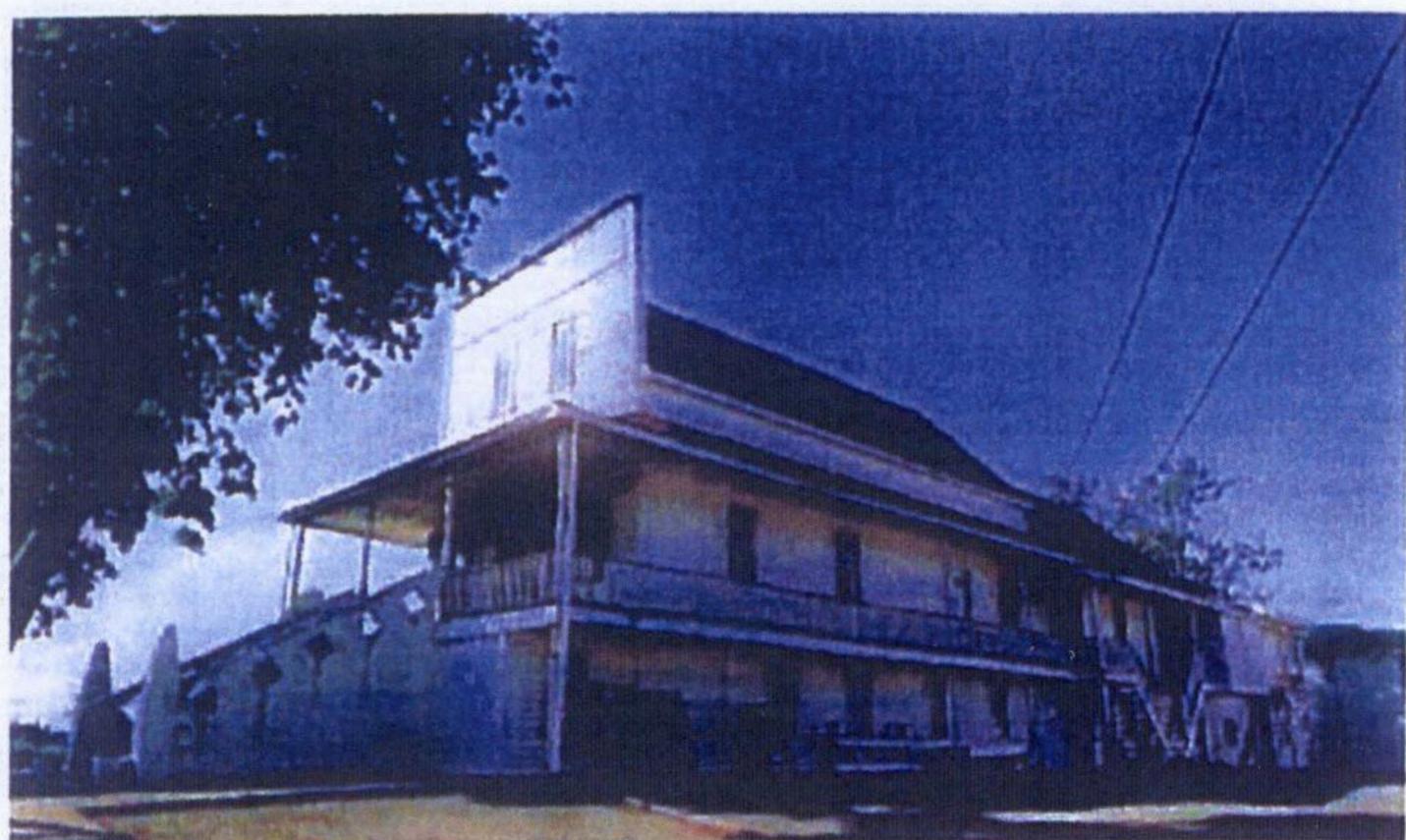


# ABBOTSFORD SIKH TEMPLE



*National Historic Site of Canada*



### **Name**

Abbotsford Sikh Temple----It is also referred to as a Gurdwara, the Punjabi word for temple but the word temple is considered to be recognizable to most Canadians.

### **Location**

33089 South Fraser Way, Abbotsford, British Columbia. V2s 2A9. Just across is the new Sikh Temple at 33094, South Fraser Way.

### **Brief History**

It was built in 1911 by determined Sikh pioneers who came from Punjab, India and worked in the nearby sawmill owned by the Trethewey family. The owners donated lumber for the construction of the temple, setting an enviable example of accommodation and humanism. The project was spearheaded by Sunder Singh Thandi, who worked for the Abbotsford Lumber Company and was one of the leaders of the Sikh community. With Arjan Singh he purchased the present one-acre property, located on a prominent hilltop outside the Abbotsford village and close to the mill, for \$3,000. They donated the land to the Khalsa Diwan Society and raised some funds from the community. It is the only temple from the

pioneer phase of Sikh settlement in Canada that has survived intact. It has been designated a National Historic Site, not only because of its being the oldest surviving Sikh temple but also for its role in the early period of Sikh settlement; for embodying the fundamental beliefs of the Sikhs and their experience in Canada and for its architectural adaptation of Sikh tradition to the Canadian context. At this early stage in their immigration history, the Sikhs preferred to blend into the host society rather than to emphasize their differences.

Some 5000 Sikhs came to Canada from Punjab, India starting from the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the first decade of the twentieth century. Most of them were young who found work in the lumber and agricultural industries in the Fraser Valley, Vancouver, and Vancouver Island. The Khalsa Diwan Society, the central institution of the Sikhs built a temple in Vancouver in 1908 (no longer extant), the first in Canada.

The first Sikhs arrived in Abbotsford in 1905. Within a few years the community numbered about fifty people, many of them were employed at the Trethewey family's Abbotsford Lumber Company on Mill Lake. The Lumber Company provided separate accommodation for its Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and Caucasian workers.

The Abbotsford Temple adapted the Sikh religious traditions to Western Canadian vernacular building. The wood-frame gable-roofed building with a false front facing the street follows a popular building form. This common type has been adapted to

accommodate the various ritual requirements of the 'gurdwara': a prayer hall (located on the upper floor), a community kitchen (on the ground floor), and doors on all four elevations. A staircase on the south (entrance) façade leads to the prayer hall and to upper-floor balconies along the east and west sides. The other important feature of the site is the Nishan Sahib, a tall, distinctive flag-pole which indicates the presence of a Sikh Temple, as well as, the base of the original Nishan Sahib, which was trimmed out of a 70 feet high tree.

The temple was enlarged at the rear in 1932 to extend the prayer hall, and a second addition was built in the late 1960's. Though a number of other minor changes have been made inside and outside, yet overall the building retains much of its original appearance. Although the historic temple is no longer used for regular worship, it remains an important community resource. Senior members of the Sikh community get together there during the day. Some of them read the holy Scripture, Guru Granth Sahib. They also discuss their religious and social affairs and pass their time properly.



## **Sikhism:----- History and Beliefs**

Sikhism is a relatively recent religion with roots in the Punjab region of undivided northern India. Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1539) who posited the existence of one God and rejected the Hindu pantheon as well as the restrictions of caste. He called his followers Sikhs or disciples and insisted that God could be experienced by all persons, not just by priests or holy men. The founder Guru was followed by nine other Gurus and the Sikhs believe that the same holy spirit pervaded all of them. The tenth Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708)-proclaimed that the succession of living Guru had ended and elevated the holy book to the level of Guru. From then on the sacred text, called Guru Granth Sahib has been understood to be a Guru in its own right. The Guru Granth Sahib is written in verse and contains hymns, not only of the Sikh Gurus, but also of many Hindu, Muslim and the so called low caste saints. It is the source of authority that governs the life of the Sikh community all over the world.

Common meal or Langer as it is called, is an important and significant feature of Sikhism. Prepared communally and eaten together, this meal has immense theological significance. Langar affirms the equality of all who partake of it. It is not refused to anyone, Sikh or non-Sikh. Gurdwara (Sikh Temple) without Langar is incomplete and inconceivable.

The Abbotsford Sikh Temple also played an important social and economic role for the new arrivals. It provided new comers with meals and a place to stay, as well as information and guidance about the new society and culture. The Temple acted as a forum for the discussion of issues facing the community, ranging from minor personal disagreements, to political questions both in Canada and India.

As the only early temple that has survived intact, the Abbotsford Sikh Temple has become imbued with symbolism. For the Sikh community, the building is a gift given to them by the pioneers. They consider it their duty to preserve it for future generations. The old temple is an important touchstone to their past; its preservation also represents one of the first steps in documenting and transmitting their history in Canada for future generations.

A new dimension was added to the importance of Abbotsford Sikh Temple when the Hon'ble Jean Chretien, Prime Minister of Canada, accompanied by the Hon'ble Minister of Heritage, Sheila Copps and the Hon'ble Minister of Human Resources Herb Dhaliwal, visited the temple on July 31, 2002. and declared the Temple as a National Historic Site which in fact is a great tribute not only to the Sikh pioneers but to all Sikhs around the world.