

Wokingham Remembers

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EXHIBITION

A showcase of India's valour in the Great War

On show until the end of the month, a new display aims to tell the story of the help the allies received during the First World War from Asia.

VIVIENNE JOHNSON explains

A NEW exhibition featuring rarely seen material sheds light on the major contribution that Sikh and Indian soldiers made in the First World War.

The display is on show at Reading Museum until the end of the month and aims to help the Punjabi community in Wokingham and Reading to engage with its own history and heritage - although the exhibition is open to everyone.

The month-long display, called Legacy of Valour, was opened on Saturday, August 1, with a special delegation headed up by the High Commissioner of India to the UK, HE Ranjan Mathai and James Puxley, the Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire.

Also attending was the Mayor of Wokingham Borough, councillor Parry Bath, and Reading West MP Alok Sharma.

Legacy Of Valour aims to tell the story of how India helped the allies during the First World War by providing a massive volunteer army. Between 1914 and 1918, the country provided 1.5million soldiers and support personnel, fighting in all major theatre of war.

To help tell the story, exhibition organiser Inderpal Singh Dhanjal gathered together many rare items that have not been seen for a generation.

Mr Dhanjal said: "The exhibition hosts many rare documents and photographs that have not been viewed in public over a century. It will also highlight the connection of Indian pilots with Reading town where they were trained as Royal Flying Corps (RFC) combat pilots.

"Not many people are aware of these facts."

Indian High Commissioner, Mr Mathai said: "It is important to remember that the Indians entered the war in 1914, very shortly after it was declared.

"Within a month, boys from India started landing in Marseille, in a place they could never ever imagine in their lives, when they were driven to the battlefields and the trenches.

"Here on the Western Front, they fought in horrific conditions, not just in the cold, this was slaughter on an industrial scale, which even the most hard soldiers from any army are completely unused to. Yet they made such a decisive contribution and won all those Victoria Crosses.

"People often ask, why did they sign up? Why did they volunteer to fight in a war they had no understanding of?

"Well simply, there is a tradition in many families,



Open to all - guests gather for the official opening of the Legacy of Valour exhibition at Reading Museum. From left: Alok Sharma MP, James Puxley, the Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire, exhibition organiser Inderpal Singh Dhanjal, the High Commissioner of India to the UK, HE Ranjan Mathai and Wokingham Borough mayor Parry Baath and his wife Surinder. Pictures: Paul King



in many villages, that you go yourself. Your father did it so you did it. And once you join, it is loyalty to your regiment, loyalty to your sense of honour and the pride of comradeship that drove these men with the sense that one day India will benefit for all that they have done and all of their sacrifice."

Speaking after the event, Mr Sharma said: "The Legacy of Valour exhibition is a poignant reminder of the extraordinary contribution and incredible sacrifice that individual Indian soldiers made.



Memorials and graves of fallen Indian soldiers are to be found in 60 countries showing the extent of their sacrifice.

"The story of the Indian contribution is seldom told and talked about and I would therefore encourage everyone to visit Reading Museum before the end of the month to see the full exhibition."

Also at the launch was Mike Churcher, custodian of the Wokingham Remembers website and this very page. He has compiled a special report about the Indians' contribution to the First World War and the connections to Wokingham which can be viewed on the Wokingham Remembers website. "India provided Britain with a massive volunteer army in its hour of need with over 1.5million Indian soldiers and support personnel serving during 1914 to 1918.

"Their contribution to the early part of the war was especially critical; Britain had seen most of its professional army wiped out by the summer of 1915 and Kitchener's army were not ready to fight until the September of that year."

■ The exhibition is on show at Reading Museum in Blagrove Street in the main gallery until August 31. A second, smaller, exhibition is on display on the ground floor and remains on show until January 10 next year. For more details call the Museum on 0118 937 3400.

■ To read Mike's piece, log on to www.wokinghamremembers.com

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