

# Regaining of Sri Lanka's Independence



An illustration of the Duke of Gloucester presiding over the first self-rule sitting of Sri Lanka in 1948.

As the Union Jack was lowered and the Ceylon Lion Flag was hoisted on February 4, 1948, Sri Lankans rejoiced in unison. Seventy-six years ago, a nation was reborn, one that would be named "Sri Lanka" in 1972. Sri Lankans gather together each year to commemorate the independence gained from the British Empire and the right to self-rule. The heroic tales of independence activists are retold with pride. Yet, at the sites more closely linked with the momentous occasion, the emotions and patriotism will overflow.

**Photography** BT Images.



The hoisting of the Lion Flag on February 4, 1948.

## **Independence Memorial Hall**

The Independence Memorial Hall was built at the venue of the formal ceremony marking independence in Sri Lanka, which was held under the patronage of His Royal Highness Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester (the uncle of Queen Elizabeth II).

A symbol of indigenous Sri Lankan architecture, the audience hall is an awe-inspiring sight against a backdrop of colonial edifices and serene greenery. Towering cement pillars embellished with Buddhist motifs bear the iconic Kandyan roof. Proud lions guard the memento, a symbolic gesture of how Sri Lankans must safeguard their cultural heritage. At one end of the hall, the dark silhouette of the Father of the Nation, D S Senanayake, the first Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, rises into view. The Independence Avenue, flanked by Na (Ceylon Ironwood, Sri Lanka's national tree) and False Ashoka trees (*Polyalthia longifolia*), is almost an isle that leads to the hall.

Under the advice of then Premier D S Senanayake and Minister Sir John Kotalawala, a formidable team searched for a design that was a fitting reminder that both appreciated the sacrifices of Sri Lanka's heroes and motivated future patriotism. The inspiration for the hall stemmed from the audience hall at the Dalada Maligawa (Temple of the Tooth Relic), where in 1815, the Kandyan Convention was signed, relinquishing Sri Lanka to the British Empire. Ironically, it must have seemed fitting to the architectural team that the venue where the



Kandyan Flag was lowered be recreated in Colombo centuries later to celebrate the milestone of the hoisting of the Sri Lankan flag.

Nearly a decade after regaining self-rule, the Independence Day celebrations took place at the Independence Memorial Hall for the first time on February 4, 1957. It was the historic opening of the symbol of Sri Lanka's freedom from colonial rule.

Traveling through Independence Avenue, motorists take a bend that results in a momentary pause of respect before the statue of the first Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, D S Senanayake, and the monument built to commemorate the Island's hard-earned independence.



The Independence Memorial Hall and monument for the Father of Sri Lanka.

### **Independence Memorial Museum**

In the basement of the hall is the Independence Memorial Museum. Wooden doors carved in Kandyan style open into a mystical chamber of history. Our motherland's heroes and freedom activists and their contributions have been immortalized in mortar to ensure the future will never forget the pride of a nation. Memoirs such as the diary of social reformer Brahmachari Walisinghe

Harischandra, a leader of the Buddhist revivalist movement, are displayed. The renaissance of the Island's art and literature and its contribution to the independence movement are not forgotten.

Sri Lanka's literary greats, including Martin Wickremesinghe, Kumaratunga Munidasa, and George Keyt, the famed painter, also share in the limelight. Events from the Uva Rebellion to the signing of the Kandyan Convention and the first Cabinet of Ministers of 1931 are illustrated in a display of the unyielding Sri Lankan spirit. The latest addition to the museum is the War Heroes Commemoration Gallery. This display pays tribute to Armed Forces members who laid their lives in sacrifice for peace in their motherland during the three-decade conflict.

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Sculptures of the Independence Activists at the museum.



A sculpture of Premier D S Senanayake at the Independence Memorial Museum.

## **Old Parliaments**

Facing the blue ocean and the resplendent Galle Face Green, the serene brown granite Anglo-Palladian style façade of Sri Lanka's Old Parliament is difficult to miss. Amidst towering modern skyscrapers and pale colonial structures, it continues to draw the attention of passersby.

The neoclassical structure with its "iconic order" was designed by Austin Woodeson, Chief Architect of the Public Works Department at the time. It was declared open as the Legislative Council on January 29, 1930. At the outskirts of the Colombo Fort and just at the edge of the Beira Lake, the building was strategically located proximate to the residence of the Governor of Ceylon. Although a lasting reflection of Britain's longlost imperial glory, to Sri Lankans it marks the beginning of a Sri Lankan governance. After the ceremony marking the Island's independence, the Duke of Gloucester arrived here to open the first self-rule sitting of the legislature, then called the House of Representatives.

His niece Queen Elizabeth II opened the first session of the second legislature of Sri Lanka during her Commonwealth visit in 1954. The signage within the chamber, would change from the British Court of Arms, to the Court of Arms of the Dominion of Ceylon and finally the 1972 Emblem of Sri Lanka.

When the 225-member Parliament was elected in 1978, the premises was considered too small and the relocation was discussed. It later moved to Sri Jayewardenepura in 1982. However, the glowing classical edifice that looks on



deep into the Indian Ocean continues to play an important role. It is now the Presidential Secretariat and Office of the Executive President.



The classical façade of the Old Parliament building.