

## **Shasters of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji Sold**

**Fresh look at archives by the National Sikh Heritage Centre & Holocaust Museum shows that the shasters were sold in 1965 for £25,000 and not handed over by the government as widely thought**

Wahe Guru Ji Ka Khalsa, Wahe Guru Ji Ki Fateh.

Letters between W.G. Archer (Curator of V&A Museum) and the great-great-grand daughter of Lord Dalhousie researched by the National Sikh Heritage Centre & Holocaust Museum (Derby, UK) and the Sikh Community and Youth Services (Nottingham, UK), have found that the shasters of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji which were returned in to Anandpur Sahib in 1966 sold for many times their original asking price. The shasters, which were taken by Lord Dalhousie in 1849 from the Sikh Treasury, remained for a hundred years in the home of Dalhousie's descendants.

W.G. Archer who was a curator at the Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum (London, UK) played a pivotal role in liaising with Lady Lindsay the great-great-grand-daughter of Lord Dalhousie for the purchase of the sacred shasters of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji. The purchase price is believed to have been £25,000, which in today's terms is in excess of £3/4 million.

Historically it was thought that Archer was liaising on behalf of the Sikhs, as revealed in a letter written by P.N. Haksar, Deputy High Commissioner, in December 15<sup>th</sup> 1965, to Archer, "I am sure that without your kind assistance, it would not have been possible to arrange this transaction so smoothly and with such grace." Little did P.N. Haksar know that Archer in fact encouraged Lady Lindsay to increase the price of the shasters.

**Photocopy of the letter sent by Archer to Dr Zail Singh after a visit to India to receive an Honorary Degree**

London NW3 4ST  
26 March 1976

Dear Dr Zail Singh,

My wife and I want to thank you more than we can possibly say for your extreme kindness and generosity in making possible our visit to the Punjab and extending to us such bountiful hospitality. It was a great privilege to have such full and frank discussions with yourself and the Punjab's leading Sikh historians. I also very greatly appreciated the conversation I had with the Chief Secretary. Mr Tarlochan Singh also could not have been kinder or more helpful. Our visit was full of highlights but I shall never forget the occasion when I received my Honorary Degree at the Guru Nanak Dev University, and also saw for myself the six Dalhousie weapons in shining purity at Anandpur Sahib.

A fresh look at the correspondence by the National Sikh Heritage Centre and Holocaust has revealed that on April 8<sup>th</sup> 1965, Archer wrote to Lady Lindsay, where he explained to her that, "...the Sikhs are, after all, a very wealthy community; many of them make money like mad; if they really prize and want the relics, it is not reasonable that they should pay a decent sum for them. I would think that £2,000 for each item would not be unreasonable."

*Photocopy of the letter sent by Archer to Kewal Singh*

bear it in mind when arriving at a figure. I also feel that the very fact that the objects are unique and sacred must affect our calculation. Too slight a sum would not only be insulting ( and hence unacceptable) to Lady Broun Lindsay; but it would also demean the Sikh religion.

Bearing all these circumstances in mind, I feel that a sum of £25,000 would be about the right amount to propose as compensation. I have little doubt that this amount would be acceptable to Lady Broun Lindsay and it would ensure that the six relics are secured for the Sikh people in a gracious and dignified manner.

Yours sincerely,

W.G.Archer

In the same letter he also encourages Lady Lindsay to ensure that she gets the maximum political benefit from any return of objects to the Sikhs and that the Sikhs should not benefit, "...once Mr Singh knows that they are with you the Government of India through the High Commissioner over here will ask you to give them to the Punjab Government, for making over to the Sikhs, presumably for installation in the Golden Temple at Amritsar... it would be an extremely political gesture and I feel that should you wish to make it... whatever capital is made out of the gesture, you and not the other side benefit from it."

The National Sikh Heritage Centre and Holocaust also have revealed that on April 25<sup>th</sup> 1965, Archer wrote to Lady Lindsay about the discussions he had with Kewal Singh, from the office of the Indian High Commissioner, where Kewal Singh trusted Archer to negotiate a fair compensatory price for the shasters, "...no figure was mentioned during our talk but it was left that I should consult you further and in due course give him a considered recommendation. I am disposed to think that a round sum of £10,000 would be eminently fair".

The most startling correspondence which clearly shows the true colours of W.G. Archer can be seen in a letter sent to Lady Lindsay following a letter written to Kewal Singh encouraging him to offer £25,000 for the shasters of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji, "...I believe, however, that in the event of their being sold by public auction in London, they would fetch an exceedingly high sum... I feel, bear it in mind when arriving at a figure... too slight a sum would not only be insulting (and hence unacceptable)... but it would demean the Sikh religion. Bearing all these circumstances in mind, I feel that the sum of £25,000 would be about the right amount to propose as compensation". However, in a letter Archer writes to Lady Lindsay on the same day he states, "I enclose a copy of a letter I have sent to Kewal Singh... You will notice that I have recommended a sum of £25,000 for the six relics, whereas the figure we had previously thought of was £15,000...". Clearly, W.G. Archer exploited the Sikh sentiments to the full.

Manraj Singh Khela, Director of Strategic Development and Research at the National Sikh Heritage Centre & Holocaust Museum said, "these letters make the most interesting of reading. To actually see the flow of communication between the different parties all these years later really gives us a different perspective on the negotiations that took place in the mid 1960's. W.G. Archer has been highly praised amongst the Sikhs as the man responsible for locating and negotiating the return of the shasters of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji to the Panjab. But now all these years later, we can see how the Sikhs were in fact being manipulated and paid a high price for objects which were theirs by right in the first place. There are too many examples in history where the good nature of the Sikhs has been manipulated to our detriment. We need to act in a much more coordinated considered manner and learn from other cultures about how they have approached the matter of repatriation of their objects."

The combined research teams of the National Sikh Heritage Centre & Holocaust Museum and the Sikh Community and Youth Services (Nottingham), some 12 strong, have been researching many aspects to do with Anglo-Sikh history. They have already made many new and exciting discoveries such as establishing that the Kalgi of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji, which was also taken by Lord Dalhousie, was sold at an auction in the

late 1890s, something which all preceding research had failed to find. The research team's objective is to share all of their findings with the Panth in an attempt to encourage others to be open and transparent about their own research.

Manraj Singh – [mskhela@nationalsikhmuseum.com](mailto:mskhela@nationalsikhmuseum.com)

Director of Research and Strategic Development

National Sikh Heritage Centre and Holocaust Museum

Or

Balvinder Kaur – [balvinder.kaur@scys-notts.co.uk](mailto:balvinder.kaur@scys-notts.co.uk)

Coordinator

Sikh Community and Youth Services (Nottingham)