
PATHS YOU WALK

Oral
Testimonies

South Asian Migration

to Walsall and the Black Country

Supported by The National Lottery Heritage Fund

So . . . we've sort of been mixed up together for a long time then?

NOTE

The words in this book are drawn from oral history interviews conducted as part of the Paths You Walk heritage project in Walsall. They are presented without names or markers of identity. The speakers chose to share their memories. We have chosen to let the memories speak for themselves.

These testimonies were recorded between 2024 and 2026 in Caldmore, The Butts, Willenhall, and across the Black Country. They are part of an oral history archive held by Reimagining Industrial Migratory Stories CIC, catalogued in partnership with Walsall Library Archive.

The fog in the Black Country back then . . . it wasn't like the fog in London. It was smog. The foundries were still going full tilt — the malleable iron works, the leather tanneries. The air had a taste to it. Metallic. Sulphurous.

People in India said go, it's good for family. Came alone,
sent money back. Never thought we'd become British —
that wasn't the plan.

We lived in a terraced house on Victor Street, ten or fifteen of us. We were farmers' sons from the Punjab, but here? We were like teenagers again. A "second adolescence." We pushed prams full of coal from the Langley canal in the snow of '65 — two feet deep — just to cook chapattis on a coal fire. We ate them with sugar because we had no vegetables.

I remember the first night she arrived. I sat her down in front of the gas heater — the old Super Ser. It was making this noise — hiss, pop, hiss. I said, “Listen to this. This is the god of England. It gives you a headache, and it smells of fumes, but you must love it, or the cold will kill you.” I told her about the silence, too. In Punjab, the night is loud. Here? After ten pm, Walsall is a graveyard. I told her, “You must get used to the quiet. It is the loudest thing here.”

You see, for men like my father, the railway was the symbol of the British Empire. No matter how much he scrubbed them with that harsh green soap, the Swarfega, his knuckles were permanently grey. But he sat in his armchair like a king. He felt that by keeping the trains moving, he was proving that we belonged here.

If we knew news was coming — maybe a letter from the village — my mother would treat it like a royal visit. She would wash our faces. She would put on her best silk sari, the one with the gold border she saved for Eid. She would even put out a plate of biscuits.

I'd be listening to The Beatles. "She Loves You, Yeah, Yeah, Yeah." I sat there in my shalwar kameez, nodding respectfully at the village news, but in my head? I was at the Cavern Club. We were living these two lives simultaneously. The grief of the village layered right on top of British pop culture. I think that's why my generation is so adaptable. We learned to switch codes before we could even read.

My mum tried to be charitable. She heard the “Commonwealth people” were poor, so she took cakes and blankets to them. She was met with total confusion. The Asian women looked at her like, “Why are you giving us this? We aren’t beggars.” There was a pride there that the locals didn’t understand.

She shouted, “Leave the lad alone! He’s doing a job!”
That was the Black Country for me. Rough, but fair. If
you worked hard, they respected you eventually.

She said, in that broad Walsall accent, “Yo’ m alroit, lad. Yo’ actually care.” After that, I wasn’t the ‘Asian Chemist’. I was just ‘The Chemist’.

We sat there, an Indian man and a Black Country miner's wife, drinking tea and complaining about the government. That was the real integration.

Necessity is the mother of integration.

*Caldmore was our sanctuary. We had the
cinema — the Imperial — showing Bollywood
films on Sundays.*

They were a generation of fighters, Billy. They had to be.
They walked through the fire so we could go to Art
College.

COLOPHON

Paths You Walk: Oral Testimonies

An artist's heritage project by Billy Dosanjh
Reimagining Industrial Migratory Stories CIC

Oral history interviews conducted in Walsall
and the Black Country, 2024–2026.

In partnership with Walsall Library Archive,
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