

1. Increasing understanding

The project aims to increase our understanding of gurdwaras, how they have developed in a British context and in what way they are valued by different stakeholders (including users of the buildings, heritage and planning professionals and wider society). This is being carried out through desk-based research and interviews.

2. The Gateway to the Guru

A gurdwara is a Sikh place of worship – it literally means ‘gateway to the Guru’. It is home to the Guru Granth Sahib, a collection of writings and hymns produced by a succession of 10 Gurus (and others) in Punjab from the 15th century. It is treated like a living Guru within the gurdwara, and has a special room called a Sach Khand where it sleeps at night.

Another important space is the Langar kitchen, where food is prepared and served by volunteers. Everybody eats together on the floor as a symbol of equality.

3. The gurdwara in Britain

The first gurdwara in Britain was recorded at a terraced house in Shepherd’s Bush, London in 1911. Following the partition of India in 1947 and the expulsion of British nationals from East African countries in the 1960-70s, the number of gurdwaras in Britain began to rise.

There are 227 gurdwaras in use across the country. Each has developed in a unique way with many occupying previously used buildings. They range from factories to churches to schools.

42 gurdwaras have been purposely built with designs ranging from a local vernacular to facades complete with onion domes and intricate Indian carved stone.

4. Spatial practices within gurdwaras

“Without the Guru Granth Sahib there is no gurdwara”

“He is the pivot around which the whole gurdwara operates”

“We bow before it as a mark of respect”

“It’s beautiful as it is, why would we move to a new building?”

“There are restrictions with old buildings but they have created something quite decent”

“The Langar tradition is in every gurdwara all over the world”

“Respect is very important, you don’t take dirty shoes inside”

“Sikhs must never refuse to give food to anybody”

5. Social and communal value

Gurdwaras often have other spaces dedicated to community work. Classrooms for Punjabi schools, libraries, gyms, common rooms and museums are all found in gurdwaras in Britain, catering for the needs of each community. Social activities within the gurdwara are highly valued as they bring members of the community together.

6. The adaptation of space

Big, open spaces are required for prayer within a gurdwara. Some previously used buildings, such as churches and factories, are suited for prayer as they offer large spaces where the Guru Granth Sahib can be seen.

Sikhs sit on the floor, below the level of the Guru Granth Sahib, out of respect. Existing pillars can obscure this view, and often there is no floor above the Guru Granth Sahib so people can not walk above it.

7. The significance of gurdwaras

This research will feed directly into guidance produced by Historic England in assessing and managing the historic built environment.

The study of people’s relationships with gurdwaras can tell us much about the significance of the buildings. For those who use them frequently these buildings can represent the history of a whole community and the everyday things they do. They are imbued with historic, social, religious and aesthetic value and need to be understood within the planning sector and elsewhere.

The study of gurdwaras as part of our cultural heritage offers the opportunity to promote this understanding to ensure accurate and appropriate policy-making in the future, informed by those who know the buildings best.