

## Brick Lane 1978: The Turning Point



Outside Bethnal Green police station, London, 17 July 1978.  
Sit down protest, demanding the release of two arrested demonstrators. © Paul Trevor, 1978

### Exhibition reveals a dramatic struggle for justice in east London

A major exhibition of photographs by Paul Trevor documents a dramatic struggle for 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' new exhibition, *Brick Lane 1978: The Turning Point*, brings together seventy of Paul Trevor's images alongside accounts of pioneering activists, to produce a powerful narrative of the time.

The show marks the culmination of a major heritage project led by Four Corners and Swadhinata Trust with a dedicated group of volunteers, and who have interviewed many people involved in these momentous events. The exhibition pays tribute to a generation whose actions changed the course of civil rights in the UK.

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 and 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.”*

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### Notes to editors

*Brick Lane 1978: The Turning Point*

**Exhibition launch:** Thursday 9 June, 6.30-8.30pm

10 June – 10 September 2022

Free admission. Opening hours 11am-6pm, Tues- Sat, until 8pm Thurs

Four Corners Gallery

121 Roman Road, Bethnal Green, London E2 0QN

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[Website](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Instagram](#) | [Facebook](#)

### Events

The exhibition is accompanied by a programme of talks produced in collaboration with Swadhinata Trust, Paul Trevor and the Altab Ali Foundation. Further information:

<https://www.fourcornersfilm.co.uk/whats-on/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 as a touring show to 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 17<sup>th</sup> century religious persecution, to the Irish poor of the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 for the first time in this exhibition. 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 focused 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.

*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](http://www.fourcornersfilm.co.uk)

### Paul Trevor

Photographer Paul Trevor 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. <https://www.swadhinata.org.uk>

The project was developed in collaboration with the [Altab Ali Foundation](#) and [Bishopsgate Institute archives](#).

### 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.

[www.heritagefund.org.uk](http://www.heritagefund.org.uk). Follow @HeritageFundUK on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) and use #NationalLotteryHeritageFund

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