

The Indian Army Memorial Room and Indian Army Museum at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst

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Introduction

In 2019, the National Army Museum (NAM), UK and the Royal

Military Academy Sandhurst (RMAS) carried out a major refurbishment of the Indian Army Memorial Room situated in the Old College of the Academy. Whilst the display was to be refreshed and renewed, a key part of the curatorial ethos was to retain or put back as many as possible of the historic artefacts that had been in the room since its inauguration. This meant a great deal of research into the history and origins of the room and displays therein. This article looks at some of the results of that research. Although now based in Chelsea, London, the NAM originated at the RMAS, and continues to maintain displays there. The museum was founded in 1960 by Royal Charter, but it is important to note that charter incorporated into one national body the existing museum sections based at RMAS for cavalry, disbanded Irish Regiments, and the British Indian Army. The development of the Indian Army Museum section and the Indian Army Memorial Room is inseparable, and both will be discussed here.

Origins

It is common to the birth of many regimental museums that they were formed from the accumulation of silverware, paintings, and memorabilia owned privately by the officers and traditionally displayed in messes. However, with Indian independence in 1947, the contents of the British Indian Army officers' messes were generally left behind as British officers left the new armies of independent India and Pakistan and handed over to their Indian and Pakistani counterparts. It was rare for British officers to elect

to bring their mess property back to the United Kingdom, particularly when there were fellow Indian and Pakistani officers in place and able to sustain the officers' messes. In England after 1947, there was a gradual accumulation of artefacts at RMAS, often presented by families with a long-standing and often multi-generational history of service in the armies of the East India Company and the Indian Army, and that stimulated the idea that an Indian Army Museum should be formed. At the time, the only national museum which collected material relating to the Indian Army was the Imperial War Museum, with a remit limited to the First and Second World Wars.

In 1948, Field Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck, the last Commander-in-Chief of the British Indian Army, left the Commander-in-Chief's private residence 'Snowdon' in Simla for the last time. The house had hung a series of coats-of-arms, one for each Commander-in-Chief from Robert, Lord Clive in the 18th century to Auchinleck himself. The tradition was that each incoming Commander-in-Chief commissioned and paid for his own coat-of-arms to hang with the others. As Snowdon was the C-in-C's private residence and was privately furnished, Auchinleck, on the disbandment of the British Indian Army, had the coats-of-arms sent back to the then Commonwealth Relations Office¹ (CRO). The CRO, evidently unsure what to do with them as they were private rather than government property, sent them on to the RMAS. It was artefacts like this that formed the nucleus of the museum collection there.



Image 1 : The Commander-in-Chief coats-of-arms at 'Snowdon', Simla circa 1947

At the RMAS, some Indian Army colours were already hanging in the chapel and other items were displayed in the separate library building, situated between Old College and New College. Some of the coats-of-arms sent by Auchinleck were first displayed there in 1948. That display also included medals from two collections: a series originally compiled by Lord Birdwood² when he was secretary to the Government of India, Army Department in 1913, and a second collection from the Adjutant General's office of the medals issued from 1913 to the Second World War. The medals are almost all unissued specimens of every medal for which soldiers of the British Indian Army and its predecessors, the Presidency armies of the East India Company, were eligible. Birdwood's original collection was formerly displayed in the offices of the Military Secretary at General Headquarters (GHQ), New Delhi. The second collection was in the Adjutant General's office of the same building. GHQ India briefly became the Supreme Command Headquarters, covering both the new

armies of Pakistan and India, but was disbanded in 1947, and as there was no equivalent supreme headquarters for the partitioned sub-continent, Auchinleck sent the medals awarded by the British Indian Army back to Britain.

As the Indian Army collections at Sandhurst continued to grow, it became clear that the display in the library was inadequate for them, and there was much talk at Sandhurst about what to do with them. The then Commandant, Major General FRG Matthews, sent a firmly-worded memorandum on 13 April 1948 which brought about the birth of the Indian Army Room (later to be called the Indian Army Memorial Room):

“There has been endless talk about the conversion of the old College Library into the new Indian Army Relics Room. I have decided that this room will now be the Indian Army Room and having made this decision require all the Indian Army flags, shields, pictures, relics, etc., to be in the room by 26th April”.³

The Old College Library (not to be confused with the separate library in which the original Indian Army display was created) was formerly the chapel of the Academy. As the Academy expanded, the chapel was deemed to be too small and a new chapel was built in 1879. After it ceased to be used for worship, the old chapel was used for various purposes, including a dining hall (fondly remembered as such by Auchinleck from his time as a cadet in 1902), and, until 1948, as a second library. It was this room that was to become the centrepiece of the British national Indian Army collection, as it remains to this day.



Image 2 : The Indian Army Room circa 1950

Whilst the Indian Army collection was quietly evolving at RMAS, the idea of establishing a national Indian Army Museum was being discussed at a high level. On 13 May 1948, Brigadier L Monier-Williams and General Sir Geoffrey Scoones (both of the CRO) held a meeting with General Sir John Coleridge (formerly of the Indian Army and at that time a trustee of the Imperial War Museum), Captain E Altham (curator of the Royal United Services Institute museum), Colonel CG Robins (representing RMAS), and LR Bradley (Director of the Imperial War Museum from 1938 to 1960). The meeting was 'in connection with a proposal to form a collection of trophies and exhibits of the late British Indian Army, to discuss (a) sources from which material can be drawn (b) accommodation likely to be available'.⁴ Coleridge was one of the most important early advocates for the creation of an Indian Army Museum. As a trustee of the Imperial War Museum from 1943 to 1949, he had an understanding of how museums worked, and was able to influence their collecting policy so that some Indian Army material went to Sandhurst. Furthermore, he had friends in

high places. In August 1948, he wrote to Robins that he had seen Auchinleck and told him of the proposal for an Indian Army Museum, arranging for him to come to Sandhurst and see the Indian Army Room.⁵ This was the first direct involvement of Auchinleck in the development of the Indian Army Museum, although artefacts presented by him were already on display there. Coleridge spent some time trying to find accommodation for the museum in London, but eventually, as the Indian Army collection at Sandhurst grew, it became inevitable that that would be the natural home for the museum.

To establish the nascent Indian Army Museum on a secure footing, an advisory committee, initially known as the India Room Committee (later the Indian Army Museum Committee), was convened for the first time on 11 November 1948. Its purpose was to discuss the offers of artefacts for the Indian Army display, and (inevitably) the costs of creating high-quality displays. Until its last meeting in 1981, the committee continued to advise the Indian Army Museum (until 1960) and subsequently the National Army Museum. The committee is important to the history of the museum, and the Indian Army Memorial Room, not least because its first two presidents were Field Marshals Auchinleck (until 1960) and Slim (from 1960). Both took a keen interest in the development of the museum. In 1948, Auchinleck and Lord Birdwood launched an appeal in *The Times* requesting artefacts and financial donations for the new museum. This was successful in raising the profile of the museum, as well as funds, and donations of objects. Many donations came from veterans of the British Indian Army and families with strong connections to India over generations.

As the collections grew, the first curator of the museum⁶ was appointed in 1950. He was Lieutenant Colonel Henry Leonard Boulton, a former officer of Skinner's Horse. He was succeeded in 1955 by Lieutenant Colonel Charles Bernard Appleby, late of the 1st Punjab Regiment. Appleby was to become the first Director of the NAM in 1960, and after his retirement in 1966, remained on the Indian Army Museum Committee until his death in 1975; a poignant note in the minutes of that committee records that the members stood in silence to remember him in the meeting

shortly following his death. In 1965, Appleby was able to report to the committee that the 'greatest authority on Indian Army uniforms', William Young Carman had joined the museum as deputy director.

Museum Exhibits

Regiments of the new armies of India and Pakistan were involved with the museum right from the start. Apart from donating artefacts for display, they were subscribers to a long-running scheme to make carved wooden plaques of all of the badges of the regiments and corps (regular and auxiliary) of the Indian Army as it stood in 1947. The badges were carved in the 1950s and 1960s.

Regiments of the armies of India and Pakistan also subscribed to two portrait commissions specifically for the Indian Army Memorial Room. In 1963, Appleby suggested to the Indian Army Museum Committee that they should commission portraits of Field Marshals Auchinleck and Slim to hang in the room. Auchinleck's was first, intended to be produced in time for his 80th birthday in 1964. Auchinleck requested that the well-known artist Edward Seago painted the portrait. They were good friends, near neighbours in Suffolk at the time, and Seago had served as a Royal Engineers camouflage officer under Auchinleck during the Second World War. Auchinleck was a keen painter in his spare time, and corresponded with Seago about technique and other aspects of painting. The artist's fee was 500 guineas. This sum was raised by subscription from individual former British Indian Army officers, regimental associations, current Indian and Pakistani Army Regiments and admirers of the field marshal. It was presented by Slim at a ceremony on 07 October 1964. Auchinleck, ever a humble man, wrote afterwards that he 'was really quite overcome'⁷ by the presentation.

Slim's portrait was painted in 1967 by Leonard Boden. Slim initially felt his facial expression was too severe, and wrote on 07 March 1967 that he had 'complained some time ago the [facial] expression was "another word from you, and I'll knock your ruddy block off"! But Boden has softened it down a bit'.⁸ The portrait was presented in a ceremony in the Indian Army Memorial Room on 06 May 1967 by General Sir Frank Messervy.⁹ Lady Slim wrote privately to the artist with the high praise that 'it was wonderful for

me to feel so certain that I liked it'. As with Auchinleck's portrait, the painting was paid for by subscription from similar subscribers. To this day, both portraits continue to hang in the Indian Army Memorial Room.



Image 3 : The Indian Army Memorial Room circa 1960

The Memorial to the Indian Soldier

1969 was an important year for the museum. It was only then that a decision was made to formally adopt the name Indian Army Memorial Room, though the room had generally been called that for many years. The room was in need of updating and it was in that year that the committee started a project to commission three stained glass windows for it to commemorate the Indian soldier in the period 1914-1947. These would complement existing stained glass in the former chapel, including the 2nd King Edward VII's Gurkha Rifles (the Sirmoor Rifles) memorial window. The windows were officially unveiled in 1971 by Auchinleck. They depict the Indian soldier in the First World War; the period 1919-1939, in particular on the North-West Frontier; and the Second World War.

They are of particular importance as a memorial specifically to the Indian soldier rather than to their British officers, who are well-represented throughout the memorial room.

The 2019 Refurbishment

In 1950, a dedication ceremony had been held to underline the commemorative purpose of the Indian Army Memorial Room. It was a place primarily for former officers of the British Indian Army and their families, rather than for the general public. Those who visited on a Sunday would often attend chapel, then the museum, where they could enjoy a glass of sherry with the curator. As time went on, the purpose of the room evolved. The former officers of the British Indian Army gradually died out and interest in the room declined, leading to a period of neglect. The 2019 refurbishment was probably the most significant change to the Indian Army Memorial Room since the unveiling of the stained glass windows in 1971. That year had also seen the NAM open its building in Chelsea, London. From that time onwards its focus was naturally on its London displays, and the memorial room display became a secondary concern.

In 2018, Brigadier Justin Maciejewski was appointed Director of the NAM. Maciejewski visited India to develop the idea of setting up a British Indian Military Heritage Partnership with a view to reinvigorating collaboration on various aspects of the shared history, and heritage, of the regiments of the British and Indian Armies. Whilst in India, a number of people suggested that a reinvigorated Indian Army Memorial Room at Sandhurst would be a good place to start this process of a renewed focus on shared history. Foremost amongst the advocates of this idea were Squadron Leader Rana Chhina (Retd) of the United Service Institution of India, Major Kinny Khanna (Retd) of the Indian Cavalry Association and Lieutenant General Tajindar Shergill (Retd), advisor to the Chief Minister of Punjab. Fortuitously, Brigadier Bill Wright, the Commander at Sandhurst, had recently launched a programme to reinvigorate the display of heritage at the Royal Military Academy as a source of inspiration to the cadets. The stars were aligned.

A joint NAM and Sandhurst team was swiftly mobilised and started work. The intention was to maintain or reinstate as much

as possible of the artefacts which had long been on display, along with enhancing the commemorative nature of the room through the use of pictures that present a balance of stories of Indian soldiers and British and Indian officers who had served in the British Indian Army and the armies of the East India Company. The vast height of the room presented the opportunity to display a large number of portraits from the museum's unrivalled collection of material relating to the Indian Army. Highlights include pictures of Victoria Cross winners Gaje Ghale, Yeshwant Ghadge and Mir Dast, along with the commissioned portraits of Auchinleck and Slim. The picture display is complemented by showcases displaying regimental silver and mess china; together with the specimen medals and coats-of-arms presented by Auchinleck in 1948.





Image 4 and 5 : Part of the 2019 Redisplay

The refurbished room was opened by Field Marshal Sir John Chapple, late of the 2nd Gurkhas, former Chief of the General Staff and generous benefactor to the museum's Indian Army collection, on 06 September 2019 in the presence of distinguished guests that brought together members of the military, academic and diplomatic communities from the UK, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Members of the Royal Gurkha Rifles provided a Guard of Honour and played the pipes and the opening ceremony was followed by an army curry lunch, that perhaps was the most enduring cultural legacy of the shared service in India.



Image 6 : Distinguished Guests at the 2019 Reopening

The reinvigorated Indian Army Memorial Room has been a tremendous success with a dramatic increase in use and visitors since its reopening. It will continue to act as a focal point and a memorial to the British and Indian soldiers of all ranks who served together in the British Indian Army over nearly 200 years. It represents a physical, and powerful, reminder of the shared military history and heritage that exists between the armies of Britain and those of South Asia. The message that these objects convey to the young officer cadets today of the eternal soldiery values of courage, discipline, loyalty, and mutual respect that transcend religious and cultural differences is powerful and moving. The diversity of the British Indian Army was a source of strength proved beyond question in the battles in Italy, Africa and Burma in the Second World War. This message of 'the strength that can be created through diversity and mutual respect' is a message of enduring relevance in today's world for all those training to be leaders in the British Army and the armies of many

countries who train at Sandhurst, and the members of the public who visit the Indian Army Memorial Room through the tours organised by the Sandhurst Trust. We offer our congratulations to the United Service Institution of India on its 150th anniversary, and sincerely hope its members will visit Britain and see the Indian Army Memorial Room themselves.

Endnotes

¹ In 1968 this was to become part of the new Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In 1948 there was a separate Colonial Office, Foreign Office and Commonwealth Relations Office.

² Field Marshal William Riddell Birdwood (1865 – 1951) was C-in-C in India 1925-1930.

³ NAM Institutional Archive D2/1/1/10

⁴ In NAM Institutional Archive C1/2/237/1

⁵ On 3 August 1948, General J D Coleridge wrote to Colonel C.G. Robins that 'I saw F.M. Auchinleck recently, and spoke to him about the proposed I.A. Museum and what you had done at the R.M.A. in particular. He was much interested, and would like to go to Sandhurst, see the proposed Museum and have a talk with you'. In C1/2/237/1

⁶ He was curator of the whole RMA Museum with all three sections for Indian Army, Cavalry and disbanded Irish Regiments.

⁷ NAM Institutional Archive F4/2/31

⁸ NAM Institutional Archive C1/2/191

⁹ Auchinleck had been approached to make the presentation but was unable to make it; feeling bad for not being able to return the compliment to Slim after his own portrait presentation, he sent an urgent telegram on the day which simply read 'very sorry not to be with you today best wishes Auk'.

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