

GRC's Return!

Many hands involved as retreat centre prepares to reopen

At last that day has come...when nearly two and a half years of refurbishment works at the Global Retreat Centre are drawing to a close, and GRC starts to prepare once again to serve the world.

Project director Ratan Thadani, who over the past 50 years has worked on many multi-million-pound projects for Baba's yagya at centres and retreat centres around the world, says this was by far the most challenging of all.



With GRC being equivalent to a grade I historical building, government requirements were such that no fabric of the building could be changed. All the plumbing and rewiring, including renewal of 70 bathrooms and relocating the boiler house, had to be done without chasing the walls or drilling holes in the plaster works. A new exhaust and ventilation system for a brand new

kitchen also had to be installed, without any alteration to the main structure.

On top of that, the building was infected throughout with asbestos. It was found in the walls, ceilings, doors, chimneys, and around the old underfloor pipework, radiators, and wiring.

Problems mounted as the works progressed. Covid-19 restrictions added to the difficulties, with social distancing maintained for the workers, masks having to be worn, and government requirements stopping the work entirely at times. Bats, a protected species, were found nesting in the roof.



'The list is endless', Ratanbhai said. 'But with Baba's blessings we were able to carry out these works in less half the period it would have taken, very economically - saving millions for the yagya.'

The impossible became possible, and Dave Waters, site manager for Life Build, the contractors, has now returned the keys for completed parts of the building, enabling carpeting and other minor works to go ahead. Sub-contractors are putting finishing touches to the job, and most residents are expected to move back in November.



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‘With a number of regulatory authorities to deal with, and professionals, contractors, sub-contractors and specialists working on this job tirelessly, we must not forget to thank them for completing this most challenging project,’ Ratanbhai said.

It was at the request of the late Dadi

Janki, head of the Brahma Kumaris, whose UK charity owns the lease on the historic Oxfordshire property, that Ratanbhai, chairman of the charity’s trustees, undertook overall responsibility for this most difficult project in March 2018. The ancient and deteriorating plumbing system had forced the sudden closure and evacuation of GRC.

His right-hand man throughout was Brian Fitzgerald, who left his job as a surveyor to act as link-man between the charity and the contractors. Ratanbhai was also supported with a team consisting of Marek Frydrych, Urvashi Patel, Brian Stokes and Shivali Sharda.

An Interior design team led by Sister Manda and including Wendy Marshall and Urvashi, assisted by Suman Kalra, was active

throughout the period of the refurbishment. Some of the grand “state rooms” where retreat participants gather have been given a completely new look, including the Reception area, and first-floor Anteroom and Drawing Room.

The kitchen has been redesigned and re-equipped, complying to fresh standards, and with a view to reducing the workload. Ancient laundry equipment has been renewed, having been kept going for years through the magic of maintenance expert Maciek Szlegielmilch.

Many hands are involved in the remaining weeks of preparation for reopening.

Doug Stephenson has been taking care of the grounds with Gudrun Duwe, Stephane Tardy, Phil Bradley and other helpers throughout the closure period. Interior fittings are being put in place by voluntary workers coordinated by Marek and Roy Irvine. Doug, and residents Suman and Jasmin Boetel, are leading the massive operation to clean up and move furniture, bedding, office equipment etc, back in place after its long time in storage. They are being helped by a band of brothers from Leicester, Birmingham, and Worcester, and local BKs Maggie Parle, Tracey Llewellyn, Sanjay Johanputtra and several people from the Reading and Hounslow centres.



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Phil Blunn, who with the late Joyce Blunn originally received the keys to the near-derelict property more than 25 years ago, is doing carpentry work. Tony McCann is painting, and Peter Brady has led a team that cleaned and polished brassware, including countless door and light fittings.

Returning residents include the long-serving Brijben, Arunaben, Sister Heli, Roy Irvine, and Mina Karawadra. New blood will include Bhavesh Ramji, from Leicester, and Polina Temponera, from London, both joining the residential team. Senior brother Nick Christianson, currently based in Leeds, will also be spending extended periods at GRC.

Lalitbhai and ShriDevi, a couple from nearby Reading, have played supportive roles throughout the project and will be continuing in service at GRC three days a week after it reopens.

Others, including the London IT team, are working behind the scenes to put in place the new wifi, telephone and computer networks and Al Hodgson has been redesigning sound and lighting systems, and exploring new software approaches to streamline the retreat administration.

Jayantiben and Maureen have both pledged regular stays during the first few months, when retreats will be for BKs. This is partly to build a powerful atmosphere, and partly to allow the team to become familiar with the new systems.

Manda, who held together what we used to call "Dadi's Army" for the first 25 years of

GRC service, in which an incredible 300,000 guests received benefit, decided at the time of the closure that in future, responsibilities should be shared more widely.

With that in mind a group called CaST - Coordination and Support Team - has been set up by Sister Jayanti, with six members representing diverse backgrounds and experiences. It includes previous residents Doug, Jasmin, Marek and Neville, and two new members: Usha Bhavsar, whose previous service stations have included Pakistan and Ghana, and Samantha Fraser, a professional teacher, with long experience of serving in many African countries.

In preparation for the reopening, both CaST and the wider GRC community have received hours of online training in shared decision-making, and in the listening and communication skills needed for collaborative working.

Their guides have been a group that came to be known as SGG - Sarah Egger, Gabriella Havard, and Geoff Marlow - who all have professional experience in organisational change and human resources management.

More than three years have passed since GRC was vacated. The wonder of the drama has been that the long closure also gave former residents an opportunity to step right back from what was previously a very intense period of service, and recharge internally. A feeling of immense gratitude to the BK family for having funded the redevelopment is contributing to a sense of excitement at the wonders that we know lie ahead.

