Islamic architectural influences in Britain from India and Andalusia go back to the 18th century. Inspiration from the Middle East appears in private houses, synagogues and mosques. The 19th century was a century of immigration and growth of a British Muslim community in the last fifty years, purpose-built mosques have been constructed and have absorbed an older ‘orientalist tradition’. Other mosques have been converted into cinemas, private houses, churches and factories, often with some decoration intended to Islamize the building.

There is nothing alien about Islamic architecture in 18th-century Britain. Nor is British Islam a peculiar 20th-century phenomenon. Close connections between the Islamic world and Britain go back for over four centuries, through trade, diplomacy, travel, art, the Empire and scholarship. In the early 17th century there is evidence of a small community of Muslims in London – including craftsmen and a lawyer, though there is no record of a mosque.

Imperial fantasies

The 18th century was a great age for building in Britain. Styles often reflected an attitude of philosophical curiosity about the world. From Islamic countries there were influences from buildings from Grenada to India. Mosques were designed, not as places of worship but as ‘garden embellishments’. One such example was at Kew where William Chambers built an exotic collection of oriental buildings for Frederick Prince of Wales. His mosque (now disappeared) had ‘Gothic ogive arches’ above the doorways with quotations from the Holy Qur'an in gold lettering.

Britain’s closest contacts with the Islamic world two centuries ago were through the expanding Empire in India. In the first twenty years of the 19th century there was a vogue for an Indian style. British architects relied on artists’ drawings that would have been produced in expensive folio editions. One pioneering artist was William Hodges who produced Select Views of India between 1785 and 1788. Hodges was impressed by what he called ‘Moorish grandeur’ and argued, as had Sir Christopher Wren twenty years earlier, that there was an historic connection between Islamic architecture and the Gothic arch. The supreme example of replication of Indian Islamic architecture was the Royal Pavilion at Brighton, whose architect, John Nash, included volumes on Indian buildings. Though a classicist throughout his life – he designed the Regents Park estates – Nash was versatile and delighted, as

one architectural historian has observed, ‘in small domes or “pepper-pots” of every shape’ and ‘some of them deliberately oriental’.5

Brighton Pavilion had an impact on many new buildings throughout the 19th century, but other influences were reaching from Andalusia and from the Middle East. Orientalist painting has been fully documented. Thanks to the development of the steam-driven ships, travel to the Middle East from the 1830s became easier. Travellers returned with souvenirs, and also ideas of design and notions of space and pleasure. Two outstandingly self-conscious attempts at reproducing Arab architecture in 19th-century Britain are: one is at Leighton House in London, built in 1865 for the art dealer and collector of Islamic art, Anthony William Leighton, who collected ceramics and other Islamic artefacts during visits to the Middle East. The house was built to house his souvenirs. The model was La Zisa in Palermo, but the 17th-century mosque was by Tanguy of Burgos and the Marqués of Buté. Burgos had been to Turkey. He had taken time off from designing the Crimean Memorial Chapel in Istanbul to study the city’s mosques. The floor pattern of the hall, to quote partial English tradition, ‘sets out the Islamic eight-fold figure, which is developed with pyrotechnic virtuosity in the domical ceiling’.6

Faith takes over

While fantasy was yielding place to faith, the first religious buildings to owe inspiration to Islamic models were actually new synagogues. Newly prosperous Jewish communities echoed the Gothic or the Classical styles. One was associated with medieval Christianity, the other with 18th-century rationalism. The adopting of a ‘Moorish’ style was a reminder of Jewish glories in Arab Andalusia. The finest examples have been in mainland Europe, but there is one good example inLiverpool: another in the heart of Muslim Bradford has a horse-shoe arched doorway and horizontal banding of alternate colours of stone. Some new churches also displayed Islamic influences, albeit indirect. The best example is Christ Church Streatham in South London, whose architect, James Wild, used horse-shoe shaped arches and a grand west door way modelled on the doorway of the Sultan Hassoun Mosque in Cairo.

From the late 19th century there was a growing Muslim presence in Britain. At first, prayers were held in private houses or in rented halls. Sometimes there were rallies at Leicester Square (ironically by the Alhambra Theatre, now the Odeon cinema), Hyde Park Corner or Peckham Rye. The first purpose-built mosque was at Woking, south of London. This was constructed from funds left by the British expatriate Mohammed Yazdani, who was born in 1885 by a British non-Muslim architect.

Today it is reckoned that there are about 1.5 million Muslims in Britain. In addition to

the small number of converts, about 600,000 are of Pakistani origin, 150,000 from India and 200,000 from Bangladesh. A majority of British Muslims have now been born in Britain. The South Asians have tended to occupy particular areas of inner cities. In many places South Asian Muslims have often been the latest waves of outsiders. The appearance of an area may be like a palimpsest with physical evidence of earlier settlements. Manningham in Bradford, for example, has been home to a series of German Jewish immigrants, then Irish and now South Asians. Near the synagogue all is mentioned, and gigue and bar are incongruous prominent buildings in an area inhabited by people overwhelmingly of Pakistani origin.

There are today about 1200 mosques and prayer areas in Britain, of which approximately a hundred have been purpose-built. The major mosques from Pakistan and attend much greater.