

## ABDUL-HAMID, SHEIKH (1900 - 1944), architect and Muslim leader

**Name:** Sheikh Abdul-hamid  
**Date of birth:** 1900  
**Date of death:** 1944  
**Spouse:** Armida Abdul-Hamid (née Gioja)  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** architect and Muslim leader  
**Area of activity:** Art and Architecture; Religion  
**Author:** Abdul-Azim Ahmed

Sheikh Abdul-Hamid was born on 21 January 1900 in Rajputna (roughly coterminous with contemporary Rajasthan) in northern India. He is described as the son of a Rajput clan chief, though details of his family are absent. His first name was Sheikh, which may also have been a reference to his lineage, but it was not a religious title.

From the age of fourteen he worked for three years as a draftsman for the Prince of Wales's Own Regiment in Jodhpur, India under Sir Samuel Swinton Jacob (1841-1917). From 1917 to 1928 he worked under 'Mr. Skelton, Architect, and Consulting Engineer' on projects in Kodaikanal in Tamil Nadu (south India), and subsequently in Delhi and Mount Abu in the east of contemporary Rajasthan. Eventually he earned sufficient experience to join Mr. Skelton's firm as a partner. In 1929, he moved positions again and joined 'Messrs Lanchester and Lodge' in their project to build a new palace for the Maharaja of Marwar in Jodhpur, working there until 1932 when he moved to London and successfully obtained Licentiate of the Royal Institute of British Architects.

Abdul-Hamid spent most of the 1930s working as an architect in London, and would sometimes frequent the Shah Jahan Mosque in Woking. In 1931 he met Armida Gioja, and in 1935 it was announced with some fanfare in the papers that they had become engaged and that she had embraced Islam to do so. Armida was the thirty-year-old daughter of Count Eduardo Gioja (1862-1937), a celebrated Italian artist and portraitist. Less than three months after Armida's conversion, her father also embraced Islam, announcing it publicly via *The Islamic Review*, a periodical published by the Woking Muslim Mission. Armida herself died in 1984, at the age of 80, in Middlesex.

Abdul-Hamid's time in London during the 1930s was one of establishing himself in Britain. He was networking amongst the existing Muslim activists and leaders in the city, offering his services as an architect for mosque projects, including what would go on to become London Central Mosque and East London Mosque (though his plans were never used).

In 1940, Abdul-Hamid relocated to Rhyl in north Wales as an employee of the Ministry of Works (likely a wartime commission). The change in circumstances was embraced by Abdul-Hamid. He took an active part in the civic life of Rhyl, organizing charity events for the Red Cross and St John Prisoner of War Fund. He was also a regular visitor to Colwyn Bay Cricket Club.

While in Rhyl he took the initiative to organize Eid prayers. On the morning of 9 January 1941, Muslims and non-Muslims gathered in Nant House, Prestatyn. The guest of honour was the dethroned monarch Prince Mohammed Hasan Mirza of Persia, heir of the Qajar Dynasty which had ruled Iran from 1789 to 1925. This event in Prestatyn would be the last Eid prayers held in the region for decades.

Over a year after this prayer meet, in April 1942, Abdul-Hamid lead the inaugural prayer at the newly opened 'Home for Indian Seamen' on Upper Parliament Street in Liverpool. On 28 August 1942, he organized a meeting in Cardiff with other Muslims to pray for the success of British war efforts. Guests included Sufi teacher Sirdar Ali Shah and the Lord Mayor of Cardiff Alderman James Hellyer and Lady Mayoress Mrs Hellyer. Abdul-Hamid organized the event under the banner of the 'Muslim Society of Wales', of which he was founder and president.

Abdul-Hamid is notable in the historical record as one of the earliest examples of Muslims identifying with Wales. We can only speculate as to why. As a young man he served in the Prince of Wales's Own Regiment, and as his career developed he was commissioned to build a palace for Maharaja Umaid Singh, who himself served as aide-de-campe to the Prince of Wales. His employer, Henry Vaughan Lanchester, whose support brought Abdul-Hamid to Britain, had also built Cardiff City Hall, a jewel of Welsh architecture. And finally, the Second World War had made him relocate to north Wales. Throughout his life then, he would have heard about this nation in the heartlands of the British Empire. The distinction of Wales perhaps didn't mean much to Muslims during this period, at least in comparison to the weight carried by the terms 'Britain' and 'British', but life had uniquely prepared Abdul-Hamid to recognize that to some, Wales and Welsh carried great meaning, and a meaning he could draw upon.

Abdul-Hamid's experience in organizing gatherings, his networks amongst Muslims and the influential circles of Britain, and his belief in the alignment of Islamic interests and British interests culminated in the launch of a new organization he founded in 1944. The Society of Friends of the Islamic World was launched on 13 June 1944 with a luncheon at the Savoy Hotel, London, presided over by Edward Turnour, Lord Winterton. In attendance were a long list of high society individuals, including the Turkish Ambassador, Lady Willingdon (widow to the former Viceroy of India Marquess Willingdon), and Leo Amery, the Secretary of State for India.

Ten days after the launch of the Society of Friends of the Islamic World, Sheikh Abdul-Hamid was killed by 'enemy action' in southern England on 23 June 1944, aged 44 (though his death certificate states 42). His address at the time is noted as 34A Buckingham Gate. His funeral took place in Cardiff on 30 June, overseen by Sheikh Hassan Ismail, and he was buried in Cardiff's Western Cemetery, Section E, grave 223.

Sheikh Abdul-Hamid's activities in Rhyl, London and elsewhere generated several obituaries. Most praised his charitable works and his support for the British cause, but also noted his successful career as an architect. His premature death cut short his institution building, and had he survived, organisations like the Muslim Society of Wales may have also survived until today. Abdul-Hamid was one of the earliest Muslims, if not the first, to build an institution focused on Wales, an example that would be followed in coming decades.

## Author

Abdul-Azim Ahmed

## Sources

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*The Daily Mirror*

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General Register Office, United Kingdom

Cardiff Council's Bereavement Services for help in identifying Sheikh Abdul-Hamid's grave

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