

# **Burial of Indian Muslim soldiers of World War 1 in England — How it began in November 1914**

**Compiled by Dr Zahid Aziz**

*Website Editor:* [www.wokingmuslim.org](http://www.wokingmuslim.org)

During the First World War, wounded British Indian army soldiers from France and Belgium were sometimes removed to England for treatment and recovery in military hospitals. For any such Muslim soldiers who died while in England, their funeral and burial arrangements were discussed by the British government with the Imam of the Woking Mosque so that they may be carried out according to Islamic custom as well as for the convenience of Muslims.

*The Islamic Review* of December 1914 (p. 534) reported on the first such burial, reproducing the report from the *Woking Herald*. It took place on Monday 9th November 1914. The report is as follows:

## **“Indian Soldier Buried at Woking**

The first burial in this country of an Indian soldier who has died as a result of wounds received while serving with the Indian Expeditionary Force at the front took place in the Mohammedan Cemetery at Brookwood on Monday afternoon. He was Ahmad Khan, of the 3rd Sappers & Miners, and he died on board a transport while on the way from France to Netley Hospital, on November 4. On Saturday the body was conveyed to the Woking Mosque in a motor hearse, the coffin being enshrouded in a Union Jack. The community of Muslims at the Mosque made arrangements with the Necropolis Company for the interment, which was not largely attended, chiefly on account of the fact not being generally known, but most of the Mohammedans at Woking were present, amongst them being an Arab from Medina, the burial place of the Prophet Mahomet. The brief and simple

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ceremony, which was conducted by Maulvie Sadr-ud-Din, consisted chiefly of silent prayer, interspersed with recitals of the glory of God. The coffin was first placed on the ground by the side of the grave, the Muslims facing towards Mecca during the prayer. After interment, and when the grave had been enclosed, silent prayer was again engaged in. On the coffin were placed several floral tributes from Woking friends — viz., Mrs. R. H. Howell, Mrs. Walters, Mrs. Chambers, and Mrs. Welch.”

### **Imam discusses cemetery location with the War Office**

Another news item in the same issue (p. 532–533) is as follows:

“The Maulvie Sadr-ud-Din, of the Woking Mosque, was invited by Colonel Lucas, C.B, to the Victoria Royal Hospital, Netley, to approve of a site for opening an Islamic cemetery in the grounds of the hospital, where Indian wounded soldiers are being nursed. The Maulvie did not like the idea of opening a cemetery there, and suggested that it should be set up at Woking, which is the centre of the Muslim community, and where obsequies can be performed satisfactorily in his presence. The Colonel agreed, and asked Colonel Sharaman to accompany the Maulvie to the War Office and India Office, where the question could be discussed and finally settled. Gen. Sir A. Keogh and Gen. Sir Edmund Barrow received the Maulvie Sadr-ud-Din, and discussed the question with him, and decided finally to follow the suggestion offered. Accordingly officers from the War Office called three times at the Mosque, Woking, to prosecute the project. A site along the bank of a canal, some five hundred yards from the Mosque, has been pointed out, where it is hoped that the contemplated Islamic cemetery will be opened.

Further suggestions were submitted to the War Office, which elicited the following reply:—

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*From* THE SECRETARY, War Office, London, S.W., November 12, 1914.

*To* THE MAULVIE SADR-UD-DIN, B.A., B.T., The Mosque, Woking.

Sir,— I am commanded by the Army Council to thank you for your letter of the 9th inst., relative to the proposed cemetery for Muslim soldiers at Woking, and to inform you that the question of selecting a site on the land north of the railway and canal, which you inspected with Captain H. C. Cole on the 8th inst., is receiving urgent consideration of the Department. The owner has been approached in the matter, and his reply is awaited.

I am to add that you will be kept informed of the action taken, and will be further consulted when the actual site is decided upon.

—I have the honour to be, Sir, your most obedient servant,

(Signed) B.B. CUBITT ”

### **Later history**

At first, burials took place at Brookwood. From sometime in 1915, they started taking place at Horsell. A news item in *The Times*, 18 April 1916, under the heading *Honouring Indian Dead*, reported:

“Arrangements have been made by the Secretary of State for India, in consultation with the War Office, to preserve the graves of Muslim soldiers who have died while under treatment in this country.

Early in the war the Muslim soldiers, to the number of about 25, were interred in the burial ground set apart for them at Brookwood Cemetery; but subsequently a separate site was acquired on Horsell Common, near the Woking mosque, and now

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contains the graves of 17 soldiers. It has been decided to enclose the graves on Horsell Common and sufficient ground for possible future requirements by a wall, with a domed entrance gate and minarets at each of the four corners. Within the enclosure groves of cypress and yew will be planted, and each grave, both there and at Brookwood, will have a headstone. There is no corresponding Hindu cemetery, as the Hindu custom of cremation has been followed.”

Many years later, in the 1960s, the graves at Horsell Common were also re-located to Brookwood.

### **Kitchener’s appeal published in *The Islamic Review***

Lord Kitchener’s famous, nation-wide Call to Arms also appeared in *The Islamic Review*, November 1914. Shown below is its image from the back cover of that issue:



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