

Round the world

SULLOM VOE Oil prospect

BRITAIN'S Atlantic fleet sought a safe haven in the 50 square miles of Scapa Flow, off the Orkneys, during the second world war. Today, those 50 square miles mean something else for the citizens off the islands north of Scotland: rental income from the new oil find in the Atlantic.

With the best of the North Sea oil rent now carved up, the politicians of Shetland and Orkney are competing for the landing-rights for the oil that will enrich someone for the next 20 to 30 years.

During the boom years of the '70s and early '80s, the Orkney's invested some of its oil rent revenue through the Oil Reserve Fund, which now stands at £60 million. The income is used to support community projects.

Islanders are now looking forward to another bonanza, but one Shetland councillor, Jonathan Wills, warns: "Once the hydrocarbon age is over, folks, it's back to the land".

MOSCOW Naturally!

Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, now head of an environmental protection organisation, says: "We need a new set of values to live at peace with nature."

LONDON "Heartbreak" rents

RESIDENTS in Covent Garden are heartbroken. High rents are driving out traditional shops in favour of the retail chains like Marks & Spencer.

Covent Garden used to

be London's fruit & veg. market. Residents managed to prevent it from being redeveloped into a soulless office district. But by attracting tourists, the area has become a victim of its own success. "You cannot legislate against the greed of landowners," says Ms Jo Weir, who heads the Covent Garden Community Association.

Financial institutions started to buy properties in the area as the shoppers flooded in, and they are now changing the character of Coven Garden by leasing to fast-food outlets like Pizza Hut. The small specialist shops are being driven out by high rents.

MEXICO CITY Rural conflict

CIVIL unrest in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas has surfaced again because of conflicts over land rights. The Mexican government sought to quell the uprising of Indians in January with assurances that there would be a deal giving land to the peasants. But following elections for the state governor, which the Indians claim were rigged, the Zapatista National Liberation Army's leader, "Subcommandante Marcos", has broken off talks with the government negotiator.

LONDON Sky-high rents

THE rental value of the open skies can now be calculated. Commercial firms are being told that "an effectively designed balloon can bring a return of 400% on the original investment within six months" according to the magazine Association Quest (No.5: August/Sept., p.2).

The balloons cost be-

tween £35,000 and £130,000. Stick the corporate logo on it (a device used by firms like IBM, Budweiser, the Daily Express and Citroen), send it up with a load of hot air, and Presto! The marketing benefits flow once the balloon occupies space in the sky, within visual distance of motorists and high-density pedestrian walkways.

HARARE New settlement

ROBERT Mugabe's government has backed down in its conflict with white farmers whose land was threatened with confiscation. The Zimbabwe government was embarrassed by revelations that land that was supposed to be transferred to peasants under the Land Acquisition Act 1992 was leased, instead, to government ministers. Now the government is working with the white-dominated Commercial Farmers Union - more than half of the Mugabe cabinet ministers are members - to identify "suitable" land for the resettlement programme.

DUBLIN Dead ransom

SOME OF the tenants of the 7th Earl of Lucan are refusing to pay their rents until their landlord returns from the dead. Lord Lucan has been missing for 20 years. Scotland Yard want to interview him about the murder of his children's nanny in the basement of his home in London.

In Castlebar, Co Mayo - where Michael Davitt launched the Land League over a century ago - tenants have been holding back on their rents until their "absentee landlord" turns up to collect. At one point, the

Lucan family owned 62,000 acres in the area.

Ground rents were introduced by the British. "The system is a leftover from colonial times," says Councillor Dick Morrin. "De Valera told us not to pay ground rent to absentee landlords, and they don't come much more absent than Lord Lucan. If he presents himself here, we'll pay him."

Lucan's family want him declared legally dead. His son, Lord Bingham, is being urged by his tenants to write off the rents. The locals in Castlebar say their rents funded Lord Lucan's gambling. "We can't be expected to pay rents to a fugitive from the law," explains one of them.

VIENNA Double-deals

HUNGARIAN farmland is being secretly bought by Austrian farmers for small sums of money. The purchases start with the privatisation of Hungary's cooperatives. The land is supposed to go to Hungarians, but many acres are being bought by Austrians.

The land is privatised through the state auctions. Hungarian frontmen are hired by Austrian farmers. The Hungarians "buy" the land with money supplied by Austrians, who hope that the law will be changed once Hungary falls under the influence of European Union legislation.

Meanwhile, the risk is worth taking. The price - £270 a hectare - is a bargain for the cash-rich Austrian farmers.

Last April a law was passed designed to stop speculative purchases, but this has exacerbated the problem: the foreigners are rushing to buy before the new law comes into effect, with the result that prices are being forced above levels that Hungarian farmers can afford.

News in Brief