

# Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG)

## Terry Fitzpatrick



*Terry Fitzpatrick is regarded as the champion of the Bengali community in fighting anti-racism in East London. He is one of the founders of BHAG.*

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Little did a small group of housing activists know that a meeting at the Montefiore Centre in January 1976 would shape both the Bangladeshi East End and the first generation of Bangladeshi activists.

What began as a small movement with white squatters helping a homeless Bangladeshi families had, in two years, grown to fifty families with many more wanting to squat. Through the windows in the room where the meeting was held could be seen the almost entirely empty Pelham Buildings. The meeting decided to do two things. Form the Bengali Housing Action Group and occupy Pelham Buildings.

On Easter Sunday a few weeks later the first few families helped by myself and Farukh Dhondy broke into the building and within a month sixty were in occupation.

Both the Greater London Council and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets were opposed to any negotiations with squatters and the official policy was to evict but in May 1977 the GLC became Conservative run and they had an entirely different approach.

They told BHAG that if it nominated what were considered safe estates the GLC would re-house all of its members on them. A list was drawn up and gradually over several months Pelham was emptied of its Bangladeshis. Tower Hamlets was then forced to follow the same policy and for the first time a community had forced the British state to house them were they were safe from racial attacks.

Through this, and the physical defence of the community against racial attacks, the first generation of young Bangladeshi activists learned about direct action and that has shaped the community making it what it is today.