



HISTORIC ROYAL PALACES

**THE LAST
PRINCESSES OF
PUNJAB**

A Guide for School Visits

SPACE TO STIR AND BE STIRRED

TOWER OF LONDON • HAMPTON COURT PALACE • BANQUETING HOUSE
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	5
Practical Guidance	5
Booking Tickets	5
Contact Information	5
About the Exhibition	6
Before Your Visit	8
During Your Visit	11
After Your Visit	16
Glossary	18



INTRODUCTION

Discover the story of Punjabi princess and suffragette icon, Sophia Duleep Singh and five women who shaped her extraordinary life. For the first time, Queen Victoria's childhood home of Kensington Palace will offer an intimate look into six lives shaped by empire. This new exhibition – created to celebrate Sophia's 150th birthday – will focus on the women of a royal dynasty whose destinies were profoundly and violently transformed by it.

This exhibition offers students a unique opportunity to connect past and present, exploring British South Asian heritage and the role of women in shaping social change. From Maharani Jind Kaur's defiance against British rule to Princess Catherine's humanitarian work during the Second World War, these stories encourage reflection on activism, belonging, and equality, issues that remain relevant today.

The legacy of empire shaped the lives and identity of these women and continues to affect lives here and around the world. Once forgotten, these royal women are now finding a new legacy as inspiring role models for new generations.

This guide has been designed to support teachers as they prepare to bring groups to experience the exhibition before and after your visit.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE

Last Princesses of Punjab takes place in the Pigott Gallery at Kensington Palace from 26th March to 8th November 2026. Entry is included with palace admission. We anticipate it will take about 30 minutes to explore the exhibition, though groups may wish to take longer if desired.

BOOKING TICKETS

Pre-booking is essential for all visits to Kensington Palace. Please visit our [website](#) for support booking and planning your visit.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Historic Royal Palace's Schools team is happy to offer additional support and advice to prepare for visits to all of our palaces.

For school visits, please contact: kensingtonlearning@hrp.org.uk

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition explores the story of Sophia Duleep Singh through the women who shaped her.

PRINCESS SOPHIA (1876-1948)

Youngest daughter of Maharaja Duleep Singh and Maharani Bamba, Sophia was raised within the English aristocracy and became closely connected to the women's suffrage movement. She played a leading role in the WSPU and the Women's Tax Resistance League, while also supporting causes affecting people of South Asian heritage.

MAHARANI JIND KAUR (c.1817-1863)

The last Maharani of the Sikh Empire, she became regent for her six-year-old son Duleep Singh and fiercely resisted colonial control, leading officials to undermine her and separate her from him. After the Anglo-Sikh Wars she was imprisoned and later took refuge in Nepal, before being allowed to reunite with Duleep only by travelling to England, where she died two years later aged 46.



Queen Victoria © Royal Collection Enterprises Ltd 2026 | Royal Collection Trust

QUEEN VICTORIA (1819-1901)

Queen Victoria played a major role in the lives of Maharaja Duleep Singh's children, arranging guardianship, financial support and educational opportunities, enabling the princesses to enter elite British society and pursue education. Yet this friendship and protection afforded to the Duleep Singh Family by the Queen's favour, was contradictory. Their privilege depended on the woman in whose name their kingdom was taken away.



Bamba & children at Elveden © Peter Bance Collection



Sophia, Catherine, Bamba at old Buckenham Hall, 1900 © Peter Bance Collection

MAHARANI BAMBA (1847-1887)

Born in Cairo to a German banker and an enslaved Ethiopian woman, Bamba was educated at the American Presbyterian Mission's girls' school, where her strong Christian faith shaped her identity. Chosen by Maharaja Duleep Singh as a Christian bride she married him at sixteen and moved from a modest life to English aristocracy before her early death at thirty-nine.

PRINCESS BAMBA (1859-1957)

The eldest daughter of Maharani Bamba and Maharaja Duleep Singh, she saw herself as the rightful heir to Maharaja Ranjit Singh's legacy and worked to preserve her family's history. Living between England and Lahore, she campaigned for the return of her family's lands, forged connections with South Asian intellectuals despite British hostility.

PRINCESS CATHERINE (1871-1941)

The second daughter of Maharaja Duleep Singh and Maharani Bamba, she studied at Somerville College, Oxford, where she met Lina Schäfer, her lifelong companion. A committed suffragist who supported the NUWSS, Catherine returned to England from Germany after Lina's death and helped at least eleven Jewish refugees flee Nazi persecution before her own death at the age of seventy-one.

BEFORE YOUR VISIT

To help prepare your students for your visit to Last Princesses of the Punjab you might like to explore:

- Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Sikh Empire and the Royal Court of Lahore
- Queen Victoria's role as the Empress of India
- The women's suffrage movement and key events such as Black Friday

Below is some key information and some suggested enquiry questions you can adapt for your students.

THE COURT OF LAHORE

The Court of Lahore under Maharaja Ranjit Singh was the vibrant heart of the Sikh Empire celebrated for its cultural diversity and artistic brilliance. Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims worked together creating a unique environment of tolerance and collaboration. Known for its splendour, diplomacy, and artistry the court attracted poets, musicians, and skilled craftsmen from across South Asia. This cosmopolitan setting symbolised the strength and unity of the Sikh Empire, which extended across Punjab, Kashmir, and parts of present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan.

After Ranjit Singh's death in 1839, the court became embroiled in succession struggles that weakened the empire opening the door for British intervention. The Anglo-Sikh Wars ultimately led to the annexation of Punjab in 1849. The court's legacy survives through its art, architecture, and the stories of resistance offering students' insight into identity, power, and the human cost of empire.

- How do you think the Court of Lahore differed from the Royal Court in Britain in the 19th Century?
- How did British colonial rule change life in Punjab, and what lasting effects do you think it had on the people and culture of the region?

VICTORIA AND INDIA

Queen Victoria's formal relationship with India began in 1858 when political control passed from the East India Company to the British Crown. In 1876, she took the title Empress of India, a symbolic gesture that reinforced Britain's imperial dominance. Loyalty to the Queen became an important idea for many Indians as it seemed to offer the possibility of imperial citizenship, with the same rights and status as subjects in Britain – but in practice this never happened.

Victoria never visited India, yet the country fascinated her. She maintained personal connections with South Asians and collected Indian art and textiles. These relationships reflected the contradictions of empire: Britain presented itself as liberal and inclusive while ruling through systems that were deeply unequal and exploitative. Today, her title and the treasures associated with it invite critical discussion about the human cost of empire and the ways in which colonial power shaped identities and global history.

- How did Queen Victoria's personal fascination with India differ from the political reality of British rule, and what can this tell us about the contradictions of empire?
- Is it unusual that Queen Victoria never visited India despite being declared "Empress of India," and what does this reveal about how the British Empire claimed power over places



Elvedon Interior © Peter Bance Collection

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE AND BLACK FRIDAY

The campaign for women's right to vote in Britain spanned over 90 years. Suffragists, such as Princess Catherine, represented by the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), believed in peaceful, constitutional methods such as petitions and lobbying. In contrast, Suffragettes, such as Princess Sophia, led by the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), adopted the motto "Deeds not Words" and used more militant tactics, including protests, a campaign of arson, bombing and property damage, and hunger strikes. These actions highlighted the growing frustration with a political system that denied women representation while expecting them to obey laws and pay taxes.

On 18 November 1910, 300 suffragettes marched to Westminster. Prime Minister Asquith had dissolved Parliament, halting progress on the Conciliation Bill that could have granted women the vote. Protestors, including Princess Sophia, met a heavy police presence. Under orders from Home Secretary Winston Churchill, no arrests were made but officers responded with violence to disperse the women. Women were beaten, thrown to the ground, and some were sexually assaulted. The brutality lasted six hours. Despite public outrage and demands for an inquiry, the government dismissed the women's testimonies as "hysterics." The day became known as Black Friday – a defining moment in the fight for women's suffrage.



Sophia selling newspapers © IanDagnall Computing/Alamy

- Why do you think some campaigners chose peaceful methods while others turned to more militant tactics in the fight for women's suffrage? What were the advantages and risks of each approach?
- What does the violence of Black Friday tell us about attitudes toward women's rights in early 20th-century Britain, and how might this event have influenced public opinion about the suffrage movement?

DURING YOUR VISIT

Below is some key information to help you navigate the exhibition and some suggested enquiry questions you can adapt for your students.

THE JEWELS OF JIND KAUR

In South Asia, jewellery often represents a woman's personal wealth. For Jind Kaur, her jewels represented far more: they were a link to her identity and the dignity of the Sikh Empire. When the British seized her jewellery during her exile, it was a deliberate act to strip her of power. Decades later, 525 pieces were returned to her in London on the condition she never return to India. These jewels reinstated some of both her own dignity and royal status and that of the Sikh Empire.

Bazubands (arm bands) have been worn by men and women in South Asia since ancient times. Although traditionally worn on the upper arm, Maharani Bamba wore hers as a necklace on her wedding day.

- How far did Jind Kaur's actions challenge your expectations of royal women in the 1800s?
- As Jind Kaur's jewels became symbols of imperial identity and resistance, what objects might symbolise your own identity, status or community, and why?



Bazumand © Toor Collection

QUEEN VICTORIA AND MAHARAJA DULEEP SINGH

Queen Victoria considered herself a mother figure to the young Duleep Singh and he formed close friendships with the royal family. When they met, Queen Victoria admired Duleep Singh's appearance, respected his royal status, and approved of his conversion to Christianity. She saw herself as a substitute mother figure, while disapproving of his own mother, Jind Kaur, and being concerned that her lasting influence would make Duleep turn against the British empire and Christianity.

Duleep Singh developed close friendships with the Royal Family. As he grew older, Victoria championed and supported him, at times against her own officials. She continued to support his family even after he later opposed the British government.



Prince Arthur and Prince Alfred in North Indian dress
© Royal Collection Enterprises Ltd 2026 | Royal Collection Trust

- How do the clothes and jewellery in the exhibition show the ways clothing was used to communicate identity and status?
- What does Duleep Singh's experience reveal about religious tolerance within the British Empire, and how does this compare with the Court of Lahore under Maharaja Ranjit Singh?

ROYAL CIRCLES

Princess Sophia and her siblings attended the coronations of Edward VII in 1902 and George V in 1911 and in 1937 Sophia attended the coronation of George VI. Despite their activism and changing circumstances the princesses retained their royal status throughout their lives.

The princesses made their court debut at Buckingham Palace on the 8th May 1895. Newspapers singled them out as looking 'very distinguished in their lovely Court Gowns of White and silver'.

- Why do you think Princess Sophia and her siblings continued to be invited to important royal events like coronations, even though their lives and roles were changing?
- Do you think they were treated differently in England and India? How did the way they were treated reflect their status?

SOPHIA THE NURSE

During the First World War, Sophia trained as a nurse with the British Red Cross, volunteering 2500 hours between 1915 and 1916 caring for wounded soldiers at Isleworth hospital in London. Between shifts she would visit Indian soldiers being treated for their injuries in Brighton often giving out small keepsakes such as this mirror.

In 1916 she left nursing and began campaigning for the welfare of Indian soldiers fighting with the British Empire in World War I. In 1918 she led India Day selling paper flags and urging public support honouring those who 'nobly did their part'.

Her life reflects the contradictions of empire, an Indian princess raised as "a thoroughly English girl" who fought for equality and worked to improve conditions for her countrymen.

- How does Sophia's care for wounded soldiers, both British and Indian, help us understand the challenges she faced balancing her British and Indian identities?
- How did Sophia use her position to challenge inequalities and support those with less power?

URSULA HORNSTEIN

Ursula Hornstein was one of the Jewish refugees who found sanctuary in Britain thanks to Princess Catherine and Lina Schaffer. Catherine acted as a guarantor during the rise of Nazi persecution, ensuring refugees had accommodation and employment. Ursula's identification card, issued in 1939 when she was nine years old, shows how Jewish people were forced to adopt names like "Sara" or "Israel" under Nazi laws, Ursula has defiantly crossed out the name.

Catherine later gave Ursula a precious family heirloom, a pendant possibly adapted from a traditional Indian ornament, as a gift for her confirmation. The Hornstein's had converted to Christianity before leaving Germany in the vain hope it would protect them from Nazi persecution.



Ursula Hornstein's identification card, January 1939
©Michael Bowles

- What does Ursula's identification card, tell us about identity and survival during times of persecution?
- How does Catherine's activism challenge our assumptions about what aristocratic women could do to influence social change?



© Historic Royal Palaces

DRESS AND IDENTITY

After moving to Lahore, Princess Bamba wore Indian clothing more frequently, both in Lahore and when she was visiting England. She may have found them more comfortable than the restrictive clothing of the period or they may have been another way of proclaiming her identity and her right to reclaim her father's lost Kingdom.

This skirt resembles a lehenga but, like many garments passed down and reworn, it shows signs of being adapted. The sleeves would have been attached to a blouse and perhaps worn with this skirt. These textiles represent traditional Indian craftsmanship and highlight Bamba's appreciation for her cultural heritage and elite status. However, such crafts were deeply affected by colonial trade policies and by the displacement of communities after Partition.

- Why do you think Princess Bamba chose Lahore as her home after leaving England, and what does this tell us about her connection to her family's heritage?
- How might Princess Bamba's choice to wear Indian clothing, in both Lahore and England, be seen as a form of resistance against the expectations of British society and colonial rule?

AFTER YOUR VISIT

We hope you enjoyed your visit to Last Princesses of the Punjab. Below are some extension questions and activities to do in your classroom.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What surprised you most about the lives of the princesses?
- How far do the stories of these women challenge the idea that royal women were passive figures in history?
- How did each of these women resist or adapt to imperial power?
- What similarities and differences do you see between the activism of these princesses and campaigns for equality today?
- What campaigns and causes are important to you and your community?
- What object in the exhibition stood out to you and why?
- If you had to choose an object from your life to represent yourself, what object would you choose?

ACTIVITY STARTERS

In your own words

The women in this exhibition often defied societies expectations. They are hard to sum up in just a few words – **how would you describe these women?**

Choose one of the women (or work through all six).

- Think about what you've learned about her story, personality, and actions.
- Write down three words that you feel best describe her. Eg Jind Kaur: Maharani, matriarch, warrior
- For each word, explain why you chose it, what part of her life or choices inspired that word?
- Compare your words with a partner or group. Do your choices match or differ? What does this tell you about how we interpret history and identity?

Raising your voice

Jind, Sophia, Catherine and Bamba all resisted against inequality and injustice, advocating for those in need. They navigated a world where they may have felt as though they often couldn't see themselves.

Today protest can take lots of forms from art works to marches. It is used as a way of expressing disagreement, demanding change, and making voices heard on issues of social justice, equality, and human rights.

In the exhibition Ramanique Ahluwalia's spoken word piece 'Half Normal' captures their ever-evolving relationship with their mixed British-Indian heritage, detailing their journey from shame to pride in a society that defaults to white. It is a call to action as we reflect on our shared history. You can find out more about the community responses in the exhibition [here](#).

How will you raise your voice?

- Consider an issue that you think is important.
- Think about the different ways that you could raise your voice – perhaps you could write a letter to your local MP, create a poster or write your own spoken word piece like Ramanique.
- Create your own call for change and share it with your community.

Letters Across Time

Throughout their lives Sophia, Catherine and Bamba stayed in touch despite living in different countries, highlighting their close relationships. In the days before mobile phones and video calls they stayed in touch through letters, sharing insights into their lives, their passions and their beliefs.

Can you write a letter to Sophia, Catherine or Bamba reflecting on something that you learnt when you explored the exhibition.

You might like to include:

- A question for them about their activism or experiences.
- Something that resonated with you.
- An act of resistance you would like to share.
- Something about your own life today you think they would find interesting.

GLOSSARY

Mixed Heritage: Having a family background of multiple heritages.

Example: Sophia's family is of mixed heritage.

Brown: The colour brown. Belonging or relating to groups of people with brown skin, especially people who come from or whose family originally came from South Asia or the Middle East.

Example: "She was dressed in expensive Parisian couture and her brown face stared back fiercely at those who stared at her" Anita Anand, Princess, Suffragette, Revolutionary.

Sikh: Relating to or a person who adheres to the principles and practices of the Sikh tradition.

Sikhi: The principles and practice of the Sikh tradition.

Singh: Historically, Sikh men who were born or initiated into the Khalsa community took the surname Singh. Today, most, though not all, Sikh men take Singh as a middle or surname. They do not have to be a member of the Khalsa to take the name.

Example: Maharaja Duleep Singh is the youngest son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Kaur: Historically, Sikh women who were born or initiated into the Khalsa community took the surname Kaur. Today, most, though not all, Sikh women take Kaur as a middle or surname. They do not have to be a member of the Khalsa to take the name.

Example: Maharani Jind Kaur fiercely defied British rule in India.

Sikh Empire: A regional power based in the Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent, spanning modern day India and Pakistan (1799-1849). It was founded by Ranjit Singh, who captured Lahore at the age of 19 and went on to become the undisputed Maharaja of Punjab until his death in 1839.

Khalsa: A collective identity for the Sikh community and the name of a specific group of initiated Sikhs.

Gurdwara: A Sikh place of worship. Literally meaning 'doorway to the Guru'

Example: Princess Sophia Duleep Singh often visited the Khalsa Jatha, the first gurdwara in Shepherds Bush, London which opened in 1911.

Maharaja/Maharajah: A royal title, literally meaning 'great ruler', usually associated with Hindu rulers.

Maharani: The feminine form of Maharaja.

The Raj: The period of British rule in India, specifically from 1858 to 1947. Following the 1857 Uprising, the rule of the East India Company was transferred to the Crown in the person of Queen Victoria.

Court of Lahore: The royal court of the Sikh Empire. It was the political and cultural heart of the empire.

Annexation: Annexation is when one state takes control of another territory and absorbs it into its own empire, usually through force or political pressure.

Regent: A regent is someone who rules on behalf of a king or queen who is too young, unable, or not present to rule for themselves.

Suffrage: The right to vote in political elections.

Suffragettes: A suffragette was a woman who actively campaigned, often through bold or disruptive actions, for women to gain the right to vote in the early 20th century.

Suffragist: A suffragist was someone who campaigned peacefully for the right to vote, especially for women, using methods like petitions, meetings, and public speaking.

This terminology guide has been developed and researched by HRP and Jassa Ahluwalia.

