

Once again the Churches Committee not only organised a fascinating and informative visit, but also arranged for the sun to shine on this late September Saturday! This meant that, as we drove through the gateway to the Gurdwara, the marble and granite building glinted in the sunlight and the beautifully kept flower borders added to the welcome. While we were gathered on the forecourt, David Carder introduced our guide, RajVinder Singh Gill, and we showed our appreciation of the forthcoming visit with a warm round of applause as clapping is not permitted inside the Temple. We had been sent guidelines regarding dress and behaviour prior to the visit and removed our shoes and donned head-scarves in the foyer. RajVinder assisted many of the men as they attempted to tie head-scarves correctly. After washing our hands we moved into the Gurdwara.

RajVinder showed us around, explaining as we moved from room to room the different functions of each one and the ethos and symbolism of Sikhism. The building can be entered through four doors, one on each side of the building, to show that you can enter from any direction. The Gurdwara is a building in which to meet other people and to be part of a vibrant community.

The Sikh community arrived in Gravesend from East Africa in the 1950s and 1960s to work in the extensive docks and factories. Building of the temple was commenced in 2000 and the community moved into it in 2010. So far it has cost £14m and a further £1m is needed to complete the building. The site was originally wasteland. It is the biggest in Europe and is modelled on the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Indian craftsmen were employed to carve the marble, granite and wood in panels. These were then shipped to England in 'flat pack' form and erected on site. The outside of the building is granite as Indian marble would not withstand British weather. The Sikh community of about 8-10,000 people is very much part of Gravesend and welcome all into their Gurdwara.

Sikhism was founded in the 15th century by Guru Nanak Sahib. Unlike Hinduism, there is no caste system as the Guru felt that humans should be judged by their deeds and not place of birth, hierarchy or gender. The Sikh religious text, Guru Granth Sahib, is considered to be a live person and consists of verses gathered together in the early days of Sikhism from around the known world. It is therefore written in several different languages. Sikhs meditate three times a day and in the Gurdwara music is very much part of the meditation. There is no formal priesthood as no one person holds the truth, but scholars visit and stay in the Gurdwara for two weeks before moving on. RajVinder explained the meaning of the different symbols of their faith. We had covered our heads to hold ourselves in one place and removed our shoes in order to leave the hurts and problems of the world outside the building.

Our visit ended with a meal, provided by the community every day for any who require food, reflecting the acts of charity performed since Sikhism was founded. This account really cannot cover everything that we were told, saw and experienced and I apologise if I have missed something of importance or misrepresented what we were told. There was a lot to take in and I'm sure that many of the group found, as I did, that it was an uplifting visit.

Our sincere thanks go to RajVinder for his detailed explanations and to David Carder of the Churches Committee for suggesting and organising this visit to a place of worship so different to the usual locations. Besides looking at the fabric and history of the building, it also fulfilled another of the committee's objectives: that of finding out about the community connected with the building.

José Gibbs