

# GOSFORTH AND KENTON SYNAGOGUE

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1947-1984

**1947** After the end of World War II the Jewish population of Newcastle upon Tyne moved north. Most newly marrieds also settled in the area so that by 1947 over one hundred Jewish families lived in Gosforth and Kenton, all of them some considerable distance from the nearest established synagogue. Most were members of the Old Hebrew Congregation.

During the summer of that year a meeting was held at the Gosforth Assembly Rooms to discuss the formation of a new Hebrew Congregation. The attendance was well over two hundred and was not confined to residents of Gosforth and Kenton. The meeting voted heavily in favour of such a project.

At that time religious classes were being held in the Archibald Street council school, off Salters Road, and the aims were to provide a Communal Centre where religious services would be held and where religious instruction could be given in Jewish surroundings. It would be used also as a communal centre for *simchas*, social functions and other Jewish activities.

In September of the same year, High Festival Services were organised and held at the Gosforth Assembly Rooms. They were most successful, very well attended and addressed by Rev. E. Drukker and Dayan Grossnass.

**1948** Then, as often happens, there followed a period of inactivity. There were those who thought that High Festival Services should certainly continue but, for the time being, nothing more. There were others, however, who felt that if the new Congregation were to become a reality the enthusiasm shown so far should be fanned. The first essential was the establishment of a regular Sabbath *Minyan*.

Early in 1948 a small group of enthusiasts got together and rented a room for £1 per week from the Wallsend Conservative Club in Lansdowne Terrace, Gosforth. On 1st February, the first service was held at the Jewish Communal Centre, as it was called. Fifteen adults and several children attended. The whole Service, including Reading of the Law, was conducted by Mr. I. H. Cannon of Gateshead.

A fortnight later, a temporary Executive was formed headed by Mr. M. Cannon. Thus, the Sabbath and Festival Services were established. After a year or two the venue was changed to a larger

room, this time in Gosforth High Street and continued there until 1954 when the Communal Hall became available. During this period High Festival Services were held in the Gosforth Assembly Rooms, the Church Hall, Salters Road and for three or four years at the Central Hall, Gosforth.

**1949** The next event takes us back to 1949. The Gosforth and Kenton executive had found a suitable piece of land in Lansdowne Terrace. They called together the leaders of the Old Hebrew Congregation and the Jesmond Hebrew Congregation. The land could be obtained for about £1,600 and the question was whether or not the two other synagogues would wish to join with Gosforth and Kenton in purchasing the land and furthering the project. Both congregations showed interest but in the event, the Jesmond Congregation decided not to proceed further and the Old Hebrew Congregation decided to join in. The land was then purchased jointly with the Old Hebrew Congregation.

**1951** In September 1951 the Rev. S. P. Toporoff of Leazes Park Road Synagogue was inducted by Chief Rabbi Dr. Israel Brodie, Regional Minister to the Old Hebrew Congregation and the Gosforth and Kenton Hebrew Congregation. The latter half of this title was looking, in a way, to the future, for although land had been secured, building was still some way off. However there were already sixty Founder Members of the congregation and at High Festivals about one hundred and fifty persons were attending the services.

On the same day, Chief Rabbi Brodie inaugurated the Building Fund appeal at a meeting held in Gosforth Central Hall. The target was £6,500. The proposed building would have a Main Hall, would accommodate 250/300 persons and could be extended at some later date within the shell, to hold 500. A row of classrooms would run down one side and these could be extended as required. Temporary partitions would divide the hall from the classrooms and they could be removed or erected as desired. Kosher kitchens were also planned. There would thus be an all-purpose building providing full facilities for religious services and classes, *simchas*, social functions, meetings and the various gatherings of the Newcastle Jewish Community.

The appeal was successful. Meanwhile Services continued in the High Street and at High Festivals, in the Central Hall. Before *Rosh Hashanah* the Ark and the *Sifrei Torah* would be carried across the High Street to the Central Hall and after *Yom Kippur*, before breaking the Fast, the reverse journey took place. There was no lack of helpers!

**1954** Early in 1954 building started, and on 4th April the foundation stone was laid by Mr. L. Jacobson. An open air Service took place and the congregation included the local Clergy and Civic dignitaries. Rev. S. P. Toperoff delivered the Address and Rev. E. Drukker and Rev. J. Kahan conducted the Service. Building proceeded well and the Synagogue was opened on 21st November in the same year. The President, Mr. Julius Cohen, performed the opening and the Chief Rabbi Dr. Israel Brodie consecrated the Synagogue and Communal Hall. Clergy taking part in the Service included Rev. S. P. Toperoff and Rev. M. M. Baddiel who was then Reader to the Old Hebrew Congregation. North East Jewry were well represented together with Civic dignitaries of Gosforth and Newcastle upon Tyne. The Chief Rabbi in his address, emphasised that he had consecrated "a Synagogue that combined the function of a Place of Worship with that of a Seat of Learning in the Jewish Faith and in this he rejoiced".

So the multi-purpose building was open. The *cheder* in Archibald Street covering the Old Hebrew Congregation and Gosforth and Kenton moved in and flourished with Rev. S. P. Toperoff as Headmaster. Regular religious services were held in the Synagogue hall and when this was used for social and non-religious purposes, the Ark was screened off. The demand of the whole community for the use of the hall steadily increased.

It was about this time that an arrangement was made between Gosforth and Kenton and the Old Hebrew Congregations whereby a member of one congregation automatically became an associate member of the other, thus further strengthening the ties that existed between the two Congregations. The Regional Minister occupied the pulpit on occasions, particularly during a Festival or on the occasion of a Barmitzvah, and there emerged an Honorary Reader, Dr. P. Birnbaum, who conducted the services in excellent manner for more than ten years. His "tunes" became part of the ritual and his presence enabled the congregation to grow and strengthen.

**1959** The classrooms soon became inadequate, the Hall being used for more than one class and in 1959 two rooms were added using part of the shell that was still empty. This considerably relieved the congestion.

**1961** The feeling was developing that the use of the hall as a synagogue as well as for other purposes was not very satisfactory in the long term. It had been thought that the communal hall might be extended at an appropriate time and a Synagogue proper erected on the land still vacant. Thought had now changed, however, to the possibility of building a Synagogue in the still empty part of the shell and this was done so that the Synagogue

had the full sanction of the *Beth Din*. A Jewish Nursery School had been established in 1961 and was using the Gosforth and Kenton facilities and a few months before the Synagogue was consecrated Chief Rabbi Brodie paid a visit to the Nursery School. This visit provided an opportunity for the Building Committee to discuss with him the final details of the new Synagogue. Permanent seating for 120 men and a gallery accommodating 80 ladies were achieved.

**1963** The consecration took place on 1st September 1963. Chief Rabbi Brodie was unable to do this and the consecration was carried out by Dayan Morris Swift, the assisting Clergy including Rabbi S. P. Toperoff. The Synagogue was opened by Mr. D. Bloom, Chairman of the Building Committee. Once again, the large gathering included a full representation of North East Jewry. The Bishop of Newcastle and Civic leaders and officials were also present. In his address, Dayan Swift made a powerful plea for the continuation of tradition.

**1964** The following year, the Claims Conference, a fund derived mainly from German heirless reparations, acknowledged the creation within the walls of the Communal Centre, of facilities for religious services, *Cheder*, Nursery School and social functions and awarded the Congregation £1,000.

**1968** The Congregation continued to grow but lost its honorary reader, Dr. P. Birnbaum when he and his family moved away from the area. The feeling was already growing that although Rabbi Toperoff, as Regional Minister, ministered to the Congregation and occupied the pulpit as often as he was able, the service of a full time Minister working with him was desirable. The opportunity came, and in 1968 a "call" went out to Rev. M. M. Baddiel, who had earlier been reader to The Old Hebrew Congregation, to become Minister at Gosforth. He accepted. Rabbi Baddiel, as he later became, was appointed Headmaster of the Religion Classes, Rabbi Toperoff becoming Principal.

Although a multitude of organisations have used the facilities provided at Gosforth and Kenton, two only have been mentioned; the Religion Classes with about seventy pupils and the Nursery School. From the very beginning the Ladies Guild has been, and continues to be, a pillar of strength; the present membership of the congregation is about 120 and continues to grow. There are no permanent seats, each worshipper sitting where he or she pleases. In the early days the members were mainly young but as the years have passed the spread has become greater.

**1972** The Congregation celebrated its Silver Jubilee. It fully supported the proposed unification of the three Congregations and to that end had joined as an equal partner with the Jesmond

and Old Hebrew Congregations in the purchase of Culzean Park. Because of uncertainties of City and County planning it was not known exactly what would happen to the city's various Synagogue buildings over the next few years, but all were decided that Gosforth would be the centre of unified activity thus justifying the far-sightedness of those few stalwarts who founded the Gosforth and Kenton Hebrew Congregation a quarter of a century ago.

**1972-1973** At the beginning of our Jubilee year an Extraordinary Meeting of members approved the draft constitution for the proposed United Hebrew Congregation. The final meeting of the old Council of the Gosforth and Kenton Synagogue as an independent body took place on the 31st January, 1973. On the 19th February, 1973 an inaugural meeting of "Scheduled Members" took place to elect the first Board of Management of the Gosforth and Kenton Synagogue, then to be one of the constituent synagogues of the new "U.H.C." There were also four members elected to serve as our representatives on the "U.H.C." Council.

On the 8th April of the same year a new Sefer Torah scroll was solemnly consecrated, acquired as a result of a legacy of the late Mr. Max Bloom, a member of our Council since its inception.

A similar ceremony took place in May, 1980, when the Lustman family consecrated a Sefer Torah on the occasion of the Barmitzva of Selwyn Lustman.

During the latter part of 1973 Rabbi Toperoff, Regional Minister of the Gosforth and Kenton Congregation since 1954, announced his retirement and Aliyah to Israel.

In his Silver Jubilee message Rabbi Toperoff placed on record two innovations which "Gosforth", being a young congregation unfettered by tradition and custom, had very successfully pioneered:

- (i) Community singing was encouraged perhaps more than in the average community.
- (ii) From the outset there was "One Class" membership linked with unclassified pews.

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Contrary to prognostications of outsiders this proved to be the most favoured and popular arrangement. In the same spirit a conscious decision was taken that the Hon. Officers should not wear top hats, these being considered "Victoriana".

**1976** Evening services, hitherto held at our synagogue on Fridays, Shabbat, and Yomtov, were now to be held at Culzean Park.

**1978** The closure of the Leazes Park Road Synagogue meant increased attendances for both "Jesmond" and "Gosforth". The transition went quite smoothly and did not present any difficult

problems. We obtained additional scrolls of the Law including silver ornaments. The Memorial Board of victims of two World Wars was resited at Gosforth and a special service marked the occasion.

After the closure of "Leazes", services were shared between Rabbi Baddiel, who had become the Senior Rabbi and Rabbi Fine. When the latter moved to London, Rev. Chaim Ingram was engaged in 1982 to take his place.

**1984** A satisfactory agreement was concluded for the sale of our synagogue building and spare land, bringing to an end the thirty years' life of a most intensively used communal building. Henceforth regular Shabbat services will take place on a temporary basis at Culzean Park House until the completion of the new town synagogue scheduled for Autumn 1986. The Gosforth Civic Centre has been secured for the High Festival Services 1985 and for other Yomtovim.

In the nature of a postscript it should be mentioned that the Synagogue records, including this brochure, have been deposited with the City Archives for safe keeping.

**1973-1984** Writing now after 12 years the far-sightedness of the move to Gosforth has stood the test of time, as has the Gosforth and Kenton Congregation's full commitment to the cause of "U.H.C." Meanwhile the continuing decline in the overall size of the community made the decision to close the Leazes Park Road synagogue in 1978 inescapable. The favourable result of the Lands Tribunal in December, 1982 cleared the path for the realisation of full unification — not only unified administration, but more important still unified worship, with educational, youth and social activities all on one site; and the most superior site for this purpose has proved to be Culzean Park. Whilst we are understandably sad to witness the end of the road for "Gosforth" it is the beginning of a new chapter in the annals of the Newcastle community, meeting the challenge of changing times and circumstances. The great spiritual benefits to be reaped from ultimate unity should safeguard and strengthen our heritage until well into the 21st century.

The historical notes up to our Silver Jubilee in 1972 were researched and written by our late, lamented friend Dr. Lionel Goldman. It is a great privilege to follow him in bringing his "story" up to date.

Walter Sharman

October, 1984