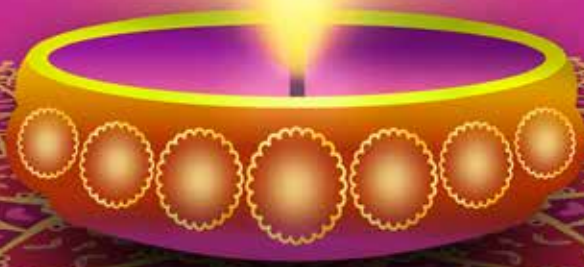


# 6000 Lights

The History of *Diwali* in Leicester



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Leicester  
City Council



# 6000 Lights

## The Story of *Diwali* in Leicester

Leicester today has what is regarded as one of the largest Diwali celebrations outside of India, but the festival had very humble origins back in the 1960s. The exhibition explores why Leicester has this spectacular festival and the people, organisations and events that have made it happen.

Local people have shared their memories and photographs to create a unique record of how Leicester's Festival of Lights has been celebrated through the decades.

# What is Diwali?

Diwali, the Festival of Lights, is one of the most significant festivals in Indian culture and is celebrated by Hindus, Sikhs and Jains every autumn between mid-October and mid-November. It signifies new beginnings, the victory of good over evil, light over darkness and knowledge over ignorance.

It has a rich social and cultural heritage of legends and customs that include religious ceremonies, decoration of homes and temples, time with family and friends, feasting and exchanging gifts.



Divas lit at the Golden Temple for Diwali.



Hindu gods; Saraswati, Lakshmi and Ganesh. Leicester Mercury Archive at the University of Leicester.

## A Diwali Dictionary

**Divas** – Traditionally these were small earthenware oil lamps each called a “deep” or a “diya”. The word Diwali comes from the Sanskrit word dipavali or deepavali meaning a row of lamps.

**Rangoli** – these are colourful, creative floor designs which bring good luck and provide a welcome.

**Deities** – are gods or goddesses. There are many legends and deities that are associated with Diwali.

**Puja** – means ceremony. Chopda Pujan is a ceremony performed by Hindus on the third day of Diwali and involves closing the past year’s account books (partly a reflection on your life) and receiving blessings for the forthcoming New Year.

**Fatakda** - means firecrackers or fireworks in Gujarati.

**Aarti** – is a Hindu religious ritual of worship in which the light of the burning divas is offered to deities to the accompaniment of specific prayers.



Rangoli at Belgrave Neighbourhood Centre, 1984. Leicester Mercury Archive at the University of Leicester

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*“Diwali is mixed with Indian religion, mixed with Indian traditions and mixed with the three seasons, and is a festival of lights- darkness goes when there is light. It is an enjoyable time, spreading happiness, love and light.”*

**Maganbhai Patel, OBE**



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Chopda Pujan performed at the Shree Hindu Mandir in Cromford St, Highfields, 1980. Leicester Mercury Archive at the University of Leicester

# Celebrating Diwali

## Hindus

For Hindus, Diwali is a five-day festival that coincides with the Hindu New Year. Hindus associate Diwali with the legend of Lord Rama, his wife Sita and his brother Lakshmana returning from exile to their kingdom in northern India after defeating the demon king Ravana in the 15th century BC.

Festivities have their origins in the way people celebrated Rama's return with divas (oil lamps) and gifts of sweets, customs that remain popular today. It is also traditional for homes to be cleaned and decorated with colourful rangoli patterns, gifts to be exchanged and for new clothes to be worn.

**Some of the religious ceremonies Hindus undertake at Diwali time include:**

**Lakshmi Puja.** This is performed on the third day of Diwali and involves reverence to the Goddess Saraswati (the Goddess of Education and Knowledge) and Goddess Lakshmi (Goddess of Wealth). Lighted lamps accompany prayers for the well-being and prosperity of families and businesses.

**Chopda Pujan.** Today this ceremony is normally performed in temples and takes place on the third day of Diwali. It involves closing the past year's account books (partly a reflection on your life) and receiving blessings for the forthcoming New Year.

**Govardhan Puja.** This ceremony, also known as Annakut, is carried out in temples on the fourth day of Diwali and involves offering vegetarian foods to deities in gratitude.

## Sikhs

For Sikhs, Diwali celebrates the release of the sixth guru, Guru Hargobind, and the 52 Hindu Rajas (kings) from imprisonment in 1619. Sikhs celebrated the homecoming of Guru Hargobind by going to the Golden Temple of Amritsar located in the Punjab, India.

Today in India, Sikhs celebrate Diwali by lighting candles and divas in houses and on the Sarowar – the sacred water which surrounds the Golden Temple. The Guru's mother celebrated her son's release by distributing food and sweets within the community and it is traditional at Diwali to visit friends and relatives with gifts of special food.

In Leicester, Sikhs celebrate Diwali in gurdwaras (temples). Sikhs use the term "Bandi Chhor Divas" when referring to Diwali. The word "bandi" translates as "imprisoned" (or prisoner) the word "chhor" translates as "release" and the word "divas" means "day" so "Bandi Chhor Divas" translates as "Prisoners' Release Day".

## Jains

For Jains, Diwali marks the anniversary of the attainment of Moksha, the final liberation of the soul from the cycle of death and rebirth, by Lord Mahavira. On this day Jains celebrate this permanent happiness of the soul and remember Lord Mahavira's last sermon, which lasted for 48 hours, culminating on Diwali Day, before his soul left his body and was liberated.

Diwali is celebrated in an atmosphere of simplicity, serenity, equity, charity and environment-consciousness. Jain temples, homes, offices and shops are decorated with lights and divas that symbolise knowledge. Some devout Jains will also fast for the two days of Diwali, following the example of Mahavira, and spend Diwali night in the temple.

**6000**  
**Lights**

# Celebrating Diwali

## Fireworks

Fireworks are a big part of Diwali celebrations today. They illuminate the night sky with spectacular displays of lights so are now a vital part of the festival, even if the tradition is not very old.

## The five days of Diwali

**Day 1** - Dhan Teras. This is the official start of festivities and dedicated to the worship of Goddess Lakshmi.

**Day 2** - Kali Chaudas. On this day Goddess Kali is worshipped and there is a focus on abolishing evil.

**Day 3** - Diwali Day. This is the main day for celebrating the "Festival of Lights". Clay lamps (called divas) and candles are lit in temples and houses, and fireworks are let off. People also clean and decorate their homes with rangoli patterns, exchange gifts, buy new clothes and give sweets.

**Day 4** - Nutan Varsh or New Year's Day. On this day people visit temples for blessings and prayers and businesses traditionally open new accounts.

**Day 5** - Bhai Dooj or Bhai Beej. This day is important as it celebrates the relationship between brothers and sisters.

## Diwali foods

Preparing and sharing delicious Diwali foods is an important part of the festivities amongst all faith groups. Indian sweets or "mithai" are particularly popular. They are a cross between a snack, dessert and confectionery, to which nuts are added, flavoured with fragrant and sweet spices. Popular sweets include "laddos", "barfis" and "halwas".

It is customary to exchange extravagantly decorated boxes of mithai, as well as dried fruit and nuts on silver serving plates, with family and friends. People also prepare foods at home for when guests arrive.

For Hindus, New Year is a time for thanksgiving and is traditionally celebrated with Annakut, "a mountain of food". This is an offering to deities of hundreds of different types of vegetarian food, all given in thanks for the previous year and to seek blessings for the forthcoming one.

## Diwali greetings

Diwali is a time for reconnecting and reuniting with friends and family through personal visits, cards and calls. Traditional greetings play a significant role in the festival and it is common to hear "Diwali na shubh abhinandan" (We wish you a happy and auspicious Diwali) and "Nutan varsh abhinandan" (We wish you a bright and prosperous New Year). Other greetings include wishes for continued good health, peace and contentment, and wealth and prosperity.

Visits are often accompanied by gifts and traditional Diwali delicacies. Today, new technology and social media make keeping in touch with those back home much easier and cheaper. Back in the 1960s and '70s families might only have been able to make one expensive international phone call home.

## Rangoli

Rangoli is a colourful, creative floor design used to decorate living areas or courtyards. It signifies a welcome and brings good luck. Traditionally the materials used are coloured rice, dry flour, coloured sand, red brick powder or flower petals. Vermilion, turmeric and other natural colours are added to rice and flour to provide colour.

Rangoli designs are often passed from one generation to the next and can feature simple geometric shapes, deity impressions or flower and petal shapes. They can be done individually or by numerous people.



# The Story of Diwali in Leicester



The first Diwali lights on Belgrave Road (1983)



Diwali lights in 2015

Leicester today has what is regarded as one of the largest Diwali celebrations outside India. People come from far and wide to see the thousands of decorative Diwali lights along the city's "Golden Mile", enjoy spectacular firework displays and see homes, temples and gurdwaras all illuminated. They also come to join family, friends and communities to celebrate together and enjoy the entertainment programmes. Other attractions include the fabulous food in restaurants and fashion in shops all along the Belgrave Road.

Diwali celebrations in Leicester, however, had very humble origins and it took a lot of determination over many decades to achieve the remarkable festivities we enjoy today.

This exhibition explores how the festival has developed locally and the people, organisations and events that made it happen. We have used the words of local people to tell their own Diwali stories which, alongside archive photographs, create a unique record of how Leicester's Festival of Lights has evolved over the years.



*"For the Asian community, the festival of Diwali is not only of religious significance. It has given a sense of pride, a sense of being able to share with a wider cross section of people the sense of sharing the light. The spirit of Diwali can be shared with everybody"*

**Rita Patel**

*"Diwali is a joyous occasion. We say "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" which means the world is one big family. We have no distinctions between caste, creed, colour or faith. We should celebrate what we have in common - not the differences".*

**Sanjiv Patel**

*"We have found that people come from overseas, Canada, America and even India. We normally have nearly 40 to 50,000 people on both days - Diwali Lights Switch On and Diwali Day"*

**Maganbhai Patel, OBE**

*"It is not just a Hindu festival, the meaning of Diwali is to make sure that you light up everybody's life. You light up the whole house, the whole world. It's not just about Hinduism, it's a universal thing.*

**Bharti Acharya**



BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir illuminated for Diwali



Diwali Annakut darshan 2015



Children playing with sparklers, 1980. Leicester Mercury Archive at the University of Leicester



Celebrating Diwali night on Belgrave Road, 2008

# Diwali in the 1950s and '60s

## “Doing the best we can”



Worship at home. Leicester Mercury Archive at the University of Leicester

The 1950s and '60s saw many Sikhs and Hindus emigrating to Leicester from India and East Africa. Here a Leicester Hindu recalls the kind of traditional Diwali celebrations people would have enjoyed in their homelands:

*“Every house, wherever you looked, all lit up with divas. Every time a diva went out we couldn't wait to run and light it up. People would all be visiting. All varieties of sweet dishes would be cooked as well, certain dishes that people do just at Diwali time. You exchanged those with your neighbours, your family, your friends.... Before Diwali you cleaned everything, the floor, linen, everything. On the doorstep you painted rangoli patterns” \**

New arrivals did what they could to keep their faith and traditions alive. Diwali was an important festival and newcomers continued to celebrate it as best they could.

In the 1950s and '60s celebrations were inevitably more private and took place mostly in the home. The festival could not be celebrated in the same way in a country where families were separated, neighbours were unfamiliar and few ingredients were available to make traditional delicacies. If Diwali fell on a working day, festivities and family meals had to fit around shift patterns. At the very least families would try to do a small rangoli, prepare a sweet and make one expensive international phone call to relatives back home.



*“In those early days, for Diwali, we used to meet I think at a house in Doncaster Road, in their garage - drawing pictures of deities such as Ram bhagwan, Krishna bhagwan and Swaminarayan bhagwan, and celebrating. In the early years we used to meet in people's houses, do aarti, share food”*

**Sanjiv Patel**



Lighting divas. Leicester Mercury Archive at the University of Leicester



Belgrave Road in 1956



Many Sikhs and Hindus emigrated to Leicester during the 1950s and 60s

*“At that time there were two other Asian households in Moorgate Street and really only a handful of Asian people in the area.... Diwali when I was young in Belgrave was celebrated really amongst the families who were around”*

**Rita Patel**

\*Taken from Leicester Celebrates – Festivals in Leicester Past and Present (a Living History Unit Publication)

# Diwali in the 1970s

## "All on a very small scale."



*Pupils at Moat Infant School work on a rangoli design. Leicester Mercury Archive at the University of Leicester*

As the Asian community in Leicester grew, so did its Diwali celebrations. From 1972 the city became home to many Asians expelled from Uganda who were to settle and create an even greater appetite for Diwali festivities.

The first mandir (Hindu temple) was established in Leicester in 1969 in Highfields and others were to follow. As well as places to worship, mandirs provided a focal point for local Hindus to gather and celebrate at Diwali time.

With a larger community to cater for, more Asian shops opened along the Belgrave Road, supplying specialist products from India. Leicester's Asian community could now buy the ingredients to prepare popular Diwali foods and celebrations would start to take on a more traditional feel.

Community centres with local Asian users started up rangoli competitions and community halls were hired for Diwali gatherings and family dinners. At this time however people tended to mix just within their extended families and caste groups. Schools also started to embrace Diwali during this period with children staging Diwali plays and dance performances.

In 1977 Leicester City Council set up the Belgrave Neighbourhood Centre in a former Methodist church on the Belgrave Road. During the following decade, this was to have a significant effect on Diwali celebrations in the city.



*"A lot of caste organisations started setting up and there would be celebrations in various halls around the city. Often celebrations were limited to one caste or another and you had to belong to that caste to go to their events"*

**Rita Patel**

*"Diwali has changed over the years. In the early days it wasn't as organised as it is now. Before, you'd have more things happening in the street but as the numbers increase they just can't do it with the volume of people. As kids you used to come down with your mates and have a good time. I remember kids whacking all the bangers on the floor. I enjoyed it"*

**Pravin Mistry**



*Belgrave Neighbourhood Centre became a focal point for Diwali celebrations in Leicester*



*Diwali celebrations in Westcotes Library, Narborough Road. Leicester Mercury Archive at the University of Leicester*



*Many Asian families made Leicester their home during the 1970s*



*The Shree Shakti Mandir in a converted church, near Melton Road*

*"We came in 1972 from Uganda. In those days we celebrated in homes. The Hindu community was more scattered. Diwali was on a very small scale. People were so busy trying to settle their children in schools, trying to find jobs, learn the language, the culture. In the 70s, Belgrave was very much a slum area"*

**Bharti Acharya**



# A brighter Diwali for the 1980s

## “Bringing the communities together”

This was the decade that marked the foundation of the celebrations we know today. It was in the '80s that community workers, residents, councillors and council officers first discussed the idea of decorative Diwali lights, with the first set going up in 1983. They ran along Belgrave Road from Dorset Street to Loughborough Road and were switched on by the community's oldest resident. The new lights were to have a significant impact on local shops. Traders started opening longer and later to cater for those coming to enjoy Leicester's "Golden Mile".

Another significant development at this time was the use of the Belgrave Neighbourhood Centre for community activities, especially around Diwali time. There was a new desire to bring the community together, get people out of their homes, away from their caste groups and to celebrate Diwali as one. The Neighbourhood Centre provided activities that were cross-caste and inclusive.

As the festival grew, so did local feelings about how it should be run and organised. Tensions ran high when the City Council, who organised the Diwali lights, asked the High Commissioner of India to switch them on one year. If community Diwali celebrations in the city were to thrive, and remain culturally relevant, a closer partnership was needed between those with a stake in their future. The solution proposed was the creation of a Hindu Festival Council chaired by a city councillor, which is still central to the festival today.



Belgrave Neighbourhood Centre decorated for Diwali in 1988



Belgrave Road Diwali lights 1986



Diwali Mela on Belgrave Road in 1986



Diwali parade in 1989 along Narborough Road

**Tanmanben Patel** describes the kind of Diwali activities that took place in the Belgrave Neighbourhood Centre in the 1980s: *“The hall was full with more than 500 ladies. We had rangoli and fancy dress competitions. We arranged games...every Diwali had a programme of different activities. There were garba dance competitions, a “sweet dish” competition and also a “making the perfect samosa” competition.*

*“I remembered that in India there was always a Melo [Mela] at Diwali. So we decided that's what we wanted to do - where all the communities needed to come together as opposed to celebrating Diwali in their homes or caste organisations. We had Billy Bates Fun Fair and sold “Chana chaat” and peanuts in cones. Contrary to everything people had said, 20,000 people came and the police had to close off the road. That was the first Diwali Melo. It was amazing and it was the kind of Melo that you had in India”*

**Rita Patel**

*“In those days it was very, very difficult. We wanted to celebrate, wear our new clothes and be in the party mood but our classmates who were white, fully British, didn't understand about Diwali. They used to give us such a hard time, throwing racist comments and if we wore Indian clothes they would say awful, awful words. The teachers also used to say you cannot come out of uniform, so all the way from top to bottom we were penalised. We could have totally gone the other way and stopped celebrating, but we came back home and celebrated it. We made the most of it”.*

**Bharti Acharya**

# A national festival and Diwali in the 1990s

## “It’s a big ask”



Diwali lights switch on celebrations in 1997

By the 1990s the Diwali celebrations along Belgrave Road had developed a national reputation. It was important, however, that the event remained true to its origins as a cultural festival. To ensure that this was the case the Leicester Hindu Festival Council (LHFC) was formed in 1992 to oversee not just Diwali, but other major festivals.

What had originally been regarded as a local community celebration was now a major festival. Entertainment and firework spectaculars amused thousands and local media covered the Diwali nights with live broadcasts and documentaries.

The City Council and other agencies, like the emergency services, were by now more heavily involved in the event management as thousands of new visitors were creating increased challenges for the organisers. Road closures had to be organised, increased security was required and armies of street cleaners cleared up after the event.

By now people were booking days off from work for Diwali and schools were giving children time off too. Schools and shops all joined in the festivities. Diwali was a good time for the Belgrave Road traders with thousands flocking to the area to buy gifts and clothes. Shopkeepers decorated shop fronts with Diwali lights and ordered special stock like Diwali cards, rangoli colours, special ingredients for cooking and the latest jewellery and sarees. People were also buying more Diwali foods too rather than making them at home.

**Manjeet Virdee** recalls an incident in 1995 when the switch on of the lights had to be cancelled for safety reasons: *“A small stage had been added outside the Belgrave Neighbourhood Centre. A well-known group had been invited to the switch on. At the time they were due to perform there was a rush of people that came from each end of Belgrave Road to the stage. A restaurant opposite rang to say the windows in the restaurant were starting to bow from the pressure of people outside. Given the risk we decided to cancel the event. I remember looking in shock at the number of people. It attracted more people than we could manage. To manage that many people on a public highway and then to clear the road up, it’s a big ask”.*

*“I think the role of the temples has changed for the better, doing a lot more, bringing the communities and young ones together. They bridge the gap between the young ones and the adults by doing things like Rangoli competitions where everyone does things together. Even the Chopda Pujan, people used to do it alone, now they come together and the power of prayer in togetherness is immense”.*

**Bharti Acharya**



The Lord Mayor, Mrs Margaret Bell, meets Alanka Saree shop owner Mr Dagdish Modha and his wife Ranju in 1994. Leicester Mercury Archive at the University of Leicester



Shopping for jewellery on the Belgrave Road in 1991. Leicester Mercury Archive at the University of Leicester



Food store on Belgrave Road. Leicester Mercury Archive at the University of Leicester



Rangoli competition in 1993. Leicester Mercury Archive at the University of Leicester

# Diwali Today

## "The largest event outside India"



Diwali celebrations today attract a wide range of people to Leicester

Leicester today has what is regarded as the largest Diwali celebrations outside of India. It is a huge multi-agency operation that takes months to plan and is steered by the Diwali Advisory Panel who all work hard to improve the festival offer; making it bigger, better, safer and more vibrant each year.

As well as 6,500 lights all along Belgrave and Melton Roads there is a huge events programme collectively recognised as "Diwali Leicester". Around 50 separate events are now spread across the city over a two-week period. It includes music, dance and live performances in a variety of venues, all ending in a spectacular firework display.

The celebrations now reflect a new age, a stronger community and a greater ambition for a festival with an international reputation. Messages to relatives abroad are now sent via WhatsApp and Facebook instead of expensive international calls. A few sweets eaten in the home after work have been replaced by a vast array of special foods and delicacies in shops and restaurants. Entertainment on Diwali nights has gone from talking and eating with the family to firework spectaculars and a huge street party along Belgrave Road. Even the humble earthenware divas have now been transformed into the motifs illuminated by the 6,500 energy efficient LED lights along Belgrave and Melton Roads.

**So where does Diwali in Leicester go from here?**



*"Diwali celebrations in Leicester are the largest in my eyes... People come from all walks of life and all countries to see our Diwali lights here. I am proud to be a Leicestarian, even in India it isn't celebrated with such style and elegance, there wasn't the sort of atmosphere we have here...the excitement that you feel here when you walk along the Golden Mile, the vibrations of Diwali and the sense that something exciting is happening".*

**Iyotsna Dilip Atara-Khoda**

*"We want to keep the foundation of Diwali celebrations like the storytelling, otherwise we'll just succumb to the lights and fireworks which are not what the celebrations are about. We need to keep the traditional things but also move with the times to make it exciting and engaging. Having a longer programme for two weeks would be just perfect I think. That's the way forward. There will be more things for local people to do and things for people from outside too. It will be a good tourist attraction.*

**Pravin Mistry**



Annakut ceremony in the BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir



Aerial view of Belgrave Road Diwali celebrations in 2015



Performers on stage at the Diwali celebrations in 2015

# In grateful thanks.....

Funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, this project is a partnership between Navrang and Leicester Arts & Museums Service. As part of the research for this project, members of the local community were interviewed by a team of volunteers. Those interviewed included individuals from the business community, community development workers, civic leaders, members of the Hindu, Sikh and Jain faiths, local media organisations and city council officers.



This booklet is based on the 2016 exhibition “6000 Lights: The Story of Diwali in Leicester” which took place at New Walk Museum in Leicester.

For information about the ‘Diwali Resource Pack’ which is full of activities about Diwali, or to borrow the travelling exhibition ‘6000 Lights: The Story of Diwali in Leicester’ please contact:

[museum@leicester.gov.uk](mailto:museum@leicester.gov.uk) or  
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[www.navrangarts.com](http://www.navrangarts.com)

