

Famous and Dangerous – Leeds Hill Top Cemeteries

by
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The area known as Hill Top lies above The Leeds Huddersfield Road, in South Leeds some eight miles away from the Jewish community. The area contains the burial grounds of a number of synagogues: *the Beth Hamidrash Hagadol* (BHH), *the New Briggate* also known as “The Grinner” (which was the largest synagogue between the wars), *the New and Old Mariempolar* also known as “The Central”. “The Grinner” amalgamated with the Great Synagogue in Belgrave Street, the oldest establishment synagogue and some others to form the United Hebrew Congregation in Leeds (UHC) in 1931. Their cemeteries had been in use from 1875 until 1970. The earliest graves in the BHH cemetery date from 1905, some thirty years after the foundation of the synagogue. We are uncertain where they buried their dead but most likely it was at “The Grinner” grounds. Unfortunately, the records of the BHH cemetery were lost in a fire in 1952.

Hill Top is an inhospitable and unkind site; it always seems to be blowing a gale even when the weather is balmy in the other cemeteries which are across the main Huddersfield Road. The access lane is very rough, there is no mains water or electricity. I cannot imagine how uncomfortable it must have been in the early years for the mourners to climb up the hill by horse-drawn carriage. The difficulties for the sextons and monumental masons must have been enormous. I do not know how they erected the large columned monuments of which there are a good number and some of these monuments are of an enormous weight. The Coal Residual Authority (‘The Coal Authority’), who currently have responsibility for the site and grounds, with all their modern civil engineering equipment, struggled with these weighty stones.

In the past, the ground has been the home for wildlife, foxes and rabbits which, in turn, attracted hunters. Until management closed the lane, there was serious illegal fly tipping. There were two ohels (prayer Halls) which were demolished to deter further vandalism.

We have no documents relating to the purchase of these grounds by either ‘The Grinner’ in 1875 or the BHH Section in 1905. Maps showed the land was riddled with china clay and limestone mine shafts. In the 19th century owners could just walk away from a disused mine once it was depleted of minerals. Today one still has the responsibility for the safety of the disused mine even when the ownership has been transferred for other purposes.

In the BHH cemetery in 2008, six graves and stones collapsed thirty feet into what was probably a mineshaft and the Coal Authority agreed to be responsible for the restoration. The stones were recovered and re-erected but the coffins were left. The whole procedure was all under ecclesiastical supervision. Expert opinions reported that if there was only one incident in 150 years, the cemetery could be considered safe. A year later a large columnar monument collapsed down into another shaft. Consequently, all cemeteries on Hill Top were deemed unsafe and are now closed permanently. Fortunately, we have recorded all the data from the tombstones and photographed most of the 3,000 graves.

The BHH policy was to bury ‘next in line’ so there was no ‘elitist’ area, nor any defined area for children. Only recently did we create a special area for the *Cohanim*. The good, the bad, the famous and infamous were all interned next to each other, which makes the cemetery most absorbing. It was always believed that it was the custom to bury those who committed suicide and those who married out of the religion against the wall. This may have been so but there is no definitive evidence of this. This is a subject of further research.

Interesting Graves

Rabbi Yisroel Hayim Daiches is possibly the most famous person interned in Hill Top. Arguably, he was the greatest Talmudic Scholar to come to England from the Lithuania and was the BHH Rabbi from 1901 to 1937. He wrote the definitive publication on the *mikvah* (ritual bath) as well as an outstanding commentary on the *Jerusalem Talmud*. He was well known for the leniency of his decisions, encouraged secular education and the speaking of Hebrew in his family, as opposed to Yiddish, which was the usual practice at that time.

He made Leeds a centre of Talmudic Scholarship, he organised a Conference in 1909 of European rabbis and edited a Talmudic journal. He suffered a stroke in 1930 which left him housebound for the rest of his life, so his only contact with his community was through his scholars. The edges of his tombstone have his name as an acrostic and he is truly described as a *tzadik* (righteous one) and judge. He is buried in one of the very few mausoleums in Leeds.

His Vilna born sons Samuel and Silas obtained *smicha* from their father and furthered their education in Berlin obtaining degrees in philosophy from the University in Berlin and Talmudic study at the famous Hildersheimer *yeshiva*. Silas's PhD at Leipzig University was on the English Enlightenment philosophers.

Samuel served as a rabbi in Sunderland and then became a lecturer in *Mishna* and *Talmud* at Jews College. Silas also became a rabbi in Sunderland before he moved to Edinburgh where he soon became the most eminent Jew in Scotland, with a regular column in the *Scotsman*. He was an acclaimed Hebraist and Zionist and was invited to the famous opening of the Hebrew University. A street was named in his honour by the city of Edinburgh. His son Lionel became a senior Scottish law officer. His other son, David, was an English professor in Edinburgh, Oxford and in America and was the first vice-chancellor of the University of Sussex and was an expert on Robert Burns and malt whiskey.

In his biography *Two Worlds*, David describes, how on a bitterly cold Scottish *Shabbat* afternoon, the *shabbos goy* failed to turn up. Silas's children pleaded to be allowed to turn on the electric fire and eventually he relented with the call to his father Hayim sleeping at Hill Top to forgive them. The Daiches were an amazing intellectual family Talmudists, Linguist, Philosophers and Zionists and in many consider them the precursors of today's modern orthodox Jews.

Heinrich Fischer was born in the former Yugoslavia and later moved to Vienna where eventually he was appointed *Obercantor* at the prestigious Sietenstetengasse Temple where one of his predecessors was the famous Solomon Sulzer, a friend of Beethoven and Schubert. He came to BHH under the aegis of the Wartski family, the jewellers.

Cantor Fischer had an imposing presence and a strong voice. He was a composer and a number of bars of his music are on his *matzevah*. He imported his Central European Jewish aristocratic culture to Leeds, and he and his wife held court on a *Shabbat* afternoon sitting on gilt chairs and offering Viennese cakes. Cantor Fischer was not very happy in Leeds he could not adapt to many Litvak (Lithuanian) practices, especially the lack of synagogue decorum.

Sinai Adler, a local grocer and president of the BHH, also had *smicha* in his own right. Because of this, Sinai and his like would destroy any speaker if they found a weakness in his Talmudic interpretation.

His son Saul was asked by Chaim Weizmann to head the new Microbiology Department at the Hebrew University. He became a world expert on parasitic diseases and bred the Syrian golden hamster, now the standard laboratory research animal. This achievement was honoured by sharing his photo with the

hamster on the 4.5 NIS stamp. He was fascinated by Charles Darwin and translated his *On The Origin of Species* into Hebrew.

President Chaim Hertzog's family lived in Leeds prior to going to Ireland where he was born. Some of their relations remained in Leeds. Isaac Hertzog and his wife Dora may have been the president's cousins and are buried here. President Hertzog took time out from his duties to arrange and fund the restorations of their tombstones. Rabbi Isaac Hertzog, President Chaim's grandfather, was rabbi of the Grinner Synagogue and left for Paris in 1911.

Rabbi Mayer Paltarovitch was rabbi of the 'Old Central' or *Mariempolar*. It is believed he went to New York for some time but returned after a number of years. Reports of his *Shabbat* sermons can be read in the JC archives. The actress Gwyneth Paltrow is his great-great-granddaughter.

Suzanne Rakusen, the young wife of Philip of the *matzo* baking family, died at 34. The grieving young widower constructed a magnificent squared column monument, on which was written: 'I am waiting for the time to meet you again in the Garden of Eden'. Philip remarried, had another family, and then moved to Harrogate where he is buried but there is still space in this double plot.

In March 1942, the dry dock in Normandy was the home of the German U-boats and battleships that were harassing allied shipping in the North Atlantic and threatening vital supplies. A daring and seemingly impossible plan, with the support of Winston Churchill, was carried out to destroy the massive gates of the dry dock. It involved 618 combined services personnel of which 168 were killed including Montague Rakusen RVNR. He was a solicitor, aged 33, and also a member of the *matso* baking family. A memorial tablet has been placed on his mother's grave – Montague probably lies in the depths of the Atlantic.

Sam Burman, a member of Leeds AJEX, was praying at the annual Remembrance Parade when he died. Many other eminent members of Anglo-Jewry had their origins in Leeds and many later moved away. This is why our numbers have reduced by 60% since the end of World War II but they have left their ancestors in our cemeteries.

Tombstone Details

An interesting aspect of recording details inscribed on the tombstones is the collection of small epithets of social and cultural history. Membership and officers of the various Jewish friendly societies and lodges, *Baron Hirsch*, *Yeomen of Israel*, *Order of the Buffalo*, etc. as well as 'The Secretary', the 'First President of the *Chevra Torah*' or *Chevra Shas*.

They must have been extremely proud of their affiliation to these synagogues and associations, many of which have long since disappeared or merged. This is possibly the only testament to their community work, interests and activities for many researchers and relatives.

These cemeteries are a rich source of information for genealogists, social and cultural historians and you would have to dig deep into paper records for similar information but here it is literally 'in your face' or in our database, which we hope will soon be available on the web.

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