

In December 2021, I joined a walk to the Chattri, a memorial dedicated to the Indian Army soldiers of the First World War. The Chattri sits high on the South Downs, on the outskirts of Brighton – it's in a beautiful setting, however, it is hard to reach and to many it is hidden.

Seeing the Chattri that day was an important event for me. It evoked feelings and thoughts of dislocation and belonging and fuelled a desire to explore more of my own history. My family is from Guyana in South America – three generations ago, they left India as indentured labourers to travel to the colony of British Guiana.

After the Chattri walk, we had a tour of the Pavilion and the Dome. Dulani spoke of how these sites were transformed into a military hospital during the First World War and between December 1914 and February 1916, the Estate treated over 2,300 injured Indian soldiers. In total, 12,000 were hospitalised in different places around Brighton.

In December 2023, our writing group were invited back to see the Pavilion and the Dome and also the newly refurbished Corn Exchange.

It was another evocative experience and what follows are my reflections from that day.

Shirini Heerah

Reflections at the Dome

I don't know, here we go again
the Dome is up the road
it's only 15 minutes away
but it's miles for me to connect

I'm steeped in complex history
in the Royal Pavilion Estate
as I stretch my eyes to see or touch
any reference to the Indian soldiers of old

a centre of cultural richness
a dome, a stable, a regal home
a hospital, a dance hall, a piano and a writing zone.

The Corn Exchange refreshed
an acoustic heaven in wood
with a Sunday audience that rises up
from a stage that can move back and forth.

The Pavilion, soft carpet and muffled tones,
a Chinese warrior on a chandelier
looks down at a peacock on the floor

red, gold, gilded and bright.
I seek the soul
imagining the Indian men lying here.
What would they have thought –

a palace to recover in or a waiting room to hell?

I look for signs of their sacrifice –
photos on the wall
some permanent visual reminder
to tell everyone of their temporary home

there's an exhibition upstairs, I'm told
Bring it down, make one of the rooms a ward –
let's fill the space with their voices in this iconic quarter
that royalty and world class artists have adorned!

Back in Anita's Room, the archive materials await
images, posters and programmes
coated with history and laminate.

Scattered there, names from my youth –
David Essex, Jimi Hendrix, Abba – smiling in the grounds
David Bowie's contract – he was paid £125!
And suddenly, I'm sad that so many years have gone.

I sit, I contemplate, and then my bones begin to warm
at those concerts and shows that I remember made my heart soar
Anoushkha Shankar, Akram Khan, Amina Khayyam and her Kathak dance
the Indian women survivors in Nirbhaya (Fearless), who asked those who'd been abused to stand
and David Olusoga in the festival vibe and his decolonisation of history talk

outstanding performances, I will never forget
at this site that calls for reorientation – an adjustment of sorts –
with minarets that reverberate shadows of the past
and architecture that leaves me cold

The Dome is on my doorstep
it's a venue to behold
but whenever I come here, I'm aware
it takes time for me to own

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