



# **BARNET & MUSEUM**

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## **LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY**

### **A TRAVEL SPECIAL**

In these pandemic days of lockdown, stay-at-home and isolation, BMLHS brings you a little international relief in this special edition of our Journal.

David and Colette Nicolle are Barnet locals who, as Museum volunteers and researchers have helped paint and promote our Battle of Barnet banners. David has also used our archives to research a book on, of all things, aviation in World War One Egypt (yes- World War One Egyptian aviation in our Museum!)

For research on another of his books David visited India just before the 2020 lockdown. Of course, to keep him in order, Collette accompanied him. Following the trip, David drafted this report.

It gives a sense of the vibrancy and colour of India – somewhere far away, that will seem even further away to many of us trapped by the Covid 19 travel restrictions.

We hope that you enjoy this temporary departure from local history. Stay well.

September 2020

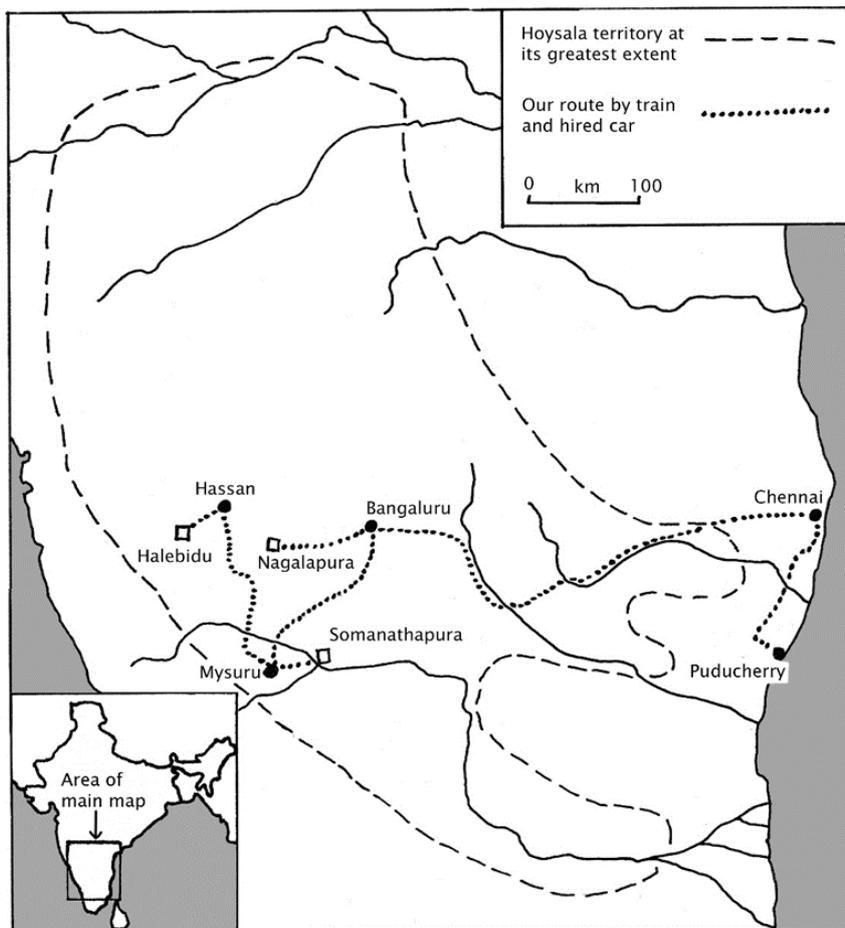
# "Chaps in armour" - the Indian version

## Colette & David Nicolle

Ever since we went to India in 2012 for our son's second wedding party, we have been hoping to go back. That earlier trip was to Delhi, Agra and finally Kolkata (Calcutta) from where our daughter-in-law's family originates. However, the main reason - or more correctly the real excuse - for this recent trip was David's research for a book on the *Armies of Medieval India* for the Osprey Men-at-Arms series, published in Oxford. In fact, he had signed the contract to write without telling Colette, who had been under the illusion that her husband had retired. She was not too happy about it and also felt under some pressure to go to India, while uncertain that she was capable of the sort of adventurous travel they had done in the past. To top it all, their daughter recently announced that she was expecting a baby.



For David, of course, it was a fine excuse to go looking for carvings and other images of "chaps in armour" - a passion he had inherited from his father, the illustrator Pat Nicolle, and which he had ruthlessly imposed upon his children across two decades of summer and other holidays. Nevertheless, we started our adventure on 13 February 2020 and returned on 2 March. Our itinerary mainly focussed upon David's research, but kept enough free time to explore and relax, especially towards the end of the trip. We also had excellent support and advice from Sujith at HolidayAir on Barnet High Street, especially on hotel recommendations and train reservations. The map below shows our route, and for each major location we will give highlights on both historical research and holiday interests. We provide hotel names and perhaps a note or two, but do not plan to make this a Tripadvisor style review.



## Bengaluru (Bangalore)

The Vividus Hotel in Bengaluru provided a wonderful first stop, with very friendly and helpful staff who went out of their way to make us feel welcome. They even placed flowers and swan-folded towels on the bed because we arrived on Valentine's Day after a tiring flight on Emirates Airlines.

By spending four nights in Bengaluru we not only recovered from that flight and got reacclimatized - southern India being hot rather than merely warm, even in February - but David was able to get straight down to serious work. The startlingly red Government Museum in Bengaluru might be a bit dusty and short of funds, but its collections are amazing, and there were no restrictions of photography other than a ban on flash-guns and tripods. With a decent modern camera these are really not necessary if the pictures are just for research purposes.

Our first targets outside the city were the Kadavaresvara and Sri Chennakeshava Temples in the village of Nagalapura, 123 kms west of Bengaluru. Having hired a car and driver, we set off in the cool of the early morning and, after our driver had made enquiries in villages along the way, eventually found these two "minor" examples of Hoysala temple architecture and the superabundance of small carved figures that David had longed to see. Those of particular interest showed episodes from the *Mahabharata* Hindu religious epic written in Sanskrit between the 4th century BCE [BC] and the 3rd century CE [AD]. As such, it included an abundance of warriors, war-elephants and similar scenes. Built in the latter part of the 12th century CE, the Kadavaresvara Temple is undoubtedly a gem of Hoysala architecture, and it offered David his first sight of Hoysala period "chaps in armour". To be honest, there was virtually no evidence of armour as such - but plenty of weaponry, shields, costume, horse and elephant harness, so he was quite content.

The nearby Sri Chennakeshava temple had been commissioned by Somanna, a general in the service of Hoysala King Narasimha III (1263-92 CE), so David assumed that any military figures might have been carved with more than usual attention to detail. This appeared to be the case but, as would also be found in other temples we subsequently visited, the warlike scenes of interest to David, were all on the lowest bands of horizontal carving, from 0 to 1 metre from the ground. Easy to see and photograph, but also a bit hard on the knees of a man in the final month or so of his seventy-fifth year. And they went around the entire circumference of every temple.

Bengaluru may have been research intensive, but we were still able to enjoy a wide range of curries, especially at a nearby restaurant called the London Curry House with a Buckingham Palace-style red-coated guardsman in a busby standing outside the entrance. We boarded Colette's first tuk-tuk here, David loving every moment and his wife hanging on for dear life.

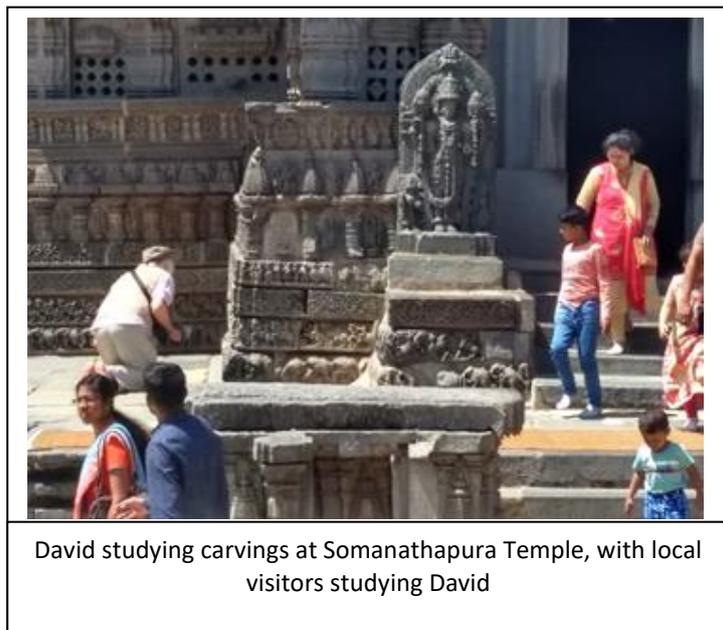
### Mysuru (Mysore)

Next came first-class seats on the train to Mysuru, an experience in itself, trundling at an occasionally respectable speed across the parched plateau of Karnataka state. The air-conditioning worked, the seats were padded and the compartment clean enough, though "first class" did remind David of British Railways second class in the 1950s. We spent two nights in the Fortune JP Palace in Mysuru on this occasion, later returning for one night at the Royal Orchid Metropole, an ex-princely guest house, on our return journey. The latter hotel was very impressive but, due to travel plans, we could not take

advantage of all the facilities which may, in any case, have been a bit excessive for ordinary travellers like ourselves. The Fortune JP Palace was ultra-modern, with plenty of bling, twinkling lights and an excellent well-shaded swimming pool. All in all, it set us up well for the next, more adventurous stage of our trip.

It was also within walking distance of the old town and the Tipu Palace; quite a long walk and we had to cross a major road, but Colette still felt it was more enjoyable than another tuk-tuk. On leaving the grounds of the Tipu Palace, however, we agreed to take a tuk-tuk to a small business making and selling oils and joss sticks. Of course, we fell for the invitation from the tuk-tuk driver who was most likely earning commission, but we did so in full knowledge and with our eyes wide open. In fact, it turned out to be very interesting and even gave Colette the chance to make a joss stick for herself, then buying a small number. These have proved to be a special souvenir, highly fragrant and long-lasting.

Our second day in Mysuru was given over to a shorter drive in a hired car with driver, this time to the more famous Chennakesava Temple at Somanathapura. The town was named after Somanatha Dandanayaka (General Somanatha, also sometimes written as Someya), another of King Narasimha III's commanders. He also commissioned this temple which was consecrated in 1258 CE. The layout of these Hoysala period temples is always essentially the same, which is also true of the bands of carving which most interested David, with consequent wear and tear upon his aged knees.



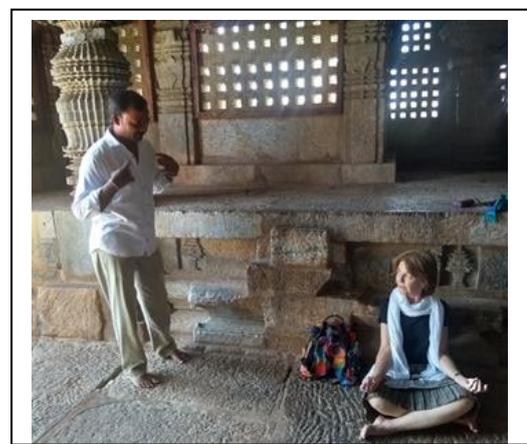
### Halebidu (Halebeedu)

Next came a slightly more complicated journey - a regional train from Mysuru to Hassan, an extraordinarily battered and crowded local bus from the railway station to the main bus station, then a marginally less battered and crowded bus from there to the small town of Halebidu, next to its man-made

lake or "tank" as these irrigation works are called in India. The KSTDC Hotel Mayura Shanthala in Halebidu - the only hotel actually in town which rates a mention on international hotel booking sites - is a basic but clean, government rest-house. The location is excellent, across the road from the main historic Hoysaleswara Temple with the lake beyond. Here we stayed for three nights while visiting the three nearby temples. We also slightly sneered at the jostled tourists who were disgorged from their (hopefully) air-conditioned coaches for a hurried visit to the main temple before being bundled back to their presumably air-conditioned hotels in places like Hassan or even Mysuru or Mangaluru (Mangalore). We saw a few of them in the neighbouring Halebidu Archaeological Museum but none in the Kedareshwara or the complex of three Jain temples which were little more than a kilometre walk away.

The Hoysaleswara Temple is actually a complex of two, which are older than those we had already visited, erected under the orders of King Vishnuvardhana who ruled the Hoysala state from around 1108 to around 1152 CE. Work is believed to have started c.1121 CE and was complete just under forty years later under King Narasimha I who, by defeating his nominal overlord the ruler of the Western Chalukya Empire, was able to proclaim Hoysala independence. These Hoysalas were, in fact, a warlike bunch, which probably accounts for the number and accuracy of the military figures carved on the outsides of their temples. Unfortunately for David, these were still located between ankle and groin height. Though regarded as major archaeological and historical sites, the temples remain sacred buildings and all visitors must remove their shoes before mounting the platforms on which they are built, let alone enter the temples themselves. Furthermore, the southern Indian February sun now burned hotter still and instead of walking-kneeling-walking-kneeling around the Halebidu temples with a floppy brimmed hat on his head, David skipped from rush mat to rush mat on the burning hot flagstones, then kneeling on his hat to avoid burning his knees. The top of his head had to look after itself.

For the rest of our time in Halebidu we walked through the markets, without much worry about traffic, stopped to buy bananas and trying a fresh coconut with its refreshing milk, piles of which we had often seen for sale on the side of the road. For Colette one of the highlights was an introduction to yoga, just by chance informally taught one-to-one by the guardian of the Kedareshwara Temple,



Colette being taught basic yoga positions at Kedareshwara Temple, Halebidu

while David took photographs of the astonishingly well-preserved soap-stone carvings. They are believed to date from before 1219 CE, the temple itself having been commissioned by King Veera Ballala II (1173–1220 CE) and his Queen Ketaladevi. Veera Ballala II is considered the Hoysala kingdom's most renowned ruler, and the Kedareshwara Temple certainly reflects a golden age - though still a warlike one. The Jain Parshvanatha Basadi is slightly earlier, having been built around 1133 CE. Our journey back to Mysuru was straightforward, and our single night at the Royal Orchid Metropole offered a startling change from the Hotel Mayura Shanthala in Halebidu.

### Chennai (Madras)

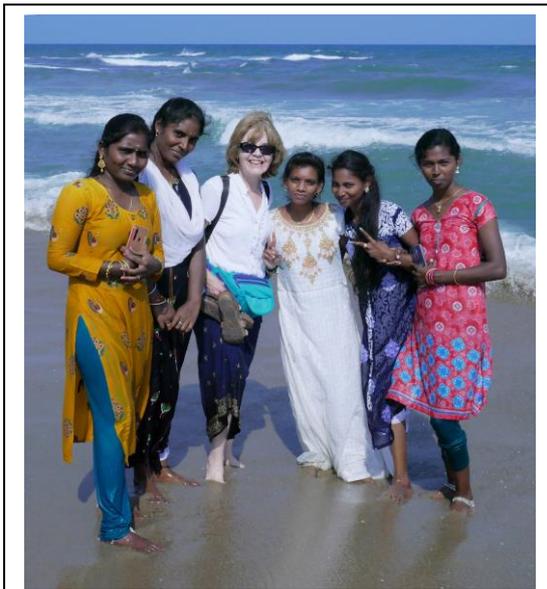
This was followed by a relatively plush inter-city train from Mysuru to Chennai (Madras) and two nights in the Iris Hotel. Here the staff were enthusiastic, helpful and also made us feel welcome when we returned for a single night before flying home from Chennai, even letting us continue to use the room for a few hours after checking out but before leaving for the airport.

Our single day Chennai was again focussed on research, in this case in the warm, sweaty but well worthwhile Government Museum. So the long-suffering, loyal and loving Colette had little more to comment on, apart from tuk-tuks and traffic. After one tuk-tuk driver had trouble finding the hotel, constantly stopping in the middle of traffic to ask directions, Colette insisted on walking next time we had to get back. It was a long way and at one point she panicked at a dual carriageway-roundabout-flyover junction. With Colette rooted to the spot, a kind, uniformed individual probably from the nearby American Embassy, walked into the middle of the road and stopped the traffic for us. Did he recognise Colette as a fellow American?

### Puducherry (Pondicherry)

It was now time for some rest and recuperation, and even David recognized this fact. Indeed, he had planned for it, so we boarded another train with an even more than usually friendly carriage attendant, and rolled southwards to the ex-French enclave of Puducherry. We stayed at the Atithi Hotel, with its excellent central location within walking distance of the entire old town and the beach, its restaurant, rooftop bar and rooftop swimming pool. Unfortunately, the latter was fully exposed to the ferocious winter sun, and we did not use it.

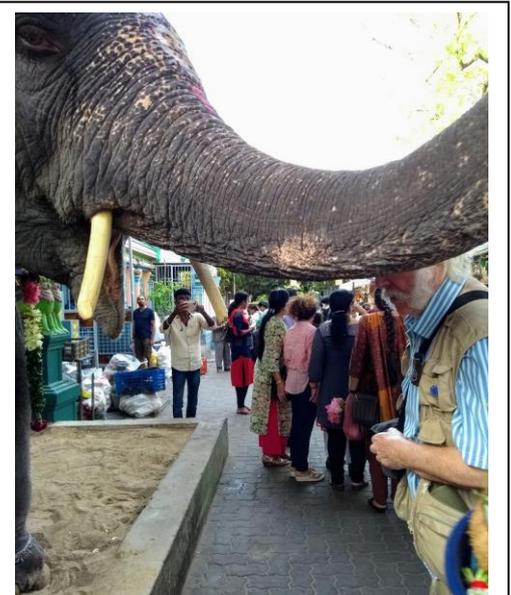
Yes, Puducherry did have a fine little museum with some nice medieval carvings, and yes, we did go to the Institut français de Pondichéry. It was from the latter that Jean Deloche, the Director of the Centre for History and Archaeology at the École française d'Extrême-Orient in Paris from 1992 to 1994, had carried out much of his research. It was also this which had prompted David to head for the Hoysala temples in the first place. Sadly, Jean Deloche died on 3 December 2019 and one of our reasons for going to the Institute was to pay our respects.



Colette & local girls on beach, Puducherry

Puducherry was Colette's favourite spot, walking through the French sector and along the promenade, and dipping her feet in the Bay of Bengal - no swimming despite one of India's best beaches being not far away. This was only one of many occasions where Colette was asked for a selfie with local women and girls.

We also met a decorated sacred elephant named Lakshmi who blessed visitors with her trunk, especially if they offered money in notes which she then handed ("trunked") over to her handler. This was at the Sri Manakula Vinayagar Temple, dating from before the arrival of the French in 1666 CE, and decorated with different forms of the Elephant-headed god Ganesha and his younger brother. Colette also found a tunic shop from a chain called Fabindia which she had visited and loved years earlier in Kolkata. This gave her a chance to add another tunic to her collection, and was a relaxing way to end our hot, sometimes strenuous adventure.



David at Elephant blessing at Arulmigu Manakula Vinayagar Temple

Meanwhile David walked into the glass door of a Ben and Jerry's ice-cream shop; blood everywhere, but also plenty of ice to staunch a gash over his eye which was, in fact, more spectacular than serious.

### Homeward

We returned to Chipping Barnet on 2 March, going into our lockdown on 17 March, thus just avoiding the lockdown restrictions in India and considering ourselves very lucky indeed. David now has the research required to complete his book and is already thinking about the next visit to India, and an academic article on "The Hoysala Cuirass". What is more, we were recently delighted to see the 2020 BBC I television series, The Real Marigold Hotel, where older celebrities explored India while deciding whether retirement in this South Asian country would suit them. They spent most of their time in Puducherry, which they clearly loved as much as we had.