

Cultural
Walk 3



Exploring Banglatown and the Bengali East End



TOWER HAMLETS



Walk 3

Banglatown and the Bengali East End

Starting point St. Botolph's, Aldgate
Finishing point Truman's Brewery
Estimate time 1.5 hours

Introduction

Today approximately 300,000 Bengalis live in Britain, most of whom originate from Bangladesh, from the region of Sylhet in the north east of the country. Other Bengalis come from West Bengal in India.

Tower Hamlets has a long tradition of welcoming immigrant populations from all over the world including Huguenots in the 18th century and Jews in the 19th century. Now one third of the population in Tower Hamlets is Bengali, the largest Bengali community in the UK.

However many people are often not aware that Bengali people have lived in London for nearly 400 years. Early Bengali residents left few signs or buildings to mark their presence but some clues still remain. In 1616 for example the Mayor of London attended St Dionis Church in the City for the baptism of "Peter", an East Indian from the Bay of Bengal, who had arrived in 1614 and whose 'Christian' name was chosen by James I.

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

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| 1 St Botolph's Church | 12 Poem by Tagore |
| 2 Jewry Street | 13 Sonali Bank |
| 3 East India House | 14 Brick Lane |
| 4 Cutler Street | 15 Offices of Janomot newspaper |
| 5 13 Sandy's Row | 16 Café Naz |
| 6 Wentworth Street | 17 Christ Church School |
| 7 Calcutta House | 18 London Jamme Masjid |
| 8 Toynbee Hall | 19 Kobi Nazrul Centre |
| 9 Altab Ali Arch | 20 Black Eagle |
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| 11 Shahid Minar, 'Martyr's Monument' | |



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Start at Aldgate Station (not Aldgate East) turn right (west) towards the City of London.

Begin the walk at an East End site with early links to Bengali settlers. **St Botolph's Church, Aldgate (1)**, which is dedicated to the patron saint of travellers, has stood here since the reign of William the Conqueror. The current church was built between 1741 and 1744 by George Dance.

Church archives mention the burial of a converted Indian Christian (who may have been a Bengali) 'James, Indian servant of James Duppa Brewer' here in 1618.



If you stand in front of the Church, Jewry Street is diagonally to your right across Aldgate High Street, running southwards. East India House (Lloyd's Insurance building) is round the corner, in Leadenhall Street, running westwards.

Across Aldgate High Street is **Jewry Street (2)**. Mr and Mrs Roger set up an Ayah's home and job centre on the corner of India Street in the 1890s where nannies from Bengal, Burma and China could have lodgings, seek work and arrange passage home.

On the right is Lloyd's Insurance building, designed by Richard Rogers, with its twin rooftop blue cranes (blue lights at night), which towers above Leadenhall Street. It is on the site of **East India House (3)**, the East India Company's headquarters from 1722 to 1873 after which time Lloyds took it over.



The Merchant Navy War Memorial by Tower Hill lists seafarers killed in World Wars I and II. It includes some of the 6,000 Indian seamen who died, (many with Bengali names – Miah, Latif, Uddin, Choudhury, Ali) working as stokers, greasers, coal trimmers and firemen in the engine rooms, and cooks in the galleys.

The East India Company

The East India Company was of vital importance to the development of the East End and its links to Bengal. It began to develop trade with Asia in 1600, particularly in spices and by 1608 its first ships had arrived in Surat, India. In 1614 the company had built its own dock in Blackwall, London.

The company's first trading factory opened in India in 1615. In 1757 the company took control of Bengal. Its ships brought back precious cargoes of goods to east London, but also a human cargo of immigrant workers - *lascars* (Asian seamen) and later *ayahs* (Indian nannies, nurse maids and servants) who accompanied the families of the colonial *memsahibs* (wives of senior officials) of the Raj back to Britain.

The numbers of lascars arriving in the Port of London on East India Company ships - and later on P&O, Clan Line Steamers and British India Steamship Company vessels - grew to over a thousand by the Napoleonic War and to many more thousands through the 19th century. Many arrivals were Bengalis who returned home on the next passage. However some jumped ship. Others were just abandoned here without wages by unscrupulous employers.

The East India Company records lascars arriving at their Leadenhall Street offices 'reduced to great distress and applying to us for relief' (1782). From 1795 lascar hostels and seamen's homes were set up in Shoreditch, Shadwell and Wapping. The lives of lascars 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. The Society for the Protection of Asian Sailors founded the Stranger's Home in Limehouse in 1857.



From the Church, turn right into subway (exit 7), come out of exit 2 (westside) into Houndsditch which is the old moat outside the city wall. Over the centuries noxious trades were confined to the east of Houndsditch beyond the walls of the City. The curing and tanning of leather took place here. Whitechapel's messy haymarket was held three times a week from the 17th century to 1926. Also banned from the City were brick making, theatres, places of entertainment and foreigners. In 1484 King Richard III declared it illegal for 'aliens' (foreigners) to work in the City.

Take second right into **Cutler Street (4)**. At the T-junction at Cutler Street the smartly renovated luxury office accommodation is directly in front of you. It occupies the 6/7 storey former warehouses of the East India Company. Spices, perfumes, pearls, tea, cotton, muslins, gingham dungarees, chintz and taffeta, calico, silks, indigo ivory and saltpeter of the company's East India trade were stored here. So was opium, grown in Bengal and sold particularly in China to finance the tea trade. In 1699 angry local weavers, protesting at cheap imported cloth from Bengal, stormed East India House. In 1700 the importation of dyed and printed cottons from the East was banned in Britain, causing devastation in Bengal.

From Cutler Street go south eastwards and then left into Harrow Place, from Harrow Place turn left into Middlesex Street and go up to Sandy's Row, which is the 2nd road on the right.

From the end of World War 1 more Asian seamen began to settle in this area. Their numbers grew steadily, mostly single Bengali sailors who left their ships to find work in the catering industry in the West End or jobs in the East End's clothing industry.



An early and influential Bengali resident was Ayub Ali Master, who lived at **13, Sandy's Row (5)** between 1945-59. He ran a seamen's café in Commercial Road in the 1920s and the Shah Jalal Coffee House, also called the Ayub Ali Dining Rooms at 76, Commercial Street. Shah Jalal was the Yemeni Sufi mystic who came to Sylhet in 1303. Ayub Ali Master turned his home into a vital centre of support for Bengalis which included a



lodging house, job centre offering letter writing, form filling, an education service, a travel agency and an advice bureau. He also started the Indian Seamen's Welfare League in 1943.

Just before Sandy's Row, turn right into Frying Pan Alley, which will take you to Bell Lane, turn right to go towards **Wentworth Street (6)**. At the crossroads of Bell Lane, Wentworth Street and Goulston Street turn left. First right is Old Castle Street, where Calcutta House is situated.

Walk through to Wentworth Street, part of the famous Petticoat Lane Sunday Market which started in 1603 with stalls selling Huguenot lace and silks. Visit when the market is open and spot a wide range of stalls selling leather, fashion and fabrics including printed cottons for the African community.

Progress to the far end of Old Castle Street to find **Calcutta House (7)**, once an East India Company tea warehouse, now part of London Metropolitan University. The East India Company shipped thousands of tons of tea to Britain. Firstly from China and then in the 1850s from Assam (India) and British tea estates on the hills of Sylhet, Bangladesh.

The building is named after the Indian city of Calcutta (now known as Kolkata) which was founded by Job Charnock, an

Immigrants and the clothing trade

For at least seven centuries immigrants have settled in the East End and worked in the clothing industry. Geoffrey Chaucer, who lived in Aldgate, describes a xenophobic mob chasing Flemish weavers down the streets of Whitechapel in 1381. From 1590 French Huguenot refugees developed silk weaving in Spitalfields. The Jewish community worked here in the clothing trade particularly from the 1870s to the 1970's.

Today Bengali cutters, machinists, pressers and finishers continue the long tradition of clothing production.



English sailor who settled in a Bengali village 150 miles up the river Hooghly in 1687. It soon became a trading post and fort of the East India Company and developed into a great port city. Kolkata-based Indian *serangs* (headmen and boatswains of Asian deck crews) often recruited their sailors from Sylhet.



Turn back up Old Castle Street to Wentworth Street and from Wentworth Street cross Commercial Street and then turn right to find **Toynbee Hall (8)** on your left, which was founded by Samuel and Henrietta Barnett in 1884 as a centre for education and social action in the East End. The building has impressive political connections. Clement Attlee, MP for Limehouse and Labour Prime Minister from 1945-51 lived here in 1910. The economist William Beveridge planned the principles of the modern welfare state in Toynbee Hall. This work formed the basis for the establishment of the National Health Service and the modern benefits system. Beveridge himself was born in Bengal, India, in 1879, the eldest son of a judge in the Indian Civil Service.



Artist and blacksmith David Peterson made the wrought iron arch at the entrance to the park as a memorial to Altab Ali and victims of racist violence.

Toynbee Hall has a long history helping the East End community. In the 1960s the Council of Citizens of Tower Hamlets organised English classes for Bengali seamen and machinists here. Today it continues to serve the Bengali community by providing a meeting place, study centre, lecture hall and base for social programmes and religious, political and cultural events such as the Bangladesh Film Festival. Bengali Hindus celebrate *Durga Puja* here.

From Toynbee Hall turn left southwards and continue up Commercial Street and turn left into Whitechapel High Street. Commercial Road junction, which can be seen across the road on the right, was built to enable the East India Company to transport its goods from the docks to their warehouses.

Continue along Whitechapel High Street where the famous Whitechapel Art Gallery has been exhibiting artwork since 1902. At the southeast corner of the crossroads of Whitechapel High Street, Osborn Street, Whitechapel Road, and Whitechurch Lane walk into the open space through the **Altab Ali Arch (9)** which was previously the churchyard. The 'white chapel' that gave the area its name stood here in 1250. St Mary Matfelon's Churchyard was renamed **Altab Ali Park (10)** by Tower Hamlets Council in 1998 in memory of a young Bengali clothing worker from Cannon Street Road, stabbed to death in Adler Street in a racist murder on 4 May 1978.

The abstract monument on your right - a white structure representing a mother protecting her children in front of a rising crimson sun - is the **Shahid Minar**, 'Martyr's Monument' **(11)**, a locally founded replica of a larger memorial in Dhaka, Bangladesh, which commemorates the 'Language Martyrs' shot dead on 21 February 1952 by the Pakistani Police while protesting against the imposition of Urdu as Pakistan's state language.

In February 1999 the United Nations declared February 21 World Mother Language Day. At midnight on 20 February (*Shahid Dibosh*) the Language Movement is remembered in a solemn ceremony in the Park – to which the Bengali community comes to lay wreaths. 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.



Also find by St Mary Matfelon's foundations, a sapling that has been planted to replace the giant cedar that once stood here. Embedded in the path metal letters form a poem by Bengali poet, Rabindranath **Tagore (12)** (1861 - 1941), who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1911 and wrote the national anthems of India and Bangladesh.



The shade of my tree is offered to those who come and go fleetingly. Its fruit matures for somebody whose coming I wait for constantly

Further information

The Author

This booklet was compiled and written by Dan Jones, a youth worker in Tower Hamlets from 1967, now working for Amnesty International. It was largely based on research by Daniele Lamarche of Shadinata Trust, and by Jo Skinner, Chris Lloyd and Ansar Ahmed Ullah of Tower Hamlets Council.

References

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Further Information

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London Jamme Masjid (Brick Lane Mosque)
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Tel 020 7247 6052

Places to go, things to do

To find out more about Spitalfields and shopping in Tower Hamlets visit www.spitalfields.org.uk or www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/data/discover

Eating

Give your taste buds a treat in Brick Lane's many restaurants. www.bricklanerestaurants.com

Shopping

For a definitive guide to the more unusual and unique shops in the area, pick up a copy of the **Quirky Shopping Guide** or download it from www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/quirky



A large print version of this leaflet is available by contacting 020 7364 4958 or visiting www.towerhamlets.gov.uk



Exit the park via the Altab Ali Arch, cross the road and walk up Osborn Street leading to Brick Lane.

Find a wide selection of Bengali/Asian music, films, newspapers and magazines in the area. Visit Geet Ghar (Osborn Street), and Sangeeta, Mira and Music House in Brick Lane and Eastern Co-operative and others in Hanbury Street. The lively music pouring onto the streets mingles with

recordings of religious prayer further down Brick Lane creating a vibrant atmosphere.

Note the **Sonali Bank (13)** on your left, where Brick Lane begins, is used by Bengali workers to send remittances to their families in Bangladesh. Also found here are travel agents offering flights to Dhaka, Sylhet and to Makkah (Mecca) for the *Haji*, the most important Muslim pilgrimage.



Continue onto **Brick Lane (14)** – an area of London that has derived its name from the 17th century when, particularly after the Great Fire of 1666, London clay was dug up here in deep pits in the fields, to be fired in smoky kilns. Heavy carts ferried bricks along the rutted lane to Whitechapel. The

famous architect, Christopher Wren was noted to have said Brick Lane was “unpassable by coach, adjoining to dirty lands of mean habitations.”



Mina Thakur’s Brick Lane Arch, dates from 1997 and like Brick Lane’s lamp posts, is adorned with the crimson and green colours of the Bangladesh flag. Also note that street names are translated into Bengali script.



A number of shops still sell fabrics, linings, buttons, machinery and other material for the clothing industry, particularly for the manufacture of women’s dresses and outerwear. Women’s garments sold by top retailing chains are still made round here,



often as sub contracts in small workshops employing 5 to 8 men or as piecework by Bengali women working at home. At the other end of Brick Lane is evidence of the now declining leather industry.



Located at 26 Brick Lane is the Modern Saree Centre. The *saree (sari)* dates back 5000 years and is worn by millions of women in Bangladesh and India. A saree is 5–9 yards of cotton or silk, sometimes printed with simple patterns and sometimes interwoven or embroidered in silver, gold and other thread, worth hundreds of pounds. Usually wrapped around the body over a short blouse and petticoat, it is a versatile garment that can be a loose flowing gown, a veil to cover the hair, tucked up as shorts for working in paddy fields, a cradle to carry baby or a purse. When it is completely worn out and torn, Bengali grannies use saree thread to make *Kantha* hangings and quilts in amazing cross-stitch patterns.

Bengali men often wear the long *Punjabi* shirt and *pyjama*, especially during festivals and for weddings. In Bangladesh many wear a *lungi* (sarong). Bengali Muslim men and boys often wear a *tupi* (skullcap) which comes in many shapes, designs and colours, particularly when going to mosque.

On your right in Chicksand Street are the offices of **Janomot (15)**, London's longest running Bengali weekly newspaper, first published on 21



Brick Lane Arch

February 1969. Further down in Greatorex Street is *Notun Din*. There are six Bengali language papers, many magazines, two radio programmes and two satellite TV programmes serving London's Bengali-speakers.

No. 46, now home to **Café Naz (16)** was built where the old Mayfair Cinema of the 1930's once stood, which became the Naz Cinema in the 60s, showing Asian films and visited by Dilip Kumar, the Clark Gable of the Indian film industry and his heroine Vaijanti Mala. Café Naz was thrust into the news in 1999 when a car bomb planted by a neo-Nazi exploded outside. Fortunately nobody was hurt.



Preparing paan

All four local Asian film houses – the Naz, the Palaseum and Bangladesh Cinema Hall in Commercial Road and Liberty at Mile End – closed down in the early 1980s with the advent of video shops.

Past Café Naz on your left at 47a is **Christ Church School (17)**. 95% of the pupils at Christchurch Church of England Primary School are Bengali Muslims. A century ago when the Stepney's Jewish population was 120,000, they would have been 95% Jewish. After school many of the children go along to the Brick Lane Mosque for religious teaching and Bengali lessons.

At No. 74, the Music House, paan is prepared. The betel nut comes from the tall betel palm (Areca) that grows across South East Asia. The betel nut is sliced thinly, wrapped in a paan leaf that comes from the betel vine (Piper), smeared with a little lime, a pinch of tobacco and a sprinkle of aromatic spice - cardamom or turmeric. It is eaten after dinner as a digestive and stimulant and sucked and sucked, the lime producing a brick red juice that dyes the mouth.

The Bangladesh Welfare Association was once located at 39 Fournier Street (on your left). Originally built for the minister of the church in 1750, it was the base of Huguenot charitable work with the local poor. Jewish charities were based here at the end of the 19th century. The building housed the Pakistan

Welfare Association from the 1950s. After the independence of Bangladesh, it was renamed Shaheed Bhavan – Martyr's House. The Bangladesh Welfare Association has branches throughout the UK.

London Jamme Masjid (18), the Brick Lane Mosque (59) is housed in a building where worship has taken place by different faiths for 250 years. It was built by French-speaking Protestant Huguenot refugees who named it *La Neuve Eglise*, (the New Church) in 1743. High above, on the Fournier Street side of the building is the sundial bearing the mournful Latin message *umbra sumus* – “we are shadow”. A Methodist Church from 1819, it became an orthodox Jewish Synagogue in 1898. In 1976 it became East London's second mosque where Muslims pray to Allah. The building houses a religious school on the first floor. On Fridays piles of shoes of the faithful spill out onto the steps



from the large prayer hall on the ground floor. Continue along Brick Lane to Hanbury Street, turn left at the junction.

At 30 Hanbury Street is the **Kobi Nazrul Centre (19)**, a Bengali arts centre founded in 1982 and opened by Lord Fenner Brockway. Exhibitions, seminars, concerts and performing arts take place in the beautiful concert space upstairs. The Centre is named after Kazi Nazrul Islam.

Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) is the national poet of Bangladesh. Most of his plays, poems, novels and songs were written between 1920-30. The British administration in India jailed him during the Indian Independence

struggle and banned some of his books. A great humanist, he wrote against sectarianism, slavery, colonialism, and for social justice and women's rights.

Turn back onto Brick Lane where the walk is completed at the sign of the **Black Eagle (20)**, where Truman, Hanbury and Buxton made ale from the 17th century, using the clean spring water and the skills of Huguenot brewers. The brewery closed in 1988. The Brewery buildings have now been converted into some of London's hippest nightspots, such as the trendy 93 Feet East (150) and the Vibe Bar (93). Among the performers that you can see here are the homegrown Bengali underground music outfits such as Asian Dub Foundation, Joi, State of Bengal and Osmani Sounds and the young Asian talent explosion, the superb Nitin Sawhney and Talvin Singh.



Timeline

- 1600** *East India company founded*
- 1614** *First record of Bengali settlement in London*
- 1617** *Mughal Trade Treaty with East India Company*
- 1757** *Annexation of Bengal*
- 1773** *Norris Coffee House serves curry in Haymarket London*
- 1801** *First Lascars hostel*
- 1802** *The Ayah's home established in Aldgate*
- 1895** *M M Bhowndegree Asian MP for Bethnal Green*
- 1920** *First Indian restaurant in East London*
- 1947** *Indian independence and partition of India and Pakistan*
- 1951** *Pakistan Welfare Association founded*
- 1971** *Bangladesh liberation*
- 1976** *Jamme Masjid opened*
- 1978** *Altab Ali killed*
- 1999** *Brick Lane and surrounding area branded Banglatown*

While every care has been taken to ensure the accuracy of the information in this guide, Tower Hamlets Council cannot accept responsibility for any errors, omissions or subsequent alterations.

Tastes of Banglatown

SWEETS: *Misti*, made from sugar, flour, endlessly boiled milk and *ghee* (clarified butter), with flavorings of coconut, rosewater syrup, and pistachio. A must for the sweet-toothed Bengali, often accompanied by many cups of sweet cardamom-laced chai. Is it often eaten at *Baishakhi Mela* (the Bengali New Year Festival), when breaking the Ramadan fast, at Pujas, or when celebrating birthdays, weddings or welcoming a visitor.

FISH: Find frozen freshwater fish that were recently swimming in the *haors* (flooded fields) or rivers like the Ganges and Brahmaputra that lace Bangladesh – one of the world's most important freshwater fisheries. On offer is a wide variety of Bengali fish including *Boal maach*, *Ruhi* – mirror carp, *Bhag* – a large leopard-spotted fish, tasty little *Keshi*, delicious oily *Ilish maach* (Hilsa) or dried *Ilish* or *Shidol*, a pungent fish and shrimp paste.



VEGETABLES: Vegetables on display include white radish, sweet potato, egg plant, okra, *sheem* beans, *shatkora*, a bitter lemony fruit of Sylhet, *khacha kola* (green plantain), *jhinga* (ribbed sponge gourd), *chalkumra*, *misti kumra* (pumpkins), *aamphul* (mango flower), *kala thur* (banana flower) and all sorts of *saag* (spinach).

CURRY: The Indian curry ranks only second to fish and chips as the most popular food in Britain. Brick Lane has nearly 50 Indian/Bengali restaurants and has been dubbed the '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 to suit the British taste. Some risk hot *Madras* or very hot *Vindaloo*. The universal Anglo-Indian hybrid, *chicken tikka masala*, bears no resemblance to dishes actually eaten in the Indian subcontinent. A number of restaurants in Brick Lane now serve more traditional Bengali cuisine with Bengali vegetables and freshwater fish.

