PART A

EVOLUTION
Like the other embassies in the capital of the Ottoman Empire, the British Embassy was always called a ‘palace’ because, as Philip Mansel puts it so well, “if in other capitals ambassadors lived like princes, in Constantinople they lived like kings”.¹ They did this because of the strong and enduring belief that the Ottoman government attached particular importance to ‘outward appearances’ and because the rivalry between the great powers for influence at the Porte was always intense. They were able to do it because there was money to be made by a shrewd envoy in Constantinople in the early years, some of them even brought money with them, and sultans themselves were sometimes generous with gifts of land and buildings to their foreign guests.

In the early nineteenth century the English Palace, previously always a rented building, was given purpose-builtd premises. Despite this, their fate was not to be a happy one. With most of its buildings made of wood and the density of its population accelerating, the Ottoman capital experienced a marked increase in destructive fires in the nineteenth century,² and the British Embassy suffered along with the rest of the urban fabric. This led to great arguments as to where exactly it should be located as well as about its architecture. By the outbreak of the First World War it certainly had a palace worthy of the name but at huge and oft-lamented expense. It also had a summer embassy on the Bosphorus but most of its buildings had just burned down. It had a fleet of vessels to ply between the two but they were the smallest, slowest and oldest on the water.

¹ Mansel, Constantinople, p. 194.
² There were an astonishing 229 “extensive fires” between 1853 and 1906, which was greatly in excess of anything that had gone before, Çelik, The Remaking of Istanbul, pp. 52–3.