

Bradford Literature Festival – Culture as Social Intervention

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Bradford Literature Festival (BLF), established in January 2014, was founded with a clear and ambitious mission: to transform lives through the power of arts, culture, and literature. Over the past decade, BLF has rapidly evolved into one of the largest literature festivals in the UK and Europe's most eclectic and diverse cultural showcase. Not only does it stand as the foremost platform for Muslim arts and culture in the UK, but it has also become a cultural disruptor, leading the way in inclusion, diversity, and social engagement.

At the core of BLF is a deep belief in the transformative power of the arts—viewing culture as a fundamental right, not a privilege. The festival's commitment to social inclusion, accessibility, and representation is embodied in its Ethical Ticketing Policy, which ensures free access to those who need it most. Education is another pillar of BLF's vision. The festival's year-round programmes are designed to inspire a love of words, nurture literacy, and demonstrate how education can change lives, foster economic engagement, and serve as a foundation for positive change.

Harnessing the voices of a multitude of diverse communities, BLF has created a global cultural platform that unites artists and institutions across boundaries. The festival fosters an environment of inclusivity and mutual respect, encouraging cultural dialogue that promotes global understanding and celebrates shared human experiences. As the largest Muslim platform in the UK, BLF amplifies the narratives of Muslim writers, artists, and thinkers, offering a space to explore and appreciate Muslim arts, culture, history, and heritage. This platform not only serves to deepen the understanding of Muslim contributions to global culture but also builds bridges between communities, fostering unity through shared storytelling.

June 2024 marked BLF's 10th anniversary, a significant milestone in the organisation's history. Since its inception, BLF has evolved from a modest 24 events with 968 attendees in 2014 to 699 events with an audience of 155,934 in 2024. Over the past 10 years, BLF has engaged an audience of more than 705,000 people from 34 countries, including 269,000 children and young people. Nearly half of the audience (49%) comes from ethnically diverse backgrounds, and the festival has showcased 3,544 artists representing

heritage from 72 countries.

The 10 year anniversary of the festival offers a moment to pause, reflect on achievements, and consider the lessons learned over the past decade, as BLF continues to chart a bold path forward.

Bradford, the beating heart of Yorkshire, has a rich history shaped by waves of immigration. In the 19th century, Irish migrants arrived, fleeing the Potato Famine, and seeking work in the booming textile industry. Around the same time, Jewish Germans were drawn to the city's wool trade, becoming influential merchants and business owners. Their contributions can still be seen in Bradford's beautiful Victorian architecture, which reflects both German and Sephardic influences.

Post-World War II, Eastern European migrants, including Ukrainians, settled in Bradford, which now boasts the UK's largest Ukrainian population outside London. In the mid-20th century, South Asians, alongside the Windrush generation, came to work in the textile mills, further enriching the city's cultural tapestry.

These communities have shaped Bradford's cultural identity making it one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the UK, with over 180 languages spoken. The 2021 census recorded a 43% ethnically diverse population and the second largest Muslim population in the UK. This immense cultural diversity has also been marked by periods of division and tension, most notably during the race riots of 1995 and 2001. These incidents, driven by deep-seated racial tensions, economic inequality, and strained relations between minority communities and authorities, left lasting scars. The 1995 riots arose from local grievances, while the 2001 unrest, aggravated by far-right provocations, led to widespread violence and highlighted issues of segregation and racial inequality on a national stage.

In 1989, Bradford drew international attention when demonstrators publicly burned Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* outside the city hall. This act became one of the most symbolic moments of the UK protests, highlighting the deep tensions between free speech and religious sensitivities. The event placed Bradford at the heart of a heated national debate over the novel's controversial content and its impact on Muslim communities. From that moment on Bradford became the barometer of UK Muslim sentiment, the place journalists came to take the pulse of the Muslim community on both national and international events.

BLF was conceived against the backdrop of a city grappling with these challenges, including annual demonstrations by the English Defence League. The festival emerged out of necessity, functioning as a social intervention while taking the form of a literature festival. Its cultural strategy and design were driven by two key areas: cohesion and education. True re-

From the outset, BLF was designed to bring people together; to take control of, and reshape the, narratives surrounding the city and its diverse population. Committed to uniting all communities, rather than focusing on any single one, it was founded as a space to build bridges and foster cohesion, offering a neutral platform for nuanced dialogue. This unique per-

TOP 10 BEST-SELLING EVENTS



1. **The Hamziyya of Imam al-Busiri** | Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, Ian Abdal Latif Whiteman, The Fes Singers
2. **Sufiyana Kalaam** | Orchestral Qawwali Project
3. **Places of Revelation** | Professor Abdullah Alkadi, Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, Feraidoon Mojadedi
4. **Our Lady Fatima al-Zahra** | Shaykh Yahya Rhodus
5. **Great Books from Great Traditions** | Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, Dr AishaSubhani, Dr Asad Tarsin
6. **Miriam Margolyes in Conversation** with Peg Alexander
7. **Treatises of Imam al-Ghazali** | Shaykh Yahya Rhodus
8. **Husam Zomlot in Conversation** with Secunder Kermani
9. **An Evening of Comedy** | Shaparak Khorsandi, Aurie Styla, Scott Bennett, Tez Ilyas, Priya Hall
10. **Emperor of Rome: Mary Beard in Conversation** with Remona Aly



generation and transformation of a place require a focus on both the physical environment and its people. The most important and transformative regeneration is that of the communities who inhabit and shape the place. In cities like Bradford, arts and culture are not luxuries for a privileged few, but essential components of dialogue between communities and a key rung of social mobility.

spective and strong sense of identity made the festival nationally and internationally relevant as curating a programme that is relevant to, and reflective of, the concerns and sensibilities of the communities of Bradford is to create a programme that is the face of modern Britain.

BLF's unashamedly ambitious approach threw away the rulebook, reimagined the cultural landscape,

and successfully engaged with audiences and communities who are traditionally seen as hard to reach and are habitually underserved. BLF understands the difference between 'hard to reach' and 'easy to ignore' and people are at the heart of everything the festival has achieved, with all deliverables measured against one core conviction - literature and education have the power to transform individual lives, as well as society as a whole.

BLF has become renowned for its disruptive, inclusive programmes, which marry the popular with the intellectual, and the historic with the innovative. The festival is grounded in partnerships with prestigious institutions like the British Library and the Bodleian, but also works with local community centres and care homes. What sets BLF apart is its ability to work with organisations of the highest cultural merit while translating that engagement into meaningful interaction at the grassroots level. It has become a festival both internationally recognised and hyper locally rooted, uniting people across social divides.

At its heart, BLF understands that politics is shaped by narratives—by the stories we tell and the slogans we use. Stories, whether told through words, images, or performances, are how we make meaning as humans. They shape our perceptions of ourselves and others, influencing the political and social structures that govern us. Throughout history, stories have justified both conquest and liberation. Today, the rise of digital media and short-form storytelling has created new opportunities for cultural engagement and narrative shifting. Stories shared on platforms like TikTok are reaching audiences on an unprecedented scale, creating cultural movements that challenge the status quo and offer new ways of seeing the world.

In troubled times, culture offers a pathway to grace, understanding, and compassion—values that are desperately needed today. The arts, whether in the form of literature, architecture, or calligraphy, have long been a way for Muslims to express faith,

identity, and community. Today, the work of Muslim creatives—artists, writers, journalists, and producers—continues to enrich the cultural fabric of the UK and the world. It is crucial that young Muslims see themselves reflected in cultural spaces and on screens, as representation fosters pride, identity, and belonging. BLF plays a pivotal role in creating such spaces, celebrating the voices of Muslim artists while promoting broader cultural dialogue.

BLF's focus on education and literacy is central to its mission. Through its Children and Young People Programme, the festival inspires a love of reading and helps students understand their heritage, identity, and place in history. By doing so, BLF shapes students into open-minded global citizens, fostering a greater understanding of their role in the world.

BLF is at the forefront of using stories to create meaningful, sustained change, by fostering resilience, promoting mental well-being, and bridging divides in an age of polarisation. BLF challenges misconceptions that migration is a recent phenomenon, shining a light on the deep historical roots of the migrants communities and diverse histories that have shaped modern Britain. The festival has created a space where artists and audiences from diverse backgrounds feel safe and welcome, coming together each year in a shared commitment to dialogue, mutual respect, and global understanding. The festival's success has been key to Bradford's winning bid to become the UK City of Culture 2025, further cementing its impact.

As we navigate an era marked by division and uncertainty, culture remains one of the most powerful tools we have for bridging divides. Effective cultural strategies take time, but they are vital for creating sustained, meaningful change. By engaging with culture, we can shift narratives and foster unity. BLF stands as a testament to the power of culture, not just to entertain, but to unite, heal, and help us imagine a better world.

Syima Aslam is the CEO and Artistic Director of the Bradford Literature Festival; a 10-day literary and cultural celebration hailed as 'one of the most innovative and inspirational festivals in the UK'