



Jacob's Seal

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Oxford

## Linora Lawrence investigates the vibrant and colourful history of Oxford's Jewish community

If, one day in 1150, you had gone shopping and were stopped by a stranger at Carfax who asked you for directions to Oxford Castle, you might well have found yourself saying: "Turn right and walk down Great Bailey Street, you will see the Castle straight ahead."

If the stranger had then asked the way to Folly Bridge you might have added: "Go down Great Jewry Street, past the fish stalls and you'll come to the bridge."

After giving all that advice you might have taken yourself across the road down La Boucherie (now the High Street) and bought some meat from one of the butchers' stalls in the middle of the road. Perhaps you would have looked in on the Jew Asher, son of Licoricia, who lived in a property where Fellows of Oxford is today.

Then you might have doubled back to the low-rent district near the town prison at Bocardo Lane (now St Michael's Street) to visit Isaac Le Pullet and his wife Comitissa and son Hakin Le Petit ('little Isaac') who lived where The Nosebag and Arcadia are now. Or the rather nefarious Josce Bundy who lived on the site that is now Austin Reed. Mind you, if you had visited Josce you might have kept that under wraps as he was generally up to no good.

People can be forgiven for having a general impression that Jewish life in Oxford began in the mid-19th century. The much neglected truth is vibrant and exciting.

*The first Jews to settle in Britain came from Rouen with William the Conqueror. A new era was opening up in England and William's symbiotic relationship with the northern French Jewish community was a significant part of the new regime.*

Jews were expelled from England in 1290. After a gap of 366 years Cromwell invited them back in 1656, nevertheless, returning Jews tended to keep a low profile.

The 1841 census recorded only three Jewish households in the city — the 1851 census showed an increase of seven households, but the formation of 'The Congregation' in 1882 confirmed a small, but real, Jewish presence. An article in *The Jewish Chronicle* on January 13, 1882 reported that there were 25 Jewish undergraduates at Oxford, nine of whom were at Balliol. It was only 11 years previously that the University Tests Act had swept away the last legal bar to full membership of Jews in the university.

Jews had, of course, obtained places at Oxford before, but they had always been converts and indeed would have had to have had a considerable knowledge of Christian teaching to pass the entrance examinations.

The present Jewish Synagogue in Richmond Road was completed in 1973, to replace the building that had served for the previous 80 years. Before that the small number of Oxford Jews had met in (possibly rented) premises in St Ebbe's, and before that probably in each

# Oxford's Jewish heritage

other's houses as small religious communities have always done.

Early records of a Jewish community in Oxford date from 1141, but it seems likely that Jews were established in the city several decades before that.

The first Jews to settle in Britain came from Rouen with William the Conqueror. A new era was opening up in England and William's symbiotic relationship with the northern French Jewish community was a significant part of the new regime.

Jewish expertise provided an already established credit and trading system which was vital to William as he added England to his continental territories. It suited the Jews to lend to the king, as they were forbidden by their religion to lend to their own, and it suited the king to borrow from the Jews for a number of reasons. It gave him financial independence from his nobles and enabled him to play one group off against the other.

The Jews, being considered 'outsiders,' were wards of the King. He could confiscate property and money from them at any time. They were a 'soft target' as far as taxes were concerned — for example, a third of a Jew's estate was payable to the king as death duties.

For the Jews this meant that, at worst, they would have to give up everything to the monarch, if and when he demanded money, but the plus side was that they could claim protection from any of the king's castles and had freedom to travel his highways.

William built castles in key places to enforce his claim to England and one of them was, of course, Oxford. And as William built his castles, Rouen Jews would settle near them. As historian Pam Manix puts it, "nestled often in the elbow between the castle and a sleepy Saxon priory".

The 'elbow' was, in Oxford's case, the houses either side of Great Jewry Street (later known as Fish Street, now St Aldates) down to the South Gate below St. Frideswide's Priory, where Brewer Street now sits.

Owing to superior Norman and Angevin record keeping (remarkably detailed for Europe at this time) surviving deeds and records show precisely who lived in each house. We know that Christians and Jews lived side-by-side in



Licoricia of Winchester, second wife of David of Oxford, once lived in this house

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this area — as those who could afford it lived away from the smell of fish, skin and offal.

Aaron, son of Isaac, lived at Carfax on the site of Edinburgh Woollen Mills until his house was burned down in 1141 by King Stephen, who was trying to frighten money out of the Jewish community to fund his war against Matilda. She had famously escaped from Oxford Castle across the frozen Thames during a blizzard, camouflaged in a white cape.

The Jewish community had recently handed over a lot of money to Matilda, but they managed to scrape together enough to convince Stephen not to burn down the rest of the Jewry.

After 19 years of unrest a compromise was reached. Stephen would reign for his lifetime, but Matilda's son, the great-grand child of William the Conqueror, would succeed to the throne thus preserving the direct royal lineage. This child was to become Henry II and he proved to be a good thing all round.

Henry had excellent administrative talents. Surrounding himself with able ministers he brought stability to the land. He organised and centralised record keeping and re-established good relations with the Jewish community. Indeed this could now be described as a golden era for the Jews in England and they prospered.

When Aaron of Lincoln died in 1176, his wealth was so vast that a separate exchequer was set up to value his properties. This exchequer was soon directed to record all Jewish transactions, the records of which survive to this day.

Jewish exchequer rolls were kept in chests in 25 designated towns and cities, including Oxford. They were called *archae* and each had four locks. The four keys were kept by two Christians and two Jews, so the chest in question could be opened only in the presence of at least the four key holders.

Subsequent Norman and Plantagenet kings saw the advantage of allowing the Jews to conduct their businesses and trade freely, thus building up reserves of capital which could be taxed and which, because of the peculiar status of the Jews, could be called upon in times of need.

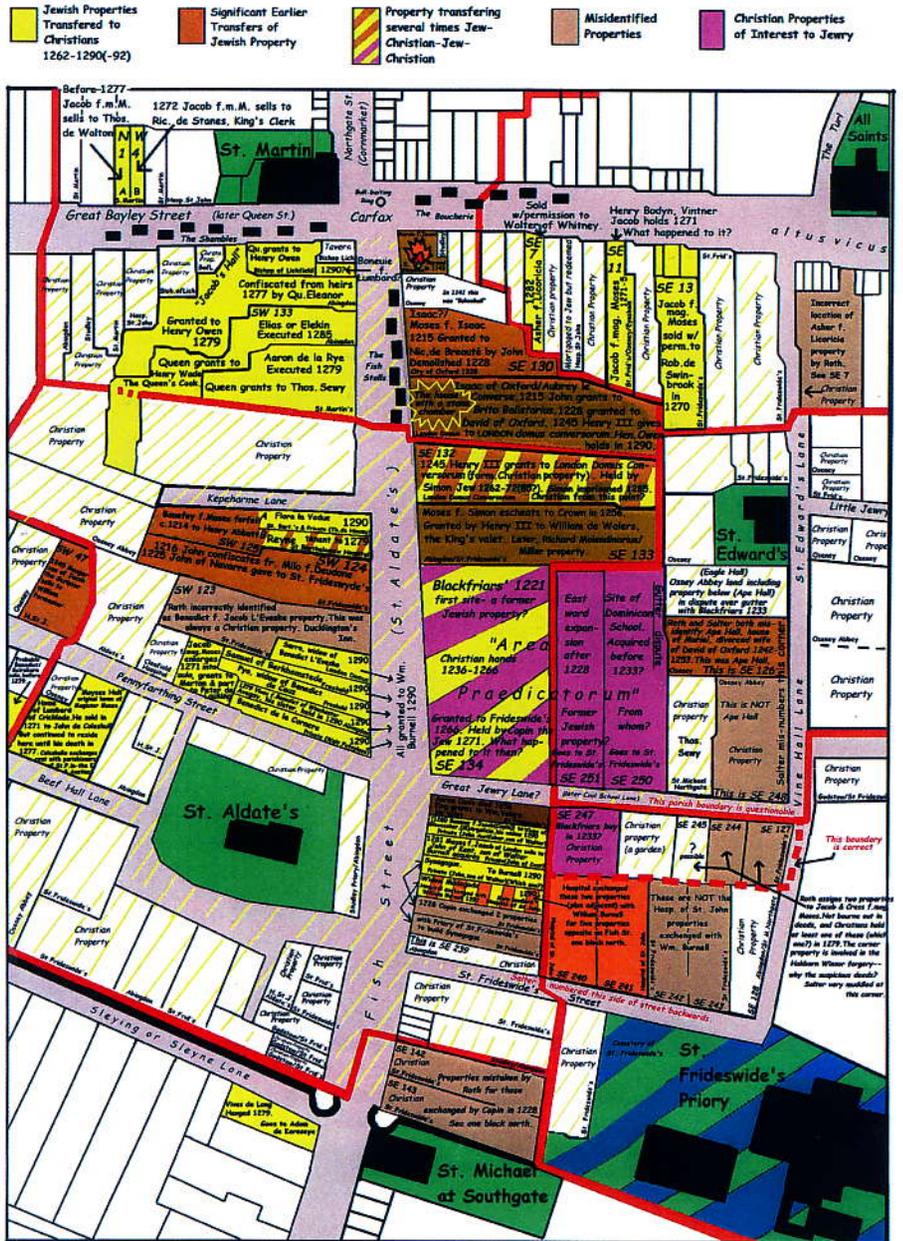
It was Jewish taxes that paid the enormous ransom of £100,000 for the safe return of Richard the Lionheart in 1194.

### Oxford personalities

Aaron Canis, who died in 1265, lived on the corner of Fish Street and Little Jewry Lane. Issac of Oxford lived in a house on the site of the Town Hall. As a rich financier, he also owned the building next door known as 'The House with the Stone Chamber'.

His house was supposedly knocked down in 1228 to make way for a new town hall, but given that Issac's home was stone built, and therefore very valuable, it seems more likely that it was incorporated into the new building. The present Victorian town hall stands on the same site.

Many Jewish women conducted business, often as widows who had inherited a going concern. One such was Mildegod, widow of Copin of Worcester, who became a respected financier in her own right, after taking over her husband's business following his death in



Copyright Pam Manix: Mapping the Medieval Oxford Jewry (2000)

Map Title: Jewry Enlarged

**William the Conqueror built castles in key places to enforce his claim to England and one of them was, of course, Oxford (pictured). As William built his castles, Rouen Jews would settle near them**



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1252. Her house is recorded as being opposite St Aldate's Church and next to the synagogue.

Another lady going by the lovely name of Floria la Vedue lived on the corner of Kepeharm Lane and was known to still be alive in 1290, so presumably was expelled in that year. Kepeharm Lane was the old name for New Inn Yard, just beyond the Central Post Office under the arch at the St Aldate's pub, an area earmarked for development in the near future.

David of Oxford was an active man throughout the 1220s, 30s and 40s. He was targeted by Papal Edict in 1235, but substantial gifts to the King protected him. He was a delegate to the Parliament of the Jews in Worcester in 1241. He divorced his first wife, Muriel, and married Licoricia of Winchester with whom he had a son, Asher. He died in 1244 and the considerable sum of 5,000 marks was payable as death duty. This was spent by Henry III largely on building Westminster Abbey.

Jewish businessmen were living and trading in Oxford for some time before the university was established but, as young men started to gather in the city to sit at the feet of scholars (often in churches) the need for lodgings soon arose. The Jews were among the first to recognise this.

Many of the early halls which later became colleges had been Jewish-owned, but were, of course, confiscated when Edward I ordered the expulsion of the Jews in 1290.

Magister Moses was a significant and highly respected figure. He and his family owned property in Bristol and London, as well as Oxford. He was born in the stone house on the site of the town hall.

Married twice, he had sons who prospered; Elias of London, Benedict of Lincoln, Hagin of Lincoln and Jacob of Oxford (the most important Jewish financier of the mid-13th century) who married Henna and produced a large family. Jacob became a holder of a chirograph (*archa*) chest key.

In 1268 the entire Oxford Jewish community was briefly imprisoned because one of their number had supposedly broken the crucifix being carried in Oxford's Ascension Day parade. As a result, the Jews had to pay for the erection of a stone crucifix near Merton College.

It was around this time that Jacob of Oxford sold two buildings to Walter de Merton for the establishment of Merton College. The original documents detailing this transaction still exist in Merton's Muniment Tower.

Jacob dealt widely in property but in later years repeatedly came up against Edward I's queen, Eleanor of Castille, who demanded his entire estate.

In 1275 he was put in the Tower of London for tax arrears — his son Benedict took his place for him. After his death in 1276 his heirs entered into a prolonged court battle against the Queen with Anthony Bek acting as the Queen's lawyer, which was particularly galling as Bek had been a lodger of Jacob's while an undergraduate at Oxford. Inevitably, Jacob's sons and widow lost.

### Where is the ritual bath?

If there was a thriving medieval Jewish presence in Oxford where was the Mikveh — the ritual bath? At present no one knows, but excavations taking place west of St Aldates



**The University of Oxford Botanic Garden was created on land which, in the 13th century, was a Jewish cemetery**

may throw up some information.

Any new development in Oxford has to have an archaeologist attached to it so, if there is anything to be found it will be recognised.

Another possibility is that, as the medieval synagogue lay in the direction of the river (it was on the site of Christ Church College), there was a bath on the north bank.

The last trace of a medieval Oxford Jew after the expulsion is found on a list of Jews living in Paris in 1296, where Meir of Oxford (also Myer of Cricklade) is recorded as 'Mahy de Quiquelarde, L'anglais'.

The return of Jews to England in 1656 was preceded, as these things so often are, by a handful quietly slipping back in to the country, and Oxford, in the mid-17th century. As the university established itself a need for Hebrew scholars became undeniable. It is recorded that Philip Ferdinand, a Polish Jew who converted, was admitted to the privileges of the University in 1596, and taught Hebrew in various colleges and halls before moving on to Cambridge. In 1607 Sir Thomas Bodley was known to be

seeking a scholar to help him catalogue Hebrew manuscripts.

Evidently he found help when a convert, Jacob Wolfgang, was admitted as a reader in the Bodleian Library in 1608 to be followed by another convert in 1612, Jacob Levy. A very colourful character, Jacob the Jew from the Lebanon, set up Oxford's first coffee shop in 1651 on the premises of what is now the Grand Café.

Three years later a rival Jew, Cirques Jobson from Syria, opened up for business on the corner of Queen's Lane, which, as everyone knows, has been in continuous use as a tea shop ever since. They were very popular and treated as 'exotics' with a veil drawn over their origins — after all they were providing an original and much appreciated service!

It is also thought that Jewish confectioners were the first to add sugar and milk to raw, bitter chocolate, making it much more palatable! Medieval Oxford, with all the added vibrancy of the Jewish community, must have been an exciting place in which to live. 

■ A young unnamed Christian deacon could be described as the 'first' Oxford martyr. An early student at the University, he converted and married a Jewess. His very open rejection of Christianity doomed him to be burnt for heresy in 1222. A plaque, which misnames him as Robert of Reading (who converted without repercussions 50 years later), commemorates the event. It can be found on an old wall, part of Osney Abbey, to be seen at Osney Marina at the end of Mill Street.

■ The University of Oxford Botanic Gardens are situated on land that was originally the 13th century Jewish cemetery.

■ Jews were expelled from England by Edward I in 1290, returning in 1656 after a gap of 366 years.

■ The first Jewish Head of House in either Oxford or Cambridge was Arthur

Lehman Goodhart who was Master of University College from 1951 to 1963. Incidentally, he was also the first American to hold such an office.

■ The Oxford Jewish Heritage Committee was set up in 2006 with the aim of researching, recording and bringing this fascinating, and totally neglected part of Oxford's history to light. A website was launched in September last year. Walking tours of Jewish Oxford are in operation, information boards are planned for the Botanic Gardens and Oxford Castle and others will no doubt follow. Oxford Jewish Heritage's dream is to have a museum in central Oxford. For further information visit the website: [www.oxfordjewishheritage.co.uk](http://www.oxfordjewishheritage.co.uk)

■ Further reading: *The Jews of Oxford* by Dr David M Lewis (ISBN 09519253 0 X) *The Jews of Medieval Oxford* by Cecil Roth