



The Chattri Memorial Service at Patcham, East Sussex



View from the Chattri Memorial

EVERY JUNE, on the glorious South Downs of Sussex, above Brighton and Hove, a large group gathers to commemorate the ultimate sacrifice made by hundreds of Hindu and Sikh soldiers from the Indian subcontinent who gave their lives in the Great War. This is the Chattri Service, a hugely moving and memorable event, attended by people of many faiths and from all walks of life. The High Sheriff of East Sussex is always invited to lay a wreath at this memorial service. I was honoured to be able to participate in the Chattri Service this year.

The Chattri itself is a memorial built on the site where the cremations of First World War Indian soldiers took place. These soldiers had died of war wounds in the three military hospitals established for their care, including the Brighton Pavilion, in 1914-15. The memorial was unveiled by the Prince of Wales in 1921. His Royal Highness felt very strongly that these Hindu and Sikh men had been exceptionally loyal to the Crown. Having died so many thousands of miles from their homes, it was fitting to erect an imposing memorial as a mark of respect to these brave men.

The memorial service was resurrected in the year 2000 by Davinder Dhillon DL, a Sikh teacher from Brighton. He and a small team of volunteers organise the day's proceedings which are followed by a wonderful curry lunch back at the Dorothy Stringer School in Brighton, by courtesy of The Punjab Restaurant from London. On display was the Chattri Exhibition, with photographs and historical information about the Indian soldiers' journeys from India to the Western Front and then to Brighton.

The memorial service saw dozens of wreaths laid by, among others, the Deputy High Commissioner of India, Mr Charenjeet Singh, who also gave a very

moving speech; the Lord-Lieutenant of East Sussex, Mr Peter Field; the Mayor of Brighton, Cllr Mrs Alex Phillips; and the Chief Constable of Sussex Police, Mr Giles York QPM. Many branches of the armed forces were represented. Of particular note was the presence of Mr James Whittaker and his son Rupert, the great-grandson and great-great-grandson of General Sir James Willcocks, Commander of the Indian Corps in France in 1914.

The prayers were led by leaders of several religions, including Bhai Sahib Sohan Singhji. In the wider group, there were participants from many, many faiths. People had travelled great distances to be there. One group of friends had come from Athens to commemorate great-grandparents who had fought in the Great War. We also met two young women, participants from India in a training programme for flight attendants at Gatwick, who had stumbled upon this event in their local Hindu temple in Crawley. As their brothers and fathers are currently in the Indian army, they saw the day as an opportunity to say thank you for past sacrifices and see more of the English countryside in the process. It was cheering to realise that our Sussex gathering can touch so many people around the world.

After the Chattri ceremony, the curry lunch and many photos, I felt glad to have been welcomed by this community which has such well-established traditions and which keeps close links with its history. The beginning of my shrieval year was looking very promising indeed.

◆ Violet Hancock

High Sheriff of East Sussex 2019-20



Above: At the end of the service. **Above Right:** Front row, left to right - Rupert Whittaker; James Whittaker; Violet Hancock, High Sheriff of East Sussex; Alex Phillips, Mayor of Brighton & Hove; Peter Field, Lord-Lieutenant of East Sussex; Charenjeet Singh, Deputy High Commissioner of India with Davinder Dhillon DL addressing the gathering

