

## Visit to the Shah Jahan Mosque in Woking

In June 2017, twenty-three members and friends of the Society visited the Shah Jahan Mosque in Woking. This is the earliest purpose-built mosque in Europe, if we exclude those built by the Moors of Islamic Spain prior to 1492.

The mosque was founded by Dr Gottlieb Leitner, a German Jew who converted to Christianity and appears never to have practiced Islam. He was appointed Head of Punjab University and after many years in India decided to settle in England and set up an Oriental Institute. He found a suitable site in Woking, within easy reach of London by train. At this time there were very few Muslims in England, and these were mostly British converts. However Dr. Leitner wanted a mosque to be attached to the Institute, and he persuaded the female ruler of Bhopal, the Begum Shah Jahan, to provide much of the money needed.



A Scottish architect, W.I. Chambers was chosen and the building was completed in 1889. At first it was used mainly by foreign visitors. The Muslim servants of Queen Victoria, including her favourite Abdul Karim would come to the mosque from Windsor.

It was built in the Indian rather than Arabic style, and as is the custom in mosques it is aligned towards Mecca. The front of the building is divided into three bays, which hold four turrets each holding a green sphere and a golden finial. The central bay contains a large ogee arch with arabesque inlay in gold on a green background. Behind this rises a large copper dome, originally painted white but now green, supporting a golden crescent. There is no minaret.



After removing our shoes we entered the building through a central quatrefoil doorway. In the wall straight ahead is the Mihrab, a recess where the Imam stands when leading the prayers. Next to this is a small platform which may be used for sermons. The interior architecture, like the exterior is beautifully symmetrical and Mughal in style. The decoration is simple and consists almost entirely of highly decorative Arabic calligraphy describing the 99 other names for God (Allah being the first one).

The Head of Learning, Shayk Naveed Arif explained to us that Muslims pray five times daily, starting at dawn and ending before midnight. The exact times will vary according to the position of the sun, and are displayed on five wooden clockfaces on the wall, with a sixth clock showing the time of the Friday prayers. At this mosque men and women can pray together, although in separate rows so as not to be a distraction to each other.

This building will only hold 50 worshippers at a time. As the Muslim population grew, two further prayer rooms were added by converting storerooms once used by an adjoining factory, which can be reached through a garden. The original building is usually now only used for the early morning prayers when numbers are fairly small. The new prayer rooms will hold up to 2,000 worshippers, but even this is now not always enough during Friday prayers and important occasions such as Eid, which marks the end of Ramadan. The mosque authorities would like to build more facilities but are constrained by Tree Preservation Orders and the local council's requirement that the mosque can be seen from the nearby railway line.

Our visit took place during the last few days of Ramadan, and in each of the larger prayer rooms an area had been curtained off (one for men and one for women) so that those who wished to could fast and pray for 24 hours or more in seclusion.

There was plenty of time for our questions. Mr Arif and the mosque Manager Muhammed Habib talked frankly about the recent terrorist activity and the need for mosques to condemn all acts of violence as well as looking out for any extremist tendencies within their membership. They also told us something of the work that they do in the wider community. Last year they received 100 school visits. They host Police Training Days and hold open days. They work closely with the Anglican church across the road and by welcoming groups such as ours they do all they can to foster understanding between people of all faiths and none.



In one of the large prayer rooms we met a mosque volunteer. Jamil came originally from Kashmir and sported a splendid hat. He recited a prayer in Arabic and English and then gave a reading from the Quran which had much in common with parts of the Bible.

We then moved on to a third building, the Sir Salah Jang Memorial Hall. This was built around the same time as the mosque, in an attractive Victorian Islamic style. On the first floor is a flat for the Imam, and two further flats which help to provide an income for the mosque. On the ground floor there is a meeting room for the community, and a library of religious books in Arabic and English. Our visit ended here, with refreshments which our hosts very generously supplied but were unable to share in as they were observing Ramadan.

*Jenny Murray 2017*