

The Colonial and Indian Exhibition

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Leamington Spa Town Hall was a part of The Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886. At a time when Queen Victoria reigned over one-fifth of the inhabited areas of the globe, the connection between the inhabitants of the various lands that formed the empire was fragile, as cultural differences were immense. Therefore, the aim of this exhibition was to strengthen the empire by establishing links between the people of the different colonies that formed the British Empire and the citizens of the United Kingdom. Leamington demonstrated its willingness to bond this union by welcoming and hosting 150 attendees from the exhibition. As Mayor Samuel Thomas Wackrill established in his welcoming speech “everything which tended to promote order and happiness in a town increased the power of the state”.¹

In the opening of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886, the poet Lord Tennyson wrote:

Sons, be welded each and all
Into one imperial whole,
One Britain, heart and soul!
One life, one flag, one fleet, one throne!
Britons, hold your own!

The poem reflects the spirit of the exhibition, in which Leamington took part, the establishment of a cultural link between the colonized lands and the metropole. As the *Saturday Review* stated, the purpose of the exhibition was “solidarity of a world-wide Empire, its unity of interest, and its manifold resources”. However, the organizer of the exhibition, the future king Edward VII and then prince of Wales, saw an opportunity to demonstrate England’s great political, economic, and military power; a technique to guarantee the cohesion of the different territories and peaceful relations with the United Kingdom.

The exhibition was opened on the 4th of May in South Kensington and lasted six months. During these six months, around 5 million people visited the display of the colonial power of the British Empire. Many of the countries that nowadays form the Commonwealth, such as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, participated in the exhibition displaying their cultural traditions and their history. But the real highlight of the exhibition was the Indian pavilion.

During the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations in 1851, also known as the Crystal Palace Exhibition, the Indian pavilion made a great impression on the public, including important historical figures such as Karl Marx and Charlotte Bronte. But this pavilion looked insignificant compared with the one in the Colonial and Indian exhibition of 1886, being five times bigger. Although this exhibition is far from our modern times, in this epoque the media was very limited and India was more than 4,000 miles away, their culture a mystery for most of the normal British citizens. However, the organizers managed to reflect what we can see as the ‘idealistic’ side of India by recreating the Indian jungle, a bazaar, a palace, a royal door, and so on. In addition, the exhibition had numerous shows on Indian culture as well as traditional artworks and crafts. In particular, the visitors were said to be astonished by the display of Indian artisans working. Yet, these artisans, who were supposed to be displaying the “ancient techniques” of Indian crafts, were prisoners of the Central Jail in Agra; who had spent their period of rehabilitation learning these techniques in order to display them, in an almost theatrical way, at the exhibition.²

¹ *Leamington Spa Courier*, 3 July 1886, p. 6.

² Chaudhuri, S. (2017) *Commodities and Culture in the Colonial World: Colonial Subjects, Imperial Objects and the Lives of Commodities*. Routledge: London.

We may wonder what role Leamington played in the Colonial Exhibition of 1886. Although the centre of the exhibition was in South Kensington, visits to other parts of the country were arranged in order to establish cultural relations beyond London. In the 4-day trip that was organized around Warwickshire and Oxfordshire, Leamington Spa was chosen as the centre for the stay of 150 visitors. A reporter from the *South Australian Advertiser* who joined the trip said of his stay in Leamington: “If her Majesty the Queen had been making a royal progress, she could not have been better treated than we are here”.³

The Leamington we are so familiar with was then decorated with the British Empire flags everywhere, crowds were waiting to see the visitors, and bands played God Save the Queen all over the town. The toast “to our colonial and Indian visitors,” marked the opening of the Town Hall banquet, uniting people coming from completely different parts of the world.⁴

During the visit, places such as the Liberal Club, in what today is Upper Holly Walk, the Conservative Club and the tennis court were offered and used by the colonial visitors. Among them, there were some notable figures, including Arthur Wellesley Peel, speaker of the House of Commons and the MP for Warwick and Leamington. Also among the guests was Sir Peter Stark Lumsden, a renowned British Army officer who participated in events such as the Second Opium war and the suppression of the Indian Rebellion of 1857. In addition, officers from the Bengal Staff Corps, one of the three military branches in the British Raj, were in attendance. However, the guest of honour was Pratap Singh, the Raja of Narsingharh, a princely state of the British Raj. The *Leamington Spa Courier* reported that upon the arrival of the Rajah and his retinue, “the appearance of the Indian ladies and gentlemen, in their travelling costumes, which were in a style singularly apropos to the extremely warm weather, excited no little curiosity amongst the spectators”.⁵

Beyond the desire to establish peaceful and friendly relations between the inhabitants of the different colonies, the Colonial and Indian exhibition as well as the colonial reunion in Leamington Spa had also political intentions: to discuss the creation of the Imperial Federation.

To contextualize the situation, the idea of creating an Imperial Federation arose around the 1880s, as an alternative to the British Empire. The empire was facing a major challenge: the lack of political cohesion in its different colonies since they were all being governed differently. Moreover, as the 20th century was approaching, more colonies were becoming independent such that the British government and crown were becoming afraid that the empire would disintegrate. Therefore, different colonialists were seeking a solution and they found it in the idea of federal union. This proposed joining Britain with the dominions of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa on the basis of a shared free trade area or common naval and military force. Though rarely made explicit, this vision rested on a racial distinction, excluding India and other colonies subject to direct rule from its incipient national identity of ‘Greater Britain’ and representation in an imperial parliament.⁶ The colonial visit to Leamington and especially the banquet with its speeches was an ideal occasion to discuss federation, which was one of the main topics of the time.

The Colonial and Indian exhibition made a difference in the colonial history of the British Empire, and especially in the history of Leamington Spa. The stay of the 150 colonial visitors was significant for Leamington Spa as a town, showing the willingness of its population to welcome any person and, at the time, serve the duties of the Empire and the crown – the fusion of which can be seen in the statue of Victoria outside the town hall, referred to as Queen Empress.

³ *South Australian Advertiser*, 10 August 1886, p. 6.

⁴ *Leamington Spa Courier*, 3 July 1886, p. 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Mehrotra, S. R. (1961) ‘Imperial Federation and India, 1868–1917’, *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 1(1).