



Hidden Histories of World War One: Ramgarhia Sikh Tapestry Project

A collaboration between the Ramgarhia Social Sisters
and the Centre for Hidden Histories





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Common Cause Research

This case study was produced in 2018 as part of the Common Cause Research project.

Common Cause aimed to document and explore existing collaborative research between universities and Black and ethnic minority community organisations. The project was funded under the AHRC Connected Communities Programme and included partners from University of Bristol, University of Liverpool, Xtend, University of Nottingham and Runnymede Trust.

We hope that these case studies will provide inspiration to those thinking of engaging in collaborative research, as well as insight into the challenges and benefits of such partnerships. Our intention in these case studies is to document the relationship between the partners from the academic institution and the community organisation. We have not evaluated the projects or engaged with the project participants. However, by capturing the perspectives of the partners, we hope to understand the structural and practical support needed to initiate and run projects involving universities and Black and minority ethnic organisations.

You can find more case studies, resources and information about Common Cause Research at www.commoncauseresearch.com.

At A Glance

Title

Hidden Histories of World War One:
Ramgarhia Sikh Tapestry Project

Key Partners

Centre for Hidden Histories

<http://hiddenhistorieswwi.ac.uk/about/>

Ramgarhia Gurdwara

<http://igurudwara.com/ramgarhia-board-gurdwara-leicester/>

Funder

Arts and Humanities Research Council

Dates

2015

Website

- <http://hiddenhistorieswwi.ac.uk/uncategorized/2016/12/impact-professor-mike-heffernan-and-the-ramgharia-sikh-tapestry-project/>
- [Video of a presentation about the project](#)



Project Summary

Ramgarhia Sikh Tapestry Project was funded by the Centre for Hidden Histories, which is based at the University of Nottingham, to undertake work during 2015. The collaboration was between a group of Sikh women in Leicester and two academic advisors from the University of Nottingham who are also Co-Investigators with the Centre for Hidden Histories. The collaborators were supported by a Community Education Manager (CEM) from Leicester City Council who brokered the initial connection between the women and the Centre for Hidden Histories. The aim of the Sikh Tapestry project was to support the women to undertake research on the contribution of Sikh soldiers to the First World War, and their research informed the creation of an embroidered tapestry that represents Sikh involvement in this war and reflects the Sikh culture, faith and art. The tapestry was also informed by the women's own family histories linked to the First World War. This case study is based on group discussion and feedback in which nine of the fourteen women participating in the project, one of the academic Co-investigators and the CEM from Leicester City Council participated.

Ramgarhia Gurdwara in Leicester is a faith organisation catering for the religious, social, cultural and educational needs and interests of the Ramgarhia Sikh community. The women participating in the Ramgarhia Sikh Tapestry project are from the Sikh community in Leicester who have links with the Gurdwara.

The Centre for Hidden Histories is one of five World War One Engagement Centres, established by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), to support community engagement activities that seek to reflect on and commemorate the legacy of the First World War. A key aspect of work undertaken by the Centres is to

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connect researchers from universities with communities. The lead university for the Centre for Hidden Histories is the University of Nottingham. The Centre has a consortium of staff from the universities of Nottingham, Derby, Nottingham Trent, Leeds, Manchester Metropolitan, and Goldsmiths University of London. Themes of particular interest to the Centre for Hidden Histories include migration and displacement, the impact of this and subsequent legacies of the First World War on diverse communities within Britain.

Women participating in the Ramgarhia Sikh Tapestry Project were the first community group to engage with the Centre for Hidden Histories' work with communities, the connection having been brokered through the CEM from Leicester City Council. The women were supported by two academics from the University of Nottingham, who are also Co-Investigators with the Centre for Hidden Histories, to undertake research by visiting memorials, museums and exhibitions. The CEM supported the women to develop their ideas and project into a tapestry depicting Sikh involvement in the First World War (WWI); working on a tapestry enabled the women to apply their skills and experience gained through work in the textile industry. Support from the academics also enabled the women's personal stories about their family and community links to WWI to be located in the context of documentary history. These approaches enabled the knowledge and expertise held by academics and community participants to be brought together and inform the development of the tapestry. Its design was also informed by the religious and cultural guidelines obtained through consultation with the wider Sikh community and religious leaders at the Gurdwara. The key aim of the project was to research and bring to light the hidden history of Sikh contribution to WWI, and in doing so the project also encouraged engagement in historical research, life-long learning and an awareness of the history of WWI in the Sikh community. The tapestry has



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been displayed in several venues along with presentations about the project, and it has informed work in schools with pupils and families to share the learning and encourage them to look into their own family histories. Two further tapestries are planned and work is already under way on the second; it was envisaged at the start of the project that there was potential for work to continue beyond the grant allocated to undertake research and produce the first tapestry.

How the collaboration came about

The connection between the Sikh women's group and the Centre for Hidden Histories was brokered by the Community Education Manager at Leicester City Council, who, wanted to connect with diverse communities as part of the Council's work on community education. It was in this context that, through another colleague at the Council who was from the Sikh community, the CEM contacted one of the ladies from the Gurdwara a founding member of 'Ramgarhia Social Sisters' that was established through the Gurdwara some 21 years previously, to talk about learning skills work that the Council was undertaking and whether there was interest in the community to engage with this. The founding member of 'Ramgarhia Social Sisters' then contacted and mentioned this to the other women at the Gurdwara and in her wider network. This resulted in the first craft workshop with a group of Sikh women, a one-off activity provided by the Council; the budget was limited so it wasn't possible for the Council to undertake further work and propose a more sustainable approach to working with the women. However, the craft workshop demonstrated that there was scope to develop further activities with the women and encourage them to recognise and further develop their knowledge and skills.

The CEM from the Council became aware of the Centre for Hidden Histories AHRC funding and approached the University of Nottingham, with an idea based on the one-off craft workshop undertaken with the Ramgarhia Social Sisters. A meeting was then arranged with representatives from the Gurdwara to present the idea of developing a project with the ladies, many of whom had participated in the craft workshop. Initial conversations highlighted that the ladies had family stories of relatives and other members of their community fighting in WWI, one having kept her grandfather's uniform stored in her wardrobe at home. Many hidden skills of the women came to the fore in these conversations and the fact that several of them had worked in the textile industry in Leicester also came to light. The ladies were

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interested to participate in a potential project. Two academics from the University who were linked with the Centre for Hidden Histories had an interest and expertise in Indian history and geography, they supported the idea proposed by the CEM and subsequently went on to support the ladies in undertaking their research.

The first meeting between the CEM from the Council and representatives from the Gurdwara was also attended by the Community Liaison Officer from the Centre for Hidden Histories. This meeting shed light on the fact that when history is taught to students the focus tends to be on the European contribution to WWI; in particular British, French and German contributions, and this war comes to be seen as a European war. The ladies saw the need for and wanted to shed light on the Sikh contribution to WWI.

Following this first meeting, the person leading on behalf of the Sikh women informed them about the discussion and the outcome was that they were keen to develop the project. Before pursuing the idea of the project further, the Sikh women first sought permission from the Gurdwara about whether the project could be taken forward and received a positive response. It was after receiving this go-ahead that the decision was taken to apply for a grant from the Centre for Hidden Histories. There was a long lead-in time between this decision and the start of the project and this is described as helpful because it gave time to build relationships and trust between the collaborators.

Ramgarhia Sikh Tapestry Project was the first to be undertaken with a community group by the Centre for Hidden Histories and is described by the academic partner as informing subsequent collaborations with other communities.

The academic partner relates that the University would have struggled to establish contact with the women without the broker role played by the CEM from the Council. Community participants, when asked in the discussion for this case study if they had thought about contacting a University before this collaboration took

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place, said they would not have thought about this because they didn't think their stories would be of interest to people outside of their families and community. The feedback illustrates the importance of brokerage; from the colleague of the CEM at the Council brokering contact with one of the women at the Gurdwara, who then acted as intermediary with other women in her network, to the CEM brokering contact with the Centre for Hidden Histories. A long lead-in time before securing the funding is described as helpful in this collaboration because it enabled relationships and trust to be established before the project commenced.



Developing collaborative research

The idea to produce a tapestry came from the women, encouraged by the Council CEM to make something of their skills. The academic input during early discussions about the possibility of developing a project, enabled the ladies' own knowledge and anecdotes to be put into some historical context and facilitated the idea of a research project to be realised.

Discussions regarding race, ethnicity, and collaboration were not a specific focus for discussion; the subject of researching and recording this history informed the collaboration and focus of the research. Academic input is described as important to enabling the women to understand the research aspect of the project and how this could inform producing the tapestry; importantly, it also enabled them to gain confidence in undertaking the research.

No particular challenges, other than time, were encountered in developing the research activities. Once the idea for creating a tapestry was agreed the challenges were around agreeing and following the religious and cultural guidelines, such as what colours should be used for the tapestry and where particular items should be placed such as the embroidery of Guru Gobind Singh. These issues were addressed by the women consulting with the wider Sikh community and religious leaders at the Gurdwara.

Academic partners saw their role as enabling the community to do the research and not them stepping in to undertake the research themselves. They guided the women about where to look for information and how to examine documentation, places to visit such as memorials, museums or exhibitions. The women then undertook the research and related site visits. The Council CEM encouraged and supported the women to recognise and apply their skills and this is described as an important motivating factor by the women.

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A lack of spoken English, or confidence to speak the language, can be a barrier to participation and a projects such as this is described as enabling people in this predicament to be supported and encouraged to take part. Participating in a group where the women already know each other also builds confidence because this provides a trusted source of encouragement and support

The approach to developing the women's idea for a tapestry, informed by research they were supported to undertake by the academic team, is described as working well. Academic input provided the women with confidence to undertake the research and the Council CEM's input provided further support and motivation for the women to believe in their skills and abilities to undertake the project. The established connection between the Gurdwara and the women enabled access to religious and cultural advice in creating the tapestry and the established connection between the women enabled them to support each other to undertake project tasks.

Funding

A grant of 10k was awarded by the Centre for Hidden Histories. The academic partner led on developing and submitting the bid by agreement with the community group and consulted with them to devise a breakdown of costs.

The grant was to support start-up of the project which could continue beyond the available funding. In this sense there is no end date as such for the project beyond the funding period of the grant and the work can continue in various ways; more tapestries can be made, more dissemination and other events can be held and so on, for as long as the community group want to continue. No particular challenges are highlighted in relation to either the process of application for funding or that the small grant was being awarded as a start-up.

The women highlight the following messages to funders:

- **Make funding available for this work is good: the group were keen to do this work and the funding has enabled them to take it forward. Without the grant, they would not have been able to do things such as fund the trips to undertake their research or buy materials for the tapestry. The women gave their time for free and members of the group are not all in a position to fund trips or buy items needed for the project.**
- **Make people aware it is possible to do this work: most people are not aware about such possibilities and would not see themselves as researchers, or that people might be interested in their stories.**

The academic partner highlights that small pots of funding are a good thing for start-ups like this to get things moving. Larger sums of money can complicate matters by becoming unmanageable due to the additional bureaucracy involved in overseeing and administering bigger grants, managing more systems and

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people. People want to do this work, but it can be difficult to develop and undertake on top of other demands and responsibilities; having someone recognise the potential, provide encouragement and support to get started and access funding are important motivators in enabling communities to engage in and undertake their own research.

Undertaking the research

The academic partners, two Co-Investigators linked to the Centre for Hidden Histories, provided advice to the community group on relevant documented history relating to Sikh soldiers in the First World War, how to access and examine documentation and advised on places the ladies could visit to acquire relevant insights and information. The women then undertook the visits to memorials, museums and exhibitions. This is described as important for the project and also for gaining personal learning and knowledge; the women didn't know about these places or how to go about identifying relevant information. Fourteen women participated in the project. More specifically, the places visited include:

- The Chattri Memorial in Brighton which was unveiled in 1921 to honour Indian soldiers who died in the First World War. It stands in the location where Hindu and Sikh soldiers were cremated after dying in war hospitals in Brighton.
- The Cenotaph in London, the UK's national war memorial
- The War Memorial in Victoria Park Leicester, an arch designed by the architect Lutyens who also designed many of the buildings in New Delhi, India; thereby providing a link between Leicester, India and WWI.
- The Tower of London's installation of ceramic poppies marking one hundred years since Britain's involvement in WWI.
- The Empire, Faith and War exhibition at Brunei Gallery at SOAS University of London commemorating the contribution and experiences of Sikh Soldiers in WWI. The exhibition was part of a three year project and the first major exhibition on Sikhs in WWI.
- Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire which was the Home of Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India from 1898 to 1905 and houses a collection of Indian artefacts.



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- **This kind of research is described by both academic and community partners as accessible to communities and they can undertake it with relative ease, as compared to more complex research methods that academics might apply.**

The women gained considerable knowledge and insights from their research including:

- **When WWI started the Sikhs formed less than 2% of the Indian population but represented 22% of the Indian army.**
- **How the soldiers coped with travelling, living and fighting a war in European countries that were considerably different to their social and military experience and environments in India. For example, a colder climate and not being used to fighting in trenches.**
- **How the soldiers were received by Europeans and European reactions to having Sikh soldiers on their soil.**
- **The role of Sikh women during the war including in Britain; such as the story of the Sikh Princess Sophia, a granddaughter of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, she was a suffragette and a nurse who played a key role in Britain and in helping Sikh soldiers to convalesce in Brighton.**

A wide range of craft and design skills were apparent among women participating in the project and these were matched to inform developing artwork for the tapestry. For example, those who could sew led on this work, those who could embroider applied these skills, others who didn't sew or embroider but could knit were accommodated to contribute these skills, and those with drawing skills sketched the outlines to be embroidered on cloth. In this way, all participants felt able to meaningfully engage and contribute to the project.

The Gurdwara was the meeting point for the women to work on the tapestry and this is described as a good location for them because it was a familiar space. If women were unable to come to the Gurdwara or only come for a short time, they

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could take work home or have the other women drop off the work to them. This coming together and working together is described as being good for the women's health and well-being.

Research undertaken by the women and the spiritual elements of Sikhism informed the design of the tapestry. The wider Sikh community and religious leaders at the Gurdwara were also consulted to ensure religious and spiritual guidelines were honoured in developing the tapestry; such as the appropriate colours to be used and where on the tapestry specific emblems should be placed. The finished work presents:

- **Guru Gobind Singh is recognised as a Guru for warriors. Sikh soldiers look to him as their spiritual leader. In the tapestry he looks down on soldiers located in the middle of the tapestry.**
- **A poem written by Guru Gobind Singh which has become an anthem recited by Sikhs before going into battle.**
- **Sikh soldiers on horseback carrying the British flag.**
- **Paisley patterns which symbolise a link between India and Britain because paisley shawls were imported to Europe in large quantities by the East India Company.**
- **Poppies. These were the first to be created for the tapestry with input from a community tutor and their inclusion was informed by the women's visit to see the ceramic poppies at the Tower of London.**

The knowledge and information gained from researching, developing and delivering this project will inform the next two tapestries the women intend to make. The second tapestry, on which work had already commenced, will focus on war memorials and include the ones visited by the women as part of their research for the first tapestry, namely the Chattri memorial in Brighton, the Cenotaph in London and the memorial arch at Victoria Park in Leicester. The third tapestry will

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focus on depicting the lives of the Sikh soldiers, their families, how the soldiers travelled to Europe and coped in a new country.

The completed first tapestry and a related presentation were made at the Gurdwara, attended by 150 people from the Sikh community, which is described as an indication of how interested the Sikh community are in this history.

No significant challenges were encountered while undertaking the research activities. Support and advice from the University is described as giving the women confidence to undertake their own research, and it is not something they say they would have done without the input and advice of academics and the encouragement and support of the Council CEM. Enabling the women to recognise and use their skills is described as important to their feeling confident that they could undertake the research and apply this to developing a tapestry.

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Roles and responsibilities

An informal approach was adopted to allocating roles and responsibilities based on individual skills and availability of individuals to undertake tasks at the time they needed to be done. One of the women took on a coordinating role to provide a central point of contact both for the other women and the academics. The two academic Co-investigators had an advisory role and the Council CEM supported the women on as needed through regular contact. Otherwise there was no specific or formal allocation of roles and responsibilities.

The challenge was fitting work on the project around the women's other family, community and work responsibilities. Otherwise the informal approach worked well because the women already knew each other and were keen for this project to be undertaken successfully.

Roles and responsibilities are described as working well and a shared sense of responsibility was achieved, with the result that the informal approach worked well for this project.

Accountability

The approach to accountability is also described as informal. The small grant was a start-up and the role of the University was to advise and support the women to undertake their research. In this sense there was no need for formal accountabilities to be put in place. There was sufficient trust that people would do the agreed work and the women describe having an informal sense of responsibility to each other. This approach is described as working well and no particular challenges are highlighted.



Outputs and legacy

Several tangible outputs and intangible outcomes are highlighted: tangible outputs include:

- **The finished tapestry representing the Sikh contribution to World War I.**
- **Several presentations, that are still ongoing, to promote and display the tapestry and disseminate the learning. One of the presentations, including the tapestry, can be viewed [here](#) and the women are happy to be invited to give a 20 minute presentation.**
- **Ongoing talks and workshops delivered to schoolchildren and their parents.**
- **Television and media coverage about the project on BBC Radio Leicester in February 2015, in Sahib International Panjabi Magazine in October 2015 and on the international Sikh TV channel, Sangat, in October 2015.**

No academic papers are planned and this was not a purpose or requirement of the grant. However, the requirement now for universities to demonstrate impact has led the academic partner to consider submitting the project as an impact case study, and this will be discussed with community participants and submitted with their permission. The academic partner highlights not being entirely comfortable with the idea that submitting the project as an impact case study might indicate that it is the work of the University that has made the impact; because the University has played a largely enabling role and it is the women working on the project who have created the impact. This is to be discussed between university and community partners before reaching a decision as to whether the project is to be submitted as an impact case study.

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Intangible outputs include the increased knowledge, skills and learning that the women have gained. Social benefits are highlighted, arising from the women meeting more regularly than they did before working on the project, and this is described as deepening the friendships and support between them. Some of the women have been able to establish their own family's links and contributions to the WWI in more detail and describe feeling moved and happy to share their stories beyond immediate family and friends. Participation in the project has enabled this. In one case, medals awarded to a relative of one participant came to light as a result of working on the project; another member of the group had kept her grandfather's uniform which was stored away at her home and related how moved she feels to be able to show and share this as part of the project.

The presentations and workshops delivered by the women in schools have inspired pupils and parents to look into their own histories and also to learn more about the contribution of Sikh soldiers. The work in schools is described as important because this history is not known or taught and remains hidden.

Staff from the University and the Council relate they have benefitted from gaining considerable knowledge about Sikhism and about working with communities on a project such as this.

The outputs produced to date are owned by the community participants.

The tapestry was displayed as part of the Military History Live event in Leicester in June 2017, including presentations of work completed by children through the follow on work delivered by the women to support Family Learning.

Representing Communities

The fourteen women participating in the project were recruited by word of mouth through those initially contacted by the Council CEM. All had existing links with the Gurdwara and range in age between 30 and 80 years. The women are representing themselves and highlight that, through their research, they are also representing the Sikh people who contributed to WWI and to some extent also the community of the Gurdwara where the project has been taking place.

In order to achieve fair representation of the Sikh community and religion, open and honest conversations took place, before the project started, between the women interested in working on the project and other people in the Gurdwara. The Giani at the Gurdwara, a person who has achieved spiritual and religious knowledge and often leads the congregation in prayer, was asked for advice and permissions when needed.

The women feel they are representing themselves and nobody else is translating their experience. They have undertaken the research themselves, created the tapestry, they deliver workshops and give presentations and, therefore, feel that they are telling their own stories. All partners from the University, community and Council feel that steps have been taken to ensure that community representation is as fair and authentic as possible.



University–Black and minority ethnic community collaborations

The role of broker is described as important both in terms of establishing initial contact between universities and communities and in relation to facilitating further discussions and negotiations about taking forward collaborative projects. In this project, the Council CEM fulfilled these brokerage roles, and her ongoing support to the women in undertaking the project is also described as important; she met with the women regularly when the first tapestry was being produced, kept them motivated and encouraged to do the work. Now she is less able to participate and this is highlighted as one reason the women also don't meet quite so regularly to work on the second tapestry. Working towards a goal and output was easier with someone like the Council CEM providing encouragement and ideas. The encouragement of another person from the Sikh community, who was working at the Council and linked the CEM with the community, has also fulfilled a similar role to the CEM; her contribution is described as important to brokering the collaboration, especially from the Council side and she has also been supportive in encouraging the women to develop their skills and confidence.

The Future

The partners would consider collaborating again with each other and with other, different partners. The women continue to liaise informally with their contacts in the Council and at the University, and they are already working on the second tapestry which will focus on memorials and are continuing to display the first tapestry and give talks at various events.

Leicester City Council have been able to provide modest follow-on funding for dissemination work locally. The women would like to tour the tapestries as an exhibition, nationally if possible and to also present it in India. Availability of funding and other resources will determine whether and to what extent future collaborations will take place between the same partners and with others.

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