “They disappeared because a lot of the men went off to fight and did not come back. This loss of skill set means there is a limited group who know how to build them.”

He hoped to bring these skills to a new generation of Marsh Arabs through building a mudhif in Chabayish. The building will be used as a community centre as they were traditionally where the village elder or sheikh would hold meetings and social gatherings.

The second project will be to build much-needed toilets and hand-washing blocks for two schools. Mr Laird hopes people from the UK will take part in these ventures through working holidays.

Finally, the most heart-wrenching of the charity’s work will be at the children’s hospital in Basra, which saw some of the heaviest fighting in the last Iraq war.

“It is just desperate,” Mr Laird said. “It is hor-

rible, there are children with terminal cancers, great big open sores and they live in unpleasant, cramped wards with no pain relief.

“We do not really yet understand what we are going to be able to do there. We will either work with a pharmaceutical firm to provide pain relief and cancer drugs, or so-called ‘soft deliverables’ like clean blankets and toys.”

Mr Laird launched the charity in 2007 with two friends, David Burton and Gary Tong.

“We started out working in Morocco and people kept coming to us with projects, saying can you help us,” he said. “So we took on a project in Senegal and this one in Iraq. I have built up friends and contacts in Iraq because it is an incredibly difficult country to get into.

“I’ve been to 78 countries, a lot of challenging countries, which would be considered the ‘badlands’ under a jaunted Western view.

“I’ve been to Pakistan and Afghanistan and I find Arab or Muslim communities totally endearing. I love being with the people, their culture and food. I find it all very engaging and interesting.”

As part of the fundraising efforts, Mr Laird is planning to swim the Channel next July and last weekend he was heading off to the Isle of Wight for a practice open water swim.

He offered some advice for travelling to Iraq, saying: “Bullet proof vests and helmets put a barrier between you and the community. I try and fit in as much as possible, adopting their ways, I grow a beard.

“My safety is something the Iraqis worry about because of the opportunism of capture and ransom.

“They protect me as best they can and I do sensible things like not speak English loudly in the streets, but it does not mean that you can’t sit at a roadside café in Basra having coffee.”

■ For more information and to donate visit www.marocaroundtheclock.org.



DEDICATED: Mike is pictured left during a previous charitable project in Morocco. Right is the inside of a mudhif



THIS SUMMER EXPECT MORE GREAT VALUE

There's no better way to travel to France and now's a brilliant time to book a great value journey. Luxury lounges, restaurants, onboard shop, outside decks, tranquil views, all for one price for your car and up to nine people.

Expect more for your money – book with us today.

dover to calais
any duration web fare each way from

£35*

includes a car and up to 9 people

POferries.com
08712 22 01 22

P&O Ferries

Calls cost 10p per minute plus network extras. Calls from mobiles will be higher.
*Including all taxes and a £2.50 web discount. Fare applies to restricted space, sailings and dates.
Full terms and conditions apply.

dover calais • hull zeebrugge / rotterdam • cairnryan / troon larnie • liverpool dublin