

Press release for immediate use



Photograph © Paul Trevor, 1978

The racist killing of Altab Ali was the transformative moment for Britain's Bengali community

The racist killing of a young Bengali man in 1978 was the George Floyd moment for Britain's Bengali community. Sparking mass protests against far-right intimidation and institutional police racism, it led to a turning point in race relations. Photographer Paul Trevor captured the dramatic summer of that year.

The 4th May marks Altab Ali Day, held each year to commemorate the racist murder of Altab Ali, a 25-year-old Bengali leather garments worker, in East London. It recalls the transformative year of 1978, when the local Bengali community mobilised in an unprecedented, anti-racist uprising. Their actions represented a turning point in local and national resistance against racial harassment and discrimination.

Today a local project is documenting the memories of people involved in these momentous events, inspired by Paul Trevor's extensive collection of photographs. The search is on to identify people in the photographs, and to record their memories. The **Brick Lane 1978** heritage project will create a first-hand record of peoples' memories, and make Paul Trevor's significant photographs publicly accessible. It culminates in an exhibition and public talks at Four Corners Gallery in 2021.

Paul Trevor said: *"They say a photo is worth a thousand words. But sometimes, as in this case, words are essential. This project is an opportunity to add the voices of those who made history to the images of that story."*



Jamal Hassan points to events in 1978, taken over 40 years ago.

Carla Mitchell, Artistic Development Director at Four Corners said: *"This history is hugely relevant today, with an increase of racist attacks and police violence making the headlines. Thanks to National Lottery players we will be able to ensure that this powerful heritage is made publicly accessible for a wide audience of current & future generations."*



Women at the project launch saw photographs of themselves as children, taken by Paul Trevor.

Stuart Hopley, Area Director, London & South at The National Lottery Heritage Fund said: *“The history of community activism and anti-racism of Brick Lane 1978 has played a significant role in shaping the culture and heritage of London. We’re delighted that, thanks to National Lottery players, we can support Four Corners to explore and record this crucial part of the local community’s heritage, acknowledging its impact on the city and promoting better understanding in the wider community.”*

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Notes to editors

Brick Lane 1978: The Turning Point is supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. It is a collaboration between Four Corners and Swadhinata Trust, in partnership with Paul Trevor. With the help of volunteers and original activists, we’re creating a record of this watershed moment as told by local people. This includes:

- an archive of photographs and oral histories
- a short documentary film
- a touring exhibition
- a free public events programme
- a study pack for schools

Contacts

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Historical background

1978 began with opposition leader Margaret Thatcher on World in Action, saying that many Britons feared being “rather swamped by people with a different culture.” Her comments were seen as a direct appeal to would-be National Front voters in working class neighbourhoods. The National Front’s headquarters were in Hackney, and their newspaper pitch at Brick Lane’s Sunday morning market attracted skinheads for a bit of ‘paki bashing’. Racist violence was endemic in East London, and Brick Lane was the most dangerous place of all. Here recently arrived Bengali migrants worked in the local rag trade, as had the Jews before them. They were a target for far-right groups, who blamed them for high unemployment and bad housing.

The area has always been a haven for migrants, from the French Huguenots fleeing 17th century religious persecution, Irish poor of the 19th century, and Jews escaping Cossack pogroms in Russia and Poland. It also has a long history of racist violence and resistance to it. Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists Blackshirts famously tried to march east to the docks in 1936, but were stopped by Jews, Irish dockers and communists in the famous Battle of Cable Street.

Altab Ali's murder on the night of the May 1978 local elections in which 41 National Front candidates stood marked a turning point for the Bengali community. 7,000 people marched behind his coffin to Downing Street to demand police protection. They were supported by a grassroots movement against the electoral threat of the far right – Rock against Racism – which had just held a huge open-air concert in nearby Victoria Park, headlined by Tom Robinson and The Clash. Community protest and music radicalised a generation, and helped destroy National Front support, who failed to secure any seats in the local elections.

Photographer Paul Trevor documented the moment when second generation, East London Bengalis mobilised against racist attacks and institutional police racism. Trevor was a member of the radical Half Moon Photography Workshop (HMPW) collective, who focused on socially-committed documentary. His images, covered in the HMPW's *Camerawork* magazine, showed how Bengalis endured racial abuse as a constant factor of everyday life. Some of his images can be seen at Four Corners Archive online:

<https://www.fourcornersarchive.org/archive/view/0000111>

<https://www.fourcornersarchive.org/archive/view/0001739>

By the end of 1978, the National Front was forced to leave its headquarters near Brick Lane. But far-right racist attacks in East London persisted into the 1990s. To this day the name Altab Ali remains linked with the struggle against racism and for human rights in London's East End.

Four Corners

Four Corners is a creative centre for film and photography, committed to community-wide participation for over 40 years. It supports projects that engage with social and cultural themes, and open up perspectives for audiences, particularly in East London. www.fourcornersfilm.co.uk

Paul Trevor is a photographer and was a founder member of the Half Moon Photography Workshop and its magazine *Camerawork*. <http://paultrevor.com>

Swadhinata Trust

The Swadhinata Trust is a London based secular Bengali community group that works to promote Bengali history and heritage amongst young people. The organisation has been operating since November 2000, offering workshops, exhibitions and educational literature to young Bengalis in schools, colleges, youth clubs and community centres. www.swadhinatatrust.org

About The National Lottery Heritage Fund

Using money raised by the National Lottery, we Inspire, lead and resource the UK's heritage to create positive and lasting change for people and communities, now and in the future.

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