

Chattri Memorial Service 2017

An Interfaith Memorial Service in honour of Indian troops who died on the Western Front during the First World War, or from their wounds in Brighton hospitals after returning to England, is held annually at the Chattri on the Brighton Downs. The Chattri, unveiled by Prince Edward, Prince of Wales, on February 21st 1921 stands on the site where Hindu and Sikh soldiers were cremated after their deaths in the First World War.

This year the Memorial Service was held on June 11th 2017. Remembering the greatly increased numbers that arrived last year, and determined not to be late, BJ and I set out earlier than usual. This was probably just as well because there was already a queue of cars and coaches climbing up the hill at Standen Lane, the turn off for the Chattri, when we arrived. We found a parking place without difficulty and walked down the hill where everyone was gathering..

Tom Donovan, who always tells BJ where to stand with the Association's wreath, was on holiday. Nevertheless BJ had no trouble in finding the partitioned off area where she joined the other wreath layers. She is becoming quite experienced now. Much as I hate admitting it, I had to bring a chair because my sense of balance has worsened over the last year. The sergeant in charge of the cadets very kindly insisted on carrying it for me, and helping me find a place to sit which was more or less on the level.

After a welcoming address by Davinder Dhillon, prayers were said before the wreath laying began. As usual the first to lay his wreath was the Indian High Commissioner Mr Y K Sinha accompanied by Defence Adviser Brigadier Rajesh Jha, and they were followed by the Lord Lieutenant of Sussex, Mr Peter Field. Following them were the High Sheriff of East Sussex Mrs Maureen Chowen, and the Mayor of Brighton and Hove Councillor Mo Marsh. Then came the turn of two members of Parliament, the Right Honourable Lloyd Russell-Moyles, member for Brighton Kemptown, and Councillors Pete West and Alex Phillips on behalf of Caroline Lucas, member for Brighton Pavilion. They were followed by the Chief Constable of Sussex, Mr Giles York. On behalf of the Ministry of Defence a wreath was then laid by Rear Admiral Graeme Mackay.

Then followed those with close connections to India. Jaimal S Johai laid a wreath in honour of his Grandfather, Subedar Manta Singh, who had been cremated here. Rajinder Singh Dhatt and Muhammad Hussain laid a wreath on behalf of the Undivided India Ex-Services Association. James Whittaker and his grandson Rupert laid a wreath on behalf of his Great Grandfather, General Wilcox, who had commanded the Indian Army on the Western Front.

The next to lay their wreaths were those connected with the Regiment. There are too many to record here, but BJ was fairly high up the list because she was laying her wreath on behalf of the Sikh Pioneer and Sikh Light Infantry Association, and one of their regiments, recorded below, had served in the trenches on the Western Front. Sitting in my chair, I was unable to watch her and decided I shall be far better with a shooting stick next year!

Once again we kept to the wording suggested by Davinder Dhillon and Tom Donovan for our wreath:-

In Memory of soldiers of the
34th Royal Sikh Pioneers
Who gave their lives serving
On the Western Front during
The First World War
Otherwise known as
The Great War

Although we did not understand a word of the prayers, all spoken and intoned in Hindi and Punjabi, the Service itself was a very moving experience. As usual it ended with the bugler sounding the Last Post and Reveille, and then it was time for photographs to be taken. The first to mount the steps of the Chattri were the distinguished guests, and then we were all invited to have our photographs taken. Climbing up steps is of course impossible for me, and BJ preferred to watch the proceedings with me.

We then made our way back to our car, and were amazed to see the huge number of cars, coaches and motorbikes that had arrived after us, far more than last year. We all left in a very orderly fashion, cars making way for others wanting to join the queue for the exit from the Chattri.

Nearly all were heading for the Dorothy Stringer School in Loder Road. As usual there was a very sumptuous meal awaiting us, and probably much needed by those who had left London early in the morning by coach. We joined the queue and found plenty of people to talk to.

Rather than sit in the dining hall at tables where all seem to know each other, BJ and I prefer to sit in the conservatory outside where we are always joined by others. Very soon two young couples, who had travelled from London by coach, sat down at our table. This was their first attendance at the service which impressed them very much. They hope to return next year and will be encouraging their friends to join them. The two boys led the conversation and one of them had stories to tell about his great grandfather who had served in the trenches on the Western Front during the First World War. He was one of the survivors. The girls were delightful but rather quiet and BJ and I could hardly get a word in either, but we greatly enjoyed sitting with them all and listening to the wartime recollections of their ancestors.

The coaches do not allow their passengers much time at the Dorothy Stringer School and those at our table soon had to leave for their return journey to London. I thought they might not like having to hurry. I was quite mistaken! They were determined to come back next year, and expected more coaches to join them. It seems that those attending this Memorial Service, for Indian soldiers who died for the British Empire, will continue growing.

This increase in numbers is largely thanks to the huge effort made by Davinder Dhillon, and in July of this year all his hard work for the Chattri Memorial Service was recognised when he received a Points of Light award from the Prime Minister. I had never heard of this award before and spent some time trying to find out about it on the internet.

Points of Light is a comparatively recent honour initiated in the United States by President Bush, and the form it took was developed during the early years of his Presidency. It is bestowed on people who have made an outstanding contribution in their voluntary work. A similar award, with the same name and modelled on the American example, was introduced into this country in 2014 and has been awarded ever since. Unfortunately information on the internet concentrates on how to become involved in voluntary work, and who has received the award, rather than the history of the award itself which is what I should have liked to write more about here.

In conclusion I think it would be appropriate to end this report by congratulating Davinder Dhillon on behalf of the Association, and wishing him continued success in increasing the numbers who attend the Chattri Memorial Service.

Kim Gibson-Wynes

SIKH PIONEERS AND SIKH LIGHT INFANTRY ASSOCIATION

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