



From a castle to a coffee house: on the trail of Oxford's Jewish history

Tour guide **Victoria Bentata Azaz** leads us through the streets of Oxford to reveal the city's rich and little-known Jewish heritage. Illustration **Thomas Fournier**

Oxford used not to feature on the Jewish tourist trail, which was a pity, because it has some of the most intriguing Jewish heritage in the UK and one of the best-documented medieval Jewish quarters in the world.

For this reason, ten years ago a few of us set up the Oxford Jewish Heritage Committee, by which means the previously hidden Jewish history of Oxford has made its way into the Museum of Oxford, as well as into a symposium, exhibitions in Oxford Synagogue and two new plaques at both sites of the medieval **Jewish cemetery**. The subject also features in three recent books: *Beneath your Feet* by Pam Manix, which is a history of Oxford's Jewish cemetery; *City Walks Oxford* (written by myself); and Rebecca Abrams's book on the Ashmolean Museum, *The Jewish Journey: 4,000 years in 22 Objects* (p14).

We don't know precisely when the Jews arrived, though it was probably around 1077, when they came across from Rouen in the wake of the Norman Conquest. However, we do know the names of many of those who lived here in the period until the expulsion of 1290. We know exactly where they lived and we have some tantalising glimpses into their lives.

Oxford Castle is a good place to start a Jewish Oxford tour because it was a royal

castle, built by one Robert D'Oilly, who worked for William the Conqueror. This is significant because the Jews were the 'king's Jews', answerable to the constable of the castle and not to the city authorities. The king could call upon their services at any moment and they owed him a third of their estate at their death. The castle was also the tax point and the location of the **Archa Chest**, one of around 25 chests set up around the country during the reign of Richard I specifically for Jewish transactions. It is also where Empress Matilda was besieged by her cousin Stephen during the Great Anarchy, when both were vying for the English throne.

The significance of this becomes clear as we trace a route along **Queen Street** (taking in the story of a 19th-century fire in which a rabbi, his daughter and a Torah scroll were tragically lost) to the medieval Great Jewry (of which unfortunately nothing medieval remains). Great Jewry was the road running to the South Gate from Carfax (crossroads) in the centre of Oxford. At the top of the street was the house of a Jew called Aaron son of Isaac. The aforementioned Stephen burnt down this house in 1141. The Jews had refused Stephen's demands for money on the grounds that they had already given generously to his cousin Matilda two

weeks earlier. Stephen then threatened to burn down the Jewry one house at a time – unfortunately for Aaron, his house was first. It was also, thankfully, the last and we presume that cash was forthcoming thereafter.

In the 13th century a financier called David of Oxford lived one house down on the site of the current **Oxford Town Hall**. Our sources tell us that he had his application to divorce his wife Muriel turned down by both the London and Paris Beth Dins before he finally got King Henry III to grant him a divorce (possibly by bribing him with a pair of golden spurs), allowing him to marry a woman called Licoricia, with whom he later had a son and heir called Asher.

Later on, in 1278, Vives le Lung (Chaim the Tall), who lived at the end of Great Jewry, met an unfortunate end when he was hanged in London for coin clipping, along with 292 other Jews. We don't know whether or not he was guilty, but we do know that many Jews were impoverished in this period, particularly after the proclamation by Edward I in 1278 of the Statutum de Judaismo, which banned them from 'usury' and proposed they take up 'handicrafts and farming'.

There are other stories to uncover in a tour along Great Jewry, the street now known as **St Aldates**. One concerns an incident in 1244, when students rioted because they had pawned all their books;

another, the occasion in 1268 when a Jew dashed a ceremonial cross to the floor during a Christian procession in honour of Oxford's patron saint, St Frideswide. This resulted in the whole community being briefly imprisoned in the castle before an agreement regarding reparations was reached with the mediation of Prince Edward. The Jews had to build a huge gold cross and a smaller one in silver gilt. The crosses have disappeared, but we think we have found their base, now in the Museum of Oxford.

The street where the synagogue and Jewish homes once stood is now dominated by **Christ Church**, which was founded by Cardinal Wolsey in the 16th century and refounded by Henry VIII after Wolsey's death. Henry VIII took a special interest in Hebrew and funded the Regius Professorship of Hebrew, so this is the place to consider the importance of Hebrew teaching to the university since the earliest times. It is also a good moment to enjoy the cheeky poem written to Queen Elizabeth I by Thomas Neal, Regius Professor of Hebrew, in an effort to ensure her continued financial support for his post. He compares Hebrew studies to a tree, whose 'boughs have grown proudly, Elizabeth, from your coins', and reminds her that 'its roots must be watered by your hands, Elizabeth, a daughter's duty'.

At Christ Church, we can also reflect on the extraordinary story of Einstein and the refugee scholars of the 1930s (see p22). It was **Professor Lindemann**, head of the physics department and the Clarendon Laboratory, who had originally invited **Einstein**. Convincing him that there was good sailing to be had in Oxford,

Lindemann secured a position for him at Christ Church and Einstein spent three summers lecturing and playing his violin with the college servants (and presumably sailing...). A blackboard from one of his lectures still has pride of place in the university's **Museum of the History of Science** and there is a heart-warming account of the way one of his lectures was received 'with thunderous applause' by Oxford students in 1933, just after the Nazis had taken power in Germany.

Next is **Corpus Christi College**, renowned at its creation in 1517 for its trilingual library, featuring Latin, Greek and Hebrew manuscripts, which, Erasmus predicted, 'will draw to Oxford in the future more people than were once attracted to the sights of Rome'. There are seven medieval Hebrew manuscripts in the college's collection – one of which is a remarkable 12th-century siddur (prayer book) that has a handwritten list of English business contacts, including bishops and nobles, written in Judaeo-Arabic on the back page.

Next to Corpus Christi is **Merton College**, founded by Edward I's right hand man and sometime Chancellor of England, **Walter de Merton**. The college's Muniments Tower still contains several Starrs, medieval documents in Latin and Hebrew pertaining to various transactions including the sale of two houses on the site of the current college to Walter de Merton by Jacob son of Rabbi Moses of Londres.

Time for a cuppa? In the High Street, you can visit the oldest coffee house in England, started by 'Jacob the Jew'. A sign in the window of what is now **The Grand Café** states, 'Here, in 1651, encouraged by the open-handed policy towards Jews

by Oliver Cromwell, Jacob 'the Jew' first commenced business... In Oxford, another Jew, Cirques Jobson, opened a coffee house at the corner of High Street and Queen's Lane. It has been suggested that Jacob and Jobson are in reality the same person'.

Since Jews (along with Catholics and other non-Anglicans) were finally fully accepted into the University of Oxford in 1871, the Jewish contribution to the university has been profound and varied, firstly in terms of erudition and more recently in terms of benefactions.

Dame Stephanie Shirley, a Kindertransport child who decided to make hers 'a life that is worth saving', is one of the founders of the Oxford Internet Institute and probably the first person to have a portrait that includes an iPad.

A visit to the Benefactors' Plaque on the university's Clarendon Building also records **Michael Moritz**, the child of a Kindertransport refugee, and his wife **Harriet Heyman**, who gave £75 million in scholarships for the poorest students in the university. **Ronald Cohen's** new Cohen Building for Exeter College bears a plaque inscribed to his parents, 'who knew that education is the one possession that cannot be taken away from you', a poignant reminder that his family had everything else taken away from them before being expelled from Egypt by President Nasser after 1956.

Our most recent benefaction is the largest in the history of the university: **Stephen Schwarzman**, head of the private equity firm Blackstone, has given £150 million for the study of the ethics of Artificial Intelligence. ■

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