

text + work

# **HOMES FIT FOR HEROES**

Photographs by Bill Brandt 1939 – 1943



12 September – 7 October 2005

Curated by  
Peter James & Richard Sadler  
in association with  
Birmingham Libraries

## HOMES FIT FOR HEROES

By Stuart Bartholomew

When the gallery at the Arts Institute was enlarged and redesigned it was our hope that the new space would show work able to stimulate interest in contemporary creative practice within and beyond our academic community. The concept of text + work was adopted to give exhibitions a more enduring life. Ideas are generated by words, images and artifacts and the dynamism of their interaction fuels debate and discussion.

'Homes Fit for Heroes' may raise scepticism over its place in a gallery committed to contemporary creative practice. The photographic work is the outcome of a commercial assignment executed between 1939 and 1943. The photographs document the material circumstances of people living in 19th century slum dwellings, set against those housed in new municipal housing of the war years.

The content of the exhibition has historical relevance but it also provides an aesthetic reference for the work of Bill Brandt, one of the most important photographers of the

20th century and one whose work has a continuing influence on contemporary photographic practice.

Bill Brandt (1904-1983) had a long and productive life as a photographer. As an assistant to Man Ray he was associated with the Surrealist Movement. Following his move to Britain he became a leading exponent of reportage documentary photography which was shown through popular magazines such as *Picture Post*, *Lilliput* and *Harper's Bazaar* rather than the gallery. The exhibition 'Homes Fit for Heroes' shows work of this period. It is a photographic essay revealing Bill Brandt's photographic aesthetic as well as a narrative about ambitions for post war reconstruction.

The Arts Institute is grateful to Richard Sadler and Peter James for the curation of this exhibition and to Birmingham Library Service for their loan. Richard Sadler, who is himself a distinguished photographer, was a friend of Bill Brandt and his wife Noya. Richard made the series of prints from the original Brandt negatives for the Birmingham Library where they form part of the photographic archive. These are also published in the book 'Homes Fit for Heroes' jointly authored by Peter James and Richard Sadler.

This show of work and its associated text opens the academic session 2005-2006. We are pleased that 'Homes Fit for Heroes' will contribute to the successful programme of exhibitions that have taken place and are planned for our Gallery.

Professor Stuart Bartholomew  
Principal, The Arts Institute at Bournemouth

HOMES FIT FOR HEROES  
Photographs by Bill Brandt  
1939 – 1943

By Peter James

Despite Bill Brandt's fame and considerable influence on the development of modern photography, the photographs in this exhibition are a little known body of work made between 1939 and 1943 when Brandt worked on a commercial assignment for the Bournville Village Trust (BVT).

The collection, held as part of the BVT's archives in Birmingham Central Library, comprises an album of seventy-seven enlargements (ranging in size from 5.5 x 6.5 to 11x 9.5cms) and sixty-six two and a quarter inch square negatives, the majority of which corresponded to the prints. The photographs illustrate and contrast the living conditions in a range of housing types, from back-to-back slums built in the nineteenth century through to modern municipal housing built in the 1930s. The majority of the photographs were taken in Birmingham but also some in London taken near to his own home in Camden Hill.

The origins of this work lay in two intertwined histories: that of Brandt's earlier work and the efforts of the BVT, amongst others, to

address issues of housing and post-war reconstruction. For example, the photographs here follow distinct narrative sequences – through the idea of ‘a day in the life’ – a device frequently used by Brandt in at least four earlier essays for *Picture Post*. There is also evidence of formal and structural relationships - schemes of social and visual juxtaposition and the careful use of light to emphasise these contrasts - which echo the devices Brandt famously used to lay out the pictures for his books *The English at Home* (1936) and *A Night in London* (1938).

London was undoubtedly one of Brandt’s favourite subjects and the photographs here, taken around 1943, are amongst a much larger body of work Brandt shot in the capital city before and during the war years. This includes those he produced to illustrate ‘Enough of All This!’: “an impassioned polemic against the evils of poor housing and poverty in London” published in *Picture Post* in April 1937.

Away from the capital, in 1937 the BVT were initiating their own programme of research into matters affecting housing and the re-planning in Birmingham. By 1939 this work was complete and the Trust began producing a ‘well illustrated and attractively drawn up book’, to disseminate their findings. The outbreak of the Second World War served to halt existing building programmes and remind planners and politicians of their earlier failures to build ‘Homes Fit For Heroes’. It also delayed the publication of the BVT’s book until 1941 with the consequence that its original local remit was now situated within the wider context of post-war reconstruction: a point emphasised by its title, *When We Build Again*. Further evidence of this recontextualisation is provided by the film of the same title (also shown in the exhibition) completed in 1943 which included a commentary in part written and performed by Dylan Thomas.

There is good evidence to suggest that Bill Brandt provided some of the photographs illustrating *When We Build Again*. Research also suggests that this may have been part of a larger commission by the BVT and Cadbury Brothers to produce a series of photographs addressing housing and post war reconstruction. For example, there is a series of images in two subsequent publications produced under their auspices: *Our Birmingham* (1943), which presented facts about housing and social issues to pupils in local schools, and *Changing Britain, Illustrating the Industrial Revolution: 1750-19*, which reveal distinct thematic and compositional similarities to those used in *When We Build Again* and the BVT album. Furthermore, Brandt is amongst the photographers officially credited in this latter publication.

It therefore appears that the photographs shown here, whilst having been created as part of that wider commission, were not used, were edited out, or were perhaps intended for another publication that did not see the light of day.

Peter James  
Curator + Head of Photographs at Birmingham Central Library



BILL BRANDT  
ON ASSIGNMENT

The Photographer's Tale

By Richard Sadler

The key to Brandt's approach with the camera is unveiled in his *Camera in London* (1948) where he explains that to be of any substance such imagery has to be drawn from inside of you, from your own experience of moments of sadness, desperation as well as elation. Brandt expanded his thoughts on these subjects during our conversations in the mid 1970s. I began to understand much more about what he said and wrote when, in 1994, I began making a series of prints from his negatives for the exhibition at Birmingham Central Library. Commissioned work with defined parameters can only be effective if it is true to the photographer and his experience of that moment. And for me this is the stuff of art and contemporary photography irrespective of the method of production and practice.

What was Brandt's philosophy and how did he pursue this through his work? Brandt was loath to commit himself to a formula saying that 'a dangerous facility with words can cover up a problem by over-simplifying it' – a situation with which many photographers would sympathise. It appears that

irrespective of the subject matter that Brandt had seen or sensed – he did not always know which – ‘an atmosphere’ was inherent to his subject. He then tried to convey that atmosphere by intensifying the elements that composed it. He records ‘I lay emphasis on one aspect of my subject and I find I can thus more effectively arrest the spectator’s attention and induce in him an emotional response’.

Brandt was very conscious of the atmosphere created within an environment. He appeared particularly sensitive when entering a room for the first time. It was an experience he believed we have all shared at one time or another and he used this to describe the notion of what he defined as ‘atmosphere’. In recalling this he says we can all come to a heightened awareness of a subject and lay ourselves open to a similar feeling. For Brandt, this is a feeling that can be both disturbing and reassuring.

Composition is important to Brandt but not something that he believed can be learned. As it is an important factor in his work he worried that it could become an obsession or a formula and so destroy not only the elusive ‘atmosphere’ but also the ‘sense of wonder’ that he felt and believed was essential when engaged in photographic practices. In achieving the latter he believed that another element was that of an unprejudiced eye. Such instinctive working methodology also drew heavily on past associations and influences either consciously or subconsciously.

Brandt always did his own printing. He varied his methods to suit his images and to overcome problems inherent in the sensitive materials available at that time. Management of, and the ability to deal with, contrasty subjects was an “art” in itself. Photographic papers were not those with variable contrast that photographers today enjoy; contrast grades were limited and the “normal” grade made by one manufacturer was different in its tonal range from that of another. Of cameras he stated in *Camera in*

London that "a perfect all round camera has yet to be made". He used the Automatic Rolleiflex favoured by many other professionals at that time. Indeed he also gives the technical data in that book for all the images reproduced. From this one can see that he liked to use roll film, with its advantages over 35mm film of a larger image size and the resulting need for less enlargement to produce an image on 10" x 8" paper, the size demanded by most publications at that time. The Rolleiflex and the other cameras he used employed a 'reflex' method of viewing the subject at the full size and format of his negative, thus aiding composition. Brandt experimented with cameras which could give him different angles of view of the subject, but again like all the professionals of the day he was unimpressed by their unreliability at that format size and the poor definition of the 'wide angle and telephoto lenses' available for them. The Rolleiflex, with its precision construction, shutter, optics and its slightly wide-angle lens became his favoured instrument until the 1960s. However, from the 1930s until the 1950s the Rolleiflex was not synchronised for flash bulbs. He therefore purchased a hand-held Sashalite Pistol Grip Reflector that enabled him to both direct the light from such a bulb as well as fire it. For Brandt the qualities and direction of light were key elements he used to induce in the viewer an emotional response – that elusive sensation of "atmosphere" which he felt when entering a room and the sense of wonder he believed was essential to making a good picture. These were the tools and methods Brandt bought to making the images in the Bournville album. These, coupled with an instinctive working methodology, which, by its very nature drew on past influences and association, either consciously or subconsciously, was at the heart of his approach to delivering this assignment, and exploring the personal picture making opportunities it provided.

Looking specifically at the Birmingham photographs the detail explains more of Brandt's working methodology. In a view of the London kitchen (3.F.L.S.13) we

note the position of the light is indicated in the top left hand corner by a glimpse of a white lampshade. Compare this with the photograph of a woman in this kitchen in front of the gas-stove (3.F.L.S.6) we see this is not provided by the lighting in the previous image. It is obvious that a light has been directed towards a cooker. Also there is an increased amount of laundry drying above the cooker and there has been rearrangement of the objects on the mantelpiece and range in the time that has elapsed between the two photographs as indicated by the clock.

A further look into image 3.F.L.S.6. shows the range that in the previous image (3.F.L.S.13) was covered by a newspaper, but now has an additional piece of newspaper on which lies an ES fitting light bulb. Domestic light bulbs of the time were bayonet fitting only and from earlier comment we know that Brandt used a Kodaflex lighting unit using ES bulbs. Brandt has previously remarked that attached to this unit was 'enough flex to stretch the full length of Winchester Cathedral'. In viewing the photograph of the ideal kitchen (3.F.W.1) and another of a couple reading at leisure (3.F.W.10) we become aware that both images have been lit to help enhance the detail in the shadows. It would have been difficult to adequately record without additional lighting due to the inherent contrast range of films available at the time.

In another photograph of a family sitting at a table (3.F.S.6) we see again how Brandt has lit this situation with a light to the left-hand side of the picture, in order to light the child held by a male member of the family. When compared to the close-up of child and man (3.F.S.7) we realise objects on the table have been rearranged. This demonstrates another device that Brandt uses to define the concept behind the assignment or his notion of 'atmosphere'. He is reputed to have stated that he did not use conventional or compositional methods in arranging or framing his subjects. In fact he abhorred them.

The rearrangements of objects on the table are a compositional device that coupled with the lighting does induce in the viewer that emotional response to the selected subject. The image (3.F.S.7) encapsulates the 'atmosphere' of the situation in that room – of which Brandt was fully aware and which he wishes us to examine and share in the light of our personal experiences.

A further example arises in comparing images 3.F.W.11 and 3.F.W.12. In image 3.F.W.11 a family is enjoying their garden, the therapeutic fresh air, sunshine and relaxation essential to good health, key factors of which Brandt is aware. The window in the centre is open, as are the other windows of the house. Here the child is standing between the seated parents. Note the height of the child and the distance from the ground to the window ledge. Compare this with image 3.F.W.12 with the child outside leaning on the windowsill and looking into the room and it is evident the child has grown remarkably. All devices were legitimate to this consummate professional who had a sense of humour, albeit ironic and surreal.

What is apparent with this body of work is that Brandt constructed his images bearing in mind the nature of the assignment. There were key photographs (3.F.S.7 and 3.F.W.12) where Brandt is the artist, in that they address his personal aesthetic he called 'atmosphere'.

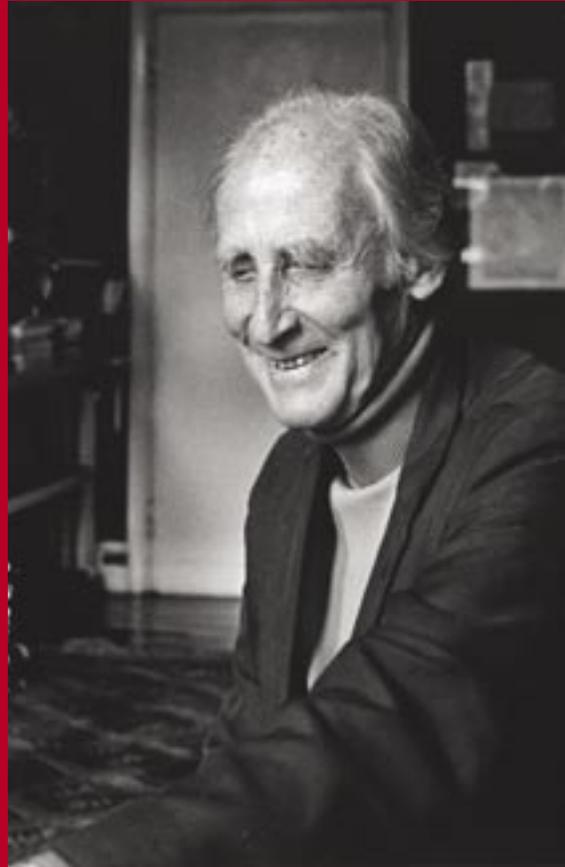
Richard Sadler  
Curator + Photographer  
Photographic Researcher, Writer & Educational Consultant



Bill Brandt (1904-1983)  
Photographer

Bill Brandt remains one of the pre-eminent photographers of the 20th Century. His career as a photographer began in Vienna in 1928, before he moved to Paris where he assisted Man Ray. After working freelance for `Paris Magazine` in 1930, Brandt settled in England where he photographed for magazines such as `Lilliput, Picture Post`, `Harper's Bazaar` and `News Chronicle` for which he documented the conditions of England in the depths of the Depression. He photographed English middle- and upper-class life both before and during World War II, `publishing The English at Home` (1936), `A Night in London` (1938), and `The Camera in London` (1948).

Working as a photojournalist on assignment, his photography was a singular and idiosyncratic mixture of straight reportage with a consistent, if subtle, streak of strangeness - the legacy of surrealism. Brandt lost interest in reportage toward the end of the war and began experimenting



Bill Brandt  
photographed by Richard Sadler

Richard Sadler

Curator + Photographer, Photographic Researcher, Writer & Educational Consultant

The conversation is based on quotes from an interview with John Blakemore and Richard Sadler.

In 1960 John Blakemore visited the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry to see the production of "Never Had It So Good", a play by John Wiles specially commissioned by the theatre, for the City of Coventry. In the foyer of the theatre was an exhibition of photography that critiqued the famous or not so famous aphorism that gave the play its title. Inspired by this John sought to meet the exhibition's curator & photographer, Richard Sadler.

Richard Sadler trained in photography at the studios of Edward Eves in Leamington Spa in 1948 before working extensively within the textile and aircraft industries, where he held major photographic positions. He ran his own studio working on commercial assignments. Richard also worked at Courtaulds, Coventry before starting his own business.

In the late 1960s Richard worked at the Coventry College of Art teaching photography, later moving to Derbyshire College of Art & Design, which became part of the University of Derby, where he was Head of Photographic Studies.

Richards' practice has been described as embracing two major strands, a commercial practice involving the production of commissioned work, and a more intimate personal practice. The creation of images through the medium of photography continues to inform Richard's current practice.

Peter James

Curator + Head of Photographs at Birmingham Central Library

Peter James is Head of Photographs at Birmingham Central Library in which capacity he is responsible for one of the national collections of photography. He is a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society and, until last year, was Chairman of the National Committee of Photographic Collections.

He has curated exhibitions of historical and contemporary photography at the V&A, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham Library, The Royal Photographic Society, The Royal Palace, Milan and Museum Africa, Johannesburg amongst others. He has written widely on historical and contemporary photography in Birmingham and is published internationally.

He is the author of books including *Coming to Light: Birmingham's Photography Collections (1998)*; *World City: Birmingham and its People Portrayed (2003)*, and *Homes Fit for Heroes: Photographs by Bill Brandt (2004)*. He has also contributed essays to books including *Making Connections: Birmingham Black International History (2002)*, *Time & Motion: Photographs by Edward Muybridge, Harold Edgerton and Jonathan Shaw (2003)*, *Bullring: the Heart of Birmingham and Remaking Birmingham: Regeneration & Visual Culture (2004)*.

When We Build Again  
Film, 23 Minutes  
Bournville Village Trust  
1943

In an article written in 1941, Paul Rotha hailed film “with its many unique devices of animated models, diagrams, and map work, with its power for argument and discussion in the sound track, with its simple yet persuasive powers of explanations” as a “medium unequalled for spreading information by a multiplicity of showing”.

Perhaps prompted by this idea, the Bournville Village Trust set about making a film version of their book, *When We Build Again*. The finished film – which included a commentary in part written and performed by Dylan Thomas, who had been photographed by Brandt around 1941-45 – was hailed as “the first made in Britain to present some of the basic issues of town planning to the public”. Copies of the film were made available to the Ministry of Information for group showings up and down the country.

The film included sequences exploring a model town that had been specially designed for the purpose by Mr Thomas Sharp. This model formed the centrepiece of a touring exhibition “designed to interest the layman” produced by the BVT and Town and Country Planning Association in 1943. In April that year *Picture Post* published an article by the Archbishop of York in which he argued for the church’s vital role in the political, social and economic issues of planning a post-war reconstruction. This was illustrated with a photograph by Bill Brandt showing the Archbishop studying the model.



The Bournville  
Village Trust Album

This list follows the original  
page sequence of the file

3.F.W.1-16: Municipal Estate, Kingstanding,  
Birmingham, 1939.

The Kingstanding Estate lies five miles to the North of Birmingham. Its modern houses were sited along broad, grass - verged roads and were supplied with hot and cold running water, modern cooking facilities, bathrooms, a well-lit parlour and living rooms fitted with cupboards. Ample gardens and nearby recreation facilities offered play areas for children, as did the countryside beyond.



3.F.W.1.



3.F.W.6.



3.F.W.7.



3.F.W.3.



3.F.W.10.



3.F.W.12.



3.F.W.8.



3.F.W.9.



3.F.W.11.



3.F.W.10.



3.F.W.16.



3.F.W.14.



3.F.W.2.



3.F.W.11.



3.F.W.15.



3.F.W.9.

3.F.B.1-14: Back-to-Back Slum house, St. George's Terrace, Brearly Street, Hockley, Birmingham, and Shenely Fields Estate, Weoley Castle, Birmingham, 1939.

In 1941 there were over 38,000 back-to-back houses in Birmingham, housing between 100,000 and 150,000 people. Most of these properties were built in the early nineteenth century by speculative builders who crowded as many houses as possible onto the sites available. The modern "artisan's homes" on the Weoley Castle Estate were built between 1931 and 1934. The houses show superior planning and architectural treatment to those of the early speculative builders. They frequently contained rooms fitted with cupboards, fireplaces, electric lighting, hot water, gas heating, gardens and play areas for children nearby.



S.F.B. 12



S.F.B. 17



S.F.B. 13



S.F.B. 14



S.F.B. 16



S.F.B. 15



S.F.B. 18



S.F.B. 19



S.F.B. 1



S.F.B. 4



S.F.B. 2



S.F.B. 11



S.F.B. 7



S.F.B. 5



S.F.B. 3



S.F.B. 8



S.F.B. 6

3.F.S.1-14: Back-to Back Slum House, near Watery Lane, Small Heath, Birmingham, April 1939.

Situated near the Birmingham City Football ground, this back to-back usually contained three rooms; a kitchen-living room with a bedroom above, and over that an attic. The houses were built in a double row under a single roof, one row facing the street, the other facing a paved courtyard. Almost every house was therefore surrounded on three sides by similar dwellings preventing through ventilation or adequate daylight illumination. As early as 1840, a Select Committee had condemned back-to backs as unsuitable for people to live in. The calendar in the photographs of the kitchen gives the date of these images as being April 1943.



3.F.2.1.



3.F.2.7.



3.F.2.2



3.F.2.8



3.F.2.5.



3.F.2.4



3.F.2.6



3.F.2.3.



3.F.2.9.

### B.S.1-12: Back-to-back and Tunnel-Back Slum properties, Hockley, Birmingham, 1943.

These include views into the courtyards of back-to-back and tunnel-back houses in the inner-city, probably in Hockley. These paved courtyards served as a drying area for washing and as a playground for children. A few water closets for the common use of tenants were grouped in the courtyard alongside the "brewhouses", or wash houses, which tenants used one day a week for washing. Entrance to the houses in the courtyards was through a narrow passage tunnelled through the block of houses fronting on to the street which also served as a playground for children. The Street signs locate two of the images as being Great King Street and Great Hamilton Row, in Hockley. These streets were located close to factories such as that owned by Lucas, and the areas were therefore prime targets for German bombers during the war.



B. S. 6.



B. S. 5.



B. S. 9.



B. S. 11.



B. S. 14.



B. S. 13.



B. S. 2.



B. S. 7.



B. S. 8.



B. S. 10.



B. S. 12.



B. S. 1.

3.F.L.S1-14: Slum Housing, near the Malden Road, London, 1943.

These old residential properties were located near the Malden Road, London, NW5, not a great distance from Brandt's home in Camden Hill. The newspaper headline, 'Wedge Made near Catania' relates to a Second World War campaign in Italy fought around July 1943.





3-PL-5-F



3-PL-5-G



3-PL-5-H



3-PL-5-I



3-PL-5-J



3-PL-5-K



3-PL-5-L



3-PL-5-M



3-PL-5-N



3-PL-5-O



3-PL-5-P

'A fascinating collection  
of recently discovered work.'

Text by  
Richard Sadler + Peter James

HOMES FIT FOR HEROES  
Photographs by Bill Brandt  
1939-1943

Hardback available to purchase  
ISBN 1-904587-07-0

Despite Bill Brandt's fame and considerable influence on the development of modern photography, the photographs in this book are a little known body of work.

The work was carried out between 1939 and 1943 when Brandt worked on a commercial assignment for the Bournville Village Trust. The prints and negatives have been with BVT for some 60 years and the work has never been previously published.

The photographs illustrate the living conditions in a range of housing types, for example, the back-to-back slums built in the nineteenth century through to modern municipal housing built in the 1930s. The majority of the photographs were taken in Birmingham but also some in London where he looked at 'old residential' properties near to his own home in Camden Hill. London was undoubtedly one of Brandt's favourite subjects and these photographs, taken around 1943, are amongst a much larger body of work Brandt shot in the capital city during the war years.

The Bournville Village Trust was set up by George Cadbury in 1900 to manage the Bournville Estate, the model housing development which he created near his factory on the outskirts of Birmingham. The objects of the trust included: "the amelioration of the conditions of the working class population of Birmingham and elsewhere in Great Britain". Many books and articles published around this time sought to address the issue of the living conditions of the working classes and photography played a key role.

The images form distinct picture stories where direct contrasts are made between slum and municipal housing. Brandt also uses light very carefully within these images to emphasise these contrasts. A number of the stories follow a distinct narrative sequence – through the idea of 'a day in the life' – a device frequently used in the influential magazine, *Picture Post*, for which Brandt often worked.

For further information on book contact Dewi Lewis on +44 161 442 9450





### Photographs copyright

Bournville Village Trust Archive,  
Birmingham Central Library

Richard Sadler: portrait of Bill Brandt

### Text copyright

Peter James + Richard Sadler  
Professor Stuart Bartholomew

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# text + work

HOMES FIT FOR HEROES

Photographs by Bill Brandt 1939 – 1943

12 September – 7 October 2005

Curated by Peter James & Richard Sadler in association with Birmingham Libraries

## Event

Tuesday 4th October 2005

Curators Talk: Main Lecture Theatre, 5.00pm – 6.00pm

Followed by a Drinks Reception: The Gallery, 6.00pm – 7.00pm

for further information on the exhibition and event contact:

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## HOMES FIT FOR HEROES

Photographs by Bill Brandt 1939 – 1943

12 September – 7 October 2005

Curated by Peter James & Richard Sadler  
in association with Birmingham Libraries

The Gallery, The Arts Institute at Bournemouth

### Opening Hours

9.00am – 8.00pm      Monday – Thursday (Term Time)

9.00am – 6.00pm      Monday – Thursday (Summer Time)

9.00am – 4.00pm      Friday

9.00am – 1.00pm      Saturday (Term Time)

Closed Bank Holidays

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