

VICTORIAN JEWRY IN BRISTOL

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The disappearance of the archives of the Jewish community in Bristol now makes it impossible to give a detailed account of the development of the post exile congregation. However, due to Bristol's position as a port, it is reasonable to assume that some semblance of an organised community existed there by the end of the seventeenth century. It is certain that a minister was employed by 1752,¹ and that a synagogue was consecrated in the fifteenth-century Weaver's Hall in 1786.

The expansion of the city docks after the construction of the New Cut and the Floating Harbour at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the development of the fashionable suburbs of Clifton and Hotwells, which for a short time enjoyed greater popularity than Bath as a spa and holiday resort, must have encouraged the growth of the Jewish population during the Regency period.

In 1811, Isaac Jacobs, the manufacturer of the famous Bristol coloured glass, donated to the community a plot of land in Rose Street, Temple parish, and this constituted the second recorded post exile Jewish cemetery in the city. Isaac Jacobs himself was laid to rest there in 1835. His gift continued in use until about 1840 when the Barton Street burial ground was established. This third cemetery was used until the turn of the century, by which time it too was filled to capacity. It was then in its turn replaced by the present burial ground at Ridgeway. The Rose Street cemetery was removed in 1928, when the adjacent G.W.R. goods yards were extended, the interments and several of the monuments being transferred to Ridgeway at that time.

In 1828, the congregation seems to have split in two, 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 reference to it; so its exact nature must remain uncertain. It is generally suggested that the rift was healed by 1835, and from that time until 1842 we may assume that the whole of Bristol Jewry worshipped in the tiny Weaver's Hall, which measured a mere 24 feet by 13 feet. It has been estimated that the Jewish population of Bristol numbered 300 by 1850, and even if we suppose a rapid growth in numbers between 1835 and 1850 the Weaver's Hall must have been very cramped accommodation after the return of the secessionist group.

No doubt these conditions must have goaded the wardens into a search for larger premises, and by 1840 they had secured the former Quakers' meeting house in Temple Street. The building underwent considerable alteration and embellishment, which, according to a contemporary account in the **Bristol Gazette** of 25 August 1842, amounted to "almost a new construction of them". The building was approached from Temple Street "by a colonnade which leads to a vestibule communicating with the principal hall. On entering the latter the visitor is struck with its beauty, and the taste with which it has been furnished. Directly facing him at the eastern end, is a portico, in the Grecian style of architecture, supported by marble columns, with their capitals and entablature highly finished and ornamented with gold. Within the recess formed by this erection is the depository of the ark, access to which is veiled by a curtain of crimson velvet, also ornamented with gold."

"The building is lighted by day by a magnificent cupola, which occupies a considerable portion of the roof, the interior of which, below the glass is divided into panels ornamented with bosses. There is also a window of ground and stained glass on either side of the portico, and in the centre, immediately over the ark one of purple glass, with the Ten Commandments in Hebrew characters, in amber, the effect of which is very beautiful."²

1 A cemetery existed in a 'brick yard' in St Philips' by 1759

2 As the firm of Isaac Jacobs had ceased to produce glass by this date, the glass described in the **Gazette** may well have been donated by Messrs. Levy and Levy, a firm of glass grinders in the city.

The actual consecration of the synagogue on the 23 August 1842 was conducted by the Rev. Aaron Levy-Green, who had been appointed to his post as minister in Bristol at the age of sixteen, in May 1838. By 1842 the young minister had attracted considerable attention by preaching sermons in English, and during the rest of his long career the Rev. A. L. Green was to make many other contributions towards the development of Anglo Jewry.

The consecration service provided the community with an opportunity to invite representatives of the various Christian denominations in Bristol, and the **Gazette** account notes that "on the same bench might be seen some of the strictest communicants of the Established Church, with independents, methodists, quakers, and baptists all in immediate contact with the descendants of Abraham".

The attendance by these members of the various churches is indicative of the improvement in the position of Jewry in English society during the nineteenth century. In Bristol there had been no 'official' manifestation of anti-semitism since 1754, when the Merchant Venturers Society had protested to Parliament against the proposed Bill allowing the naturalisation of the Jews. By 1835, Joseph Frankel Alexander, a prominent member of the local community, had stood as a candidate for St. Augustine's ward in the municipal election. Although he was not successful, his brother Abraham gained the City ward for the Conservatives in 1845. He held the seat until 1852, when he became 'Docks Member' representing the interests of the Port of Bristol in the Council Chamber. This unusual post had been created in 1847 when the city docks were brought under civic control — a move which Abraham Alexander was instrumental in achieving. He appears to have retired from local politics in 1866, when his seat as Docks Member was voted to his brother, William Wolfe Alexander, who had been elected to the council in 1850. He continued to hold the Docks Seat until his death in 1874.

In many ways the Alexander family were the symbol of the social integration of Jewry in Victorian Bristol. Besides their successes at the hustings, they had widespread commercial interests centred on a flourishing shipping and marine insurance company which in turn led to three members of the family being appointed to consular posts in the city. From 1828, until his death in 1870, Abraham Alexander was consul for Hanover and Russia, with the Republic of Chile being added to his duties in 1850. Joseph Frankel, who died in 1840, was consul for Bremen, Saxony and Frankfurt, whilst his brother William Wolfe made do with a consular appointment from 'His Majesty of the Two Sicilies'.

Like the majority of other successful Bristolians the Alexanders resided in Clifton, first in Park Street and then in Berkeley Square and Lansdown Terrace in Victoria Square, where, if contemporary reports are to be believed, the ladies of the family became the arbiters of fashion and elegance.

Despite the remarkable career of this family none achieved the mayoralty of the city. The first Jew to achieve that particular honour was Joseph Abrahams, a wealthy merchant and importer of wine. He was elected to the council in 1861, and was chosen as Mayor in 1865. He died in January of the following year. Joseph Abrahams does not seem to have been particularly active in his office as Mayor. He attended few civic functions, preferring to delegate such honours to various members of his family. Indeed he made such slight impact on the communal memory that by 1971, when Alderman Mrs. Bloom was elected to the same position, she was generally acclaimed as the first Jewish Lord Mayor of Bristol.

Although the congregation must have been able to bask in the reflected glory of its most illustrious members, the synagogue institution does not seem to have enjoyed any extra material benefit or if it did, they were quickly dissipated.

After the opening of the present place of worship in 1871, the congregation was faced by increasing financial embarrassment. The building of the new synagogue was not a matter of choice, and it resulted in an enormous debt for the congregation, which was not relieved until 1873, when Samuel Platnauer, who had been chairman in 1871, personally donated £400 to clear the synagogue of its outstanding debts. This was the only recorded major donation to the community during this period, although a board recently removed from the entrance hall of the synagogue records a number of smaller contributions. Neither were there any gifts of

intrinsic value except for a small silver table centre-piece. The late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw gifts of fine Torah ornaments but the second half of the last century saw no comparable presentations.

The removal of the synagogue to Park Row was necessitated by the construction of Victoria Street during the early 1870s. The city fathers had long been aware of the traffic congestion in the medieval Temple Street connecting Bristol Bridge with Temple Meads Station; By the 1860s the problem had become acute and plans were drawn up for a new thoroughfare to run from the bridge to the beginning of the Bath Road. The execution of the plan involved the demolition of much of Temple Street, including the Weaver's Hall (which had become a Sunday school for Temple Church) and the synagogue of 1842.

The community must have been aware of these proposals by 1865, when an attempt was made to secure a plot of land in Park Row. The negotiations failed and the land was leased to James Macready Chute who built the Prince's Theatre on the site. (The theatre stood until 1940 when it was destroyed in the blitz).

In 1869 the congregation obtained the residue of the land formerly occupied by the Convent of the Little Sisters of the Poor. This establishment had recently been obliged to move to Cotham Hill when most of the convent buildings were cleared away to enable the building of Perry Road, connecting Park Row with Upper Maudlin Street.

Work started on the new synagogue in 1870, and it was completed by 8th September 1871 when it was consecrated by the Chief Rabbi, Dr. Adler, with Rev. Berliner of Bristol as cantor. The **Bristol Times and Mirror** of 9th September contains a lengthy account of the building, which it describes as a "plain but substantial looking building", with a total seating capacity of 240. The ark was designed by "Mr. Collins of London and the carving has been executed by Mr. Margetson of this city". "Mr. Fripp, one of the city surveyors" was responsible for the overall design of the synagogue, and the form of the interior seems to have been inspired by Smirke's Neo-Classical church of St. George, near by on Brandon Hill. (Smirke is said to have been influenced by the current interpretation of a Classical Greek synagogue when designing St. George's). Fripp, in producing his copy seems to have gone so far as to reproduce the painted frieze of Greek Key motif on the architrave supporting the gallery, as used by Smirke. This band of decoration has survived in St. George's church but has been lost under layers of paint in the later adaptation.

The synagogue also had a magnificent stucco ceiling, the work of a certain Mr. Williams, a local craftsman who seems to have worked in the tradition of the eighteenth century "Bristol school of master plasterers". This fine feature was dismantled in 1960 after having been weakened by war-time bombing and neglect.

The whole building cost upwards of £4000, more than one third of this sum being expended on excavating two terraces into the hillside to provide a level site for the structure. Behind the synagogue, and separated from it by a narrow courtyard, the community added, without planning permission, a communal room now called the "Committee Room". This new facility must have encouraged the flowering of several Jewish societies in Bristol. Previously there had only been a Ladies Benevolent Society (founded in 1845) in 1849, it paid tribute to Rev. Green for his "continued and unwearied efforts in the religious instruction of the children". However, by 1906 Arrowsmith was able to note that a "Hebrew School" (probably the present Talmud Torah) had been founded in 1890. A Board of Guardians was established in 1894, and a Zionist society made its appearance in 1899, whilst the Literary society, founded in 1894, boasted 51 members by 1906. There was also a Jewish Girls Club which met in a private house in King's Square, but this last venture does not seem to have been successful.

In 1878, Bristol saw the establishment of a new and at that time, unique Jewish community in the form of a Jewish house at Clifton College. It was the first Jewish house in a British public school. Its first Housemaster was Mr. Heymann; he held the post until 1890, when his place was taken by Rev. Joseph Polack, who also served for a number of years as Chairman of the Bristol Board of Guardians. The house, which is still known as Polack House, probably owes its origin to the friendship between the Headmaster, Dr. Percival (who

later became the Bishop of Worcester) and the M.P. and financier Lionel Cohen, who used to holiday at Clifton during Shavuot. Cohen subsequently steered the Bill for the College's Royal Charter through the Commons, and it is possible that Dr. Percival established the Jewish house as a mark of friendship and gratitude.

Despite the active community life in Bristol and the innovation at Clifton College, there does not seem to have been any dramatic increase in synagogue membership during the latter part of the century. The census held during the last Saturday in March 1851 records that the attendance on Friday evening was 126, and on Saturday morning, 95. In 1881, according to figures given in 'Bristol Past and Present' published in that year, the attendance on Saturday morning was 102, an increase of only seven in thirty years. In 1906, Arrowsmith (Arrowsmith's Bristol) stated that the community numbered some 806 souls, although an unofficial figure for 1914 was more conservative, putting the number at 300.

Whatever the true figures were, there seems to be little doubt that Bristol did not benefit from the influx of East European Jewry, and many of the large number of Jewish poor in Bristol requiring assistance from the Board of Guardians were probably indigenous. It seems as though the Poles and Russians who did come to Bristol were for the most part travellers, itinerant pedlars and fund raisers for religious institutions within 'the Pale'. The absence of immigrant settlement in Bristol is reflected by the names recorded on the stones in the Barton Street burial ground. There are many German names and several others which have been anglicised, but there are few which seem to have had their origins in Russia.

As Lloyd Gartner has pointed out, "Other British ports such as Southampton, Newcastle and Bristol were either smaller or did not bestride the main emigration routes". Perhaps it could be argued that Bristol's failure to attract East European Jewry was a major cause of the decline of the community during this century, although the causes may have originated in local failings such as the inability to attract and retain ministers.

After Aaron Levy Green's departure in 1851 there was a rapid succession of ministers, few of whom seem to have stayed for more than five years. Bristol became a professional stepping stone for those who aspired to the growing communities elsewhere in Britain and in the United States. The reason for this quick turn-over of clergy is not difficult to discover. In 1844, when Rev. Levy Green married and set up house at 1 Pritchard Street, the wardens in a fit of generosity increased his salary from 27/6 per week to 30/-. In 1906, Rev. Abelson was still being paid the same sum, although he was provided with free accommodation in a house attached to the synagogue. This house, surrounded by the high and damp retaining walls of the Hillside was, understandably, an unpopular residence, and as early as 1890 the Rev. Emmanuel Levy chose to live in a house in Wilder Street, St. Paul's, abandoning his official residence to Bristol's one and only second reader, Rev. A. H. Eisenberg.

After the turn of the century the congregation experienced few changes. A communal hall was added alongside the Committee Room in 1904, and a Succah was added in 1906. The synagogue choir was disbanded in 1914 when most of its members volunteered for military service, and despite the fact that the choirmaster, Mr. Goldman, was to live for another forty years the choir was never re-established. No doubt this first loss passed almost un-noticed by the majority of Bristol's Jewry. Indeed, in a period of growing financial uncertainty many members had other, more pressing problems.