

Discover Birmingham: Your Conference Guide

We hope that your visit to the EPTA International Conference will also give you an opportunity to discover Birmingham and the surrounding area.

Birmingham is England's second-largest city and has a fascinating history of innovation, industry, culture and, particularly appropriately for EPTA delegates, music. Whether you have an hour or two between conference sessions, a free evening, or would like to extend your stay, there is plenty to explore.

Birmingham Town Hall – A Remarkable Musical History

One of the most important places for music lovers to visit is Birmingham Town Hall. Opened in 1834, this magnificent Grade I listed building became the home of the celebrated Birmingham Triennial Musical Festival, which attracted some of the greatest composers and performers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Its musical history is extraordinary:

- Felix Mendelssohn conducted and performed at the Birmingham Festival. His oratorio *Elijah* was commissioned for the Festival and received its premiere in Birmingham in 1846.
- Antonín Dvořák visited Birmingham, and his *Requiem* was commissioned by the Festival and premiered there in 1891.
- Edward Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* was commissioned for the Birmingham Festival and received its first performance at Birmingham Town Hall in 1900.
- Elgar's *The Apostles* was also premiered at the Festival in 1903.
- Other composers whose music featured in Birmingham's great festivals included Grieg, Gounod, Sibelius and Delius.

For musicians visiting Birmingham, the Town Hall is therefore much more than an impressive Victorian building – it is part of European musical history.

St Philip's Cathedral

St Philip's Cathedral, also known as Birmingham Cathedral, is the oldest building in the city centre still used for its original purpose.

The building features four spectacular stained-glass windows designed by the famous Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones. Following a extensive conservation project in 2023, these historic masterpieces have been fully restored to their original brilliance.

Admission is entirely free, and everyone is welcome to attend services, light a candle, or explore the historic architecture. The Cathedral also hosts a vibrant schedule of community events, musical concerts, and guided tours throughout the year.

Symphony Hall

Just a short walk away is Symphony Hall, one of the UK's leading concert halls and home to the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO).

Delegates may wish to check the concert programme before travelling to Birmingham – an evening performance here would make an excellent addition to a conference visit.

Birmingham's Famous Organ

The organ at Birmingham Town Hall is itself historically significant. The original instrument dates from the opening of the Town Hall in 1834 and was, at the time, one of the largest and most technologically advanced organs in the world.

Mendelssohn was among the distinguished musicians who played the Town Hall organ.

From Classical Music to Heavy Metal

Birmingham's contribution to music did not end with its great nineteenth-century festivals. The city is widely regarded as the birthplace of heavy metal, most famously through Black Sabbath, formed in Birmingham in 1968.

Visitors interested in Birmingham's more recent musical heritage can look out for the Black Sabbath Bench and Bridge on Broad Street.

Birmingham and the wider West Midlands have also produced an extraordinary range of internationally successful artists and bands, including UB40, Duran Duran, Electric Light Orchestra, The Move, The Moody Blues, Joan Armatrading and Steve Winwood.

It is an unusually diverse musical heritage – from Mendelssohn and Elgar to Black Sabbath and Duran Duran.

Exploring Birmingham

Library of Birmingham

One of Birmingham's most distinctive modern buildings and well worth visiting. Head up to the terraces for excellent views across the city.

The Library also contains the beautiful Shakespeare Memorial Room, originally created in the nineteenth century.

Allow: around 45–90 minutes

Good for: a short break between conference activities

Aston Hall

One of Birmingham's most impressive historic buildings, Aston Hall is a magnificent seventeenth-century Jacobean mansion surrounded by historic gardens and parkland. Built between 1618 and 1635, it offers a fascinating glimpse into Birmingham's early history and the lives of the people who lived there.

Allow: around 1–2 hours

Travel: around 10 minutes by car from the city centre

Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery

Located in the heart of the city, the museum is particularly known for its outstanding collection of Pre-Raphaelite art, as well as collections relating to Birmingham's history.

Allow: 1–2 hours

The Jewellery Quarter

Birmingham's historic Jewellery Quarter has been at the centre of Britain's jewellery trade for more than 200 years.

Today it combines historic workshops and architecture with independent shops, cafés, restaurants and bars.

It is an excellent area simply to wander around and is particularly good for anyone looking for an unusual souvenir of Birmingham.

Allow: 1–3 hours

The Coffin Works

One of Birmingham's more unusual museums, the preserved Newman Brothers factory tells the story of the city's manufacturing history. The company produced coffin furniture and fittings used in some very distinguished funerals.

It provides a fascinating glimpse into the workshops and working life of industrial Birmingham.

Allow: around 1–1½ hours

Birmingham Back to Backs

These carefully preserved National Trust houses provide an atmospheric insight into the lives of ordinary Birmingham families from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Tours are normally guided and advance booking is advisable.

Allow: around 1½ hours

Ikon Gallery

Located at Brindleyplace, Ikon is Birmingham's leading contemporary art gallery and is housed in a beautiful former Victorian school building.

Allow: around one hour

Birmingham's Canals and Brindleyplace

Birmingham's canals are an important reminder of its industrial past, but today the canals around Brindleyplace and Gas Street Basin are lined with restaurants, cafés and bars.

A walk along the canal is an easy and enjoyable way to see another side of the city. Visitors can also take a canal boat tour, offering a relaxed way to explore Birmingham's waterways and learn more about the city's industrial heritage.

Perfect for: an early-evening stroll, canal boat trip or dinner after the conference.

A Little Further Afield

Lichfield – Samuel Johnson and the English Dictionary

The beautiful cathedral city of Lichfield is around 35 minutes from Birmingham by train and makes an excellent half-day or full-day excursion.

Lichfield is the birthplace of Dr Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), one of the most important figures in the history of the English language.

Johnson is best known for his monumental *A Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1755. Although it was not the first English dictionary, it became the most influential dictionary of its time and remained the standard reference work for more than a century.

Samuel Johnson Birthplace Museum

Johnson was born in a house in Breadmarket Street in 1709 and spent the first 27 years of his life there. The house is now the Samuel Johnson Birthplace Museum, where visitors can explore five floors devoted to his life, writing and famous dictionary.

Lichfield Cathedral

Lichfield is also home to the magnificent Lichfield Cathedral, famous for its three medieval spires and more than 1,300 years of history.

Erasmus Darwin House

Another of Lichfield's famous residents was Erasmus Darwin – physician, scientist, inventor, poet and grandfather of Charles Darwin. His former home is now a museum.

Allow: Half a day or a full day

Travel: Around 35 minutes by train from Birmingham

Warwick Castle

Around 30 minutes from Birmingham by train, Warwick Castle is one of England's most impressive medieval castles. Visitors can explore the castle, grounds and gardens while discovering more about its long history.

Allow: Half a day or a full day

Travel: Around 30 minutes by train from Birmingham

Coventry Cathedral

Around 30 minutes from Birmingham by train, Coventry is home to the striking ruins of the medieval cathedral alongside Sir Basil Spence's modern cathedral, built following its destruction during the Second World War. Music lovers may be particularly interested to know that Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* received its first performance in Coventry Cathedral in 1962.

Allow: Half a day

Travel: Around 30 minutes by train from Birmingham

Oxford

Around an hour from Birmingham by train, Oxford makes an excellent day trip for visitors with additional time. The historic university city is renowned for its beautiful architecture, colleges, libraries and literary associations.

Allow: Full day

Travel: Around 1 hour by train from Birmingham

Elgar's Birthplace

Around an hour from Birmingham by car, the birthplace of composer Edward Elgar offers an opportunity to discover more about one of Britain's most celebrated composers. The cottage where Elgar was born is now a museum exploring his life, music and connection with the Worcestershire countryside.

Allow: Half a day

Travel: Around 1 hour by car from Birmingham

Ironbridge Gorge

Around 45 minutes from Birmingham by car, Ironbridge Gorge is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is widely regarded as the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution. The area is home to museums, historic buildings and the famous Iron Bridge itself.

Allow: Half a day or a full day

Travel: Around 45 minutes by car from Birmingham

Cadbury World and Bournville

Chocolate lovers may enjoy a trip to Cadbury World. It is also worth exploring Bournville, the attractive village developed by the Cadbury family for their workers. Its history provides an interesting insight into Victorian and Edwardian ideas about industry, community and workers' welfare.

Black Country Living Museum

For delegates extending their stay, the Black Country Living Museum in Dudley makes an excellent half- or full-day excursion.

This large open-air museum recreates life in the industrial Black Country through historic houses, shops, workshops, transport and costumed interpreters.

It is also particularly familiar to viewers of *Peaky Blinders*, scenes from which have been filmed there.

Allow: at least half a day.

For Literature Lovers

Shakespeare's Stratford-upon-Avon

International visitors who have some additional time may wish to make the journey to Stratford-upon-Avon, birthplace of William Shakespeare.

Visitors can explore Shakespeare's Birthplace, Anne Hathaway's Cottage, Holy Trinity Church – where Shakespeare is buried – and, depending on the programme, attend a Royal Shakespeare Company performance.

It makes an excellent day trip from Birmingham.

Tolkien and Birmingham

J.R.R. Tolkien spent part of his childhood in Birmingham and several places around the city have associations with his early life.

Visitors interested in Tolkien may particularly enjoy Sarehole Mill and the surrounding area. The landscapes of Tolkien's childhood are often discussed in connection with the environments that later appeared in his writing.

The Cotswolds

For those with a little more time, the picturesque villages and countryside of the Cotswolds are roughly an hour's drive from Birmingham. With their honey-coloured stone cottages, historic villages and beautiful countryside, the Cotswolds offer a very different experience from Birmingham's industrial and urban landscape.

Allow: Half a day or a full day

Travel: Around 1 hour by car

Planning Your Visit

Opening times, exhibitions and performance programmes will change before August 2027, so we recommend checking individual venues when planning your visit.

Or why not combine your conference visit with a trip to explore more of the UK?

- Visit London and, if your visit coincides with the season, attend a BBC Proms concert at the Royal Albert Hall.
- Experience the Edinburgh International Festival, held each August.
- Explore the historic cities of Bath, Cambridge and Durham.
- Discover the beautiful national parks of Wales, Derbyshire, the Lake District and the Scottish Highlands.
- Enjoy the UK's beautiful coastline and beaches.