



The Maharajah of Mulgrave

Albert Elliot

Britain and India are worlds apart, not only in distance, but also in climate and culture. Yet despite this great gulf separating the two countries, Duleep Singh, the Maharajah of Lahore – twenty years old in 1858 – came to live at Mulgrave Castle, Lythe. How and why this came about is a fascinating story.

In 1843, at the age of five, Duleep Singh was crowned King of the Punjab and head of the Sikh nation. He was fabulously rich. However, following annexation of the Punjab by the British in 1849, he was dispossessed of all his lands, estate and possessions, including the magnificent Koh-i-Noor diamond, whose name means ‘Mountain of Light’. In compensation, he was given an annual allowance of £40,000 by the British Government; a colossal sum of money in those days. At the age of eleven, the young Maharajah was exiled to Britain, going first to live with guardians in Scotland where he took up shooting and fishing, becoming a renowned marksman and angler, his Purdey shotguns his most prized possession. He was known as the ‘Black Prince of Perthshire’ and became a firm favourite of Queen Victoria, who befriended the good-looking young Sikh.

In 1858 Maharajah Duleep Singh moved to North Yorkshire, renting the Mulgrave Estate from the Marquis

of Normanby, who was serving as British Ambassador in Florence. The Maharajah soon settled into life as an English country squire and was often seen hunting and hawking on local moors dressed in full Sikh regalia and accompanied by his extensive entourage. A contemporary account by an amazed witness verifies this extraordinary and incongruous sight near Ugthorpe:

“We were enormously aroused by a motley crew marching in line across the moors. In the centre was a fine stalwart man of some five and twenty summers, arrayed in gorgeous oriental dress – the Maharajah Duleep Singh. On either side of him were two swarthy sons of India, his Royal Falconers, with belled hawks on their shoulders, while six English gamekeepers in scarlet uniforms and a crowd of domestics filled up the picturesque tableau. It was His Royal Highness taking his sport a-hawking across these wilds. A picture, in truth, worthy of the limning of Landseer.”

Queen Victoria dined with the Maharajah on at least one occasion at Mulgrave Castle, where she and her attendants were honoured guests. The Queen waxed lyrical about the Maharajah’s appearance, saying he was “extremely handsome and has a pretty, graceful and dignified manner. He was beautifully dressed and covered

The Maharajah of Mulgrave

in diamonds...” and “those eyes and those teeth are so beautiful...” Victoria, who was to become the Empress of India in 1877, remained a friend and supporter of the Maharajah and his family for the rest of his life. She became godmother to his children, even allowing Duleep’s eldest son to be christened in Windsor Chapel.

While at Mulgrave Castle, the Maharajah had a new toll-road constructed between Sandsend and Whitby (the modern road follows in part the route of this). The stone-built toll-booth house can still be seen opposite Whitby Golf Course. However, the legend that he built the road to accommodate his elephants because they disliked walking along the sandy beach is not true. In fact there is no evidence of elephants at Mulgrave: it is nothing more than a myth created around the eccentric Maharajah.

Duleep Singh used to fish from a boat just offshore at Sandsend, using the age-old Chinese method of hunting with trained cormorants. These birds were tethered on a long fine lead and had a ring fitted around

their necks that prevented them from swallowing any sizable fish they caught.

After leaving Mulgrave in 1862, Duleep Singh bought Elveden, a 17,000 acre estate bordering Norfolk and Suffolk, where he continued his lavish and exotic lifestyle, spending enormous sums of money on improving the house and entertaining. But in later life, as his fortune dwindled, he became dissatisfied with his lot. He visited Russia and had nefarious dealings with government conspirators and spies, hoping to enlist the Tsar’s help in starting a rebellion in his homeland, with the intention of reclaiming his lands and kingdom in the Punjab. His attempts failed and sadly he would never return to his native land. He died in 1893 in Paris at the age of 55 and is buried at Elveden.

In 1999, HRH The Prince of Wales unveiled a life-size bronze statue of Duleep Singh astride his horse at Bутten Island, Thetford, a town that greatly benefited from the Maharajah’s patronage and generosity.



Find out more

Anita Anand and William Dalrymple,

‘Kohinoor: the Story of the World’s Most Infamous Diamond’, by Anita Anand and William Dal (Bloomsbury 2017) -
the definitive story of the Koh-i-Noor and Duleep Singh

Victoria & Albert Museum article on Duleep Singh:

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/m/maharaja-dalip-singh/>



Maharajah Duleep Singh, Thetford, Norfolk



Maharajah Duleep Singh in the 1860s



Memorial to Maharajah Duleep Singh, Thetford, Norfolk