

One week with JOHN GULLIVER

john.gulliver@camdennewjournal.com

Grace finds evidence of a wartime cover-up

A SCANDAL about documents destroyed in mysterious circumstances at the Foreign Office has been unearthed after painstaking detective work by a quiet-spoken Highgate author.

I was astonished to hear Grace Livingstone reveal at the launch of her book on dictators in Latin America how she had stumbled, in effect, on a "crime scene" – that the FO had destroyed 322 folders, containing thousands of documents, many of which – according to their headings – referred to vital meetings between our high-ranking civil servants and military figures from Argentina when we were supposed to be in diplomatic conflict with them over the future of the Falklands.

In researching for a PhD she discovered secret meetings and offers to allow Argentina to test the new French Exocet missiles in Cardigan Bay in Wales – missiles that were later used against our navy in the Falklands war.

Grace, who worked for short time as a reporter on the *New Journal* in the 1990s, made her discovery about the missing documents while meticulously sifting through the files at the National Archive Centre in Kew for her doctorate.

Her research lasted three years. And every day she would cycle from her home to Gospel Oak station and take the train to Kew.

Eventually, she realised there appeared to be some



Grace Livingstone

missing letters and emails.

So, she fired off a Freedom of Information request – and back came the reply that 322 folders covering the 1970s and early 80s had been disposed of.

As a seasoned researcher she knew that not all documents can be expected to be retained but she noticed from the headings of the missing 322 folders – and each folder would be expected to contain probably hundreds of documents – that some of them were clearly recording events of meetings which would prove a grave embarrassment to the government if made public.

Among them were records of a key visit by the chief of the Argentinian navy, Admiral Emilio Massera, to this country. The admiral had a shady career and after the Argentinian junta fell in 1982 he served a jail sentence for war crimes. Readers may recall

thousands of people were "disappeared" by the regime which developed the novel way of dealing with opponents – they were flown by helicopter over the Atlantic and dropped into the sea.

Other equally startling facts flew around at the launch of Grace's book at London University on Thursday – that the ratio of the 300 British soldiers killed in the Falklands War to those who later committed suicide was one-to-one. That is 300 have killed themselves since the 1982 war because of depression, homelessness and rough living on the streets.

Possibly, said Professor Bernard McGuirk, the ratio for the Argentinian army was higher.

Another speaker, 89-year-old Stan Newens regaled a hushed packed audience with stories about his opposition to the cruel dictatorship in Chile and Argentina in the 1970s and 80s, and his support as an MP of former Labour leader Michael Foot. Later he became an MEP for the central London area.

He wound up, to loud applause, saying that he offered his support to a "fellow socialist" Jeremy Corbyn.

● Grace Livingstone's book is *Britain and the Dictatorships of Argentina and Chile, 1973-82: Foreign Policy, Corporations and Social Movements* (Palgrave, Macmillan).

