

Telling our Stories, Finding our Roots, Exeter's Multi-Coloured History Interview Summary

Name of interviewee: **Mohammed ABDULLAH, Shahidur RAHMAN, Sayed Masuad ALI**
 Name of interviewers: Nazima Khan, Mona Hassan
 Date of interview: 28th January 2013
 Location of interview: Exeter Mosque
 Transcribed by: Ghee Bowman

| Time | Topic |
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| 00:00 | Introduction by Nazima – interviewing three mosque founders |
| 1:07 | Introduction by Mr Mohammed Abdullah , He came to Exeter in 1970, at invitation of Mr Shaheed UI Hassan Exeter quiet, We were just like one family |
| 2:40 | Restaurant called 'Curry House' |
| 2:45 | I came from London, Bradford, Luton |
| 3:25 | Genghis restaurant Shahid ul Hassan had the Taj Mahal |
| 3:44 | Was different food-wise then – people didn't eat much 'Indian' food then |
| 4:00 | It's difficult to get halal food then – friends would get from Bristol or London or Birmingham |
| 4:30 | Prayed <i>Jummah</i> in Genghis restaurant or Taj Mahal or Curry House |
| 5:00 | Later on, found an Arab student renting flat at 15 York Road – Brother Nakib. Big gatherings eg Eid – at university |
| 5:55 | Getting bigger and bigger - bought 15 York Rd in 1977, using flat there before then |
| 6:30 | Raised money – university and businessmen together, bought 15 York Rd, started Islamic Centre. Lot of help from councilors, friends, English people. "People in Exeter are really nice" |
| 7:50 | Permission from council, numbers restricted, then numbers increased. Jobs limited- only catering jobs. |
| 9:06 | Lots of middle east students, Sheikhs. Bought 14 York road next door. Then competition for the next site (dining hall and swimming pool for St Sidwell School) |
| 10:20 | Also help from Mayor and Bishop, to buy 12 York road. Help from architect |
| 10:40 | When we came here, all married, with children. All educated here. Education in Exeter is one of the best in UK. |
| 11:38 | I've got two sons & two daughters - married in Exeter in 1976. My family came here. 1978 – first son born in Bangladesh, came here when a few months old. I was very involved in Exeter school & Maynard school |
| 13:10 | Q: Problems with schools eg Eid prayer? Schools have their rules & regulations, time is very short, not always possible for people to join Friday prayer. You can't have both ways – need children to follow our culture, but also children to adjust. School sympathetic & listened. Not much complaining |
| 14:45 | Q: You were involved in schools – teaching about Islam? We talked about the mosque and what we believe. Schools also visited mosque. Was very limited, now spreading – we are one of the luckiest [mosques]- quite a lot in summertime. Visitors see how we pray. |
| 16:08 | Q: Was it different before? Lot different. Bigger community now, everything spreading. At that time, Imam was busy. Now we have more people – two Imams, excellent, working hard, lots of people |

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| | helping. Credit is for all the community in Exeter and outside Exeter. |
| 17:00 | My children are all graduated – one is a doctor in Brompton hospital, daughters graduated. Now family growing up, lots of restaurants, lot of families. Provision for Islamic study. Our children can do both – very hard for them. Good for them to learn our culture. We hope the centre will improve and spread our culture to non-Islamic people |
| 18:50 | Other people should not think that we are not good people. We are good people, we like them, we respect them, we want them to respect us, we don't do anything against them. We don't have any complaints |
| 19:30 | Sometimes you face problems from outsiders – you have to adjust. Police here are the best. Any problem, they're always with us, take very prompt action. We had problem, police were very good. |
| 20:15 | Q: Do you remember the problem? I can't remember. I hope it will help the people, and everybody will help us. Would like to go on and on. |
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| 20:55 | Shahidur RAHMAN introduces himself, came to Exeter in 1968 from Birmingham |
| 21:25 | Brother Abdullah covered most of the things I was going to I was one of the first trustees of the Islamic Centre - Shaheed Al Hassan, Shahidur Rahman, Dakta Laki, Atal Rahman Raskal. Another trustee was a very old person, very religious |
| 22:40 | All over Devon, people very friendly, compared with all over the UK, this is a very nice place to live Q: Even better than Birmingham? Better than any other place. Weather is nice, not too cold, not too warm. Police very careful – very few crimes. |
| 23:46 | Started with Dr [Ekmelleddin], Brother Lakid from university. Shaheed ul Hassan - hinted we needed something to do. Brother Lakid from Egypt, Brother [Ekmeleddin] from Turkey, encouraged us, offered to provide help, financially, spiritually. Couldn't speak fluent English at that time. |
| 25:30 | After a few years, I resigned trusteeship. My restaurant was Curry House, started in 1967. At that time I had two colleagues (now passed away). When I had difficulty running the business, I called my brother-in-law (Sayed Masuad Ali) to come and help me – half share of restaurant |
| 27:00 | Bought 15 York Rd, then 14 York Rd, then here. My one son is a chiropractor, another one still with me. Two grandchildren, one graduated, nice job in London with oil company. 10 A* at GCSE in Plymouth. |
| 28:20 | Another grandson studying medicine in Romania, Bucharest. |
| 29:00 | My brother-in-law has 5 daughters, all graduates, all are teachers in London. |
| 29:30 | Brother Shaheed ul Hassan is one of the main body with Dr Ekmeleddin. Used to pray our Eid Jummah at Curry House, sometimes at Taj mahal, sometimes the university. Dr Ekmel and Brother Nakib arranged place to pray at university. |
| 30:10 | Q: How many people were you at the start? Twelve staff from the restaurants, plus a few from the university. 25 or 30 in all. Not like now. |
| 31:00 | We bought 15 York Road, sometimes only 4, 5 or 6. Q: Before you came in 1968, it wasn't a large community? We think we were the first Bangladeshi people – Shaheed ul Hassan, me and the other two. All from the Sylhet people in Bangladesh. At that time, no other Bangla people in Devon. Taj Mahal restaurant was first, my restaurant (Curry House) was second in Devon. (now called Tandoori Nights). Nearly 22 years since I retired. Although I'm not |

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| | a trustee, I am an active member of the mosque |
| 33:00 | Q: are you still involved? Decision taking is by the committee. |
| 33:30 | Q: No difficulty living in Exeter? Racism I did not find any of this when I first came. Q: Did racism start after 9/11? Yes. |
| 34:10 | Q: What message would you like to give? I'm still an active man in the mosque, not a trustee or committee member. Insh'allah I pray to Allah to give us a good community, nice brotherhood. |
| 35:20 | Sayed Masood Ali introduces himself. I came from Manchester – my sister was here. My brother-in-law said you must come. Came to England in 1962, to Exeter in 1971. He came in 1968 – I visited him in Birmingham. He said "I'm going to Exeter" I said "why Exeter, nobody there?" I said "we will miss you". Then we decided this was our permanent life here. |
| 37:00 | We tried our best with local people, people from middle east, from Libya, friend of Gaddafi, helped with funding. |
| 37:40 | Every time we face something, a brother comes. I was treasurer I said "if that building going for auction, I only have £2,500 in the bank, and we have to pay £100,000" How? So we tried with the whole community, we got as much as we can. We got £50,000 in one go. Dr Naim Muktar from Malaysia, a judge. Last year he was at Oxford university and stayed with me. Now he's in America, at Harvard. Studying Sharia law. |
| 39:30 | Very great effort to establish this place for our Muslim community from all over the world for our generation. We are already running to the third generation – my grandchildren were here for the mosque opening, graduated. My daughter was the first Muslim girl married in Exeter in 1986. <i>Niqah</i> was here, and prayers. Hired St George hall for the wedding. Q: It must have been a very proud occasion? Yes, all the community was invited. This is our community. We're very close to each other |
| 41:10 | A lot of thinking – how to build this thing. Another brother who was very helpful, Professor of university - Brother Abu Ela. <i>Shahidur Rahman</i> : One of the great great men of Exeter. Said Mohammed Abu Ela, one of the best men we found until now. |
| 42:04 | Very close, very friendly. We always invite our brothers to our houses. |
| 42:25 | Q: Was he a student? Yes. Doing a PhD at Exeter university <i>Shahidur Rahman</i> : I'm an old man now, so I forgot Dr Abu Ela's name. He was one of the president of the Islamic Centre |
| 42:50 | He was the first president of the Islamic Centre. Dr Nakib was the Imam. Then we had another Imam from Egypt, he's a blind man. But luck, Saeed Al Rahman from Sudan, he's a nice Imam, I don't think we'll get another one. He's the best, very good friend of ours, and very guidance and make everybody together. Always, even now, we ask him anything we want. |
| 43:35 | Q: Can you ask him to interview? He works in the prison now. People of Exeter welcome us very nicely. We didn't feel anything. Even today they still say hello, how are you, are you OK? Never had any problem. Health department, hospitals are always nice. |
| 44:20 | If you are nice, everyone is nice. |

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| 44:45 | <i>Shahidur Rahman:</i> Dr Abu Ela – I don't find anyone like him until now, one of the most knowledgeable Islamic men. |
| 45:08 | Q: Can I write his name? Yes. Deputy very hard working. I left Exeter for a while, went to London. My children (5 daughters) one is here –why don't you move here again? Every weekend I go to London. I have six grandchildren. My grand-daughter did Law as first degree. Grandson doing accountancy in London. Daughters -three of them going to College. Very beautiful children |
| 47:20 | One time I asked Abu Ela "I have 5 daughters, shall I send them to Bangladesh" He said "don't make this mistake, because opportunity, everything is here". |
| 47:50 | Their first job was in Sainsbury's, they were 16, in High school. I said before you go to interview, ask them "can I wear hijab" Sainsbury's said yes. So my children were the first women to work in Sainsbury's with the hijab – the Sainsbury's in the Guildhall, in the 80s. |
| 48:55 | Daughter at school, I went to a meeting with the head, to ask if my daughter can wear the hijab. She was the only Muslim girl at the Maynard school. The head said she had to invest some money if she wants to be a good student. The first year we pay the fees, then we'll give a scholarship on merit. First year went very well. In the 1970s. If your daughter have to maintain Muslim dress, she can wear long shirt and long pants, navy blue. They gave a prayer room for her, specially. This is why we love Exeter – when we ask something, they do it for us. |
| 51:10 | My youngest one went to St Margarets school. They all went to King's College. Nazima: Mashallah - all very bright children Now they're all English teachers and science teachers. She [youngest daughter] was the only Muslim girl at that school. He asked again about wearing the hijab . So I had a meeting, they said they will discuss with governing body and let you know. They gave me a letter. Whatever you do in life you have to do with honour and respect. I said "you are a woman, you have to stand on your own feet" Nazima: Did they find it difficult? Were the other children OK? They were OK. |
| 52:40 | They were born here, born in Exeter. So no problem – they're not like me. My father-in-law Brother Talal is very nice. |
| 53:00 | Your name is Khan- can you speak Urdu Nazima: Of course [talking in Urdu then Nazima talking about the process of the project] |
| 54:50 | This is the story of the success of the mosque? It's a good story, and very honest working people there. This is for the Muslim Umma and for our own children, they feel great. |

End of interview