

## Sucha Singh Bains: UK's Sikh Mayor

IN MAY 2003 COUNCILLOR Sucha Singh Bains was thrust into the mayoral spotlight in the wake of the UK council elections.

The 67-year-old former Alvis worker became the city's first Asian Lord Mayor without the benefit of having a year as the deputy, after his Labour colleague Peter Lacy, who had been in line to take the role, lost his seat.

Mr Bains, a Sikh who has already chosen Coventry's international reputation for 'peace and reconciliation' as his theme for the year, said he was looking forward to the challenge.

"I feel very proud and it's a privilege to be the first Asian Lord Mayor," he said.

"My wife is also proud - she doesn't realise how much work she will be doing.

"I represent the whole city and Coventry is internationally known for peace and reconciliation. It's a great city and I want to represent everybody.

"I respect every religion and have friends who are Hindu, Muslim and Christian.

"I would like to see harmony in the community and everyone living in peace.

"We are here, we are part of this city and we have to continue to develop this city as much as we can. We have to put every effort into keeping the city on the world map."

Mr Bains grew up the youngest of three children in a small village in the Punjab. His father was in the army and a veteran of both World Wars before concentrating on farming after retiring from armed forces.

Mr Bains did well at school and was always good at maths and sciences. He went on to attend Punjab University where he graduated in mathematics and was also general secretary of the Students' Union.

When he told the head of department at his university that he was planning to move to Britain he was warned against it, but he remembered one good piece of advice. "He said: 'Don't go, but if you do go, go as an ambassador of your country.' That's the advice I always remember," he said.

Mr Bains, who also earned a postgraduate degree, arrived in Coventry in 1959, aged 23, to improve his education and get some extra experience, and he was one of the first students at Coventry Polytechnic, (now Coventry University), in about 1961.

"In India it was a different way of life, a different way of living, but I never felt any difficulty coming here as my brother was already here and had been living here since 1952," he said. "I had no problem in settling here at all."

Mr Bains married Darshan Kaur, who becomes the Lady Mayoress, and they raised their two daughters and son in Stoke.

Despite having worked briefly in Canada for about six weeks in the early 70s, he was adamant to continue living and working in Coventry, most notably because of the education system and what it offered his children.

He said: "I had not come to settle but after three or four years I decided to do so and get married and I brought up my family here.

“When I came here I was young and the people are so nice. They accept everybody and are welcoming and that’s one thing I like more than anything.

“Coventry is also right in the centre of the country and so you are well connected to reach anywhere within the country.

“I still believe this country’s education system is the best in the world and my children went to school in Coventry at Stoke Park.”

He was persuaded to join the Labour Party in about 1962 and became a city Councillor 13 years ago while working full time at Alvis as a project cost accountant.

It is his interest in politics which he wants to instil in youngsters from all backgrounds in Coventry.

“I would like to encourage young people to come into politics,” he said. “We will get old and have to retire and somebody has to take our positions.”

One of the charities he will be backing is the air ambulance and he is also keen to promote amateur sports in his year as Lord Mayor.

Mr Bains, who played hockey at university, said: “I believe we should help young people to build their characters and confidence.”

Looking forward to the year ahead and the work involved, he added: “Ever since I became a Councillor I’ve worked hard - I will do what I can do.

“My daughter used to say ‘your health is good while you work; so carry on - keep yourself occupied’.”

**[Courtesy: Dr. Bhai Harbans Lal]**

