



Walk

Banglatown and the Bengali East End

Explore the British Bengali community in London's thriving East End

Time: 1½ hours

Distance: 2 miles

Landscape: urban

Around 500,000 Bengalis live in Britain, in one of our youngest and fastest-growing communities. They came to the UK from Bangladesh, particularly from the Sylhet region in the north east of the country, and from West Bengal in India.

The London borough of Tower Hamlets has the UK's largest Bengali community, with a third of the local population identifying as Bengali. Many people assume Bengalis arrived only recently - but there is evidence that a small number lived in London nearly 400 years ago.

Today the thriving streets of the East End offer a fascinating insight into the British Bengali community's significant contribution to contemporary UK culture - from music and food, to politics and architecture.

Location: Aldgate, Whitechapel and Brick Lane, London

Start: St Botolph's Church, Aldgate High Street, EC3N 1AB

Finish: Under the London Overground bridge on Brick Lane (nearest postcode E1 6SA).

Grid reference: TQ 33593 81195

Keep an eye out for: The lamp posts on Brick Lane – decorated in the colours of the flag of Bangladesh

Directions to the start: Exit Aldgate tube station and turn right onto Aldgate High Street. St Botolph's Church is about 30 metres down the street on your right.

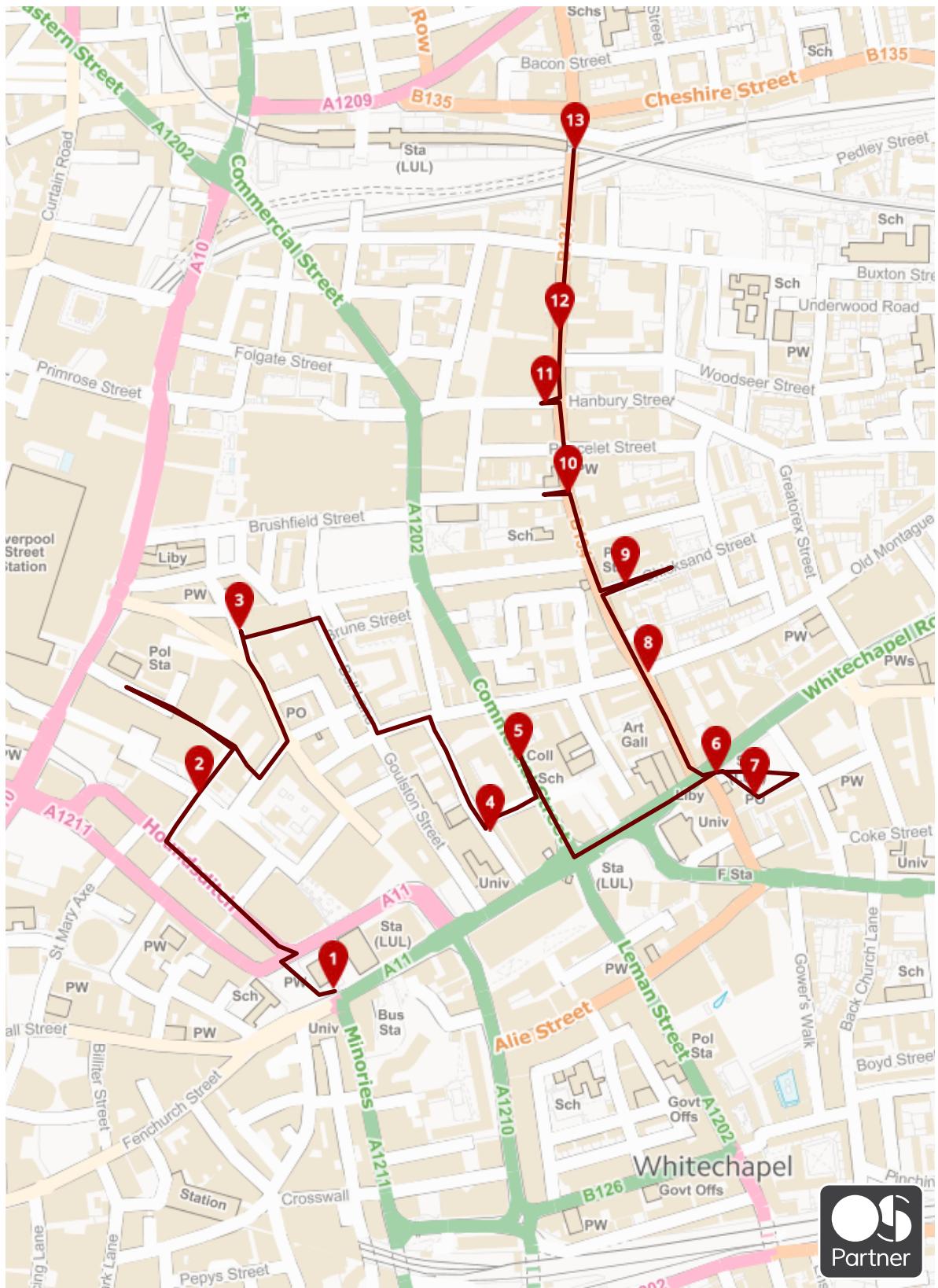
Thank you!



This walk was created by **The Swadhinata Trust**, a London based secular Bengali community group that works to promote Bengali history and heritage.



Route and stopping points



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01 St Botolph's Church without Aldgate

The most common religions practiced by Bengalis are Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. A Church may therefore seem an odd place to start our walk, but St Botolph's holds an early clue to Bengali presence in Britain.

The church archives mention the burial here of "James, Indian servant of James Dupper Brewer" in 1618. James was a converted Indian Christian, who may have been a Bengali. This is our first hint of how long people of Bengali origin have resided in Britain and the relationships they may have held with British people.

The church we can see was built between 1741 and 1744 by George Dance, so it looks rather different to the one James might have known. St Botolph is the patron saint of travellers, however, so this is a rather fitting resting place for James, an early traveller from the Indian subcontinent.

With your back to the church, look diagonally right across Aldgate High Street to Jewry Street. Just 100 metres along this street is another site of hidden Bengali history.

In the 1890s local benefactors Mr and Mrs Rogers set up an ayahs' home and job centre on the corner of Jewry and India Streets. Ayahs were Indian nannies, nursemaids and servants for the families of colonial officers of the British Raj. These women came from Burma, China, and, of course, Bengal in India.

When the officers and their families returned to Britain, their ayahs often accompanied them. The Ayahs' home provided support for these women. It helped them to find lodgings, work, or a passage home after they left their British employers. We will find out more about Britain's relationship with Bengal over the next few stops.

Directions

Facing St Botolph's, walk around to the left of the church through Dukes Place. Turn right into St Botolph Street, then almost immediately turn left into Houndsditch. Walk up Houndsditch and take the second right into Cutler Street.

At the end of Cutler Street, cross the road and go through the grand gateway of Devonshire Square, a luxury development of offices and restaurants. As you do so, look up at the buildings on either side. Stop in the square.

02 Devonshire Square, Cutler Street

Note the simple facades and large arched windows of these buildings. These luxury offices were once the warehouses of the East India Company (EIC). The EIC was a British company founded in 1600 to trade with the East, South East Asia and India.

The EIC was vitally important to the development of London's East End and its links to Bengal. Over the years it developed into a huge corporation with its own military. The EIC effectively became an aggressive colonial power and in 1757 seized control of Bengal, making many of its officials and stakeholders very wealthy.

The EIC began by trading with Asia in 1600. Goods from EIC ships were unloaded at docks in the

Pool of London then brought here for storage. The first building on this site stored raw silk and textiles from Bengal, so it was named Bengal Warehouse. The building to our left is still called The Silk Store.

With their fortress-like walls and fire-proof construction, these warehouses offered excellent protection for the precious goods inside. Among other things, they stored spices, perfumes, pearls, tea, cotton, silks, indigo, ivory, and opium. But besides these goods, the EIC also brought human cargo - immigrant workers.

They included lascars (Asian seamen) and then later ayahs (nannies), who arrived in London on EIC ships. The name 'lascar' was given to Asian sailors or militiamen employed on European ships from the 16th to the mid-20th century. It comes from the Persian word *Lashkar* meaning 'army'.

Lascars were employed to provide manpower on ships returning from India. They were often poorly treated and given the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs. Many lascars were Bengalis, who returned home on the next passage. Some jumped ship, however, or were abandoned here without wages by unscrupulous employers.

In 1782 the EIC recorded lascars arriving at their Leadenhall Street offices "reduced to great distress and applying to us for relief". Initially the Company refused responsibility for these men, but from 1795 lascar hostels and seamen's homes were set up in nearby Shoreditch, Shadwell and Wapping.

By the early 19th century, over a 1,000 lascars had arrived in Britain through the Port of London. Thousands more came throughout the 18th century. Their lives were often poverty stricken and hard. In the winter of 1850 "some 40 sons of India" were found dead of cold and hunger on the streets of London.

In 1857 a missionary group founded the Society for the Protection of Asiatic Sailors and set up a Stranger's Home in Limehouse to help support the growing population. Standing outside these former warehouses, it is not hard to appreciate the very different lives lead by the lascars and other employees of the EIC.

If you have time, walk straight ahead towards the new building with a clock mounted on its façade. Just before the clock bear left (pass the Spice Building on your right) and walk towards a small alleyway. Go through the alleyway into a courtyard with a glass roof. Continue straight ahead and out through another alleyway opposite and into New Street beyond. Just on the left you will find a venue called the Old Bengal Bar serving Bloody Bengal and British Raj cocktails in a rather unusual nod to the heritage of this place! Then head back through the two alleyways to the clock.

Directions

Walk straight ahead towards the new building with a clock mounted on its façade. The clock case is the original from the EIC warehouses. Turn to your right and take the exit down the narrow alleyway onto Harrow Place. Turn left into Harrow Place and walk up it to Middlesex Street. Turn left into Middlesex Street and walk up it until it branches, with Middlesex Street continuing to the left and Sandy's Row heading off on the right. Walk along Sandy's Row until No. 13, the restaurant La Tagliata, on your right.

03 No.13 Sandy's Row

Between 1945 and 1959 No.13 Sandy's Row was the home of Ayub Ali Master. Ayub Ali was an influential Bengali man who ran a seamen's café on nearby Commercial Road in the 1920s and the Shah Jalal Coffee House on Commercial Street.

We've stopped here to explore the role Bengalis played in British seafaring. By 1914 lascars made up 17% of mariners on British-registered ships. During the First World War sailors were drafted into the Navy and Army, so lascars were employed on merchant and naval ships to aid a shortage of manpower.

After the war, many lascars were left without employment. In search of new work, some of them settled in London. Many entered the catering industry in the West End or the clothing industry in the East End. Bengali lascars were drawn to the East End because there was already a Bengali presence here.

These ex-seamen faced a number of struggles. Some had jumped ship and were wanted for being in breach of contract. Some had very little English, and others suffered racist abuse. Ayub Ali turned his home into a centre of support for these Bengali sailors. This included a lodging house, a travel agency and a job centre offering letter writing, form filling and educational services.

As more Bengalis came to London, they were directed to Ayub Ali's house as a first port of call. The lascars called him 'Master' because of his education and way with words. In 1943 Ayub Ali formalised the vital social welfare work he did with the lascars by setting up the Indian Seamen's Welfare League.

During the Second World War Bengali lascars also played an important role. They worked on merchant ships, hospital ships and helped with the Dunkirk evacuation. Many of these seamen ended up living in London afterwards. Overall though, the contribution of Bengali and Indian men to both World Wars is often overlooked.

Not far from here in Tower Hill, the Merchant Navy War Memorial lists seafarers killed in both wars. It includes some of the 6,000 Indian seamen who died. Among them are many Bengali surnames, such as Miah, Latif, Uddin, Choudhury, and Ali.

Directions

Retrace your steps down Sandy's Row and almost immediately turn left into Frying Pan Alley. Walk along the Alley and turn right into Bell Lane. Walk down Bell Lane until you meet Wentworth Street. Turn left into Wentworth Street and then take the first right into Old Castle Street. Walk down Old Castle Street until you reach Calcutta House, part of London Metropolitan University. There is a covered walkway overhead and across the street on your right is the former 'Wash Houses' building (Whitechapel's public baths from 1846).

04 Calcutta House

This building is currently part of London Metropolitan University, so why have we stopped here? The clue is in the name! Calcutta, now known as Kolkata, is the capital of the state of West Bengal.

Calcutta was founded by Job Charnock, an English sailor and EIC administrator, who settled in a

Bengali village on the banks of the River Hooghly in 1687. Calcutta soon became an EIC trading post and fort. It then developed into a great port city, partly thanks to tea.

This building, Calcutta House, was built as a tea warehouse for Brooke Bond in 1909, a company who are still going strong today.

The EIC shipped thousands of tons of tea to Britain. Britain's tea was originally shipped from China but to break the Chinese monopoly on the trade, the EIC established its own plantations in India from the 1850s. Key tea estates were Assam in India and the hills of Sylhet in Bangladesh, as they had the right climate and soils. Both of these areas are in the east of the Indian subcontinent, so Calcutta became the ideal port for shipping the tea to Britain.

Tea was transported from the Sylhet plantations to Calcutta in small boats. Calcutta-based 'serangs' (the headmen of Asian seamen crews) often recruited Sylheti sailors to work on their ships taking tea to London. Once in London, some Sylheti sailors jumped ship or lived here temporarily while looking for passage back home.

During the 20th century India was the world's biggest tea producer (it is now the second-largest after China). Before the commercial British plantations, tea was not a popular drink in India but may have been used for medicinal purposes. It has grown in popularity since though - today India is the largest consumer of tea worldwide!

Directions

Retrace your steps back under the covered walkway and turn immediately right into Pomell Way. At the end of Pomell Way turn left into Commercial Street. Walk approx. 50 metres along Commercial Street and turn right to look across the road at the redbrick building of Toynbee Hall (Note: in Summer 2018 there are renovation works taking place on the site - you can still see the building peeping out behind the scaffolding).

05 Toynbee Hall

The gothic-style redbrick Toynbee Hall was founded by Samuel and Henrietta Barnett in 1884. Confronted by the poverty around them in the East End, they wanted a radical yet practical solution to help. So they set up Toynbee Hall as a centre for education and social action. It aimed to bring together rich and poor to work together as an interdependent community.

The building has impressive political connections. Between 1903 and 1905 the economist William Beveridge worked here and began planning the principles of the modern welfare state. Beveridge was born in Bengal in 1879, the eldest son of a judge in the Indian Civil Service. His work here formed the basis for the establishment of the National Health Service and the modern benefits system.

In 1910 Clement Attlee, MP for Limehouse and Labour Prime Minister (1945 to 1951), lived at Toynbee Hall. More recently, Bengali residents continued the legacy of helping the East End's poor communities. In the 1960s the Council of Citizens of Tower Hamlets organised English classes for Bengali seamen and machinists here.

The Hall still serves the Bengali community today by providing a meeting place, study centre, lecture hall and base for religious, political and cultural events, such as the Bengali Luncheon Club. Bengalis have been responsible for many innovations here. For example, Anis Rahman

helped develop women-only sessions at the Hall's Free Legal Advice Centre and Abul Azad started 'Surma' which supports elderly Bengali people in the community.

Directions

Walk back down Commercial Street in the direction you have just come from and turn left into Whitechapel High Street. Before Whitechapel Gallery there is a small alleyway off to the left called Gunthorpe Street. If you pop your head in here you can see a nice map and mural of the area, including Brick Lane.

Continue along Whitechapel High Street past the Whitechapel Art Gallery. At the crossroads of Whitechapel High Street, Osborn Street and White Church Lane walk into the green space of Altab Ali Park.

06 Altab Ali Park

Before 1998 this place was called St Mary's Gardens Park after the 13th century church that once stood here. The church was painted white and gave the area its name - 'White-chapel'. St Mary's was badly bombed during the Blitz and finally demolished after a lightning strike a few years later. Look for stone 'remains' in the grass which indicate the old church site.

Now look at the ornate metal arch we passed under to enter the park. It was built in commemoration of a young Bengali man called Altab Ali. On the night of 4 May 1978 Ali was walking home from his job as a leather garment worker on Hanbury Street. In an unprovoked racist attack he was fatally wounded on the edge of the park in nearby Adler Street.

Sadly this was a time of overt racism in Britain, with many families living in fear of verbal and physical abuse. The murder shocked the neighbourhood and roused the local community to act. Bengalis and other Asian youths were angry at the government's failure to do anything about such attacks, at the levels of police racism and at the criminalisation of immigrant communities.

In protest they carried Ali's coffin all the way to Whitehall. They were joined by other anti-racist protestors, forming a procession of over 7,000 people. It was a galvanising moment for Bengali community organisations and had a real impact on the anti-racism movement in Britain.

The Bengali youth movement, the Anti-Nazi League and Rock Against Racism were all born out of the events of 1978. The National Front, which had its headquarters not far from Brick Lane, was also driven out of the area. Altab Ali is remembered every year, although it was not until 20 years later that this park was renamed to honour him.

Local activist Ansar Ahmed Ullah said: "*We weren't able to transform anything overnight, but by the 1990s the intensity and the violence had subsided...I think we were able to change the mind-set of the situation, in terms of how the police, councils and the government treated racism.*"

Directions

Now walk to the far right hand corner of the park where you will find a red and white abstract monument.

07 Shahid Minar / Martyr's Monument

This is the Shahid Minar or 'Martyr's Monument'. It is a replica of a larger memorial in Dhaka, Bangladesh which commemorates the Language Martyrs. The Language Martyrs were protesters shot dead by police in 1952. The incident is seen as the start of the Independence movement in Bangladesh.

After the creation of Pakistan in 1947, questions arose over what the state language should be. Urdu was proposed. Students and intellectuals in East Pakistan, however, argued that Bengali must be included as one of the state languages as it was widely spoken there.

Discussions broke down and the West Pakistan-based government tried to instate Urdu alone. There were protests and strikes over the following years. On 21 February 1952 the police shot dead several protestors at Dhaka University. Days later a memorial was erected on the site. This monument in Altab Ali Park recalls it.

In 1956 the government adopted both Urdu and Bengali as the state languages of Pakistan. While this helped matters, the East Pakistani population still felt under-represented by the government. They demanded East Pakistan be given greater self-determination and be called Bangladesh. This culminated in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, which ended with Bangladesh becoming a sovereign nation.

In 1999 the United Nations declared 21 February 'World Mother Language Day'. In Bangladesh it is a public holiday. At midnight on 20 February (Shahid Dibosh), the Bengali community lay wreathes in Altab Ali Park during a solemn ceremony remembering the Language Movement. Abdul Gaffar Choudhury, journalist and freeman of Tower Hamlets, wrote the well-known Martyr's Day song '*Amar bhaier rokte rangano Ekushe February*', which is sung at the ceremony.

This park is a very important site for British Bengalis. Jakia Chowdhury, who has lived and worked around Brick Lane since 1987, said of Shahid Minar: *"I celebrate it every day, I keep the importance. But I do also mark important events like Ekushe [21 February] and our Independence Day... It's my identity, it's our identity. If I don't mark that, I don't know my roots."*

Directions

Walk around the park then exit the way you came in. Cross over Whitechapel High Street at the crossing and walk up Osborn Street. Continue along Osborn Street until you see the Sonali Bank on your left and metal archway over the street ahead. Stop somewhere between the two.

08 Brick Lane

Brick Lane got its name in the 17th century as an area where clay was dug up for bricks. In 1666, the Great Fire of London destroyed hundreds of wooden buildings and created a huge demand for bricks to rebuild them. This street was a rutted clay track that became a source of brick making. The finished bricks were carried along here to Whitechapel. Architect Christopher Wren described Brick Lane as "*unpassable by coach, adjoining to dirty lands of mean habitations.*"

Throughout the centuries, Brick Lane has been a hub for immigrants. In the 18th century thousands of Huguenots, fleeing persecution in France, moved to the area. Many were skilled weavers and soon Brick Lane became a centre for the silk and garment businesses. In the next

century, Eastern European Jews settled here following pogroms in Russia. They slowly took over the garment industries and also worked in the rag trade. Irish immigrants, fleeing famine and poverty in Ireland, worked here in the same trade.

As Bengali seamen arrived in the area, they also found work in clothing and leather industries. Bengali immigration boomed in the mid-20th century. Following World War One, Britain required unskilled labour to rebuild the country. Britain appealed to former Commonwealth countries for help. As a result, many from the Indian sub-continent came to Britain to work.

With so many Bengalis living in the area, shops and cafes sprang up to cater for them. We'll take a closer look at some at our next stop. Brick Lane gradually became the heart of the Bengali community. Amjad Ali came to Britain in 1973 and grew up here: "*Tower Hamlets means Brick Lane. And everything starts from Brick Lane. You can say it is the capital city of the Bengali community.*"

Shops along Brick Lane still sell fabrics, linings, buttons, machinery and other material for the clothing industry. For several decades, women's garments sold by top retail chains were made here, often as sub contracts in small workshops employing 5 to 8 men, or as piecework by Bengali women working at home. This is no longer the case, and other Bengali businesses, particularly restaurants, have sprung up.

On our left is Sonali bank. Sonali means 'gold' in Bengali - a fitting name for Bangladesh's biggest state bank. The bank enables local Bangladeshis to send money back to Bangladesh to support family and friends. Money sent in this way is known as 'remittances'. In 2015-16 \$863.28 million were sent in remittances from the UK to Bangladesh.

Flows of remittances are changing as some people who live in Britain no longer have relatives living in Bangladesh. Nonetheless, the bank is still an important part of the community and shows we are in a predominantly Bengali area.

Now look ahead to the large metal archway over the street. Designed by Mina Thakur, it was erected in 1997 to mark the entrance to 'Banglatown'. The crimson and green colours come from the flag of Bangladesh. Having contributed so much to the area, the Bengali community campaigned to get the arch installed as part of celebrating Bangladeshi culture around Brick Lane.

In the late 1990s Tower Hamlets Borough Council helped to fund and install the arch and rebrand Brick Lane as Banglatown to attract Londoners and tourists to this vibrant neighbourhood. Take a closer look around and you can spot some other additions to the streetscape. The lampposts are also decorated in the colours of the Bangladesh flag and have recently been updated with illustrations referencing the history of the area. The street signs too now appear in both English and Bengali.

Directions

Continue along the street and under the arch along Brick Lane. Take the second right into Chicksand Street. Walk a little way up Chicksand Street and on the right you will see a sign for the offices of Janomot. Stop here.

09 Janomot and former Café Naz

We are now outside the offices of Janomot, Britain's longest-running Bengali weekly newspaper. Founded in 1969, originally the paper was written, prepared and printed all on this site. Today the journalists still work here while printing has moved off-site. Janomot is still Britain's leading Bengali newspaper and emphasises just what a hub Brick Lane is for the community.

Chicksand and its neighbouring streets is still very much a Bengali neighbourhood. The other side of Brick Lane though has changed more over the last decade, with artists (including Gilbert and George) and young professionals buying houses and gentrifying the area. Some are concerned that Bengali families are being priced out. Others have chosen to move further East to places like East Ham and Ilford to benefit from more space for their families.

Directions

Walk back down Chicksand Street and turn right into Brick Lane again. Look at the building on your right – No.46 Brick Lane, currently Belmonts Estate Agents.

This building was once a cinema. It was originally built in 1936 as the Mayfair cinema and by the 1960s had become Naz Cinema - a key hangout for Bengalis. On weekends, people travelled here from all over Britain to catch the latest releases from the Indian film industry. It was even visited by Dilip Kumar, the Clark Gable of the Indian film, and his heroine Vaijanti Mala.

The cinema also hosted meetings of young Bengalis and Asians keen to organise against and fight the racism they experienced in London and beyond. As recently as 1999 a car bomb planted by a neo-Nazi exploded outside Café Naz. Luckily no one was hurt and, on the whole, overt racism has been cleared from these streets.

Next door to the former Café Naz stands Amar Gaon, one of many Bengali restaurants still going strong. It sells an assortment of delicious Bangladeshi-British food, including fish curry. Curry is perhaps one of the things that Brick Lane is most famous for. Brick Lane has nearly 50 Indian / Bengali restaurants and has been dubbed 'Curry Capital' of the UK.

The first Indian curries sold in London were served in West End coffee houses during the 1770s. By 1960 there were 500 Indian restaurants in Britain. Now there are 10,000, employing 80,000 people with a turnover of £2 billion. Most are owned and run by Bengalis. Curry houses serve dishes cooked in a mix of British, Indian and Bengali styles.

If you pop inside Amar Gaon, the counter on the right sells paan. Paan is a type of snack popular across South Asia. It is made from betel nut, which comes from Betel Palm trees that grow in the region. The nut is sliced thinly and wrapped in a paan leaf from the Betel Vine (*Piper*). It is then smeared with a little lime, a pinch of tobacco and a sprinkle of aromatic spice - cardamom or turmeric. Paan is typically sucked after dinner as a digestive and stimulant, the lime producing a brick red juice that dyes the mouth.

As we continue along Brick Lane keep an eye out for No. 55 Arzu Sweet Centre. There is a blue plaque on their wall marking this as the former residence of DJ Haroon Shamsheer of the dub / dance collective Joi.

Print media, films, food and music – all of these elements have made Brick Lane not just a key hub for Bengalis, but a vibrant and innovative neighbourhood more widely. It is easy to see why

many people wish to celebrate this area as Britain's Banglatown.

Directions

Continue down Brick Lane and stop by the distinctive silver minaret of the Brick Lane Mosque

10 Brick Lane Mosque and Bangladesh Welfare Association

The London Jamme Masjid, or Brick Lane Mosque, provides a fascinating reflection of the changing waves of immigration that Brick Lane has played host to over the centuries. Today it is East London's second mosque, where Muslims, including many Bengalis, pray to Allah. The mosque houses a religious school on the first floor and a large prayer hall on the ground floor.

The building started life however in a very different vein. This was originally La Neuve Eglise (the New Church), built in 1743 by Huguenot refugees. The Huguenots were French Protestants who towards the end of the 17th century faced persecution from Catholic royalty. Thousands fled France and many settled in Spitalfields. In 1685 there were no Huguenot churches here - by 1700 there were nine!

In 1819 the building became a Methodist Church, and then in 1898 it was converted into an orthodox Jewish Synagogue. This reflected the influx of Eastern European Jews to the area in the early 19th century. By the second half of the 20th century many Jews had moved out to suburbs like Golders Green and Hendon in north London. So in 1976 the Synagogue was converted into a mosque for the growing Bengali Muslim community.

Although many Bengali immigrants arrived before this time, often as seamen, a real influx came in the mid-20th century. Like the Huguenots and Jews before them, many found work in the textile industry, while others set up shops and restaurants.

Directions

Turn left into Fournier Street and the building next to the mosque with the blue front door is No.39, the Bangladesh Welfare Association.

Like the mosque, the Bangladesh Welfare Association had a Huguenot and Jewish past. For example its address, Fournier Street, is named after George Fournier, a man of Huguenot extraction. The building is now a centre for charitable work for the Bengali community.

The Association was founded in 1952 as the Pakistan Welfare Association, to look after the increasing number of Bengali seamen arriving in London and campaign for their rights. After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the building was renamed 'Shaheed Bhavan' – 'Martyr's House' and later the Bangladesh Welfare Association.

This is the largest Bengali community organisation in the country, providing advice and information on welfare rights, housing, education and IT. In essence, it operates rather like Ayub Ali Master's house did several decades before.

Directions

Return to Brick Lane and continue walking down it. [Note Taj Stores on the right just after Princelet Street]. Turn left into Hanbury Street when it crosses Brick Lane. Just a few metres down the road you will find the Kobi Nazrul Centre on the left (the building with the burgundy coloured facade and gold lettering).

11 Kobi Nazrul Centre

The Kobi Nazrul Centre is a Bengali arts and cultural centre founded in 1982 and named after Kazi Nazrul Islam. Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) is the national poet of Bangladesh. He was a great humanist and wrote against sectarianism, slavery and colonialism, and in favour of social justice and women's rights.

In fact, he was known as the 'rebel poet' for his resistance to all forms of oppression. The British administration in India jailed him during the Indian Independence struggle and banned some of his books. This was despite the fact that he had served in the British Army in the First World War!

Most of Kazi Nazrul Islam's plays, poems, novels and songs were written between 1920 and 1930. He drew on both Muslim and Hindu cultural traditions, so his work had a broad appeal. He greatly admired the older poets and writers, but his work was fresh and contemporary, with vibrant rhythms and political subjects.

Here is an extract from his poem 'Don't be afraid, O human soul!':

"The traveller of the path of truth! Don't be afraid, don't fear!
Those who seek peace, defeat is not for them, my dear!
Sometimes the enemies of peace win in their disguise,
At the end only in humiliation and shame comes their inevitable demise."

In a fitting recognition of Kazi Nazrul Islam's contribution to culture and peace, the Centre was opened by Lord Fenner Brockway, a British politician and peace campaigner. Exhibitions, seminars, concerts, and performing arts take place in the beautiful concert space upstairs.

The Centre is an important addition to the area, which has been a hotbed for Bengali culture over the decades. More recently the poet and writer Gaffar Choudhury, painter Shafique Uddin, and film-maker Ruhul Amin have all lived and worked in the vicinity, contributing to the rich creativity of Brick Lane.

Directions

Return to Brick Lane, turn left along it and continue until you reach the old Truman Brewery and a sign on the left for the Black Eagle.

12 Truman Brewery

The Black Eagle Brewery was established by the Bucknall family, probably in the 17th century. In 1666 Joseph Truman joined the Bucknalls and over the years the business expanded. By 1748 it was the third-biggest brewery in London, producing over 39,000 barrels of beer a year. For a brief period in the 1800s it was the biggest brewery in the world, even sending IPA (India

Pale Ale) to the British Raj!

The brewery made use of the clean spring water found nearby, the skills of the Huguenot brewers, and the local supply of immigrant labour. In the second half of the 20th century British brewers struggled with competition from imported lagers. The Truman Brewery was taken over in a merger and finally closed down in 1988.

The old brewery buildings have been converted into nightclubs and bars, including 93 Feet East and Vibe Bar (on either side of the road just after the Eagle sign). Bengali artists have been central to the vibrancy and success of such venues and regular performers include Asian Dub Foundation, Joi, State of Bengal and Osmani Sounds.

Directions

Continue up Brick Lane. If you look down Buxton Street you can see the start of Allen Gardens. This is where the first Bengali festival of Boishakhi Mela was held and the site of the first Taj Stores. Stop when you reach a bridge where the London Overground crosses overhead.

13 Beneath the London Overground bridge

For several decades this bridge marked the start of a no-go area for Bengalis in the East End. From the mid-1970s the National Front had their headquarters on Great Eastern Street, a few minutes' walk west of here. Every Sunday their supporters and local skinheads gathered at the junction of Brick Lane and Bethnal Green Road to distribute their literature and make raids into Brick Lane, targeting Bengali businesses and families.

This bridge was often a clash-point where Bengali youths would face-off to them and attempt to protect their neighbours. Activist Ansar Ahmed Ullah said: "*At that time, it was very difficult for Bengalis to go out on their own, because you'd often be abused. If you lived on a council estate your neighbours would be very hostile towards you. They would break your windows, they would push rubbish through your letterbox - basically making your life miserable.*"

Thankfully, and with a lot of hard work from the Bengali community and anti-racist campaigners, relations have improved a lot since then. While there are still sometimes tensions, today Brick Lane is held up as a symbol of multiculturalism in London and Britain as a whole.

Bengali restaurants attract thousands of tourists and Bengali arts and music create a vibe that has attracted a whole new generation to the area. Come here on a Sunday and you can barely move for the crowds eager to see the clothes, crafts and food on offer. Bengali, Turkish, Somali, white British and many others fuse to produce a pleasing cacophony of colour and sound.

But the Bengali contribution is much deeper and more significant than this. Bengalis have provided welfare and support to the poor and marginalised in the community. They served in great numbers in the First and Second World Wars. They have campaigned and fought against racism in Britain's streets and institutions. They have created new fusion sounds and cuisines combining Bengali and British flavours. And they have helped to regenerate a neglected and dirty backstreet to a vibrant hub of the East End.