



THE MEDIEVAL COMMUNITY

One of the most important Jewish communities in medieval England, it's thought that Jews may have arrived in Oxfordshire as early as 1080, when a man called Manassess is mentioned in the Domesday Book as living in the village of Bletchingdon. In Oxford itself, there was certainly an established community by 1141, when records show that King Stephen and Queen Matilda tried to extort money from the town's Jewish residents and Aaron ben Isaac had his house burnt down for refusing to pay.

Based in the heart of the town's commercial centre, the community numbered between 80 and 100 – and possibly 200 at its height – a significant proportion of Oxford's total population in the late 13th century of 5,500. Most lived south of Carfax in St Aldate's and, such was their presence, the street became known as Great Jewry Street. They also lived in some of the adjoining streets and there is thought to have been a 'parvus Judaismus' (a poor jury) on the former Jury Lane, south of present day Blue Boar Street.

The town had at least one recorded synagogue, provided by Copin of Worcester in 1228, and sited around the present north-west tower of Tom Quad at Christ Church. And it's likely that there were other private synagogues, if the pattern of other major communities was followed. There was also, almost certainly, a Talmudic academy, probably located in Jacob of Oxford's House, now 121 St Aldate's.

They were also one of the first communities outside London to have a cemetery. The first was founded circa 1190 on what is now the site of the medieval portion of Magdalen College. When this was confiscated in 1231, they were moved across the road to a new plot at the site of what is, now the Rose Garden of the Botanic Gardens. The community would also have had a *mikveh* (ritual bath), and there is slight historical evidence for one of these, in or around Jacob of Oxford's house. Furthermore in 1987, a stone culvert was dug up on the cemetery site and this may have been a mikveh for bathing the dead.

The community practiced the usual professions of small trading, medicine, pawn-brokerage, trading in jewels and precious metals, and of course, money lending. As the University arose around them, they became particularly involved in providing vital finance for the poor clerics who populated the colleges, also providing their housing. Indeed, up to 10 percent of all student accommodation in this time was let by Jewish landlords.

SCHOLARS AND ACADEMICS

Jews themselves though were not eligible to attend the university. However, they were evidently very active in Jewish study and scholarship. David of Oxford possessed an important private library thought to comprise some 49 books or more, in an era when a well-produced book might cost the equivalent of £20,000 in modern money.

Some of the scholars attained not only national but international repute. The rabbinic dynasty of Moses of Oxford spanned four generations and were known for their expert opinions on Jewish law, their commentaries on the Talmud and the vocalisation of the Hebrew Bible. (See special feature on the dynasty of Moses of Oxford). Other Jewish writers associated with the town included Berechiah ben Natronai haNakdan, also known as Benedict le pintur of Oxford, who, amongst his other works, designed the famous Fox Fables (*Mishle Shualim*), before 1186.

In the Christian university, academics such as Roger Bacon and Bishop Grosseteste of Lincoln, who was Chancellor of the University in 1224,, encouraged the study of both Hebrew and Arabic, and there can be little doubt that Christian scholars consulted the local Jewish rabbis and scholars. Indeed, a letter in Corpus Christie College library (in M.S. Corpus Christi College 10) from Bishop Grosseteste recommends the production of Latin Bibles, with the Hebrew translation, to help Christian scholars learn Hebrew. The production of these bilingual texts would have required the collaboration of Jewish scholars, although whether observant or convert Jews, or both, were employed to do this, is an open question.

A psalter (CCC 10) and a portion of the Rashi commentary on the Bible (CCC 6) in the Corpus Christi collection are thought to have been written in Oxford in the 13th century by Christian and Jewish scholars. Such manuscripts are clear evidence of the interchange between the two religions and cultures in the medieval town.

ANTI-SEMITISM AND EXPULSION

While relations between the Jews and Christians of 13th century Oxford tended to be positive, there were sporadic outbreaks of anti-semitism. The student rent riot of 1244 was a notable episode, when students protesting about Jewish rents, attacked and sacked Jewish homes. The Church also feared the potentially heretical influence that Judaism might have on Christians. In 1222, when Robert of Reading converted to Judaism – and even worse – took a Jewish wife, he was burnt before the gates of Osney Abbey for his pains. It is also reported that other Jews were burnt at the castle in 1222 for their alleged heresy.

Such attacks generally occurred in Oxford, as elsewhere, at the time of major Christian festivals - particularly the Easter period. The most notable of these was the Ascension Day riot of 1268, in which it was alleged that a Jew had attacked a religious procession and trampled the Crucifix to the ground. The whole community was temporarily imprisoned, and the king punished them by forcing them to pay for a marble and gold crucifix that was set up in Merton College.

As Jews gradually left the town, both Merton College and Balliol Colleges bought up and speculated in Jewish properties – this was to play a significant role in their early development. By the time of their expulsion in 1290, only 10 Jewish-owned properties remained. These were confiscated and passed onto Balliol College.

The former synagogue (a core block of seven Jewish properties) was turned into Burnel's Inn, and this together with the rentals from the rest of the Jewish holdings (a further two or so properties), provided the college with an important annual income until Cardinal Wolsey demolished them in 1525 to build Cardinal College.

Although there's little evidence of any Jewish presence after the expulsion until the 17th century, it is thought that by some that there was a House of Converts on the site of the modern town hall. One authority on Hebrew manuscripts has claimed that the Corpus Christi Manuscripts may in fact be 14th century, meaning that they might have been produced by converted Oxford Jews after the expulsion. Furthermore, a 14th century astrolabe has been identified as having been made in Oxford and having a Jewish owner. The astrolabe includes the name of the local saint, St Frideswide, demonstrating its Oxford provenance and has Hebrew inscriptions as well as the Hebrew name of its owner.

RETURN TO OXFORD

There's certainly evidence that Jews had returned to Oxford by the mid 17th century. Most assisted with the cataloguing of Hebrew manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, or taught Hebrew privately to University students. Indeed, the founder of the Bodleian, Sir Thomas Bodley implored his librarian, 'to gette the helpe of the Jewe', so as to produce correct Hebrew title entries for the library's first printed catalogue.

The first Hebrew Manuscript catalogues were drawn up by a 'Jacob of Merton College'. This may well have been Jacob Wolfgang, who converted in order to become a member of the University in 1608. He is almost certainly the first Jew known to be a member of Oxford University. But for all his pains, he was sneered at by his collegians for having little ability in Latin, Divinity, or Humanity.

The Jewish drift back to Oxford also included tradesmen. And one of these was to change student life forever, providing that crucial boost for undergraduates 'pulling all-nighters' when faced with an essay crisis. Jacob (probably identifiable as Cirqes Jobson, a Levantine Jew) introduced coffee and coffee shops to the city, and indeed, it is thought, to the country as a whole.

By the 1730s, a small Jewish community had established itself in St Clement's village, close to the East Gate of the city. Outside the religious and civic jurisdiction of the all-powerful university, it was an ideal location. Counting itinerant pedlars, grocers, and traders in its ranks, the community's interests were largely business not academia. And in the tolerant spirit of the age, they became social and economically integrated into society, suffering little in the way of anti-semitism.

ADMITTANCE TO THE UNIVERSITY

The community remained very small up to the 19th century, due to the continuing stifling presence of the religiously orthodox university. However, the advent of intellectual and religious liberalism in Oxford, as well as moves to provide political freedom for Jews nationally, swept away the bar to unconverted Jews attending the University.

In 1856, Jewish undergraduates were permitted, and in 1871 college fellowships were opened to all, whereas they had previously been open only to ordained clerics. It was, though, some decades before Jews took full possession of the freedoms they had been offered with very few Jewish undergraduates before the end of the 19th century.

There were, however, some early lecturers who held readerships. The first two were Adolph Neubauer, appointed in 1884 as reader in Rabbinical Literature (Exeter College) and David Samuel Margoliouth, who was appointed to a Readership at New College in 1889, where he resided and taught Arabic. Not unexpectedly the earliest Jewish presence was mainly within the Oriental Faculty. (Sir Isaiah Berlin became only the fourth Jewish academic fellow in Oxford, when he got his fellowship in All Souls College in 1932 – a fact of which he was very proud.

COMMUNAL LIFE IN THE 19TH CENTURY

The Oxford Jewish Congregation traces its foundation back to 1842 but during the Victoria era, communal life was poorly organised with sporadic services held in private rooms.

The first 'synagogue' of the modern era was on the north side of Paradise Square established circa 1849. This was followed, after a gap of 18 years, by one at St Aldates from about 1870 and, latterly, by one at George Street from 1878. The George Street Synagogue was regarded as more suitable than the previous establishments, but it was in a backyard over stables on what is now thought to be the site of the Old Fire Station and its approach and surrounds were regarded as most unsavoury.

Things improved with the acquisition of a better facility at Worcester Place in 1884. The new synagogue was probably in an upper room on the west side of Worcester Place near to Richmond Road. The increasing numbers of Jewish undergraduates (and the wish to encourage their religious observance) seemed to provide some impetus for the provision of better facilities, as well as a desire to show the Jewish faith in more favourable surroundings.

The congregation finally attained its goal of a permanent synagogue building in 1892 - a mission hall that had been built on the site of the present synagogue on Richmond Road. It was a simple brick building in a mission hall style, complete with Gothic windows and doors and it appears to have been built for use as a lecture room.

Despite the fact that the university had opened its doors to Jews, during the early years of the 20th century, the community itself was tiny having suffered an apparent decline. In 1896, 35 Jews were reported to have been congregants in Oxford. And in 1901, apart from undergraduate students, it's reported there may have been only one resident Jewish family in the town- the Lipsons, who lived next door to the synagogue.

THE INTER-WAR YEARS

The First World War saw a temporary expansion of the community, due to the upheavals of war, but at the end of the war most went back to London, and the synagogue was largely run for, and by, the undergraduates

The focal point of Jewish Oxford, from 1920, and indeed its main continuity, was Herbert Loewe (1882-1940) who lived in Beaumont Street. A lecturer in Oriental Languages at Exeter College, appointed in 1913 and working in Oxford until 1931 until he went onto Cambridge. his grandfather, Louis Loewe (1809-1880), had been Sir Moses Montefiore's 'oriental secretary' and the first Principal of the Judith, Lady Montefiore College at Ramsgate.

Loewe was one of the very few visible Jews teaching in Oxford and, on return from war service in India in 1920, he made his home an open house for undergraduate Jewish students on the Sabbath and festivals. Noted both for his religious observance and tolerance, he conducted services that were accessible, as far as possible, to Orthodox and Progressive Jews. It may be that this practice influenced Oxford Synagogue's later celebrated accommodation of multiple traditions under one roof.

Another significant Jewish member of the University was Cecil Roth (1899-1970) at Merton College. He was appointed as reader in Jewish History in 1938 and he, in many ways, took up the mantle left by Herbert Loewe. While his official area of teaching was Biblical Studies, he was a celebrated and wide-ranging historian of Anglo-Jewish history and Jewish art. His studies in Oxford Jewish history are seminal

Roth and his wife often invited Jewish students to Sabbath tea parties where, in the early days of (misunderstood) freezer technology, left-over sandwiches were apt to be recycled from tea party to tea party, including one apparently with a bite taken out of it, that cropped up on a regular basis!

During the early 1930s Isaiah Berlin estimated that there were probably not more than 70 to 80 Jews in Oxford University, that he knew of, and still a good number were keen not to be identified as Jewish. By this time the university supported both the Adler Society (encouraged by Loewe) and the Zionist Society.

TWENTIETH CENTURY TOWNSFOLK

In the town itself, the Jewish community was small and very much a minority. The late Donald Silk, a well known Alderman and City figure, (whose first marriage was to the Jewish tennis star, Angela Buxton - the first British tennis star to reach the Wimbledon finals in 17 years and also winner of the Wimbledon Doubles Championship with Althea Gibson in 1956), recalled that his Oxford school days were not without their travails.

He recounted how his time at the Oxford Council School was made a misery each Easter by a teacher who would retell the Easter story. At the end of the Passion, her piece de resistance, was to turn to the class and declare, 'and how do we know this is true? Stand up the Jews!' Whereupon Donald and his fellow Jewish student, on rising from their seats, would wish for the floor to open up under their seats and swallow them up from the humiliation of being the proof of the myth of the Wandering Jew.

The efforts Donald's father, Bobby Silk - an East-Enders by origin - to establish the family fortunes give some insights into Jewish life in Oxford in the period as well as the changing patterns of Jewish occupations. A family anecdote from the late 1920s recalls how Bobby would tour the county in a van, peddling goods in different villages.

On one fateful day, he had a collision between Banbury and Oxford, which left the wreckage of his van, shop and business strewn across the road. Bobby, though, was not disheartened. Instead, he raised an impromptu storm sale on the crash site, attracting the local inhabitants who bought all the goods lock, stock and barrel. He was even able to sell the wreckage of the van. A local newspaper was reputed to have run a story about the incident with a photograph of the 'enterprising Jew'.

Having run a confectionary shop at 1 Broad Street, Banbury, in the early 1930s, Bobby then moved to Oxford in 1935 to be closer to London. Initially, he ran a grocer's shop at 101 Cowley Road and subsequently he opened another store next to the Old Swan on Cowley Road, where he sold some kosher goods - apparently the first shop to sell kosher groceries in Oxford in the 20th century. A family story relates that after one war-time Pesach there was a surplus of matzah. Bobby broke it up into pieces and advertised it as a breakfast cereal... 'No Points on Your Coupon - just add milk and sugar!'... which was quickly snapped up by his non-Jewish customers!

In the years that followed, he established Silk Estates, a very well known property business, which he started after selling a property for a relative and realising it was better business than grocery. The company specialised in property around the Iffley Road, and Pembroke Court was one of his developments. He was later a prime mover in the construction of Oxford's West Gate Shopping Centre (1970-2).

A REFUGE FROM NAZISM

The inter-war idyll of Oxford was broken with the rise of Nazism in Germany. As Jews started to flee the country, the university and the Oxford Refugee Committee played an active role in bringing in Jewish academics from Germany, helping to save many Jews. The most famous of the refugees was Albert Einstein, who spent time in Oxford, before moving on to America.

During his brief sojourn in the town, he lectured at Christ Church. One student related how he had heard that Einstein was giving lectures and decided to go and hear the great man. On arriving at the lecture hall, however, he was surprised to see he was one of only two students there. Then, all became clear; Einstein delivered his lecture entirely in German as he had not yet learnt English. However, a blackboard chalked with equations has been preserved in the Hooke Museum, from one of these lectures.

Some colleges, such as Balliol, Magdalen, Christ Church, University, Corpus Christi, All Souls and Queens, were very active in bringing over or supporting refugees. Others did little, whether through lack of funds (an important and real limitation for the poorer colleges), the lack of inclination, or both. Conditions weren't easy for the refugee academics. Though spared from a far worse fate in Nazi Germany, many notable figures experienced a serious loss of status and frequently lived in very straitened circumstances in poor digs, as there was a lack of accommodation and funds.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The war, when it came, led to a massive, though temporary, swelling of the Jewish population in the town, by several thousands, as both refugees and evacuees poured into the town. Pre-war, the community had amounted to some six families and a few university students. And on High Holy Days, the congregation had only been able to muster 'ten or twenty worshippers'; by 1940, however, congregations were in the hundreds and the community had the services of a rabbi, Dr Weinberg.

The wartime influx meant that there was a rich Jewish social and cultural life in Oxford. One of the well-known community centres set up in this period was in the YMCA building in Walton Street. The community also had a social club in the Forum on the High Street and there were other unofficial Jewish congregations set up in Iffley, Cowley and Headington.

Additional overflow congregations set up around the city for religious festivals were to be found in St James' Hall on Cowley Road as well as a hall in Collins Street (near Eastern Avenue). There was also a kosher meat section in Butterfields and Sons, a butcher's shop in the covered market, and a number of Jewish traders elsewhere in the market, which gave a distinctive Jewish flavour to this famous Oxford landmark.

Initially, for around three months, most of the foreign Jews in Oxford were temporarily interned amidst fears for national security. They were released from 1940, after being graded by a university committee, the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPLS). Class I refugees worked in areas directly of benefit to the war effort, Class II refugees were scholars of 'great distinction' and Class III contained the rest.

Many of these refugees played a vital role in the war effort, among them Ernst Boris Chain, a Berlin Jew and a talented musician, who arrived at Oxford (via Cambridge) in 1935. His worth was somewhat overlooked at first with Hans Krebs of the SPLS rating him as a 'C minus' and stating that he was, 'more of a musician than a scientist and would do better in music than in chemistry.' However, when Chain teamed up with Howard Florey, the pair played a pivotal role in the development of penicillin, thereby saving the lives of countless combatants who would otherwise have died from infected wounds. In 1945, Chain and Florey shared the Nobel Prize for Physiology and Medicine with Fleming – just recognition for one of the greatest of all medical innovations.

Other Jewish residents of wartime Oxford made a more unusual contribution to the war effort, having been recruited to work at the Bletchley Park Government Code and Cipher School, where they helped to decrypt the Enigma code and produce intelligence codenamed 'Ultra'. It seems that government recruiters considered their ability to read Hebrew and Hebrew studies ideal preparation for the task at hand.

POST-WAR DECLINE AND REVIVAL

The immediate post-war period was a difficult time for the Jewish community, as most of its inhabitants returned to their pre-war homes. The rabbi, Dr Weinberg, left in 1948 and so few were the number of Jews that there were often no Saturday services outside of term-time. There was also an unsettling Town-Gown conflict in the congregation in the 1950s, but the B'nai B'rith organisation worked with some success to close the gap.

One beacon of levity in the post-war period was the founding of the Oxford University 'Choolent Society' in 1955 and which ran for 30 years. An ironic Jewish take on famous Oxford dining societies such as the Bullingdon Club, it was well known for its good company, humour and talks. Above all it was reputed for serving the sacred choolent in a special chamber pot, as well as its special bow ties and *kippot*.

However, the 1960s saw a turn-around for the community. Young professionals with children started to establish themselves in Oxford and a great many Jews came as students or to take academic posts. Sir Isaiah Berlin maintained that these changes seem to have been the product of wider social changes and were certainly never the subject of any formal discussion in the university. Note that in 1953, Sir Keith Joseph was only the fifth Jew to be elected a fellow.

The revival was indicated by the rebuilding of the synagogue in 1974 and latterly in 1992.

The post war success of Jews in the university is indicated by the fact that by 1991, no less than seven heads of Oxford colleges were Jews, and between seven and nine percent of students were Jewish. This has ensured the fortunes of the Oxford Jewish community.

Jewish Heads of College, have included distinguished figures such as, Sir Claus Moser of Wadham and Sir Zelman Cowen of Oriel, the former Governor General of Australia and pro-vice-chancellor of the university. Dr Baruch Blumberg of Balliol College, Oxford and Flatbush Yeshiva, New York, was notable for both his academic achievements and Jewish orthodox credentials. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in medicine in 1976, for developing the Hepatitis B vaccine, which has saved the lives of millions.

Another famous, or rather infamous, Oxford figure was Robert Maxwell, the proprietor of the Mirror Newsgroup and Macmillan Publishing. Maxwell located his famous Pergamon Press in Oxford and he also lived in Headington Hall, which he described as his 'council house' as he was able to lease it from the council at a nominal rate. Pergamon Press was based in the stables and the staff called it 'Pergatory Press', though many regarded a stint there as good for their careers and Maxwell did pay well.

A MODERN, THRIVING COMMUNITY

Today, Jewish study is thriving both within and around the university in the Oriental Faculty and the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Yarnton Manor, founded by David Patterson in 1972. The National Anglo-Jewish Heritage Trail is also based on the campus of the OCJHS.

Jewish life has become much more self-confident and outward going in the recent past, as is evidenced in the establishment of a Chabad House in Oxford in 1987 under Rabbi Gershon Overlander, and in its subsequent form as the Oxford University L'Chaim Society in 1989, which courted local, national, and even international publicity for itself, until its demise in 1994.

The society, under the directorship of Rabbi Shmuel Boteach, 'the motormouth rabbi', had nearly 2,000 members at its height and held prestigious events (often in partnership with the Oxford Union Society) with international figures such as Michael Gorbachev, Bob Hawke, Ariel Sharon, Benjamin Netanyahu, Simon Wiesenthal, and Elie Wiesel. Rabbi Boteach was noted for his supreme ability at PR and self-promotion, as well as his ability to project Judaism into the popular press and media. The society lasted for more than 10 years, but caused severe controversy among many in the community and university, with both vehement opponents and supporters.

Today, the Oxford University Chabad Society under Rabbi Eli Brackman has developed Chabad House into an excellent student resource, with adjacent housing for Jewish students, as well as a large new student centre in George Street. They're also building a new mikveh at the Cowley Road site, the first mikveh in Oxford in modern times.

The local Jewish community, largely based at the Oxford Jewish Congregation in the Oxford suburb of Jericho, remains relatively small, but is lively and stable, with around 200 families. Many members of the OJC are also members of the university, and the passage of Jewish students through the community is a constant stimulus.

The OJC is home to an active University Jewish Society (JSoc) which runs regular events and has its own student chaplain. The synagogue is affiliated to the United Synagogue, but has had no rabbi since the 1948, and makes a significant virtue of the fact, supporting a unique menage of Liberal, Reform, Masorti and Orthodox congregations under one roof, with services, and funerals, conducted by synagogue members.

It is optimistic about its future, as is evidenced by a recently completed building programme which established a major new education block as well as providing a striking new roof line, reminiscent of breaking waves.