

SPEAKER ON 31ST JAN - PAM REYNOLDS

The hall was packed and we had visual aids in the shape of ex-Gurkha soldiers and their wives in different Nepali tribal costumes. Pam Reynolds BEM spoke to us about the Gurkha way of life and the Gurkha Ladies project here in Reading. She also talked about SSAFA, the Soldiers Sailors and Air Force Association, the oldest military charity, founded in 1885 with the purpose of caring for the wives and families of ex-service personnel. She gave some background information about Nepal, its people, and the dialects of the Nepali language which are largely associated with the 4 main tribes - the Gurung, the Rai, the Limbu and the Magar.

The Gurkha connection with the British Army dates back 200 years and it was/is the bravery of the Gurkha soldiers that has struck fear into their enemies, whether in the two World Wars, especially in Burma and Malaya, and in Afghanistan. In the Falklands War the Argentinians refused to fight against them! Their motto is 'Better to die than be a coward'. Unfortunately the British did not treat the Gurkhas very well by way of pensions and welfare benefits until Joanna Lumley got involved and shamed the British Government of Gordon Brown to take action. The result was that in 2007 they began to receive pensions and from 2009 they were granted citizenship rights. As mothers and wives began to settle in and around Reading it was recognised that they needed to be taught how to read and write, both in English as well as Nepali, how to understand British customs and culture, and how to access medical services and other local services. Supported by SSAFA and various charities classes are provided for these ladies by a group of volunteers, led by Pam Reynolds. The results are that these ladies have grown in confidence and many can be seen shopping and enjoying themselves in Reading. This project is now being replicated in other parts of the country.