

Brick Lane 1978: The Turning Point

The Touring Show



Sit down protest outside Bethnal Green police Station, demanding the release of two arrested demonstrators.

© Paul Trevor, 17 July 1978

Exhibition reveals a dramatic struggle for justice in east London

This major exhibition of photographs by Paul Trevor documents a dramatic struggle for racial justice.

Following the racist murder of Altab Ali in May 1978, east London's young Bengali community took to the streets in protest. Four Corners' Touring Show *Brick Lane 1978: The Turning Point* brings together Paul Trevor's dramatic images alongside accounts of pioneering activists, to produce a powerful narrative of the time.

The exhibition will be touring venues in Tower Hamlets following the success of the opening show at Four Corners Gallery in 2022. It was created as part of a major heritage project led by Four Corners and Swadhinata Trust with a dedicated group of volunteers, who interviewed many of the people involved in the momentous events of 1978. It pays tribute to a generation of Bengali activists whose actions helped change the course of social equality in the UK.

The exhibition will tour in winter/spring 2023 to Mulberry Secondary School for Girls, the Osmani Centre, Brady Arts Centre. Then on to Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives in autumn 2023. We are delighted that the exhibition will continue to reach new audiences at schools and community centres in the borough.

Julie Begum, Chair of Swadhinata Trust, said, *“It is important to commemorate Altab Ali Day to remember the racist violence the Bengali community faced in the East End of London, and to celebrate the community’s united defence to defeat the evils of racism.”*

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.”*

Carla Mitchell, Artistic Development Director at Four Corners said: *“This history is highly relevant today, with an increase of racist attacks 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.”*

ENDS**Notes to editors****Brick Lane 1978: The Turning Point****Touring Show locations:****Mulberry School:** Monday 16 January – Thursday 26th January 2023

Free admission.

Opening hours Thursday 19th January, 3.45-6.30pm, Monday 23rd January, 3.45-6.30pm, Thursday 26th January, 3.45-6.30pm

Mulberry School for Girls

Richard Street

Commercial Road

London

E1 2JP

Telephone 020 7790 6327

Osmani Centre: Thursday 2 February – Tuesday 25 April 2023

Free admission.

Opening hours Monday – Friday, 10am-7pm

Osmani Centre

58 Underwood Road

London

E1 5AW

Telephone 020 7247 8080

Brady Centre: Thursday 4 May – Thursday 25 May 2023

Free admission.

Opening hours Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm, Saturdays 10am-4pm

Brady Centre

192-196 Hanbury Street

London

E1 5HU

Telephone 020 7364 7900

For local press, listings and social media: anna@fourcornersfilm.co.uk

Further information: <https://www.fourcornersfilm.co.uk/brick-lane-1978-the-turning-point>

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, the project has created a record of this watershed moment as told by local people. The exhibition, oral history interviews, short films and podcasts, will be available and will be lodged at the Bishopsgate Institute Archives.

Historical background

1978 began with opposition leader Margaret Thatcher on 'World in Action' television programme 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. Racist violence was endemic in east London, and particularly around Brick Lane. Recently arrived Bengali migrants worked in the local rag trade, as had the Jews before them. The National Front's newspaper pitch at Brick Lane's Sunday morning market attracted skinheads who harassed the local Bengali community. They were a target for far-right groups, who wrongly blamed them for high unemployment and bad housing.

East London has always been a haven for migrants, from the French Huguenots fleeing 17th century religious persecution, to the Irish poor of the 19th century, and Jews escaping Cossack pogroms in Russia and Poland. It also has an equally long history of racist violence and resistance to it. Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists 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 a rally in Hyde Park, then to Downing Street where they handed in a petition demanding police protection. That year young Bengali people mobilised in a community-led, anti-racist struggle which brought about a radical social transformation both locally and far beyond.

Anti-racist protests against the electoral threat of the far right National Front party were supported by a grass-roots, multi-cultural movement - Rock against Racism – which held open-air concerts in nearby Victoria Park, headlined by The Clash, Steel Pulse and Tom Robinson. Community protest and music radicalised a generation, and helped destroy National Front support.

Local photographer Paul Trevor documented the dramatic events of the era in over 400 photographs, many of which will be on show during these Touring Shows. His photographs show how the local Bengali community endured racial abuse as a constant factor of everyday life, and how they united to end violence and institutional racism.

Trevor was also a member of the Half Moon Photography Workshop collective, whose work focussed on socially committed photography. Some of his images were covered in their *Camerawork* magazine:

<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, though 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

Brick Lane 1978: The Turning Point is a Four Corners exhibition. We are a centre for film and photographic arts, based in east London for nearly 50 years. Our exhibitions explore social histories and community activism, and share stories from the margins that might not otherwise be told. 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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