

# 'Let Hindus share all our freedoms'

**An Article from The Times, Monday July 11, 1994.  
by Lord William Rees-Mogg.**

*A protest over one of Britain's important shrines' deserves the support of those who believe in liberty.*

Last Thursday evening I was walking past the Liberal Democrat head office in Cowley Street, a quiet Queen Anne street just behind Westminster Abbey. There were two Hindu monks standing outside the office, and some yellow posters placed against the railings. I stopped to talk to them, to find out why they were conducting a hunger strike outside the Liberal Democrats' building. The protest was held not with any hostile intent but in the hopes that the Liberal Democrats on Hertsmere District Council would support Bhaktivedanta Manor's planning problems. There was a larger demonstration of Hindus outside Parliament earlier in the week.

As we talked, one of the monks continued to pray, while the other acted as spokesman. The scene was a peaceful one; the spokesman argued his case with gentleness and moderation, showing understanding for those who are opposed to the Hindus. The planning question now has a 20 year history. In 1973 the Bhaktivedanta Manor was bought for the International Society for Krishna Consciousness by George Harrison, who had been one of the four Beatles. The house is a large mock-Tudor building, built about 100 years ago. It is now a Hindu temple and a theological college for 50 student priests. The Hare Krishnas claim that it is now "the most important Hindu shrine in Britain", and on certain festivals it attracts congregations of 20,000 people or more.

The founder of this shrine of Radha and Krishna was the Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who had been instructed by his spiritual master in 1922 to take the message of Krishna to the West. Although he died in India in 1977, his rooms at the Manor are themselves regarded as a separate shrine, and attract many visitors. The work of the manor as a theological college is important to Hindus throughout Britain. Most British temples have to bring in priests from India, but these priests do not always find it easy to communicate with young Hindus who have been born in this country. The primary function of the manor is similar to that of an Anglican theological college or a Roman Catholic seminary.

The success of the manor has, however, created the planning difficulties; the shrines have become a magnet for Hindu worshippers. In 1973 Watford Rural District Council decided there was no need for a change of planning consent, as the manor had previously been used as a training lodge for nurses. In the late 1970s the growth of the outside congregations, particularly on festival days, led to discussions with the new Hertsmere council, and a large car park was built inside the 17-acre grounds in 1983. At the same time a Section 52 planning agreement was signed, "allowing the use of the

manor for public worship and festivals" under certain conditions. On six festival days unlimited congregations were allowed, while the Society for Krishna Consciousness agreed not to arrange ceremonies likely to attract more than 1,000 people on any other day.

This Section 52 agreement became the cause of the dispute. One might think that the Section 52 agreement was itself oppressive. No Christian shrine, established before the planning laws came into effect, is subject to such an agreement. In 1986, Hertsmere district went to the High Court for an injunction, alleging breaches of the agreement. It had employed private detectives to stand outside the manor to count how many people entered, in one case dividing them into "coloured persons" and "white persons". There was of course nothing in the Section 52 agreement which referred to the ethnic origin of the congregation. The council lost its case; the court found that there had been no breach because the authorities at the manor had in fact scheduled no special event on that particular day. Thereupon Hertsmere council unilaterally revoked the Section 52 agreement and issued an enforcement order prohibiting all festivals and public worship. That, on the face of it, was a thoroughly undesirable use of the planning powers to restrict the freedom of public worship at an established religious centre.

Worse was to come. In 1987, the society appealed to the Department of Environment, and the appeal was rejected. Attempts were made to find an alternative site for a temple in the same area, but they failed on planning grounds. The society then proposed to draw all the traffic away from the local village of Letchmore Heath, where there has been considerable congestion, particularly on festival days, by developing a new access route at the rear of the property.

Tomorrow Hertsmere district, which is now a hung council, will be considering this application for a new route, which would solve the worst part of the congestion problems. If it does not accept this route, the enforcement order will come into effect. Public Hindu worship at the manor is already technical illegal, and it would then become so in fact.

One can understand the resentment in the village at their manor attracting more than 20,000 Hindus on six festival days in the year, and large numbers on other days. There are similar inconveniences caused by such events as the Glastonbury Festival or the Epsom Derby, both of which attract large crowds. The local authority would certainly have been justified if it had insisted at an earlier stage that a route to the manor should be developed which bypassed the village. Yet the balance of public sympathy should lie with the manor and the Hindu community. The original Section 52 agreement was an interference with worship. It was abrogated after the council had lost an application to the courts. The society has offered an alternative route which would greatly improve the traffic situation. The manor is an important training college for