

THE JEWS OF BRISTOL

By the early eleventh century Bristol had already established its pre-eminence as England's western port and it is reasonable to assume that French and Spanish Jews engaged in various forms of trade visited the town during this early period, and possibly set up residence there. The majority of historians, however, now accept that the great influx of Jews into these islands occurred during the reign of William II (1087-1100); a short period of comparative tolerance towards the Jews which was shattered by the wave of fanaticism which followed in the wake of the successes of the early crusades.

Although no accurate records were kept until the middle of the twelfth century, we may accept that the Bristolian Jewish community was established on a secure footing some time shortly before 1100. Many of the records of medieval Jewry in Bristol have survived, and the names of no fewer than eighteen twelfth century Jews have been preserved in contemporary documents. Amongst them we find references to Bristol's earliest recorded Rabbi, known as 'Moses of Bristol'. Both he and his son, Yom-Tov, the author of 'Ha'tannaim', were martyred during the anti-Jewish riot at York in 1190. Other Jewish names in the town of Bristol include Rabbi Samuel Ha Nackden, author of 'Dekayut', a treatise on grammar; as well as Samuel le Pointur, who may also have been a Rabbi in Bristol.

The slander of 'ritual murder' had already been levelled against the Jews of Norwich, Gloucester and Bury Saint Edmund's with appalling consequences for the communities in all three places, but when the charge was made in Bristol in 1183, royal protection or disbelief on the part of the authorities saved the congregation from any serious consequences. In 1210 the doubtful shield of crown patronage was withdrawn. King John required more revenue for his war in Ireland, and the Jews were recognised as an obvious source. When the 'tallage' was levelled against Anglo-Jewry, one member of the Bristolian community, a merchant named Abraham, proved unwilling to part with his wealth and was quickly conveyed to Bristol Castle, where one tooth was extracted for each day that he remained obdurate. Seven days later Abraham made over 100,000 marks to the king's representative (current value approximately £7,000,000).

Throughout the thirteenth century, until their expulsion in 1290, the majority of Bristol's Jews lived on a narrow strip of land between St. John's Gate and the banks of the river Frome. This ghetto seems to have consisted of one main street with houses on both sides. 'The Jewry', as it was known, is now occupied by Nelson Street. The synagogue, according to William of Worcester, who wrote an account of the town in 1484, was situated in the crypt of the already disused church of St. Giles', whose site is now marked by the junction of Small Street and St. Giles' Lane. The cemetery

was outside the city, on the northern slopes of Brandon Hill. This burial ground was rediscovered in the early 1850s when the foundations were being laid for the present school of Queen Elizabeth's Hospital. The finding of these tombs prompted one academic to note that whatever the standard of Latin and Greek might be; the boys would at least have a good Hebrew foundation!

It is possible that some of the interments on Brandon Hill were the victims of the anti-Jewish riots of 1275, when the quarter was burnt and the synagogue sacked. The same year saw the dispersion of the communities at Marlborough, Worcester and Gloucester. The Jews in the last of these places being sent to Bristol. Anti-Semitism now had a greater degree of official backing, and a new powerful advocate in the person of Queen Eleanor, wife of Edward I. In 1290, the King finally expelled the remnant of Anglo-Jewry, and the community in Bristol officially passed out of existence.

From that time until the reign of Edward VI (1547-53) we know nothing of a Jewish presence in the city, although it is possible that Jews did pay occasional visits in connection with trade. It is recorded that the Jews of Navarre were trading in green cloth from 'Vristol' between 1400 and 1433, and some may have made the journey to Bristol whilst keeping their faith a closely guarded secret.

By the 1540s a cryptic community was certainly installed in the city. Few details survive, but it is recorded that the congregation was led by Henriques Nunes and his wife who held services at their home in Baldwin Street. Prayer books were sent via a similar out of sight, if not secret, community in London. The most important member of the Bristol group at that time was Antonio Brandao, an eminent surgeon from Santarem; he was a nephew of Amatus Lusitanus, who has been described as the most illustrious medical analyst of his age.

It appears as though the community was tolerated during this period as long as it remained inconspicuous. One Jew who failed to keep silent when necessary was Joachim Ganz, a Bohemian mining engineer who had arrived in England some time in the 1570s. In 1581, when in Bristol, he became involved in a dialogue with a clergyman, during the course of which he imprudently let it be known that he was Jewish. Ganz does not appear to have regretted the confession; for when he was brought before the Lord Mayor and Aldermen of the city he openly admitted that he was a Jew, born in Prague and never baptized. The horrified clerk went on to record that Ganz ".....did not believe any article of our Christian faith, for that he was not brought up therein." The city fathers were scandalized; they sent Ganz to London where he obligingly repeated the performance before the authorities in the capital. He appears to have been deported shortly afterwards.

In 1656, an Order in Council re-admitted the Jews into England, and it is most probable that many of the newcomers entered through the port of Bristol. Nothing is known of the state of the congregation during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In fact, the only evidence for there having been a community before 1754 is a single reference in an advertisement which mentions the Jews' burying ground behind a house in St. Philip's.

Bristol's last manifestation of organised anti-Semitism occurred in 1754, when the Merchant Venturers sent a protest to Parliament against a proposed bill to allow the naturalization of the Jews. By 1786 the earliest recorded post exile synagogue in Bristol was opened in the ancient Weaver's Hall, which stood at the junction of Cart Lane and Temple Street. A contemporary description in Matthew's Guide of 1791, describes the place as beautifully furnished. The menorah, which still exists, was selected for special mention.

The development of the fashionable suburbs of Clifton and Hotwells encouraged the growth of the congregation during the Regency period, when the leading lights of Bristol Jewry were the Jessel family and the Jacobs's, the latter being the makers of the famous Bristol glass.

In 1828 the congregation seems to have split, and a second place of worship was opened at the Counterslip. No accounts survive of the events leading to the formation of this breakaway community, and none of the contemporary directories even contain a mention of it; so its exact nature must remain uncertain. It is suggested that the rift was healed by 1835, and from the time until 1842, the whole of Bristol's Jewry, which then numbered some 300 souls, worshipped in the tiny Weavers Hall synagogue.

A new synagogue was opened in Temple Street on August 25th, 1842. A newspaper report of the time commented that "the visitor is struck with its beauty, and the taste with which it has been furnished." Indeed, the synagogue, whilst by no means the largest place of worship in the city, seems to have been one of the most elegant, with pillars of gilded marble, coloured glass windows, a magnificent dome and a great chandelier of brass.

The consecration was a remarkable event, for it was attended by the representatives of various Christian denominations in the city. It must have been one of the first occasions on which members of the churches attended a synagogue service in an official capacity which did not involve an element of surveillance. The consecration was conducted by the Rev. Aaron Levy Green, who had been appointed as minister in Bristol at the age of sixteen in 1838. He remained in Bristol until 1851 and it was during this period that the community played its fullest and most noticeable part in the life of the city. The emancipation of the Jews during the 1830s and 40s encouraged members of the faith to stand for civic office. In Bristol, as early as 1835, Joseph Alexander had stood as a

candidate in the St. Augustine's ward. His brother, Abraham, was more successful in 1845 when he became the first Jewish councillor in Bristol (and one of the first in Britain). A third brother, William, was elected to the council in 1850.

In many ways the Alexander family epitomized the social integration of the Jews in Victorian Bristol. Besides their successes at the hustings they had widespread commercial interests. Their trade activities resulted in all three brothers being appointed to consular posts in the city. Abraham became consul for Chile, Hanover and Russia. Joseph was consul for Saxony, Frankfurt and Bremen; whilst William had to make do with a consular appointment from 'His Majesty of the Two Sicilies!' Like the majority of influential Bristolians, the Alexanders resided in Clifton, where, if contemporary reports are to be believed, the ladies of the family became the arbiters of taste and fashion.

In 1871 the present synagogue was opened in Park Row. The move was made necessary by the construction of modern Victoria Street which involved the destruction of much of Temple Street including the 1842 synagogue. The new place of worship was described as a 'plain but substantial looking building' with a total seating capacity of 240. The cost was more than £4,000, which resulted in a debt which was to dog the congregation for several years.

Besides the establishment of the first Jewish house in any British public school at Clifton College in 1878; the late nineteenth century saw the flowering of several local Jewish societies. The present Talmud Torah was constituted in 1890; the Board of Guardians and a Jewish Literary Society both make their appearance in 1894, the latter was able to boast a membership of 51 in 1906. By 1899 Bristol already had a Zionist Society.

Thus, Bristol passed into the Indian summer of its heyday. The estimated Jewish population of Bristol was about 300 in 1851; by 1906 it had risen to 806. In 1914 it was estimated as 400, and a similar figure was given in the 1960s. After the completion of a hall and sukkah in 1906 no major works were undertaken. The first World War and its aftermath brought a decline in the wealth and status of the community. Bristol Hebrew Congregation slowly slid into obscurity. After having been one of the foremost communities in Britain it became one of the least known.

If anything is to be said of the present it is that after decades of decline there are, at last, the signs of a revival. The growth of the university and the recent influx of commercial concerns attracted by Bristol's environmental advantages over many other centres is at last bringing an increase in the number of Jews in the city and a revival of communal activities. At last the future looks promising.

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