

News

Les Jackson

newsdesk@thesentinel.co.uk

A FAMILY forced out of their country are celebrating 50 years in Leek.

In 1972 Idi Amin ordered all Asians to leave Uganda.

Prakash Samani was 18 when he, brother Umesh, 10, and their five sisters, the youngest aged two, were forced to leave their country behind. The ramifications if they refused didn't bear thinking about.

While mum Prasanbala travelled with them, dad Pyarelal didn't have the necessary documents and was sent to a United Nations centre in Austria as a stateless person.

It would be several months before the wheels of bureaucracy allowed him to be reunited with his family.

Prakash said: "Idi Amin kept showing the concentration camps and what happened to the Jews. The clock was set ticking and we were given 90 days to get out. Initially we thought he didn't mean it. So the first month, nobody did anything."

"I suppose none of us wanted to believe what was going on. And then they put a multi-billionaire in prison, an Asian guy, and people thought 'if they can do that to him what chance have we got?'"

The family arrived in England on November 5 – three days before the deadline expired. They had nothing more than the clothes on their backs.

Prakash said: "When we arrived at Stansted Airport we were greeted, put on a coach, and put on the motorway."

"We were like 'what's happening?' It was going dark at three in the afternoon – we were not used to any of it. After three or four hours, we came off the motorway and were taken to Raleigh Hall in Eccleshall, and told 'that's the accommodation.'"

Umesh said: "None of us wanted to believe what was going on. The thing I remember about the camp is queuing up for the clothes and the food."

As the eldest child, Prakash knew it was down to him to become the breadwinner.

He said: "I'd never worked before. I was a full-time student. I said 'right, I'll take a job.' They sent me from Eccleshall for an interview at a pottery in Baddeley Green."

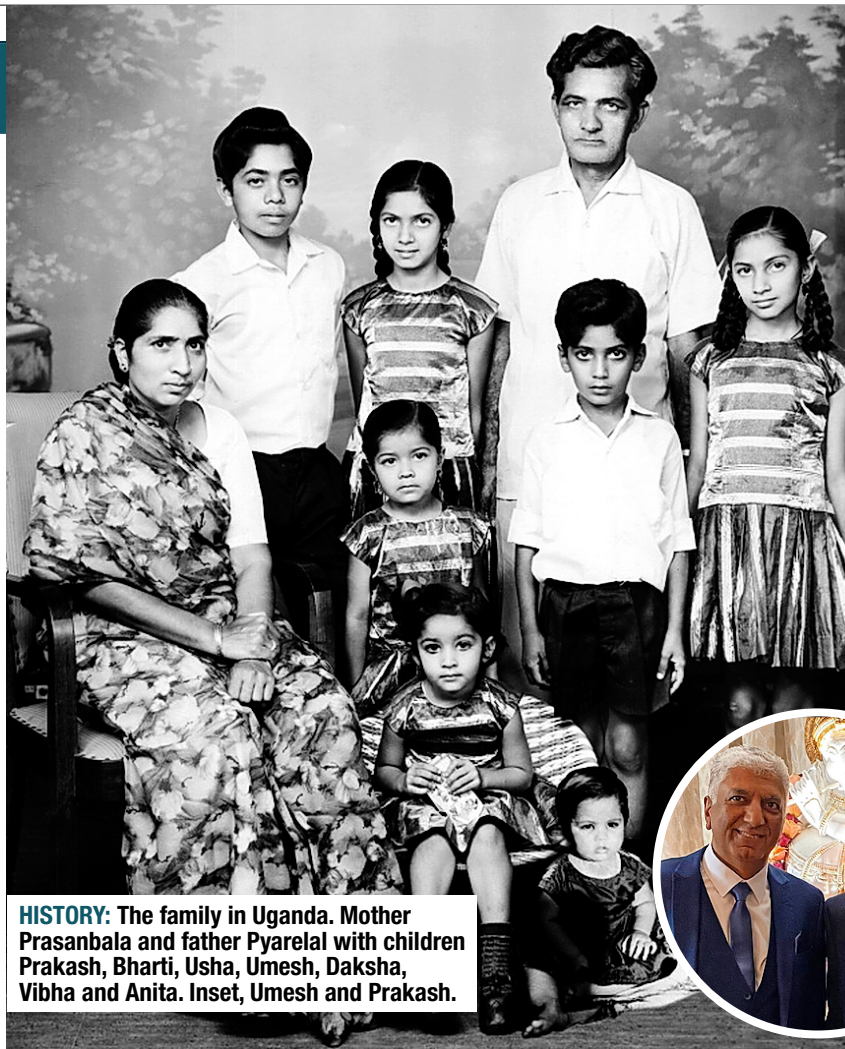
"I changed three buses and got there about three o'clock after setting off at 10 in the morning. When I got there the job had gone."

They offered him a different role, the fact that the factory was on Leek Road prompted those back at the camp to mistakenly think it was in the town.

They told Prakash the Moorlands authority was offering accommodation in Leek – councils nationally had been asked to help with the arrival of 60,000 Ugandan refugees.

"They said do you want to go there and I said it was fine by me," said Prakash. "I didn't even know where Leek was. So one Saturday morning a minibus picked us up from Eccleshall to take us to Leek."

That Saturday morning, December 9, 1972, is forever



HISTORY: The family in Uganda. Mother Prasanbala and father Pyarelal with children Prakash, Bharti, Usha, Umesh, Daksha, Vibha and Anita. Inset, Umesh and Prakash.



CLOSE FAMILY: The Samani siblings today, from left, Prakash Samani, Bharti Mashru (London), Usha Dattani (Watford), Umesh Samani, Daksha Samani (London), Vibha Eardley (Endon), Anita Woolf (London). Below, Prakash meets Queen Elizabeth II.



Family forced to flee by Idi Amin mark 50 years in town they're 'proud to call home'

Seven siblings arrived with just the clothes on their backs

etched in the family's memories. Prakash, who has two sons and two granddaughters, recalls: "The people of Leek had arranged a welcome second to none. It was really cold. The thing I can remember, coming into Leek, is the Monument. And then we went on to 120 Windsor Drive."

"There were councillors waiting there, the WRVS, neighbours, the Round Table, Rotary Club, MP David Knox."

"As soon as we got into the house, everybody was trying to settle us in. There was a fire lit. Everyone was really welcoming – which was just what we needed."

Umesh said: "I can remember the first Christmas there purely because of the number of presents we received. We used to get between 200 and 300 cards."

A story had appeared in the Leek Post asking townspeople if they had any spare clothing or cooking utensils.

"Every time we walked into town,"

says Umesh, "people would stop and ask if we needed anything. It was just phenomenal."

Despite the National Front, predictably, expressing outrage that Ugandan families were being offered homes in Britain, prejudice and discrimination was never an issue for the Samanis.

Prakash said: "We never heard of discrimination. In Leek, we were the Samanis."

"There were a few comments made at school," adds Umesh, "because kids aren't used to seeing somebody different. But it's how you handle it."

"At the end of the day, this is who I am, this is my colour, and you've got to accept me for who I am. Simple as that."

While the council had made several houses available, the Samanis were the only Ugandan family in Leek.

It would be two years before they met another Ugandan family, in Stoke-on-Trent, where the local

authority had also offered refuge to those fleeing Amin – Prakash estimates there are 40 Ugandan families in the city.

Sadly, Prasanbala passed away in 1975 and dad Pyarelal also died early in 1988.

"It was very difficult for them," says Umesh, "because of the language barrier and culture, the weather."

"To us, we had no choice," added Prakash. "To them, they had history behind them."

Four of the Samani sisters now live, successfully, in London; another, Vibha, who lives in Endon, has a successful beauty business in Newcastle.

"We're still all very close," says Umesh. "We're not in each other's pockets, but we're always there for each other."

Umesh, who has his own car sales business in Cobridge, stayed in the Moorlands, now living in Biddulph Moor, while dad-of-two Prakash remains in the very street

that became home in 1972. When he got married to Anila he bought the house over the road. Prakash assigns the siblings' success in England to one thing – "if you don't work, you don't get".

"We literally came with the clothes we were wearing. We didn't know there was a benefits system – as far as we were concerned if you wanted something, you worked for it," added Prakash.

Umesh said: "A lot of people say 'you've been very lucky.' Have we been lucky? You have to work for your luck. Luck doesn't play a part in it. Certainly, fleeing for your lives makes you rather more philosophical about the chances you've been given."

In 1973 Prakash saw a job for an office junior at the Leek Post, which he was successful in getting. He then moved into advertising.

As his career progressed he was appointed the first non-family director of Hill Bros (Leek) Ltd and at the time when it was sold in 2002, was managing director – having worked with three generations of the Hill family.

He has also been a magistrate for more than 25 years and is Deputy Lieutenant of Staffordshire.

One of Prakash's sons, Sunil, 39, went to Oxford University after Leek High and is now Co-General Counsel at GTX Markets in London, while Nikesh, 33, went to Leicester University. Nikesh, who gets married next year, is head of operations at Bumper London.

Five decades on and the Samanis remain grateful for the start Leek gave them.

Amin ruled Uganda for eight years. Ousted in 1979 by Ugandan nationalists, he fled into exile.

By then, the Samanis were established and settled in Leek. Their future was here – the 'what ifs' don't haunt them.

Prakash added: "We are proud to call Leek our home. Thank you."