

# The Shah Jehan Mosque, Woking An Unexpected Gem

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with acknowledgements to **Khalil Martin**

**For over 100 years, commuters on the Waterloo to Portsmouth Harbour line have caught an occasional glimpse of one of England's most unusual listed buildings.**

**T**he Shah Jehan Mosque in Woking is northern Europe's earliest surviving purpose-built mosque. Its architectural distinction and historical importance are recognised in its designation as a Grade II\* listed building.

Its origins and history are as intriguing as its architecture. The building was commissioned by Hungarian-born linguist and scholar Dr Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner (1840–99). The son of Jewish converts to Protestantism, Leitner was educated in Istanbul as a consequence of his widowed mother's remarriage to a Levant missionary.

At a Muslim college, Leitner mastered Turkish and Arabic, displaying extraordinary linguistic prowess at an early age. At 15, he could speak eight languages fluently and was appointed interpreter to the British Commissariat in the Crimea. At 19, he became lecturer in Arabic, Turkish and Modern Greek and at 23 was made Professor of Arabic and Muslim law at King's College, London. In 1864, he was made Principal of Government College in Lahore, a connection of considerable importance in the history of the Woking mosque. He dedicated himself to the study of the languages, art and culture of the Indian sub-continent, transforming the college into the University of the Punjab.

Returning to England in 1881, Leitner devoted himself to the foundation of a European centre for oriental studies, a quest that brought him to Woking. In 1883, he acquired the buildings of the defunct Royal Dramatic College in Woking, a short-lived attempt to create a centre for the performing arts and a home for retired theatrical

professionals. This became the home of the Oriental Institute.

## The Oriental Institute

The Institute prepared Asian students for careers in the professions and offered language training to Europeans wishing to live and work in the East. Leitner filled the Institute's newly acquired home with an outstanding collection of Greek and Indian art, including a large collection of Punjabi fabrics. It also became a powerhouse for the publication of academic journals in Sanskrit, Arabic and English. By the 1890s, it was offering degree courses affiliated to the University in Lahore, although it failed to secure full independent University status.

Leitner also concerned himself with the spiritual life of the students of his Institute and launched an ambitious plan to build a mosque, a synagogue, a church and a temple, setting aside parcels of land on which to build. Work on the mosque began first, due to generous donations from the Nizam of Hyderabad and the Begum Shah Jehan of Bhopal. The foundations of the Hindu temple were also laid, although further building was frustrated by Leitner's untimely death in 1899. The plots for the synagogue and temple were sold, although the church, St Paul's, Oriental Road, was completed in 1895.

## The mosque

The mosque was designed by English architect WI Chambers, who drew heavily on Indian architectural styles studied in the India Office

Library. It opened in October or November 1889, following considerable efforts to ensure that the building was correctly orientated: 'A seaman of the P&O boat kindly went to Woking and took the bearings.' Although small in scale, the building is dignified and well proportioned, square on plan, with a wide, welcoming portal flanked by apsidal pavilions providing facilities for ritual ablutions.

The interior, under a spherical dome, is

simple, with calligraphic decoration its principal enrichment. Gold stars dot the interior of the dome, and the principal focus of the small space is the niche in the east wall, the mihrab, indicating the direction of Makkah.

To the north is the iman's residence, a spacious two-storey brick house with stone detailing echoing that of the mosque. The two buildings stand in a landscaped park with trees screening the nearby railway line



The mihrab, indicating the direction of Makkah, of Shah Jehan Mosque, Woking, Surrey, Europe's oldest purpose-built mosque and now a Grade II\* listed building.

and a busy road. While the students of the Institute were the most regular worshippers, the mosque has always served a wider Muslim community. Queen Victoria's Indian attendants made occasional trips from Windsor, and the Shah of Persia, the Begum of Bhopal and the Emperor Haile Selasse were among its most distinguished visitors.

### Later developments

The Oriental Institute was very much Leitner's creation, reliant on his energy and wealth, and after his death it was disbanded and its buildings, art collections and land sold. The mosque remained closed until 1912, when Indian lawyer and Muslim scholar Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din of Lahore noticed a newspaper advertisement for a 'mosque for sale' while in England conducting a case before the Privy Council. The mosque was on the point of being sold for demolition, but Khwaja took the case to the High Court, arguing that as a consecrated place of worship it enjoyed the same rights as a church and could not simply be demolished. He won his case and acquired the mosque, which he reopened in 1913, with the support of the Lahore Ahmadadiyya Movement, founding the Woking Muslim Mission and Literary Society. The Mission published the first English translation of the Qu'ran in 1917 and the influential *Islamic Review*.

Khawaja Kamal-ud-Din had almost been converted by Christian missionaries in India but instead was inspired to bring Islam to England, giving up a lucrative legal practice to do so. His mission enjoyed early success. By 1924, there were 1,000 English converts to Islam, most of them high ranking, well educated and articulate. Woking was the spiritual heart of this nascent convert community. One of its most prominent members was Lord Headley, who campaigned for the foundation of a mosque in London, the capital of an Empire with more Muslim than Christian subjects. Despite the foundation of mosques in Berlin in 1926 and Paris in 1928, London's central mosque in Regent's Park opened only in the 1970s.

In the 1950s and 1960s, growing numbers of Muslim immigrants from Pakistan and the Indian sub-continent arrived in England. Woking's mosque naturally attracted Muslim families to the area. In 1960, for example, over 4,000 people gathered in Woking to celebrate the festival of Eid Al Fitr. In 1968, Sunni Muslims took over the running of the mosque. With a growing community of worshippers,

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it continues to serve as an important place of prayer, devotion and education. Today, the Woking Muslim population is estimated at approximately 5,000, predominantly from the Kashmir and Mirpur areas of Pakistan. The mosque, which can accommodate about 60 worshippers, is used every day for the five daily prayers. Between 700 and 1,000 worshippers attend the Friday mid-day congregational prayer, and on these occasions, and at other times when the congregation is too large to fit into the original mosque, prayers are conducted in a nearby building converted for the purpose.

The special significance of the mosque is highlighted in a current project coordinated by English Heritage. In May 2004, a group of Indian ex-servicemen from Slough visited the mosque as part of the project, exploring historic sites relevant to the experience of Indian Servicemen who fought in the World Wars. Muslim soldiers who died of wounds in hospitals along the south coast were buried in a purpose-built Muslim burial ground near the mosque. Their graves are now found in the military section of the nearby Brookwood Cemetery. The visits have contributed to an oral history project and will inform a travelling exhibition planned for the south-east in Spring 2006. More information may be obtained from [Cynara.Davies@english-heritage.org.uk](mailto:Cynara.Davies@english-heritage.org.uk).

The main façade of the Shah Jehan Mosque, Woking (Grade II\*).