

Relics of Maharaja Duleep Singh@

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@ The death anniversary of the Maharaja Duleep Singhji (1838-93) falls on October 22.

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After attending the World Punjabi Conference in London from 17 to 19 May, I had a keen desire to pay a visit to the Elvedon Estate Churchyard, near Thetford town, where the last remains of the last sovereign of the Sikh empire, Maharaja Duleep Singh are buried. Gurdeep Singh Sandhu, Chief Editor of the *Punjab Times*, London, was so glad to provide us the desired ride. We started from London in the afternoon. The ever-enthusiastic Sandhu had no problem in maneuvering the crowded and narrow lanes of the sprawling London metropolis. Harbhajan Singh Bains, the renowned Punjabi poet of Seattle, USA, was with us. We covered the distance of about 100 miles to the north in a most enjoyable and refreshing mood. The greenery around the highway was exceptionally captivating. As we moved through the Elvedon Estate area, the scenic road, the natural beauty of the isolated clusters of calm trees and vast expanse of the green fields all around seemed really casting a soul-soothing spell on us. Once this chunk of serene splendor belonged to Maharaja Duleep Singh, which he had to sell to the Earl of Iveagh. Seeing the signboard of Elvedon Estate, on our left, we parked our car in the not-so-nicely paved courtyard. There are some structures having some rooms here and there, which seem to be rarely used for any purpose. On the right hand side, across the road, is the gate of the Elvedon Estate Churchyard, which contains several graves including the graves of Maharaja Duleep Singh and Maharanee Bamba, and their son Prince Albert. The graves have about 5 feet high stones, having epitaphs on them. The following is the epitaph of Maharaja Duleep Singh:

"IN MEMORY OF DULEEP SINGH, C.C.S.I. MAHARAJA OF LAHORE. BORN IN THE PUNJAB 4TH SEPTEMBER 1838. DIED IN PARIS 22ND OCTOBER 1893. AGED 55."

The British dethroned Maharaja Duleep Singh when they annexed Punjab in 1849.

The child Maharaja Duleep Singh was cunningly converted to Christianity and was taken to England in 1854. He was given the vast Elvedon Estate property for his luxurious living, near Thetford in Suffolk, so that he does not look back to his background. But afterwards Duleep Singh became determined to embrace Sikhism and started for Punjab. On the way he was stopped at the port of Aden. Finding no other way out, Maharaja Duleep Singh got *Amrit (Khande Di Pahul)* from five *Piaras* on May 25, 1886 at Aden. Duleep Singh faced untold hardships during his last days and died in Grand Hotel, Paris on October 22, 1893. His body was brought from Paris to his Elvedon Estate where it lies buried quite far from the madding crowd in the abandoned and isolated church.

The Sikh community 'celebrated' the centenary of Maharaja Duleep Singh on October 22, 1993 and a plaque was erected in the church in the memory of Maharaja Duleep Singh. The plaque fixed on the wall of the old church contains the following inscription.

This plaque was given by the Sikhs of United Kingdom in memory of Maharaja Duleep Singh Ji in the presence of The Rt. Revd. John Dennis Bishop of St. Edmundsbury & Ipswich, on Friday, 22nd October, 1993. Erected by Maharaja Duleep Singh Trust. As part of the Centenary.

- "Bringing history and culture together"

The lone palace of the Maharaja is a few hundred yards away from the churchyard amid cluster of trees. We could see no activity around the isolated palace or in its lush green surroundings. The palace bears the mark 1900 on it, which indicates that it was last renovated in the year 1900 after the demise of Maharaja Duleep Singh in 1893.

We moved on to Thetford City, a few minutes drive from here where the Sikh community installed the statue of Maharaja Duleep Singh on July 29, 1999 in collaboration with the Thetford Borough Council. The statue, about 15 feet high, is in a small beautiful park by the side of a gracefully flowing stream. On the left side of the seven feet high pedestal of the statue is written a brief history of Maharaja, in Punjabi, and on the right side it is written in English along with the Sikh symbol of *Khanda* on the front side. Many main stream people could be seen there enjoying the splendor of the turbaned Sikh Maharaja gracefully riding a horse and taking photographs with its background.

The "Ancient House" that was bought by Prince Frederick, the 2nd son of Maharaja Duleep Singh in 1921 for opening a museum is also in Thetford. Frederick gave his house to the City Council, along with some memorable articles of his father. Frederick, being an M.A in History was interested in archaeology. Prominent Sikh artist, Jarnail Singh also gave some of his historical paintings about the splendor of the Sikh Empire to the "Ancient House Museum" when he paid a visit to this place in 1992. Jarnail Singh was also present at the multi-cultural ceremony of Statue installation in 1999 and was honored for promoting Sikh history and Punjabi culture through his paintings.

Despite all these formal celebrations and centenary of Maharaja Duleep Singh, it is felt that the place containing the last remains of the last sovereign of the Sikh Empire lies quite desolate, deserted and ignored. Not many people know or visit this important landmark of Sikh history. Therefore do we need to think, understand, or do something more in this connection?

