Worship in the Valley of Wolves

Posted on
Wolvendaal Church: Spiritual landmark

Wolvendaal Church was described by a former British governor as “the Westminster Abbey of Ceylon”. One of the oldest Protestant churches in the country, and an example of glorious architecture, it is one of the few Dutch buildings in Sri Lanka that retains its original use.

Words Richard Boyle | **Photographs** Mahesh Bandara and Vishwathan Tharmagulasingam

When the Dutch defeated the Portuguese at Colombo in 1656 they converted the former colonists’ Catholic church in Gordon Gardens – now part of President’s House – into the Protestant Kasteel Kerk, or Fort Church. By 1736, such was the dilapidation of the building that the then governor appealed to the Dutch East India Company (VOC) for approval to construct another church at the same location.

The VOC, however, refused the request and the plan was abandoned until the arrival in 1743 of dynamic Governor Stein van Gollenesse. He decided that any new church should be located beyond the walls of the Fort, a vicinity largely consisting of swamp and marshland. The Dutch confused the packs of jackals that roamed

there for wolves, and the place became known as Wolvendaal, or Valley of Wolves.

The site selected happened to be on a hill commanding magnificent views across the town and harbour (the church became a significant landmark for ships entering the port). Moreover, it was near the town's entrance. But the deciding factor was that a small church, which also served as a schoolroom, had been maintained on this spot from the early days of Dutch colonization.

The foundations were laid in 1749 and the construction followed the Doric style, in the form of a Greek cross, with walls made of local clay ironstone 1.5 metres thick, upon which the gables were raised. The dome was a brick arch surmounted with a crowned lion displaying a sword in one hand and seven arrows in the other, representing the seven provinces of the Dutch Republic. (In 1856, lightning destroyed the lion and damaged the dome, which was later replaced with an iron covering.)

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Wolvendaal Church, able to accommodate 1,000 worshippers, including Tamil and Sinhalese Protestants, was completed after eight years on March 6, 1757. The interior is much the same after 250 years. And because it was constructed during the period when the Dutch were peerless in the 'golden age' of furniture, the church presents some extraordinary examples of woodwork.

Such information was provided by Sri Lanka's renowned historical writer, Richard Leslie Brohier, in his 1938 brochure on the church, illustrated with photographs by the Island's greatest photographer, Lionel Wendt. In recent years Brohier's daughter, Deloraine, has been responsible for a lavish new edition, the bilingual Dutch/English *De Wolvendaalsche Kerk: Time, Like An Ever-Rolling Stream.*

The interior, with pulpit at left

The most important pieces are the antique chairs, intricately crafted in ebony, nadun, and that "aristocrat of Ceylon wood," calamander. During this period the Wolvendaal neighbourhood was a sleepy suburb dotted with neat Dutch villas. Brohier explains that "a custom prevailed in the 18th Century of keeping the

kerkstoel or ‘church chair’ in the home and having it carried to church each Sunday by a slave or domestic retainer: in course of time many of these chairs were left behind in the church”.

The governor regularly attended services and had, of course, the most valuable chair of them all. Brohier imagines his arrival at the church: “Mijnheer and Mevrouw, clad in their Sunday best, are slowly walking up Wolvendaal Hill from their home in Pettah, while the old bell breaks the Sabbath calm. They linger by the door of the church. Suddenly the word goes around – the Governor! – and a stately carriage draws up. Amid the respectful bows of the assembly, the Ruler of the Land, in wig, knee breeches and silk stocking, moves to his elevated pew.”

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And what a pew! Solidly constructed and lined with red velvet padding, the State Pew as it is known rests where it always has, furnished with half a dozen ebony and calamander chairs. Some of them, according to experts, are even older than the church.

Directly opposite is the pulpit, reached by a “charming stair and handrail”, as Brohier describes it. “[The pulpit] has been developed in the national style. A certain simplicity and sensitiveness about the wood and carving, in the execution which the Dutch excelled, bespeak even to the uninitiated what the world has lost since machinery took the place of the patient craftsman.”

Immediately below the pulpit stands an exquisite silver baptismal font that rests within an elegantly-carved tripod made of calamander. It was originally gifted in 1667 by the then governor to Kasteel Kerk, the old Dutch church in the Fort. Nearby is the lectern upon which an illustrated Dutch version of the Bible was displayed.

The floor is paved with supposedly Dutch granite flagstones interspersed with engraved tombstones, some of which were transferred from Kasteel Kerk. There are five Dutch Governors buried at the church.

“Most artistic, emblazoned, heraldic hatchments, tombstones, and monuments were set up,” writes Brohier. “The story of those to be seen in the Wolvendaal Church

alone would make an entrancing book. On the mass of these tombstones raised to the memory of the departure a great measure of skill was spent. The carving was obviously done in Holland or by specially trained craftsmen in Ceylon.”

The “old bell” referred to by Brohier is another monument worthy of mention. The church possessed no belfry, but a bell of Portuguese origin, which had been transferred from one church to another, eventually ended up at Kayman’s Gate at the eastern end of nearby Main Street to call the residents of Pettah and the Fort to prayer.

There are many other aspects of the magnificent Wolvendaal Church that can’t be squeezed into this article. Go there and experience the place for yourself. It’s a special spot combining religious inclination and architectural brilliance that makes for a worthwhile excursion for anyone with history in their heart.